

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

*Geoffrey Craig*  
**Snow**

**H**e swore at himself. He had been certain that Mercersburg was on the road to Janesville. Twenty miles back, he had taken a right fork south towards Mercersburg because the left fork had looked to be swinging east; and he knew for certain that Janesville was due south. With it already starting to snow, he had felt an urgency to get a move on and had not bothered to check the map.

"Gotta trust your nose sometimes," he thought.

He prided himself on a first-class sense of direction.

Now, twenty miles later and with the snow coming down thicker and blowing hard against the windshield, the damn road was veering southwest. The snow was accumulating fast, and the car had slipped going around a curve. He knew he should slow down; but even if this was the right road, which was far from certain, he had a long way to go.

The driving snow blurred the dense stands of pine, spruce and hemlock that lined the road. The solid wall of trees was broken only infrequently by an occasional field and once an ill-painted house with a sagging porch. His headlights had trouble penetrating the white morass while the wipers struggled in vain against the pelting flakes. Snow jammed the corners of the windshield and was spreading. The storm had come out of nowhere although, truth be told, he had neglected to check the forecast before leaving.

He had thought of cancelling; he had so much work piled up – witness the bulging briefcase on the back seat. But he didn't want Aunt Kate spending her seventy-fourth birthday alone. Who knew if there would be a seventy-fifth. She was the last of his mother's generation. Leaving the bank early Friday afternoon, he promised himself to work most of Saturday.

A curtain of snow swept sideways across the windshield, and he could see nothing for an instant. He took his foot off the gas, gripped the leather-covered steering wheel and leaned forward. The crosswind let up, and the snow again came straight at him. He accelerated slowly, checking for the side of the road. He had not seen another car for a good fifteen minutes. A sign loomed into sight: Dry Creek – eight miles / Mercersburg – fourteen miles.

Maybe I should find a motel in Dry Creek and head down first thing in the morning. Storm should be done by then. We'll miss tonight's reservation anyway. I'll call Aunt Kate from the motel. And check the map, idiot.

On the right, he passed a narrow road - the first break in the line of trees for almost a mile. The storm was getting worse. Snow blew up from the road and over the hood, worsening the already poor visibility. It seemed later than four. He was having trouble distinguishing the road from the shoulder. The BMW's fog lights didn't help. He slowed to twenty-five.

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He pushed the power button on the radio and scanned through the stations. He got static, ear-splitting rock and *Rock of Ages*. He stopped when he heard an announcer say: "...worst storm of the past five years. Stores and offices in Mercersburg and the surrounding area have been closing early to allow their employees to go home. Unless travel is absolutely essential, our listeners are advised to stay off the roads, which are becoming increasingly treacherous. The storm, which the National Weather Service had expected to pass a hundred miles south of Mercersburg, veered suddenly north at mid-morning – demonstrating once again that Mother Nature has a mind of her own. With widespread power outages expected, Downstate Power has advised residents to locate their flashlights and batteries, bring in plenty of wood, and fill the tub while the pump is still working. It's going to be a very long weekend."

"Damn," he muttered, turning off the radio. "Of all the lousy luck."

He kept leaning forward over the steering wheel. How far back had he seen the sign? Three maybe four miles. Not far to Dry Creek, assuming nothing happened.

Bite your tongue.

At that moment, a deer ran across the road not more than ten yards in front of him. He slammed the brake and jerked the wheel to the left. The car skidded, and he pulled the wheel to the right. The skid worsened. He pumped the brake, but the car slid remorselessly towards the left shoulder. Fishtailing as it hit the edge, the car went through a foot of snow and down a shallow embankment. Smacking against a tree on the driver's side, the BMW came to an abrupt stop.

His head knocked against the door jamb, and a sharp pain flashed through his brain. He fell forward against the steering wheel. His breath came in gasps. The beams from his headlights glistened in the snow. The motor continued to turn over. Gradually, he relaxed his grip on the wheel and looked around. His briefcase had fallen off the backseat and un-snapped; papers were strewn all over the floor. He put two fingers to the side of his head; they came away wet with blood.

"Oh Christ," he said.

He turned off the motor, put the keys in his jacket pocket and unfastened his seat belt. The cold seeped into the car. He had left straight from work and still wore his suit. He reached behind him and pulled his overcoat off the back seat. He wiggled into it. He had gloves and a ski cap in his suitcase in the trunk. Twisting, he reached the briefcase's handle and pulled it towards him. He extracted his cell phone and, from his wallet, his AAA card. But the phone screen read: "No Service Available".

"Shit!"

He pocketed the phone and maneuvered himself into the passenger seat. He had to use his shoulder to open the door, but it finally swung upwards. Freezing air and snow blew into the car. He clambered out of the car, and his crisply-polished loafers sank into the snow. His thin socks were immediately soaked. Snow whirled all around him. He shivered. His head throbbed. He reached down, grabbed a handful of snow, made a ball and pressed it against his forehead. He looked at the ball and saw red

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stains. Water slid past his ear. Hanging onto the car, he made his way to the trunk. His pants cuffs filled with snow. He took a sock from his suitcase and held it against the cut.

He climbed up the embankment, which was fortunately not steep, and stood on the shoulder. He looked up and down the road.

I could make Dry Creek except my feet will freeze in these shoes. But if I stay here, I'll be dead by morning – unless someone comes along. And what's the chance of that? Maybe I'll find a house along the way. Hah!

Blood had soaked into the sock. He touched the cut. His finger came away dry. *At least, it's not bleeding anymore.* Then he remembered the old boots he had chucked in the car a few days ago to drop in the used clothing bin at the strip mall. *Thank God, I never got around to it.* He scrambled back down the embankment and tugged open the rear door. They lay forlornly behind the driver's seat. *So glad to see you.* He got two pair of socks from his suitcase. The soles of the boots were worn thin, and some stitching was gone. *But then you know about beggars.* It was a snug fit with two socks, but his feet would be relatively warm and dry. *Laziness finally pays off.*

He got the flashlight from the glove compartment and stuffed the papers back into the briefcase. He went back to the trunk and took off his overcoat, suit jacket and tie. Shivering uncontrollably, he put on two sweaters, the overcoat and the ski cap. The shivering subsided, but his fingers were tingling with cold. He shoved his suit jacket and tie into the suitcase and found the gloves. Not super warm but all he had. He locked the car and, briefcase and flashlight in one hand and suitcase in the other, climbed back up to the road. He took a last look at the BMW and asked himself if he had forgotten anything. His shoes, but he doubted he would need them. The bloody sock, he had tossed into the trunk.

A fresh inch of snow had fallen on the car. He shone the flashlight towards the sky and watched intricate flakes cascade onto his face. He opened his mouth and felt the cold on his tongue. He was thirsty, but he had brought no water. *Hope there's something in Dry Creek. Not exactly a promising name.* He shone the light down the road. He could only see a few feet, and he couldn't distinguish between the road and the shoulder. He checked his watch: four-thirty-five. It wouldn't be light again for over twelve hours. What if the flashlight died?

That kind of thinking is not helpful. I can do this in a couple of hours. Of course, it wouldn't hurt if the wind decided to change directions. Yeah, and if a helicopter decided to land in front of me with a gorgeous stewardess holding out a cup of hot chocolate.

For the hell of it, he cut off the flashlight. He was in near total darkness. The snow pelted his face as he trudged down the road. He kept the light on and prayed. His nose and cheeks were raw with cold, his fingers icy. The exertion kept the rest of his body warm. In fact, he was sweating. But if he stopped, the sweat would dry; and he'd be all the colder. Snow coated his eyelashes and moustache. His arms ached, especially the right one because of the suitcase, which was much heavier than the briefcase. His back felt stiff. He wanted to rest but thought better of it. He stopped only long enough to check the time: five.

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In another fifteen minutes, I'll take a short break. If I have to, I'll leave the suitcase. Dead men don't need to brush their teeth ... or change their underwear.

