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A Walk on the Ice

The trip began in Barry's Volkswagen before first light on Saturday morning. The backseat was crammed with their sleeping bags, knapsacks, jackets, and Mary's briefcase, full of ungraded term papers. They crossed the Newburgh bridge before eight and headed north. Mary was barely awake, but nervous. Barry was smoking little cigars. He did all the talking.

He said she'd like his friend Donald. Donald was a writer who lived year round on his own island. Barry had met him when they were both at college. Donald was probably his best friend, when you thought about it.

"He used to spend summers playing piano at the resorts up there," Barry said. "His folks had a big old house on the island. Burned down five or six years ago. Donald built the place we'll be staying in, with the royalties from his book."

Mary was staring at her fingernails. "What book?"

"I don't remember the title. It was published when he was just twenty-two. He hasn't published much since. It got reviews that were pretty incredible. They even made a movie out of it."

"You don't remember the name?" Mary asked.

"Something with 'it' in the title. 'Leaving It Behind,' or 'Getting Rid of It.' Something like that."

"I don't think I've seen the movie," Mary said.

"Nobody has. Some small outfit in the city did it. Artsy. Nobody's ever heard of it."

The Volkswagen pounded along the interstate. It didn't have shocks. The road wound its way through the Catskills. Then the land became flatter. Mary watched fence posts, black against the snow-covered fields, that seemed to revolve as the car went past. They'd been driving for hours.

When Barry had asked her to come north for the weekend, her first apprehension was that they'd never get back. They'd be snowed in. Or the ice on the river would melt in a sudden thaw, and they'd be stuck, marooned on his friend Donald's island.

Barry had said no way would they be marooned. It was too late in the season for heavy snow. And if the ice melted—which in fact would take weeks—they'd launch one of Donald's boats. No big deal. One way or another, they'd be back in plenty of time for school on Tuesday.

Barry taught at the high school where Mary worked in Hartford, Connecticut. His subject was English, hers was American history. The weekend in question was a three-day holiday in honor of George Washington's birthday.

It had taken her more than a week to decide to come. She was still undecided the day before they left. She kept telling Barry she had to think about it. Finally he'd said, "What's to think about? The worst that can happen is you get laid a few times."

The remark was so out of character that she'd simply stared at him. Barry was vice president of the teacher's union local. She was a member of the union grievance committee. They usually met over egg salad sandwiches or baked ziti in the teachers' lunchroom. They'd seen two or three movies together. He'd kissed her once after a cocktail party. She'd thought he was still in love with the school psychologist, the woman

he'd shared an apartment with until just before Christmas.

When he and the psychologist split up, Barry had appeared at Mary's apartment door at 3 A.M. one cold morning. He was drunk and he had the beginnings of a black eye. She made him toast and let him sleep on the sofa. He'd stayed the better part of a week, during which time he used her toothbrush, stopped shaving, and told her much more about the psychologist than she cared to know.

She looked across at him now as he lit another cigar. The smoke was grey against his black beard (he kept it short and carefully trimmed). His eyelids were slightly puffy, which made him look sleepy.

"How much farther?" she asked him.

"We get off at the next exit. Then it's half an hour to the river," Barry said. "Donald will meet us in town, and we'll all walk across together."

The cigar smoke curled across the front seat. Mary rolled down her window for a moment. The air outside smelled absolutely cold, like ice. Crystals of snow along the roadside banks glittered in the pale sunlight.

The Volkswagen barreled down the exit ramp, skidding a few feet over an icy patch near the stop sign. Its motor sputtered as Barry shifted gears. He turned his head to look at her. "Glad you came?"

"Of course," she said. She looked away, out of the window.

They passed a motel made of pink stucco with a circle of cracked blue cement in its front lawn. Mary wondered why they'd bothered to clear the snow out of the pool. She imagined the scene in summer, children paddling in chlorinated water, watched over by overweight women in lawn chairs.

"Closed for the season," Barry said.

