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## The Snow Queen

The car is a Gremlin, a metallic green gone hazy with age, pitted with road salt. At Simone's look around its interior, the driver—*Jeremy*, he introduces himself formally as she settles herself on the passenger seat—explains he's the third, maybe fourth person to own it. He reaches out with his free hand to punch in the stubby black bulb of the lighter, gives her a look and pries it from its socket on the dash.

He lights a cigarette, offers the lighter's red coil her direction. "Ice a foot thick," he marvels. "That takes work, man."

Simone's own cigarettes—*pack-of-Marlboro-Reds-in-a-box, please*, a nonchalant sing-song that tripped from her tongue when she walked into the drugstore around noon to buy them—nestle in one pocket of her shapeless green parka. To smoke would mean removing her gloves, finger by soppy woolen finger. The Gremlin's heater is no match for the cold; to take off anything at all would be as revealing as a striptease. She shakes her head. The work Jeremy's talking about is water's, or frigid weather's, but his voice is so pleased she can't help but think he means his own. He pauses. "Now all I got to do is wait for dark."

On the other side of the windshield lies the

landscape Simone has lived with her whole life: comfortable, rounded hills, an occasional barn set down in the curve between them. Houses set into fields like pictures from books, except where manure smears the old snow. She holds herself upright to keep from leaning into the passenger-side window of the Gremlin, where a greasy circle from someone else's head has been pressed across the glass at chin height. What Jeremy intends is—she doesn't know. Is it illegal? She hopes so, but suspects it isn't, just ill-advised. She cuts her eyes toward him, looks away. The seats of the Gremlin seem to have been slashed a while back. By hard use or something more deliberate? She likes her faint unease, of not knowing. The seats in back leak stuffing.

He had let the Gremlin wallow in the tar-colored slush at the curb when he spotted her, then leaned across the seat to lever open the passenger side door, textbooks and notebook paper cascading onto the floorboards. "Late to class?" he'd speculated as she wordlessly slid in. "Jesus, it's cold."

She'd shrugged. She was late to class, because she hadn't even gone to school that morning—but that was nothing Jeremy needed to know.

Not that he seems to care, much. He has a

story of his own. A sad and dull one, of course—why else would anybody bother to pick up a girl trudging along the side of the road, rendered genderless by the bulk of her coat? He isn't half bad-looking, with tiny wire-framed glasses that glint in the afternoon light and make him look more studious than the story he's still telling her indicates that he is; soft curly hair that probably smells good. His face is tender with cold, or else disappointment.

"When my dad finds out two semesters worth of tuition money's down the tubes, he'll kill me. Absolutely kill me."

Is he proud or sorry? Simone imagines the series of financially unsatisfactory transactions that must've brought the Gremlin into his hands. Is he living in it?

*All signs point to yes*, she thinks. The cupholder holds two convenience store cups etched with a retreating tide line of coffee. At some point, all cars, even used Gremlins, contain within themselves some sort of grown-up value. Like ... medical bills. Or, she imagines, houses. Or two semesters of UW tuition money spent—on what? Beer, weed? Girls meaner than Simone has learned how to be yet? Jeremy's father is a *fool*—even she can see you shouldn't give a guy like Jeremy the money for his junior year tuition and expect him to do the right thing.

He hasn't set foot in class since early October and now it's January. His reckoning is at hand. But first...

"Where'd you say you wanted to be dropped off?" he asks. "State Street?"

She looks over at him. "I'll go, too," she says, pushing back the faux-fur hood that obscures her face.

*Armor*, her mother called it once—the contents of the little tubs that sat atop the chest of drawers in the bedroom she shared with Simone when she was six, maybe seven. Simone had watched from the top of the bed, knees drawn to her chest. Her mother stood in front of the mirror attached to the back of the closet door. Dipped a fussy little brush into the slim, hinged container that held eye-shadow, surveyed her face with clinical detachment, stroked color onto her lowered eyelids.

