

NICHOLAS MAES

## Snow Day

AGAIN TOM ASKED WHEN HIS PLANE would be leaving, and for the third time the agent replied, with an impossibly white and professional smile, that the runways were in a terrible state, but that his flight would be announced in an hour or so, that's what her experience suggested at least. Thanking her, Tom moved away and bought a paper from someone whose English was shaky, who could only nod and smile politely when he observed the storm was something else, that they hadn't had a blizzard quite like that in ages. With his paper in hand, he debated his best course of action, whether he should proceed directly to his gate, or find a seat and read the news and analyze the passengers and their mounting frustration.

A picture window drew him over. It looked onto the road that led to the main entrance, and Tom grinned as he gazed upon the fragmented sky, the fishtailing cars, their wipers toiling feverishly, and well-dressed pedestrians doubled over in pain, as if all of them were Superman and the gloss on their coats a form of kryptonite. A mother emerged from a cab with her baby, shielding the child with a glossy leather purse, and at the sight of this pair Tom's smile faded and he hurried off in search of a public phone.

"Is he feeling any better?"

"He threw up, but it hasn't helped. What's happening with your plane?"

"According to the agent it should be leaving soon. Has school been cancelled?"

"It was announced five minutes ago. The first snow day in ages, and he can't enjoy it."

"Have you tried putting him into the shower? A nice hot shower has worked in the past."

"He needs to sleep. That's the only solution."

"I can cancel my flight. The guy will be in Boston on Thursday, and a delay of two days won't make any difference."

"There's nothing you can do, even if you stay. Look, I've got to go. I can hear him retching upstairs ...."

"I'm serious," Tom repeated, "I really can cancel," but his wife had hung up on her end already. It took him an effort to replace the receiver—by doing so he knew he'd be catching his plane—and for a moment he studied the long bank of phones and debated calling home on a different line, in case each connected you to a changed situation, like sci-fi portals that lead to parallel worlds, and the Matt who answered would be migraine free and bouncing about like any healthy six-year-old.

He chuckled to himself. If Matt were with him, he'd be inspecting the phones, fiddling with the coin return and depressing the receiver, in search of change which, from his perspective, wasn't the result of people's carelessness so much as it was a gift from some unfathomable spirit, a reward for kindnesses that had passed unnoticed, the same way, Tom concluded with a nervous flutter, the headaches might be payback for some hidden transgression, the odd white lie, neglecting to clean up, playing with matches, leaving food uneaten ....

"I'm sorry," Matt had screamed the previous summer.

"Why are you sorry?" Libby had asked, not daring to embrace him in case his migraine should worsen.

"I threw mud at David Pillar. I spat at him twice."

"I always spit at people," Tom had replied, to set his son's tender conscience at rest. "It's only wrong when you do it into someone's food." "Will I die?" he'd clamoured, his terror almost glowing beneath his contractions. "Will you put me in a coffin and dig a hole in the earth?"

"Don't be ridiculous! The doctor said you're perfectly healthy!"

"I didn't do anything! I wasn't so bad!"

Tom studied the departures board and saw his flight was still delayed by an hour. He sat and tried to read the front page, but its pessimistic headlines failed to engage him, and he scowled with impatience and thought of calling again, this time to suggest she prepare him some tea, or rub some ointment into his temples, or sing *Stormy Weather*, or tune the radio to static (as a baby Matt had found the sound reassuring), or massage his soles.

Aware his call would set her nerves on edge, he headed towards a coffee shop and thought about the General, wondering how to woo the guy without appearing too eager, too much the slimy business agent, easier said than done because he didn't know the military mind that well. He'd studied the guy's bio, of course, and ....

A dog started barking from somewhere close by. Glancing round, he spied a cage with a poodle, and the brute was whining and pawing the door and gnawing a mat that had broken free of its moorings. If Matt had been there, he would have run to the beast and spoken to it softly and touched it through an opening, observing all the while how dogs were so perfect, how he loved them so much, how he so much wanted a dog for his birthday.

He strode into the coffee shop and placed his order, wondering if the General was your typical boozier, whether he'd have to take him out on the town and match him drink for drink and listen to his stories. Unless his flight were cancelled and he could head on home and lie next to Matt and later stroll in the storm.

"I know you," someone announced from behind, as the server handed him a small cup of decaf. He wasn't sure whom the woman was addressing, and that's why he only glanced at her obliquely, at an angle that allowed him to take her trappings in, her duffel coat and penny loafers and knapsack with a Peruvian design—items that revealed she wasn't flying business class.

"You're Tom Caster," she declared, following him to an alcove where the cream was waiting, "Your hair's a little thinner, but you look just the same."

At this mention of his name, he looked her over closely, at her narrow face and its unusually round cheekbones, at her careful nose and generous mouth, at her hair, a sheaf of wheat with a few protruding stalks, and at her eyes, rich as gravy, but unwelcoming and puzzled.

