

Utilities

No matter how hard it worked, the defroster could not do its job. The car sat idly for ten days in long term parking, collecting snow and ice and a few nicks from rambling luggage carts. Courtney and Dan weren't going to sit and wait for the car to warm up because it might never warm up again. It had been through winters before, but none like this. This was the winter to outdo all winters. More snow. More ice. Temperatures that always began with "below" or "negative". Courtney and Dan agreed upon something for the first time in ten days: let's just drive, go home, it'll warm-up as we go. They couldn't tell if the car warmed up or not. After ten days in tropical heat, one gust of chilling wind turned their bodies were icebergs. Generations would pass before they could comprehend terms like "heat" and "warm". Neither said so, but they agreed silently. Dan reached to the radio dial, hoping a song they liked would be playing and help them break their self-imposed silence.

You remember this song?

Of course. We heard it that time at that place and blah blah blah we had such a good time.

No we had a good time afterwards.

We did. We did.

But Dan's fingers were too cold to remember how to work and he caught Courtney's twisted look and put his hand back on the wheel.

"We'll have to stop at the store. Maybe after we get back," said Dan.

"You were supposed to order groceries," said Courtney.

"How could I? The internet," said Dan.

"Oh I forgot you booked us a two-week stay in the 19th century," said Courtney.

“Ten days,” said Dan, regretting instantly that he decided to correct her. He watched as she nodded, plotting her rebuttal. He should have remained silent, though his life was a perpetual series of “should haves” the past two weeks. There are losing streaks, and then there is this. Holes dug deep enough to feel the warmth of the Earth’s core. “Not quite two weeks.”

Courtney turned on the radio and watched the industrial remnants brush passed the window. She tuned the dial to commercials and as soon as a DJ’s voice came through the speakers, she turned the dial till she found more commercials. They had an hour drive ahead of them and they were going to be joined by ads for television shows they’d never watch, medications they didn’t need to take, and restaurants they’d never dine in.

“I’d rather listen to music I don’t like than this,” said Dan.

“I’d rather read something other than The Norton Guide to Literary Criticism,” said Courtney.

“It’s not what I meant to download,” said Dan.

“Do you understand the difference between singular and plural?” said Courtney.

“Don’t be - rude,” said Dan.

“When I say, ‘hey Dan, download a couple of books for me for the trip, you know what I like’, and you download 1,500 pages of literary criticism, it makes me wonder if you know the difference between singular and plural. Or if you know what’s appropriate for vacation,” said Courtney.

“I - I,” said Dan.

“And I’m so glad you let me borrow your books. Thanks,” said Courtney. “All of your secret downloaded folders you thought I’d never find. You could probably get arrested for some of that stuff. I hope you do.”

“It’s - no. If you would let me explain, it’s really -,”

“Did you see how other guys checked me out? How sexy they know I am?” said Courtney.

“When we get home I’ll -,”

“When we get home? When I get home. I don’t know what home you’re referring to because it’s not the home that you’re dropping me off to. I know that much. That home is one that I pay for with my job and you’ve stayed in for a few years but I think you’ll like your new home a lot better,” said Courtney.

“Really, if you’d just let me -,”

“Shh. I really love this commercial,” said Courtney, turning the volume up to a deafening level.

They drove and drove and drove and the highways gave way to exit ramps and then to streets labeled with green signs. Snow was everywhere, as if someone colored the world with a bottle of whiteout. Dan gripped the steering wheel as the back of the car fishtailed on black ice; the car corrected itself, narrowly avoiding a collision with a leaning telephone pole. Dan parked in front of the driveway, but there was a slight problem.

“Did you take a wrong turn?” said Courtney.

“No, I didn’t. Obviously,” said Dan.

“You had to,” said Courtney.

“I could drive to the house blindfolded,” said Dan.

“Maybe you did,” said Courtney.

“You were watching me drive! You saw that I went the right way,” said Dan.

“I was listening to my commercials,” said Courtney.

“I went the right way!” said Dan.

“You didn’t! If you did, then we’d be home!” said Courtney.

“We are!” said Dan.

“Then if we’re home, where’s our house?” said Courtney, asking a very sensible question.

Dan peered through the windshield, hoping the smoky glass was concealing their house.

