



Sun glinted off the snow in a daybreak dance, a million ice crystals sparkling with such radiance that she had to shade her eyes just to watch. It was always like this, the first snowfall, something to look forward to in a life of same tomorrows. The first snow might seem a small thing to some of her newer transplant neighbors, but she looked forward to it with the impatience of a child at Christmas; maybe more, since her childhood Christmases on a logger's income hadn't delivered much in the way of surprises.

In the distance a coyote barked, most likely coming from the eastern woodlot, but then again her addle-pated brain made it hard to distinguish direction. Maybe just her neighbor's pit scrapping at the injustice of its chain.

Another bark. This time Ailadean joined with a wail of her own, more raw and feral than anything she had ever uttered, the sound echoing through the madrone and Doug fir, startling small creatures inside their snowy boles and nests. She clamped her mouth shut and filled her lungs with satisfaction. A squirrel danced down the trunk of an oak with a red madrone berry in its mouth, its grey tail a feathery shadow as it leaped to the snow. It was a moment of utter harmony to be held forever, she thought. She reached in her bathrobe pocket for one of Raymond's Walnettos in a crumpled wrapper and pitched it to the squirrel, paper and all. The squirrel caught the candy in its paws and scampered back up the tree, pausing once to chirp down at her before it disappeared into a hole.

She patted her chenille bathrobe closer and tried to remember what she was doing out here in the cold. The kids would be coming soon. She had phoned them after she made the call, when the young dispatcher insisted she do so. In a matter of hours the house would fill with worried glances and furtive whispers between her daughters, but for now she was content to remain as she was. One spot in particular caught her attention, a hole she had dug on the day Raymond fell ill, thinking she needed another yellow Cecil Brunner to make an even dozen. The hole, now a ragged scar in the yard, quietly softened and filled with powdery snow. As always, the land knew best; without the extra bush the yard had space for the others to spread out.

She returned inside, closed the slider behind her and made her way into her bedroom to rummage through her closet. What to wear seemed important. A critical decision needed to be made between a dress or the mauve Alfred Dunner polyester slacks that were a fair match for an almost-new jersey top that, on second thought, might not do since she would need the sleeves to stay put when she rolled them to the elbows, later on. She considered a dress with its spattering of purple posies in the crisp print fabric, but she set it aside. She would need her bib apron with its oversized pockets and

what was the point of dolling up like she was looking forward to something. Come to that, she might as well put on her pearls and make a real show. For a moment she considered wearing black, even if Raymond had claimed she looked like a fortune teller in bad lighting, whatever that meant. Her daughters would insist on black all around, but she didn't intend to dress herself in widow's rags until they arrived to make a fuss. It was no one's business how she grieved.

Irritation seemed to provoke the rebel in her, and at such a time as this. She glanced at the dresser where a cobalt blue bottle of Evening in Paris *eau de parfum* stood nearly empty beside her jewelry box, a gift to herself the year Raymond claimed he didn't have any idea what she wanted for Christmas. Well, she showed him, and the Macy's counter girl, too. She charged his account and didn't bother to pay it off until February.

With a quick spritz into the air, she stepped through the mist like the perfume girl showed her and watched the excess drift toward the bed. Unexpectedly, a shortness of breath doubled her over in weak, jerky gasps until she forced her shoulders up. With one hand on her breast, she managed to fill her lungs in a whoosh. She felt her body sag, but she was all right, only a little panic attack. The next few breaths were easier.

She slipped her feet into a pair of pink Minnetonka mocs that her daughter-in-law had given her last Christmas, easing them over the compression socks that the doctor insisted she wear. The beaded moccasins limited her options; she pulled a denim six-gore skirt from a hanger and after slipping it on, buttoned herself into a plaid shirt that would do. Her hair



was another matter. Raymond was the one who loved the length, like most men who didn't appreciate the effort it took for spindly arms and shaky hands to braid thin, fly-away hair—hair that even he couldn't pretend was anywhere near the thick horse's mane she had possessed when they met. Maybe afterwards she would have the beauty shop gal chop it off. She was tired of finding it in the drain and on Raymond's socks, just out of the dryer.

She carried her hairbrush into the living room and set it beside the fireplace while she tried to rekindle the spent embers of a fire she had built in the early hours. She would need to add some wood, another of the chores Raymond had handled.

On her way to the woodpile she stepped across the worn rag rug she had made from a stack of green and rose-colored curtains she'd spirited out from under Edna Reilly's quick hands at the Methodist rummage sale, before Edna could claim them for one of her colorful quilts. The rug looked dirty and sad from muddied boots tromping on it and a shaggy dog taking its rest. On afterthought, maybe she should have let Edna have the yard goods.

