

Stillness.

“Where are you?”

“I’m still here,” she said, in a soft voice. Her auburn hair rise back up the ladder to his eye level, back to where he was lying in a tumble of old blankets. “I haven’t gone yet.”

Kain propped himself on an elbow and reached into a small nook in the wall. He pulled out his glasses and placed them on his nose. But he realized that the lens were too foggy and he could not see. He tried to dry them off with the blanket, but that only made it worse.

“I’ll come with you,” he said.

“Okay”

Kain crawled over to the ladder that descended down to the ground floor, pulling the blanket behind him as he went. For a moment, drowned in the scratchy old comforter, he felt like a child, and he looked down by instinct at Kristy to see if she noticed; by the ghost of a smile that flashed on her lips when their eyes met, he knew that she did.

It was a big wooden triangle of a cottage, with two faded mattresses lying on half floors that jutted out from the sides of the tall ceiling like wooden tongues. Together, they were reachable only by ladders, and nestled so close to the ceiling that was impossible to even sit upright. Downstairs, an ancient sofa and a kitchen looked out through windows onto a blue mountain range that, as of last night, had been – suddenly, and without warning – deluged in a thick blanket of snow.

The last step of the ladder creaked loudly and then Kain reached the floor. He turned around and saw Kristy, gripping herself tightly in the single old robe they’d found in the chest yesterday. She was already shivering, shuffling from one foot to the other on the icy wooden floor.

“Are you going to...?”

“Yeah, yes.” he whispered. He walked slowly to the door and put on the old slippers from the day before, wet to seams. Then he turned the old bronze handle and he pushing his body against the door and the rampart of snow that had accumulated from the night before. With the door ajar against the snow, he stepped outside.

The calm stillness of the snowy vista caught him off guard. For a brief moment, everything seemed so minute in the scale of so much serenity and beauty. The sky – so thick during yesterday’s

blizzard, that for the last half mile before the cottage, it seemed like they were driving into a vast, towering tsunami of snowflakes - had turned a clam, steely shaded of blue. Down the range, behind the old Camry, he could see a small cloud of snow pick up and fly down the slope of the mountain on a passing gale, so distant that he couldn't even hear its whisper. The pines stood tall and silent, with only the occasional bundle of snow crashing off a branch and onto thick layer snow that had marooned them in his uncle's cottage.

Kain trudged his way through snow to the back of the cottage, where the old generator he'd started the night before stood silent now beneath a short overhang. Beside it stood the two red, gallon-and-a-half sized fuel canisters, both empty. Grabbing both, and the short snippet of garden hose he'd found in the tool shed, he retraced his steps back to the door, and then to the car, just as the packed snow in his slippers began to melt.

Pulling out his keys, he opened the driver door and fumbled with numb fingers beneath the dash until he heard the click of the fuel latch opening.

He made his way to the back of the car, but his fingers were too swollen to open the fuel cover, and when he managed to tuck them underneath the clasp, he found it stuck. Kain fumbled for a moment, then slid the zipper of his parka into cover and popped open the tank and unscrewed the cap. *Here we go.* Dropping the hose down the gas chute, he nestled the two fuel canisters firmly into the snow, and hesitated for a brief moment before kneeling down into the snow and descending onto two propped elbows. Placing the hose between his teeth, he drew on it and on the second try, watched as a stream of gasoline began flowing out the end of the hose. Quickly he slid the hose into the first canister.

The gas transferred quickly. For a moment, Kain realized they could have stayed in the car. *I wonder how long its heater would last?*

No. They made the right decision. The cottage was a much better shelter. They couldn't sit in a car for forty eight hours. The idea of the two of them sitting in that freezing steel cage in the snow made him shiver faster.

The first container was filled; as soon as he saw the fuel gurgling near the mouth of the canister, he moved the hose to the second container, and watched with dismay as the stream grew fainter and fainter. He pushed the hose deeper into the tank, but eventually the trickle faded to nothing. After he was finished and tightened the fuel cap, he picked up looked down at the canister.

