Merry Christmas

Sara felt winter in the icy drafts under the cracked window frames of her condo, the sheet of frost on her windshield, so predictable Sara almost forgot that she needed to take the small plastic scraper from the passenger side, under the seat, and carve it away, piece by piece. She had run out of antifreeze months ago, and one of the windshields was missing, torn off when it had caught in the dented gap between the hood and the rest of the car.

Slamming the door so that a large chunk of ice carved off the small side window from the force, she jammed the key into the hole beside the wheel, turning it to rev the car to life, a sputtering, pained sort of groan. She looked back at the house to recite her mantra*: the oven is on, the door is unlocked, someone has snuck in and is hiding in the downstairs closet, the gas pipe is blocked by snow, the alarm has disconnected, the refrigerator is open...* When Jeremy had still been paying for her therapy, Melissa, with her high voice and brightly colored barrettes, had told her in an animated voice that voicing her fears could help dissolve them. “Like cotton candy!” she had chirped. Sara jiggled the radio knob angrily at the memory and heard the halting voice of the weather forecaster and his strangely pitched monotone,

“Winter storm warning. Lake effect snow expected. Plan on slippery road conditions. In addition, areas of poor visibility are expected. Total snow accumulations of 12 to 16 inches, with locally higher amounts possible. Avoid road travel if possible.”

Sara backed out of the short driveway, crunching over the freshly fallen snow. It made a squeezing, gasping sound as tire tracks marred it. Sara was grateful for the blinding white. She and her neighbor Samantha had been arguing for weeks whether the roadkill squirrel strewn into thin layers of crushed organ and fur was on the other’s side of the double driveway or not. It had lain there for weeks, almost a month, preserved by the cold, and Sara had gotten used to averting her eyes, blocking it. Avoidance had become her new ritual, a turn of the head, a squint until the mass of tire-tracked limbs faded to grey and red blurs on her vision.

Now, she fought the urge to look away from the pristine snow, and she wondered, inexplicably, if there had ever been a squirrel at all, or if, somehow, the snow would melt to reveal smooth asphalt, unmarred. She had a sudden painful urge to knock on Samantha’s door to ask her, to make sure. But Samantha wasn’t home, Sara remembered, she had gone to stay with some relative with a bigger house and brighter Christmas lights upstate, where, Sara knew, she would hang ornaments on a tall tree and gossip about her brother’s new wife and forget, or at least try to forget, that she lived on a street in a town where arguing about the property boundaries of roadkill was one of the more glamorous things to do.

The roads were empty as Sara made her way carefully through the streets. The radio blared Christmas music, echoing tinny harmonies through the small car. Sara realized, suddenly, that it was Christmas Eve. The snow was coming down thickly now, coating her windshield far quicker than the solitary wiper could push it to the side. She drove slowly, watching the semicircle open and close in front of her, the white pushing in as soon as it cleared. She imagined that if she stopped driving, she would be covered, buried, until there were feet of snow on either side and above. Maybe this was it, this sense of needing to move to stay able to move, that actually propelled people. Jeremy had been like that, always fidgeting, always looking around as if the world was changing in the time it took to glance away. Fears about the tailpipe being blocked, pouring noxious fumes into the car, nonwithstanding, Sara felt she could brake right then and there, lie back in her seat and wait for the spring to melt through the ice around her. And then, as soon as the snow had run into the gutters, she could just start the car and keep driving, over the dandelions between the cracks in the asphalt, the spring sun pushing through the lingering winter clouds. In this fantasy, though, she was never driving through this town. The snow had melted to reveal her childhood streets. Here, the old basketball courts behind the elementary school; around this corner, the library where she had met him; down this street, the house her parents had built on the sloping city hill, the small planter boxes where they had grown marigolds every year, bursting orange and yellow petals like fire.

She adjusted her grip on the steering wheel and snapped herself back to reality, bringing her head back to bounce against the seat, refocusing her gaze through the blurry glass. Turning into the supermarket parking lot, she was half surprised to see the lights on. She had almost forgotten, through the muffled white and the dark houses, that she was not alone.

Sara knocked the snow off her boots and glanced up at the security screen, her small face staring down at her, sagging skin and messy hair hanging in a tangled mass above her shoulders. A haggard looking saleswoman greeted her, name pinned to her chest like a weapon, some declaration to the world that she had a reason to be in this empty store at this empty hour. Sara was surprised to see nobody else there, but, she supposed, it was 8pm on Christmas Eve, and this part of town normally cleared out on the holidays. It was not the kind of place people travelled to, only away from, minivans pulling out of garages and automatic lights installed by the same company going on in synchronized harmony, then off and on and off again.

Sara piled gallon jugs of water in her cart and stacked cans of refried beans beside a 100-pack of matches. She know that her basement was already full of these, but it was this ritual, this methodical stacking that reminded her that she was safe, that humanity had advanced to the point where 24-hour stores gave her all the necessities of survival. But it was more than that. Each winter, as the town was buried under the first heavy snowfall, she became ever more confident that she had earned life, that she had worked for it. It was this driving, this stacking, this metallic cart scraping over linoleum floors that made her feel as if she was some ancient creature, trekking across tundra horizons.

