

Snowstorm

L. Lee Lowe

Helen's thoughts kept sliding off course as she gripped the steering wheel. It had been a mistake not to stop for coffee at the last service area, but she was good at making mistakes. Even if she could spot a roadside café through the ever-thickening snow, anybody in their senses would have locked up and gone home long ago. Certifiable, she'd seen it on their faces when she refused to wait out the snowstorm. 'You ought to be locked up,' Richard had raged at his son after the Incident. But Mack will feed Garm, bake a couple of frozen pizzas for Cait and Phil (had she remembered Mack's Cajun Chicken?), see that they brush their teeth, he's a good kid really. One evening of 'unsuitable programmes' won't kill them. Do his colleagues know how obsessed Richard can get? There are hints of it, though they're circumspect with the New Wife, except for that ridiculously transparent Liz. 'Possessed', Helen used to tease him, back when she could still tease him.

Out of her musings a dark spectre came at her. With a small cry she twisted the wheel to the right, too far, too fast, and the car began to skid. Richard's voiceover: 'Don't brake.' Had there been time, she might have wondered what it would be like to let go, the snow so soft and thick, pillowy. But a compact almond of nuclei inside her temporal lobe had already taken charge, and there would be no overturning, no swift trajectory into oblivion, not this time. Her foot unsteady on the brake pedal, she brought the car to a halt straddling the verge and switched on the emergency flashers. She leaned her forehead against the steering wheel, breathing fast, then after a few seconds forced herself to sit upright and unclench her hands. It had been a roadside tree, bare and ghostly in its winter coat. Ahead of her there was only snow, more snow. The mileometer couldn't be right, could it? She'd like to get out and walk a bit, her foot was aching from being flexed without respite, and her neck felt welded to her

shoulders, but her boots were back home in the boot rack. Instead she wound the window down and let the snowflakes melt on her face till the heater could no longer compete with the indraft of cold air. She checked her rearview mirror, but there was little danger from behind; the last car had turned off at least half an hour ago, though somewhere not far ahead a snowplough must be clearing the road. She promised herself not to look at the clock till she passed the stretch of wind turbines. Day or night, sunshine or blizzard, they hovered over the countryside like metallic storks, and she would sense their presence – a nursery constructed to deliver electricity, not babies. Though the local authority insisted the noise from the turbines was low, about the level of a small, meandering stream, on nights when, sleepless, she'd sit for hours in the front room, a faint crooning drifted through the double glazing, the caulking, the weather stripping, the foam-injected walls. Richard would never tolerate a badly insulated house.

She wouldn't mind so much if it were about the money, or the future of the planet. It was odd, really, all this snow, with the global warming they were forever going on about. White noise, it became after a while, though she only switched to another programme if by herself. Still, she remembered those winters from her childhood, when the lake would freeze for weeks at a time, and she'd skate with Ian till their fingers and toes lost all sensation, despite the bulky, itchy, and slightly greasy woollens which their nan supplied each autumn – red for Ian, blue for Helen; till it would be growing dark and they could no longer see the rough patches or ensnared branches, sometimes thick as an arm, or a frozen crow which Ian would kick around if his mates were out; till the ice cracked. Twenty years, and she still heard that first crack: fate thrusting its fist through the icy threshold to seize her little brother. 'It was meant to happen,' Nan had said. 'Some things are meant to happen, no one's to blame.'

She decided not to leave the flashers on, though it would be dark soon. If she had any beauty, it was the delicate, understated sort which didn't call attention to itself. Her hairdresser said that with her bones she would age well, but he was a kindly man for all his

flourishes, his endearing insistence upon ‘stylist’. At first she’d been surprised by Richard’s interest in her – flattered, but daunted too – though they say opposites attract. As she inched out onto the road, her mobile rang, and without glancing at the display, she knew instinctively it was Richard, who would only berate her. ‘For God’s sake, *try* to be a little firmer with them. Mack’s making a fool of you,’ he’d said just last night. She switched on the radio.

