

Erica Plouffe Lazure

THE COLD FRONT

WHEN WE SAW JOAN SMALLS, she was standing on the lip of her unshoveled driveway off Strutmore Road, howling as she removed what was left of her long underwear. It was the day after a blizzard, a Saturday; by the time we got there, she wore nothing but her snow boots. She screeched at her husband Curtis about “Swiss Miss snow bunnies” and “slutty Barbie dolls.” She hurled many snowballs. She cursed, loudly. When we turned down the radio, we caught “that nasty e-mail-sending whore” and “why won’t you just listen?” Curtis Smalls was silent. He shoveled snow.

We were out for a ride with the kids after the storm, test-driving the four-wheel drive on Lora’s Jeep, when we came across the Smalls. I slowed down and flipped up the shade attachment for my glasses to get the full effect.

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“Lookit there, honey. A snow queen,” I said. I have to admit, Mrs. Smalls looked pretty darn good. The cool air had hardened her nipples to a deep pink and you could almost see every last goose bump on her muscular body. Her hair was flyaway blonde, strewn skyward from static. Along with scattered stacks of magazines—was that a *Playboy*?—which blew about in the wind, her clothes littered the frozen lawn. I rolled down the window.

“James, don’t,” Lora said. She clutched the sleeve of my parka. “The kids!” I ignored her and stuck my head out the window.

“Hey, is everything all right there?” I asked. “You need any help?”

Mrs. Smalls turned toward us—no shame, only anger—and hurled a snowball in our direction. “Haven’t you seen a naked woman before?” she yelled. “Get the hell out of here!”

“I don’t think the Smalls need our help, dear,” I said to Lora, trying to keep a straight face behind my beard.

“This isn’t funny, James. I’m calling the police. We can’t have this in our neighborhood,” Lora said. She glanced back at Susie and Paul, asleep in their car seats. I followed her gaze and lowered my voice.

“Give her a break, Lora. There’s a time when you’d have stripped down to your skivvies yourself just to make a point,” I said. As it was, Lora had been wearing the same grey sweatpants and duck boots for three days. Her navy blue vest puffed up and distorted her top half. And you’d never guess that under her L.L. Bean look, a tattoo of blue stars lined the upper ridge of her hipbones, or that she used to strut around Duck’s Tavern on a Thursday night singing karaoke in tight jeans and a tube top.

“That time is over,” Lora said. She pawed through her purse for her cell phone.

Joanie Smalls had begun to stomp on magazines—*Playboy* and *Hustler* among them—as Curtis continued to shovel, his wide face expressionless. For a while, he used to anesthetize patients down at Mewborn Memorial. I would see him walking through the hospital from time to time when Lora was getting her chemo treatments, and he’d flash an icy smile, as neighbors do, and continue on his way. Then I heard down at Duck’s that not long after they fired him from the hospital, he got into some online porn business. No one at Duck’s knew why he’d been fired, but honestly I just couldn’t imagine his thick fingers sticking needles into people on an operating table any more than I could see him selling porn out of his basement. He seemed too numb. Even now, he did not react to his wife’s snowballs, or her accusations, not even when she yanked the shovel from his grip, pushed him down in the snow, straddled his stomach, and shook him by the collar of his coat, screaming, “I just want you to see me!”

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Lora focused on her phone, thumbs pushing buttons. “No service,” she said. “Damn.”

“Put that phone away. Can’t you see they’re having it out?” I said, pulling out of neutral. I’d seen all I had to after that straddle maneuver. “Let’s get out of here.”

As soon as we got home, Lora stepped out of the Jeep with the phone pressed to her ear and headed indoors. The kids were awake now and fidgeting, so I took them out of their car seats and let them loose in the front yard. Susie followed her mother, while Paul went to check on the snowman we’d built that morning. It was almost time for dinner, but I didn’t feel like going in the house. Instead I found my flask under the front seat of my truck, took a quick swig, and stowed it in my pocket as I joined Paul before the snowman.

Our snowman is an ordinary snowman. He’s got an ugly blue scarf wound around his neck and an old Burger King crown on his head. He’s sloppy-dumpy, like any other front yard suburban snowman, with charcoal features and an unpeeled carrot for a nose. I won’t waste briquettes on buttons, or break branches for arms. It doesn’t matter, really. In the end, arms or no arms, top hat or paper crown, all snowmen will eventually look alike: frozen and sagging into the grass, one big puddling mess.

I’d promised Paul earlier we could build another snowman—this time, a girl—before the snow melted.