She passed the hair products section, averting her eyes from the cucumber scented, 2 in 1 antidandruff shampoo, sitting, as she knew it did, on the second to bottom row, five from the left. It was the problem with living in the same town so long, like listening to a tape made decades ago, it had the sense of familiarity with all the heaviness of memories, pressing down as thickly as the wet snow she could see falling by the streetlights through the high windows. She started as she heard the bell above the door ring as another customer entered, and Sara turned the corner carefully, to the hallmark card aisle, hoping to catch a glimpse. It was a notion that, if there was someone else here, this late, they would have something to share, some glance or small talk that could remind her that this town was not as empty as it seemed.

She browsed through the cards without looking at them, through thank yous and happy birthdays and anniversaries and baby showers and feel better soons, hands skimming over cartoon hearts and glitter stars and word bubbles and thick pink text and faux-watercolor flowers. It was almost ten minutes later that she emerged, furtively, pushing her cart as naturally as she could through the aisles.

The woman was standing with her back to Sara as she moved into the next aisle. Her hair was short and blond, cropped close to her head, but soft looking, falling limply to brush the back of her neck. She turned at the sound of Sara’s cart and Sara flinched in surprise.

“Melissa?”

The blond woman cocked her head in confusion at her name, staring at Sara with an almost fearful look. Sara realized that it had been almost five years since they had seen one another. “It’s Sara…” she trailed off, unsure of how else to define herself to a woman to whom she had spilled her deepest fears: *I think that someone could be down there for ages without me realizing, I think the fire could spread, someone could take the TV or my mother’s pearl necklace, I think he might leave me…* And more than that, someone who had confirmed them. Sara forced her thoughts away from that to avoid glaring at Melissa and fixed her face into a faux smile, moving to back up her cart, ready to give some apology for mistaken identity, to escape back to the safety that the high shelves provided, the mazelike separation.

But Melissa’s eyes had jumped now in recognition. “Of course!” Her voice was the same in the way that the print of Monet’s Water Lilies propped against the wall in Sara’s bedroom looked the same as the original, it was reedy and harsher than it had once been, high and clear, still, but animated only in a false sort of crescendo and fall. “How have you been?” She asked it tentatively, seeming to draw each word back into her mouth almost as soon as she had said them, as if sucking in smoke from a cigarette.

“Fine,” Sara responded shortly, knowing that a glimpse into her cart likely proved something else, piled to the very edge with cans of food and water and, on top, a card with a picture of a squirrel wearing a tiny stethoscope with the caption “Get Well Soon!” printed across the bottom. The moment of almost manic hilarity that the thought of placing it on the snow above the flattened driveway roadkill had induced in her had been enough for Sara to prop it elegantly upon the 24-pack of energy drinks.

“How’s Jeremy?” Sara meant it to be vindictive, cutting even, but under the high-pitched hum of the fluorescent lights, her words just sounded soft and wary. Melissa stiffened, pulling her cart slightly back towards her.

“Things are…well, I actually thought about calling you…I…”

“To apologize?” Sara felt her words grow stronger, angrier as they shot through her pursed lips.

“No, I mean, I should have! But that’s not…I wanted to ask you, I mean…” She trailed off again with a pained expression and Sara noticed her knuckles had turned white on the cart, her hands so cracked and dry they were almost bleeding. Was that a shadow of a bruise on her jaw? Sara hovered on the verge of asking, then glanced below Melissa’s hands to her cart. In it was a solitary pack of m&ms and a cucumber 2 in 1 antidandruff shampoo.

“Is that all you’re getting?” Melissa seemed surprised at the change of topic,

“I just…I wanted to get out for a bit.”

“The roads are dangerous. You really shouldn’t be driving in this weather.”

“You’re here too.”

“I’m picking up a last-minute gift for my son.” This lie shocked Sara even as she said it, and, despite the fact that the contents of her cart clearly proved otherwise, Melissa’s eyes widened at her statement.

“Son?”

“Yes,” Sara could see it now, “three years old, big sesame street fan. I was hoping to find an Elmo stuffed animal, maybe even Big Bird. Big bird’s his favorite.” She laughed. And then, because the lie was tasting sweeter with every word, “my husband wanted to do it, but I insisted he stay to put Timothy to bed. He’s much better at it.” She chuckled warmly, “and it’s especially hard tonight; he’s so excited!” She combed her eyes over the other woman’s face to gauge her reaction. Melissa was looking down at her almost-empty cart, hands still gripping ever tighter on the plastic handle as if she was trying to pull it off.

“I should go,” Melissa’s voice had lost the false chirpiness; it was low and soft and for a moment, Sara wanted to reach across the gap between them, take one of Melissa’s white-knuckled hands, ask her about the darkness under her eyes, the shadow on her cheek, but, instead, she began to pull her cart backwards.

“It was nice to see you, Melissa. Merry Christmas.” And then, because she could not resist the vindictive wave of pleasure it gave her, “Give Jeremy my best.” She did not see Melissa’s reaction because she had reached the end of the aisle and spun her cart around, pushing it, quickly, up to the register.

As she brushed the snow from her window and got back into her car, Sara caught a glimpse of Melissa through the glass doors, standing with an unmoored look and downcast eyes under the flickering lights near the front of the store. But then, the car had turned, moving out into the darkness, and all that was left behind was falling snow.