A foreign language, one she couldn’t identify. Something exotic like Persian, maybe. She switched to another channel, her attention on the road ahead. Were you supposed to brake downhill? A panicky rush of blood to her chest left it hot and prickling even after she contrived to ease off the accelerator and change down a gear. Unlocking one hand from the steering wheel, she plucked at her collar, then flapped the front of her jumper. The snowflakes hurtled towards her, an unceasing barrage, as though time had chipped its every arrowhead from ice. It was difficult not to focus on them. It was spellbinding to focus on them.

The radio crackled, and along with the burst of static she heard a vaguely familiar voice, but before she could fix on one of the usual newsreaders, it disintegrated into gibberish, yet with a plaintive tone that needed no translation. ‘What’s a shirt lifter?’ Ian had asked plaintively once their dad moved out of earshot. She tried another channel before giving up altogether. It must have something to do with the weather conditions. With a fierce squint she looked beyond the snowflakes to a hot drink and a warm house and Garm’s boisterous welcome. Ian had chosen the name, he’d been given a book of Norse myths for his birthday the year they got the first Garm as a fat puppy. She still had it on her shelf. ‘Funny old book,’ Cait had said. ‘Can I colour in the pictures?’

Helen had more photos of her dogs than of Ian, it was time to ask her mum for some prints, other families talked about these things. The Newfoundland was Garm number four; no rescue-centre mongrel for Richard. ‘Get yourself a puppy, we don’t need any more children.’ On occasion she’d thought about an ‘accident’, but Cait (and, increasingly, Phil) was beginning to see through her evasions, her small white lies. That business with the shirt –

it had been a mistake trying to explain, Richard's voice carried, and it just made things more difficult with his children. Mack could be sweet, but like all teenagers knew when to use a situation to his advantage. And accidents ... no, on balance it was probably better this way, though she sometimes pictured a little boy with Ian's red curls. A grandchild at last, her mum would surely stop being so toxic. 'Last chance,' Richard had said about Christmas, and now it was only a week away. Why had she ever pressed him? If she had an accident, they'd be able to put it off. She projected herself into a frame for a shattered leg, weeks in hospital, then a long, restful period of recuperation at a rehabilitation centre with the latest memoirs of Sylvia, plus that Moses novel she'd always meant to read. *Wintering*, how apt. They could afford a private room. There would be fresh-squeezed fruit juices, a heated pool, massages, aromatherapy. There would be a detoxifying diet. There would be no reason to hurry her healing, back home it would be pizza and chips and rows over the broccoli.

She glanced at the clock, its numerals glowing with electronic rebuke, then was immediately annoyed at herself for her lapse. If she kept this up, she'd never get there. It already felt as though she'd driven off the road into one of Mack's games, the car motionless amidst a stream of snowy pixels. Maybe she ought to drape something over the clock. Her eyes shifted to the passenger seat, where she'd tossed her bag and jacket.

Headlights flashed behind her. Startled, but not unduly so, she saw in her rearview mirror what looked like a 4x4 or people carrier approaching – not speeding, precisely, but travelling faster than she'd dare. A curve up ahead forced her to slow a bit, but the signalling persisted. 'Damn,' she muttered, and switched on her emergency flashers, then slowed even more and edged towards the verge as the driver sounded the horn, a long rude blast. *His* horn: Helen could now make out a man behind the wheel, fortyish, balding and with a beard like Richard's. 'Idiot.' As though able to hear, he hooted three, four times so that she felt her palms grow moist. To pull off any further might mean getting stuck, or worse – the banks

were steep along certain stretches of the road, there was no way to tell short of getting out and testing the snow's depth.

'Go on, overtake me. Serves you right if you end up in a ditch.'

With a final, brazen, jubilant trumpet – like a bull elephant in heat, she thought in disgust – he swung out through the darkening afternoon and sped past, his wheels spurting up a granular fusillade which splattered the windscreen. Already overburdened, the wipers needed several passes to clear the glass, by which time his taillights, thickly coated, were a mere reddish glow, soon to vanish into memory.