They passed other motels, and shops, and restaurants, all of them closed. Then they hit open country again. There were few houses, and most of them were new. They were squarely built, set close to the road, without trees or hills to break the winds.

"How'd you like to live there, Barry?" Mary asked. They were passing a one-story house, perfectly square, with mustard-colored aluminum siding.

"I'd go crazy," he said.

"I doubt it," Mary said. "In fact, you might benefit greatly from living in a house like that. It would put ballast into your soul."

He smiled.

"I'm serious," she said. "Give you a year in a house like that and you'd do great things. Write the great American short story, who knows." At parties Barry always introduced himself as a writer who taught. Never a teacher who wrote on the side.

"Yeah, I bet John Updike lives in a house like that," Barry said. "And Joyce Carol Oates probably has a ranch right down the block."

They came to an intersection. Barry shifted into second gear, then sped up again. "We'll share a house together, one day, if we feel the same way about each other," he said.

Mary said, "What?"

"We'll share a house together one day, if we feel then as we do now," he said. He was watching the road, his eyes opened very wide.

Mary looked out of the window.

They didn't speak until they pulled into the town. They passed the high school, and a bowling alley, and two car dealerships. Billboards

advertised motels and boat tours. "Where's the river?" Mary said.

"Straight ahead."

He drove until the road ended, intersecting with the town's main street. Mary saw only shops and offices. "Where's the river?" she repeated.

"There." Barry pointed to a blur of white, visible in the gaps between the buildings. He parked the car and they got out, taking their jackets from the backseat.

They walked to the edge of the snow field. It looked like a field, not a river. The wind rolled across the white expanse, stinging their faces. Mary reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a woolen hat. Her hair whipped across her eyes, and she pushed it inside the hat. Some distance away she saw big lumps of snow, with trees growing out of them. "Those must be the islands," she said.

Barry moved close to her. She could smell his leather jacket. He put his arm around her. "Welcome to the river," he said.

"Which island is Donald's?" she said.

"It's down there." He pointed to a smudge of black and white, trees and snow, far across the ice and to the west. "It's called Champagne Island on the charts," he said.

"I like champagne," she murmured.

He pulled her around toward the road again. They walked back toward the car.

"I'll buy you a drink at Marie's Café," he said. "That's where we're meeting Donald."

Marie's Café was a storefront building with dark red curtains in its windows. Pink neon letters spelled out COCKTAILS in one window and FINE FOOD in the other. It was next door to Marie's Motel.

It was dark inside, and stuffy, like a closet full of old clothes. Barry led the way between a pool table and a piano. Mary took off her jacket and put it on a chair.

"Tell you what," Barry said. "Order me a scotch and water. I'll move the car into a parking lot for the weekend."

Mary said, "Right." Her eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet. She could make out the bar, and the figures of men drinking at it.

Barry left. Mary went to talk to the bartender, a woman in her thirties wearing pink lipstick and a pink sweater. Mary ordered the drinks. The old man drinking to her right ignored her; to her left a group of younger men was watching. She glanced at them. They seemed to be in their twenties, dressed in plaid flannel shirts and jeans. Two of them had hair that fell below their shoulder blades.

Mary carried the drinks back to a table near the wall. She waited a few minutes, looking at the dead fish mounted on plaques. Some of them had teeth that looked as sharp as needles. These, she saw from the engraved brass labels, were called muskies.

Mary began to sip at her drink. The old man wasn't talking. The young ones were loud.

"Never again, never again," one of them kept saying.

"Not since you fell in, huh?" another one answered.

"Not unless I had someone to spend it with," the first one said. He turned to look at Mary, briefly.

"Shit, there's plenty of women on Grindstone already," another one said.

"Yeah, in the summer," the first one said. He had long, dark hair,

worn in a ponytail. "Very few ladies want to spend the winter closed in. Now, this year I got my apartment in town, and I got the grocery right down the street, and I got Marie."

"Right you are, honey," the bartender said. She took his glass and refilled it with draft beer. She set it before him again. "Rick's my honey," she said, to no one in particular.