"I don't recognize—" he started to say, although she did have a familiar air, and instinct was warning him he had reason to be cautious.

"I'm Georgia Parker. We attended the same high school."

"Sure, Georgia. Now I remember. Mr. Adder's English class."

"And other places. Where are you headed?"

"To Washington, provided my flight's not cancelled."

"Why Washington?"

"I'm an agent. I recruit personalities for speaking engagements. There's a four-star General who's just published a book, and I'm flying out to see if he can live up to his billing."

"You're married?"

"With a six-year-old boy. How about you?"

"What do you think?"

"I'm not in touch with anyone, so I really wouldn't—"

"I'm a high school teacher, as a matter of fact. I teach out west—I've been living there for years—and was visiting town only because my sister's had a baby. Otherwise I'd never come back to this hole."

"The city can be crazy—"

"It's the people I'm avoiding, as a matter of fact. But there's no point bringing up old grievances, is there?"

"What do you teach?" Tom asked, only to add without awaiting her answer, "It's been great seeing you. I'd better look into my flight." Depositing his coffee on a nearby counter, he quit the shop with a nod to the server, his fingers gripping his briefcase so tightly that the handle would end up leaving marks in his skin.

He moved toward the airline counter, not knowing what to make of this meeting with Georgia. He'd thought about her on the odd occasion; in fact, he distinctly remembered mulling her over, when Matt had experienced his first serious migraine. He'd been three at the time, and they'd been returning from his parents, an overnight stay that had been pleasant enough, apart from his father's obvious worry that his boss was going to force him to retire prematurely. To cap the weekend off, they'd stopped off in a diner and ordered Matt a plate of scrambled eggs and French fries. He'd taken half a bite of his meal when, almost instantaneously, as if he'd swallowed something deadly, he'd started to wail in his high-pitched voice—the "daddy siren" Libby liked to call it—that his head hurt, his head hurt, could they please make it stop. Because Matt had taken a sip of Libby's milkshake, Tom had told him the pain was due to the ice cream, that it would vanish in a moment and he'd be feeling okay. Only instead of abating, his agony had worsened and he'd pressed his fragile hands against his skull, as if searching for a hidden spring that would neutralize the headache. In a panic, Tom had called the waitress over and asked directions to the closest hospital. As they'd exited the diner, with Matt howling in his embrace, and the stares of dining families escorting them outside, he'd remembered Georgia, the way she'd left the party, her panic-stricken look a perfect match for his own.

"It will be another half hour at least," the woman at the airline counter spoke. How was it that her smile showed no signs of fatigue?

"The flight isn't cancelled?"

"So far, no."

"It looks like you're in for a really long day."

"I like snowy days. If it's terrible now, the summer months will be gorgeous."

"But maybe the winter will never end. Maybe this blizzard will go on forever."

As the woman laughed and addressed the person behind him, Tom spied a sign to the observation deck and figured what the hell, it was worth looking over. He moved off at a hurried clip—the deck was situated at the terminal's far end—squeezing his flight bag under his armpit so it wouldn't leave his shoulder and interfere with his stride. There were lots of travelers cluttering the hallway, and most of them were in a terrible mood, to judge by the way they were pacing about, or screaming into their cell phones at some invisible party, or hitting their baggage with their airline tickets whose final destinations had vanished from the map, deleted like typos from a laptop's screen.

Was it his fault maybe? He wasn't superstitious; he didn't feel that science had it wrong, that there was anything really besides energy and matter, that when we spoke of pain or love or betrayal, we meant anything more than proteins being zapped. Still. It was possible, wasn't it, that his petty misdemeanours, the lies he'd swapped, his quarrels with Libby, his work's empty promise and, removed but relevant still, his treatment of Georgia, his lousy behaviour, it was possible, even likely, that these errors were embedded in his DNA, which in turn he'd injected into Matt's frail structure, hence the glutinous balls of plaque that triggered his migraines every month or so.

What was Matt thinking? Through the tangle of pain, the cloying nausea, was he picturing the storm he wasn't able to play in, or the fort he'd maybe build when his father came home, or the latest instalment of his favourite cartoon, something about robots that were constantly duelling? Unless he was brooding on his upcoming birthday, wondering if they would get him a dog, a little one would do, a Chihuahua or beagle.

"Watch where you're stepping."

"I'm sorry. I didn't see your bags."

They'd known each other only from a distance, yet he'd been able to tell she was interested in him, from her glances and, more important, remarks by his friends. Her distinctive trait had been her gentle expression, an absence of that scornful look that had been typical of his peers, "mass produced ass-holes," as one teacher had described them. There'd been her shyness, too, that had kept her from straying, unlike her class-mates who'd followed their baser instincts, without pausing to consider the long-term effects, whether their kids would one day have to pay for their sins. Her father had died or run away or something, and she'd worked part-time in a flower shop, hence the smell of loam that had trailed her like a shadow.