As she cautiously headed into the bend, a cone of light swept sideways, briefly illuminating a snow-encrusted road sign and the gauzy outline of a stand of pines, then swept onwards towards her like a lighthouse beacon. Her brain initiated its cunning trick of time dilation to brace her for the impending impact while the beam revolved another half-turn – later she'd recall a glimpse of red – before sailing in a graceful skyward arc. The 4x4 rolled twice and came to rest belly up, its tyres spinning to a gradual halt, its horn mute after one final bleat, its headlights still gleaming through the shroud of falling snow. As the spume thrown up by the crash settled, it left the car buried up to its door handles in a deep drift.

The slow, eerie, nearly silent accident had taken no time at all. Perhaps there had been a slight tremor, felt rather than heard, the way you feel pressure waves from nearby thunder or a bass drum. But now Helen felt nothing except a dreamlike calm: she watched herself wind down the window, she watched herself creep along the bend, she watched herself turn her head towards the wreck, she watched herself scan for a vital sign – arm pushing through the snow, muffled shout. Her mobile lay on the dashboard. The air was icy and whipped her hair about. She ought to stop, everyone knew that. Soon it would be dark. The snow would fall for hours, fairytale snow, pure and pristine, and fall long past midnight, cold and cunning and cruel, and keep falling. By dawn a death mask would have set over the frozen earth. It was likely there would be a white Christmas. She drove on.

The hitchhiker stood in the middle of the road, waving his arms; otherwise she wouldn't have stopped. As it was, he was forced to scamper out of her path, his red stocking cap as long as the ones Gran had knitted to match their mittens. A pompom dangling from its tail, too, distinctly eccentric for a lad his age. One year Ian had cut his off, not realising the wool would unravel.

'What are you doing out here in the midst of a blizzard?' she asked testily. Seventeen or eighteen, she guessed.

'Can you give me a lift?'

He clapped his gloved hands together and stamped his feet while waiting for her decision. At least he's wearing boots, she thought, wondering if that were excuse enough to leave him behind.

'Look, I'm not going to rape you or anything. I just want to get out of the cold for a stretch.'

'I've got a mobile.'

'I don't care if you've got an AK-47, as long as your heater's working.'

She hesitated a moment longer, then pictured all the times Mack must have stood at the roadside with his thumb out. 'OK, get in. But shake off your cap first, the snow will melt down your neck.'

While she tossed her clutter into the back seat, he did as asked, even using the hat to brush off his shoulders and sleeves before walking round the car and folding himself inside. The light of the small interior lamp highlighted his springy, shoulder-length red hair, a startling contrast to pale, almost waxen skin. Wasn't that a sign of frostbite? Without the crisscross of snowflakes to obscure his features, she could see that he was actually quite beautiful, though perhaps older than she'd first assumed. His face reminded her of the Rossetti paintings she'd loved so much in her late teens. And no lad ought to have such sensuous lips.

‘Your jeans must be soaked through,’ she said.

‘Not really. I haven’t been outside that long.’

Had she made another of her mistakes? She regarded him uneasily, but he returned her gaze with the cool mockery so typical of Mack and his mates that she found herself disguising a smile (and her curiosity) with a hurried yawn, rather than bristling. So he knew what she was thinking, did he? Shifting into gear, she resolved not to question him till he’d thawed a bit. Not all adults are insufferable meddlers.

He unzipped his anorak, leaned back against the headrest, and closed his eyes. She was surprised that he didn’t ask for music. For a while they drove in silence, and it was a nice change not to steal glances at the clock. In profile his face seemed older still, more androgynous, with a delicate bluish cast from the snow. Was he beardless or merely clean-shaven? Despite his bulky jumper, she could see he was very slender. And the lithe way he’d moved in the cold hinted at the effortless grace of a dancer or figure skater. A few times her eyes strayed to his crotch.

He had a gift for stillness. Just when she reckoned he must have fallen asleep, he said without opening his eyes, ‘About half a kilometre ahead there’s a lane on the left.’

‘Your house?’

‘It’ll be hard to see in the snow, I’ll warn you in plenty of time to turn off.’

