

Meeting Katharine

1

by Robert Craig

Cover illustration: Silence, by Barbara A. Lussier

© Robert Craig 2018

All rights reserved. This work may not be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the publisher (Arts and Academic Publishing, Pomfret, CT 06258, USA), except for brief excerpts in connection with reviews or scholarly analysis. Use in connection with any form of information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed is forbidden.

First published 2018
ISBN 978-0-9747973-4-2

Pennies. On my desk, sagging my pockets, on tables, floors, the driveway, the hall, my drawers, on rugs- for months, they've been there, everywhere, without letup. Every time it rains it rains. I have not chosen this, but just the same, it is coming. I know it is, like nausea; the knowledge of its coming, fearing its arrival, anticipating the relief; the restoration of warp and woof; fabric of a new sort, of an older sort, but now stretched to tearing.

What is there to be done? It interferes with everything- my every thought. How am I to function? When would it be done? I find little sleep, and even then sleep is punctuated with dreams of it. What it would be like; how it would look? Could it last? Was it forever?

And now there are red skies. Red skies at morn, this morn, not to mourn- not any more, for the foreseeable future, maybe never; the entire sky, from horizon to zenith- flaming scarlet. Sometimes the sky glows rose at the horizon, but now it is bleeding, hemorrhaging- a difficult birth. My truck glows red from it. It glints from pennies on my floor. I'm driving into red. Red skies, red skies, nothing but red skies.

Does it take this much- a river of it, an ocean? Darkness in daytime or no daytime at all. It gives my stomach a knot. Black magic, white magic, no magic, providence, divine intervention, just nature, just chance- what?

Work. The parking lot. Pulling in, stopping the engine. I can do this; fake my way through it. It's Friday. Good Friday? I must get hold of

myself; walk up the steps without stumbling; no one must know. Oh, dear; oh, god; oh, Pop. Are you aware of this? Do you know what's coming? Are you behind it, part of it, are you nothingness, is she?

Steps, the hallway, my door- open it, close it, sit down, hold my head, brace myself- fifteen minutes to curtain call. Fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten....

Rrrriinnngggg!!!

"Good morning Dr. Maxwell!"

"Good morning Goody. Ready for today?"

"Dr. Maxwell- it's not even 7:30. My bagel's cold, my coffee's bitter. Do I look ready?"

"You should have gone to Dunkin. Boston Crème, chocolate sprinkles- the breakfast of champions."

"Did you stop for us?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's vacation."

"After vacation, then."

Rrrriinnngggg!!!

Loudspeaker: "Please stand for the pledge of allegiance. I pledge allegiance, to the flag...." Loudspeaker again: "Please remain standing for a moment of silence..."

"How about an hour of silence."

"Behave."

Silence. Seconds of it; at least five.

"So what'd you guys think of that sky this morning. Creepy? Oooooohhhhhhhhh."

"Dr. Maxwell."

"What?"

"Nobody's awake yet."

"Did you see it Goodman?"

"Dr. Maxwell, I can't lift my eyes up that high this early."

"You guys are no fun first period."

"And you are?"

"Its my other middle name. Name one thing more fun than first period physiology. Come on, corpses- one thing."

"Sleep."

"All right, all right- two things..."

"Does Chicken Little get up this early?"

"Chicken Little needs her beauty rest, especially at her age."

"How old is she?"

"A hundred and six in doggie years."

"Well, I need my beauty rest too."

"Hester, it's not working."

"Do you want to live to winter vacation, Goodman?"

"Guys, be nice or death."

A chorus: "We choose death. Bring it on."

"How about something worse than death, like homework?"

Chorus again: "Homework over vacation? Come on, Dr. Maxwell."

"Okay, okay, let's get down to business then. I have an interesting topic for today."

"Only if you tell us how old you really are."

"Back to that? What does that have to do with the price of eggs?"

"Everything. Tell us. I think you're fifty. Am I close?"

"Nope. Twenty-two. I told you."

"Dr. Maxwell, you're such a liar."

"Would I lie about a thing like that?"

“Yes. How old’s your son, then?”

“He’s twenty-seven.”

