

Shoveling

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Timothy was scrubbing lasagna remnants from a glass baking dish when the siren threatened to overtake Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 1* playing on his stereo. He stared out the kitchen window into the fresh darkness as though the recent snow could portend the ambulance's destination. He resumed scrubbing, the dish almost clean, but after another minute, he dropped the washcloth in the suds, and yanked off his yellow gloves.

In the living room, he paused the stereo, the siren louder still. He parted the beige curtains — snow was illuminated by red and blue flashing lights. The ambulance slowed in front of his house before turning into Joe's driveway and silencing its siren. He and Joe had shoveled earlier that morning; even at 76, Joe had seemed his usual self.

Timothy felt as a high-school junior when his Grandpa Arch was hospitalized with a severe stroke — it was like someone from behind pinning a metal bar across Timothy's chest. As he opened his front door, he struggled to breathe, the February night's crisp air not helping. The metal railing beside the front steps was colder than he'd expected, and his legs seemed frozen to the concrete. Two blue-uniformed paramedics pulled out a gurney from the ambulance, and once they entered Joe's house, Timothy could move.

Inside Joe's house, the TV was blasting *Wheel of Fortune*. The paramedics — men in their thirties, he guessed — knelt on either side of Joe, one taking his blood pressure, the other readying an oxygen mask.

Joe's sharp blue eyes met Timothy's as he stood in the doorway. "Call Linda," his raspy voice said.

The men turned, and Timothy sensed he should defend his presence. "I'm his next-door neighbor. Is he going to be okay?"

"It's good he's alert enough to call 911," said the paramedic who strapped the oxygen mask over Joe's face. "C'mon," he said to the other man, and they hoisted Joe onto the gurney.

Timothy held open the door while the awkward procession passed by. With his free hand, he touched Joe's arm. Joe's eyes were wide, afraid — the image foreign to Timothy. Shivering, he watched until the ambulance turned on Washington Avenue. Inside, he switched off the TV, flicked off the living room lights, but left the kitchen sink light on. Linda's number was among a handful Joe had scrawled on a sheet of lined paper taped beside the phone base.

"Oh, my God," Linda said when Timothy told her. "Daryl. Dad's in an ambulance to the hospital."

"I'll lock up the house," Timothy said. "Should I bring anything to the hospital for him?" He told her how Joe was awake, but he didn't say how Joe had looked frightened.

"Daryl can always run over and get whatever Dad might want," she said. "Thanks for keeping an eye on him."

Timothy told her it was no problem, and said he'd see her up at the hospital. He didn't think Joe needed looking after.

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When the snow finally ceased, Timothy was still in his flannel pajama pants and gray East State University sweatshirt and relaxing in his

recliner. He reluctantly closed his book, *Peace Like a River*. Soon, Joe would be outside, wielding one of several shovels, and Timothy would join him. It had begun as a neighborly act during the first snowfall in late October, not that Joe needed help, as he clearly let Timothy know that first time. Nevertheless, shoveling was one of the homeownership chores Timothy loathed the most—it reminded him that it was too cold to run or walk outside, the air triggering his asthma. Plus, you made progress only to repeat the process in a week or two or even a day or two.

By the time he tied his winter boots, he heard the familiar scrape of a shovel. He slipped on his sunglasses, tucked his stocking cap over his ears, and headed outside where even though it wasn't sunny, the fresh layer of snow brightened everything.

Joe halted his shovel, waved at him. "'bout time you got out here, Doctor."

Long ago Timothy had stopped asking Joe not to call him that. One time he had protested, Joe had replied, "You worked a lot of years to get that title. It's the right thing to call you. Even if you can't call in my prescriptions."

"How much did we get?" Timothy asked.

"Six inches, by my reckoning. Just glad there wasn't much wind."

"True, True," Timothy said, and they started on Joe's driveway.

Later when they'd cleared half of it, Joe rested his forearm on the shovel's handle. "How's that fiancé of yours?"

"She's doing well." He'd brought Lauren to meet Joe after the Christmas blizzard two months earlier when she'd been stranded here and they'd become engaged.

"She doesn't have to deal with *this* down there, right? Texas?"

Timothy nodded. "She grew up in Kansas

City, so she's experienced blizzards."

"Well then she knows what she's getting into," Joe said. "Nice young woman, though."

"Yes, she is."

Joe resumed shoveling. Conversation was over for now.

