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Shopping for Meat in Winter

YOU WAKE UP in the driver's seat of a sedan that is not yours, to the sound of a siren wailing in the distance. The seat is tilted back to facilitate your sleeping. You sit up. The cold air inside the car hits your back which was kept warm against the seat. The interior of the car is brown, and you notice, looking at the mirror on the door, that the exterior is burgundy. The hood of the car is covered in snow.

Glancing out the windows, you find that the car is sitting in the middle of an enormous field. About a kilometre or so behind you there is a thick forest, and in front of you, about the same distance away, there is a wire fence, surrounded in yellow grass poking out of the snow. On the other side of the fence there is a road, behind which rises a bare moraine, also fenced in. You can't be sure, because of the heavy grey sky, but you guess that it is probably late morning. You find your watch attached to your wrist, which confirms your estimate.

At the right-most vantage point of the windshield, a red fire engine comes screaming into view. Because it is so far away, it hardly appears to be moving at all. Still, it is kicking up huge clouds of snow in its wake. You watch it as it travels across the horizon, backdropped by the white hill. The closer it gets, the faster it appears. Still, its speed does not answer for the urgency of the siren. The sound grows louder until the fire engine passes in front of you. You can hear the low growl of the engine itself underneath the siren's whine. As the fire engine passes, the sound diminishes slowly. You watch it now out the driver's side window. It careens into the leftmost horizon and disappears entirely in the

snow, the land, and the distance. The air is quite still, and the snow falls gently back over the road.

For a moment you watch the spot where the fire engine disappeared. Coming back to your senses, you begin to assess your situation. You check, but there are no keys in the ignition, and none in the glove compartment or folded into the visor. You check your pockets for your own keys and wallet, and find both there. Out of curiosity, you check for car keys on your key ring, finding none. The car is clean, and, except for a pair of gloves on the passenger seat and an ice-scraper in the back, empty. You reach for the lever on your left side and pull the seat to its upright position. The sound is louder than you expected, compared to the stillness and insulation of the snow.

You reach for the door handle, pull it up and the door creaks open. It sounds as though it hasn't been opened for a while, or needs grease. You step out into a foot of snow. When you slam the door, the ice frozen to it breaks off and disappears into the white cake. You walk around the car. The trunk and roof are also covered with snow. Walking around it, you cannot find any tracks that might indicate how you and the car came to be in the middle of this field. You kick the ice off the license plate which claims to be from Wisconsin.

Having walked around the car twice, you scan the surrounding area for any indication of houses or barns: a wisp of smoke standing into the sky, or a TV antenna. Failing to see anything of the kind, you decide to walk towards the road, which must, eventually, lead to something. You grab the mitts from the passenger seat, and move away from the car.

You reason, as you stumble over the furrows whose valleys and peaks are hidden under the snow, that the fire engine had to have come from a small town or village. Since the siren was on and the lights flashing when it passed, it must have been on its way to a fire, not coming back from one. With this in mind, you veer to the right corner of the field closest to the road.

You finally reach the fence. Up close, you see that the wires are all coated in ice. When you grab the fence, most of the ice breaks off, revealing the rusted wire beneath. You climb over, close to a fence-post for stability. You look back at the car. Though it is still distinctly a vehicle, it now looks black and small.

The road has been plowed and the walking is easier. It is a dirt road. There is a brown twin path left by the fire engine, over

which the snow is feathered out in long wisps. Following the path with your eyes, you see, perhaps two kilometres away, a number of houses and a gas station. You begin to walk towards them. A wind has picked up outside the shield of the forest, which has ended, giving way to another field. It is cold, and you hug your jacket closer.

You notice there is another road bisecting the distance between you and the houses. The road is no different than the one you are on, except for the telephone wires that line it. Within fifteen minutes you have crossed that road, and within another fifteen you enter the hamlet.

Just before you reach the houses, you pass a blue sign that says "Valens." Some houses in Valens have lights on, but most are dark. Many of the cars in the driveways are propped up on cinder blocks, or covered with tarpaulins. Outside one house you see cartoons cut out of wood, Kermit the Frog and Porky Pig, their mobile feet frozen in mid stride. Beside this house sits the gas station.

