

No One Comes to the Summer House in Winter

Elena is sick of inching over the ice, sick of being afraid to fall. And she will fall. It's inevitable. "Each year 1 out of every 3 of those over 65 will fall. Falls are the leading cause of death for older Americans."

The ice looks like the plastic pellets in packaging. She doesn't remember it looking like that as a child. A car horn blasts. She falters, throws out her arms, catches her balance, remains erect. The window of the Acura purrs down. The driver's face is purple with rage. "What the hell you think you're doing?" He rolls the window up again. Turns away. But not before she hear his sign-off, "Fuckin' bitch."

She knows he was afraid, afraid he would hit her. She knows fear breeds anger. "F . . . you," she whispers to the disappearing fender.

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No one goes to the summer house in winter. It would be stupid. It's too far from the main road. Too cold. There's no heat, no electricity, no running water.

Back in her apartment, the phone rings. A computer says, "Carl Meunier, please."

"He's dead," Elena says. "My husband's been dead for sixteen years."

"This is a courtesy call. For a low . . ."

She hangs up.

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No one ever went to the summer house in winter, not even her father, who lugged the lumber a mile up the hill on his shoulders before there was even a road. It was his cross, his redemption for the sins of the Somme. Today they would say he had PTSD, then he had only his unbridled anger to fling at the rocky soil of New England, burying his ghosts deep in the Berkshire forests, stifling their cries in the rasp of a saw and the thwack of the hammer, the chatter of birds when the sun came up and the night call

of frogs and foxes when it went down. And finally it was done, a fairy house of secret stairs and candlelight. He called it *La Cupole*, a room above the turmoil.

As a child, Elena loved the fairy house. Sent away from the city to avoid the scourge of polio, she and Gabe, who was two years older, and who, in the city, was often called restless and sometimes even incorrigible—today it would be ADD—turned cows into dinosaurs, trees into castle walls, and rocky outcrops into troglodyte caves. In the bee-loud glade of summer, restlessness was necessary energy. They listened to thunder cannonade in the green hills. They watched lightning split the heavens and raced the rain to the tiny porch where they flung themselves, panting. In the fall, going home, she cried. Now Gabe is gone.

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The phone rings, a real voice: “Because of your excellent standing with us, Mrs. Meunier, we have been authorized to send you a free credit report.” Elena doesn’t want a free credit report. The caller, anticipating her reaction, counters, “The free report costs you nothing and will let you know where you stand in this very difficult economy.” The caller rushes on, “And you can cancel at any time.”

“Cancel what?”

“To keep track of your credit after your initial free report, you will pay only \$12.50 a month.”

“But . . .”

The woman’s voice drops, “You don’t have to.” The tone is conspiratorial now. “You can cancel the day you get your free report,” she confides.

Elena capitulates, “I can cancel?”

Her credit rating is 800.

Elena calls the credit people. “I got my free report,” she says. “Thank you. Now I would like to cancel.”

This time it’s a man. “My name is Byron Black. May I have your ID number, please?” He’s friendly. When Elena admits she can’t find the ID number, he guides her gently to the spot on the page that accompanied her report. It’s a number among several numbers. He says more but Elena can’t hear him.

“I’m sorry.” she says. “My hearing’s not good. Could you speak up?”

Louder, but still gentle, "May I ask why you want to cancel?"

"I don't want a monthly credit review. I can't afford it."

Byron is shocked. "Do you realize that identity theft has risen from 21 percent in January to 28 percent in just 30 days?"

"Twenty-eight percent of what?"

But now it is he who doesn't hear. "Do you know who they go after?" his voice rises. "People like you. People with a rating of 800. They want your identity! And if that happens, if *they* use your credit." His voice lowers, proffers salvation, "Our program . . ."

"I don't want it,"

"We can protect . . ."

"No." she snaps. "No. No. No." She bangs the receiver down.

The phone rings again.

"This is Lisa with Green Company. You have been selected for a free cruise to the Bahamas."

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Nobody went to the summer house in winter. In the summer of '63, Elena and Carl put in electricity and indoor plumbing. Cows no longer pasture in the near field, but the boys turn deers into dragons. Trees morph into rockets. Later the grands will transform them yet again. And still no one comes in the winter. What would be the point? Cold clamps the hills. Snow buries the caves. No one wants to cross-country ski on the tree-crowded trails. In October the utilities are cut off, the water drained, and the key tucked under the flower pot to the left of the porch.