If she hadn’t given up smoking to be a good model to Richard’s children, she would have reached for a cigarette – a stratagem of Mack’s which infuriated Richard but secretly amused her, since it served as provocation as well as delaying tactic. She switched on the radio. A low hum came from the speakers, but no reception. She tried another station, then cycled futilely through all the channels, AM and FM, before fumbling for a CD, only to recollect that Richard had recently told Mack to ‘put down the damn guitar for once and clean the car’. Her hitchhiker straightened up but said nothing.

‘Sorry, but I’m not taking a diversion in this weather. You’ll have to hike in.’

‘Don’t worry. We won’t get stuck.’

Again she revised her estimate of his age. The next time Richard railed about teenagers taking things for granted, she might be less inclined to defend Mack. With her eyes on the road, she searched for a conciliatory response. The stress of driving through this damn blizzard was making her ridiculously jumpy. He was only a lad. She wished he hadn’t mentioned a gun, though. Risking a sidelong glance in his direction, she spied her mobile on the dashboard. ‘Why don’t you ring your parents and see if someone can drive out to pick you up?’ But before she could congratulate herself on her quick thinking, he reached for the mobile, keyed in a number, and brandished the display: the no-network logo.

‘It’s a heavy snowstorm,’ he said.

‘Interference?’

‘Slow down now. We’re coming to the turning.’

She peered into the snowy maelstrom, convinced he couldn’t possibly recognise any landmarks in the foreshortened corridor lit by their headlamps. After a short distance, however, a gap in the snowbanks appeared, and as she drew abreast and stopped, a light glimmered at the bottom of the lane, surrounded by an amber halo.

‘It’s not so very far for you to walk.’ Or for her to drive, but she was determined not to capitulate.

‘It’s up to you. You can always turn round and go back.’

‘Look, I’ve got a family waiting for me at home. Please, just get out so I can carry on.’

‘That’s not possible. The road ends about 150 metres from here.’

‘What are you talking about? I’ve driven this road hundreds, maybe thousands of times.’

‘Not this road, you haven’t.’

Other than abandoning the car, she had no way of divesting herself of this clearly disturbed, or at best confused, hitchhiker. To think that she ... angrily, she rammed the clutch pedal to the floor and shoved the gear lever forward.

‘OK, I’ll take you up to the house. *After* we have a look at this dead end of yours.’

‘Suit yourself.’

Her mind elsewhere, habit reasserted itself. A touch too much pressure, and everything spins out of control. But as the wheels lost traction, the hitchhiker reached over as if to touch her hand – ‘Easy, now’ – and though she jerked aside, she let up on the accelerator so that the car rolled backwards. She eased it forward again, and then with a few careful rocking movements, they were free of the rut.

The barrier, as far as she could gauge, was situated squarely where he said it would be. He’d exaggerated, of course; typical teen. The road didn’t end, but might as well have: snow had been ploughed across its entire breadth to form a two-metre high bulwark. It would take a bulldozer to clear a passage, not that teaspoon masquerading as a spade in the boot.

‘What idiot decided to block the road like this?’ she finally asked.

‘Don’t worry, it’ll be gone later. In the meantime, you can get some coffee and a sandwich at my place.’ He gestured towards the right snowbank. ‘Can you turn on your own or should I get out to guide you?’

‘I can manage,’ she snapped.

They drove back without speaking, Helen stubbornly silent when the lane – more a track, really – proved indeed navigable. The snow continued to fall heavily round and about, but the gravel was merely dusted with a sprinkling of white, like icing sugar. She wondered if heating cables had been laid beneath the surface; or some other technological marvel, lasers maybe. She didn’t notice the pattern to the snowfall.

A building soon came into view through the trees, a very unappealing squat structure more warehouse than dwelling, all concrete and glass and sixties. The orange glow coalesced

into an industrial streetlight, the sort you find in car parks and along the motorway; admittedly useful at such a secluded site. Several windows in the house were lit but shaded, so that it was impossible to see if anyone was moving about.