"It wasn't women put Rick off wintering on Grindstone." The old man spoke for the first time. "It was his uncle, ain't that right?"

"That was ten years ago," Rick said. He sounded disgusted.

"That was a terrible thing," the old man said.

"What happened?" one of the young ones asked.

"He was out there, drove his pickup right through the ice," the old man said.

"I never knew that. What was he doing out there with a truck anyway?"

"He was ice fishing," Rick said.

"It was a terrible thing," the old man said.

They stopped talking for a minute. Mary wondered what was keeping Barry. She drummed her fingers on the table. Then she drank more of her Bloody Mary.

The one called Rick went off through the door marked "Gents" at the rear of the room.

"Guess that was the last time he went ice fishing," one of the young men said.

"Who? Rick?"

"Naw, his uncle."

The old man said, "His uncle was drowned."

"Probably froze before he drowned."

"They never found the body," the old man said.

"What's the fishing like this year anyway?"

Mary stopped listening. Barry was taking a long time to park the car. She looked out of the nearest window. All she could see was the motel next door. She glanced again at the fish mounted on the walls. Then she finished her drink.

Rick came back to the bar from the men's room. She could tell he was watching her. One of the young men said good-bye and left. The others began to talk about football. Mary stared at the stain on the pool table. The murmur of voices was like a buzz in her ears. She glanced up at the fish again. Their scales looked as if they'd been varnished.

"Your friend stand you up or what?" Rick was leaning over her table.

"I don't think so," Mary said. "I mean, of course not."

"You staying around here?"

"For the weekend," she said.

"You at the motel?"

"With a friend," she said.

"Your friend like parties? We're having a hot one tomorrow night. We're celebrating. Jody's coming out of the Navy."

"That sounds good," Mary said, uncertain of the words she was using.

"But I think we'll be on the island then."

"You going across the ice?"

She didn't like so many questions. But he had intelligent eyes, she thought. "Yes," she said.

"First time?"

"First time."

“Which island?”

Before she could speak, the front door opened. Barry and another man came in, stamping their feet. Each was carrying two bags of groceries.

“Well, shit, it’s Donald Morgan,” Rick said, looking at the man with Barry. “The old grey cat himself.”

“Yes, it’s me,” the man said. He put the groceries on a chair. Then he unzipped his blue nylon parka and pulled it off. He wore rimless spectacles, and he pulled these off next, wiping the lenses on his shirt sleeve.

“Donald, this is Mary,” Barry said.

“Hi, Mary,” Donald said. He sat down at the table.

“Hello,” she said.

Barry put his grocery bags on another chair and sat down.

“Oh, Barry, this is Rick,” Mary said suddenly.

They nodded at each other. Barry picked up the glass of scotch waiting for him, then looked at Donald. “Let me get you a drink,” he said to Donald. “What’ll it be?”

“Beer,” Donald said.

Barry went to the bar. Rick stood by the table, looking at Donald.

“Heard you’re over on Champagne again,” Rick said.

“Yes,” Donald said.

“You catching anything?”

“Only colds,” Donald said.

“How’s Jennifer?”

“Jennifer’s back in Boston,” Donald said.

“She’s left you?”

“Jennifer’s living with her mother,” Donald said.

“Couldn’t take another winter, huh?” Rick lowered himself into a chair at the next table.

Donald looked at Mary. “Barry tells me this is your first trip north,” he said.

“I was up here once when I was a kid,” Mary said. “My parents took me on a boat ride.”

“Probably went right past Champagne,” Donald said. Barry returned with the drinks. “The old tour boats used to go farther upriver than now,” he continued. “Remember, Barry?”

“They used to go by your front door,” Barry said, sitting down.

“We’d be down there, skinny-dipping off the dock, and the boat would come by, loaded with tourists and cameras, and the guide telling them the family history over the loudspeaker,” Donald said. He picked up his beer and drank half of it.

“Maybe that’s why they changed the route,” Rick said.

Mary said, “How long has your family lived there?”

“My grandfather bought it in 1890 or thereabouts,” Donald said.

