

Lake Effect

Sullivan relied on his son Michael for this much: when Michael said the snow would start an hour before dawn and fall late into the night, and, as with all first snows, people would forget how to drive, Sullivan knew he was right. He scraped his Swedish meatball frozen dinner into the trash and grabbed a bar of soap from the kitchen sink while Michael described how cars would slip into gulleys, collide at stop signs, and fishtail through turns like joyriding adolescents. The boy swung his arms side to side to imitate how they would careen from guardrails and jam their horns as their headlights whipped the snowfall. It would be dangerous to drive, Michael said, but when seeking advice on danger Sullivan looked to anyone but his son, who understood so much about the weather and nothing at all about human beings.

Sullivan himself knew well enough what first snow meant. "Son of a bitch," he said and gripped the back of Michael's leather chair. Physically, they were ready. They'd stockpiled weeks of groceries, used DVDs from the dollar bin, and endless winters on Lake Michigan's eastern shore: thirty-nine for the son and sixty-four for Sullivan. But this year more than ever Sullivan dreaded the isolation. He was three weeks into a new woman, Anne, and winter could burst fresh romance like unwrapped pipe. The cold drove people deep into their private lives. He forced a warm breath between his palms. "You say it'll start about dawn?" The clock on the television read nine thirty.

"A litde sooner."

"Too soon this year."

Michael turned in his chair and leaned back. "You can't rely on what seems normal," he said. "Climatology is unreliable in the short term." Sullivan knew that Michael was *glad* to see their world roped off, expectations wrapped and frozen like so many pounds of deer meat. After forty inches their lives would setde into the year's most dependable pattern: shoveling walk and drive, freezing pots of stew or chili (they both hated to cook and prepared two weeks' worth in a day), and memorizing TV sports schedules-Michael's Lions and Wolverines and Sullivan's Islanders- while outdoors a procession of silver sky yielded to flat gray until gray covered every surface, even the dazzling snow crust. Sullivan would dig his way to the mailbox for a government check, their income but for what Michael made

reading the weather for a local radio station. They let him do it over the phone. He'd argued he was better able to prepare a forecast at home and the station did not object. Sullivan suspected their first meeting with the strange boy convinced them. They didn't know the half of it. He liked to record his broadcasts without a shred of clothing on. Nude Radio, he called it, his sick joke on his listeners. In a city it would be the gimmick that could make him a star, he said. He thought he was some undiscovered talent.

They would set aside their tempers because confinement dictated cooperation, and in a home-bound regime they yielded to something like contentment. Sullivan would not demand in a drunken rage that Michael move out, and Michael withheld threats to inter Sullivan at the Traverse City Regional Living Center, a pastel detox for the prematurely old. As if he could survive a week on his own. As if he knew anything about life on the ground besides what his father told him. But there was no stopping what was coming, that much Michael was probably right about. He had a knack for the weather-always did since he was a litde kid-and it was the one thing about *either* of them that had made the boy's mother proud.

"Well, if we're about to get buried then I'm going out." Sullivan said. "Out with a bang." He walked to his bedroom.

"If you spend the night with Anne, there's no telling when you'll get home. I won't have a way to bring you."

"Going to the bar, stupid ass. I want a few last beers from the tap."

Michael followed him through the house. There was no money for a tow; he shouted through the bathroom door. Sullivan flushed the toilet and started the shower. He hoped the noise would silence Michael's bitching. He emerged twenty minutes later, his body hairy and shriveled and glistening. Michael towered over him, twice his weight and six inches taller. He dominated the cramped hallways and rooms so Sullivan always felt cornered, ducking aside as Michael passed. Sullivan's hair hung silver over his ears and he tucked his blue-striped shirt into his jeans quickly, impatient with the scrutiny. "I don't want beer from the refrigerator," he explained. "I want a frosted mug in Novotny's. Smoke and grease-something'll take six weeks to wash. You just stay right here and watch your computer like there's one damn thing you can do about the weather, or any other fucking thing in your case. The *Internet*. Jesus fucking Christ." Just then Sullivan could not recall when he'd given up on the boy.