The University had decreed that the tiny boxes of the bathrooms of its drab sought-after apartments across the road from the lake, including the one where Simone's mother's knees bumped the underside of the sink when she sat down on the toilet, could only be repainted a medicinal, toothpasty green by its grad student tenants. The living room must remain a flat gray that reflected the lake that lay on the other side of the dark scrim of trees like their own personal ocean.

The smear of color, the mask, her mother was meticulously painting onto her face both drew and repelled Simone; the pearly spill of powder across the top of the chest of drawers was both seductive and distasteful. Her mother made a face at herself in the mirror, turned away. Came across the room to sit at the edge of the bed.

*Other mothers...* Simone thought, sneaking a

look at her mother.

Everything rode on this, her mother was saying, studying her reflection in the mirror, enough reason right there for armor. Her Defense would start at three. No one could predict how long it would last. *Hours*, her mother muttered, drawing on her panty hose, foot extended like a dancer's. Simone would have to use her key to get in after school. Did she have it?

Simone felt for the twist of yarn around her neck, retrieved the key that dangled from its loop from inside her T-shirt. *Good*, her mother said, giving its gleam a brief sharp look.

It's a beautiful thing, the ice. So says Jeremy, who by now has tamped at least two bowls of weed into a little carved wooden pipe and sucked in the smoke until the interior of the car goes cloudy with it. Simone's eyes water, she reaches for the window crank. Discreetly. She isn't exactly opposed, it's just hard to breathe.

In forming, the ice takes one substance, compresses it, and creates another.

This is true, she thinks, wondering if she's stoned herself. Because it's suddenly marvelous to her as well—that the surface of the spreading lake that's lain at the edge of her consciousness all her life can be stoppered up like this, by such a cold solid seal, thick enough to drive on.

Jeremy knows a place, an out-of-the-way boat ramp, an easy slope. Because that's the problem, he says. That's the hard part. How to actually get down onto the ice. Once you're on it, as long as you steer clear of pilings you'll be fine. Around

docks and bridges, the ice might be weaker.

He's from up near Menasha; he knows things like this. "Bluegills," he says and Simone yawns. They're what you catch, ice-fishing. She imagines his childhood: a trailer, snowmobile parked in front. Or cows, she thinks. Cows are more likely, because under the rich grassy reek of pot, there's something wholesome about him. She was lucky in her choice of rides. Dark falls quickly, this late in the winter.

Not quick enough for what Jeremy plans, though. They've been killing time since he picked her up. Driving along the periphery of campus, past the slumping rental house he said he shared with a succession of roommates until he couldn't make rent for three months in a row. *Wanna go by your place?* he leered, an attempt she could tell was perfunctory. He nosed the Gremlin through neighborhoods, out Highway 151 toward Columbus and back, the same route he'd have to take to Menasha in the morning. Simone felt lulled by the thump and grip of the tires.

Now he's pulled over in parking lot of the First Congregational Church; busy in the pale late afternoon light with his penknife, scraping resin from the screen of his little pipe to resmoke.

"Like the prodigal son," she says, thinking.

He looks over without comprehension. "Going home to your dad," she adds. "It's like, in the Bible."

Jeremy's just a means to an end. And the end is? She yawns again, shakes off sleep.

He looks over at her, slantwise, and reaches for

her hand. His nails look worried at, the pale half moons at their ends bitten down to the quick. On the other side of the windshield snow has started falling again, softly, in efficient brushstrokes.

He drops her hand, twists on the wipers. Their rhythm is comforting, like a heartbeat.

“My dad’s going to kill me,” he says, staring out at the snow. Simone looks over, thinking: *God, he goes on. If his dad doesn’t fucking kill him, I might.*

*A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.*

By now, Simone knows the ridiculous slogan for what it had been — a battle flag, arced across the front of one of the frayed T-shirts her mother had worn, back when they lived in the one-bedroom apartment sliding toward squalid across the road from the lake, probably not all that far as the crow flies from this neighborhood she’s ended up in, of impervious ranch-styles.

