



FLIPd

FPLD's Literary Anthology



WINTER *Wonderland*



WINTER
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FREMONT
public library



FLIPd

FPLD's Literary Anthology

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THE GIFT YOU DESERVE

by Kari Pohar



The defroster in my car couldn't keep up with the cold. Snow whipped around outside and covered the icy roads. When the stoplight turned red, I gently pressed on the brake, but my car continued to move forward through the intersection.

Luckily, no one else in the small town was out. They were most likely tucked into their homes and warm. I shivered as the chill seeped in and challenged my heater to battle. The cold was winning.

The few small motels I passed displayed their no vacancy signs. It was my own fault, really. When I headed out on my roadtrip, I didn't bother with details like places to stop for the night. In my mind, there would be plenty. The hotel world would be my oyster.

Except it hadn't been.

A wintery storm had blown into my path and disrupted my plan.

Now, I was in a tiny town with nowhere to stay for the night. It became obvious to me an hour ago that sleeping in my car wouldn't be an option. I would freeze to death before morning broke over the horizon.

The tiny town probably had one snowplow, if they were lucky and the roads were rapidly becoming treacherous. I needed to stop.

Restaurants and shops were closed and dark for the night. It appeared that the storm had forced most of their town to close early for the night.

A flashing light ahead of me caught my attention. At first, I thought it would

be an emergency vehicle, but then realized it was simply a store sign.

I neared the sign that read, “Open.”

The lights within the store were on, but the name of the store was covered in snow and icicles.

Quickly, I pulled into a parking spot and rubbed my hands together to warm them. Maybe I could just warm up for a few minutes, before I tried to find somewhere to stay for the night.

I dashed out of my car and my shoes crunched in the mounds of snow that were being formed by the harsh wind.

The moment I yanked open the store door, a blast of heat and cinnamon encompassed me.

A bell from above the door jingled and a woman said, “It’s a chilly one tonight!”

I stomped my boots on a mat before responding, “Yep it is. Your place is the only thing open.”

Then I looked around the shop.

Odds and ends covered every surface. Clutter was everywhere. A narrow path led through the store. The place was a total fire hazard.

From behind a large pile of books that rested on a counter an old woman hobbled around. She was bent over a hand carved wooden cane. It clunked on the floorboards as she walked toward me.

Her gray hair floated around her head in a cloud of curls and tangles. She wore a pair of light blue sweatpants and a white printed sweatshirt with a winter scene across the front.

“The snow is really piling up,” she said as she leaned to look around me and out the front cluttered window.

I nodded. “Do you mind if I hang out here for a few to warm up?”

“Of course. Of course,” she smiled up at me. “I’m Sonia. Sonia Kaufman and this is my shop, Kaufman’s Gift and Gable. Seems like fate brought us together tonight.”

"I don't think fate had anything to do with it. Just the storm," I replied flatly. From the look of the store, the shopkeeper didn't get many customers and was looking for a sale from me. I would happily purchase a piece of her junk to repay the woman for the warmth. It was the least I could do.

"Actually, I could use help finding something."

"As I said, fate. I have something here for everyone, if I only look deep enough," Sonia said. "Now, let me guess who you could use a gift for." She pressed two twisted fingers against her thin lips and hummed lightly.

"It's my..." I began to say, but she interrupted me.

"I said, let me guess." She looked me up and down. "You look like a young man who has experienced some kind of loss. A job loss, a breakup, or loss of someone."

"How? How did you know that?" I asked with surprise.

She waved her hand around in front of her as she said, "You just give off that aura. You also look profoundly sad. Nothing has gone your way recently. I've also never seen you in my store before, so you're not a local."

I opened and closed my mouth, at a loss for words. Instead, I just nodded at her.

"You want to reconnect with that person you've lost, right? That's why you're here in our small town, isn't it?"

"It is," I replied softly.

She clapped her hands together and bounced a little. "I knew it! I may be old but far from rusty.

Sonia turned away and began to mumble. "The perfect gift. Where did I put you?" She rummaged through a shelf nearest her. "Nope. This isn't your person. They'll come, I promise," she whispered to a cardinal statuette.

Slowly, she walked toward the back of the shop.

"Don't you want to know what the person likes?," I called after a few minutes. It was uncomfortable watching Sonia shuffle and step around mounds of boxes and clutter. "Could I help you?"

"No, dear! I've got it. You just stay up there. It's around here. I just need to find it."

With a shrug, I walked to a nearby shelf and reached out to peruse a stack of books, when Sonia's voice rang out, "Those are not for you. Don't touch, please."

With hands shoved in my pockets to prevent me from touching any of the artifacts, I turned around. Around the window, icicles had formed and created a frame to the wintery scene outside. The snow had piled and drifted against the cars and buildings outside. The wind whistled as it whipped through a crack in the door. I shivered and took a step back from the cold that seeped in.

"Ah ha!" Sonia cried from the back of the shop "I found it!"

What on earth would she think I needed and how much is this going to cost me? I asked myself. Hopefully, she takes credit cards.

Sonia's hair was covered in cobwebs, and her shoulder had a smudge of dust on it. In her hands, she cradled a worn white box, its lid torn and curling. "It took me a bit, but I knew it was here. The perfect gift. Now, I pride myself on always having a gift for everyone that walks in through those doors. It may not be the gift they thought they needed, but they always get the gift they deserve."

"The gift they deserve?" I asked. "What if a criminal walked in? What would you give them?"

"That's not for me to decide. The shop has a way of...guiding me to the gift. I'm just the shop's keeper. The things here let me know who they belong to," she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

"But seriously, what if a hardened criminal came in? What would the shop decide for them?" I pressed.

Sonia shook her head and a clump of dust escaped from her hair and fell onto her nose. Quickly, she wiped it away. "I would give that person whatever gift they were needing. If they needed to be reminded of their childhood, I would assume the shop would show me things that they had as a child. If they needed a warm embrace, perhaps an old sweater or perfume that a mother or grandmother had worn."

"So they would get something to comfort them, even if they were a serial killer?" I asked.

"Can't say I get many serial killers through these doors, sir," she replied. "Mostly, my customers are those that need or want to give comfort to others."

With an exasperated sigh, I asked, "What did your shop find for me?" The woman sounded like she had lost touch with reality a long time ago and I wasn't

sure how much longer I could tolerate her.

“Oh, yes!” Sonia said. With a wave, she beckoned me closer. She placed the box on the counter. Her crooked fingers shook slightly as she opened the top. Carefully, she reached into the box and slowly pulled out a snow globe.

My head dropped a little. Who even liked snow globes anymore? That wasn't the gift I would have chosen. I looked around the shop again and knew that there wasn't a gift in the entire store I would have chosen. For me or anyone else I knew. It was all garbage here.

The wooden base clunked on the counter as Sonia placed it down. “It may not be what you think you wanted but believe me. It's what you deserve.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned closer to the snow globe. Instantly, I froze.

