**Enough to Think it was Her**

Patrick Malka

Rain or shine, I walk the kids home from daycare.

Our double wide stroller fits both kids comfortably and can be pushed through pretty much any weather. As long as the kids are well dressed, they seem to enjoy it well enough, even though it takes forty-five minutes on a good day. At least Arthur and Rae had a good day. I was hopeful. At least when I walk them, I am in control.

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*The first time I saw Kerri, she was playing an acoustic guitar on a highway overpass. She wanted to see if she could sing louder than rush hour traffic. I stood there and watched as she unabashedly broke strings and blood vessels battling it out with 18-wheelers. It was during her rendition of “Everything I have” by Siskiyou that I decided, as long she stood there, screaming at the world, I would be by her side.*

*Ten years and two kids later, it’s still true.*

*But I’m tired.*

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The last thirty minutes of the walk home are my respite. A quiet stretch of residential streets, the kids laid back or sleeping. Easy. But anticipation for the rest of the day’s routine is a constant stressor. I don’t know where Kerri will be. And if she is home, I don’t know which Kerri will be there to greet us.

On that day, it began to snow hard at the start of those last thirty minutes. Large intrusive flakes and violent updrafts making it hard to see or move forward. I had never seen the weather shift so suddenly.

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*The first time, I was scared in a way that redefined fear.*

*Kerri called out from our bedroom. No words, just a guttural sound. I was in the living room reading. Arthur was asleep in his crib, only recently sleeping the night. I was annoyed that Kerri would risk waking him by shouting out. What could possibly be wrong this time? When I opened the door, her bedside lamp flickered where it had been knocked over. Clothing was scattered all over the floor as though a strong gust of wind had blown through. The morning’s coffee cup was shattered at my feet. How did I not hear any of this? I noticed the room because I was momentarily blinded to Kerri herself, seizing in bed, bloody tears flowing from her eyes, drifting across her forehead, and soaking her hair line. She hovered, high enough that I could see beyond her in the space between her and the bed. The air was so cold that the vapor of our breaths crystalized and spun with unseen currents.*

*In an urgent voice that was only one part hers, “it’s okay, it’s okay, she won’t last, go, go back.”*

*I closed the door. Arthur had started to cry. What haunts me most is the sound of Kerri imitating Arthur’s cry through the door.*

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My phone rang through my headphones as I struggled across newly formed dunes of snow. I stopped the stroller and pulled out my phone. It was Steph, Kerri’s sister. I was out of breath and uninterested in speaking to anyone, so I let it go. The ringing stopped and the texts started flooding in.

*“Hey, have you spoken to Ker?”*

*“She called me earlier. Something’s wrong.”*

*“Are you home yet? I can come get the kids anytime.”*

*“You’re probs walking. K. I’ll try her again. I’m worried. This feels different.”*

I looked up at the last straightaway. About ten long blocks. It was already dark but the islands of light emanating from each of the regularly spaced streetlamps were refracting off airborne snowflakes, giving the entire street a pulsing glow. All I could see ahead of me was a wall of backlit snow. As I got the stroller moving again, the kids started singing a song in dissonant harmony. I could not see them under the layers of snow gathering on the plastic stroller cover, but their voices carried on the increasingly numbing wind. Probably a song they sang in daycare. I smiled. Their sense of timing was, as always, impeccable. It took me too long to realize they were actually singing “Everything I have.” I didn’t know they knew the song. They sang it louder with every repetition and after a time I could no longer tell where their voices were coming from, as the song just managed to cut through the roar of wind and the beat of my breath.

Down the street, the shadow of a person appeared, as seen through the translucent screen of snow. I thought we were the only ones braving the weather. I could tell the person was walking away from us because they appeared to be maintaining the same distance, even as I continued to push on. Then I could hear her. I could hear Kerri’s voice joining in with the children.

Was that her up ahead? She shouldn’t have been out in this weather. She shouldn’t have been out at all. Maybe Steph got to our house first, and Kerri talked her into it.

I stopped walking. The kids stopped singing but the echo of the song remained. The shadow up ahead was just out of sight.

I sat down in the snow, listening to the white noise of the weather but focusing on the clinking, crystalline sound of drifting snow, like the sand being flipped over in an hourglass.

“Daddy, why are we stopped?” Arthur’s voice registered as barely a whisper.

“Daddy, we can’t see you.” Rae, the influence of her father’s anxiety coming through.

“Daddy, can we keep going? I want mommy.”

“Daddy?”

I could tell. Everything would be different. If I made it home, I would have to face it. But what if I didn’t? What if I didn’t make it home?

“Daddy, I’m cold.” This voice, I did not recognize, floating in from farther away.

“Come home.”