“How can that be?”

“It’s a miracle.”

“You’re a miracle, Dr. Maxwell.”

“Be nice. Slow torture is another option open to me.”

“You’re so funny, Dr. Maxwell. So what’s your interesting topic?

Poodle anatomy?”

“Now, now. The poodle happiness zone will be discussed another day.

For right now I have something else. Remember we were talking about the temporal lobes of the brain? Well, here’s a think-about to carry with you over vacation. Let me ask you this: what is the seat of your you-ness?

What do you think? Anybody.... Be brave; Faith, tell me what you think.”

“The brain?”

“Ah, the brain- a reasonable response. Let’s examine it. What about the brain makes it you?”

“It’s where you think.”

“Except in Goodman’s case. He sits where he thinks.”

“How’d you like to sit where you think, Hester?”

“Do I detect a budding romance, or is this simply why you’re considered my honors class- because you make the smartest wisecracks? Okay, what is thought? What permits you to have thought?”

“Like nerve connections, chemistry?”

“Hmmm. Like chemistry. Thought is a biochemical process, isn’t it? So is that what makes you you? Molecules? If you could excise the brain from the body and keep both alive, which would be you?”

“It has to be the body. Look, Hester has no brains, and we still call her Hester.”

“God, you guys. Am I going to have to spank you?”

“Can’t do that, Dr. Maxwell.”

“Ah, just a pleasant thought. But what do you really think?”

“I think it would be your brain. You wouldn’t have thoughts without it.”

“So your thoughts are what make you you? Anything else? Let me put it this way- thought appears necessary for your you-ness. Is it sufficient? And is thought necessarily confined to the brain?”

“This sounds like philosophy and not science.”

“Plato would have argued that science is simply an aspect of philosophy. So Why can’t I get you to be this quiet when we’re taking notes? Answer now or homework torture will descend upon you Silence still? These are hard questions, aren’t they? People have been asking them for a long time.

“So, let’s get to the crux of my story. This will not be quite what you expect. Serious time, now. Let me begin: when my father was very old, I spent his last day with him. He laid in bed, drifting in and out of consciousness, but when he was awake he was still lucid. At one point he wanted to get up, so I helped him to his feet and he stood for the last time. Hours from death and there he was, standing on his own feet. Then he laid down again and slept restlessly, on-and-off. He told me when he woke that when sleeping he was surrounded by wounded soldiers. He had served in Europe during World War II, and most everyone he knew had been killed in action. He himself had been wounded again and again- and even to that day had Nazi shrapnel next to his heart- so for whatever reason that’s where his mind went. As night came he drifted off more steadily, so I moved to just outside his doorway where I could lay on a couch. I drifted off for a while too, although I couldn’t really sleep. Then along about two or three in the

morning as I lay staring toward his bedroom, I heard a sound- a sound I knew well; as well as my own name. It was a hummingbird. It flew with those buzzing, halting wings of hummingbirds, from the direction of his bed, through the open door, to perhaps three feet from my head, and it then continued on and up to the kitchen where it disappeared at the wall. I looked right at it, but could see nothing.”

“A hummingbird inside at night? Could it have been an insect?”

“No. I have this facility for sounds. My science acquaintances will tell you that. I’ve been studying natural sounds for twice as long as you’ve been alive and then some. I’ve tested myself a million times; even at great distances I don’t make mistakes. Ever. I heard a hummingbird or, more precisely, something that sounded exactly as a hummingbird sounds; not moth fluttering, not anything else. I even got up and checked the kitchen, although I didn’t need to. I knew my father had left- and indeed he had.

“So, back to my question: what makes you you? The Greeks separated the concepts of body and spirit. Which one was Pop? The physical presence that was left- the body *and* brain that had ceased functioning- or the essence that appeared to depart? What do you think?”

“You think he turned into a hummingbird?”