On a piece of plywood painted white, in red and blue lettering, you read: Orville's Esso. Gas Station and Restaurant. The single storey restaurant is panelled in light, varnished wood. The inside is lit and looks warm. There are two cars parked outside, and three pickup trucks. The roads in town have been salted, and slush accumulates around the parking lot and between cars in crunchy brown lines. An attendant sits in the booth by the pumps, smoking and reading a magazine.

You go into the restaurant. The bells over the door announce your entrance, but they quickly die down, replaced by country music coming from a jukebox in the back corner. The interior is done in the same wood as the exterior, and everything that isn't wood, like the curtains, table cloths and napkins, is checkered red and white. You take a seat in a corner, looking out one of the front windows. A man in a denim jacket and blue baseball cap watches you, licking the back of his teeth. Besides him, you cannot see the rest of the patrons, who are blocked in the other side of the restaurant by the central entrance way.

You see a pay phone hanging on the wall beside a counter with bar stools. Staring at it absently, you check your pockets for change. You have three quarters and two dimes. You have a five dollar bill in your wallet.

The waitress interrupts your stare. You look up at her. She has sandy brown hair held back in a ponytail. She is wearing jeans

and a white shirt, covered by a red-checked apron. Her name tag reads, "Dolly." She explains that phone lines are down on account of the storm. You order coffee and a muffin. She pokes her pen in behind her ear, smiles and walks behind the counter.

Avoiding the man in the denim jacket's gaze, you find a newspaper in the booth behind you. Nobody is sitting there, so you take it and unfold it on your table. The headline on the front page reads: Heavy Snow Storm Coming. The paper is old and of no value to you. You flip through the rest of it. The stories are dull, and you don't spend much time on any of them. The third page hosts a cartoon by an artist you have never seen, depicting two boys outside a house, shovelling snow, while a their mother stands in the window with a steaming mug. Before you read the caption, Dolly returns, placing the muffin and coffee on the table, not spilling a drop.

The coffee is hot, and you appreciate its warmth against the back of your throat. Listening to the uninterrupted country music, and the quiet conversation of patrons, you feel yourself getting tired. With your head propped up in your right hand, you doze off.

After what seems like twenty seconds, you come to. Your head now rests in the elbow of your arm which is extended across the table. The first thing you notice is that it is darker outside now than it was earlier. You check your watch: 4:25. Glancing around the restaurant, you notice that the man with the denim jacket has been replaced by an older woman in a mint sweater playing solitaire. No other patrons are visible. Dolly comes around the counter with a plate in one hand. She delivers the food to the old woman.

You get up, pulling your coat around you and donning the mittens. You are not sure why, but you feel that you should go back to the car.

You leave the diner as a navy blue pickup pulls into a parking space. Once on the road, you head out of Valens the same way you came in. The houses are all lit now, the actions of the occupants obscured by curtains. The walk back seems shorter than the walk into town. You find yourself looking across a field at the car before you expected to find it. You climb over the fence, again at a post, and head towards the sedan. Soon, you intersect the footprints you made earlier that day.

You spy a shape moving behind the car. You slow your pace, and watch. The figure sways between the car and the forest. You approach the car in a wide semicircle. As you get closer, you

discern a cow's figure: the black patches joining within the white outline. The cow is walking away from the car, towards the forest, seemingly unaware of your presence.

You open the door to the car, kicking the snow off your boots before settling into the seat. The sound of the door closing strikes loudly against the car's interior. You replace the mittens on the seat beside you, and stick your hands in your pockets. You notice just how dark it has become. Then, out of the corner of your left eye, you see a repeating pink flash far off in the distance. You study it closer, and it gets brighter. Soon a flashing red light climbs into view. It is the fire engine. This time, its siren is not on. Again, it appears to be travelling slowly at first, gradually speeding up as it nears, and slowing again once it has passed. The fire engine disappears behind the horizon from which it came earlier this morning. The flashing red light is swallowed in the snow blown up off the road. You watch the light influence the side of the moraine until the pink flash vanishes.

With your left hand, you pull on the lever beside your seat, reclining it back. You lie down, close your eyes, and wait.