A tiny church with a tall white steeple was in the center of the globe. I squinted and tried to move closer. As I inspected, the church was almost exactly the same one that I had been married in a few years ago. But that is a complete coincidence. Didn't most churches look the same, especially when they were mass produced?

The tiny groom vaguely resembled me, but I was an average guy that had a face that looked oddly familiar to strangers.

It was the bride that caught my breath. She was almost exact. From her bright red hair down to the blue sneaker that peeked out from under her dress. Her head was tilted back with her mouth open to catch the falling snowflakes.

Slowly, I straightened my back and looked at Sonia. “How?” was all I could think of to say.

A mischievous smile crossed her lips as she said, “The shop always has the gift you deserve. To me, it looks like you had a pretty special relationship. You were happy. I hope you can find your happiness again.” Her warm, dry hand reached out and grasped my sweaty hand.

I nodded briefly. It was the entire reason for coming on the roadtrip. Carefully, I picked up the snow globe and tilted it. The snow flurried around the couple and covered the landscape. It was a tiny winter wonderland in a jar.

There hadn't been a day that had gone by that I didn't wish I could be back to that day. It was the happiest day of my life.

A droplet fell onto the dome and I realized tears dripped down my face. Sonia placed a tissue in my hand. “Why don't you come back here and rest while

we wait for the storm to pass.”

Gently, she guided me to a back room of the shop. Instantly, it was a stark contrast to the front of the store. The room was neat and orderly. There were even labels on boxes.

“Why is this so neat?” I asked as I looked around with wonder.

“The shop doesn’t give me much room for organization. This is my only area that I have some control over. This place has a mind of its own,” Sonia said with a shrug.

With the snow globe still clutched in my hands, I sat in a chair. Within minutes, I felt my eyes grow heavy. I placed the snowglobe on a nearby table and let sleep take me away.

A few hours later, I felt Sonia tap me on my shoulder. “Sir. The roads are safe for you now.”

I startled awake and looked around, not sure of where I was for just a moment. When I finally remembered, I looked up at Sonia. She smiled warmly down at me and held out a neatly wrapped box.

With a stretch, I stood up and took the box from her. “Thank you. For the place to rest and for the snow globe. How much do I owe you?” I asked her.

Sonia guided me out to the cash register and rang me up. I was glad she didn’t just give me the snow globe. The moment she told me the price, I instantly forgot it. She could have told me it was \$1,000 and it would have seemed reasonable to me.

“I hope to see you again, soon, young man,” she said to me as I walked out of the store.

The roads had been plowed, but the rest of the world was covered in white. Snow sparkled in the sunshine. With the blue sky overhead, the entire town reminded me of a snowy paradise.

I uncovered my car from a mound of snow and hopped inside. As soon as I could, I shifted into drive and headed to my destination.

In silence, I drove and didn’t bother with the GPS. I knew the route by heart despite the time that had passed since I had been there last. Down side streets and through neighborhoods I went until finally, I pulled up to a black iron fence.

With the box in my hand, I stepped out of my car and trudged through mounds of snow. No one would have thought to have shoveled here, yet. Snow drifts piled against the trees, fence, and stones.

Crystal was in the corner of the lot, where she could overlook the field. I neared her and knelt down. Carefully with one hand, I swept away the snow that had gathered around her.

Carefully, I uncovered her engraved name on the pink granite headstone. Crystal Frost - January 4, 1986 - April 13, 2018.

"I miss you, Crystal," I whispered. The wind gently brushed my cheek. It was almost as if she had sent it to me for comfort. "I need to tell you good-bye. One final time." A tightness in my throat stopped me from continuing. The breeze rolled down my back.

"I'm getting married again," I finally said. The wind died down in an instant. "It wasn't something I had planned. I wasn't even sure it was going to happen, but I ran into this random shop today and found this." I held up the box and gently unwrapped it. "Somehow, it's us on our wedding day."

The chilly air ruffled my hair.

"I would give anything to have you back. You know that. I would choose you every single time. In every lifetime. But you left me too soon and I've found a glimmer of the happiness we had. This snow globe reminds me that I can find solace from my grief. I hope you can understand."

The snow at my feet turned my toes into icicles and I knew I needed to go. If I could stay with her forever, I would.

Gently, I sat the snow globe next to her headstone and said, "I love you, Crystal. And always will."

The Gift You Deserve

By Kari Pohar

First Place Winner





SECOND PLACE

PLENTY OF TIME

by J. F. Gram

The second hand jerks forward. Tick.

The EKG answers with a thin, stubborn beep.

I sit here with her hand in mine, wondering if I already said goodbye or only rehearsed it in my head. Did I tell her I love her, or did I just mouth the words into the sterile air? She made me better—I know that much—but does she know? Does the body hear what the ears no longer can?

Another tick.

Another fading beep.

The hospital room hums with soft machinery, the kind you don't notice until you're listening for every sound a body might make. Claire's hand lies in mine—warm still, though fading at the edges. Her nails are trimmed neatly, the way she always kept them. Even now. Even at the end. She was always put-together, even when the world wasn't.

Outside the window, snow falls in slow, drifting sheets—thick flakes that blur the streetlights into glowing halos. It reminds me of our beginning. A lifetime ago, and somehow also only last week.

"Claire," I whisper, leaning close enough for my breath to brush her cheek, "you made me a better man. I know I said it before, but I need you to hear it. You made me better."

She does not stir, but I speak anyway. Speaking to her still feels like speaking to the world.

Tick.
Beep.

We met in winter. Of course we did.

I was twenty-two, new to Chicago, and constantly cold. Claire was twenty-one and warm with a courage I didn't have.

We met each other at the little bookstore down the street from her parents' place. Claire worked there most afternoons. She had a laugh that drifted through the aisles, soft but sure of itself, the kind that made you smile before you even realized it.

Before long, I started stopping in almost every day, pretending to browse, flipping through books I had no intention of buying, waiting for the moment she'd look up and notice me.

One afternoon, after hovering too long in the mystery section, I finally worked up the courage to ask if she wanted to see a movie.

She said yes immediately.

After the show we walked out into a Chicago night so cold it made my teeth ache. The snow underfoot was dry and squeaked with every step.

"Do you want to walk along the lake?" she asked.

I stared at her. "In this weather?"

Her smile widened. "Especially in this weather."

We made our way toward the shoreline, the wind cutting across our faces like needles, the waves slapping frozen rocks with a sound like glass breaking.

"It all looks so dead," I muttered, pulling my collar tight around my neck.

Claire stopped walking and turned toward the lake. Snow clung to her lashes.

"It's not dead, Walter," she said softly.

"It's just waiting for its moment in the sun."

A gust of wind sent ice crystals skittering across the path. She tucked her hair behind her ear and added, "Right now it's a winter wonderland."

Before I could come up with something charming or witty, she reached out—just reached out—and took my hand.

Her fingers were warm despite the cold.

My breath caught.

The whole lakefront seemed softened into something quieter.

She looked up at me, eyes shimmering. "See? Winter's not the end. It's just the waiting place."

And there, on the frozen shoreline, hand in hand with a woman I barely knew,

something inside me thawed.