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Elena looks forward to lunch with Meredith. They hadn't been close at college where different dorms and majors made all the difference. Now survival is the key. Meredith lives within blocks and her husband, too, is dead. They are immigrants in the same strange land.

Elena doesn't care where they eat. Meredith chooses Patriot Place, Boston's Vatican City of sport. Meredith adores the Patriots. Elena doesn't like sports, although Carl had loved them and had

ritually screamed and thrown things at the TV. To Elena sports are meaningless, although she had liked and did miss the community aspect—half-time suppers on Sunday, the annual Super Bowl dinner.

Now, as they speed toward Patriot Place, she feels uneasy. Meredith has a painfully bossy GPS. “Take a right,” it orders. “In 300 feet take a left.”

“Shut up,” Elena mutters.

“You have reached your destination,” says the GPS. In front of them rises the city of sport—a great muscular stadium shoulders the sky. To the right towers a glittering IMAX.

Farther back are the big box stores—Home Depot, Staples—and a hotel. It is a place of pharaonic dimension, the aesthetic of monumentality.

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They park on an ocean of pavement and make their way gingerly over ice. Wind whistles along empty sidewalks, rattles signs, and scatters the thumping rhythm of outdoor Muzak coming from concrete mushrooms on the center mall.

Either because it’s winter or because the economy is rotten—or maybe both—only a handful of shops and restaurants are open. Byron Black had threatened her identity; Patriot Place swallows it.

They push through revolving doors into one of the few open restaurants. In front of them is so much space it could be an airplane hangar except, instead of planes, there are dozens of high dark tables and in the center an over-size bar ringed with hi-def TVs. Other screens, all tuned to different sporting events, hang along industrial brick walls. Above soars vaulted blackness.

“Not exactly your mother’s Schrafft’s,” whispers Elena. What is there about overlarge spaces that compels one to whisper?

In a far corner they find a normal-size table. Immediately a waitress in black jeans and t-shirt materializes. Meredith orders salad and Elena orders a burger. “Rare,” still whispering. Meredith’s finger taps the menu note, “Eating undercooked meat can . . .”

The waitress brings their coffee. “The thing is,” Elena says, “The other day, this man from some credit company called me . . .”

“Did you read our alumni magazine?”

“No.”

“Six people in our class have died in the last four months: Betsy Martin Scholes, Ellen Cutwerp Sander, Kiki Lewis . . .” Meredith tolls the names.

Schadenfreude, Elena thinks. “I didn’t know any of them,” she snaps. “I don’t think they died of rare meat.”

Meredith scowls. The waitress returns, doling out the plates. Elena stares at the burger. “Byron Black. That was his name.”

Meredith frowns.

“He’s almost got me convinced: I’m going to wake up one morning and bang, my identity’s gone.”

Meredith sighs. “You know, you and I are really lucky. So many people in our class are really old. I saw Maryanne Carson the other day. She’s on a walker.”

“I’m just more and more anxious about everything.”

“It’s Fox News,” snaps Meredith. “So take a Xanax. Better yet, Zoloft.”

Zoloft. To waft aloft. Elena looks toward the ceiling, an industrial metaphor, the vaulted blackness crisscrossed with silver ducts that have no real function.

“I think I’ll go to La Cupole,” says Elena slowly.

Meredith stares. Laughs. “Why? You want to freeze to death?” She pauses, smiles, reminiscing: “Remember . . . oh, ages ago. We said when we got real old we’d get a room at the Ritz, bring a boojum of Jack Daniels and cartons of Camels and go out with flair. But freezing to death in La Cupole! Anyhow, I thought we were going to do a Thelma and Louise.”

“We’ll have to find a cliff,” says Elena. But she’s not thinking of death.

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Nobody goes to the summer house in winter and Elena doesn’t intend to stay at La Cupole for more than an hour. She’s not a fool and only mildly quixotic. As to when she’ll go, she’s not sure, aside from that it must be soon. The cold, the snow are essential to her search and what she’s searching for is a space beyond any input, a physical equivalent of total emptiness, and in that emptiness, she’s convinced she’ll re-find—or perhaps for the first time find—her true self—find that identity beyond the one that

Byron Black would steal.