“Tell her about the dead bodies buried over there,” Rick said.

Mary said, “Bodies?”

“Soldiers,” Barry said. “Died of cholera. But that’s enough history. This is boring you.”

“I’m not bored,” Mary said. “History is my subject, you know. I’d like to hear more.”

“Drink up!” Barry said, looking at Donald. “You, too, Mary. Let’s get warm before we get cold.”

Rick pointed at Mary’s feet. “You’re going to have trouble with those

boots," he said.

Mary looked down at her boots. They were flat-heeled, made of suede and lined with sheepskin, and they laced up to her knees.

"Your feet are going to get wet," Rick said.

"Probably right," Donald said, his voice lazy. He'd finished his beer.

Rick turned to him. "You going to play us a song, Donald?"

"Later," Donald said. "Maybe."

"I have extra socks in my knapsack," Mary said.

"You'll need those when you get there," Barry said.

"How far is it?"

"A couple of miles."

"How are we going to carry the groceries?" Mary said.

"I've got a sled," Donald answered. "Don't worry."

"Whose round is it?" Barry said.

"Yours," Donald said. "I spent all I had on the food."

Barry went back to the bar.

"Too bad about Jennifer," Rick said. "She was a nice girl."

"She wasn't when she left," Donald said.

"I remember she told me she was painting a lot of pictures over there," Rick said.

"Told you? Told you when?" Donald said.

"Sometime when I ran into her. Sometime at the post office or someplace," Rick said.

"Yeah," Donald said. "Yeah. She painted a lot. Didn't finish much. Know what she painted?"

Rick said, "Animals?"

"She painted self-portraits," Donald said. "And she never finished one of them. She put layer upon layer of paint on the canvas. You can scrape off a layer two inches thick."

Barry came back with the drinks. Mary drank down her second Bloody Mary to make way for the third.

"I'm talking about Jennifer," Donald said to Barry. "And those pictures of hers."

"I remember one she did last summer, of the church," Barry said. "I liked that one especially."

Rick said, "That was the Catholic church or the Baptist?"

"The Catholic church," Donald said. "At least she finished that one." He turned to Mary. "You do any painting?"

"Never," she said. "I can't draw a straight line. I'm the opposite of an artist."

"Well, thanks be for that," Donald said.

"How about a little music?" Barry asked.

"Later," Donald said.

"No, I didn't mean the piano, I meant the jukebox."

"Go right ahead," Donald said. "By all means."

Barry pushed his hand into his pocket. "Here you go," he said to Mary, handing her some quarters. "Choose us a song."

"Right," she said. He looked surprised at the tone of her voice.

Mary went over to the jukebox. The songs were listed on strips of pink-and-white paper beneath a flyspecked sheet of Plexiglass. Most of them were country-and-western songs she didn't know. There were some rock-and-roll "golden oldies," and a few classics such as "God Bless America" and the "Anniversary Waltz." Mary looked down the lists of titles. "Your Cheatin' Heart." "Do It to Me One More Time."

“Another One Bites the Dust.” Nothing seemed appropriate.

She sensed the men at the bar were watching her. Quickly she slid in the quarters, worried that one of them might come to help her choose. She pressed the red buttons, punching in “Let It Bleed” by the Rolling Stones and “Piece of My Heart” by Janice Joplin. Then she went back to the table.

Mary was sitting down when the first song began. It was Kate Smith singing “God Bless America.”

Barry was talking about his work. Donald was drinking more beer and listening. Rick winked at Mary. “Patriotic, huh?” he said.

“Spring, I figure,” Barry was saying. “And I’ll be a free man.”

“About time,” Donald said. “They had you in their clutches before and they’re trying to do it again.”

“They can’t touch me now,” Barry said.

“Smoke?” Rick offered Mary a cigarette.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Yes indeed,” Donald said, reaching for the pack. He took one and said, “Match?”

Barry patted his pockets and shook his head. Rick said, “Find your own.” Donald stood up and walked to the bar.

Barry looked at Mary. “What’s this music you’re playing?”