Tick.
Beep.

Claire's breaths now come thin and shallow, like she's already halfway into a dream. I smooth the blanket over her. Her hand rests loosely in mine, and I trace the lines on her palm with my thumb—the map of a life etched into skin.

I close my eyes.

Memory comes.

As it always does.

Tick.
Beep.

Our wedding was in June—warm breeze, peonies, her hair pinned loosely at the back of her neck, a few strands far too stubborn to stay put. She laughed when the wind tugged her veil into her face. I remember thinking that if she could laugh through that, she could laugh through anything.

We rented a tiny apartment with a kitchen so small only one of us could stand in it at a time. That never stopped her from squeezing behind me to kiss the back of my neck while I tried my hand at cooking.

On our first Christmas together, we couldn't afford a tree, so Claire taped green construction paper triangles to the wall in a lopsided spruce shape.

"Next year," she promised, "a real tree."

"Next year," I echoed.

Tick.
Beep.

We lost Diane in October.

The doctor kept his voice gentle.

The nurse held Claire's hand while I held our daughter.

She was so small. Too small. Her skin translucent, her lips parted like she might draw a breath if someone coaxed her hard enough.

"Can I hold her, Walt," Claire whispered.

My heart broke.

"Do you want to name her?" the nurse asked.

I looked at the tiny, perfect face in my arms and said, "Her name is Diane."

Claire let out a soft, stuttering sob. "Diane," she whispered. "Yes. Diane."

We placed a knitted yellow hat into Diane's casket.

After the funeral, she sat on the edge of our bed for hours, staring at her empty hands.

"It happens to lots of women," she said dully. "That's what they told me. We'll try again. There's plenty of time to try again."

But time is not a gentle god.

Tick.

Beep.

The miscarriages came quietly, like thieves slipping through a house in the night. Sometimes we barely caught the hope before it was gone.

Claire tried to be brave.

I tried to be strong.

Neither of us succeeded.

After the third miscarriage, she held up a tiny onesie her sister had bought—little yellow ducks marching across the front—and pressed it to her face.

Claire packed away the baby things in silence.

It was autumn when she did it, September light slanting through the blinds in thin, dusty lines, laying themselves across the small room we had once called the nursery. She didn't ask me to help. She didn't say she was doing it. I walked by the doorway and saw her kneeling on the floor, her hands gentle on the soft cotton of a yellow onesie, the one she'd bought the week we learned we were pregnant with Diane.

I stood there a moment, unnoticed. Claire didn't cry. She moved slowly, methodically, folding each tiny thing as if it were something sacred. Maybe it was.

She placed the onesie into a cardboard box and smoothed it with her palms. Her hands lingered—trembling but controlled. It broke me that she was trying so hard to fold away the last piece of a dream she still wanted.

I went to the kitchen instead of stepping in to help. Cowardice disguised as respect.

Later, I heard her in the bathroom.

The shower wasn't running. No toilet flushing. No sink. Just the sound of muffled sobbing—raw and strangled, the kind that comes from the bottom of a person. I stood in the hallway with my hand hovering over the doorknob, but I didn't go in.

Claire always cried quietly. That was the worst part.

She cried like she didn't want to burden me.

When she finally emerged, her eyes were red, but her hair was combed, and she'd applied a little foundation—like she used to before dinner dates, before the hospital, before the doctor said the words “nonviable pregnancy” with the same tone a man uses to describe a defective appliance.

“Hey,” I said, trying to make my voice gentle.

“Hey,” she answered. Her smile was thin, shaky.

We sat at the table. Neither of us touched the coffee between us.

The silence got deeper then, like the whole room inhaled and held its breath.

“Walt...” she said finally. “I'm sorry.”

“For what?” My voice cracked.

“For wanting something my body can't safely give. For pushing us. For hoping too loudly.”

“You don't have to apologize for that.”

“I do,” she whispered. “Because I saw your face in the hospital. The fear. The guilt. You were afraid for me. And I kept thinking: what if this is the last time? What if trying again... means you end up standing in a room with two boxes instead of one?”

A sharp pain hit behind my ribcage.

I reached for her hand.

“Claire, I just don't want to lose you.”

“And I don't want you to resent me,” she said.

That was when it hit me—how tightly fear had curled itself around everything inside me. Not anger. Fear.

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I'm sorry I got angry. I'm sorry I pulled away. I just—every time something happened, I saw all the ways I could lose you.”

Claire leaned across the table and pressed her forehead to mine, her hands cupping

my cheeks.

“We’ll stop trying,” she said softly. “We’ll let it go. We’ll... have our life. Just us.”

Just us.

I nodded. And she smiled, relieved—even though her eyes still shimmered with what-ifs.

Later that night, when she fell asleep against me, I lay awake listening to the quiet of the house, thinking of the cardboard box in the nursery closet. Thinking how fragile we both were.

Some nights—years later—I’d wake to find her sitting by the window, staring at the moon.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I’d whisper.

She’d shake her head. “Just thinking of her.”

“Diane?”

“Yes.”

A small smile.

“She would’ve been beautiful.”

Tick.

Beep.

Our marriage wasn’t perfect. No long love ever is.

We argued—over money, over my temper, over the games I watched instead of listening. I would snap, say something too sharp, and immediately hate myself for it.

“Why do you get angry like that?” she asked once, her voice small.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you,” she replied gently. “You just don’t know how to let go of the day when you walk through the door.”

I sat down hard, face in my hands. “I’m sorry.”

She walked to me, slid her hands onto my shoulders, and whispered, “It’s all right, Walt. You love me. That’s enough.”

And she forgave me—too easily, maybe.

She always forgave me.

Tick.
Beep.

It was the twelfth anniversary of our first date on the lakefront when she shook me awake at midnight.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Put on your coat.”

I blinked at her in the dark. “Claire, it’s late.”

“That’s why it’s perfect,” she said, her voice soft but insistent. “We almost forgot last year. I’m not letting us forget again. Not tonight.”

There was something in her tone—hopeful, trembling at the edges—that made me sit up. She wanted this. Needed it, maybe. One more small moment carved into the years. A way of telling me, without saying it aloud:

We still have time.

“Okay,” I murmured. “Let’s go.”

We stepped outside in our pajamas and boots, the cold wrapping around us like an old friend. Snow drifted down in slow spirals, soft as breath. The houses on our block were dark, curtains drawn, the world holding itself still for us.

“It’s a winter wonderland,” she said quietly, leaning her head on my shoulder.

I wrapped my arm around her and kissed the top of her head. “You always did like winter,” I murmured.

“No,” she whispered. “I like beginnings. Winter reminds me of that.”

Tick.
Beep.

Years passed.

Decades.

We learned to live with what we had, not what we lost.

Claire became the aunt every child adored. She’d show up with homemade cookies, or take the kids skating, or sit cross-legged on the carpet reading picture books in silly voices.

She mothered the world.

And she mothered me most of all.

We spent New Year's Eve on the couch most years—her under one blanket, me under another—watching the ball drop on TV while she leaned against me.

