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*The* Shortcut

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“When do we tell the children?”

He said it without feeling, without emotion, without giving weight to the words. He said it as though he was asking the latest stock price for Microsoft or Google. These were his first words after nearly twenty minutes in the car together. On our anniversary.

“After Christmas,” I said, matching his evenness, his coldness. “Not tonight or tomorrow.”

“Don’t you think they know by now? At least that something’s up?”

“Not David, he’s too young. Justin asks questions and just looks at me with those doe eyes, but he keeps it in. Becca is the one I worry about.”



“Kids are resilient. If they don’t know, they’ll understand. It’s for the best. For all of us.”

I hope he’s right.

“Now they’ll have two Christmases,” he said.

The windshield wipers beat their own rhythm as wet snow fell like rain. The landscape had retreated under the white covering, adding to a previous snowfall that hadn’t fully melted. The roadway, where you could see it, shone black with treachery from the moisture and falling temperatures. Cars inched along ahead of us on an incline as Jacob drove faster, crowding the car in front of us, looking for a chance to pass.

“Are you sure he’ll be at his office?” I said, looking out the window, bracing for impact. “In this weather? On Christmas Eve?”

“He’s still there. I called before we left. The papers are ready.”

“Does he have a family?” I said.

“What?” He said it with a healthy dose of condescension, and added a look I couldn’t stand. The look I could live the rest of my life without seeing.

“Does he have a family. A wife? Kids?”

“I have no idea.” More condescension. “I didn’t know



that was a prerequisite for you.”

“It’s not. I was just wondering. Working on Christmas Eve. No wonder he’s a divorce lawyer.”

So much for a congenial discussion. The silence was getting to him now and he flipped on a talk station. I was surprised he hadn’t done that earlier. The clock showed 3:18, and a delayed Rush Limbaugh was going into a break. A commercial about an adjustable bed. Local traffic and the forecast. Snarled intersections and cold weather reporting. Expect an even whiter Christmas. Several inches whiter. Maybe more. A cold front moving in and more precipitation at higher elevations.

“Can we listen to something else?” I said.

He suppressed a huff and pressed the FM button. This was his car so nothing on the FM dial was pre-set. He hit “scan.”

He frowned. “Punch it when you hear something you like.”

I passed on Gene Autry and Rudolph. The song brought an ache for the children. Especially David who still believed in Santa and reindeer. At the next station, José Feliciano was down to his last *Feliz Navidad*. On the left side of the dial, the local Christian station played yet

## A MARRIAGE CAROL

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another version of “Silent Night.” I couldn’t stay there because of the guilt of what we were doing.

Paul McCartney said the mood was right and the spirit was up and he was simply having a wonderful Christmastime. I wished I could say the same. The band Journey sang “Don’t Stop Believin’,” but I had stopped long ago, at least concerning our marriage. This was not how we planned it twenty years ago, though the snowstorm felt similar. Twenty Christmas Eves after I walked the aisle in a dress my mother and I had picked out, I was wearing jeans, an old T-shirt, and an overcoat, cruising in sneakers down the slippery road to a no-fault divorce.

Three children and the bird would live with me (a dog made too much mess and Jacob is allergic to cats), and he would move into an apartment after the New Year. Jacob promised to stay involved. There wasn’t another woman, as far as I knew, as far as he would let on. That wasn’t our problem. The problems were much deeper than infidelity.

I hit the button on singer Imogen Heap. Nothing at all about Christmas. Just quirky music and a synthesized voice that took my mind off the present, which is supposed to be a gift, I know. I’ve heard that.



“I’m done with this road,” Jacob said. “I’m taking the shortcut.”

“Over the hill? In this weather?” Two interrogatives to his one statement of fact.

“It’ll cut the travel in half. Nobody takes County Line anymore.”

“Don’t you think we should stay where they’ve plowed?”

He ignored my entreaty and turned left sharply. The rear of the car slid to the right. I grabbed the door handle instinctively as he corrected. He gave the Jacob head shake, and with shake you get eye roll and a sigh on the side.

“Trust me for once, will you?” he said.

I wanted to bring up a million little ways I’ve tried to trust him. A million little ways I’ve been let down. For twenty years I’ve searched for reasons to place my trust squarely on his shoulders. But how do you trust someone who has failed at the life you wanted? There were flashes of caring, a dozen roses to say “I’m sorry,” but the roses wilted and died. And then we started on this direction, him on the Interstate and me on the Frontage Road, separate but still traveling in a semblance of the



same direction. Two moons orbiting the same planet, rarely intersecting.