“Then we’ll have the set,” I’d said. “A snowman. And a snow ma’am.” I was in high school the last time a snowstorm like this blew through Mewborn, so I figured Paul and Susie and I could make the best of it. We’d even made a last-minute bread-and-milk run to the Food Lion on Highway Eleven, and watched the idling plow trucks.

“What do you think?” I said. “Time we get that snow ma’am underway?” Paul nodded.

Together we started to push snow into a mound. I could feel the chill of the air through my clothes and contemplated what it would be like to wear none. I took off my gloves and scooped snow into my hands. In a moment, my palms went numb and I thought about Joanie Smalls. What was she feeling out there? God, she looked amazing. Why did she strip like that? I contemplated this until I spied Paul’s blue mittens on the ground next to me. I shook the slush out of my hands, then his.

“Come here, silly,” I said. I wiped his hands on the cuff of my pants, then

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retrieved his mittens. The front door slammed. Lora and Susie were walking toward us. Lora's brows formed a prim double arch over her wide, blue eyes. She keeps her hair cropped short, even though she stopped chemo almost three years ago.

"What is your problem?" she said.

"Paul took off his mittens," I said. I wiped the last of the wet on my coat. "I'm just getting them back on."

"That's not what I meant," she said. "You know dinner will be ready soon."

"It will be too dark for snowmen after dinner," I said. I tugged at each of Paul's mitten cuffs, for emphasis. We were building a snowman. "This won't take long."

I helped Paul scoop more snow with my shovel. He patted it down with his mittened hands. Lora stood there, brimming with unspoken words. I let it ride.

"Don't you want to know what the cops said?" she finally asked.

"Not particularly," I said.

"Well, they're busy with calls from the snowstorm, but Sheriff Stanton said they'd send someone by," she said. "You know, to check."

"So someone can't be naked around here without you calling the sheriff, is that it?" I asked.

Paul started to form what looked like a huge snowball for the midsection. I set down the shovel, found my flask, and took another sip.

"Curtis Smalls is a pervert," Lora said. "His wife's no better. Indecent exposure in a snowstorm? Seriously. What's she trying to prove?"

"Who knows? You hardly know them," I said. I helped Paul roll the midsection onto the base. "I don't see why we got to get in on the tit patrol in the middle of nowhere. Getting mucked in their mess sure as hell won't solve ours."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Lora asked.

I stopped helping Paul and leaned on my shovel. "What I'm saying is, the Smalls' problems are not ours. And we got plenty of our own," I said.

"Well, you make a lot of sense," Lora said. She was trying to keep her voice low, but the heat loomed in her words. She grabbed my arm and dragged me away from the kids. "Some naked bimbo starts screaming at her porno pimp husband in the middle of a snowstorm, and you blame me for their problems and ours?"

"God, Lora. Don't put words in my mouth," I said. "I don't blame you for..."

"Nothing would be solved, you know, if I got buck naked in front of the world," she said.

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I lowered my voice and moved in closer to her. "I wish you could hear yourself talk, Lora. Because seeing any part of you naked might do the trick," I said. "You haven't let me touch you, let alone fuck you, for how long?" She looked away, toward the kids, her arms folded across her chest.

"I'm just speaking the truth," I said. "I feel like I'm still paying for a two-year-old mistake."

Lora exhaled what was left in her lungs, unable to meet my gaze. Then she met me, full-faced. "You are," she said, grabbing hold of a branch as she walked away. When she let go, the snow from the branch came down over me in powdery chunks. Susie ran toward the backyard. As Lora tracked after our girl, I walked over to Paul and helped him finish the snowman's head.

The truth is, two years of no sex was a generous estimate. After Lora's operation, we tried once. It was a few months after her mother left and she was done with the chest packs and the painkillers and the drain tubes, after she decided she'd rather put the kids through college than pay for breast reconstruction. She said she felt ready. She said she wanted me. And I knew she'd be changed; I knew she'd have no breasts. But nothing prepared me for when our bodies actually touched. In the dark and through her nightgown, I pulled my hand away from her body. It was a reflex, involuntary, and clumsy, but she left our bed and nothing would convince her to come back. And I haven't touched her since. After that, she surrounded herself with the kids and made it so we never got a moment alone. She usually sleeps in Susie's room, or dozes on the couch; I go out to Duck's most nights to forget about it, and come home so late that it doesn't matter where we sleep. Apologies make it worse: Sorry for touching her. Sorry for pulling away. Sorry for the cancer. Sorry, now, for mentioning it.