"Another year," she'd whisper.

"Another year," I'd agree, kissing her forehead.

Tick.
Beep.

When she turned sixty-five, I threw her a surprise party. She pretended to be annoyed, but she glowed all night.

Tick.
Beep.

On our golden anniversary—fifty years—we sat on a park bench watching the Navy Pier fireworks blossom over the lake, part of some summer festival I can't even remember anymore.

Tick.
Beep.

The decline was gentle.

She grew tired more easily. Forgot little things. Moved more slowly. But Claire had always moved slowly—thoughtfully—like a dancer, so it was hard to tell where tiredness became illness.

One morning, she didn't get out of bed.
Not from pain.
Just from weariness.

"I think I'm ready to rest today," she said.

And that rest became weeks.

I cared for her.
Read to her.
Kept her warm.
Held her hand.

Always her hand.

Tick.
Beep.



When the nurse told me it was time to call the family—
not our own, life having other plans for us—
but the nieces and nephews she had practically helped raise, and her sister who still
lived in the city,

I couldn't make myself reach for the door. Not yet. Not while her hand was still warm
in mine.

"Stay with me. I'm right here," I whispered.

She squeezed my hand—the faintest pressure.

Tick.
Beep.

The snow outside thickens—drifting, heavy, beautiful.

A young couple steps out of the hospital doors below, the woman carrying a newborn
wrapped in a pink blanket. The man opens the car door, grinning nervously.
A life beginning while Claire's ends.

I bend close to Claire's ear.

"Claire," I whisper, "it's snowing."

I wait.
Nothing.

"There's a couple with a baby," I add softly. "They look scared. Happy. Like we used
to."

Her breath stutters.

"The lakefront will be white by morning," I whisper.

Her hand twitches once in mine.

"Claire," I choke out, "I want my time back. I want my time back with you. Not to
change everything—just to turn off the damn game. To listen more. To hold your hand
every time you reached for me."

Her breathing grows ragged.

"You saved me," I whisper. "More times than you knew. More times than I knew."

"Please..."

Tick.

The monitor hesitates.

Then—

Beeeeeeep_____

A flat line.

Her warmth leaves by degrees.

The snow keeps falling.

The couple drives away with their newborn, starting a journey Claire and I once imagined.

My heart breaks so quietly I almost miss the sound of it.

I kiss her knuckles.

“You were right,” I whisper. “It wasn’t dead. It was just waiting for its moment in the sun.”

I look out at the swirling snow—soft, endless, shimmering.

“A winter wonderland,” I say.

And the clock ticks on.

Time keeps going because it doesn’t know how to stop.

Tick.

Tick.

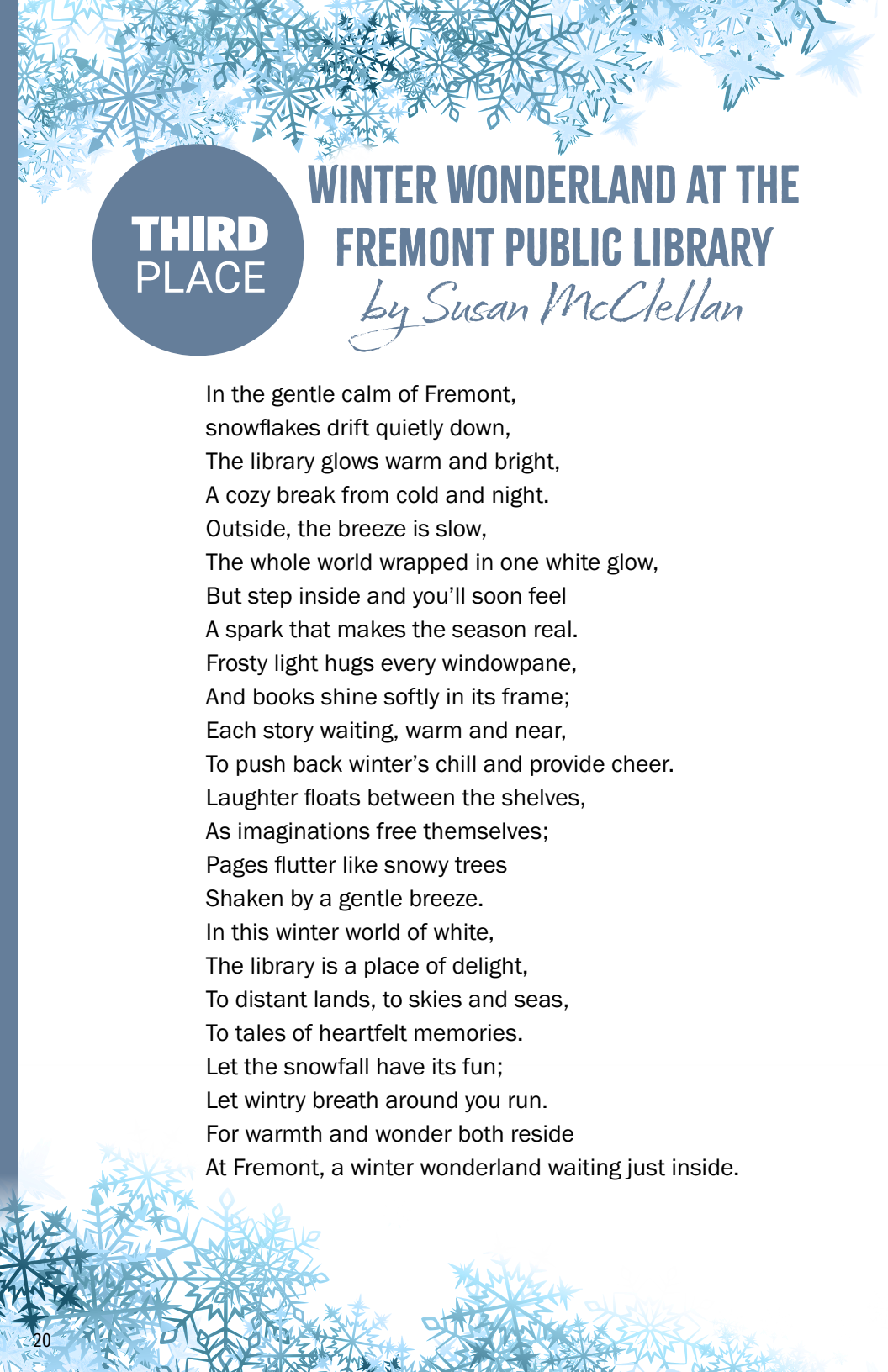
Tick.