The woods continued in an unbroken line on both sides of the road. He wished he had brought fewer clothes or had at least left some in the car. He wasn't sure it had been fifteen minutes, but he had to take a break. He set down the suitcase, wiped his face with his gloved hand and loosened the icy particles clinging to his moustache. He was breathing hard. He steeled himself and started again. The wind picked up. The flashlight was practically useless. He switched the suitcase to his left hand. Soon both arms ached beyond belief. He was no longer sweating but getting colder. The trees were an indistinct blur. Each step he had to fight the wind. It hadn't been close to fifteen minutes but he needed another break.

*Time to leave the suitcase. Too bad about the suit. Cost a bundle.* He put the suitcase on the shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he glanced down the road. He could see nothing but snow and two dim lights. *Lights?* They approached with agonizing slowness. He frantically waved the flashlight. The car slowed. *I hope this is a good idea.* The black Jeep Cherokee stopped next to him, and the window slid down. A woman with choppy blond hair and wide cheekbones stared at him.

"Good thing for you I got good eyes. Otherwise, you'd be flat as a pancake right now. What in hell are you doing out here?" She studied him. "Are you okay?"

"Sort of. My car slid off the road back there." He jerked his thumb in the direction of the car. "I'm trying to get to Dry Creek."

"In this storm, you'd walk right through Dry Creek and not even notice. Hell, you'd do that on a bright, sunny day. Get in."

He hesitated.

"You can walk to the South Pole for all I care."

"What should I do with my bags?"

"The porter will take care of them." She laughed harshly. "Give me the damn suitcase. We got to get a move on."

She threw it into the back seat as if it were a sack of grain. He climbed in, clutching the briefcase. A newspaper and a copy of *Time* sat on the seat. He shoved them into the far angle of the dashboard. A large Styrofoam cup rested in a holder. He nudged aside a pair of flat-soled shoes to make room for his booted feet.

"Sorry for the snow," he said.

"What do you call that?" she asked, pointing down at her boots. Several small puddles gleamed in the light from the dashboard.

She was not attractive: large nose and heavy lips, unkempt hair, thick eyebrows and broad shoulders. She wore a bulky sweater and jeans that bunched up around thick thighs.

"We'll take a look at your car and then I'll take you on to my house."

"How far is that?"

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"Eight ... nine miles."

"I saw one house – a long ways back."

"Side road. Turn off's a few miles ahead."

"I saw that." He paused. "Not much of a road."

She said nothing. He stared out the window at the driving snow.

"Isn't there a motel somewhere?" He paused. "I don't want to be a bother."

"Does it look like there's a motel somewhere?"

"Guess not."

"There's one in Mercersburg. That's only a mite further than Dry Creek. Just tell me where you want the sheriff to send the body."

"I guess I'll have to be a bother."

"I won't kill you. Women need more of a reason for killing than finding some stray man wandering around in the worst snowstorm of the decade."

"I wasn't thinking anything like that."

"Sure you were." She took a sip from the cup. "If I were going to kill you, you'd already be dead." She alternated watching him and the road. "I'd offer you some coffee, but I forgot my thermos. Slept late this morning. Did too good a job hiding the alarm clock."

"Hiding the alarm clock?"

"If it's next to my bed, I just turn it off and go back to sleep. This morning I didn't even hear it."

He laughed.

"I'll have to try that sometime. Where did you hide it?"

"Under a pile of sweaters."

The Jeep shimmied going through a drift, and he gripped the seat. She downshifted, and the Jeep powered out of the drift. The snow struck the windshield as if it were fired from an automatic. He listened to the metronome click of the wipers. Hot air blasted from the vents. The Jeep had seen better days. So for that matter had she.

"Scare you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"We know how to handle this stuff. Piece of cake once you get used to it. Took me a while but I got it." She shot him a sideways glance. "Not from around here, are you?"

"Wells City."

"It snows up in Wells City, last I heard."

"They do a good job clearing the streets."

"You mean not like down here in the sticks."

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"That's not exactly what I meant."

"Don't fret yourself," she said. "I'm not from around here either."

"Where are you from?"

"Down south."

"Got tired of all that sunshine?"

Her mouth tightened. Her hands gripped the wheel as if it might get away from her. She stared straight ahead. She didn't speak for a long minute.

Wrong thing to say.

"Not exactly."

"I haven't been in Wells City that long myself."

"So where are you from?"

"Back East. Got a nice job offer. Was time for a change."

"What do you do?"

"Banker."

"You don't look like one."

"Seen a lot of them have you ... wandering around in snowstorms?"

She laughed.

"We should be getting to your car pretty soon. Unless you were jogging with that suitcase."

"We must be close," he said, "but how can you tell. These woods all look alike."

"I think someone once said that about the Chinese."

"Excuse me."

"Bad joke. It's what happens when you ... live alone."

"I always forget the punch lines."

"Yeah, me too," she said. "So I make them up. Ends up being a lot worse. Not even Jethro laughs at most of my jokes."

"Your husband?"

"My dog. Don't have a husband."

He studied the landscape as it slowly passed by. Not a sign of the BMW. Could they have missed it? What a disaster? Would he ever see Wells City again? Not that he'd made any close friends. Tough for a single guy with no ties to a place. Easier somehow for women. He'd had no luck dating, no matter how much time he spent poring over Match.com profiles. So he got wrapped up in his work. Not many workaholics in Wells City, but his first year's bonus suggested someone appreciated it. Where the hell was the BMW?

"I tried calling AAA on my cell, but I couldn't get any reception."

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"Not around here, you won't. No towers. Folks thought they would spoil the cows' milk." She smiled. "Good example of one of my piss-poor jokes. Anyway, the damn thing worked so infrequently I gave it to the Salvation Army."

"Another joke, I presume."

"Yes, but I might as well have for all the use I get out of it. I'm still figuring out how to turn the damn thing on. You can call from my house, but you won't get AAA out on a night like this. Nearest one is Bud's in Mercersburg – close on to ten miles. There's a gas station in Dry Creek, but Moss doesn't do any servicing. Hard to say exactly what he does. Maybe grow on trees. You're stuck good 'til the storm ends, which is expected for sometime this year or the next."

Prickles ran up and down his spine, and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. *Thought that only happened in novels you bought in the grocery store. Not that I ever bought a novel in a grocery store.* He leaned forward to get a better look out the windshield. What good would it do anyway to check out the car? This woman could be a nut case, but what choice did he have? He couldn't start walking again; and if he suggested it, no telling how she might react. If ever there was one, this might be the time to make a deal with God. He saw a dark shape against the snow.

"That must be it," he said.

"Where?"

"Up on the right."

She slowed to a crawl. When they were parallel to the BMW, she pulled slightly off the road and lowered the passenger side window.

"Oh my God! You said slid off the road. You didn't mention into the next county."

She got out of the car and walked around to the passenger's side. He got out and noticed that she had wide hips. He was surprised to see that she was a good two inches taller than him, and he was five-ten in his stocking feet. They looked down at his car.

"Fancy bit of driving," she said.

"Do you think there's any chance it could be pushed out?"

"Sure, we'll stop some of this bumper-to-bumper traffic and find us a couple of burly guys." She laughed. "I hate to break it to you on a night like this; but even Hercules would have to say, 'NFW'. Zeus could manage it; but he's the dude that started this cock-up, and he's laughing his ass off right now. Poor Bud'll have a job of it. Nope, that fancy BMW has got itself a home for the next little while. Let's go."

"What a mess!"

"Could be worse. You don't look hurt – except for your pride..." She glanced at his forehead and noticed the cut for the first time. "...and that scrape on your head which is all dried and won't take much to clean up." She walked back to the driver's side. The snow had not let up; flakes studded her hair like miniature crowns. He stared at his car. "Are you coming?"

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Tempus fuck it.”

“I’m thinking.”