“I don’t want the kids going to our funeral,” I muttered.

He slammed on the brakes and I yelped as we went into another slide. Passive-aggressive driving is his specialty.

“Fine, I’ll turn around.”

Both hands to my head, tears welling, I hit the power button on the radio and heard myself say, “No, just keep going.”



County Line Road used to be one of my favorite drives. In summer when the hills were in full bloom and Becca was little, I would take the shortcut over the mountain to show her how other people lived—not jammed into houses so close you couldn’t breathe, but on long, flowering acres with roaming cows, horses enjoying fresh pasture, and people living less like hamsters on wheels and more close to the earth. As a child, I dreamed of living on a horse farm, riding them every day, cleaning stalls, feeding them oats and apples. But those dreams died a slow death, four hooves sticking out of the frozen snow, along



with the dream about a happy family, a good marriage, fulfillment, purpose, and a lifelong love.

Jacob flicked on the radio as we ascended, obviously disturbed by silence again. Santa sightings by the chief meteorologist gave way to a nine-car pileup and a shut-down on the Interstate.

“Told you it was smart to take County Line,” he said. I wouldn’t call it smug. Jacob wasn’t capable of smug. He was more a river of indifference. Perhaps that was it. He was the river, I was the highway. The passion was gone. Was it ever there? It’s hard to remember a fire when the embers are covered with snow. Yes, it existed at one point, but then so did dinosaurs.

We had been advised that it was better for us to decide on the distribution of our assets—the house, the cars, and the kids—before we went to court. The attorney would represent me, since he couldn’t represent us both, but we had amicably decided the allocation of everything down to the bird and our cell phones because said lawyer told us once the court got involved in deciding who gets the wagon-wheel coffee table and what visitation rights will be, things go south quickly and the children are the ones who suffer.



“Don’t give control of the future of your family to a judge,” the lawyer said in our last consult. “A judge doesn’t want to be the parent. He or she wants you to work out a plan that’s best for the kids. Do this now and you won’t have to go through that pain in a courtroom. You don’t want a judge choosing who gets how much time with the kids.”

We were doing what was best. We were being grown-ups, trying to absorb the pain of our choices and the changes that had made us such different people. We were sparing our offspring more pain, blocking access to the horror show that was our marriage. We were miles apart at the same dinner table, in a bitter relational chill, skating on precariously thin ice. And this was our effort to do the responsible thing; pull the family off before the surface cracked beneath us. We were also saving Jacob a ton of money, which is what he really cared about. If he could have purchased a divorce at Walmart, he would have. And he would have used a coupon.

“Remind you of anything?” Jacob said, his voice snapping me back to reality.

“The commercial?”

“No, the snow. Remind you of anything in the past?”





“Just like our honeymoon,” I said indifferently.

“You didn’t trust my driving then, either.”

“I wasn’t worried about your driving.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Heavy sigh. “Nothing. I was scared that night.”

“Scared? Of me?”

“Scared about what we had just done. That it wouldn’t last. That I wouldn’t be the wife you wanted.”

“Or that I wouldn’t be the man you wanted. Guess those fears turned into reality,” he said, sticking the fork in the overdone turkey.

“Yeah. It just took longer than I expected.” I spoke staring out the window at the early December darkness. Clouds blocked the sun and hung over us like specters, spilling wet tears from heaven’s portals. Higher we climbed, into the unincorporated, untarnished mountainside. Long stretches of pasture and woods stared back at me.

He shook his head and dipped the volume on the radio only a little. “If it makes any difference, I’m sorry it turned out this way.”

Out of the blue, it almost sounded sincere. I turned and found him looking at me. We were children when



we were married, which was part of the problem. “I do,” had turned into famous last words. His hair, once thick and buoyant, had grayed and receded in a forced march by the unrelenting taskmaster of time. He had refused to wear contacts, preferring the same style of glasses that had gone out of fashion and returned like my favorite pumps. Crow’s-feet around his eyes, and rosy, youthful cheeks that had turned puffy and wan. An objective viewer would say he was still handsome in some cherubic way. But I am not an objective viewer. Not that his slight weight gain made any difference to me. I always thought he was handsome.