“Oh, probably not that simple, although your predecessors here, the Indians, thought that such things might be true. Pop, his name was James, by the way, was a good man. The best I ever knew. I told him that once. It took all my courage, but I did. So if we suppose there are souls, then we could hypothesize I observed, or heard, a soul rise to heaven that night. Perhaps this is even why I have this odd ability with sounds- so that I could know this. ‘Fly my heart on golden wings’ is a phrase that comes down to us. Or, alternatively, I might have heard the wings of goddesses, who in Norse legend swoop to Earth to carry off the fallen heroes. Is that who those

wounded soldiers were? And, of course, there is the magic thinking option- the tendency of the brain to link the unrelated or willfully misinterpret events. It has to do with the brain’s capacity for making snap judgments. It’s so typical for people to do, in fact, that there is some thought it may be an evolutionary adaptation- a coping mechanism. Alternate hypotheses- a hallmark of the scientific method. But how can we know what the truth is? It is not a repeatable observation, not a replicable experiment.

“In any event, let me expand my original question: are body and spirit one and the same? What is it that we are- a fleeting biochemical illusion; solely the chance event of natural selection? Nothing more? In our brains, by the way, the temporal lobes act as our center of spirituality. If you artificially stimulate them, they produce spiritual feelings. Have we been purposefully endowed with a spiritual sense so that we can know that there is something more, or does this sense exist simply as a perceptual artifact- a byproduct of other essential activities of the temporal lobes?”

“Did you make that story up, Dr. Maxwell?”

“Did I seem to?”

“So what do you think, then?”

“I told you.”

“It’s really true?”

“This time, yes, but time’s just about up. Funny thing about time. So that’s what I want you all to contemplate over vacation. Meditate... And just think guys, during this period, you’ve all aged an hour, Chicken Little has aged six hours, but a light beam, not at all.”

“How about you, Dr. Maxwell?”

“Well, of course, in my case I’ve gotten an hour younger.”

“That explains a lot, Dr. Maxwell. Going anywhere over vacation?”

“Oh, I’ll be busy. Off all over the place.”

“Good. Take pictures. Ice cream party and slide show when we get back, okay? See you after vacation.”

“We’ll see. Better get yourselves together. Have fun; be safe. See you then.”

Rrrrrriinnngggg!

“...this is your NPR station. It’s five o’clock.” Click.

Uh. Ohhhhh. I’m too old for this. Five days in a row already. Ah. Leg’s asleep. Sit at the edge of the bed for a minute. Pins, needles, swords; hobbling like an old man in the dark. Dull, thudding ache spreading down my thigh, into the calf, across the shin, dissipating in my ankle. Foot barely works. More pins. Oww. What’s that? A penny. Shit.

Here we go. Contact lenses. In. Mouth tastes like a dungeon. Toothpaste. Brushing. Rinsing. That’s enough. Feeling my way down the hall. Where are they? Ah. Thermal socks. Maybe another pair inside these too. Long underwear. Shit, it’s so hard to get these on. Stretch, pull, fifty million buttons, ahhh. Thermal shirt. Flannel shirt. Tuck it all into lined pants. All right. Sweatshirt on top. Now ski pants, pulling them up over the bottom of the sweatshirt, and slipping the straps over my shoulders. God, I can hardly move my arms in all this. Let’s do it. Backpack, machete, GPS, binocs, note case. What am I forgetting? Watch. That would be a drag. Okay, down the stairs, not breaking my neck.

“Good morning Miss Chickens. Want chicken tinkle time? Come on you little noodle. Come on...” Squeaking open the kitchen door. “Hurry up, it’s cold out. But you could get off the porch. Chico! Okay for you, you bad chicken. Nice. You are the worst chicken ever. In history. Come on. In. Want some chick feed? How about a little of this to tide you over?”

Okay? See you later. Go back to sleep.” Orange juice. Eye vitamins.
Glug, glug. Yuck. Time’s not standing still. I must do this.

Boots, coat; barely fits over all these clothes; pennies falling out of the pockets. Hope this is enough. It’s going to be brutal.