"Any improvement?"

"He's in pain still, but at least the retching's stopped. What's happening on your side?"

“It won’t be leaving for a while.”

“By the way, he’s quoted in the paper today.”

“Who?”

“General Starch.”

“It’s pronounced ‘Stark.’ He’s sensitive about his name, or so I’ve been told.”

“The quote says people should be alert at all times, that we can’t afford to lower our guard.”

“Is Matt nearby?”

“He’s lying in our room. I don’t want to call to him, in case he’s sleeping.”

“I’ll be glad when I’m home. And tell Matt I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? What for?”

“Just tell him I’m sorry. I’ll call from my room.”

He replaced the receiver slowly, then climbed up to the observation deck, picturing his appointment with the four-star General and the hotel suite that awaited him in Washington. How he loved that moment when he opened the door and set his briefcase down and filled a strange room with his presence, a space that had contained someone else the night before, her ambitions and privacy freshly pressed into the mattress.

He reached the observation deck, gratified to discover it was virtually empty, apart from a blind man who was seated by the window, together with his guide dog, a hefty German shepherd. The chaos outside was breathtaking. When Tom was maybe six, he’d been taken to some stranger’s house where one kid had been autistic or something, and for no apparent reason had gone crazy in the kitchen, throwing plates to the floor, fragmenting pots and pickle jars, squirting mustard onto the muslin curtains, unmoved by the disorder she was bringing into being. The snow manifested the same disregard. The runways, the control tower, the buildings that should have been gleaming in the distance, the blizzard had erased every trace of their existence, and was set on immobilizing the earth itself, with its blind, harassing pinpricks of white; indifference, nihilism on a truly cosmic scale.

Tom eyed the German shepherd. Impulsively he tried to draw its attention, but the dog was too well trained to notice and continued staring into space, attempting to read his master’s will before the guy could puzzle out his own intentions.

Matt would be disappointed when his birthday arrived. Neither Tom nor Libby had grown up with a dog, or any other type of pet for that matter, and the thought of having an animal about made them both uneasy, as they’d explained to him a hundred times over. At the same time Tom often asked himself whether a dog might possibly help Matt with his headaches,

by somehow drawing the ‘poison’ out with its nuzzles and licks and other shows of affection.

“Excuse me. Can I give you a hand?”

“No, thanks, I’m fine. My daughter, you know, she’s fetching me some coffee.”

“It’s quite a storm.”

“So I gather.”

Tom studied a line of ploughs that were charging like dinosaurs across the landscape, the very last herd of dinosaurs on earth, stupid as always but aware of their danger, that nothing of themselves would escape this onslaught.

He’d been surprised to see her that Friday evening, because gatherings like that often got a bit raucous and hadn’t struck him as the sort of entertainment she’d enjoy. It had been cool, even for the end of May, although the heat in the pool had been cranked up to eighty, and its steam was assaulting the sharp night air. For a while everyone had remained in their clothes, and she’d tried very hard to hold his attention, laughing at his jokes and sipping a beer and venturing topics of conversation, teachers, college, her routines at work. Tom had joined a group of friends in the pool, and they’d raced each other and ducked each other and splashed anyone who’d been standing within range, until three girls had clambered into the water, and the boys had lifted one apiece on their shoulders and a chicken fight had started and the atmosphere had changed. From the corner of his eye he’d seen her slip out of her skirt and approach the pool in a yellow bikini, tugging at the straps to keep her breasts firmly anchored, large, fulsome concretions these, the sort of cushioning a guy would want directly beneath him when his luck was stretched a little too thin . . .

A figure in a bright orange suit was standing up to his knees in snow, two flashlights in hand with which he was directing the ploughs’ efforts. He appeared so helpless, so overwhelmed, and his solitude in that maelstrom brought Matthew to mind. He could picture him, wrestling all over his mattress, his forehead furrowed and his breathing shallow. Despite his mother’s presence, her hands poised on his shoulders, he was alone, wasn’t he, in a wilderness of fire, it was just him and the hammering of someone’s errors against his brainpan.

If not a dog, a cat he kept pleading, and Tom was almost prepared to say yes, only Libby kept insisting their furniture would suffer, that cats are cold, ungrateful things, and they’d have to make arrangements whenever they spent the night away.

One plough veered and almost crashed into the guide. Back and forth his flashlights moved, as if the fragile beams of light would offer

him protection, unless he was trying to hypnotize the snow or persuade it to fall a little less possessively.