“You can think ‘til the cows come home and the corn ripens, but it still comes down to three choices. One, you could sleep in your fancy car and freeze to death. Two, you could start walking back to Dry Creek. You might make it, and a few people do live there. Someone’s sure to take you in, but almost everyone in Dry Creek’s a serial killer. Wouldn’t you be if you lived in a place called Dry Creek? Or three, you could come to my house. I already told you I’d need a better reason to kill you than the fact that you can’t drive for shit.”

As soon as they turned off the main road, he felt the difference in the surface. Even without the snow, driving on the ragged dirt road would’ve been challenging. The Jeep bounced and swayed. *God, not twice in one day.* Snow had already partially covered the heavy tire tracks of whomever had preceded them. He took some modest comfort in knowing that other people lived on the road. *Probably as weird as her ... or weirder.* The Jeep ground forward, slipping only occasionally and then not enough to panic him.

“I’ve got Jap snow tires and four-wheel drive,” she said. “We could climb Everest if we’d a mind to.”

“Most people say Japanese.”

“Most people didn’t not get to know their Grandfather because he died in a Jap POW camp.”

Great. Keep this up, and she won’t just murder you. She’ll chop you into pieces and cook you for dinner.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “My mouth often gets ahead of my brain.”

“Would that have anything to do with why you’re living in Wells City?”

“Maybe.”

“I have foot-in-mouth problems myself from time to time.”

The snow eased, and he could more easily see the forest that hemmed in the road. They passed a few homes. Set back from the road in small clearings, the houses were either darkened or had the feeblest of light showing through the windows. Most were frame houses, but two were log cabins; and one was a trailer set on concrete blocks. None seemed closer than a quarter mile to each other.

“What happens when you need to borrow a cup of flour?”

“We ask for sugar as well so you don’t have to drive over twice.”

The jeep bounced and he came off the seat a couple of inches.

“Damn,” she said, “I generally miss that pothole. It’s been there longer than the road.” They passed another darkened house. “Don’t like the looks of this. Should be more lights on.”

“Early to bed, early to rise?”



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"Not at five-thirty. We may be hicks, but we've got TV. Power's out."

They crossed a stream on a bridge with a single railing. The snow had piled into ridges along the planks. The Jeep slipped a little sideways, and his heart flew to his mouth.

"Can those fancy tires swim?"

She straightened the Jeep, laughed and powered up a slight incline.

"Not bad sense of humor for a banker. I thought they all had pokers up their asses. Out here you need one."

"A poker or a sense of humor."

They passed a break in the solid mass of trees, and he wondered about crops. He knew little about agriculture, had seen only a few loans in that sector and those were large operators. Difficult business, lending to small – or even medium-sized – farmers. Know your customer and then some. Practically had to be a farmer yourself.

"Just out of curiosity," she asked. "Where is it that you were headed when you decided to take a shortcut through the woods?"

"Janesville."

"Janesville? What in hell were you doing on 61. Janesville's on 38 – clear across the county."

"I got to a fork, and there was no sign for Janesville. I had an idea Mercersburg was in the right direction."

"Didn't you have a map?"

"I didn't want to stop."

"I won't say what I'm thinking."

"Men," he said with a laugh.

"You said it, not me."

"People grow crops in this neighborhood? I've seen what look like fields but who can tell with all this snow whirling around?"

"The real farms are the other side of Mercersburg. If you'd 've walked some more, you'd 've run smack dab into a bunch of them. Of course, you'd 've died way before Mercersburg; but no matter, there're plenty of farms down there. Dairy, vegetables, orchards, even got us an alpaca get-up but I'm sure that's a tax dodge. Don't even bother to shear the critters. Being as you're a banker, you must know plenty about tax dodges."

"Sorry but I don't."

"Another part of the bank then. Anyway, there's some timbering up here."

"Do they clear cut?"

"Naturally. When we say forest management, we mean cut everything in sight."

The snow was coming down heavily again. She drove in silence. They

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had not passed a house in almost a mile when she said:

"We'll be there directly. I'm certain there's no power. Hope Jethro's okay."

In spite of what she had said, he was still startled when she downshifted, swung the Jeep to the right and accelerated up a short slope. He had seen no sign of a driveway and had also missed the house. Totally dark, it stood on top of a low rise. As the Jeep's headlights raked the front, he glimpsed a boxy, two-storey frame house with a front porch and unevenly-spaced windows. Gunning again, she swung right and powered through a foot or more of snow into a three-sided garage about fifteen yards from the house.

He got out and looked around. Across the road, he made out a dark, open space. Beyond that, the woods stretched away into the darkness. He could not see the rear of the house but suspected a large back yard. Crowns of pines rose steadily against the night sky so he assumed the house was set against the base of a hill. He noticed a metal pipe protruding from the roof but saw no sign of a chimney.

"Just as I figured," she said. "No frigging power."

Barking raucously, a black and tan dog bounded towards them through the snow. Wagging its tail furiously, the shepherd jumped up on the woman as if they were going to dance. She hugged the dog, grasped the fur on both sides of its neck and shook its head.

"Hello, Jethro old buddy. How was your day? Chase any deer?"

She ruffled the fur behind the dog's head and turned to the man.

"Jethro, meet our dinner guest."

He patted the dog like someone unused to them.

"He's not the biting kind," she said, "but he does love to roughhouse. So give him a good shake. He chases rabbits and deer, but he never catches them. Doesn't care to hurt 'em. On the other hand, a stranger broke in about a year ago. Was halfway to Dry Creek before I could get a shot off." She opened the rear door of the Jeep and took out a bag stuffed with groceries. She handed it to him. "Here you go. Best get to work if you plan on supper. These groceries saved your life. Stopped on the way home. Otherwise, I might have missed out on your stunt driving."

"Maybe you could ease up on that subject."

She glanced at him.

"Sure. Like I said, I run off at the mouth myself. Comes from having lived alone for some time now." She handed him a second bag. "I was the last customer. Never saw Lucy check anybody out so fast. Fred had the store lights out before I got the engine started."

Carrying a bag of groceries in one hand and a flashlight in the other, she worked her way to a side door. Jethro bounced around her feet. He followed feeling the weight of the bags in his arms. Reaching the house, she cradled the bag in the crook of her arm, shifted the flashlight, opened

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the screen door and turned a worn door knob. She set her bag on a counter and snapped a light switch on and off.

"So much for AAA. I've just got two phones – both portable so they need power. Last time we lost power in a snowstorm, it took night on to a month to get it back."

"What?"

"Just kidding. They'll take care of it as soon as the storm blows through. Our power company is as efficient as they come. Only have half their men standing around at any one time."

*Aunt Kate's going to be worried as hell, but there's nothing I can do. Hope assumes I stopped at a motel and couldn't call because of the storm. Except motel phones aren't portable. He shivered in the freezing room. He appreciated how the cave men, and women, felt before they figured out how to rub two sticks together. Phone lines could be down along with the power. I'll call when I can. Hope she's got a good fire going. Thank God I brought in all that firewood last time I was there.*

She moved the flashlight around the interior and then pointed it at the counter. He saw a steel sink and a radio with its antenna pointing into the room. The cord was plugged in next to the sink.

"Put the bags there," she said, indicating a space on the counter with the beam, "and stay put while I light some candles and lanterns. The Rottweiler's not nearly as friendly as Jethro."

"The Rottweiler?"

"Don't know what's gotten into me tonight. Don't generally kid so much. Maybe 'cause otherwise, I wouldn't have much to say. I'm no big talker. Not anymore anyways. There's no Rottweiler ... only Jethro and me ... and the ghosts."

He set down the bags.

"I'm not biting again; and furthermore, I don't believe in ghosts."

"Me neither, except those last two dinner guests just won't go away."

She opened a cupboard beneath the counter and took out two, battery-powered lanterns. She set one on the counter and the other on a square table in the center of the kitchen. She lit them both. He had been standing little more than a foot from the table and hadn't noticed it. She handed him the flashlight.