Open the door. Oh, that air; it could make your face fall off. Why do I do this? Hoarfrost on everything; wait till the sun hits it. The snow is too cold to crunch: slippery, greasy, powdery. I know what this will mean. To the truck... Great. The door’s frozen. Where is that machete when I need it? Let’s try this; slide the blade along here. Creeeek! What’s this on the seat? Goddamn pennies. Fling them on the floor. Sorry Big Guy; just kidding. Settle in. All right, crank, crank. Come on, you can do it. Ahhh. Thank, you, God. Give it a minute to warm up. Why does the temperature always fall through the floor the minute winter vacation starts? It was beautiful last week. These gods, what a sense of humor. Snapping, popping, crackling out the driveway. All right, here we go.

The highway before dawn: silent, black, brooding, sleeping. Peaceful. I like driving before dawn. I can never go very fast, and I need to. I’ve got an hour and a half before me. Dunkin would be good. I must resist. Time is of the essence.

Mile, after mile, after mile, after mile; empty ones; no traffic on the road; under an inky, star spangled sky. No ice this morning. I hate those mornings when every black spot in the headlights is suspicious. Nerve-wracking. Hope the deer stay put.

The feeling behind my ears- icy fingers, stupefying. Back again. I don’t like it. It’s been growing for days. I can’t pretend it’s not there anymore. It turns my stomach. Maybe it is my stomach. Don’t like it. I shouldn’t take those vitamins on an empty stomach. I feel like retching.

How about some radio? I like the quiet. Radio anyway; just for a minute; just the weather.

“Traffic and weather in just a moment, but first...”

Great. Click. I don’t need to re-grow my hair; well, I do, but... don’t need an ambulance chaser, no hospitals, no diet supplements, no whole chickens, no oriental carpets, no loans, no cars, no adjustable mortgages. Sixty-six percent of the time. How do they squeeze in news, if you can call it news, between all that? I could try public radio- and learn about the plight of activists for homeless, handicapped, undocumented, traumatized immigrants in need of a new program to promote victim awareness. How about weather awareness? Try again.

“... with news time coming up to 5:57. Clear and cold across the tri-state area; frigid this morning, with temperatures in the city now coming in at six degrees. Areas north and west of the city could see temperatures well below zero, particularly in the protected valleys. Temperatures will rise slowly through the morning hours, barely reaching twenty by mid-day and perhaps only ten in outlying areas. This last day of the year will also be the coldest. Look for more of the same tomorrow, with temperatures plummeting into the single...” Click.

Great. I love blue fingertips; burning ears, dripping eyes, dripping nose, ice tears sticking to my cheeks, nose drips freezing to my upper lip in my least favorite flavor. Like I’m not sick to my stomach enough already. Hope I brought tissues. I pray. Binoculars will be useless this morning; fog right over and freeze the first time I look through them. I love taking off my mittens in this, too. Here we go.

Mile, after mile, after mile.

Ah. Here it is. Exit thirty-five. Where’s this road? Look at this dump. Just what the world needs: another quarry; another gaping wound. Ledge

Road; here it is. Okay, big left. Sunset Rock. Crescent Lake. Right along here somewhere... here it is, and none too soon. The ink is lightening; fading quick. Got to hustle. Look at it now. No more red. Crystalline blue-white diamond; transparent, clear, innocent, pure, perfect.

Time to pull over. Park. Out we go. God, is it cold. Ears are ringing already; they're going to be screaming in an hour. This climb is going to be something. Wonder if I can do it? Got to. Today's the day. No other day to do this. Backpack feels like it's made out of plastic. Crinkle, wrinkle, trudge, trudge. The time has come, the walrus said. Oh, boy. The first station shouldn't be too bad, anyway. Come on, GPS, wake up! Doesn't matter. I remember where the first station is anyway. Right through the low spot and past the sapling woods to where the trees are mature. One thousand five hundred sampling stations, and I remember this one. Why? God, it's slippery.