Plenty of Time

By J. F. Gram

First Place Winner

**SECOND
PLACE**



**THIRD
PLACE**

WINTER WONDERLAND AT THE FREMONT PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Susan McClellan

In the gentle calm of Fremont,
snowflakes drift quietly down,
The library glows warm and bright,
A cozy break from cold and night.
Outside, the breeze is slow,
The whole world wrapped in one white glow,
But step inside and you'll soon feel
A spark that makes the season real.
Frosty light hugs every windowpane,
And books shine softly in its frame;
Each story waiting, warm and near,
To push back winter's chill and provide cheer.
Laughter floats between the shelves,
As imaginations free themselves;
Pages flutter like snowy trees
Shaken by a gentle breeze.
In this winter world of white,
The library is a place of delight,
To distant lands, to skies and seas,
To tales of heartfelt memories.
Let the snowfall have its fun;
Let wintry breath around you run.
For warmth and wonder both reside
At Fremont, a winter wonderland waiting just inside.



HONORABLE MENTION

Winter Thaw by Joyce Becker Lee

The teasing trail of holiday lights
Brighten the deepening dusk.
The snow has held off,
And the ground is still kind to sneakered feet
That tread the dry paved trail.
At forty degrees, the air is soft,
A caressing breeze
Dangling the carrot of green promise
Against the logic of experience.
Undeterred by the surety of the sharp to come,
Hope clings on a mild winter day.
The weeks will blur by
Through a foggy reel of sleet and snow:
Time in repetition stretching back,
Couched in soft memory.
Thus winter thaws breed hope, and we know
That there is no true winter—
Just a prelude to spring.



HONORABLE MENTION

The Warmth of Snow by Lisa Gierlach

The snow engulfs and sears me like tiny knives. I fumble with my keys; my fingers are so swollen I can't properly maneuver the door key to unlock the old Malibu. "Dammit," I think to myself, "I've got to get back into this car and get home." The snowstorm intensifies in juxtaposition with my waning strength as I muddle about. "What was I thinking when I locked the doors? All I ended up doing was to step out of the car for one minute," I say to no one in particular.

Having just said goodbye to my wife, Helen, I watch her walk up the long stairway to the Irving Park station so she could take the train out to Arlington Heights for our granddaughter's birthday party. I was supposed to go with her, but I just can't do it today; I'm too tired, and those steps up to the platform look like they could be the climb to the top of the Sears Tower. With the storm coming down hard, I begged out at the last minute and gave her a kiss goodbye right where I parked the car opposite the stairway. She didn't argue with me this time. She only pulled the hood of my coat over my head, her eyes full of the worry she voiced daily. She's been asking me to call the doctor all week as my legs and hands continue to swell, but I refuse each time she pleads. I'm just so frustrated with the doctors and their medicines. Earlier this morning, I insisted on continuing with our plans to see our grandchildren and getting us to the train station on time, only to change my mind as I drove us down the street. We wave at each other now and she enters the train. Turning back to the locked car, I shiver as this cold wind menacingly whips through me. Looking at that damned locked car door, I decide that I'll just have to walk the few blocks home. Once I get there I can catch my breath, warm up and rest. All I want to do is rest.

No one has been out yet to shovel the sidewalks, so I decide to trudge down the street where the plows have come through and spread the salt. My Floursheims have a better chance of keeping me upright here than on the slippery sidewalk. I hear some muffled traffic over on Irving Park Road, but here in the neighborhood everyone is hunkered down behind closed doors. The houses stand still and solemn, warily watching me as if they are shadowy apparitions on guard. Sound is smothered by the tenacious wind as it metes out its relentless assault. It is a slow, hard walk. My swollen ankles don't allow me to move fast and the air bears down on my chest, leaving me breathless and wheezing. My swollen hands ache. If I had known I'd end up out here I would have worn gloves. And boots. And a hat.

Stopping and moving over to a mailbox, I lower myself onto the slushy curb to catch my breath. The wind rattles some old trash cans, bare branches scraping together overhead. I lean back to give my lungs some space to pull in the cold air and I peer upward into the maelstrom. It's too strong to see anything. Closing my eyes, I let the cold seep in without fighting it. Just for a moment, one moment of rest.

What feels like only a few seconds later, I open my eyes again and see that each flake now seems to glow and dance. The squall doesn't pelt anymore, but teases around my face, allowing me to sustain my gaze of the snowy display. The wind softens, gently skimming my cheeks. The slush turns crystalline under and around me, bright and soft at the same time. My body relaxes and I begin to breathe deeply again.

A child's laugh drifts toward me. But there are no children outside. I haven't seen a single person out at all. I blink hard and find myself in the old alley behind Dinkel's Bakery in Lakeview. I smell the unforgettable mix of ash and sweetened yeast. A boy is next to me, and we are crouching behind some crates, waiting for the baker's assistant to step out and set down newly baked rolls to cool in the winter air. We know he will smoke while waiting. As soon as we see that he turns to light a cigarette, I nudge the boy. "Watch," I whisper, and dart forward quick as a sparrow. I snatch two rolls and sprint off with the boy following on my heels. We land behind some coal bins and eat quickly, crumbs falling onto our woolen coats. I notice the newspaper sticking out of his shoes and the worn elbows of his jacket.

I look up at the boy's face and with widening eyes realize this is my little brother. "Joe! Joey! You're here! Where have you been? Why are you here?"

Joe laughs, and as he does he is no longer my eight-year-old brother — he now looks as he did when I last saw him 30 years ago, when he was forty and I was forty-two. He stands, and I see he is tall and solid, with twinkling eyes, just as I remember him.

"Ah, Ed, I've come to take you home. It seems you need a little help."

"Since when do you help me?!" I scoff.

Joe smiles at me, calm and warm. "Ed, you took care of me my whole life. Now it's my turn. Come on, I'm the leader this time. Follow me."

With his words, we are back on Avondale by the train station. The snow dances upward and swirls around us in glimmering arcs. The wind curls and sings through the bare trees. The branches seem to sway in rhythm, bowing and forming a tunnel specifically for this moment and us. Everything around us twinkles in delight. The storm is no longer cruel. Rather, it is alive with improbable beauty.

I reach for Joe's hand as he helps me up. His touch spreads through me deep and warm like sunlight. My chest loosens and my limbs lighten up. The storm is a playful companion now, cheering us onward. It's no longer anything to fight against, but rather it accompanies us on our walk home. Somewhere far away yet close, I hear the laughter of two boys whirl through an alley and fold into our space. Their joy lifts me as I rise and float into the stillness of this tempest. A quiet peace settles over me as I walk with Joe. I almost want to stay in this place, yet I also want to go home. I am here, there, and somewhere beyond, feeling an exquisite blaze of life.

Later that evening, forty miles away, a family was gathered around a dining room table, a birthday cake ready to be cut. Candles flickered as the guests chattered and the kids argued over who got the first slice. The party had been full of laughter and good conversation. Dinner filled and warmed bellies and now it was the time for cake, coffee and settling in.

The kitchen telephone rang, and Eddie, the oldest child, jumped up to answer. He quickly came back and told his dad a policeman was asking for him. Everyone hushed as Bob went to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Schmidt?" The voice was careful and polite. "This is Officer Kline with the Chicago Police Department, 3rd District. I'm calling about your father, Ed Schmidt."

Bob straightened, concern etched across his brow. "This is Bob Schmidt. Is he alright?"