Paul turned toward me and giggled.

"Daddy, you look like a snowman," he said.

"Thank you," I said, looking back at where Lora had been. "Say, you got a carrot on you? I can't smell a darn thing."

"She needs eyes," Paul said.

"How right you are," I said.

I went into the garage for the bag of charcoal and dug out a few coals and handed them to Paul. Then I broke the first snowman's carrot in two. As I watched Paul wedge each coal into the snowman's face and place the half carrot for its nose, I couldn't help but imagine that Joanie Smalls would probably want a guy like me. Someone who'd pay attention to her, like she wanted. Maybe she'd lean in a cheesecake pose on the hood of my truck. Or she'd sit on a fur skin rug in the snow, her hair in two braids brushing each breast, her knees bent, each heel touching the lower corners of the rug, letting me see the pink folds beyond her

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dark down. Her boots would still be on, and we'd make love right there, in front of the snowman. Or in front of her husband, who would continue to shovel, no matter what. And everything I'd ever felt would pour into her. And she would take in all of me, accept me completely with her eyes open, wanting more.

"Daddy? How do we tell it's a girl?"

"How do we tell who's a girl?" I said, face reddening.

"You said she's a snow ma'am," he said, emphasizing the "ma'am."

"So I did. Hold on," I said. I returned to the garage to find a few ribbons in the Christmas box that I had yet to bring to the attic. I pushed past last month's ceramic fir trees and gilded stars and ratty red stockings and focused on finding ribbons. Ribbons in hand, I returned.

"Here," I said, handing him the ribbons. "Put them on her head. Then we'll know."

Paul grinned as he took them. Leaning on my shovel, I watched him wrap the ribbons, green and gold, around her head.

"She's beautiful," I said. When he was done, Paul grabbed my hand and led me toward Lora and Susie, who were walking toward the front yard.

"Mommy, we made a lady out of snow!" Paul said.

Lora gave me a sharp look. Then, in a phony, loving-mother voice, she said, "A girl snowman. That's great, sweetie. Now whose idea was that?"

"Daddy's. He said it's a snow ma'am," Paul said.

"We've got the happy pair right on the lawn if you want to see them," I said. "Mister and missus." I sounded, for Paul's sake, friendly and upbeat. Like a guy who eats cereal for breakfast every morning.

"Well, I thought it was just a plain old snowman," Lora said.

"No, it's a girl," he said. "There's ribbons."

"Let's go see," she said, still looking at me, her eyes sending out all the reformed whore, fake church-lady meanness they could muster. As we approached the snow ma'am, I said, "Now, Lora. Don't you go calling the cops. I can assure you the snow ma'am is fully clothed."

It would have been one thing if Lora had just slapped me or called me an asshole in front of the kids, then went into the house. I would have preferred that. But instead she formed two scoops from the snow ma'am's midsection, held them to her chest, and said, "I'm sure you know exactly where to put these, James." Then she threw them both at me, dead-on.

The children giggled.

"Mommy hit Daddy with a snowball," said Paul, and Susie threw a handful of snow at Paul and soon they were romping and laughing, snow flying everywhere, as Lora and I stood there, arms crossed, glaring at each other.

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I turned away from her, eventually, and as I did, the snowman's expression caught my eye. It looked to me just then like the charcoal had been arranged so the snowman held a smirking, leering grin. As though the snowman found Lora's snowball stunt extremely funny.

I reached for the shovel and sideswiped the snowman's head. His head hit the snow ma'am's straight on, and her head toppled, too. Lora backed away, and I ignored Paul's wails for me to stop. I'm ashamed to admit that I couldn't stop pummeling the snow-torsos with my fists. I stomped on their heads as my family retreated to the house. Bows and charcoal smiles and the paper crown and split carrots and scarf scattered across the lawn.

"Why do you have to ruin everything?" Lora said.

It was only then that I realized I was alone on the lawn. Lora had got the kids inside the house, away from me. I pounded on the door, my house key useless, thanks to the deadbolt.

"Why can't you see I'm sorry?" I yelled. I jiggled the doorknob one last time before I walked toward my truck. "I'm sorry!"

On my way I saw a lump of coal uncrushed from the snowman's grin. I kicked it. I kicked it again. It skittered down the driveway. I looked up at the darkening sky. What I really needed was to go for a drive.