Is the idea stupid? Maybe. Is it worth the try? Yes. Passionately, yes. She knows that she can't drive to the house. Even in summer the deeply rutted dirt path threatens the car's underside. They'd lost mud pans when cars had those, now it's exhausts and catalytic converters that fall prey to the high center crown. She'll walk the quarter-mile to the house from the state road. For one hour she will give herself to a world without interruption. She doesn't expect grandiose insight or elevation into eternal wisdom. She expects only a kind of peace — what others can find in yoga, in meditation. What began as a passing fancy in the faux industrial restaurant has become obsession.

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Elena doesn't pick the day for her trip to the summer house, it picks her. She started out mid-morning on a trivial shopping expedition — coffee, bread, staples — but the day is bright and clear, yet not too clear. Even as a child she'd hated sun-flooded days of February, obliterating shadow and nuance, shoving winter in your face. This day is more subtle and, turning out of her driveway toward the store, she knows this is it. Coats, mittens, scarf, boots, she's perfectly equipped. With a quickening of her pulse, she drives past the store, past a sign that says, "Turn Right. Church Entrance," which has always made her laugh. Can one turn left into religion? A mile farther, as traffic merges onto the Pike, she knows that her trip has begun. She's going to the summer house in winter.

The drive to La Cupole is two or three hours, depending on whether one takes the longer Mass Pike route or the shorter diagonal way across state, which is actually longer because of temptations to stop. Elena opts for the latter and at eleven pulls into a tiny pastry shop in a town whose name she doesn't even know. She chooses a seat by the window to the left of a group of elders. They're discussing a trial for which one has served on the jury.

"But you didn't have to."

"I wanted to."

"A civil trial."

"I'd want criminal."

She relishes her role as eavesdropper. Other people's conversations have always been a lure. She savors a delicious sense of truancy.

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It's almost one when Elena pulls off the highway onto the lower reaches of their road. To her relief, despite a covering of snow, there's enough traction to let her pull several feet up and onto a space sheltered by hemlocks.

The air beyond the warm car is breath-stopping cold and the snow beyond the hemlocks deeper than she'd imagined. For a moment she hesitates. She isn't a fool, but she's in good shape, excellent shape, and not just for her age. The afternoon is still young, La Cupole is close. She won't stay long, only long enough to have been there, and, with sudden clarity, she knows that it's the right thing.

Elena walks slowly and steadily, relaxing the back and thigh muscles, letting the lower legs take the burden of her stride. She has no fear of slipping here. She stops only once at the turn where the incline flattens and where, in summer, the tall grass bends to the lightest breeze like the surface of a small lake. Now in winter, the waves are stilled beneath snow. And the thought comes to her that she's the first, of all those people who have come to the summer house, who has ever seen these stilled waves, and for a moment, she's almost afraid to go on. She lifts her eyes. In the near landscape, stripped of leaves, La Cupole thrusts itself at her. She moves forward, taking small breaths. She mounts the tiny porch and gropes for the key, frozen beneath the empty flower pot. The screen door sticks and shudders. She yanks it loose. The key turns and she moves into the house. Stops.

It is the thereness of the room that startles her and for a long moment she stands paralyzed on the threshold, painfully aware that she has come into a place where she was not invited. The furniture confronts her in the white light of winter in a way that it never has in the softness of summer. The plank table that Carl made, the rag rug, a refugee from Gabe's dorm room, her father's enormous wing chair rescued from her grandmother's old home and transported up the rutted road bound like big game on the roof the Model A, all declare their presence, and in their starkness mock her.

In the summer these pieces had been unobtrusive, melting into the sunlight and the bustle of the arriving family, but now it is their room. She is the intruder. The room is bold, demand-

ing an apology for her presence. She waits, moves forward cautiously. The stillness magnifies sound. It's like when she'd first tried a hearing aid, and heard the leaves crackling. Now her boots squunch on the bare floor obtrusively. She stops, inches forward again as quietly as possible, and sinks, at last, into the wing chair, barely breathing. She hadn't expected this. No one comes to the summer house in winter and now she has come. All these years and not even her father had dared. She waits.