Okay. Here it is. Mark time: 6:58. Just right; barely light enough to see. December 31, Sunday. Take off my mitten. Ohhh, that feels good. I love pain. Press the stopwatch. Time: begin. Put that mitten on. Eight fun-filled minutes of this. Let's see. What do we have? Silence. Give it a minute... Ah, here we go. Blue Jay, eighty meters, more or less. Silence again... Chickadee. One? No, two. Three. Forty meters, forty-five, another forty-five. Good. Cardinal. Where is he? Oh, okay. I'll say seventy meters. My fingers are so numb my writing's hardly readable. I'll fix it later.... Cripes. I dropped my note case. It's covered in snow. Don't have to worry about getting anything wet, I suppose. Just brush it off; blow on it a little. Good as new. Silence. One minute, two minutes. Ah, here we go. Nope, just the same ones. Anything else? Concentrate, concentrate. Crow. Boy is he far away. Guess: six hundred thirty meters. Anything more? Seven minutes fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, time's up.

Now I'm really cold. Car warmth has worn off. The cold's seeping in and the trail gets steep. This is going to be like walking on butter crème icing. The struggling will warm me. Fourteen stations to go. How far, GPS? Two hundred twelve meters. This could take a while. Shit. There's no footing; I'm sliding back already; six inches of grease on everything. Snow squeaks under my boots. Kind of pleasant. The joys of sub-zero. When it gets to ten degrees, if it gets there, the squeaking will go away. But for now... Slogging, holding onto branches, pulling myself up the smallest incline. But, I'm generating heat, breathing heavy, making my chest burn.

Jeez. Ten minutes to walk two hundred yards. It should be three minutes. It's going to be a long morning. 7:16; sun's up in a few minutes. I'll see it hit the treetops, turning them shiny against the brooding recesses of the understory, glittering from their hoarfrost; jingling, jewel-laden branches waving in the first breaths of morning.

So, who cares what birds live in the woods in winter? Nobody. Nobody cares. Why would anyone? No tracks on this trail. Eight minutes, slogging, eight minutes, slogging, eight minutes, slogging. My neck's getting worse. Icy, sickening, straining to lift it under the weight of clothes and back pack can't be helping.

Station five. One third of the way there; at the summit, along the spine that winds above the white lake below. God, look at this. Frigging Plainville, Connecticut. Look at it- powdery, arching, bouldery slopes slipping upward, past straining trunks, leaning, groaning, sparkling in ice needles; sinewy, serpentine knife-edge summit, flooded in light; photons dancing, extending outward in bell blue atmosphere to alabaster fog, hugging the ground, ice fog, hanging in the valleys, coating the lowlands. The ridges rise above bathing in the feeble December sun.

The scene is set; my stomach churns, my ribs rise tender through multiple layers with each inhalation. The sickly fingers extend down into my shoulders. I must focus. I hope I'm not too sick to walk back- a long walk for an ailing body.

Ah, what's that? Something different. Heavy flapping. Ah ha. Croaking- a raven. Wrong symbol, or is it? He's right over that ridge. Let's look at the map. How far? How about that; eight hundred forty meters. Even from here that voice is like nothing else. Hmm. He's all alone. There should be another somewhere. We'll see. Time to plod along.

Boy, things are sparse up here. It fits, I suppose, everybody's down at the coast for the winter. Well, we'll see. Still a way to go, along this ridge, past the lake, descending into the valley below, ending up way over there by the next lake. I wonder if the ice is thick enough for fishing yet. No signs of anybody down there. If it stays like this it sure will be. The hoarfrost isn't fading at all yet. Probably by the time I finish; it usually doesn't last much past ten o'clock.

Okay, eight minutes. Silence. Nothing. It is dead. I wish it would liven up so I weren't focusing on the weight spreading down my shoulders. I feel like my neck is shoving a knife into my brain. Temporal lobes feel like they're going to explode out sideways, leaving the top of my head to flop down onto my teeth. I'm too sick to be doing this. What is wrong with me? It's not flu; I'm not run down. It can't really be that; fantasies can't be this organic. Oh, boy; it's just growing and growing. It would not be good to pass out here. I could freeze to death. Nobody'd find me till next spring. What a sight. Wrens using my hair to make nests; worms coming out my eyeballs... Stop it! What am I doing this to myself for? Who will take care of Chicken Little? Come on, mind. Stop this.