One third full. That was – two gallons total. That's it. In the midst of the blizzard, he now regretted to realize that he'd barely registered when the orange fuel light had lit up.

The shivers that had been passing through Kain as became habit as his feet turned leaden and merged into a frozen, wet mass with the old slippers. The two wet patches of snow imprinted on his elbows dripped down his forearm as he walked back behind the cabin and reached the generator, where he emptied the lighter of the two canisters into the tank. Then, arms shaking, he poured half the full canister in.

Then he gave it a go. On the fifth try, he heard the comforting rumble of the generator.

Kain walked back into the cottage, and for a moment, with the snow, all he could see was darkness. As his eyes adjusted, he saw her sitting in front of the sofa, her back turned to him, fiddling with the dial on the electric space heater. She alternately moving it one way another while rubbing the metal grills with her other hand. "I think I got it. I got it."

She turned back toward him, "It'll take twenty minutes again. I'm going to boil some tea."

Kain took off the parka and the jeans and walked across to the suitcase in the corner to see what clothes were left. Jean shorts. Two t-shirts. *Boy did we bet on the wrong horse.* He changed into the shorts and doubled up on the t-shirts.

Kristy was staring out the window as the kettle buzzed quietly. Out on the horizon, two ridges away, they could see the other house.

"When do you think Colin's coming?"

Kain stood beside her and pretend to examine the kettle. "Supposed to be 11, I think. He said he'd leave really early but who knows now." Feigning pensiveness: "He's going to have to take the interstate, so that's an extra four hours. Plus Route 8's going to be really bad with all the snow. So maybe 4? 5?"

"Okay." She looked out the window. She sighed. "I'm going to charge my phone."

"You tried that yesterday, cookie. I've never had reception here. We're too far away."

"I just want to know what time it is."

By noon, Kain could feel himself stop shivering. The generator had been rumbling for two hours now. A rusty, knife's edge of mid-morning sun beamed through the kitchen window, landing on Kristy's face as her head rested on his shoulder. He could feel her heartbeat against his chest. He turned to look, hoping, though he wasn't quite sure why, that she was asleep. She wasn't, and her eyes met his with a quiet, pensive, smile. As the cabin warmed, his thoughts turned to comforting and distant memories.

"Remember Spain?" he whispered, turning to her.

She chuckled. "Heh. Yeah." A genuine smile slowly emerged across her soft cheeks.

"Remember the bull fight?"

She laughed, feigning disgust and nestling her face in his armpit. "Nonono!" Then she looked up at him. "Poor bulls."

"It was such a warm night."

"Yeah. I loved it. I can't believe how crowded it was."

It had been crowded. Kain remember the sea of shoulders, packed tight in front of the ticket counter at the night showing. It seemed like nobody was wearing a shirt with sleeves; it was an ocean of sweat. Kain remembered how, during the fight, they'd gone out onto the railing and looked down at the crowds still gathered in front of the ticket counter; the ocean of bodies reminded him of looking through a microscope.

“It looked like the Coliseum. I can’t believe people still go to these things.”

“We did. We went to this thing, Kain.”

“But we were tourists. Everyone there was Spanish. This is like – it was like their TV.”

She was silent for a long time, and Kain remember how he had upset her once, when they’d first met and he’d been surprised she’d had a TV in her kitchen. A rustling of concern swept through him, and cautiously, he looked at her face.

But she was wearing that mischievous grin he loved. She turned to him, and opened her eyes wide. “Bullshit.”

They laughed and Kain gripped Kristy tighter.

By the early afternoon, the sun had begun to fade, clothing itself in layer upon layer of thick, snowy clouds. The gray light became infused with a swirl of snowflakes that bounced off the windowpane like badminton bird and settled down on the uneven frame.