Her patience pays off. The stillness abandons its hostility, surrounds her and embraces her. She relaxes in awe, gratitude.

Elena doesn't know how long she sits in the great chair. She's not passive or resting, rather she's hyper-alert: a mouse stirs in the wall. How do they survive such cold? The fold of her coat under her thigh grows painful. She hesitates to shift her position, to change the balance of the room.

And now the light has changed. It's gone from clear pure gray to a softer gray. She moves her gaze from the middle distance to the window. Once, her father told her that long before she was born, when he'd first come here after the chestnut blight and a fire, he could see the mountains. And even as a child she'd glimpsed their blue undulations, but then the trees, marching up the hill, had obscured the view and only the field surrounding La Cupole, periodically cleared of encroaching undergrowth, remains open. Now the gray light has thickened and even the near trees are no more than shape-shadows within shadow. She comes aware, jolts up. The furniture retreats into its discrete summer shapes. The air is full of snow. For how long has it been snowing? In a surge of panic Elena strides across the living room into the kitchen. She snatches the door wide and pushes at the screen door. It doesn't yield. The snow has already piled in front of it. She kicks her boot at the wood and reluctantly, slowly, the door yields, moving back enough for her to squeeze through. She doesn't bother to lock. In front of her the world is white, her approaching footprints mere shallows.

"Fool, fool, fool," she screams silently and strides forward into the soft indentations. The snow tumbles into her boots. Her jaw hardens. She moves forward, the snow abrading her cheeks. She stops at the snow-wave field, wraps her the scarf tighter. Breathing through wool, she strides on. The Camry appears, a white mound hunched beneath the hemlock. Angrily she moves to it, angrily she brushes the snow off it, despising its pale anonymity.

She snatches at the door handle. It doesn't respond, the door stays closed. Again she jerks the handle.

The snow, warm from the drive, has melted into the door crack and frozen. She won't panic. Not in desperation but with deliberation, she moves her bag from her shoulder, opens it, retrieves the car key, and runs it along the door crack. Nothing. Pushing the metal shaft into the crack as far as possible, she applies pressure to lever the crack wider. Nothing gives and suddenly she's afraid the key will snap. Panic tightens her throat. She rests her forehead on the cold door. There's a roaring in her ears. A stroke? Her mother died of a stroke. Her mother's fingers went numb. That was months before the end. She'd laughed, "My pressure would run a boiler." Elena's own pressure is low. The good cholesterol is low. The roaring recedes . . . and if it hadn't. If she fell here? Meredith will say:

"It's what she wanted." She'll say it sadly, but not bitterly, "Elena wanted to die at La Cupole. It was her choice."

The boys will know better. But even worse, they'll think she was confused, that she didn't mean to go to the summer house in winter. She hears their wives chattering in the back room. "I told her she shouldn't be alone. I said, 'Elena, dear, these new facilities are wonderful. If you go now'—this was shortly after Carl died—'it will be independent living. And, then, then if and when you need more, you can transition . . .'"

"Cruise ship on the river Styx," she'd snapped.

Elena straightens. She opens her bag again, retrieves a pencil. It snaps. Her ballpoint, a clumsy souvenir pen from a drug company, is too thick for the crack.

Elena examines the contents of her bag slowly, deliberately, as if it were summer and she was rummaging for sunglasses or perhaps a mint. She always carries mints, their round striped presence, wrapped in clear cellophane, clutters the bottom of the bag. She takes one now. It's hard to tear the cellophane with mittens and she removes them, pops in the mint. If it were summer she'd dump the bag on the ground or the hood of the car, but it's not summer. She lifts out her cell phone. It's the old kind, the flip kind. The tiny screen reads, "Looking for service." Carefully she inserts the slender upper shell of the cell phone into the door crack and twists. The ice crackles along the edges like laughter and the door opens.

Elena sinks onto the car seat, exhales, straightens. She inserts the key in the ignition. The engine leaps into sound. She closes the door, depresses the clutch, and shifts from park into The shift doesn't move. She takes her foot off the clutch, counts to three, tries again. The clutch is frozen fast. With both hands she pulls on the stick. "Move. Move, damn you," she cries into the silence. It stays fast.