He directed her along a semi-circular drive to the front door. An overgrown holly needed a good trim, but neat, snow-laden shrubs bordered several metres of bare paving slabs. Under the rest there might be a lawn, or there might be a yard wrested from the wood; or further dreary concrete. She drew up to the path, cut the engine, and turned to the hitchhiker.

‘Are your parents at home?’

‘There’s a garage round back.’

She nodded, having seen the fork at the start of the drive.

Inside, the house reassured her by its utter normalcy – brass coat stand, pale wooden floors, cream walls, classy oak armoire which Richard himself would approve of, and in the sitting room, a tempestuous northern seascape in a carved and gilded frame, two squishy leather sofas the colour of malt whisky, and an enormous TV and sound system. It took her a moment to discern the only odd note, which was the extreme quiet – no humming from the heating system, no pinging of snow against the windowpanes, no skirling of the wind under the eaves. Even their footfalls had a muted quality, as though they were treading on a thick carpet rather than polished floorboards.

Their voices, however, sounded much as before, if slightly flat, a detail whose import she would never fully appreciate. Mack, years later a leading studio engineer, would have been fascinated, though a bit disbelieving, had she told him. But of course she would tell no one.

‘Sit down, and I’ll fetch something from the kitchen.’

‘Where is everyone?’

‘It’s a big house. We’ll have a look for them right after eating.’

‘Do you want some help?’

‘No, I’ll do it, you’ve been driving for hours.’

Soon she’d need a toilet, but for the moment she was glad to sink into one of the sofas, shut her eyes, and think about nothing. Richard, and his children, receded to ghostly silhouettes amidst the snow inside her head. It was warm in the room, unusually warm. Under pressure snow which has melted can recrystallise into dense, granular, intractable firm; the stuff of crushing glaciers.

‘I’m sorry I can’t offer you a bed for the night.’

She roused slowly, reluctantly, then wondered if she’d been dozing with her mouth agape. What had he asked? Pushing a hand through her hair, she sat up and adjusted her jumper. From a tray on the coffee table he passed her a large mug, to which she added two heaping teaspoons of sugar. She’d swallowed half the coffee and several bites of a cheese sandwich before registering there was only one mug, one plate.

‘Aren’t you eating?’

‘Most men have a bad habit of grazing when they’re in the kitchen,’ he said with a smile.

She finished the sandwich, ate another, and sipped a refill while he sprawled in an armchair, his hair screening part of his face. She not-watched him through the steam from the coffee till her eyes began to prickle. Why, after all these years of arid silence, had Piers chosen to ring? ‘Your mother gave me the number.’ She’d heard the rasp of the veldt in his voice, the droughts. A cloudless summer day never failed to conjure up the sun-bleached colour of his eyes. There must be creases round them now.

‘Have you got any idea when they’ll clear the road? Probably I still have a few hours ahead of me.’

‘Let’s go find out.’

He showed her the guest toilet, then led her through a complicated twist of passages to a set of sliding glass doors, behind which thronged a mass of tropical vegetation.

‘The conservatory,’ he explained.

The air beyond the doors was warm and humid, yet devoid of the cloying smell which prevails in so many hothouses; devoid, in fact, of much smell at all. They sidled round fleshy plants tapping the roof as though in search of an escape route. Helen ducked under a low-hanging limb with leathery, red-veined leaves and glistening crimson berries, narrowly avoiding the outstretched talons of a thorn bush. With one hand her host parted the fronds of a palm for her to step through.

The glass wall in front of them gave onto an outdoor pond, as large as a small lake. Someone had swept the ice clean of snow, which shone like pewter in the moonlight. Scratched pewter: she could see where the blades of the skaters had scored its finish. Several kids were still larking near the banks, and one intrepid lad was zigzagging backwards, practising camels and camel-sits, as well as the odd lutz. It all came back to her then, Ian’s obsession with skating – the lessons, the competitions, the endless talk. She hadn’t been on skates since the accident, nor would she allow Cait and Phil to learn, despite Cait’s repeated pleas. ‘It’s not *fair*, it’s not. All my friends go skating.’ And to her father, ‘Why are you letting *her* decide?’ There weren’t many domains in their marriage where she, Helen, prevailed, but this was one of them.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘it’s stopped snowing.’