The generator had stopped. Kain remembered learning in high school that there was no such thing as cold, only the absence of heat. But here in the cottage, he felt like he could feel with precision each billowing puff of cold as it slid across the air like a pair of slippers on a polished floor, working its way through the thin blanket they’d spread across themselves. His arm was resting on hers, and as the coldness crept, he jumped awake as soon as he felt the minefield of goose bumps erupt on her skin.

“I’m sorry, we shouldn’t have gone” he suddenly said.

She was silent again. Then: “It’s alright, You couldn’t have known this would happen.”

Kristy hadn’t wanted to go. It hadn’t been more than half a plan to begin with – the sort of lazy idea that festers in the confines of a long, lazy relationship.

Make it up to the cottage. Have dinner. Watch the sunset. Drive back and be home by midnight. Get seven hours of sleep before work. No snowstorms.

They had a way of thinking the same thing at the same time, and it had reached the point where Kain caught himself pushing uncomfortable ideas from his mind before they developed in the hopes that, in doing so, he could banish them from Kristy’s thoughts as well. But this time, it was too late. He could feel her tense up.

“God, Jane is going to kill me. I can’t – I just can’t believe I can’t even tell them where I am. The kids probably waited for an hour before they even got a substitute.”

“It’ll be okay.” He rubbed her arm, reflexively. “These things happen all the time.”

“No.” She was becoming agitated. “I can’t just not show up, Kain.”

Kain was silent, but he could feel her pushing away. She’d crossed her arms. For the first time since the morning, Kain could feel cold air there on the sofa in the vertical crevice separating their bodies. The silence lasted for a long, long moment.

“It’s freezing, Kain.”

“Okay, I’m going to go start it again.”

The sky had turned a dark silver when Kain stepped out of the cottage. It was beautiful and silent outside, but the absence of light in the middle of the day seemed mildly treacherous. Closing the door, he peered for a long moment at Colin’s cottage on the near horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of – what, precisely? Smoke. He wanted to see billows of smoke, like a children’s book. In his head, he imagine the distant dark shape of the cottage to become a crayon-drawn stencil, complete with a warm fireplace, a smoking chimney, and his best friend Colin, with a big u-shaped smile for a face. That and a car – Colin’s big truck, with a full tank of gas and snow tires.

Kain chuckled to himself at the image.

But as he poured the last drop of gasoline into the generator, a sudden raw feeling gripped him, and he suddenly felt a dash of sweat form on his brow. What if – what if Colin wasn’t coming? They hadn’t even planned to meet. All that he was sure of was that Colin had told him on Friday that he’d be going up to the cottage next week to write, and that he’d leave early on Monday and stay the whole week. Perhaps –

And now a flurry of damning thoughts filled Kain’s mind. Every single thing that could go wrong. What was most frightening was that all of them were within the realm of possibility. The snowstorm! Of course Colin could just not go. Why would he go in a snowstorm? Or – perhaps he’d gone, but reconsidered halfway, when he saw the snow and figured Route 8 would be impassable? What if Route 8 was impassable? Three feet of snow – could an SUV go over that?

What if Colin was in an accident? Kain could feel his shoulders tense at the realization that once this gallon that he was pouring was gone, it was gone. The cottage would slowly – no, quickly – reach the temperature of its surroundings. That was tonight.

Tonight!

He felt like an idiot. They could’ve – he could’ve – just taken the shovel and shoveled their way down Route 8. Right? No. It was 7 miles. You couldn’t shovel 7 miles of snow in jeans and a raincoat.

Can you?

Why doesn’t my uncle have a goddamn phone in this cabin.

His breathing reached a fevered pitch as he tried and tried and then succeeded in restarting the generator.

Moments later, Kain stood in front of the door, waiting for the quick gasps to slow. His toes tingled from the coldness, but the mountain air did wonders to hide the sweat that had been dripping from his brow as he’d started the generator moments earlier. His reflexes calmed, he opened the door and entered.