“Your sister called before we left,” he said, switching the subject during my pregnant pause. “I told her you’d get back with her.”

My sister. The Christian mother. Loving, kind, a sweetness you could make a Blizzard with at Dairy Queen. And yet, unapproachable. As much as she said she did, she couldn’t understand our problems. And wouldn’t you know it, she had to confide in our parents and let them know our marriage was on shaky ground.

He stared at me, but I couldn’t look him in the eye. “I’ll call her after we sign the papers.”



His eyes were too much. Too blue. Nearly opaque. That was the first thing I remembered about him. Those eyes — almost penetrating the soul, it seemed.

When I looked up we were nearing a curve, and through the haze and blowing snow I noticed two headlights bearing down on us like our oncoming future. I couldn't scream, couldn't speak, just threw out a hand and pointed.

Instinct. His foot to the pedal. Steering wheel one way, then the other. Fishtailing. A truck's air horn. Jacob reached out for me.

Spinning.

Weightless.

Out of control.

A snow globe shaken and dropped.



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# Alone

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I awoke, cold and alone, the keys still swaying in the ignition. Acrid smoke filled the car—the air bags had deployed and were now limp soldiers. The windshield was smashed and the windows around me were frost covered. It felt like a vehicular igloo. I rubbed a hand over the ice on the window but had to scrape with a fingernail to see. There was nothing but piled snow outside, and the door wouldn't budge.

I climbed over to the driver's side and opened the door. The warning bell weakly alerted me that the key was still in the ignition.

“Jacob?”

Nothing but the sound of wet snow falling. The car



had come to rest in a snowbank, pushed into a clump of thin birch trees growing by the curve, but there was no sign of my husband. I looked for tracks on his side of the car but there were none.

I pulled my feet inside, closed the door, and felt my head. No significant bumps. I pulled the rearview mirror down to see if I had ruptured a major artery but the mirror came off in my hand. No blood, but the mirror showed lines and wrinkles I hadn't noticed. Thanks to Clairol, my hair had maintained a deep auburn. Brown eyes that looked tired and empty. No makeup, not even lipstick. If I had worn a head covering I could be on the cover of an Amish tragedy.

I turned the key and the engine sputtered, coughed, and sneezed, but didn't start. My breath became a fog when I exhaled, and my hands were quickly turning to ice. I opened the door again and yelled for my husband. Nothing but the echo of my voice and the *tick, tick* of ice and snow descending.

I dug into my purse and pulled out my cell phone. I could tell the kids we'd been in an accident and then I'd call 911. There was no reception in the area. No bars on the phone.



That was where Jacob went, to find a place to call 911. *But why would he leave without telling me?*

My teeth chattered, and every time I shoved my hands into the overcoat they felt colder. The cloud cover blocked the sun but gave enough light to see the landscape. Through the intensifying snow were rolling hills and trees, dense wooded areas as well as pasture with several inches of covering and in some places a few feet of snow where the wind had fiercely blown.

I took the keys and set out on foot, looking around the curve and down the hill for the tractor trailer. The road under the top layer of snow was an ice rink, and I lamented not wearing hiking boots. Maybe Jacob had followed the truck, trying to aid the driver who had no doubt plunged into the abyss. As I rounded the curve below our spinout, I expected to see flashers in the fog, the contents of the trailer spilled on the road or the hillside below, but everything was clear. There were no skid marks, other than ours. No gaping hole in the barbed wire fence. No deceased driver.

“Jacob!” I yelled, my voice echoing off the wet hillsides and trees. The only thing worse than hearing my husband’s voice was not hearing my husband’s voice.

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My cell phone still had no signal, and the battery was low. Darkness was coming quickly and the cold moved from my fingers and toes inward and upward. The only footprints leading from the car were my own and I followed them back. We had spun a 360 and another 180 into the snowbank against the trees. Other than the deployed airbags and windshield, there didn't seem to be more damage, but I wasn't worried about the car at that point.

Through the trees and snow I spotted a glimmer of light, a faint glow on the hillside. If it was a house, there had to be a road, but a quick look at the winding road that wound upward and away from the house led me to believe the fastest route was on foot across the pasture and up the hillside. Perhaps Jacob had gone there to get help.