In the days when father and son had drunk together, Novotny's was their favorite hole. Michael left Sullivan under every bar top in the joint. He also abandoned his grad school prospects under those tables, once a gifted student coveted by meteorology programs from Michigan to Texas, who now liked to remind his

father how many scholarships he'd declined, as if it were Sullivan's fault, or the bartender's, or the bottle's. Michael's mother, too, laid blame at Sullivan's boots, but the boy did what he wanted. Always had.

"I don't expect Anne will come out tonight with a storm on the way," Sullivan said. He combed his hair in the mirror. "Probably never see her again." "She might not know about the weather."

"If I'm lucky. But you'll take care of that, won't you? Probably call her up special"

Michael went back to the computer. In twenty minutes, new forecasts might reveal the very hour the snow would start. Sullivan shook his head in disgust. He grabbed his coat and hat and walked out the door.

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Over the radio, Michael's voice carried seventy miles in all directions, his mellow baritone like the banter of a lonely uncle with too many gifts. But you can trust him about the city council meeting and tomorrow's weather. As soon as Sullivan was out the door Michael called the station and asked to be put on the air immediately to read a breaking weather bulletin. He recorded the spot over a "bed" of snowfall sound effects (a stream of rice poured on a pane of glass) and faint bells. Twenty-six thousand souls in the listening area. "We're looking for the first flakes any moment now, and once it starts we'll see two feet or more before tomorrow evening. A good night for hot chocolate and a fire," he added cheerfully. This was no Weather Channel correspondent braced against a white-out like a damn fool--here was a neighbor offering a word to the wise. What the radio audience could not hear was the producer whispering into Michael's ear the number of seconds until the cut-away, helping Michael hit the post with a congenial flourish: "Good night now, folks." Nor could his audience see him: cross-legged in the bay window, a wool Santa's cap pulled to the tips of his ears, a red scarf, and nothing else.

Michael woke to the sound of a woman's laugh on the porch. Someone was trying and failing to find the proper key to the front door. By the light of his computer screensaver he scrambled for an Afghan on the back of the couch. He covered himself and curled into the fetal position as the door opened and milky porch light outlined Sullivan's head with Anne behind him. Her face was narrow and her figure slim and draped in a long coat. They smelled like cigarettes and whispered too loud as if still talking over music. Michael pushed his hands deep between the sofa cushions to find his glasses. He could feel them watching him.

"Is it snowing yet?"

"Where are your glasses?"

"I fell asleep."

Anne's words formed from the echo of her laughter: "Michael, do you need some help?" There was nothing in the house like the sound of her voice, no food or magazines or even thoughts in the same key. Sullivan had not brought a woman home since Michael's mother had left them.

"I know right where they are."

"He would say, 'thank you for offering,' if he had any manners," Sullivan said. "Hold down the fort, X-Ray vision. If bikini weather busts out, come let us know. You bring your bikini, babe?" Sullivan kissed the top of the woman's breast through her white shirt. He draped his arm around her shoulder and they moved to the bedroom, shut the door with a gentle click.

Michael sat perfectly quiet as if perched on a weak branch of his mother's favorite Red Elm. Still the timpani of mattress and the couple's sighs eluded him. Finally the boxsprings' muffled cadence grew like the high school marching band heard from inside the weight room. He squatted six hundred pounds as a senior tackle and there were always girls, not because he was attractive or popular--on the contrary, he was plagued with acne and random sweat--but because of his brute strength and the girls' willing submissions to a hulky man-child like their fathers. Yet this was not how Sullivan was fucking that woman. "Sully," as his buddies called him, was too small to overwhelm and too needy for domination. Michael imagined the woman might climb on top, direct what his father should do. He would comply, pliant and submissive. Grateful.

