

26 Miles Across the Inland Northwest

Earth Day 2011

The doorknob is cold to the touch. Its brassy finish gives no indication of the impending shock to her warm fingers. It is dark inside the garage. The sturdy family car awaits its purpose, quietly reassuring. She raises the garage door, and shields her eyes from the blinding glare that assaults them. A blast of icy air and a flurry of crystallized snowflakes give cause to linger for just another moment, inside the shelter of the garage.

She climbs into the van and notes the heavy crust of blackened snow on its undercarriage, which had not dissipated, despite its overnight accommodations. Reverse, ever so slowly, into the daylight, which feels like an unwelcome delivery from the dark womb of her suburban home.

Her eyes adjust to the brilliance that first assaulted them. Pupils dilate, drinking in the landscape that has materialized overnight. The last storm was two weeks past. It had been a weak predecessor to the previous night's blustering whiteout. The slushy remnants of that earlier event have frozen now, and the road ahead of her is treacherous with invisible moguls. The shocks of the van creak and the tires crunch over the fresh powder, creating the day's first impressions as she accelerates slowly down the quiet street.

She cracks the window, the crisp air at first feels sharp against her cheek, but as she inhales, it expands with a pleasant sensation and fills her lungs with a clean burst of life. The landscape is soft and rolling. The evergreens are heavy with snow. Each branch bears a thick burden, as if the clouds themselves fell from the sky into the boughs of the trees, waiting to cradle them while they rested for a moment here on earth.

The road curves past the Stewart's farm, where icicles hang from the barn, in a cascade of crystalized stalagmites. The cattle do not raise their heads as she drives by, instead, they cluster together and their breath fills the air with frosty vapor.

It is so quiet, she muses. Even the rumble of the van's engine is muted as they drive along. A single doe appears on the ridge to the west, and she raises her head gracefully. In that split second, she is silhouetted against the stark white backdrop. The doe's slender body arches away, and she retreats into the naked tree line. She disappears as quickly as she materialized.

The highway looms ahead, and the van's wiper blades do their best to combat the flakes as they fall, faster and thicker. She grasps the steering wheel tighter, white-knuckles and rigid spine, as if her posture could keep the car from losing traction on an invisible patch of black ice. The landscape passes now in a blur, and every muscle in her body is tense. She leans to the right, as a menacing 18-wheeler suddenly encroaches on her personal space. Black smoke belches from the cab of the truck, but even the heavy exhaust cannot overpower the driving snow, and the truck is soon swallowed by the storm. She is alone again on the road, and allows herself to ease up on the gas for a moment, as the van shudders and wobbles in the gusty wind.

She breathes a heavy sigh of relief when the exit ramp finally comes into view. The downward gradient into the city is the last of the highway's smooth, clear path. Downtown, the haphazardly cleared streets and the gaping potholes offer a surprise around each corner. Densely packed buildings crowd the street, jostling for the most prominent position. Snow is piled on their roofs and porches, making them look like menacing, chiseled faces with blank, closed eyes. The pristine powder has given way to a charcoal speckled sea of chaos. A blinking plow gurgles behind her, like a bully in line. Pushing whatever it finds, tumbling and sliding, into an imposing berm where the sidewalk used to be.

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She stops at a familiar corner, waiting for the light to change. A crow perches on a city garbage can, and its head disappears into its dark recess. A man stands near her driver's side door with a sign made from a wrinkled cardboard box. Hard Times. Anything Helps. She has no change, so she focuses on the black hole of the garbage can, swallowing the black feathers of the crow. She cannot make eye contact. But she remembers her warm house, and she wonders where the man waited out last night's storm. When the light turns green, she sees him turn away from the traffic, and rub his hands together for warmth.

She crosses one set of railroad tracks, then a traffic light, then more tracks. This is a city of trains. Weather does not seem to hold back their determined progress. In many places she's been, the train tracks blight the landscape, but here, in this city, they are seamless to the terrain. A bridge arches over a wide ravine, and an orange engine glides across the expanse, leading its dull gray and brown brood in an obedient, winding line.

This commute is a familiar one, and she allows her mind to wander for a moment. Suddenly, a loud crack sounds to the left, and she startles her from her mental detour. Tap the brakes, and awaken to see the splintering dismemberment of an old oak tree. The weight of the snow has taken down a heavy branch. The splinters are jagged and fresh. Her mouth turns downward at the sight, and she accelerates again, up the last incline before she reaches her destination.

Traffic has picked up now. The van strains upwards, in a caravan of creeping vehicles trying to ford the storm to reach the summit. She sees the parking lot ahead, bordered by imposing man-made mountains of frozen snow. These lumpy glaciers will dominate the urban landscape until late spring, when they finally succumb to the persistent heat.

The interior of the lot is not plowed. Luckily, her destination is not far from the entrance to the development, and the van pioneers its own route to what she believes is a legal parking space. The snow is a convincing camouflage to the ugliness underneath. It would be a kindness to call the apartments dilapidated, but under the early morning's forgiving grey light, and the curtain of precipitation, the front door to his building looks almost welcoming. She trudges to the portico that shelters the entrance, her boots leaving a distinctive trail behind her. Her feet are the first to break the smooth perfection on a weekend morning, when everyone else has surrendered to their beds, and left the outdoors to the bravest souls.

She knocks and listens to the heavy shuffling behind the thin door. It swings open with a gust of cigarettes and last night's dinner. The exchange is brief. No words are necessary. She takes his small hand in her own, and squeezes it tightly.

There is still so much of the day to share together. Let's go home, she says. He smiles and the snowflakes come softly to rest on his thick eyelashes. It is the loveliest sight she's laid eyes on all morning.