The apartment had been in University Married Housing, but Simone’s mother had not been that — married. Instead, she was in the midst of her Prelims. Or her Orals. Or something, about to need Defending. The subject of her mother’s dissertation had weighed down her pockets with stones and waded into a river. How, Simone wondered, would her mother defend this? What exactly did defending it entail? While her mother was doing it, whatever it was, Simone walked herself to school, then home in the afternoons, and let herself into the apartment with the key hung around her neck. Made supper for herself from jam spread across whole-grain bread. *Other*

*mothers*, she thought as she walked through the woods, the short-cut that led home. She felt incapable of finishing the thought. Other girls.

Every night she climbed into bed alone, and the living room on the other side of the bedroom wall filled with people who sat cross-legged on the floor, flicked cigarette ash into the curled half-moon of a smoked glass ashtray. *Study group*, her mother explained some nights. *Consciousness raising*, others. *Charette*. When her mother slipped into the bed, Simone was comforted by the rich red wine smell of her breath.

*Armor*, her mother called it; the hooks-and-eyes and thick elastic bands of her brassieres, the slick length of the dress retrieved from the back of the closet.

It’s as much a part of the shift of the seasons as boxing up summer clothes and pulling out the woolen ones—to replace warm weather’s lightweight tires with a set of the snow tires that make driving possible in winter.

Everybody knows that. Except maybe Jeremy. Who’s paying now for his lack of foresight, and for the second’s inattention that made him think an unshoveled driveway in a darkened neighborhood above the lake might be a good place to turn around when they hit the dead-end.

It’s got to be close to one in the morning. Simone’s slid behind the wheel of the Gremlin. Jeremy stands in front of it in the dark, shoulder pressed to its chrome grille.

*Cat litter*, she’d said practically when they figured out the tires weren’t going to do anything

other than spin. Sprinkling cat litter, or sand, or something, on the churned snow behind the tires might help them gain traction. Even somebody who grew up without a dad could figure that out. But getting some would mean a slog along the snow thrown off the ribbon of road by the snowplow, out of the neighborhood and back to the store Jeremy thinks he saw, would mean leaving the car behind in the driveway. For the moment, the windows of the house at the end of it are dark, but how long can that last? She listens to the frustrated whine of the engine and eases her foot from the accelerator. At a certain point in the evening, it had just become easier than not to, to accept the little pipe he handed across the gearshift, to take the tallboy bought not at the convenience store where cat litter might be purchased, but at another, an hour or so back.

“Fuck!” Jeremy shouts abruptly. “Gun it, Jane!”

At one end of the house, lights flash on.

Jane, she’d said when he asked her name after she first climbed into the Gremlin. She mashes her foot to the floor. The Gremlin shoots backwards, tires loosed from the snow’s clutches. Jeremy’s planted face first in it in front of the car, illuminated by the headlights, a second’s glimpse before she has to cut the wheel — sharp — and angle the car into the street. He scrambles up onto his hands and knees; faces the windshield. His chin is awash with something dark — blood. As if the snow isn’t snow at all, but flesh to be devoured. She’s glad he’s not in the car. He clambers to his feet, swipes at his face with one

snowy coat sleeve.

“Fuck, Jane,” he says when he finally yanks open the door and she gives way, sliding across the seat to offer up the wheel. “Don’t you know how to drive?”

When Simone opened her eyes that morning, her mother was standing beside her bed, head tilted to one side as she slipped earrings into the holes in her ears. She looked at Simone, her tousled head, the rumpled blankets, the pillow bruised with smears of eye shadow and winced.

“When did you come in last night?” she asked. Her eyes were fastened on something far away; a checklist, a schedule, a flight plan.

“Dunno.” Her mother was leaving for yet another weekend conference. The topic of the paper she’d deliver, as well as the location she’d be going, was information Simone had lost track of, if she’d ever known it in the first place. She rolled over, studied her mother’s shoes, the anomaly that almost made her nubby wool skirt and nondescript blouse seem transgressive. They were harsh-looking and high-strapped, footwear Simone had recently realized that the doomed writer who was her mother’s specialty might have killed for. Her mother raised her fingers, touched her ears gently. “There’s food in the fridge,” she said. “My Visa’s on the counter. Just for emergencies. Mrs. Dearborn across the street said you can call if you need to.”

“I know, I know.” Simone burrowed deeper into her nest of blankets.

