

*A February Passing*  
By  
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**F**rom street to sky it was purple cold. No wind and no snow, the weather was frozen. Besides getting the paper, I hadn't been out that morning for anything I recall. Jen was still two weeks past due, and last night was the Super Bowl. Jen watched with me as Peyton Manning and the Colts beat the Bears and that night she felt as if something could happen any time. We were on the ready to go to the hospital, so I kept sober best I could.

But Sunday night passed, and so did Monday, with no water breakage, no contractions, and no hospital. We wanted, and especially Jen of course, for this pregnancy to end. She was pretty unscathed in terms of any morning sickness or nausea, but she'd been serving tables nearly the whole pregnancy, and before she finally took off the third week of January, she nearly fell over at work. Even if I wanted more kids, I would not expect her to go through the strain of those ten or so months again.

That crystalline Tuesday, I was upstairs half-dressed when I heard knocks on the door. A group of loud, quick knocks. I hurried clothes on and went downstairs. No one was there when I opened the interior door. So, I peered out the storm door and saw my eighty-year old neighbor Paul moving much quicker than I thought he should be towards his porch.

We moved onto Bodine Road two months ago in December. We bought a small, two-story, hundred year-old house with no garage, and plain white asbestos siding. Thirteen hundred square feet of the best we could afford.

On the first Christmas, Paul, the wide eyed octogenarian with a boy's smile, came over with a knock on the door with sparse and slow floating snowflakes abound, and a Bills cap on his head leaving his exposed ears red from the air. Jen and I both answered the door, her face swollen with gestation, and he gave us a box of Christmas cookies he must have bought from the store, adding a Merry Christmas from he and his wife.

Whenever we would see Paul help his wife from his rusty white and blue conversion van with the broken antennae, or anytime outside when the weather was bearable, his wife would always smile and they'd both wave. She would always ask, "When are we going to see that baby?" And she'd smile so brightly when she looked at Jen, the glow from her eyes was so warm it made you bashful beside her joy, even if we were just passing by.

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When I poked my head out, I saw something between Paul and the van on the ground and he said, "I need help. She fell."

Shoes and a jacket went on swiftly and I was out the door. A few strides over Paul's lawn to the other side of his covered porch and there she was. Paul's wife was face

down, her thin and curled gray hair on the collar of her blue winter coat. She didn't look real. I turned her over, her iced eyes narrowly open, her face turned purple.

Blood trickled from her mouth and some soaked through the knee of her flower print pants. Then from the house across the street, a tall forty-something guy, Jeff, with long hair hanging out the back of his hunting cap stepped off his porch. After one exhale of steam from his mouth, he yelled out, "Paul?"

"She fell!" Paul's voice crackled through the dense air and Jeff immediately ran across the salt-coated street.

Half bent over, Paul's mouth gaped when Jeff met us. "I helped her out, and she just fell."

The three of us moved his wife up one stair to the porch under the awning and to the front door. Her jacket was open and her shirt came up as we dragged, exposing mushy and creased dead-white skin and a large breast that jiggled as she slid.

"What do we do?" Paul asked in a voice that was like a young boy's, as if his maturity had turned to naivety leading to this inevitable moment.

Jeff ran across the street to get help and Debbie, a woman his same forty odd age with smoke leathered skin, followed him back over. She wanted to help, kneeling down to her, but she knew there was nothing to do. She told Paul to call the ambulance, and he went inside to use the phone. The woman rubbed Paul's wife's cold face and shut her eyes completely. "So sad", she sighed.

Debbie stood up and she and Jeff introduced themselves to me. They were divorced, and they've known Paul and his wife for over twenty years. They were still friends though, both frequenting the house across the street where Jeff lived with their two daughters, although Debbie never slept there. Levity surfaced as we all smiled that this wasn't the ideal way to meet new neighbors, but smiles faded, as we stood sorry for what we were now a part of.

When Paul came back, still in innocent shock, now with his longtime neighbors I was no longer needed. Jeff and Debbie thanked me as Paul rubbed his hands together staring at his wife. I could only exhale as I made way across my driveway, the cold unable to penetrate me. When I walked in my door, the ambulance was just coming down the street.

Jen asked what was going on, and I told her. She didn't cry, because she's not that type to cry at a drop, but you could tell her heart skipped a few beats for a moment. She saw something in me as I sat on the staircase, staring between time. She moved in for a hug. I'd never been so near the moment of death, and my mind was still frozen, my memory in awe of those last few moments.

We kept watch outside to make sure things went well, and when the ambulance left, Paul followed in his van. Looking at Jen I couldn't fathom what it would be like, to spend a lifetime with someone, only to be the one left alone.

From our kitchen we could see into Paul's living room, the Christmas tree still up, and the walls covered in family photos, including a large picture of a family of well over twenty members with Paul and his wife in the middle. I was envious of Paul for that, even if in an honest way. And it eased me throughout the day to know that Paul wouldn't be alone.

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The next morning, a Wednesday, heavy snowfall moved in just after dawn. And as the clouds shed their fluffed crystal flakes of feathered ice, Jen too had something to deliver.

I had to shovel quickly just to get the car out of the driveway. Our hospital bag was in order, but we had to make a quick stop. Who knew how long it would take, so we wanted to drop our rottweiler Charly off at Jen's mother's house.

The wind grew in ferocity, east to west, and the snow was clumped and heavy, as we trekked slowly, no more than twenty miles-per-hour down back roads. I was focused on the road as best I could, not knowing how soon our child might be ready to arrive, as Jen agonized every few minutes or so.

She breathed heavy and my heart thumped blood threw my clamped hands that kept the wheel steady, the car swayed through the grooves of the snow covered roads. I slid into a turn, let go of the wheel enough to let the car steady it self, and kept on. On this half-mile stretch of road next to a field, gusts blasted blinding flurries past my view. Yet, at a slow and steady pace, I did make it to my mother-in-law's.

By the time we were back on our way to the hospital, the plows had made it to the main roads, and although still slow, I was able to make it with relative ease. Jen probably has no such memory of ease on that day, but no more than a few agonizing hours later, she did give birth to a sweet baby girl named Lillian.

Jen had to stay overnight, so that evening when she was ready to sleep, I drove home. It wasn't late by the hour, but it was dark and calm on the roads. My senses were beyond physical, as I seemed to just glide back into the driveway and parked the car. Then I looked through the window to see Paul's Christmas tree was lit, as if his wife had never left and she would be there, on the porch in the spring when Jen and I would push our stroller of joy through the neighborhood. I was too happy to feel bad, but I was never more aware of how significant the moments of life can be as I carried myself upstairs to sleep alone in our bed, much like Paul would be next door.