"I'll get a fire going in the stove. Why don't you bring in your bags? Unless I've got you so shook, you figure you got a better shot walking to Dry Creek. I'll stop. At least, I'll try to stop."

"Like you said: Out here you need a sense of humor."

Outside, he looked up. He could not see a single star. The snow stung his cheeks. It was getting colder. *She sure is quirky, but that doesn't make her dangerous. Do dangerous people joke about it so much? Never met one so how would I know. But she's got to be the strangest person I've ever met. Kind of*

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*funny though. Jesus, if she did something, who would ever know? He started for the Jeep. Hope she's got a ton of wood. Forget serial killer, we could freeze our asses off.*

When he stepped back in the house, he saw that she had lit a third lantern and placed candles on tables and window sills. She was kneeling by a wood-burning stove and loading it with kindling. Then she put in three logs and lit some balled-up newspaper under the kindling. The paper and kindling burst into flames. The bottom log started to burn, and she closed the stove door. He could see the flames through a glass window. A large stack of splintered logs stood in a metal holder next to the stove, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Her boots stood next to the kitchen door. He bent, undid the laces and placed his boots next to hers. She stood up from the stove, stretched her back and smiled.

"You'd be surprised how quickly this will heat up the place."

He approached the stove and held his hands towards the grate. The heat ran up his arms and spread through his body.

"That cut's dried," she said, "but maybe you'd like to wash up."

"In a second: after my blood goes back to red from blue."

He turned his back to the stove and looked around the large room, which comprised the entire first floor. A ratty sofa and two armchairs faced the stove. A candle burned on a narrow table that stood behind the sofa. Copies of *Time* were stacked on the table. He wondered if they were in chronological order; his were. A newspaper and a book sat on a low, coffee table in front of the sofa. A bookcase stood against one wall, and an empty vase rested on a table between two of the front windows. He noticed paintings on the walls but couldn't see any details. An old television, with antediluvian antennas and what looked like a built-in video player, squatted next to the stove like a contemplative owl. The only furniture in the kitchen was the square table and two chairs. To the right of the stove, an uncarpeted stairs with banisters on each side climbed steeply to a balcony that ran the length of the house. Four doors leading off the balcony were dimly visible. She handed him a flashlight.

"Bathroom's upstairs. Second door. You'll find a wash cloth and towel in the closet. There will be two buckets of water. Just pour a little in the sink."

When he came back downstairs, she was sitting in an armchair.

"Now you don't look quite as much like a crime scene."

"That's comforting," he said, going back to the stove.

"Would you like a beer or a cup of tea? I'd offer coffee; but the coffee maker needs power, and I'd rather drink dishwater than instant."

"I'd love a beer, but I'd better go for the tea." He thought a second. "How are you going to make tea without power?"

"Guess you're not as up-to-date as you should be with the world of low-tech." She took a gallon jug of spring water from a closet next to the fridge. He counted at least eight jugs. She filled a kettle and set it next to

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the stove. She turned a handle and *whoosh*. "Pilot light, Mr. Wells City Slicker. Latest thing from Kansas City. You ever see one?"

"In an earlier century. Me, I've got an electric stove. Also from Kansas City. Some of my friends have gas stoves with electric starters. Last pilot light I saw was at the Chicago World's Fair. That would've been 1893 ... or was it the one in 1933? Can't remember."

"You know," she said. "I can't either." She opened the fridge and gripped a large, plastic bottle of Coke. "Still pretty cold. Power hasn't been out that long, but we'd better get some of this stuff outside."

She pulled a heavy cooler from the closet. From the freezer, she took ice trays and emptied them into the bottom of the cooler to form a layer of ice. She unloaded the grocery bags onto the counter and put eggs, milk, orange juice and bacon into the cooler. She took cheese, mayonnaise, deli meats and butter from the fridge to finish filling the cooler. She snapped it shut, took two bungee cords from a shelf in the closet and fastened them around the cooler.

"Rest of the stuff won't spoil."

They shoved the cooler into the snow near the kitchen door. She got a garden stake from a pile stacked just inside the kitchen door and rammed it into the snow next to the cooler. "Let's hope the bears and raccoons think it's too much trouble." She put the rest of the groceries away and took two oversized mugs from a cupboard.

"I've got black tea with caffeine, black tea with extra caffeine and, for those of my guests who need to calm down and relax, black tea with over-the-top caffeine. What'll you have?"

"Being a banker, I'll stick to the middle of the road and take the black tea with extra caffeine."

"I was kidding about the extra."

"I do catch on after a while."

"On the other hand, I don't see the point of decaf. It's like putting no-fat milk on your Frosted Flakes. If you're going for a sugar high, might as well clog your arteries at the same time. What could be more efficient?"

"Or cost effective."

She made a clicking sound out of the corner of her mouth.

"Good thinking, Mr. Banker Man."

They sat in the armchairs. Jethro lay at her feet. He had hung his overcoat on a peg near the kitchen door and gratefully accepted the fleece vest she had offered. She had been right. The room had warmed considerably, but it was still not exactly sweltering except in close proximity to the stove. She seemed more used to the cold and had not added to the bulky sweater she had worn in the car. Cradling the hot mug in his hands, he studied her for a moment. Her hair was indeed disorderly, and dark streaks mixed with the blond. She had high cheekbones and broad shoulders, almost as if she had on football pads. She took sips of tea and in between, placed the mug on the floor. Her hands were large and chapped

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and, when not holding the mug, moved restlessly in her lap. She had on hiking socks. Even though she was not attractive, he found something appealing about her looks. Which puzzled him. He'd known unattractive women who'd performed minor miracles with the resources at hand, particularly letting their warmth shine through. She seemed to care less. Since his disastrous marriage to a high maintenance beauty who spent half her life in the gym and the other half at the hair dresser's, he had decided that looks were not the most important variable in the equation.

"To hell with looks," he had said early one Saturday evening in a bar that specialized in losers. He was working on his third boiler maker. He seldom drank to excess, but the discovery of his wife's affairs still felt like a raw wound. ("Plural," she had corrected him when he accused her of having had one.) Surprising, given the paucity of their sex life. Or rather, not surprising. He was too far gone to think it through.

"Are you talking to me?"

Despite the fog engulfing his brain, he took note of the challenging tone and turned to squint at a thin, sallow-faced woman sitting two stools away. She had on a loose-fitting, cream-colored dress with purple squiggles that made him think of larvae. He leaned slightly in her direction and rested both hands on the bar.

"I was referring," he said with a slur, "to my recently departed wife."

"I'm so sorry," the sallow woman said, considerably chastened.

"Oh no. I meant departed from our bed where she was simply taking up space."

He tipped back the glass of whiskey, finished it and chased it with a long slug of beer. They were the only people sitting at the bar. It was too late for the afternoon drunks and too early for the night-time ones.

"My wife," he continued, feeling that a more detailed explanation was called for, "was a great beauty ... an incredible beauty ... right up there with the young Elizabeth Taylor ... a real head turner... but cold enough to freeze a night in the tropics. That's probably why we didn't have kids." He hiccupped and took another slug of beer. "The sperm probably froze mid-stream."

He glanced around the dimly-lit, pine-paneled room and back at the woman, who was staring at him. Plenty of time to make friends, if that's what she wanted. The bar would not get crowded until the blues band started around nine.

"Kissing her," he continued, certain of the woman's approbation, "was like putting your tongue on an ice-cold pipe. We used to do that as kids ... to see if our tongues would stick."

He slid into the empty stool between him and the woman.

"Maybe," the sallow woman said, "if you didn't drink so much..."

"So which bank do you own?" she asked, interrupting his reverie.

The fire glowed in the stove. The wind whistled outside. Jethro stirred. He drank some tea. Why would she think he owned a bank?

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"I work for the Wells City Bank and Trust Company."