It wasn’t and he had driven to the right place. Ten days on an island with no electricity and running water hadn’t caused Dan to forget where they lived. He knew where their house was. 450 Franklin Lane. He’d spent five years there, mowed the lawn, shoveled the snow, patched a hole on the roof, put in pavers, built a birdhouse, draped Christmas lights on the hedges, handed out Halloween candy. The hedges were still there, as was the birdhouse, though both were barely visible. The house, however, was gone. It had stood in that very spot since 1948 and was now inexplicably gone.

“I don’t know,” said Dan.

“Is this something you arranged for when we were gone? Is this why you wanted to take a ten-day vacation instead of seven-day? This must be why we went to Cast Away island on vacation so I couldn’t get any calls about where the hell our house has been taken away to,” said Courtney.

“I don’t - can you even arrange for a house to be taken away? Torn down, yes, but if it was torn down, there’d be signs of it. It’s just - gone,” said Dan.

“You knew. You knew. You knew that you’d fuck up so bad on this vacation that you had the house torn down when we were gone because you knew that when we got back I’d never let you back inside the house. And because you’re you, you’d rather nobody get to go inside the house then you being banned from it!” said Courtney.

“That’s - crazy,” said Dan.

“Then go see where it is!” said Courtney.

“It’s not there,” said Dan.

“Go see,” said Courtney.

The wind sang as Dan struggled to close the door. He held onto the handle for a few moments, wondering if he could figure things out from inside the car, but he knew better. Courtney was rightfully angry about certain things, though she couldn’t blame this on him. There was no clear path to where the house once stood. The snow was hip-deep everywhere. Boots would have been nice, but in the moment they wouldn’t have made much difference to Dan. He had to trudge through snow regardless of what was on his feet. He made it to what would have been the front door. The foundation was gone. Dan used his foot to brush snow away, expecting to find a hole where the basement once was. All he found was more and more snow. The house was gone, as if it never existed at all. The wind slowed down and Dan heard a door open. It wasn’t Courtney. It was the neighbor Jo Bell. Her purple housecoat was covered by her bright orange bubble jacket. Her hair was wrapped in a scarf and her ears covered by pale blue ear muffins. She waved violently at Dan.

“I thought to call you guys but all I had was your house number,” said Jo.

“No problem. Did you -,”

“It was three nights ago after most of the snow and I let Eddie Boy out to do his business and I saw your house. He shit near your driveway. And the next morning when I let him out again your house was gone. Eddie Boy won’t go near your place. But I’m telling you, I didn’t hear a thing. Your house was just gone. Gone. I asked Barb across the street if she saw anything because she’s up all night watching god knows what and she was up and didn’t see a thing. Nothing. That’s when I tried to call but I only had your house number and that wasn’t working. I guess a house number only works in a house. We should have each other’s cell numbers, just in case of an emergency,” said Jo.

“You really didn’t see anything or hear anything?” said Dan.

“Not a bit,” said Jo. “I thought maybe you guys didn’t pay your electric bill or something. But, um, I’m just kidding. I’ve never even heard of anything like this. All I know is that Eddie Boy used to love your yard and now he won’t go near it. Just the strangest thing.”

“Alright. Thanks I guess,” said Dan.

“If you need to use my phone, just knock,” said Jo, retreating to the warmth of her home.

Dan followed his own footsteps back to the car. He looked back twice, expecting to see the house. He knocked on the window and Courtney ignored him.

“Jo says she didn’t see anything,” said Dan.

“I’m not going anywhere or letting you in till you tell me what you did to the house,” said Courtney.

“I didn’t do anything! I don’t know what happened,” said Dan.

“It’s going to get real cold real fast. You better talk,” said Courtney.

“I don’t know,” said Dan.

“Houses don’t just disappear,” said Courtney.

“Let me in,” said Dan.

“Not till you tell me what happened,” said Courtney.

Two squirrels chased each other across the telephone wire above Dan. He watched until they found an opening in a tree nearby. Dan knocked on the window again. Courtney ignored him. She wasn’t going to budge. He tried to open the door. She locked it. She’d locked all of them.

“This is some crazy -,” Dan started, but stopped once he realized he was talking to himself. She’d give in eventually. She’d have to. As soon as all the other neighbors confirmed Jo’s story. He’d have to wait it out. What else would he do? Where else would he go? He climbed atop the hood and curled into a fetal position, feeling the faint heat from the engine.