Michael found his glasses under the couch. He sneezed from the dust and went outside to clear his head. Cloud bases glided over iron streetlamps. Sullivan's red Cherokee sat in the driveway with the front wheels turned at a jaunty angle that reminded him of the old style hats his mother had worn to church. Wads of tissue smudged with ruby lipstick covered the passenger seat among foil gum wrappers. The ashtray overflowed with red-haloed cigarettes. When Sullivan woke tomorrow morning with saliva tasting of nicotine and beer, and the damp scent of sex filled his nostrils, he'd want her gone. Out. Her gauzy, wobbling gaze. He'd think of his wife--Michael's mother--and regret the coupling.

Then somebody would need to drive her home.

Michael decided to stay up and wait. There was a hell of a snowstorm coming, maybe fourteen inches by noon. People could lose their bearings in their own front yards. He lit a cigarette and tried to imagine how long the sky could hold. He sat on the front porch and cold air chapped his face like alcohol on a

cut. Air chilled fast, but water was slower to react. When the over the lake was too cold to bear its own moisture, the first flake would materialize, literally out of thin air.

In April of the prior year, a doctor had said Sullivan's liver was dying inch by inch. That night Michael guzzled three beers for every pint his father finished. When the old man collapsed, Michael slung him over his shoulder and walked the two icy miles home so Sullivan could puke on the way. Through the living room window; his mother's tired expression flashed in the television's glow; a cup of coffee still steaming in her lap. She said that if *he* would quit drinking, Sullivan might, too. Why couldn't he help his father? "Why should I?" Michael asked. "I have my own life, don't I?" The truth was he was *trying* to help, but in a way his mother could neither understand nor approve: by crushing the spirit that drove Sullivan to the bottle. He needed to learn from his own body that he was an old man. It was nothing anyone could tell him.

In May, a swarm of deadly tornadoes crossed southern Nebraska. Michael watched the radar images refresh every seven minutes and he whispered the name of each town in the path: Beatrice, Westminster, and Forney. Hours after the storms, Internet message boards flashed dramatic accounts and photos from the storm chasers. Anviled cloud-mountains dragged tornadoes like a scythe. Chasers posed like tourists in front of laminar funnels of white condensation, shapes they labeled "stovepipes" and "elephant trunks."

After the storms, Michael walked to the bar. His father arrived four beers later to the hearty cheers of "Sully boy" and a couple free shots of bourbon. He threw them back and waved for Michael to come closer, normally the signal for one of their duels, shot for shot, until Sullivan was pickled and stuporous. But instead Sullivan patted him on the back and pointed toward the door. "Got you a present out there, Mike. Now you can follow your damn twisters all you want." Michael nearly overturned the table in his rush outside, but there were no cars he didn't recognize. He checked around the corner-still nothing. Sullivan and his crew were waiting in the entrance to the bar. "Right here," his father said and lifted the handle of a child's red wagon. It belonged to the neighbor kid, eight-year old Angelo Cabrera, whose family had moved up from Texas. "You only need somebody to push." Sullivan's buddies exploded in laughter and he paused a moment then joined them.

In a few hours, they finished a bottle of Tulumore Dew, Michael holding his father's mouth open to pour the last drop. He carried Sullivan to the wagon, folded his legs up under his chest and strapped his ankles down with a belt. Two

miles he pulled his father in the child's wagon and parked him in front of the house, snoring and gurgling. The storm that had spawned Nebraska's tornadoes would bring low pressure to the Great Lakes and draw warm from the Gulf of Mexico like a flue; the old bastard would not freeze outdoors tonight. He was full of whisky anyway. And that's how Michael's mother found him at dawn. She made a pot of coffee and four eggs, then packed a suitcase and left no forwarding address. Michael held his ballcap against the southeasterly breeze while his mother climbed into a taxi cab. All summer the house was silent, her absence as absolute as nightfall.