She sat up straight.

"Hey, that's my bank ... I mean your bank has my mortgage and twenty-five-cent checking account although the balance may not be quite that high anymore. I haven't looked in a day or two. They've got a branch in Mercersburg."

"We have branches all over the state."

"You don't say. And what do you do at the bank ... since you don't own it, which I must say is a great disappointment to me."

"I'm Deputy Senior Credit Officer."

"What does that mouthful mean?"

He took another swig of tea and relished its warmth sliding down his throat and into his stomach. How many times, on a series of first, but never second, dates had he been asked that question. By now, he had an answer that didn't overstate his importance but also didn't make him look like a toady. The women who asked the question wanted to verify that he was financially secure. He doubted that was the case here. More idle curiosity and a chance to rib him again. For sure, this wasn't a first or any other kind of date. He just wanted to get out in one piece.

"I help set credit - that is, lending - policies; I approve loans up to a certain amount; and I oversee our loan servicing department."

"That sounds pretty important." She leaned forward and put her hands on her knees. "Say, can you cut me some slack on my interest rate? My mortgage is killing me."

"Not even the Senior Credit Officer could do that."

"Only the owner, eh?"

He smiled, showing teeth discolored by the large amounts of coffee he consumed. The nicotine stains had, fortunately, disappeared. He had taken up smoking as a testament to his wife's infidelities; he quit when he got the Wells City job. New beginnings.

"We're a publicly-traded company, meaning we have lots of shareholders, so there is no one owner. As to interest rates, they are set by a committee that takes several factors into consideration."

"Like what - not my measly income that's for sure?"

"Market conditions, the competition, our cost of funds, Federal Reserve discount rates and our lending spreads. All go into determining our mortgage rate."

"In other words, how much the traffic will bear."

"There are larger forces at work."

"You don't say. Well, I'm getting quite an education and all because I gave a fellow a lift in a storm." She ran her hands through her hair and arched her shoulders in a stretch. "Tough day at work." She massaged the back of her neck. "Well, you may not be the owner ... or the President ..."

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but I got the Wells City Bank and Trust Company Deputy Senior Credit Officer for dinner and overnight company. Fancy that."

The fire was burning low and the heat diminishing. She got up and thrust another log into the stove. The wood was dry and immediately caught fire. Heat surged through the grate.

"We're going to have to keep feeding this fire all night."

"I figure that means me."

"You figure good, Mr. Deputy Senior Credit Officer, but that's to be expected. I'll lend a hand, but you'll be closest 'cause you'll be sleeping on the sofa. My bedroom is upstairs." She made a V with her thumb and forefinger and stroked her chin. "By the way, I'm sorry we can't offer you a private privy unless..." She smiled mischievously. "...you care to use the big one out back."

"I'll leave that to Jethro." He studied the fire as if trying to remember something. "He was out when we arrived. Is there a dog door?"

"In the corner." She nodded in the general direction of the kitchen. "I close it at night. Otherwise, you might find yourself sleeping with a raccoon. Actually, the critters, of which we have a goodly share, don't generally come too close. Jethro smells them and sets up a racket to beat the band. That's another reason why I'm not worried about the cooler. The bungee cords were for decoration and just in case."

"Just in case?"

"Some raccoon thought scrambled eggs was worth putting up with Jethro's racket." She stood up. "Time to start supper. How do burgers and home fries sound to you?" She looked down at him. "You're not one of those vegetarians, are you? We don't take to them down here. Lucy knows what everybody buys; and if your cart don't contain forty per cent meat and forty per cent potato chips - with the rest going to sundries - it can mean big trouble."

He got up and realized that he was not used to looking up at women.

"I'm as good a carnivore as the next man. In fact, I doubt you'll find a more dedicated meat and potatoes fellow in the whole state."

"That's reassuring. I'll mix a green pepper in with the home fries - don't want anyone around here getting scurvy." She took a few steps towards the kitchen and stopped. She turned back. "I'll show you later what to do if the fire does go out. You'll wake up quick enough because it will get chilly faster than you can sneeze."

She took from the fridge an onion, two large potatoes, a green pepper, an egg and a package of ground beef.

"Yep, fine," she said, testing the package of beef. "Stayed cold enough. Good thing too: otherwise we'd have had to go shoot us a steer; and I don't know about up in Wells City; but down here, they don't take to that sort of thing."

"I suppose you really do keep a gun."



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"Rifle next to my bed ... and I sleep light as a cat." She thought a second. "Maybe, I'm the one who should worry about a serial killer."

"Nah: last banker that was a serial killer was J.P. Morgan."

"Who?"

"He was the founder..."

"I know," she said, enunciating each word, "who he was."

In a nook next to the kitchen door were several large, plastic buckets filled with water. She poured a little into the sink and handed him a razor-sharp knife. After washing everything, he peeled the onion and potatoes and then chopped everything into large squares. Meanwhile, she fed Jethro and then mixed a raw egg into the ground beef. She put two skillets on the stove and poured in some Wesson oil. The smell of frying onion and potatoes spread like a mist through the room. He felt ravenous. She formed two thick patties and gently laid them in hot oil in the second pan. The mix of odors reminded him of the diner in his hometown. With both his parents gone, he had not been back in a couple of years.

"What kind of work do you do?" he asked, leaning back against the counter.

"Assistant in a vet's office. Small animals. Don't want to be involved with the big ones. Not sure I'd enjoy my burgers quite as much. She gave the skillet with the potatoes a shake. "A while back – quite a while back, I waitressed in a couple of nice restaurants."

"In the south?"

"Yep."

"Where?"

"North Carolina."

"Coast ... mountains ... center of the state?"

"North Carolina."

"Right."

She flipped the burgers and tossed the chopped pepper in with the onion and potatoes. She bent over the skillet and sniffed. "Good." She went to the fridge, took out two beers, opened them and handed him one. He took a long swallow. Suddenly, Jethro growled and stood frozen, facing the dog door. The ruff on the back of the shepherd's neck stood straight up. Beer bottle suspended in air, he listened hard because he thought he had heard a howl. She placed a hand on Jethro's back and stroked him. The only sound for an instant was the sizzle of the meat and home fries. Then he heard the howl again, closer and more distinct. Jethro's growl deepened and took on a menacing tone.

"It's all right, Jethro," she said. "They're not that close."

"Who's they?"

"Coyotes."

A shiver went up his back.

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"Not wolves?"

"We don't have much in the way of wolves; but the coyotes are bad enough. They tore apart the Crenshaw's spaniel ... two houses down the road. They left a pile of fur and some bones. Their twelve-year-old found it. Upset the boy pretty bad. I keep an eye on Jethro when he goes out at night."

The howls grew louder, more frequent and more intense. Jethro set to barking, and she quieted him with a firm command.

"Sounds like they're coming together for a hunt," she said.

He took a long gulp of beer.

"You're going to need another one of those." She set the kitchen table and put out two funnel-shaped glasses. A shield was etched on each one and over the shield: *Gabe's Tavern*. She filled them with beer. "Supper we do in style."

Perhaps it was the long day or the dim lighting or the heat that had now spread into the kitchen, but he couldn't remember a better burger or home fries.

"The raccoons and possums," she said, "are only a shade better than the coyotes. They'll tear a dog apart if they're cornered ... or simply feeling mean. My Daddy took me coon hunting once when I was about ten, and it was only the once 'cause I refused to go again. Now my brother and me grew up with guns 'cause Daddy loved to hunt; and I liked going after quail or dove, but raccoons and possums turned out a different sort of thing.