‘Not exactly.’

Puzzled, she glanced at him, then back outdoors. ‘But –’ One hand shielding her eyes, she stepped up close and pressed her face against the glass, which felt slightly clammy. ‘I can see perfectly well it’s stopped. The moon’s even out.’ She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, then rubbed the condensation from the window, recalling her doodles and stick

figures drawn with a fingertip, Ian's outlandish beasts; their countless games of noughts and crosses. 'Is that your family?'

'Watch for a moment longer while I see about the road.'

As the boy attempted a double axel jump, his cap flew off and skittered across the ice towards the centre of the lake. He landed awkwardly, though without falling, then stamped one foot in obvious frustration. How well she remembered Ian's bursts of fury! He could never stand the slightest shortcoming in himself, the slightest blunder. For a few seconds he rested his hands on bent knees to catch his breath before heading for the wayward cap, his dandelion-clock hair freewheeling in the wind. A tall figure detached herself from the others at the shore and skated towards him, waving her arms so wildly that she lost her balance after only a short distance and sprawled onto the ice. At the sound of her cry a flock of crows rose in a single mass from the tree in which they'd been roosting, huddled together against the cold. The crows fluttered and flapped their wings in unison, flapped and fluttered and cawed as they passed like a black cloud across the face of the clairvoyant moon. Then their eerie caws died away, leaving behind a silence which the ice cleaved to fill. Winded, knees throbbing, and one ankle twisted painfully beneath her, she was unable to get to her feet. Always the clumsy one, she should have known to be more heedful.

'No,' Helen whispered.

'Go back,' she said. 'It's only a hat.'

'I promise I'll never tell another lie,' she said.

A touch on her arm. She turned round, but recognition didn't come at once. He'd tied back his hair, which accentuated the planes of his face so that he looked older again; aloof, with the patrician sombreness of a time-darkened portrait. He held up a mobile. 'It's working now.' Ian had hated it when humidity made his hair go all kinky. 'The road's clear. But going back is still an option. Think about it, will you.'

‘Back?’ she asked, glancing involuntarily towards the window. Then numbly, ‘It’s snowing again.’

Without so much as a pondward flicker of his eyes, he went past her to a ceiling-high lemon tree laden with fruit, extended an arm, and uttered something in a guttural language, half speech and half croak: a string of incomprehensible words, followed by what sounded like, ‘Come, Mooning.’ To her astonishment, a glossy black bird flew down from amongst the dark leaves and landed on his forearm, then strutted to his shoulder with an air of self-possession. She studied the bird, who, as though chancing upon a particularly droll specimen of scarecrow, maybe with uncharacteristically bulbous frontage and shocks of strawlike hair, turned to study her, its undisguised curiosity trumped by a disconcerting intelligence. Mack would call it a bird with attitude.

‘A family pet?’ she asked.

‘Something like that.’

After a brief silence, she indicated the window, and its ghostly reflections. ‘They won’t be able to skate now. And they ought to be careful, people have got lost only a few metres from shelter.’

‘Snow insulates surprisingly well. The Inuit burrow into a snowdrift if caught in a blizzard. They can survive for quite a while. But of course there are human limits.’

‘You mean –’

He smiled then, the sort of boyish smile Ian used to flash when keen for her to coax a secret from him. ‘It’s up to you, but the road back might not be open for long.’

As she drove along the track to the main road, the hard-packed surface was beginning to snow over. To the left she could see drifts mounding against the underbrush and tree trunks, and despite the dense woodland, a heckling wind jabbed and jeered at her car. Bypassing a concert of contemporary music and a dull report from the Middle East, she tuned in to a discussion

about children and bereavement, the volume loud enough to drown out the voice of the storm. Any sense of travelling through a glass tunnel had vanished, and falling snow soon obliterated all trace of the house in her rearview mirror.

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