"There's been an incident," the officer said carefully. "A neighbor found your father near his car on Avondale. I'm afraid he is deceased. We've called out the medical examiner and he has determined your father has been out here in the elements for several hours and died from natural causes. There are no signs of an accident or foul play."

Bob swallowed. "Dead?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. We looked through his wallet and found you named as next-of-kin along with your phone number. The Medical Examiner is asking if you would like an autopsy or if you have a funeral home we can transport him to."

"Where is he now?" Bob asked.

"We are still on scene with your father's body, waiting for directions," The officer replied.

Bob glanced back toward the dining room. Everyone was waiting, hushed talk dappling the air. Even the children sat still in anticipation. "No," he said, voice hoarse. "No autopsy. He... he has a bad heart. Congestive heart failure. He probably just—" He swallowed. "He probably just had a heart attack. He wouldn't want an autopsy, so no."

"I understand, sir. We can complete some paperwork now if you like and the medical examiner will transport him to a funeral home. We can talk at length later on. Once we finish with a couple questions, I'll let you go. The precinct will be in touch with more details later. And we're very sorry for your loss."

After answering the officer's questions and giving him the name of a funeral home, Bob said, "Thank you, Officer," and hung up, settling the receiver gently on its cradle. He then returned to the dining room. The family looked at him with bated breath.

Bob steadied his voice and quietly said, "I... I have some bad news. Grandpa is dead."

In a quick moment time stood still. A fork clattered on a plate. Eyes widened. A hand went to a mouth. Then Helen cried out and all bedlam began to ensue. Bob just stood still and watched. Outside, the storm raged against the house, indifferent and unyielding. In that heartbeat of a moment, Bob imagined his father lying alone in the snow. It was an awful thought and sent a shiver up his spine. But then another surprising image quickly flickered past and shooed the dreadful thought away: a soft glow of warmth and children's laughter echoing gently through the cold.



HONORABLE MENTION

Responding To Joni Mitchell's Song "River"

by Matt Tooley

"Just because it mentions the season doesn't make it a Christmas song," my wife gripes. She closes Pandora's app on Roku and opens YouTube, where she'll stream the candlelight service from the church we no longer attend. I scan the ossuary of overturned, white-washed terra-cotta bowls in the sink, crusted with dessert's decadence, and then, too weary to face them, turn my back, seeking the square on my phone labeled with the word "news": Border Patrol is chasing down brown immigrants like Herod hunted male babies; a coalition of nations has delayed anti-deforestation regulation, making Earth's heat harder to handle; and a drone strike has left a former embassy as bereft as Charlie Brown's tree, steel rods sticking out at only-natural, reindeer-antler angles, the concrete that once surrounded it nothing but dry pine needle detritus; no surprise, the supply of common goods is still down globally, which means their cost (like that of the evergreen we bought from Lowe's two days ago) continues to rise; as do the number of personalized ads for things I can't afford on my scroll downwards; and now a notification (one of Facebook's memories) slides into view: a photo of my only child, six states away, six years since her last visit. I set the phone face down and turn to the family room, dark but for the TV. Walking over to the tree, I get down on my knees and grab the cord that dangles from the feet of the angel above, plugging it into the outlet. The angel refuses to light. So I drop to the floor, where no presents can be found (meaning I must be on Santa's naughty list) and reach into the tree's reservoir. I touch the bottom; it's as dry as Ezekiel's valley. The choir has started singing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Glancing at the TV, the nativity scene on the shelf underneath catches my eye. The baby in the manger, frozen in the same position year after year, is crying, like he already knows the goodbye he'll be asked to make one day. I try to look past it, out the window of the sliding glass door beyond, hoping to see snow, but it's dark outside and there is just enough light inside to make a mirror of it. Here's my position: No, it's not a Christmas song just because it mentions the season.



HONORABLE MENTION

Teacher by Carolyn Schmit

Bough weighed down with snow
Nodding with each passing breeze
Teaches resilience



HONORABLE MENTION

Silent Night by Michael F. Latza

We gathered for Christmas
Like every year since
We had been so much lighter;
Our parents would carry us half asleep
Past snow topped crèches, buried in the night,
Into houses speckled with colored bulbs
To visit grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Years later, all together again,
We heavily watched as
The snow fell and gathered and fell;
Had we known of the coming storm
We would have called our regrets
From home stalls of comfort.

Someone turned off the overhead lights—
We grew quiet at the violent swirl
Of the maelstrom dumping drifts, reflecting
Reds and greens and yellows and blues
Hanging from the eaves just outside the big window.

I said that it was too late to start off now
And that we would all have to stay the night.
Subdued, in the gathering glow
From the fire and the decorated tree,
We grew lighter once again.

Then one of us started to sing.



HONORABLE MENTION

Trail by Richard Palmer

You lie on your back and stare through the bare tree branches up at the gray sky. White flakes gently descend through the brown limbs, swirling in the subtle breeze, and land softly on your flushed red face, which causes them to melt immediately. You take a deep breath, but the pain is shocking, and you quickly exhale.

Though, you consider, it could be worse. At least you don't think that the situation is as bad as it could have been, this certainly is not how you had expected or wanted this day to go. And everything had started so well.

Skis: check. Poles: check. Boots: check. Hats, gloves, and vest: check. Snowpants (or at least what passes as snowpants): check. You seem to have everything that you need for a little Nordic recreation in the winter wonderland waiting outside. The temperature is a perfect 30°F with no wind (and, therefore, no wind chill) and a gray overcast with just the random spot of pale blue peaking through. It's a quiet January Saturday, and you have nothing (important) to do. A final online check of the forest preserve website indicates that the cross-country ski trails have been groomed following the snowstorm a few days ago. Not really a "storm" per se, and nowhere close to the "snowmageddon" that had been predicted/threatened/promised, but still enough to really hamper the morning and evening commutes Thursday. At least that's what you picked up from watching the weather reports online from the comfort of your home office and from looking out your frosted windows as the last of the bare, brown ground disappeared beneath a flurry of flurries. It had been the first substantial accumulation this entire winter, and you had been waiting patiently to get out and take advantage of it.

Still, even though you didn't have to go anywhere during the past two days, you had to shovel out the driveway a couple of times so that you could get the car out, if the need arose. In your favor was the small amount of real estate that the small strip of asphalt took up from your attached garage to the alley behind the house. Also in the plus column, the temperature had plummeted when the snow blew in, resulting in a light, fluffy snowfall that is decidedly easier to manually shovel away than the wet, heavy, heart-attack-inducing type that falls closer to the freezing point.

However, the snowplow contracted by the homeowner's association seemed like it would come barreling down the alley just as soon as you had finished clearing the end of the driveway and started to head

back inside...each time. It's as if the driver had been watching you and waiting. You swore that you spotted the plow circling the neighborhood with the blade up, just biding time until your end was clear. Once you were in the garage and about to press the button to close the door, you could hear the scraping as it was nearing. Was that an evil cackle coming from the truck's open windows? You sighed, picked up your shovel, and tromped back down to clear out the new mound.