Kristy was sitting where he'd left her, her hands up to her mouth as she blew on them loudly before letting out a croaky cough. It was cold inside – somehow, in all the worry, Kain had expected to enter a warm room, but it was just barely warmer out here than it was out there. In fact, somehow it felt colder, without the invisible rays of UV bouncing against the snow, and with the oppressive shade of responsibility hanging over him.

Taking the freezing pile of jeans that he'd left by the door, he brushed the snow from his exposed legs. The stinging cold of the fabric made his skin jump, and for a moment, he was stricken by the incredulity of the situation, and the idea of being found frozen in a cabin wearing a pair of shorts. He banished the thought.

"Sit with me," Kristy implored, turning her whole head to look at him.

The fast breathing returned. Like an unpleasant realization momentarily forgotten, the fact that his decision had put her here had slipped his mind. But now it was back. Rubbing his arms quickly, he sat beside her, careful not to touch her skin. But some frigid part of him did, and she jumped. "I'm sorry. Here -"

She rubbed the lukewarm palms she'd been warming against his knee. Something about the act took his mind elsewhere – to those Elysian memories of their first months together, years and years ago. But now, it was a simple utilitarian act. He curled his brows the way one does when he thinks of something that is supposed to be sad that is not quite sad in real life, merely true.

Gradually, the shivers stopped again, and her fragile frame nestled itself cautiously against his. Together, they stared at the orange light on the space heater, which pulsated in the gray darkness that shone behind the window.

Neither one said anything, though Kain suspected that, like him, Kristy was swimming in a labyrinth of dark thoughts. *Pity*. That's what he felt. Ever since he'd fixated himself on the glow of the space heater, the maelstrom of worries had crystallized on a numb, sad feeling that Kain now named in his head. He had this pity for her. But why?

He knew why. He didn't know *why* this particular recollection had bubbled to surface now – perhaps he felt sorry for both of them, and in doing so, crystallized his worries on her. But now he knew, and what more, he could name the pity, picture it. Something about all this brought back something he'd packaged and hidden away for over a month. The birthday party.

He had in fact met Kristy at another birthday party – her 23rd, three years ago. It was a great, blown up affair, with some of her younger friends in college driving down to the city, and many her work colleagues from when she still worked as a consultant. It was through one of those many work colleagues that Kain was there, and he remembered the first time they met like a video. Not a perfect recollection; it was like a VHS, where some moments were blurrier than others, but others bore a surreal analog sharpness. What stood out in that memory now was not their conversation, but everything else. The noise. There were so many friends at her party, and much joy. They could barely hear each other talking.

Last month, they'd decided to make a birthday party for her to celebrate turning 26. She hadn't done anything for her 25th birthday – she was in Memphis for a business trip. So they wanted to do something fun.

He'd gotten up early that morning to purchase balloons - big green balloons to celebrate her favorite color. She got in touch with everyone. Naturally, she hadn't stayed in touch with all those people from three years ago. She left behind many of the college friends when they moved to Denver. And the switch to being a teacher took a toll on her circle of business friends, so many of whom now had crow's feet and silver hairs. But still, when she showed him the list one evening, it was a long one.

Kristy didn't want to cook ("it's my birthday, I don't have to do anything!"), so they were going to do it at a restaurant, a Thai fusion outfit that happened to be the first establishment they set foot in when they flew in to the city for the first time for his interview. This time around, they arrived twenty minutes early, and a small woman led them to a separate room with a wall covered in wine bottles. Kain remembered filling up the balloons while Kristy toyed on her cellphone, and tying them up in a corner so they wouldn't wade over and hit the bottles.

Five minutes after seven. He remembered that Kristy's bubbly persona had been unfazed. It was what had always drawn him towards her - when she was happy, she was *happy*, in a way that made the sun shine a little brighter and a world a bit more whimsical. In the back of his mind, he already felt a familiar twinge of anxiety. But if she felt it, she didn't show anything.