As he worked, Timothy couldn't dislodge what had nagged him in the two months since they'd become engaged. The more he thought about it, the more fears needled him. His longest relationship had been Courtney, freshman year of college—they'd even become engaged. After eight months, he broke it off. From then, brief girlfriends—two, maybe three, months before he'd bail. Two in his MFA program, and the same result. Before Lauren, one girl in his PhD program. Three failed attempts since he'd lived in Hamilton. A single mom from the only singles' dance he'd ever attended. A sociology professor at the university—a humiliating experience. The torment of Betsy whom he'd met at a conference. He tossed a big scoop of snow into the yard separating his driveway from Joe's.

"You okay, there, Doctor?" Joe startled him.

"How did you know Bernice was the one for you?" he said, surprised by his own directness, but he felt a release in asking it.

Joe squinted at him in the sunshine. "What the hell kind of question is that when we have all this work? Cold feet, Doctor?"

"Well..." Timothy started.

Joe harrumphed. "Tell you what, when we're done with this, you can ask away over coffee. Linda dropped off some bars, too."

"Deal," Timothy said, and he dug into the snow with a new ferocity and motivation.

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"I'm going to the hospital," Timothy said, eager to hear Lauren's voice. "An ambulance just came

for Joe." He pressed his phone to his ear, slowed at the stop sign at Fourth and Washington.

"Oh, no! What's wrong?"

"Don't know yet." Timothy flicked on his left blinker and turned down the street snowplows had cleared hours earlier. "But he was awake and alert. We shoveled this morning and talked afterward. He seemed fine." He recalled the post-shoveling conversation in Joe's kitchen.

"I hope he's okay."

"Me, too." Pressure across his chest again.

"Your Saturday night less eventful than mine?"

"Writing a midterm for my Intro to Lit class. Drinking a glass of cabernet."

"That sounds nice—I mean the glass of wine." He imagined sitting across from her at her small kitchen table. No, better to imagine her across from him at his kitchen table, where she'd be in a few short months. No, their kitchen table. "Shit!" He'd driven through a four-way stop on 1st and Washington.

"What's wrong?"

"I ran a four-way stop." He slowed, checked his rearview mirror, peered out the side windows. No other headlights.

"You'd better focus on driving," Lauren said.

"I wish I were there."

"Me, too. Love you," he said, with little hesitation.

"Love you, too."

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"I know you think it's cold in here." At the counter, Joe poured translucent coffee into two white mugs.

The linoleum was ice even through Timothy's wool socks. He sat in the chair closest to the kitchen wall, beneath the Regulator clock.

Joe shuffled to the table, set down the mugs.

"Help yourself." Joe lifted the lid from a lime green Tupperware container.

Timothy grabbed a *Special K* bar.

Joe took one, coughed once. "So how did I know Bernice was the one for me?" He cocked his head. "Second thoughts, Doctor?"

"It's just such a leap." Timothy studied the bar.

"Course it is. She was the nicest girl, had this smile that was different. I called it a *smirl*—part smile, part smirk. Only clever way I've ever used language."

Joe sipped his coffee and continued.

"I took her to junior and senior prom, got married after graduation. 53 years. I still miss her." He looked out the window.

Timothy rode out the silence before speaking.

"Did you ever doubt your decision?"

"No, but if you're getting at what I think, I noticed other beautiful women. A guy would be lying to himself to say that *his* wife was the *only* beautiful woman."

"That's not it exactly," Timothy said. "It's just—"

"Not sure you're up for the commitment? Afraid it might be a mistake?"

Timothy set the bar on the white napkin. "I don't have a great track record with women."

"Don't know the particulars of your past, and don't care to know." He flicked the air as though shooing a fly. "No offense. I just decided Bernice was the woman I wanted beside me. And I just kept choosing her."

Timothy massaged his temples. "I'm asking Lauren to live here, where I'm already established. Am I limiting her career opportunities? That's what I keep coming back to. She says she'll become a freelance editor, but what if it doesn't work out? What's she going to do here in Hamilton?"

Joe swirled the coffee in his mug. "What do you think it says that she drove all those hours through

a damn blizzard to see you, *and* that she accepted your proposal?"

"I've thought about that." He sighed. "The more I look at it from different angles—"

"Good Lord, Doctor!" Joe slapped his hand on the table as though trying to kill a mosquito. "Pardon my language. *Look at her actions!* I sure hope you don't teach your students to analyze every single thing to death so they start thinking *up* might be *down* and *down* might be *up*."

Timothy knew Joe was right—thinking had its place, but, at a certain point you had to decide. His dad would say the same thing.

"Seems there's a great young woman who wants to be with you," Joe said. "You don't want to throw that away. A guy doesn't get that opportunity every day."

"You're right," Timothy said, and even in that statement, he felt his level of unease drop a few degrees, as though a dial had turned more towards *certainty* than *uncertainty*.

"Course I am. About this, anyway."

And then they ate their bars and drank their coffee, Timothy still not used to the watered-down brew this retired farmer drank how many times a day.