"It was late and pale moonlight filtered through the moss hanging from the big oaks. There were three of us: me, Daddy and Mr. Crawford – our neighbor who brought his two hounds. When Mr. Crawford turned 'em loose, those dogs took off like thunderbolts. We followed them through swamps and thickets and up sandy ridges studded with pine and oak. Mr. Crawford could tell from their sound when they had the scent and when they'd treed a coon or possum. He and Daddy ran like blazes and I busted a gut keeping up. By the time we got to this big oak standing by itself on a little rise, I thought my lungs would pop out of my chest. The hounds were scratching at the tree and yapping to beat the band. I looked up and saw these two beady red eyes staring down at me. I reckoned the possum was not so much scared – being, or so he figured, out of reach – as pissed off at having his evening disturbed.

"Daddy fired his twelve-gauge, but it just sent shot scattering through the branches. Then Mr. Crawford had a bright idea. He lit the moss with a cigarette lighter and "whoosh" up went the flames like a Fourth of July rocket. Really mad now, the possum scampered down the tree, and the dogs went for it. You never saw such a set-to - with growling and hissing and screeching thrown in for sound effects. The possum more than held its own. Daddy circled the fight trying to get off a clean shot. I think the possum was about to finish off one of the dogs and break free when Daddy got his chance. He singed one of the dogs, but he got the possum. I put my hands over my eyes and cried. I had been rooting for the possum." She

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winked at him. "We got a passel of coons and possums around here, but I don't root for 'em anymore."

He stared at her, his mouth half-open.

"You had a rather different childhood than I did," he finally said and forked a potato into his mouth.

"I had a different everything than you did."

They ate for a while in silence. When she finished the burger and potatoes, she wiped her plate with a last chunk of roll. He followed suit, savoring the tangy juices. He drained the remaining beer in his glass and felt like belching.

"Care for another beer?" she asked.

"No thanks. Two is my limit."

"You're not driving."

"No, but I have to walk to the sofa."

She laughed.

"We should put a couple out in the snow. Otherwise, by tomorrow, they'll taste even worse than instant coffee."

"The English like their beer warm."

"I always figured they were peculiar. You been there?"

"Once."

"New England's as close as I ever got and that was a long time ago. I'd like to see more of the world."

They cleared the dishes, and she heated water on the stove. She poured a little hot water into the sink and soaped the dishes and skillets. She rinsed them using as little water as possible.

"Shall I dry?" he asked.

"God'll do the drying," she answered, putting the dishes and skillets in a plastic rack. "What was it like?"

"What?"

"England. What else?"

"Sorry: I'm a bit worn out." He thought back on the trip. "The countryside was green and neat as a pin. Narrow, twisting roads ran through high hedgerows. Driving along them was like some video game. The pubs in the small towns were quaint and cozy and everybody was friendly. You hear how bad the English food is, but I loved the pub food. London was very exciting. I went to museums during the day and a play almost every night. They were cheap and fabulous. One night I had Indian food so hot I thought my eyeballs would twirl like a slot machine and my ears steam like an old-fashioned train. I had a great time. I needed it."

"Sounds like you went alone."

"I did." She waited. He rubbed his chin and felt the long day's stubble.

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He took off his tortoise-shell glasses and polished them on a piece of paper towel. He rested his hands on the top of a ladder-back chair. The second one just had two diagonal cross-pieces. "It was right after the divorce."

"Figures." She let a second go by. "Long time ago?"

"A few years." He chewed on his lower lip. "More than a few."

"Kids?"

"Nope: part of the problem."

"Yours or hers?"

"Not that kind of problem."

"How do you know what kind of problem I meant?"

"I figured, you know, a physical impediment," he said.

"There could be all kinds of problems. Why don't you just tell me?"

"I don't know you."

"Best kind of person to confide in."

"My wife didn't find love-making all that interesting – at least, not with me."

"I see."

"Although she did get pregnant once. Made me reconsider my views on Mary and the Holy Spirit."

"Excuse me."

"The virgin birth."

"Ah."

"Anyway, she had a miscarriage – or so she told me. She took great care after that, the few times she let me near her. She knew how badly I wanted a kid."

"I'm sorry." She opened the fridge. "Let's get that beer on ice." She put a six-pack in a plastic garbage bag and, as an afterthought, added two large bottles of Coke. "Caffeine and alcohol: what more do you need?" She tied the end of the bag into a knot. "Warm Coke makes warm beer seem like a treat. Do the English drink their Cokes warm?"

"Not a clue."

"Another idol bites the dust. I figured you'd know everything about a place – except how to get there."

No wonder she lives alone. Who could take that tongue for long? Not that I haven't put my foot in my mouth more times than I care to remember.

He took the bag from her hands. "I'll take care of it." He put on his boots, carried the bag outside and thrust it into the snow on the other side of the stake from the cooler. She watched from the kitchen door.

"Another cup of tea?"

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"Please."

"I didn't mean anything by it."

"Forget it," he said.

They returned to the armchairs. Jethro positioned himself close to the stove. The heat from both the stove and the tea coursed through his body. They sat silently. One of the lanterns had gone out, but she had not replaced the batteries. Lassitude crept over him. He was dead tired and in a stranger situation than he could ever recall. *She's humorous and certainly hospitable but so unpredictable: smiling one minute, jabbing you the next. Sure hope they get the power back by morning.* His eyes fell on the radio. He sat up as if struck by lightning.

"Does that radio operate on batteries?"

"Could be. Never tried."

"Maybe we can get some news on the storm."

"If that's all you want, step out the front door."

She pulled out the cord and tried the radio. Nothing. She pried open the small, rectangular cover on the back. "How about that," she said, looking at four, corroded C batteries. "I must've put them in when I bought the thing. I'm not much these days for sitting on a blanket listening to Johnnie Cash." She hunted up new batteries while he wiped out the sticky cavity with a damp paper towel.

"...with accumulations so far of a foot or more and drifts up to four or five. The County Highway Department – God love them – is getting a start on some of the main roads, but no sooner have the plows cleared a stretch than the white stuff is piling right back up. With the storm not expected to subside until sometime tomorrow afternoon, it may be Sunday before all the secondary roads are cleared – hopefully in time for church. So folks, make yourselves as comfortable as possible and, unless it's an absolute emergency, please stay home. It's treacherous out there. We have reports of a few vehicles going off the road, and highway crews have rescued several stranded motorists. Power is out throughout virtually all of De Walt County. We're operating with a generator. Another six to eight inches of snow is expected by the time the storm moves out of the area and heads for the Eastern coastal areas. Good luck Boston, New York and Phile. That's the national and local news. If we still have fuel for the generator, we'll give you an update at nine. Now back to easy rock to help while away those long, dark hours."

She switched off the radio .

"If you'd stayed put, you might've been rescued."

"And missed that burger?"

"You are good company," she said, and her smile softened her features.

"Thank you."

Silence fell again. He nursed his tea. He could think of nothing to say. Her brow was furrowed with thought. They sat like a couple so comfort-

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able with each other they have no need for talk. Or like one that has exhausted the few subjects of mutual interest.

"How did you lose your job?"

"I like the way you beat around the bush."

"What would be the use of that?"

"Why are you so sure I lost it?"

"I don't keep up with the world of finance; but last I heard, it was the New York Stock Exchange, not the Wells City."

"Your point being?"

"You're playing me along, right? I'd hate to think you were patronizing me. Neither Jethro nor I would take kindly to that."

At the sound of his name, the dog lifted his head.

"I'm not patronizing you."

"Well, I thought you'd be faster; but okay, I'll dumb it down."

"Much obliged."

"Any time. So to be a mite clearer, unless things have changed since I was last in high finance, Wells City is not the center of the financial universe."

"You're right. I dropped that one. The town in New Jersey where I was Deputy..."

"Senior Credit Officer."

"Wasn't the center of much of anything, but I spent ten interesting years at a mid-sized bank until I woke up one morning without a job. AKA: I got fired. I had started my career with a big New York bank, but I preferred the size of the New Jersey operation. We did some stimulating, but manageable, business. And I liked living in the suburbs. It felt like a community, something I'd been short on. The New York crowds gave me indigestion."

"We think of the suburbs as crowded."