Glancing down at the depression Shep had made in the middle of the oval rug, she thought about her decision—actually her insistence—that they not replace the aged sheepdog when it passed. Stuff and bother, she had claimed; she had enough to worry about when Raymond started his decline. Now she stared at the worn spot and tried not to feel guilty. If Shep wanted her to feel bad, the ruse wasn't working.

At the woodpile she found the stack of oak cord wood that Raymond had split earlier in the season. Picking up an armful, she carried it inside.

She tossed it in and was rewarded by a lazy flame that appeared from nowhere to lick the smoking bark. From the kitchen the teakettle hissed and spit, a sure-enough surprise since she didn't recall turning it on. She wasn't herself today; that was for certain. She made her way to the stove and switched off the propane burner. Surprisingly, everything was set out for her chamomile tea, one lump, dash of milk—the way Raymond liked it.

On her way to the sofa she splashed tea onto her denim skirt. The portable phone rang and she answered with shaking hands. Ruthy had remembered.

Her response sounded strong to her ears. "Yes. I'm here. It's time."

A moment later she switched off the phone and busied herself with her teabag to keep her hands occupied, even if her mind raced. After taking a sip from her mug she brushed back a strand of hair, refolded an afghan lying on the sofa and glanced again at the closed door of her bedroom. When Ruthy drove up she remained where she was, facing the fireplace as the sound of sensible shoes crunched on fresh snow. She ignored the hesitant tap and waited for the door to open, which it did. A moment later a whiskey bundt cake settled on the counter and an overcoat shrugged itself off. Warm arms caressed her. With her eyes closed, she felt her body warmed by the touch.

Ruthy's voice caught her off-guard. "I won't ask how you're holding up, Ailadean. You'll get enough of that. You're in the in-between place. Stay there as long as you can—seize onto it with both hands."

Familiar and dear, her friend's tone brooked no nonsense, thank God. She met Ruthy's eyes and nodded. They had no need for small talk, only the shared camaraderie of the crackling fire.

It was too good to last. After a moment, Ruthy continued. "The end was easy?"

"Easier than the waiting. And now the rest of it."

Ruthy leaned in and brushed a hand across her own, hesitating at the spot where a worn wedding band rested on a joint grown crooked from hard use, before she roused herself. "Here, let me warm your tea while I fry you up an egg. You'll be glad of it later." She whisked the mug away and had it back, steaming, before Ailadean could protest, but there was no energy for such things anyway. She would eat, drink, whatever. None of it mattered.

After the stacking of empty mugs, two speckled tin basins came out of the back porch, their black rims battered and chipped from handling. Her mother had used them for clabbering milk, but when she needed something

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for Grandpa Malley's laying-out, they never made it back to the kitchen. After the last use someone had replaced the worn washcloths with neatly-folded squares of flannel scrap and new bars of pine tar soap still in their wrappers.

Ailadean filled the basins with water, hot but not scalding. It would cool soon enough.

"We have time for you to get your hair brushed and coiled, if you wish to." Ruthy stood watching as Ailadean unwrapped yesterday's braids and began brushing. "Wouldn't surprise me if you decided to cut those things one of these days. He won't mind."

Ailadean kept her thoughts to herself. No one's business but hers, what she did. While she made sure the hairpins were planted and the coils tight and smooth, Ruthy added a log to the fire and pulled a packet of white lace from her handbag. "I brought my Sunday gloves. I thought we would need something. . . ."

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The room was chilled, even with the flannel sheets. He lay between them, just as she had left him in the early hours, after death pallor stole the

warmth of his body, with his hair sleep-mussed and his whiskers stubbled until his cheeks looked like pepper on snow. She picked up his hand and felt his gold band slip nearly to the knuckle before she pushed it firmly back in place. She looked over at Ruthy and felt her face heat.

Ruthy noticed. "We'll leave the sheet on. There's no need for otherwise. You know every inch of him." Her voice sounded strangled, as did her laugh. "I expect I do, too."

Ailadean snapped from her reverie. "Ruthy, don't torture yourself. It was what it was. No sense fretting about it now." The room was warming. She heard the heat pump churning outside the window. "Since daylight I feel myself living a life that's no longer my own. Isn't that curious?"

"Not curious. Inevitable, I'd say."

"Inescapable, you mean."

"Surely that. But you will do it with such dignity, Ailadean."

She studied the way the snow clung to the potato vine twined around the wire fence until she found her tongue. "Truth is, I've spent nights rehearsing for this. Do you think I'll be faulted for it?"

"Pshaw." Ruthy squinted with one eyebrow raised, the way she did when she was perplexed. "Reminds me of something I saw on *Touched by an Angel*. Monica said, 'Some of our best living is done by the people we leave behind.' I expect she'd include you in that."