I slung my purse over my shoulder and started down the hill, gaining unintended momentum and stopping myself by grabbing a fence post. I climbed through the barbed wire and a few steps later tripped on something and fell, the contents of my purse spilling into the snow. My face, my hands, my legs were now wet and stinging, the wind biting. I located my wallet, phone, and keys and





left the rest. I zipped the coat as far as it would go and set off through the pasture. Snow snuck into my shoes, and my ankles and shins were the next victims. What I wouldn't give for a fresh pair of Jacob's unstylish tube socks I berated him for wearing.

When I hit the hillside, I lost sight of the glow. Dead leaves and dry branches cracked and hissed underneath the layers of snow. An eerie darkness enveloped me, and I wished I had a flashlight. Why hadn't I stayed on the road? If it wasn't for the little trees that gave me leverage to pull myself higher, I might have given up.

"Jacob?"

An enormous crow landed in a tree above me and cawed, daring me to continue. I was too exhausted to snap off a tree limb and throw it at him and too cold to make a snowball. He cawed again as I grabbed the tree and pulled myself forward and then awkwardly took to his wings and flew across the white meadow, dipping and wobbling until he thumped onto an old stump. That's when I saw the car on the road, headlights scanning the hillside as they passed the curve, not even slowing at our spinout. If I had stayed I could have flagged them down. I'd be warm. Or maybe in a car with a serial killer.

## A MARRIAGE CAROL

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Where is your husband when you need him? I never went for the strong, silent type, or the macho male/week-end warrior, but I would have taken a gun-toting, beer-guzzling squirrel hunter right then — to swoop me up and carry me the rest of the way.

The cold and wetness stung my face, and so did the briars I crashed through near the top of the hill. I wiped something wet away from the scratches and tears filled my eyes. My nose was dripping, my lips were numb, and my hair wet with melting snow that had fallen from the trees. My thighs, not the highlight of my anatomy, burned from the long pull uphill, but were also chilled and frozen. I was glad I didn't have a mirror right then, because I would have needed counseling to shake the indelible image.

At the top of the hill I saw the warm glow of the house in the distance. Feet frozen, I moved through a tall drift toward the yellow light. My face was so cold I was afraid my skin would crack if I opened my mouth to call out, so I just put one foot in front of the other. I navigated the backyard slowly, aided only by the light from the back windows. There was a child's swing set I didn't see that caused a problem for my forehead and a trestle I navi-



gated around, but I finally made it to the side of the house and around a shoveled but ice-covered walkway.

A lamp near the driveway gave enough light for me to find the wraparound porch. It was a two-story home, wide and tall, with one light on upstairs. In the front window stood a Christmas tree with sparkling white lights that could have been featured on the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*. The six-panel front door was painted a deep red, with a door knocker in the shape of an engagement ring—or so it seemed to me. Above the knocker was a beautiful wreath fashioned from evergreens and mistletoe. If I hadn't been so cold I would have admired it longer, but I reached out a frigid hand to the knocker. As I did, the curtain inside, which covered the small windows beside the door, moved slightly, and a tiny dog pressed its nose to the glass and barked.



The sound of heavy footsteps on hardwood. The door opened and an older man stood there, reaching to gather me into the warmth of the room. He was tall and heavy-set, and looked like some actor who always gets picked for the part of the president or angry police sergeant



who's frustrated with his officers. He carried an afghan and swept it over my shoulders with one quick throw and pulled it tight around me.

"You're freezing," he said, closing the door and getting on one knee before me. "Let's take those shoes off and get you over by the fire." He took off my shoes and slipped my dripping wet socks from my feet. I looked down on his bald spot, the gray hair forming a perfect *O* at the top of his head.

"What were you doing out there?"

"There was an accident," I said, teeth chattering. "I can't find my husband. He didn't come here, did he?"

"We haven't had any visitors with the storm. What type of accident?"

I explained and he listened intently, putting my shoes and socks over the heating vent. He stood with some effort, his knees cracking, and looked at the scratches on my face.

"I suspect he went to look for help or a cell signal, like you suggest," he said. "He's probably worried about you."

*If he was so worried, why would he abandon me?*

Water dripped from my hair onto the shiny wood



floor. I tried to stay on the welcome mat so as not to leak all over the entry. His face seemed warm and kind.

“Don’t worry about the snow. It’s just water, after all. Now come on over to the fire. We’ll get you warm and cozy.”

I slipped on the wet floor and he took my arm and guided me to the living room. He walked with a noticeable limp and when we reached an overstuffed, leather chair, he turned it toward the fireplace. Three huge logs burned and crackled, and their warmth and aroma gave me a fresh vision of welcome that covered me as well as the afghan.