Fifteen minutes after seven, and Kain sat, silently amazed. Kirsty was cracking jokes about donkeys - it was an inside joke from their third date ("it's not real. It's a donkey") and it had never ceased to be an artifact of entertainment, though he somehow suspected that these days they laughed at it - sometimes to the point of tears - out of politeness and habit. Wiping his eyes, Kain stood up and excused himself to the rest room.

That was when it happened. Minutes later, when he returned to the room, for a brief moment, he stood in the doorway and saw her before she saw him. Still there was no one there, and the balloons had shoved each other gently in the corner.

Kristy, her eyes glazed over, was staring at those balloons with the most cutting frown that Kain had ever seen. It wasn't just her face; her entire body radiated a sort of ashen decay that only appears on people for whom luminescence is a way of being. It was as though Kain had caught site of that brief moment when a person becomes, for no fault of their own, a little bit sadder.

He felt Kristy pull closer to him on the sofa. For a moment, remembering the birthday at which six people ultimately showed, he'd lost track of that same girl sitting beside him. As in the memory, she was silent, and as his mind returned to the cabin, he was surprised to see that the snow had ceased falling and the gray sky outside had parted ways. Out of nowhere, halos of late afternoon sun slowly percolated across the snowy field in outside the window. Outside, the generator buzzed contently.

"Remember my birthday party last month?" Kristy said, quietly.

Kain looked down at her, at the gentle parting of hair that graced the top of her head. Her face was hidden from him, but when he became conscious of her hand laying gently on his stomach.

"I do."

She made the last sound she expected: laughter. It was real - the sort of true, bubbling laughter that seems so abundant when one falls in love, but which dissipates into scarcity so quickly as the years

go by. "Remember," she said, "how you woke up early to get those balloons?" I was so angry that you woke me up, but then there they were. You got like forty of them."

Then she looked up at him, and for the briefest moment, that one look in her eye made everything – the cabin, the snow, the gasoline fading into the rumbling machine outside – feel as consequential as a passing rain.

For Kristy was the kind of person who hid the truth in her eyes.

When Kain opened his own eyes again, the generator was dead. The lightness on his shoulder somehow felt heavy and unpleasant. She was gone. And there was a sound in the cabin.

It took him a long moment to realize where the sound was coming from. Stumbling blindly through the dark cabin, he approached the kitchen sink, where he could see the full moon shining brightly outside.

It was Kristy's phone.

Flipping it open, he saw the text from Collin flash across the screen. *Hi cookie.* It read. *I'll be there in a second.*

Kain dropped the phone, his hand shaking.

But it was already too late. A cold mountain breeze swept across his back, alerting him to the half-opened door – a frosty silver rectangle, from whence a snowdrift was already tumbling into the cabin like a bumbling uninvited guest. Outside, he could hear the sound of an engine. The generator?

No, it was a car. It was Colin's truck. So close. Sinister.

Kain's breath left him. His temple began beating fiercely, and he felt like his own body was strangling him. Kristy was gone. Not gone – she was here.

But no longer his.

He watched as they emerged from the car.

As he did, he saw Kristy. She was a different person. Gone were the faded clothes they'd worn up to the cottage. Now she was wearing a thick black coat. She was warm. Safe. Distant.

Colin was barely recognizable. His wavy black hair was brushed to the side, and he had on the scratchy brown sweater he'd worn at the Christmas party they'd had back in New York. He was smiling when the door opened, but as soon as he saw Kain, Collin stopped smiling. He nodded instead.

Kristy looked at Kain, blankly. She looked down and saw the phone in his hand. Then their eyes met again. He had imagined, somehow, that he'd known all the faces that she'd been prone to make, but he was wrong. In all these years, I've never seen this expression. Cold, distant, and alien. Like they'd never even known each other.

Kristy reached for Colin's arm, and as she did, Kain looked intensely at her.

Who was she?

He didn't recognize her.