She'd stood next to him, hoping he'd take her on his back. The steam was writhing round her abdomen and cleavage, and she'd laughed uncertainly at someone's joke, something about a banana being used for a dildo, and her features had seemed so out of place, surrounded as she'd been by those mass-produced ass-holes, who were drunk and rowdy and unpredictable. The point was he hadn't wanted her there, and she couldn't take the hint, hadn't guessed what was coming, and there'd been no one to advise him that if he didn't treat her kindly, that if he allowed their heartless trick to unfold, the outcome could be dreadful, if not instantly then down the road, affecting him ultimately where his flank was most exposed.

The snow, it was so beautiful, delicate yes, but ruthless and implacable, the way it obsessively lunged at the earth, refusing to back down until the globe was encompassed and betrayed not even a suggestion of colour.

He could picture Matt's soft eyebrows and the sloping bone of his nose. He was sleeping, maybe, and his mouth was slightly open and he was dressed in his pyjamas still, the ones that were supposed to make him look like Spiderman.

She'd been pressing at his elbow, begging for his notice, when someone had yanked her bikini top loose, the type of antic everyone had expected, that each of them had experienced on more than one occasion. Immediately her smile had broken apart, like an antique mirror being hammered to pieces, and for an instant, before she'd been able to shield them, her breasts' inflaming heft had been bared, the heart-stopping contrast between their ivory pulp and swollen tips of purple. Squirming beneath the weight of people's stares, unaware that this was standard fare as far as mass-produced ass-holes were concerned, she'd tried frantically to catch his eye and gain some reassurance, but he'd avoided her gaze and swam to the stairs and allowed some girl to fill his mouth with beer. She'd then scrambled past him, snuffing, blinking, and reached for a towel by the side of the pool. He couldn't explain his cruelty: as she'd taken refuge in his shadow, he'd grabbed the towel and tossed it to a friend and openly derided her attraction to him.

"I'll look after it," Matt kept vowing, whenever they discussed his upcoming birthday, "You wouldn't have to feed it or change its litter."

"That wouldn't keep our furniture safe."

"Please. Just one kitten. I'll do everything."

"We'll see. Meanwhile think of something else you might like."



His plane was being announced: American Airlines flight 465 to Washington DC boarding at gate seventeen. Lifting his briefcase and adjusting his bag, he hurried down the deck's metal steps, narrowly avoiding the blind man's daughter, or so he assumed from the cups of coffee she was carrying, a bright young thing who looked both loyal and flustered. With the news that their planes were preparing for takeoff, a powerful energy had taken grip of the crowd, and instead of spinning idly in circles, like cars whose drivers have fallen asleep at the wheel, everyone was confident and heading straight for their gates, smiling no less brilliantly than their respective airline agents. The General was waiting. After listening to him talk about computerized warfare, he'd approach the guy and take him out for supper and, with a charm that even a soldier would fall prey to, discuss his delivery point by point and get him to agree to a three-year contract, in such a way that the guy, who had the President's ear, would think he was actually being done a huge favour, because ultimately that's what salesmanship was, taking stuff from people yet appearing to be generous.

"What's happening now?"

He just won't settle. He's exhausted but the pain keeps prodding him awake."

"Should you take him to the doctor?"

"That's not so easy. The streets are blocked and I'd have to shovel the driveway."

"Tell me what to do. My plane will be leaving and . . ."

"Don't worry, we'll manage. It's just that he's so miserable."

Retreating from his family, he approached his gate's entrance and fed his stuff into an X-ray machine and drifted past a barrier, causing a guard to search him briskly because his keys had set the system off. He then proceeded down a corridor and observed the travelers about him, wondering what their histories were, what misdeeds and accomplishments they had to their credit, and whether they had any children at home whose spider limbs were twisting beneath the weight of a migraine.

"What's that?" one girl had asked, pointing to a mark on one of Georgia's breasts, a bright red scar, no, more like a crust, not too large but gelatinous-looking, a blemish that had enabled them to wound her further.

"What the hell IS that?" another girl had shouted.

"Were you in an accident or something?" someone had called from afar.

"You shouldn't be swimming with an open sore."

"We might develop an infection or something."

He personally hadn't said a word, only watched as she'd retrieved her skirt and exited the backyard, her face all wobbly and impossibly creased, like an out-of-date magazine in a doctor's office. If he'd followed her and apologized and eased her trauma, would Matt perhaps be throwing snowballs or dozing peacefully beside his mother?

He pushed towards his plane. There was a rising tide of travelers, some seated in a row, others pacing restlessly, as if movement would get them to their destinations faster. As he walked, he directed his gaze to the floor, in case he happened to catch her eye, and she questioned him again about his life and family, and he confessed against his will that his son suffered migraines, and he desperately wanted a dog for a pet, only they were concerned about their new leather couch, and he didn't know what else to say, he couldn't explain his behaviour that evening.

As he walked, his flight bag knocked against his ribs, and the snow continued to harass the city, and the planes outside were waiting to fly, despite the icicles that were burdening their wings.

Maybe they would compromise and buy him a rabbit.