Michael dreamed the snow paused for his mother's return. She stepped inside and laid her pink sweater on the couch above him. "You and your father need a breakfast," she said. Michael opened his eyes when the scent of *rea/bacon* roused his stomach-Sullivan's woman was cooking. He rubbed his eyes. In the kitchen, Anne wore one of Sullivan's terrycloth robes tight around her waist. Her bare calves were smooth and she lifted her feet up and down on the cold linoleum. Toes painted speckled silver.

"I'm sorry," Michael said, "but you have to leave."

"I know you don't like to cook. But don't tell me you don't like to eat." She acted as though she'd been told not to take him seriously.

"I don't know when the storm will end. There's no way to know. Why did you two come back here?"

"We heard your forecast. We listened in the truck. Your Dad insisted we come back here, even though I have two cats who need fed. I'll have to call my sister. Your Dad is proud of you being on the radio."

"What-"

"And *you* said the snow would start *before* dawn." She pointed a metal spatula at him. "So I woke up at six to get groceries, which I am now cooking." She nodded to a bowl full of egg yolks waiting to be scrambled in bacon grease. "Now it's eight-thirty and nary a flake has fallen."

"You left and came back?"

Anne pointed to the windowsill over the sink. There was one red pepper, a green pepper, and a Yankee bell matured to orange next to three fat tomatoes. "I didn't grow them in your laundry pile," she said. "But I could've used another two hours sleep. Well, it's not an *exact science*, they say. Pretty inexact, it seems to me."

Michael slumped down in a chair at the table. It was hard to be cruel to the ones who tried to make conversation.

dad says you're a weather genius."

"He has to say something."

Anne nodded. "It's good you're here for him."

"He needs me. Sometimes he's too lazy to walk to the bathroom. He pees in a bucket."

She held her coffee mug with both hands. Michael wanted to say something worse, but he also wanted to brush his fingers through her hair. The compulsions were equal and disorienting.

"My father and me are a couple old horses, Michael. Sometimes life doesn't fall apart as much as it just falls away." She peeled strips of fatty bacon from the package. "Winter is hard when you're alone. It can feel like the sum total of your life."

"Sullivan's not alone," Michael said.

She stirred the eggs with a whisk. "Wake him up for me, can you? Tell him to come and eat."

After breakfast, Anne and Sullivan stayed in bed until eleven and listened to jazz on the little clock radio under the lamp. Michael's boss sent a text message that the station had pulled the spot he'd recorded the night before. Could he record an update? At noon, Anne joined him by the window. She leaned over to see the low, blue cloud bases. Not even a dusting yet.

"Any minute now," Michael said. "The delay will only make it worse."

They waited together another hour before Anne went to start the peppers and sausage over penne. She was starting the sauce. She called Michael in to chop peppers in narrow slices. She showed him how to brush the seeds away with her long fingers. For his work, three bowls of sliced peppers and cubed tomatoes, she offered him a quarter-sized bite of sausage. Then she lifted two bottles of Heineken from under the sink. "Go on," she said. They touched the necks of their bottles together softly. She said her grandmother made an incredible mincemeat pie with the softest crust you could ever imagine.

At two o'clock, finally, the sky turned to confetti. Michael started Sullivan's Jeep to warm the engine and scraped white tack from the windshield. Angelo Cabrera, the little boy next door, barreled through his parents' yard with a child's plastic snow shovel and began working the side of the driveway. Michael showed "Angel" how to pack a snowball when the flakes were dry, by spitting on your gloves and compacting the orb with all your might. They threw snowballs until they were exhausted and fell on their backs to sweep eagles' wings into the powder.

A city plow burrowed through the street, trailing in its wake a thin snow wall at the mouth of the driveway. Angel dove backwards into the artificial drift and asked how long it would take to melt.

"Almost," Michael said. "Nearly the whole summer."

Angel flung handfuls of snow over his head as if such abundance consoled the goodness of the world. "Does anywhere get more snow?"

"Than Traverse City?" Michael knew mountains in the Pacific Northwest or elevated regions of Siberia saw more accumulation, but this wasn't the answer Angel wanted. "Nowhere that matters."