He wasn't sure whether it was the horror imagined in his dream or the sweat dripping down his forehead that awoke him. Outside, in the moonlit luminescence of the mountain snow, he could hear the generator still running. The weight of Kristy's body pressed against him. Gradually, then quickly, he felt the fabrication recede. Kain could feel the thumping in his chest slow to a gentle jog as a warm ocean of serenity settled over everything

As he looked down, he saw an old book on the coffee table. It had been invisible during the ordeal – indeed, it had been invisible his whole life. He'd been coming up to the cabin since he was two years old, and the old hardcover with the faux gold lining had been lying on that table since before he could read. Now, as he looked down, he saw, for what seemed like the first time, the book as just that: a story. *The Dollhouse*.

Anxious to put the dream behind him, he leafed through its middle pages and it reminded him of the Proust he'd been forced to read – rich, upper class Europeans, nestled in comfortable manors, with maids and spoiled children. He couldn't stand these things.

He set the book down gently, so his arm wouldn't wake Kristin. But as he did, he felt her body move, and she lifted her head to look at him again.

She looked confused. "Did I wake you?" she asked. He chuckled. "No, I think I woke you."

She looked askance at the room, suspiciously. "I had a dream, but I forgot what it was" she said, confused. "I just remember - - really, really wanting something." She made a puzzled face, and scrunched her nose before looking at the ceiling and then at Kain with a look of dissatisfaction. "I really, really, wanted something." With the loose arm she'd laced across his chest, she pretended to pound his shoulder out of frustration, before subsiding.

"Nevermind." Then she said. "Tell me a story."

Kain chuckled. "A story?"

"Yes. While we wait."

Kain looked around the cabin, as though searching for a book. "Hmm – okay, I've got one."

Kristy looked up at him, smiling.

"A boy and a girl took a vacation up to a cabin."

"I know this story" she grinned.

"They went up to a cabin, and as they got there, there was a big, big snow storm. And everything was covered in snow"

As Kain said this, he could feel Kristy's head shifting as she looked out the window, staring at the mountains.

"Everything was covered in snow, and so they made a big fire in the cabin, and snuggled."

Kristy looked back at him and whispered, "this story has a happy ending, right?"

"Oh yes" Kain said. Becoming the storyteller filled him with a sense of comfort. "You see, the boy really loved the girl. And the girl –"

Suddenly, silence filled the cabin as the generator pouted to a stop. Kristy and Kain turned to look at the heater, which hummed for a split second longer, after which the orange light on its side slowly dimmed.

Outside, a barrage of snow slid off the roof.

They sat alone in the dark cabin. Together.

The embers floated lazily from the tip of Colin's last cigarette as he took a final drag and threw it into the snow. Dusting the ice from his bare hands, he watched an eighteen wheeler careening down the highway, honking ruinously before passing several feet from where his truck was pulled over beside a snowy rampart. *Might as well get to it.* Before getting back in the car, he looked down the stretch of asphalt in front of him, where the morning sun was already making its way over the windy, wintry horizon.

Shutting the door, Colin threw his keys into the ignition and started the pickup. Then he threw the car into drive and edged it into the snow chains that he'd laid out in front of its wheels. He hadn't expected it to be this bad, at least not on the interstate. *Oh well,* he thought to himself, lazily. *Might as well get it done with before Route 8. That's definitely not going to be plowed.* Exiting the car, he locked the chains around the wheels before returning behind the wheel and continuing his way toward the cabin.

Three hours later, Colin pulled to the side of the road as he saw Route 8 snaking its way off to the side of the highway. He felt the clank as he turned on the four wheel drive. Surprisingly, there was a pair of tire tracks, barely visible under a fresh coat of snow, mimicking the route he now took as he lumbered down the single, fragile lane of asphalt linking the small footprint of vacation homes on the ridge of civilization. The early afternoon sunlight, which had reached an intense, crystalline quality of the highway, deadened to darkness as dark, green and white canopy of the forest took over.