“I’ll be back Monday before you get home

from school. You've got forty-five minutes before the first bell rings. Go."

Her mother lowered her face, to be kissed, and Simone, dutiful, kissed it. Felt on her lips the faint grit of powder.

Even after the front door closed behind her mother, the scent of her lipstick lay faint on the air, like her second self, a ghost. Simone leaned over the edge of the bed and felt on the floor for her jeans.

They're on the right track now, Simone and Jeremy, feet crunching through snow, Jeremy's breath a smoke that mingles with his words — she can see it in the bright bar of light thrown by the headlights of the Gremlin idling behind them. Maybe Jeremy's not as dumb as he looks, maybe he's actually a person who has the capacity to learn from his mistakes. He had had to backtrack and double back, had had to nose the Gremlin up and down a dozen streets along the lake, but now they've found the snowy boat ramp, and he's suddenly, uncharacteristically cautious. Though what can she know about his character? All she's done is sit in a car with him.

"Got to make sure the way's good and clear," he says, pausing at the demarcation between sloping snow-covered asphalt and flattened snow-covered ice, huffing a little. "It'd suck to end up down here with a puncture." Being out in the dark icy air after so much time spent in a warm car makes Simone's eyes tear, her lungs ache. The two of them stand shoulder-to-shoulder, surveying the remote, snowy expanse that spreads in front

of them.

The lake reflects back the pale light, of streetlights set far back in the firs, of the moon grazing their tips. It's two things at once: the promise of depth, an unmarrable surface. "We used to come down here," Simone says, struck by the fact. "When I was little."

Nostalgia's a habit, picked up, a hook that reels a certain sort of person in. But that doesn't mean she doesn't feel it all the same, a sudden cold, creeping. She curls and uncurls her toes. The stubby black Docs she's wearing might've been a bad choice of footwear for this— but then she hadn't planned on this when she woke up this morning, even though she'd pulled on two pairs of woolen socks when she got dressed, just in case.

"If you knew the way down here, why didn't you say?" Jeremy stomps his feet and swings his arms.

"Not here," she says. "Not this exact place. But the lake." Her mother's successful dissertation defense had meant moving for good out of graduate student housing. Later, tenure had made a bungalow in the professorial neighborhood west of campus possible. Simone had walked past its pristine snowy lawns like blank faces this very morning.

But, *could we go too?* she had always asked her mother as she stood at the apartment window watching the fathers troop downhill from the apartments, shovels over their shoulders, the first morning the ice froze enough to skate on. Her mother would tap another cigarette from the

pack centered on the coffee table, a slim figure in black stirrucked ski pants who sat on the sofa with one leg folded gracefully beneath her. The long lick of her black braid knocked against her spine when she leaned forward to stub out her cigarette.

“Well, yeah, the lake,” Jeremy says now. “Where else is there? To go?” He sighs, a theatrical heaving of shoulders she can feel through the bulk of their jackets.

“What?” she asks sharply.

“Nothing.” But his voice is muffled; he turns away and starts back to the Gremlin, the sound of his boots loud in the snow. The door shrieks in icy protest as he pulls it open.

Simone stares out at the lake, body held still. Resignation creeps through her like the cold. Lucky, she’d thought hours ago, when she was still just sitting in his warm car. But nobody’s luck holds that long. He’s going to drive off and leave her. Her mind ticks through her options. The city buses stopped running hours ago; getting back home will mean a long slog through the darkness. No way will she stick her thumb out this time of night. She’s no fool.

But there’s no rev of the engine, just the sudden fall of darkness, like a curtain, when he switches off the Gremlin’s headlights. Her eyes adjust; the lake in front of her takes on the flat white of bedsheets, an almost-glow. “Better,” he says, coming back to stand beside her. “Let’s just walk out.”

It had been easy enough to slide into his car. If he’d been someone else, she knows she wouldn’t

have. But to follow him out onto the lake is something else all together. She throws a look back at the car’s protective shell, splays her numb hands and balls them into fists.