Back inside, his stomach leapt at the sweet aroma of the marinara. Anne and Sullivan watched *The Searchers* and burned microwave popcorn. "Look at that desert," Sullivan said. "Desolate, ain't it?" Anne dug through the bag for good kernels and fed Sullivan by hand. She lay with her feet in his lap and he massaged her arches and her calves. Michael sat on the floor and watched the movie. Occasionally he peeked at the snow falling in ripples like sheets on a clothesline.

The marinara drove them to their feet by early evening. Anne boiled penne and stirred in dry basil. Michael grated Asiago cheese and Sullivan pulled a loaf of hard-crust bread from the oven and set the table, arranged silverware and plates untouched since May. "What's for dinner tomorrow?" Sullivan asked with a secretive grin.

"Don't get greedy," she said. She already knew how to handle him, an edgy rapport Michael's mother never would indulge.

Michael wished he'd invited Angelo. Perhaps tomorrow or the next day. Maybe the boy's mother would bring him, and see the three of them together, Anne and Sullivan and Michael, wiping vinyl placemats and carrying pots on oven mitts with oversized thumbs. They would look busy doing these things that families do. If Sullivan married Anne, Michael could re-apply to meteorology schools. Surely the faculty at Nebraska-Lincoln would admit him at once. There was money waiting, a teaching fellowship. All he needed was someone reliable to care for Sullivan.

Michael was napping on the couch when Anne pointed to the window. "Look," she said. "It's already stopped."

An infrared satellite picture showed gaps in the snow bands. On the vapor loop, a pocket of dry air appeared as a red streak in the bright jet stream. He'd made a fundamental mistake. Behind every upper disturbance, sinking and subsidence follow. He'd failed to account for the settling. Anne kissed the top of his head. Her blouse smelled like fresh linen. "Now we'll have ice," he said. "Anything that melted will freeze after dark. The road will get treacherous."

"I ought to get home," Anne said.

Sullivan groaned. "Don't make such a fuss about it. We're in Michigan, for Christ's sake. Of course there's snow and ice. In six weeks we won't even notice. This one," he said and gestured his head toward Michael, "he'd follow tornadoes like the idiots on TV if we had *those* up here. Don't listen to him. He's half-retarded, god damn it."

"Now don't. I need to go home, Sullivan," Anne said. "My cats."

"You can bring your cats over here," Michael said.

"If you hadn't made such a racket last night we wouldn't even *be* here." Sullivan wagged his finger. "Some blizzard. I talked her into coming here because *you* can't be left alone."

Anne looked at Michael as if she wanted to convince him that Sullivan hadn't meant it, but she could only muster an expression of pity. Of course there was nothing she could say. She didn't know these men, or what they were really saying to one another.

"And I'd sooner ride with a blind man than you on ice. Give me those keys." Michael grabbed his father's right hand and pinned his elbow under his arm. He pried the fingers open, one at a time. Sullivan's hand remained bent and claw-shaped, age spots red and irritated where Michael's fingers had pressed.

Sullivan clenched his jaw. "I'm packing an overnight bag."

"No, Sully," Anne said, still looking at his hand. "I had a great time. But let's start there."

They were backing out when Angelo Cabrera's mother waved from her porch and called Michael's name. In the rearview mirror, Michael saw his father glancing over to Anne, who concentrated on the thinning clouds. They looked like siblings in the backseat, starting a few feet apart but with one inching over to harass the other. Angelo Cabrera's mother reached through the driver's side window and laid her hand on Michael's shoulder. She wasn't wearing gloves.

"Angel can go with you, Michael? He wants to see the city with snow. He wants to see the cars. You told him they drive bad on the snow. But you drive okay, right?"

"I have to take this woman home," Michael said. Angelo's mother glanced to Anne and smiled weakly.

"C'mon, Michael. He pesters his father. His father's already loco from staying indoors so much."

You haven't seen anything yet, Michael thought. There was a reason the Traverse City Psychiatric Hospital was a historical monument.