The road wasn't as bad as Colin expected; the trees had caught much of the snow, and in some sections, he could even see little ponds of asphalt. He jotted in his mind the thought that, perhaps when this article was finished, he could go someplace like this, maybe in Scandinavia, and do a photo essay there. As the road momentarily straightened out, he reached blindly down to the carton of photographs

lying in front of the passenger's seat and pulled out a photo at random. Holding it up in front of him as his car rumbled down the road, his eyes turned for a second to look at the photo shaking in his hand. It was of two young children, a boy and a girl, kneeling beside a rocky lake. One was looking at the camera. He remembered taking this photo. It was on his second train trip up to Rajistan.

He wondered, as he always did, if this would be the photograph they'd choose to publish.

No. He decided. There was no drama. No conflict. No action. Just...

Stillness.

Boredom.

After two hours, the road widened to a sunlit clearing as Colin spied the familiar turn that led up to two cabins where he and his friend, Kain, had first met and had since spent many a summer. But as he slowed the car and prepared to turn, he was surprised to notice the faint but unmistakable tire tracks, which he'd forgotten about since turning onto Route 8. As he stopped to examine the tracks out his windshield, he suddenly remembered telling Kain, when they run into each other at McTeague's, that he was thinking of going to cabin to finish the article. With the clarity of hindsight, he now remembered Kain saying something to the effect of regretting not having gone all summer.

He was going to ask Kristy. Now Colin remembered. And the more he remembered, the more it dawned on him that something may have gone wrong. He didn't put it into words at that very moment, but the somewhere in his mind it realized that there should have been two sets of tire tracks – out and back – not one.

As Colin rolled up the snow-covered hill, he noted, consciously now, that the tire tracks kept veering to the sides of the road. *They probably got caught in the blizzard.* As he crept up the shallow incline, he saw the tracks veer suddenly to the right, and then turn up and over the shallow embankment right up to where the Pfeiffer cabin was.

Colin followed them.

Kain's old sedan was the first thing Colin saw. It stood under a layer of snow in the afternoon sunlight, and even without getting out of his car, Kain could see the footstep corridor where Kain had traveled the previous day. Those footsteps marred a scene otherwise postcard-like in its tranquility. Like his grandfather's cabin, the Kain family cabin had a tall, steep roof; when Kain and Colin had been younger, they'd called it the Viking roof. Here, it rose gently out of snow like a wave, and to an outsider, the dark wooden cabin, with its backdrop of trees and its clear view of the mountains, could have adorned a travel brochure. Now and then, the roof, warmed by the noontime sun, shed another cloak of snow from its incline.

But now as Colin approached, his thoughts turned from cabin to the car, and to Kain and his longtime girlfriend. The image of finding them both inside the cabin, bodies perfectly still and frostbitten, filled him with dread. Like a bothersome insect, the thought refused to be swatted away as

he stopped his car beside his friend's sedan and, slowly, opened the cabin door and stepped his boots cautiously into the snow.

As he did, he heard a familiar voice.

"Colin" It was Kain, his voice creaking, small, like a rusty joint. "A little late."

The truck obstructed Colin's view of the cabin, but now as he emerged in full view of the house, he could see his old friend had emerged from a cabin, dressed discordantly in a pair of boarding shorts and an old t-shirt. He was frail and shivering, holding his arm tightly like a mummy, but – he was alright.

As Colin shut the door, his view was revealed into the depths of the cabin, where in the doorway, he saw a slight, hunched-over outline. It was dark, but he immediately recognized Kain's girlfriend, her face red and puffy. But as she stepped cautiously the doorway, he saw her gentle smile light up the afternoon.

"You guys get stuck out here?" he yelled.

"Yeahhh," Kain coughed. "A little."

"You're lucky bastard I decided to make it up after all, huh?"

Kain had stumbled his way rapidly through the old footpath and now stood beside Kain. "Yes. Yeah we are." He reached out and gave Colin a pat an inquiring pat on the back.

Colin sighed. "Alright man, pack it up."