He sat me down and pulled a footstool close, then draped a blanket from one of the couches over my legs and feet. “I’ll be right back with something to warm you up on the inside.” He left and the little dog returned, a teacup Yorkshire terrier that sniffed at my shoes and socks, then padded toward the chair, its ears up and eyes searching my face, as if it understood pain.

“Hey little guy,” I said, reaching out a hand. He was reticent at first, backing up. He licked his nose and yawned, then crept closer as I held out my hand. He sniffed at it and sat again, looking into my soul, into all



the hurt and coldness. Something about that dog caused the tears to well up inside me, something I didn't understand, couldn't understand. Jacob said dogs cause too much trouble. Too much mess. He couldn't stand hair on the furniture and the scratches on the floor and doors.

"I see you've met Rue," the man said when he returned with a towel. I dried my hair and kept the towel on my shoulders for any stray droplets. He also brought some woolen socks and I slipped them on.

"He's gorgeous," I said. "Such a wonderful color and shine to his coat. And a sweet disposition."

He patted my blanket and Rue jumped up on my lap and sat, wiggling his stubby tail and arching his back into me like we had known each other forever. I laughed at the feeling of something so pure and innocent excited to sit with me. He licked at my hands, then settled into a curl on my thighs and put his head toward the fire, content.

"Do you mind if I use your phone to call my children?" I said.

He gave a pained look and retrieved a handset from an end table. He clicked it on and listened. "The phone's been out all afternoon. Probably ice on the lines. And the



cell phone reception is almost nonexistent up here.”

“What about your computer? I could send—”

He chuckled. “Sorry, ma’am. We don’t have access to that either. Decided a long time ago to cut that from the budget. But I’ll go right out and look for your husband.”

“His name is Jacob. And I’m Marlee Ebenezer. Thank you for taking me in like this.”

The teakettle whistled from the kitchen. “I’ll be right back,” he said.

I stroked the dog’s fur and looked around the room. Other than my leather chair, two other couches and a loveseat were arranged around the fireplace. On the mantel was a simple wreath and below it, a snow globe with a cross inside. Bookshelves flanked the fireplace. It was all I could do not to get up and examine the hundreds of volumes there, but I was too content and too warm with Rue on my lap. There were pictures, as well, of smiling couples standing together, posing for the camera. Most of the pictures were taken in front of the fireplace or in the backyard by the lattice.

A coffee table held a single candle, a Bible, and a purple book underneath. On the hearth were fireplace utensils—a poker, shovel, tongs, and broom. Beside it



was a long-handled pot with two other smaller pots inside with the same size handles. They were gold and looked barely used.

The fire popped, and Rue gave a head-jerk and then settled again. The screen kept any stray embers from flying.

The tree made quite an impression at the bay window, but there was something strange about the room, something I couldn't pinpoint. Then it hit me that it was what *wasn't* in the room: a television. There was no sign of one.

"I have some three-bean chili cooking," the man said as he returned. "It'll be ready in a little bit. This should be a good start."

He shakily handed me a mug and saucer. The tea bag tag hung over the side and I recognized the familiar colors of my favorite tea.

"It's Ginger Lemon with just a drop or two of honey," the man said.

"Just the way I like it. Thank you."

The mug spread warmth to my whole body, and Rue sniffed at the saucer when I placed it on the arm of the chair.

"What are those pots?" I said.





He paused a moment, searching for the words. “Family heirloom. I’ll tell you about them when I get back. Let the tea warm you, and I’ll get your chili after I find your husband.”

“This is very kind of you. Thank you.”

He smiled at me as he put on his coat and hat and disappeared into the garage. The smell of the tea brought back memories, ones I didn’t want to dredge up. Fights with Jacob; arguments and outbursts from me and the silence of a man resigned to something other than love. I hated associating those memories with the tea, but some things you can’t control.

My mind raced through the possibilities of what had happened on the road. Sure, Jacob could have gone off on his own, looking for help, but what if someone wasn’t paying attention while they drove along? What if someone had skidded into him somewhere up the road? Or perhaps the truck driver had taken him for help.

Something creaked above and Rue’s body tensed, his ears pricked. In a flash he was off my lap and up the stairs, his little legs churning. He disappeared at the top of the stairs and his nails clicked over the hardwood.