Eight minutes. Two stations with zero birds? Not the first time, I suppose. But cold mornings are usually active. You have to eat a lot of food to keep from freezing. Frozen bugs. How appetizing can they be? There's just nothing here. Here we go- kinglet. Right here. Where is he? Oh, I see him. Five meters. Here they come. Chickadees- one, two, four, five; titmouse- first one all morning. One, two; Downy Woodpecker, nuthatch- two. Now it's jumping. And there they go. Well, not quite yet. Here's another wave- chickadee, another titmouse, kinglet, kinglet. Ah, creeper. Isn't it? Yes. Call's too long to be a kinglet. Zeeeeeeet. There he is- I see him. Fifty meters.

Think I'll measure this guy. Got to keep my eyes sharp. Okay, where is that tape measure? Such a pain in the ass taking off the backpack with all these clothes on. Turning makes my ribs ache more. I wish I could throw up or something. Get it out of me. All right. Attach it here. Ten meters, mark; ten meters, mark; ten more, ten more. What have we got? Forty-six meters. Good. How big are these trees here, anyway? Let me check while I've got this out. Twelve inches. This one? Fourteen. Another fourteen. That's about it. What I guessed. Let's see, that makes them thirty to thirty-five centimeters. Okay; continue. Fingers are thawing out, anyway.

Eight minutes. Slogging, sliding, plodding. Eight minutes. Drifting back to silence. That flock sucked the woods dry. Eight minutes. Here's more. Another jay. How did the Indians ever survive here? All these nuclear powered clothes and I'm still not having fun.

Oh, look at that- owl, like a ghost; right through the trees. Not even a sound. What is he? Let's see- yeah, he's pretty red- Great-horned. God, is he big. Owl, what do you know that I don't? Sitting on babies yet? Soon? Don't like me being here? Me either.

Okay, we're getting there. Two more. Eight minutes. Goldfinch. Where have you been all morning? Here's another, and another. Robin. How about that? I thought they might be here. Where is he? Can't see him. Over there somewhere. Seventy meters. Just flight calls.

I've got to be done with this before I split in half. Today's the day; it is coming. It can't be, but it is. I can feel the hairs on my legs standing out beneath all this; on my arms, on the back of my neck. It's rising up; I can't control it. Why should I even think this?

One more. Eight more minutes. Let me be done. Seven minutes, six, five, four, three...

Okay, got to make it back. There's a big log I passed a few stations back, right out on the ridge where I could sit with the sun in my face. Just let me make it to there. Then I'll rest.

Here we go: foot in front of foot. Just do it. The snow's squeaking is gone. It must have made it to ten. It's the magic number, when it becomes bearable, pleasant even on a day like this, were it not for the pulsing ache extending to my fingernails. Foot in front of foot.

I'm sweating. At ten? No, really sweating. Unbutton my coat. Keep walking. And walking... I see it. Just to there. Come on- keep going. One, two three. Come on. Just a few more. What did Pop keep saying? "Oh, god; oh, god; oh, god." Sit; close my eyes. All right, just do it. The air wreaks of open soda bottles, so just do it. Sweet, sugary, syrupy thick treatment for pounding ribs. Do I need to say it three times? Please do it.

I can't stop my eyes from rolling upward into the sockets of my swimming, reeling, swaying, circling, roller coasting head. Hold it up with my hands; just keep eyes closed and sit like this. See if it passes- passes out through wrenching ribs, out of ears crackling to thunderbolt crescendo, until it's all white, fluffy, angelic, virginal; not bad, just soft and feathery, on

dreamy fresh sheets, lemony delicious, comforting safe; all at once clean, crystalline pure, in honey silence. Not bad, not bad.

Nothingness, timelessness, spacelessness, infinite perfection.

Gasping in.

Forged steam rises billowing- a newly minted penny, bronzy, glistening in rivulets, falling, cascading, waterfall brooks, joining, parting, anastomizing braided streams, ending in showers from beaded ringlets. She stands erect, arms extended down, palms out, with head bowed and eyes closed in the torrent rushing from her lashes. Growing puddles form at her feet, spreading as ink spots out into the snow, trickling off exposed shoulders, in sheets across uncovered abdomen, ultimately pouring from bare legs to where all combine, curving and wheeling, toward the river rushing ankleward. Gravity.