I spent the next few hours rumbling down the back roads of Mewborn. We never see this much snow in eastern Carolina, and usually it shuts down nearly everything, especially where we live, some five miles out in the county. But the roads were mostly clear. Eventually I got the courage to return to Strutmore Drive. The Smalls' house was dark, save for a dim red light from a window on the second floor. Curtis's Yugo was gone from the driveway; Joanie's Camry remained.

I drove by a few more times before I stopped the truck on the side of the road. I rolled down the window to feel the night air on my face, sipping my flask. I idled there a long time, staring at footprint pock marks on the frozen, bare lawn, the shoveled driveway. I tried to imagine Joanie Smalls somewhere in that house, alone now, warm in pajamas, too brave for her own good. Then I thought of Lora, policing the neighborhood. I guess if someone drove by and saw me beating on a snowman with a shovel, she'd call the sheriff, too. And I'd deserve it. I tried to recreate my snow queen fantasy from this afternoon, but instead my mind kept drifting back to Lora, who was probably by now asleep on the couch or on the recliner in Susie's room. The last image that came to my mind as I

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drifted off was of me asleep in Lora's arms. When I awoke a couple hours later, the truck engine was still on, and I had just enough gas to get me back to the house. The light at the Smalls' had been turned off. I popped the truck into gear and drove home.

When I pulled into the driveway, I saw the wind had carried one of Paul's ribbons nearly to the road. I chased it down and wrapped it around my neck as I walked toward the house. The remains of our snow people lay in heaps on the front yard. I stood among the mess in the dark, thinking about Paul and Susie and Lora. I knelt down and began to gather the snow in a mound. Soon I'd shaped it into a snowman. Then I made another, and another. Soon there was a small village on the front lawn: icy, three-plop replicas, a dozen of them forming a small army, cold and sturdy in the moonlight.

By the time I finished, my knuckles were scraped and frozen, fingers numb. I was sweaty. It was then Lora joined me outside, in her blue vest, the cuffs of her pajamas pants tucked into her duck boots. She picked up a gold ribbon, shook it off, and wrapped it crisscross around the head of the snow person nearest the house.

"Why don't you come inside?" she said.

"I'm not done here," I said. That was true. I still had to pat down the base I was working on, make it concave, like a platter ready to receive the midsection.

"Let me help you," she said. She picked up the charcoal bag and began to place eyes on ice. She made black, three-point smiles on the frozen men.

"I'm fine here," I said.

"James," she said, "you're not fine."

I stood up. "Look. I don't give a shit about the cancer. And you always have to be so, so fucking proud or something. So perfect. All the time. And I'm just..."

Lora looked out at the lawn, as though she was searching for something. I stopped making the torso to look, too, to see what she saw. The lawn was dark and muddy in the spaces between the snowmen. It looked like there was no ground beneath them, and each one was fixed and frozen in its own world, floating in space in the darkness.

She approached one snowman and broke off a section of its head, forming it into a ball. Cupping her hands with care, she threw the snowball into the night.

"It's enough," she said. She made and threw another snowball, then turned toward me. "You're enough, all right?"

She moved to another snowman and scooped out another snowball.

"Cut it out, Lora," I said, annoyed that she'd hacked the snowman's head like that.

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This time, she aimed for me. I ducked.

"You're getting snow everywhere," I said, even though I knew I sounded like an old lady. Snow got down my neck and stuck in my beard. "I'm warning you," I added in a tone I usually save for the kids.

"What'll happen?" said Lora.

She was holding a pair of snowballs at chest level. Crouching behind one of the snowmen, I stole a snowball from its middle.

"All, I'm saying is, you'd better watch it," I said. I hurled a snowball at her. It missed. I tossed three more, but only one nicked her vest. I threw another round her way, maneuvering through the yard, trying to avoid Lora's barrage, until we'd dismantled all the snowmen. Only one remained for each of us. I took the flask from my coat and took a swig.

"Any left in that for me?" Lora asked. She threw another snowball. It hit my chest, dead-on. She advanced toward me like a stealthy soldier, shielding herself.

"Not if you're my enemy," I said. I peeked over the icy midsection of mine, clutching my flask; Lora emerged from behind her snowman to face me. I stood and extended the flask in her direction. She took a sip, then tucked the flask into the pocket of her vest. I stepped closer to her. She sighed and stared at the sky.

I wanted to follow her upward gaze, but decided against it. Taking a breath, I reached toward her instead and rested my palm on her down chest, over her heart. She placed her hand over mine, and we stood together in the cold amidst our toppled bodies.