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The only person in the ER waiting room was the receptionist seated at the desk, on the front of which hung a calendar with a Terry Redlin painting of a snow-covered field and two deer beside a stand of trees. Timothy approached her, a young woman with glasses and an efficient bun of red hair.

"Do you have any update on the older gentleman who was just brought in?"

She looked up from her magazine. "I'll check," she said, her voice flat. "What relation are you?"

"No relation. He's my next-door neighbor."

"There might not be any information yet," she picked up the phone, smiled at him, unexpectedly. "Why don't you have a seat?"

Sitting on a hard plastic chair, he scanned the magazines on a table—*Field and Stream*, *People*, *Self*, *Newsweek*. The *Sports Illustrated* cover story was the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Nothing appealing. He wished he'd brought a book—it was unsettling here. He kept returning to that hospital visit when later his Grandpa Arch had died. Timothy had been 16. There was that tightness across his chest again, and he tried to ignore it.

The outside doors whooshed open and in walked Linda and Daryl. Linda's face was a blotchy red.

"Good to see you, Tim," Daryl said, extending his cool hand as Timothy rose to greet them.

"I already asked about Joe. Nothing yet."

Linda pulled a tissue from her coat pocket, dabbed her nose. "I've told Dad he needs to get a snowblower. He's too old to be doing that shoveling."

"He's an old farmer, Hon," Daryl said, shifting his weight in his boots. "He's not going to change unless he absolutely has to."

"Maybe this'll get him to change."

"I wouldn't count on it," Daryl said.

"I'm Joe's daughter," Linda said as the three of them approached the desk.

The receptionist smiled. "He's been stabilized, and the doctor is seeing him now. The doctor will be out soon."

Timothy, Linda, and Daryl shuffled to the plastic chairs. Timothy recounted how he and Joe had shoveled that morning, that Joe had seemed fine. Alert and spry as ever.

"We're glad you're his neighbor," Linda said.

"It gives us peace of mind."

Daryl nodded.

There was then the typical small talk of weather, the spring forecast outlook, and eventually the doctor appeared. He had short gray hair, glasses, probably mid-50s, Timothy thought. Linda introduced them, and they all shook hands with the doctor.

"A mild heart attack, which is incredible for someone his age." The doctor shook his head once. "But there is some blockage that concerns us."

"Is he going to be okay?" Linda said.

The doctor pursed his lips. "We need to do an angioplasty ASAP and put in a stent."

Linda sighed, put her hand on her chest.

"It's a normal procedure for someone his age and who's otherwise in good health."

"What about recovery? Will he have to move out of his house, move into a nursing home?" Linda's words wobbled.

Daryl put his hand on her shoulder.

"It's really too early to say." The doctor's face was neutral. "He *will* need to stay at least a couple of nights in the hospital. I *do* want you folks to see him for a minute before we prep him," he said, his facing brightening. "He's very tired, understandably."

They followed the doctor through the double doors, and when an antiseptic smell threatened to overwhelm Timothy, he willed himself forward — it would be good to see Joe.

Inside the room, the TV was on a black-and-white western, the volume not as loud as at Joe's house. Joe had oxygen running above his lip, an IV in his arm. The taupe blanket was pulled up to his armpits, but his eyes lit up.

Linda hugged him, "Oh, Dad," was all she said, a catch in her voice.

"Okay, okay," Joe said, his voice subdued.

"I'll leave you folks to visit for a few minutes."

The doctor stepped out, closed the door behind him.

"Good to see you, Joe," Daryl said, standing on the opposite side of the bed.

"Wonder how much that ambulance ride'll cost," Joe muttered.

"Dad, stop," Linda said, sliding a chair right next to the bed. She set her purse in her lap, began rubbing Joe's arm that didn't have the IV inserted.

Timothy stood at the foot of the bed, the TV behind and above him. "I locked up the house, turned off the lights, except the one over the kitchen sink."

"Did you turn down the furnace?"

Daryl chuckled. "So the pipes freeze?"

"You already have it set at what, 55?" Linda asked.

"Sixty-eight during the day. Sixty-two at night."

"Good Lord," Daryl said.

"I can turn it down when I get back home," Timothy said.

"Thank you, Doctor."

"How are you feeling, Dad?" Linda pulled up one of the plastic chairs and sat beside Joe.

"Beat but alive."

Linda continued rubbing Joe's arm. "Daryl and I are going to get you a snowblower. You can't be shoveling."

"I'm not going to use any damn snowblower," Joe said, and closed his eyes. "You can save your money."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I don't want to get you riled up."

Timothy wondered if Joe would even be able to use a snowblower — it's not as though it didn't require exertion.