"Take him, Michael. Please. You're his only friend here. You're like his big brother now." She started jogging back to her house. "I already dressed him when I saw you start the car," she called back. In her doorway the little boy waited like a mummy, stiff under the layers of clothing. Michael laughed and waved Angel over to them. The boy climbed in the passenger and gave Anne a big, brown-eyed smile.

"Well, hello," Anne said. "Are you our passenger?"

"I want to see cars crash," Angelo replied.

"Isn't he cute?"

When the sky cleared, a full moon illuminated the wind's nimble brushwork in swirled patterns of drift. Michael headed for open country as his passengers settled into the stillness the snow invited. Farm fields stretched like white oceans. Finally Sullivan ran his hands through his hair. "Where the hell are you taking us? Grand Rapids?"

Anne touched his shoulder. "Michael, where are we going?"

On the outskirts of town, Michael stopped at the first rural road. The surface of the snow was hard and small tufts of powder whipped over the crust. Angel hopped through the field punching holes in the wavy dunes. He fell forward to cast an impression of himself on the virgin field. When they climbed back into the van, Michael turned up the heater and adjusted the rearview mirror.

"The slush is gonna freeze solid," Sullivan said. He looked to Anne's neck and chest. He reached for her hand and she pushed him away.

"*Why* will it get so cold?" Angel asked.

Michael pointed through the windshield to the dissipating stratus deck. "Clouds are the earth's blanket. Without them there's nothing to hold the warmth. It flies off into space."

Sullivan shifted his body so his hip touched Anne's but she looked away from him out the window. Sullivan looked up and caught Michael watching him in the mirror. They exchanged empty stares. There was nothing his father could do about him watching. He could get out and walk home if he wanted.

"Warmth?" Angel protested. "There's no warmth out there-it's cold as hell."

"Watch your mouth," Sullivan growled.

"I'll make you lick a lamppost and your tongue will stick," Michael said.

Sullivan moved to put his hand on Anne's knee. She leaned into his ear and whispered something that drained all the color from his face. Angel pressed his tongue to the passenger window and cried, "I'm stuck, I'm stuck!" Anne

watched the boy as though she were trying to remember when her own children had been so young. Sullivan's mouth sank. Whatever she'd said had hurt him. It wasn't necessary to be cruel, Michael thought. They were taking her home, and, given winter's rhythms, Sullivan might never have bothered her again. She could have left him a kiss to carry through the long season. Would that have been so much to ask?

The ice crept from one side of the road to the other. He slowed for intersections, checked both ways, and studied his rear view. A pink hue filled Anne's cheeks.

By the time they reached the first busy cross street, frost glazed the side windows. Little clouds of graupel pattered the windows with a tickity-tickity-tickity. Angel traced crystal formations on the glass. The intersection was bowl-shaped-the roads descended sharply into the crossing. A car approached too fast from the right and its headlights filled the passenger window with sulfuric glare as if a falling star were streaking toward them. Michael turned the wheel hard left and yanked Angelo away from the door. When Anne screamed, Sullivan did not reach for her. Michael imagined how their lives could change. He might be in Nebraska by spring, in time to pose in front of a tornado.

##

Casting Out

No more poems about dark or light,
that is, metaphors that pretend
their death tropes wax fresh,
their blind figures astound.

Let us too resist the use of doors.
I shall write the last one: Enter,
not through the one ajar
but the one first you must eat
off its hinges. Having done so
you may use one latinate form.
Egress, let's say; that one you may have.

Since we've begun let's trap another,
box it in, take it to the swamp,
let it go without hope of returning.
We'll hear its howls there, at dusk
(never at night), out of context,
rising over the palmettos, the bogs.
At its edges we'll hear the sound
of something being eaten, or its eating
something else. We will want less vague
answers, something to alert or amaze,
perhaps a turn of phrase to shock.
But only one word will do, and it is
lost, out there, its eyes almost visible
through the haze that rises between,
or is, God help us, just a part of what we've lost.