"Sounds like something Tess would say." Ailadean looked around, trying to remember what she was doing. "I liked that show."

Thank goodness, Ruthy seemed to have her wits about her. "I'll follow your lead. Just let me know. I don't even need to talk if it suits you."

Ailadean was still holding his hand, trying to find her Raymond in the waxen fingers, but his rope burns and wire cuts had already disappeared. Her disappointment came out sounding like curtness, but she didn't give a tinker's damn. "The rigor is setting in. Let's work the muscles soft. I won't have the kids seeing him like this."

"Here—take the gloves. I kept them new for him. You'll want them."

Ailadean pulled on her pair and fussed with the pearl button at each wrist. "Been years since I saw a pair of these."

"Maybe if Raymond had bothered to attend church in the last twenty years, you'd have seen a need."

"Don't start."

They each picked up a hand and began working down from the knuckles. Ailadean watched the way the gold band caught the light from the naked bulb that hung suspended from the middle of the room. After Home Depot came to town, she had fussed for a ceiling fan with white enamel blades that could be reversed in the summer. She glanced up, shamed at the poor showing of the room. At least she'd had the presence of mind to drape her mother's coral counterpane over the footboard so that the appliquéd flowers showed to advantage, but that was to keep Raymond's feet off when he napped rather than because she expected anyone else to see it. She waited for Ruthy to notice the scent of Evening in Paris that lingered in the air, but the clock on the dresser moved to half-past the hour without either of them speaking.

When the hands and fingers felt supple, Ailadean reached for her manicure set. She worried that Ruthy might take up the task, but her friend was busy with something across the room, her back to the bed; by the time the fingernails were buffed, and the cracked cuticles rubbed with a bit of musterole ointment, Ruthy had the water basins refilled.

Raymond slept bare so there was no unbuttoning to be done, not even lower when it came to that. She reached beneath the sheet and swabbed in slow, gentle swirls until she felt his chest hairs resist the cloth and then lay smooth. She lifted an arm and followed the curve of his body down to the private parts, glad that the sheet revered him. Across, Ruthy was washing his feet while she trained her gaze on something out the window.

When Ruthy emptied the basins a second time, Ailadean eased a fresh cloth across his lips. "He would want to be clean-shaven. That was important to him."

"He likes a straight razor and strop." Ruthy looked up with a curt nod. "I mean, he used to, when he was younger."

Ailadean chewed her bottom lip, a habit she despaired of ever overcoming. "I have his safety razor in the other room. It will do."

A blaze of color in Ruthy's cheeks and her eyebrow lifted again. "He left the straight-edge behind when he moved out. I have it somewhere if your boy wants it. A novelty these days." She shifted. "Should I fetch shampoo?"

Ailadean kept her face down until she could trust herself to speak with less starch. "The pine tar soap will do. He favored the smell, God knows why. He doesn't have much hair to work with. I'll get the part right. The kids will notice, otherwise."

Ruthy turned on a Christian praise station without either of them thinking to mention it, and the music seemed like angels filled the room. Ailadean pressed her cloth around her husband's nose and eyes until the room disappeared and she was alone with Raymond in the bed they had shared for over forty years. Ruthy had gotten the first ten or they would have made it to fifty by now, but she didn't begrudge the missed years; he had set aside a lot of mistakes that didn't bear repeating, and she figured she got the better of the deal, including three precious children. Ruthy's second husband had been a good enough man to overlook the things that drove Raymond crazy.

Ailadean carried the Sunday suit from their closet and handed it to Ruthy for brushing. She returned with his favorite blue wool plaid shirt and a western string tie that she had given him on their first anniversary. After they eased the shirt on, Ruthy stood back while she buttoned it with slow movements, and arranged the collar with the bolo around his neck with the tiger-eye stone set tight against his Adam's apple the way he liked it. It took both of them to ease him into the jacket, and afterwards, Ruthy turned away while she fastened the trousers.

They straightened to inspect their handiwork. "He looks too saintly." She hated that a man's life struggles could be erased just by his act of leaving the earth.

Apparently Ruthy felt the same. "I brought some rouge, just in case. We might add some color."

Ailadean said nothing while Ruthy pulled out a department store sample of rose blush crème and dabbed a spot on each cheek. With some considerable blending it did look better, but there was still the problem of the hands.

"Maybe some work gloves? He always kept a pair around. Do you think your kids would mind?"

Ailadean produced an almost new pair with a smudge on the right thumb. She made a move to remove the dirt, but Ruthy stopped her.

"Leave it. He was a forester, for God's sake."

Whether it was a case of nerves or a momentary fit of levity, Ruthy's comment struck Ailadean's funny bone. She set the work gloves aside with a laugh. "Remember in grammar school, we had a club?"