There was a knock at the door and in stepped a nurse. "I'm sorry, but we need to prepare the

patient for surgery.”

“I’ll take care of the thermostat for you, Joe,” Timothy said.

Joe opened his eyes, and he grinned weakly. “Thanks, Doctor.”

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Timothy called Lauren when he returned at 9 o’clock. Standing at the kitchen sink, balancing the cordless phone on his shoulder, he pulled the glass pan out of the now tepid water and rinsed it off.

“I hope it all turns out okay. He seems like such a sweet old man,” Lauren said after he filled her in.

“He is,” he said, recalling his conversation with Joe from earlier, and the shift inside, the movement toward less doubt. “I’m worried about him, though.” He set the pan in the dish strainer.

“Once I’m there, we can both help him out. Both of us can help him. We can shovel his driveway and sidewalks.”

“Next winter, yes.” He imagined Lauren bundled up, scarf, stocking cap, winter boots, gloves, wielding a shovel beside him, the scrape of plastic against concrete. He saw himself occasionally tossing snow in her direction, the kind of snow that is fine and disperses like sand, and of course she would do the same to him. And if Joe were out there, he’d likely roll his eyes. Grunt. Shake his head. Chuckle.

“I meant *this* winter,” she said. “Spring Break is only one week away. I was hoping to visit.”

Timothy recalled how Joe had stated what was so obvious – that Lauren clearly wanted to be with him, that he would be a fool not to recognize it, that he needed to assert himself with this commitment.

“Timothy?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you think? Would it be okay if I visit? I know our spring breaks don’t line up, but I could work on wedding preparations and my coursework while you’re teaching and doing office hours.”

A week with her. “Of course I want you here,” he said. “I wish you were right now.”

They talked, and talked, and they didn’t hang up until almost midnight.

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It was barely 9 o’clock, but the morning was piercingly bright – the snow reflecting the plentiful sunshine. With snow creaking beneath his loafers in the hospital parking lot, Timothy carried his copy of *Peace Like a River*. He was glad he’d spent yesterday afternoon planning tomorrow’s classes. He had no plans today other than to visit Joe. Linda had already called him early that morning: the surgery had gone well; no complications.

Inside the warm main lobby, he didn’t feel the distress that had threatened him the day before – no bar pinned across his chest. Linda and Daryl stood in the little hospital store offset from the main lobby.

“We’ve just come from Dad’s room,” Linda said, holding a purple sudoku book.

“He looks worn out,” Daryl said, shaking Timothy’s hand, “but he’ll be glad to see you.”

“We still want to get Dad a snowblower,” Linda said, “but I didn’t want to bring it up to him again.”

“I’m not sure he’d accept it,” Timothy said.

“That’s what I told her,” Daryl said. “You know how stubborn he can be.”

“I’m going to have Daryl look for one.” She patted his shoulder. “We’ll surprise him.”

"We know how Joe likes *surprises*." Daryl smirked.

"I'm getting this for him." Linda patted the book with her palm. "You know how he likes these. But I'm keeping you. You better see him before he nods off."

Timothy agreed and headed to the receptionist's desk.

"What news, Doctor?" Joe said, when Timothy entered the room. Joe still had the oxygen and the IV. Behind his glasses, his eyes appeared heavy. He seemed some other version, not the *real* Joe.

"I was hoping you had some news for *me*."

"I need to stay a couple more days." He lifted his arm with the IV in it. "*Recovery*," he said, as though the syllables tasted bitter.

Timothy didn't know what to say.

"The other doctor says I have to go on some other medication, adjust my diet. No more shoveling," he said, the last three words a whisper. There was the slightest glint in his eyes.

Timothy thought about the snowblower, but knew better than to mention it. "Lauren's going to be visiting next week – she has spring break."

"You don't say? That a boy, Doctor." Joe grinned weakly. "Hope she doesn't bring another blizzard."

"Haha," Timothy said.

"Be sure and bring her by the house. Can't wait to be back there – they keep this place so damn hot. No wonder they charge so much."

"I will," he said, imagining the three of them around Joe's kitchen table. "If we *do* get another blizzard – I'll take care of your driveway, your sidewalk."

"Appreciate it, Doctor. I bet Linda and Daryl are going to buy me that snowblower she was talking about last night. Use that instead of killing your back." His sharp eyes shone for a second. "Sorry, Doctor. I'm real sleepy. Afraid I might nod

off on you."

Timothy couldn't help but laugh at Joe's craftiness. "Do you want me to bring anything from your house?"

Joe scratched his chin. "Sneak me one of those Special K bars. I could sure go for one."

"I can do that." Timothy said, smiling. "It's the least I could do."