She's shoved her phone into her pocket and retrieves it. "Looking for service."

No one comes to the summer house in winter. There's nowhere to walk, but she'll walk and walk and walk and walk. Without preamble the clutch moves down and into reverse.

"The heat of the engine unfroze the shift," Carl says.

Elena depresses the accelerator and the Camry moves back an inch. The wheels spin. She goes into first, inches forward. The wheels spin. Reverse. Forward. Rock. She stops. Leaving the engine on, she climbs out, examining the scene dispassionately. Behind each wheel is an icy trench, brownish with mud from the treads.

Elena neither thinks nor plans. She removes her coat, spreading it over the snow. Sleeves out, fully splayed, it is a shadow person reaching its arms to the icy trenches. But the reach isn't enough. Lifting the coat, she unzips the hood, lays that over the further trench, supplementing it with her scarf. In a burst of remembering, she returns to the car, snatches the floor mats. Kneeling, she shoves them under the tires, pushing them as far as they will go. Back in the car, she eases the shift into reverse, craning to see over her shoulder. The wheels hesitate as if daring her to press harder but she knows better. If the wheels go too fast they'll spin the material up and under the car. She keeps the pressure steady, not racing the engine. The tires hesitate, yield their challenge and catch on the dry material. The Camry inches back. She shifts, applies more pressure, enough so the momentum will carry them out. The car lurches crazily and, free of the clothing, now rockets toward the far bank. She twists in her seat, fighting the wheel as the car sluices, rocks, bucks and lunges, and then it is off the country road and caroming onto the highway. If another car'd been coming they'd all be dead. Elena is crying now, great gasping sobs. Ignoring herself, she brakes gently, shifts into first, straightening the

car's trajectory. The Camry shudders, finds its balance, and moves forward.

She drives slowly. She knows she must turn on the lights, and knows that when she does, the last of the afternoon light will go. She turns them on. The afternoon flees and blackness closes in around the car, pressing against the windows except in the very front where a yellow cone of light reaches into the dark. She drives toward the receding blackness at the end of the cone.

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It's almost nine when Elena turns the lock in the door and lets herself into the dark apartment. At the end of the hallway the phone is ringing. As she moves toward it, she flicks the switch, watching light pour from the bulb across the ceiling, over herself and into the furthest corners.

She picks up the phone. Meredith is shouting. "Where have you been?"

"Out." Elena's voice startles her. She says it again, experimenting with the sound, which seems remote. "Out."

"I've tried and tried to get you." Meredith accuses.

"Ahh," Elena says, adding, "I'm sorry," holding the phone a little away as if it's something to be looked upon and studied.

Meredith is unstoppable. "It's Friday. I called and called. I left messages on your cell. I left another just now. What's the point of having a cell, if you don't answer?"

The cell phone. Her hand reaches and stops.

"I'm sorry," Elena says again.

"I said, 'You'll miss the ballet.' And, now, of course, you've missed it. Well, I've got to go," she snaps. "Glad you're all right. That was really rude." She hangs up.

Elena leans her head against the wall. "If I should die before I wake . . ." She pushes herself erect. "Thank you," she whispers.

She has gone to the summer house in winter. No one will ever know. The foxes, the field mice will collect the evidence, secreting it away their winter dens. She thinks of her phone. Service found. The fox jolts awake in his lair to its strident ring. "Loud." she had instructed the salesman. "Very loud." She has gone to the summer house in winter. She listens to the phone ringing under the snow and grins. No one can take that from her.

Love in the Age of a Good Sleep

A good sleep does not confuse itself when speaking.

A good sleep is straight and to the point.

I've been wearing this ring for a long time, Saturn says

but never takes it off, never leaves it accidentally
by the drain. A good sleep is uproarious and hard to tame
like the moment in which everyone begins to cry.

A good sleep collects tickets at the door, does not waver —
misses no hand. A good sleep is mathematical, precise
and kind. A good sleep abides its own rules, is home by ten:
is always properly informed and introduced.

A good sleep is cosmic. Icy pass around Europa, unforgiving
in its own blindness. A good sleep turns with Triton:
doesn't apologize. It refuses to carry your things and then
gives no condolences, pushes your hurt aside.