"And we cut bangs for membership? Brought my mother's scissors to class and hid in the cloak room at recess?"

Ailadean smiled. "We were the Bang Girls."

Ruthy looked up from the sock she was working over stiff toes. "Friends for seventy years and more, and we're still discussing what to do with our hair." She glanced down and patted the sock for fit. "Even he couldn't break the bond."

"We've been through a heap, that's for sure." The angels again, flapping their wings, making it hard to speak as they stood inspecting their work. Ailadean recovered first. "He looks good. Even his hair." She would ask her son about the hat, later. Ruthy was talking.

"Good cheekbones. It's that sprinkling of Cherokee, I expect."

She felt the lump settle in her throat, making speaking hard. "He took pains to hide it, same as his mother. Our kids are proud to claim it."

"He always looked good. Even when he was bad."

Ailadean laughed. Trust Ruthy to ignore the tribal talk. "Worked some of that out as he got older, I expect."

Ruthy cleared her throat as she twisted water from a flannel scrap and hung it over the basin. "I wanted to get you a card for—for the right time. But as I read them, I thought to myself, what could some strange poet know about us? They wouldn't have a clue. I thought I could do so much better. I thought I could speak from my heart."

"And save the three dollars."

Ruthy always had a healthy snort. "Three? I didn't go to the blamed Dollar General. I was over at Flossie's Florist."

"Well all right then!" After their laughter died, Ailadean picked up her husband's hand and ran a finger along the neat cuticles.

She reached to smooth his unruly eyebrows into tidy arches. His lashes, once so long and thick, and fanning those handsome cheekbones, were nearly hidden in his pallor of death. "He was a good man. He had that. Did the work of two." Another thought pushed its way out. "He wasn't in a hurry to leave. He said so more than once. Said he'd miss my cooking."

Ruthy watched silently, her expression caught in remembrance and something else, pity? No, it was regret that flashed across her face before it was extinguished by a soft smile. "You two had a fine life together. Better than most." She gave a rueful snort. "Better than me. He was always yours. Even before we married. I knew that. I took him and it was wrong."

Ailadean shook her head. The words were long in coming; they'd made it this far without the need of them, but she figured to say them anyway. "What was done was done."

"He came looking for you after he got home from the Pacific Theater, but you weren't there that fall of '45. And I was. I guess I'd changed some."

"We started first grade together, the three of us. He liked you, too."

"But he didn't love me. There was always that between us. He realized too late that he loved you. But he tried to make a go of it. Until he couldn't any more."

"We didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, there wasn't much any of us could do. Sitting near each other at the Methodist Church, square dancing every Friday night, fish feeds at the Grange. It wasn't like we could stay strangers."

"Strangers? You drove me to the hospital when Randy was born. You brought us supper after Mary Linda." Ailadean pulled off her sodden gloves, finger by finger—the squeak loud enough to send the angels flying out the window. "And there's this kindness today—"

Ruthy shook her head. "No, don't. I'm so grateful you asked. It was more

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than I deserved.” She picked up the basins and emptied them out the back stoop where the crepe myrtle was swelling. She rinsed them and set them back on the shelf, ready for the next laying-out. “It might well be one of us needs these, next time. Most of our friends are all ready tended to, or their kin use the mortician.”

“He’ll be here to collect Ray. I asked for a few hours alone.” Ailadean took her friend’s worn hands. “I imagine we’ll need each other more than ever now.” She chuckled. “The kids will be here soon. They’ll want to send me to bed with a sedative. You’ll probably want to take your leave before they start.”

Ruthy pulled her apron off, placed the gloves inside and rolled everything into a ball. “What a shame our children don’t know everything about us. Inside we’re still Bang Girls with a secret handshake. Do you remember?”

Ailadean nodded.

“Then here, let’s sing our song. Strong voices like in the old days. Come on, you too. One, two, three . . . .”

“Bang Girls, friends forever. Whatever we do, we’ll stick together. . . .”

Ruthy’s voice was a half note sour, but her enthusiasm carried them both as she led the way to the slider and opened it before the last verse trailed off.

Silence swelled through the Oregon woods, swathing everything in a blanket of stillness so complete that Ailadean imagined she heard snowflakes settling in the air, crisp and light, with a bite of brittle ozone that burned her nose. Frozen crystals settled on her lashes until she blinked and sent them sliding. Unlike her unshed tears, the icy droplets at the corners of her mouth felt welcome and clean.

Without warning the dry sobs started. She buried her face in her friend’s shoulder and racked violent heaves without making a single sound while Ruthy crooned softly against her skull. When she was finished, she straightened and soothed her hair, unable to meet her friend’s gaze.

“I remember everything like it was yesterday.”

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