An orchestral interlude was just ending, signaling the start of the second verse.

“The Rolling Stones,” Mary said.

“No, this ain’t them,” Rick said.

Mary wondered if he was joking.

Donald was talking to the bartender. She was smiling at him, the way a young girl would smile at the school’s best football player.

“Hadn’t we better get started?” Mary asked.

Barry said, “What?”

“Hadn’t we better leave soon, if we’re going to cross the ice before dark?”

“Plenty of time. Relax,” Barry said. “This is first time I’ve seen Donald for months.”

“You ain’t missed much,” Rick said.

Barry looked hard at him.

“He half tore up the town dock last fall,” Rick said. “Went out there in Joe Parker’s cigarette boat when he was drunk and stoned and came in doing more than fifty. Rammed the dock and hit a nice old Chriscraft, belonged to some Canadians.”

Barry continued to stare at Rick.

“Then in October he got into a fight at Brady’s Diner,” Rick went on. “Took off a guy’s ear.”

“Look,” Barry interrupted, “why don’t you keep your mouth shut about that stuff? You seem a decent kind of guy. You don’t need to tell people anything about Donald.”

Rick looked at Barry with new interest. “Fuck you,” he said, and went back to the bar.

Barry’s face turned red.

“Oh God,” Mary said.

Donald was drinking his beer at the bar, still talking to the bartender. She was laughing at what he said. She had on earrings shaped like little bells, and they tinkled when she laughed.

“This noise is driving me nuts,” Barry said. “You trying to be funny,

playing Kate Smith? You trying to make some subtle point?"

"Not me," Mary said.

They sat there grimly. Over at the bar Rick had joined his friends, and they were all watching Donald. Donald was whispering to the bartender.

Finally Barry called over to him, "Don't you think we'd better make a start?"

Donald looked up. "I do indeed," he said. "But first I've got to give these people a song."

He went over to the piano and put his beer on top of it. He flipped up the keyboard cover and ran his fingers over the keys. Then he began to play.

The bartender pulled the plug on the jukebox.

Donald played ragtime tunes. Mary had never heard them before. The music was fast and melodious, but something in it was very sad.

He played for seven or eight minutes, and when he stopped, Rick hollered, "All right, Donald!" His friends grinned. The bartender and Barry applauded. The old man said, "That's real old-fashioned music."

But Donald wasn't smiling. He was shaking his head, looking at the keyboard. He played a scale, then played it again, running his fingers rapidly up and down the keys. Finally he slammed the cover down and stood up. "Get the damn thing tuned," he said to the bartender.

She looked so sorry that Mary thought she might cry.

Donald came back to the table. He picked up his parka. "Are we going or what?" he said.

Mary stood up and reached for her jacket. Barry had already buttoned his and was waiting by the door. As she was pushing her arms into the sleeves, Rick came over and held the jacket to help her.

"You sure you want to go?" he said, his mouth close to her ear.

She looked up at him, startled by his closeness. His breath was warm and smelled of beer and cigarettes. Before she could answer, Donald said, "Ready?"

She nodded. Barry and Donald picked up the bags of groceries, then stood back to let her go first. Without speaking, the three of them left the café and crossed the street.

Donald's sled stood against the back of one of the buildings. It had sides steep enough to hold in the knapsacks, sleeping bags, and groceries. He pulled it toward the place where the ice began.

When he reached the edge he stopped and took a length of rope from the sled. He wrapped one end around his waist and tied it. Then he put the rope around Barry and made it fast. "You can do Mary," he said to Barry. Barry took the rope and came up close to her.

"I'm sure I'll be all right without it," she said. Her voice sounded small.

Barry didn't answer. He thrust the rope around her midriff and knotted it.

"All set?" Donald said.

"All set," Barry answered.

Donald picked up the sled's towline and stepped onto the ice. It had begun to snow lightly and the dark shapes of the islands were indistinct. Barry came next, and Mary followed, wondering why she was last. They walked single file into the white air. Mary thought, "At least it isn't slippery."