"I imagine you do. I was the Deputy; but I ran the show. My boss had been around forever and was closing in on retirement. He had never been exactly a workaholic and now he just wanted to coast - which was fine with me. I planned on coasting right into his job."

"So what happened?"

"This deal came along: local construction company building a chunk of condominiums. The numbers didn't work so I had a chat with the loan officer proposing the deal. He acted very squirmy and suggested I go back to the drawing board. He said the coverage ratios in terms of interest and total debt service were more than adequate. I studied the projections carefully again, and his numbers still didn't look good enough - plus I thought some of his assumptions about revenues and costs were optimistic, to say the least. So I spoke to my boss. For us, it was a sizeable loan. He said the same thing as the loan officer. I told him I had looked twice and couldn't

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support the deal. He said that would be a mistake. I replied that, mistake or not, I had been very thorough in my analysis and would have to express my views in Credit Committee. He looked at me strangely but said nothing further. I spoke out strongly against the deal in Committee. In response, my boss said I was being stubborn and reminded the Committee how much money the bank stood to make on the deal in fees alone. I was the only "no" vote."

He shook his head and sighed.

"I figured that was the end of it, but my boss convinced the Executive Vice President in charge of Administration that I was becoming increasingly obstreperous and not pulling my weight. I was gone within a month. Turns out both the loan officer and my boss were on the take. Came out when the construction company went under a year later."

"Boy, were you ever dense."

"Are you always so lavish with compliments?"

"Hey, I'm no Deputy Senior Credit Officer. Closest I ever got to college was a frat party where two of the brothers – both drunker 'n hell – simultaneously tried to remove my panties." She paused. "Neither succeeded. So I haven't had your advantages, but your deal makes a shithouse smell good."

"Sure ... in hindsight."

She grinned at him.

"In hindsight ... foresight ... and any other kind of sight."

"Since you're a financial genius, lay it out for me."

"Don't go getting your knickers all twisted up." She cleared her throat. "Way I see it, when the loan officer dude said you were making a mistake, he didn't mean your fancy-ass numbers. He meant don't mess with this situation. Who comes from New Jersey? The Sopranos – right?"

"Not everyone in New Jersey's in the rackets."

"I guess there's a housewife or two that's not. When your boss and the loan guy both had the exact same story, odds were they were in cahoots."

"I couldn't conceive of two long-term, well-respected officers of the bank being dishonest. Greedy maybe but not on the take."

"And I can't conceive of anyone being so..." She searched for the right word. "...so trusting. I take back the bit about your being dense. I may be dense, but you don't get to be Deputy Senior Credit Officer of a piggy bank by being dense. What you are is over-the-top trusting."

She got up, opened the stove door and carefully laid down a log. He took comfort watching the flames shoot up. They had barely made a dent in the pile of logs.

"We've got a ton more – at least two cords – in the garage and a shed behind the house. Just be sure you get up to pee frequently." She sat back down. "Trusting ... not dense. Am I right?"

"I don't want to give you a flip answer." He rearranged himself in the

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armchair. He stroked the worn fabric. A few threads came off. He rubbed them between his fingers, twisting them into a ball. They looked at each other. Her eyes were a pale blue. She had a patch of discolored skin on her left cheek. He let the ball of thread drop to the floor. She waited. "I was in that particular situation although I had an experience early in life that should've taught me otherwise."

"Sounds like a snow-storm kind of story."

"I'd need more than another beer."

"The beer is just a cooler away."

She scratched Jethro under the chin. The shepherd sat up and put his paws on her arms – the picture of total contentment.

"Thanks but I'd rather not."

"Too bad." She continued to scratch the dog. "At least, answer me this: after that fiasco, did you start handling things differently at work?"

He pulled at his lower lip – a habit he found annoying.

"I've become more skeptical in evaluating what loan officers tell me."

"Sounds like a step forward." She grinned. "Don't suppose the bank sent you an apology ... or offered to hire you back."

"Never heard from them. A friend sent me a clipping. I tried not to gloat."

"Unsuccessfully, I hope."

The firelight shone on his face. He had high cheeks, thick eyebrows and a straight nose. His hair was dark and curly and long in the back. He liked to think of it as distinguishing him from his fellow Wells City bankers who favored short hair cut straight across in the back.

"I think a lot these days not only about what I'm being told, but also who's telling me."

"Wish I had done that."

"Sounds like a snow-storm story."

"Does it, now?"

"Guess we're both passing."

The silence grew awkward.

"I listen hard and pay attention to non-verbal communications. I've developed a sixth sense about loan officers."

"And here I thought only women had a sixth sense."

"Now you know better."

She glared at him.

"That didn't come out quite as I intended."

"I should hope not, Mr. Sixth Sense."

"Let's start again," he said. "Are you a trusting person?"



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She got up abruptly.

"Let's get a weather report," she said.

She took a heavy, checked wool coat off a peg and handed him his overcoat. They pulled on their boots. They stood on the front porch staring silently into the snow-filled night. Not a star could be seen. Snow had drifted onto the porch to form rippling dunes. He could barely see beyond the porch. If he walked away from the house, he would be lost in minutes. A gust of icy wind blew snow into his face. He turned up the collar of his coat. He shoved his hands into the pockets.

I'd be a goner if she hadn't come along. The car must be knee-deep in snow by now. Getting it out will be all kinds of fun.

"They're going to have a fun time with your car."

"Are you a mind reader?"

"Don't I wish."

From the end of the porch, she shone a powerful flashlight beam in the direction of the garage. She swept the beam in a broad arc.

"We better clear Jethro a space by the kitchen. Got two shovels under the stairs. First winter I was up here, left them in the garage. Had a doozy of a blizzard right off the bat. I don't often make the same mistake twice."

"Let's get at it," he said.

Later, she brought down from upstairs a pillow and two heavy blankets. One was dark green and the other tan and bright orange with a figure of a man surmounted by a headdress. The borders contained squiggly lines, circles and stick figures of deer and hunters with bows. He studied the figures.

"Got it on a trip out west. Long time ago. Don't remember much about it."

"I've heard we remember everything if we can only bring it to the surface."

"Who wants to remember everything?"

She spread out the blankets and tucked in the edges. He checked his watch: a little after ten-thirty. He was so tired he could have slept on the floor. She gave him a bottle of water. "In case you've a mind to brush your teeth." She placed a log in the stove. "That should keep you 'til first pee."

She blew out the candles and put a flashlight on the coffee table. With a second flashlight, she climbed the stairs. Her tread sounded heavy. He waited a while and then went up to the bathroom. The doors on either side of the bathroom were half open. After flushing the toilet with the water from a bucket, he went back downstairs and settled onto the sofa. He felt sure he would have strange dreams: trudging through endless snow, driving off a bridge into an ice-choked river, fleeing from a mad woman with a scythe. Her streamed behind her, and she leered at him with jagged teeth. Instead, he fell right into a deep, dreamless sleep, savoring the warmth from the stove. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep when a chill crept up his legs. He told himself to get up but instead, tucked up his

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legs. The cold was worsening when he felt a sudden surge of warmth. He was drifting off, but some notion insisted he open his eyes. She was standing, back to the stove, and watching him. He sat up with a jerk.

"I thought beer made you pee," she said.

"What are you doing?"

"I would have thought it was obvious. I called out a couple of times when it started getting cold, but nada. So I forced myself out of my comfy bed."

"You startled me."

"Maybe now you'll keep the fire going."

"How long were you standing there?"

"About as long as it would take to slit your throat." She laughed harshly. "Don't freak out. Just kidding."

"I'm not laughing."

"Neither was I when I got out of bed."