Yesterday, there had been a brilliant azure that typically follows a snow event, along with bitter temperatures. But today, the clouds had closed back in and lowered, contrasting the fresh whiteness that encased the surface with the gloom above that felt both chilling and warming.

Now, all packed up, you back the car out of the garage and over a small ridge at the end of the driveway. Where did they find more snow on the already plowed alley?

The drive this morning has a magical feeling since the snow cover has not yet been tarnished by melty slush and grime. The open fields lay untainted, not even an animal track breaks the pristine surface. The trees still sag under the weight of the accumulation of millions of individual flakes. The forest preserve that has trails specially prepared for cross-country skiing is just a short, pleasant, peaceful drive away. There are a few cars in the parking lot. Perhaps fellow skiers hitting the non-slopes while the grooves are still groovy. Hopefully, the visitors are not cyclists with their fat tires. The big, rounded wheels crush the snow into a concave rut rather than the intended flat-bottom tracks designed to accommodate the ski shape. Whether through ignorance or malice, it is irritating and takes much of the pleasure out of your pastime.

You get your gear out of the back of the car and place the skis and poles in the snow. Sitting on the tailgate, you pull on the rain pants that you use as snowpants (hey, they're waterproof and keep you dry). The boots go on next. You got them, along with the skis and poles, from a neighbor who was giving them away after several years of not using them for one reason or another. The boots may be a size or two too big, but wearing extra pairs of thick socks never hurts during winter outdoor activities. A couple strips of Velcro help keep them tight enough to minimize rubbing and blisters.

You snap into the skis, wrap your hands around the poles, and struggle through the ungroomed, powdery snow. There are some footsteps where the path should be that leads to the main trail. You enter into the woods and reach the ski grooves in the route that circles to the forest preserve. Thankfully, they are clean and clear, and most importantly, flat. You step first one ski then the other into the channel, stick the poles into

the deep snow, bend your knees, and slide the skis back and forth. After a brief warmup, you settle your weight onto the right ski and push off, letting the left ski glide a few inches before switching your weight to the left and sliding on the right. You place the pole along the stationary ski and push with that while simultaneously lifting and moving the opposite one forward. The rhythm comes back to you naturally in spite of extended time of being off the skis.

During the past couple of winters, there haven't been suitable conditions for cross-country skiing. It's either been too cold where it could actually be dangerous to be outside or too warm where the snow is melty and sticky. Also, there has either been too little snow, which causes you to rub on the ground underneath, or too much snow so that you sink and have to walk without the glide and might as well be snowshoeing—and where's the fun in that? Last year, you were able to get out once, but only on the trails around your house, and the circumstances were less than ideal. The snow was wet and sticky which made gliding difficult, and not very deep which caused you to bottom out repeatedly. There were some tracks from a previous skier, but there were also footprints across the tracks as well as those infernal fat-tire bike ruts. Overall, it was not relaxing, though it certainly was a workout.

Even though there is the obvious exercise aspect to this activity, you find it more of a reason to get out of the house in the winter. In must be in your Finnish genes, the Nordic preference to be outside regardless of the season. For the longest time, you looked on winter as a dead time and envied the creatures that either hibernated until spring or migrated away. But you have made your peace with the cold, dark months and now look for excuses to leave the comfort of the warmth inside for the experience of the frigid outside.

You glide along the smooth path that is mostly flat with just an occasional incline followed by a matching descending slope. The only sounds are the skis as they shoosh along, the poles as they gently pierce the snow, and your breathing which is steady but rapid. Every now and then, you can hear a bird flutter or squirrel scamper among the trees, searching desperately for food.

Rounding a curve, you spot another skier coming toward you in a clockwise manner. You typically ski counterclockwise on the path since most competitive races go in that direction, but there are no formal rules here, just guidelines. And one of those guidelines is that the slower skier should make way for the faster one, whether they are moving in opposite directions or the same. Judging just from their streamlined, coordinated outfit—as opposed to your bulky, mismatched ensemble—it's safe to assume that they are the more advanced skier, so you step out of the tracks to the side. They swoosh past with a genial nod and continue without breaking stride. You sidestep back into the grooves and push off.

You arrive back at your starting point and contemplate making another circuit. Your first underlayer is damp with sweat, but you don't feel chilled at all. You have a minor euphoric "runner's high" from the exertion that you never get when you try to jog during warmer times of the year. Running just makes everything ache, especially your knees, but skiing like this is low impact.

While you ponder your next move, the sun breaks through the clouds and shines directly in your eyes. Because the sky had been nearly totally overcast, you had left the sunglasses at home, and now you are partially blinded by the glare. You lean backward a little out of reflex, then suddenly you feel all your balance go out of kilter.

Down you go!

The first part of you to hit the ground is your tailbone. The pain shoots through your entire body, and all you can do is lie in the snow, clenching your teeth and trying not to scream. Your legs are twisted to your sides, still attached to the skis, and your hands are stuck in the pole handle loops. In contrast to the blood pounding in your ears, the only sound you can make out is the rustling of dead leaves that never left the trees. At least the snow is cool as you lie there motionless.

Through a series of small but excruciating moves, you are able to get to your knees then undo the boot clasps. Freed from the skis, you can stand by leaning on the poles. As long as you stand still, you seem fine, but as soon as you take a small step, electricity fires up your spinal cord.

With effort, you are able to pick up the skis and gingerly walk the path back to the parking lot. You decide that you'll just leave the snow/rain pants on rather than try to remove them. After stashing everything in the back of the car, you open the driver's side door and slowly descend into the seat. Your mind wanders back to the old ABC Wide World of Sports intro and relates to the unfortunate "agony of defeat" ski jumper tumble. Given the circumstances, this could have been worse. Nothing is broken, twisted, or torn, and you didn't hit your head. As you start the car, you look forward to getting out of your cold, damp clothes and into a hot shower then loungewear. A hot beverage. Maybe find something unengaging to watch.

Is Wide World of Sports streaming anywhere?



HONORABLE MENTION

Lights in the Dark by Lori Beckham

Clara stomped into her snow boots and threw on her oversized coat as she walked out the front door, closing the warm light and the shouting match of her parents behind.

She knew better than to cross into the woods at sunset, for it would be dark halfway to Hannah's house. But she needed to get away – right then. She had walked for a moment in the quiet before she stopped to look back at her house, expecting her parents to rush out and shout at her to return. But no one came out. And so, Clara zipped her coat up to her face, burying her mouth in the insulated fabric, the heat of her breath giving her relief to the harsh bite of winter.

The golden sun had already sunk into a reddish hue, like a lava lamp's wax, casting a pinkish light over the fresh, white snow. The black tree branches overhead broke up the darkening sky into gradient fragments. With every minute that passed, the cold shadows of the trees overlapped the pink snow into a pale blue.

It wasn't just her parents. Clara felt a growing sense of dread over the last year. Much like the cold shadow engulfing the woods now, it was hard to imagine this land was once lush with green life, that she had been an A student, that her parents loved each other. Hannah was her best friend, but even that will end too. Hannah will move next year. Where would Clara run off to then, when it was too much for her to be in that house?

