

Ken Siewert

A Touch of Winter

The family had moved to southern California a long time ago to get away from the cold, but he had picked a place in the mountains to live, a place where he could have a little touch of winter, a little snow every other year or so.

He had built a bird feeder outside the bedroom window so that she could watch it, watch the sparrows as she drank her morning coffee. She had meant to buy seed, but every time she was in town the thought of it escaped her. Maybe, she was gazing out the window and maybe a single bird flew to the edge of the feeder, fluttered its wings and landed.

"Move the car," she said. "Move the car."

He opened one eye long enough to see her sitting up in bed with a pillow propped behind her back and a vacant look on her face. He promptly shut his eyes.

"I know you can hear me," she said. "It's snowing outside. Move the car."

He opened his eyes again, raised his head the inch or two it took to see over the comforter and glanced out the window before he let his head fall back to the pillow.

"If you don't move the car to the main road we'll be snowed in. We have to go to work. Now move the car."

He was enjoying the afterglow of a mildly pleasant dream. It was warm under the covers and he knew it was cold in the bedroom, even colder outside, for he had seen the big wet flakes of snow in

the morning twilight. With his eyes closed and his mind trying to recapture his dream, he searched for something to fit the moment.

"Enjoy the snow," he said. "It's beautiful."

"Move the car," she said.

"Let's stay home and enjoy the snow," he said. "I'm allowed a day off. You're allowed a day off."

"Move the fucking car," she said.

He couldn't maintain the glow any longer. He sat up, put his pillow behind his back and pulled the blankets up under his chin, exposing the white sheets at the bottom of the bed and letting a stream of cold air slip under the covers.

"All right, I'll move the car. But bring me a cup of coffee first." He could feel her tension ease as she slipped from the bed, hurrying for the kitchen, her feet bare on the cold hardwood floor.

He was staring out the window, lost in the whirls and eddies of the falling snow when she eased back into bed, handed him his coffee, then lit them both a cigarette.

"You have to hurry," she said. "Soon you won't be able to get the car to the main road."

"How long have you been sitting there staring out the window?" he said.

"I don't know," she said.

"How long have you been staring out the window?" he said.

"The snow was just beginning to stick and now there's three or four inches. That's why you have to hurry."

"How long," he said.

"Over an hour," she said.

He didn't want to think about tire chains, scraping the windshield or the walk back down the hill from the main road. He didn't want to think about why she had been sitting there for over an hour staring out the window. He didn't want to think about the cold. He didn't want to think about anything.

He slipped out of bed, hurried into the kitchen and poured another cup of coffee. Another cup of coffee or two he thought, and then the time it takes to shower, to get dressed, and maybe the snow will get deeper, too deep. He was thinking these thoughts as he walked back into the bedroom.

"I know what you're doing," she said. "Now move the fucking car."

He didn't say a word, but pulled on his clothes, his boots, and went to the closet and took out his down filled, camouflaged, coveralls. She had always called it the pickle suit.

The blue Honda was a mound in the snow. He cleaned the windshield with his forearm and started the engine. He was disappointed at how easily the car took the slight incline up to the main road. When he got back to the house she was waiting at the door. She had on a long grey dress and under that, her blue jeans and cowboy boots. She carried a pair of grey pumps in her hand.

"Don't walk in the tire tracks," he said, as he put his arm about her waist to steady her. "The snow is compressed and slippery."

"We never once bought them a sleigh," she said.

"Yes I did," he said.

"No, you did not."

He thought about it, trying to remember whether he had or not, and then he remembered the silver disk they used to slide down the hill on shrieking and giggling, trying to make each other crash, fighting over whose turn it was.

"I bought them one of those silver snow saucers. Remember?"

"No you did not," she said. "They stole it from one of the neighbor girls."

He had been trying to enjoy the snow, the freshness, but the life was going out of it. "Oh," he said. He knew her memory about such things was precise.

In clumps, snow fell from the limbs of trees and telephone wires and wet flakes dabbed at the windshield. Twice they spun out in the blue Honda with hood and roof piled with snow. The luggage rack kept the wind from sweeping the car clean. As they drove down the canyon, the snow fall became less and less and he could feel her tension subside. When they had lost enough elevation, reached the snow line where it was too warm and snow refused to stick, she began to cry.

He knew what she had been thinking, she was thinking about the schools, how they closed when it snowed and how the neighborhood children would be home and how today, they would be on her

hill with sleds and plastic bags. She would be, all day, at the window watching them. She was thinking, he knew, how she would not be able to stand it.

"Do you understand?" she said. "Do you understand why we had to leave?"

"So call them," he said. "Invite them home for the weekend."

He thought about them, how they used to run in and out of the house, getting warm, getting cold, hanging their wet socks, wet mittens by the fireplace.

"It wouldn't be the same," she said.

"We can't run away every time it snows," he said.

"It was like a ritual," she said, "the way the kids would be at one house and then the next, drinking hot chocolate, spiced cider. Remember the year we got cabin fever?"

He thought about that week, then that one afternoon when all the mothers got together and started sipping chardonnay and when that was finished, out came the peppermint schnapps. He remembered how the gang of them took to the streets, walking through the neighborhood like vigilantes pushing over snow men, kicking carrot faces.

"You have to remember," she said.

"I remember."

He eased the Honda, luggage rack full of snow, into the parking lot of 7-11. Children had gathered there accumulating bits and pieces of snow from cars coming down from the mountains.

A young boy, all baseball jacket and blue knit cap, knuckles red from the cold knocked at the window. "Can I have your snow, mister?" he said. "Please, can I have your snow?"

He looked at the young boy and said nothing, but as he walked into the convenience store, he yelled back over his shoulder, "It's all yours."

He stood in the doorway of the 7-11 with a cup of coffee in each hand, watching her, sitting in the front seat of the car with a smile on her face. Surrounded by children, the blue Honda was rocking back and forth as a dozen boys and girls climbed upon it, pulling at it, pulling at the snow, making snow balls and picking out targets.