He’s already talking as she steps out onto the ice behind him, his words snatched by the wind and borne back toward her. The snow underfoot is ridged and furrowed; no hint that there’s anything as impermanent as ice underneath it. They could be anywhere. The thought comes, unbidden. Jeremy’s voice is the exact same pothead drone it was in the car. What’s he saying?

That car doors, left unlocked, can offer up packs of cigarettes, forgotten on dashboards. All it takes is reaching a hand in. All it takes is feeling along the crevice between plastic dash and chilled windshield. He says this like there’s an art to it, some technique. Payphones, he elaborates, sometimes offer up spare change, a bit of wisdom that proves he has been sleeping in his car.

He waves a hand at the lake, then plunges it back into his pocket. They can’t see them, but somewhere out there are the shacks ice fishermen build hastily every winter from scavenged scrap lumber, rickety boxes on skids that shelter them from some sort of biting wind that has him hunching his shoulders. Who knows what they might turn up out here? A quart of High Life left behind by some half-drunk, half-frozen guy who gave up and staggered home when the bluegills weren’t biting? A carton of cigarettes?

“We could’ve driven out here,” he says. His voice is tinged with regret. “Sometime before the ice thaws, I will.” He turns in a half circle,

then sets off again, facing into the wind. The snow underfoot is grainy, black-and-white. Simone throws a look back at the shoreline. The trees huddle together, a mass of dark shadows punctured here and there by pinpricks of light.

*But this is the thing*, she realizes. Once your eyes adjust to it, even *darkness* stops being a blank space. The farther they get out onto the ice, the more the dark thins out and gains texture. They've probably walked past the point where nylon twists of rope and blue-and-white floats mark off beaches, come summer. Past the place where certain sorts of girls always sun themselves on floating wooden docks. Not Simone, never Simone, of course — she's got her weatherbeaten green parka and the hair she dyes so dark every six weeks or so in her mother's bathroom sink. But she knows girls like that, tan and toothy. Those docks are encased in ice somewhere behind them, covered over with snow, indistinguishable from their surroundings.

If this were water, she would never be able to swim this far. She stubs a toe, rights herself and Jeremy's suddenly there, helping her over the tumbled ridge of snow that tripped her. It blocks their way like the wake thrown by a snowplow, heaped up high enough that they have to giant-step it. He cups a hand solicitously under one elbow.

The barricade of it buffers them from the wind on the other side.

"What is it?" she asks, straining her eyes. The snow underfoot seems finer-grained than the white stuff piled up around them.

"Skating rink?" Jeremy wonders. He takes a tentative step forward. "Been a while, though, since it was cleared off. I can't even slide." He comes back to her, patting down his jacket pockets.

It has been a record winter, as far as snow goes. Somebody's worked hard to keep this straggling square cleared to its icy bedrock. On impulse, Simone kneels down. Above her, a match flares and there's a soft, soothing suck and exhale, as Jeremy cups his pipe to his face.

"Pr'oly a blanket inside one if those ice fisherman's shacks," he says in a choked voice. He tilts his head, exhales, and she realizes there are three shacks, not far beyond the rink's snowy border.

"That's all right," she says. Her voice high and clear. She stops, surprised by how well it carries. "I'm not cold." She puts the woolen fingertips of one gloved hand to her mouth and yanks with her teeth. Her hand is already numb; she'd thought the breath of the cold on her naked skin wouldn't make much difference, but it turns out it does, especially when she leans over and starts brushing the snow back. Jeremy sits down awkwardly beside her.

"We used to come out here to skate," she says. "The lake, I mean. Me and my mom." She's struck by the memory, even though she's not sure it's of her mother at all. It could be that it's a memory, transplanted into her, of someone else's. Of black hair whipped from the long braid by the wind, and someone skating slowly backwards, gently tugging a kitchen chair that she, hobbled

by hand-me-down skates and weak ankles, clung to like a towrope.

She lays her hand flat on the ice she has uncovered. She'd expected flatness but what's under her hand has been corrugated into ridges,

is water arrested, a live thing.

"All that water, underneath us," Jeremy muses, as if he knows what she's thinking. It's that observation—not him—that makes her lean toward him and put her cold lips to his. 