The warmth of the sky left. When it became truly dark and all was black, she used her phone's flashlight to guide her way. She checked to see if anyone had texted her. Nothing. She texted Hannah that she would be over soon.

After some time in the darkness, she saw a faint glow in the distance, but it was too soon to be Hannah's house. It was a warmer color than a phone's light. Clara stood still, observing. Unable to tell what the light was, she called out "Hello!"

The light moved, just behind a tree. Clara stood still for a while, listening for crunching footsteps in the snow, but there was only silence. The light could have been one of Hannah's family members, her brother most likely. Then Clara saw the light again, but this time there were multiple lights further in the distance, glowing and floating about, like fairies.

Clara proceeded with caution, keeping her phone up in case she needed to call someone. The glowing orbs were strange. They did not look like LEDs, nor were they encased in plastic or rubber. They were just pure light. One light stopped and slowly approached Clara. She stepped back; the glow floated around her and then so slowly joined the other points of light. They all moved in the same direction, like a river of stars weaving around the trees in a gentle flow. Clara tapped at her phone, wanting to record the lights, but to her confusion, the lights did not appear on her screen. Intrigued by this phenomenon, she followed the lights, hearing, so faintly, bells.

The points of light moved toward a large warm glow in the distance. Bells, like that of a song, rang louder above her. Snow began to descend, glowing off the points of light she followed. Different colored lights appeared from unknown sources. Some green, some pink, some blue, lighting up the entire area, revealing more than just trees. A giant candy cane stuck out from the ground, and another. Music continued to play louder, a simplistic percussion of sleighbells and tambourines. The scent of peppermint filled the crisp air.

Clara's wide-eyed confusion turned into an expression of pure delight. She laughed at the beauty of this magical, winter scene. She reasoned that this was either the work of Hannah's family or this was the village's doing, a kind of tourist attraction, and she stumbled upon it by accident. Well, she was guided to it. She looked around at the glowing lights that had brought her here. They moved with the percussions; some faded in and out like Christmas lights. Then she smelled hot chocolate. A tree had a large hole in its trunk, with a bright light inside it. There, she found a crystal mug full of hot cocoa, steaming. She picked up the hot drink and took a sip. The drink was rich in flavor on her tongue. The liquid felt so warm in her stomach. For a moment, all she could feel was bliss. But then she looked back at the tree and realized there had only been the hot beverage inside. The trunk wasn't a cleverly disguised vending machine – she could smell the pine, a real tree with just enough room for a single mug. Who set it there? Why was there only enough room for one?

She continued to take sips and walk around the multi-colored scenery. She pulled out her phone, but still her camera only revealed darkness. She texted Hannah, "What is this place with the lights and music?"

Clara waited for a response when she heard a voice in the distance, calling her name. She looked around as all the lights, just briefly, flickered. The music had stopped for just a second before all was well again with the bells and lights. The hot chocolate in her hand, for a moment, had felt cold, but now steam rose from the crystal mug. She drank more of it to feel its

warmth. She sighed deeply. The snow wasn't letting up, and the heat of her drink satisfied her.

There was a giant marshmallow, like a bean-bag chair, for her to lie down. The white faux gelatin was like memory foam. She sank into it as she kept sipping on her drink, taking in the smell of peppermint and chocolate, watching the beautiful lights move in unison to the music.

"Clara," the faded voice called out again. The lights flickered, the music skipped. For a second everything was black and quiet. Clara sat up instantly, not just because she wanted to see who was calling her, but the sudden interruption startled her this time. It was difficult for her to stand. It felt so warm on the marshmallow. "Must be heated," she uttered. "I wish Hannah was here."

Clara pulled out her phone. Hannah had replied with "?"

She smiled and started to write a reply when the fairy-like lights drifted down on her gently, warm, making her feel snug like a blanket woven in light.

Clara sighed deeply, about to take another sip of her cocoa when she realized...there was still plenty left of her hot chocolate. She had been drinking it for a while, but still the mug was full, the creamy liquid still steaming like it had been when she first picked it up.

Clara struggled to stand up, swatting the warm lights off her, some floating away while others disintegrated. Suspicious of the drink, she poured out its sweet contents on the ground and dropped the mug as she walked around, looking for anything new. A lit-up river, unnaturally blue and cloudy like sea glass, curved around one of the giant candy canes. As she approached, the smell of peppermint filled her nostrils.

She crouched down at the glowing river of blue-green and saw her faint reflection. Despite her uncertainty, she looked pretty, younger. She had been so bundled up before, her face covered, but her blonde hair looked good, curly and long. Her face was naked, her nose just slightly pink from the cold. She looked at ease until two figures came up from behind her reflection.

Clara gasped and turned around frantically, but to her shock, no one was there. Clara looked back down at the reflections, the foggy individuals looked familiar with their hazy smiles. Two hands appeared on her reflection's shoulders, one from each shadow, and she understood. They were supposed to be her parents. She kept looking back, thinking they would appear in real life, but there were only joyous bells, enchanting lights, and the falling snow. "You can't create that for me," she said to no one. "I still don't understand. Is this real? No...I don't think it is..."

Clara sat cross-legged now. Snow continued to fall and the points of light gravitated to her once again, clinging to her, feeling warm, secure. The faux parents in the water came closer to her reflection, arms around her faint self, an embrace. She continued to stare at the murky reflections. So happy, so content.

The points of warm lights piled on. But one light on her lap was different, bluish. She looked down and realized she still had her phone out, the rectangular display showing she had fourteen unread text messages and twenty-two calls. Twenty-two?

Clara had never turned on her volume. She looked around herself, at the bright magical land she stumbled upon. The murky reflections held up her reflection together, like when she was little.

“Ugh, I want to stay,” she said meekly. “I really do...” Her phone lit up again, another call missed. She felt tired, she wanted to sleep so badly. “But I can’t,” she said, and she turned up the volume of her phone as the points of light continued to cling to her.

The bells chimed. There may have even been an angelic choir rising from the percussion when she heard an unholy interruption. Her phone rang and it was instantly dark. The only light was her phone in her hand, poking out from the snow. Clara had been sitting at the base of a tree, her face bundled like before, the snow had piled on her. She could hear shouting in the distance as her phone rang loudly.

“Over here!” Hannah called, rushing to Clara. “Jacob! Hurry!”

Hannah’s brother appeared and the two frantically dug at the snow that had enveloped her body, up to her face.

“Clara, it’s Hannah! Come on, say something!”

Jacob stood up and faced away, screaming in the darkness, “Found her!”

“Go get her parents!” Hannah yelled and Jacob waved his phone’s light at the approaching flashlights.

Clara’s eyes rolled in confusion, but they locked on her best friend. “Hannah? Are you really here?” she uttered.

“Yeah. Your parents are coming.”

Her phone stopped ringing as Clara could see beyond Hannah two figures rushing toward her, arms around her instantly, pulling her up.



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