She is fresh and dewy sweet- like leaning blooms of snowdrops on their first morning- heady with hyacinth scent wafting in soda sugar waves, but remaining as silent as early March before the cacophony of spring. She is serene, ageless, untroubled and free, standing in a state of flowing symmetry.

My own pains have subsided, being released into contented exhaustion, blissful that this had come, relieved from the shuddering uncertainty of what might be. I sit back on the log, eyes fixed on the rigid maiden. Vapor dissipates, the river ebbs. I rise to inspect her. Should I touch? Speak? I draw up to her face and whisper, "Can you hear me? Are you okay?" Nothing. Statuesque she remains, unmoving, unbreathing. My index finger reaches across and touches hers. She is steamy tepid, amidst the frigid landscape; in this bracing, heatless air she is warm. How long can this continue? Should I prod her, shake her? Is she here just for this? There must be...

She stirs, from everywhere, shivering and rising upward until convulsing bows her, leaning, gulping, with choking gasps. Her head rises, matted, dripping hair parting and falling back, with eyes languidly open, fixed on mine, drawing me into the bottomless lake, to Venus' looking glass. She moans, barely audibly, "ohhhhh," and goes limp, shoulders slumping, knees buckling.

I reach forward to steady her shaking form and speak: "There's ice on you. You can't stay like this. Understand?" She stares through me, not resisting. "Here, sit..." I balance her with one hand and pull a raincoat from my pack with the other, placing it across the log and then grasping her arms to seat her. "Can you sit up?" I ask. She begins to keel left. I hold her shoulder and wriggle from my coat with my free arm; I then push down the straps from my ski pants and let them fall below my waist. I sit next to her, holding her body up with mine, leaning forward to untie boots and pull off the overlying thermal socks. Ski pants slide down with a tug from my ungloved fingers.

I take her hands and brush ice crusts from them. "I'm going to dress you," I say. Her eyes are closed and she leans limply, fading from any semblance of consciousness. I grab her chin and lift her face to mine. Her eyes flutter open and closed. "Are you with me?" I ask. I struggle out of my thermal shirt and long underwear, and sit in t-shirt and underpants, leaning her forward to my chest to pull the underwear up her legs, and lifting her at the waist so I can slip arms in sleeves and bring the top across her back. I button buttons and pull the sweatshirt over her head. Her feet are losing their color. I hold and rub them with my bare fingers before pulling socks onto them. Now ski pants, now my coat, my mittens, my extra woolen cap, pulled low over her ears.

I stretch back on my thermal and flannel shirts, my lined pants and boots, lacing them more tightly to account for the lost socks. My rubber raincoat fits easily over these. Now my backpack. I turn to her: "Can you stand? We have two miles ahead of us. Are you warming up?" She leans forward and rests her forehead on my chest, with arms lifeless at her sides. I inspect her face, which seems pink enough. "All right, then. I'm praying the footing's getting better, because you're a long drink of water and I'm a little, skinny guy. We'll do it, though. It'll take a while, but we'll do it." I lift her in my arms and step silently into the tracks I left on my way up.

We trudge in two hundred-yard increments. I find fallen logs and snowy boulders to rest on, checking her hands and feet each time I stop, rubbing them to ensure they are warm. She manages to keep her arm about my neck as I walk, and elicits a weak groan each time I set her down. Still, she appears well enough, save for a few wheezing coughs. Her breathing is steady, the pulse in her neck rhythmic and strong. Any sense of cold has departed from me in straining labor, and I hope my warmth sufficiently transmits to her.

Three hours evaporate in the slippery climb down the mountain, but saplings come into view and I force myself to make the last segment with no more breaks. I cross a frozen creek and the forest canopy at last gives way.

There it is- the truck, as I left it. Other cars drive by witnessing me carrying the bundled woman to the passenger door. None stop. I stand her up against the open door and fold her into the seat, lifting her legs and pushing them in as well. I strap her in, jog to the driver's seat, switch on the ignition and turn to her, again lifting her chin. "Do you need anything?" I ask. She focuses on me and feebly reaches her mittened hand to my knee. I turn onto the road, and we begin our silent journey back.