Kristy awoke to the falling thud of snow hitting the windshield, before it was pushed out of the way by the wipers. Gently, she lifted her head from where it was lying uncomfortably against the seatbelt. She could tell from the lightening tree canopy that they were nearing the end of Route 8. Tired, she closed her eyes again and concentrated on the rumbling of the truck. As she did, she felt an unpleasant voice rise from her stomach. It hurt. It hurt, and she was cold.

Up in the main cabin, she could hear her boyfriend joking with Colin. She barely knew Colin, but he'd been there at her birthday party, and his loose sense of humor was different and refreshing from Kain sporadic, cerebral wisecracks. She felt less gratitude towards Collin him now than she imagined she would, and she knew herself well enough after all these years to know that ingratitude was the first symptom of crankiness.

Her rustling must have alerted them, because Kain turned back suddenly to the pile of blankets that she had been sleeping under. Reaching his arm back awkwardly, he poked around until he found her shoulder. All the while Colin was chuckling.

"Kristy? Cookie? Where are you?"

"I'm still here" the pile of blankets answered, discontentedly.

Kain turned his head back again and their eyes met. She gave him another fragile smile, and he winked back and turned back to look out the window.

She turned to sit upright. As she did, Kristy remembered the first time he'd winked at her. Not like that, of course. No one – not even Kain himself, after that one night - had ever winked at her with such self-assured cockiness as when they first met. But the memories it invoked still made her happy, and Kain still knew it.

She turned to look at Colin. He'd been there too. In fact, among the two friends who now sat in the forward cabin, he'd been the first she'd noticed, cracking jokes in the kitchen with Emily and Sam. Somehow, the warm halo of memory surrounding that fateful day she'd met Colin had inadvertently immortalized her first impression of Colin as well – he'd been leaning with one hand against the counter, and she remembered the stirring of seeing his muscled arm propped so effortlessly against the counter.

As she turned to Kain, though, she immediately thought of how that memory had been overshadowed one hundred-fold by her encounter with Kain, the witty grad student who'd managed to keep her occupied with little stories of science affecting her, and everyone, on a daily basis, but which people could spend their lifetime never knowing of. He was self-effacing and, most attractively, absolutely enthused about a subject matter which she could never imagine being the least bit interested. Somehow, though, he'd manage to her excite about it as well. The impossibility of that accomplishment – the thought of him as a sort of magic-maker – was thrilling. She nearly toppled over her vase when she heard him calling the next day. "Hi, this is Kristy?" she said, when she up the phone.

Wrapped in her blankets, she smiled.

The aching in her stomach got louder, and she felt uneasy. The pain beckoned another memory that swam into her head, uninvited.

It was the other birthday party. The one with the balloons.

Reluctantly, she remembered, almost painfully, the memory of sitting alone, with the party whistle hanging out her mouth like an un-earned cigar. The restaurant had covered the walls with mirrors, and then, as now, she watched herself look increasingly silly in the party hat that Kain had placed atop her head when they been laughing, in those heady moments before it became obvious that they would sit there alone.

And then, to add insult to injury, Kain had gotten up and left her there, alone with her reflection.

Alone.

Alone.

A cymbal of sunlight pierced the cabin as Colin's truck turned back onto the interstate. The sound of cars gunning their way down the highway completed the sense of being back, somewhere. A feeling of warmth filled the car.

As the sun warmed her cheeks, Kristy's happiness returned. She felt as the stomach pain that accompanied her in the dark forest corridor slowly evaporated. The dark memory that had come up now seemed distant, though still present, like a large bird gliding away on the horizon. The jokes Colin and Kain were cracking in the front row made her chuckle, every now and again.

As they approached the Denver skyline, Kain felt his conversation with Colin reach a lull. On the horizon, the buildings were coming into focus. More and more, this world – of work, and paychecks, and late night gas station runs – seemed real, and the cabin seemed like a dream.

The pleasantness of the thought surprised him. As though wondering if Kristy was thinking the same, he turned his head, and was caught off-guard, before anything else, by her gentle smile.

But then he looked up at her eyes, and he knew.