She stomped up the stairs. He hoped to hell he'd be gone tomorrow and would chalk it up as one of life's odder moments. In future, he would check his map ... and the weather forecast. He got up twice after that to feed the fire. Once he went upstairs to pee. He woke at six-twenty, folded the blankets and laid them on one end of the sofa. He placed the pillow on top of the blankets. It was still snowing hard; but the visibility had improved. From a front window, he made out a long, sloping field surrounded by dense stands of pines and spruce. Blue ridges marked the horizon. A good couple of feet of snow had fallen. He thought he saw the outline of the road but couldn't be sure.

He walked around the room looking at the paintings. All were landscapes: woods, fields, a crumbling red barn, a pond with some naked boys in the background sunning on a rock and one that particularly drew his attention. A dark, threatening forest flanked a meadow with tall grass waving in bright sunlight. The contrast of light and dark had a startling effect. Wild creatures must be lurking in the forest, ready to spring at the least provocation. Blue ridges faded into a limitless distance. It resembled the scene in front of her house – just no snow. A woman in a white dress walked through the field holding a young girl by the hand. Neither of them seemed aware of the dangers lurking in the forest.

The same artist had done all the paintings. They reflected a talented but untrained hand. At least to him although he knew little about art. She must be the painter. He wondered if she used one of the upstairs rooms as a studio. He flicked a light switch up and down: no power. He went up to the bathroom. No power there either. He sighed. A small painting, which he had not noticed the night before, hung over the toilet. It showed the front of the house. Leaving the bathroom, he happened to glance through the half-open door on the left. No one was there so he went in. A neatly made-up twin bed stood against one wall.

Two posters of wild-eyed rock singers hung over the bed. He had no idea who they were. The orderly piles of papers and books on a dark-

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stained desk appeared not to have been touched for a long time. He picked up as if to test its weight. He put it down. In an eight by eleven frame on the desk, an eleven or twelve-year-old girl flashed a toothy, braces-filled grin. She looked on the verge of shaking her long, blond pony tail. This same girl frowned from a second photo atop a three-shelf bookcase. She had sent the pony tail packing and now sported shoulder-length hair cut in bangs across her forehead. He guessed her to be a year or two older and far more sophisticated. He had such trouble figuring people's ages, especially young people. He bent to examine the books.

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

The icy, measured fury in her voice stunned him. He straightened up. Her eyes bore into him like an electric drill. He half expected to find the rifle pointing at his heart. Her woolly dressing gown, flannel pajamas and fleece-lined, down-at-the-heels slippers didn't fit with the rage in her face.

"The door was open."

He knew as he spoke that his answer was inadequate. Her expression didn't change.

"Which meant you could trespass?"

"I didn't think of it as trespassing. I came out of the bathroom and was curious."

"Go downstairs."

"Your daughter?"

"Yes."

"She's very pretty."

"I said, 'Go downstairs'."

She stepped aside. He hurried from the room. Downstairs, he added a log to the fire and sat on the sofa. Her anger bothered him. What had he done that was so awful? Just looked at a couple of photos and books. Something bad must have happened to that young girl. That's the only possible explanation. He had heard about dead children's rooms becoming shrines where nothing is changed for years on end.

I guess strangers don't belong in shrines.

It also occurred to him that there were no photos of a man around. Was she divorced? Widowed? Or had there never been anyone? Just a one-night stand that resulted in a now-departed daughter. That could make even a saint prickly.

Of course, I'm making all kinds of assumptions here.

When she came downstairs, she was wearing jeans, heavy socks and a plaid flannel shirt under a V-neck sweater.

"I want to apologize," he said, "for going into your daughter's room."

"Forget it."

She lit the stove and put on the kettle. She turned on the radio.

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"...the storm is now expected to taper off by noon and end early this afternoon by which time two or more feet of snow will blanket De Walt and surrounding counties. The National Weather Service is already billing this as the 'storm of the Century'. They must mean the last one because this one's got a ways to run. Power may not be back on in the Mercersburg area until tomorrow or possibly the day after."

He groaned.

"Hush," she said.

"A lot of roads will be cleared by this evening; but folks, please stay home for the rest of the day. You're only going to be a nuisance if you start driving around. The stores, restaurants and Cineplex are all closed tighter than a drum so think Abe Lincoln and read a book by the fire or tell stories to the kids or play Monopoly. Also, take care of your arm muscles because, unless you've got a snow blower..."

She switched off the radio.

"Unless you'd like some country music?"

"That's okay."

"They'll get to us last. Always do. Not a dozen houses on the whole road, and I'm right at the end."

"Think my car will be all right?"

"If we can find it."

"That's reassuring."

"Don't worry. There's not that much snow; and besides, I know exactly where it is. If, by some miracle, Bud does pull it out before you contact AAA, he'll just tow it down to the shop and wait for you to show up."

The kettle began to whistle. She put tea bags in two mugs and poured in the scalding water.

"Are you the artist?" he asked, indicating a painting.

"Yes." She swished the tea bags and regarded him almost shyly. "Do you like them?"

"Yes, especially the one with the woman and..."

She stopped swishing the tea bag. Her expression became distant, as if she had been transported to someplace far away both physically and mentally. He would have liked to swallow his words but could think of no where to go except forward. He stumbled over his next words.

"...the ... little ... girl."

She walked to the window over the kitchen sink. She stared at the falling snow. He had no idea what to do or say. He looked at her broad shoulders. She turned back to him.

"How does scrambled eggs and bacon sound for breakfast?"

"Good."

"We'd better dig up that cooler then."

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Only a foot or two of the stake remained visible. With snow pelting his face, he dug until the shovel clanged against the cooler. Fortunately, the snow was dry. Together, they dragged out the cooler and carried it into the kitchen.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“Drink your tea. You’re on dish patrol.” She laid strips of bacon in a hot pan. They sizzled, and his mouth watered. “But you can take the cooler back outside. We’ll bury it later.”

She mixed eggs in a bowl. He watched as if observing a chemistry experiment. The smell of the frying bacon reminded him of his childhood. On wintry days when school had been cancelled, he and his sister would sit in the breakfast nook drinking milk while his Mother fried up bacon and eggs and buttered toast. The sun pouring through the windows heated the room like an oven. It made him sleepy. But he snapped to when breakfast was over, and they put on their snow suits. Covered from head to toe – he in red, his sister in white – they careened on their sleds down their street, which dead-ended in a thicket. The last house on the street, they had a good fifty yards of sledding space. All the neighborhood kids gathered in front of their house. A few mothers prevented the sledding from becoming a melee while chatting and drinking coffee from steaming mugs. If he was nostalgic about anything, it was those days sledding.

“You’re quite good, you know,” he said.

“At frying bacon?”

“No,” he laughed. “At painting.”

She smiled, and he thought she might have actually blushed. “Thanks.”

“How did you learn? Did you take classes?”

She flipped the eggs.

“I had a lot of time on my hands for a spell.”

They sat at the kitchen table over second cups of tea. He had put the dirty dishes next to the sink and was filling a pan with water when she said:

“Let’s have a another cup of tea first.”

He wanted to ask about her daughter but couldn’t decide how to begin. He found this unusual for a man who made a living asking questions. As the silence dragged on, he decided to jump, feet first, like he did at the old mine quarry near his college. After his first few jumps, he had scorned the lower ledge, at about ten feet, and gone off the one twice as high. He screamed as he plummeted past the cliff wall – out of equal parts pure joy and pure terror. He imagined – no, hoped – she was expecting the question.

“Did something happen to your daughter?”

She remained silent.

“Tell me to shove off if I’m being intrusive ... or insensitive.”

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"That was my first reaction, but maybe not. I'm not sure how to answer." She fell back into silence. After a minute, she said: "No, I don't think anything's happened to her."

What kind of answer is that? She's alive, but...

Then it struck him.

"She's grown up?"

She nodded.

"You don't know where she is?"

She nodded again. Her eyes took on a look of overwhelming sadness. A tear formed. She wiped it away with a fierce brush of her hand.

"I haven't seen her for eleven years."

"Why?"

She hesitated. Her eyes now seemed scared ... no, terrified.

"She never forgave me for killing her father."