

## **The Woman in the Snow**

The car frame reverberated with the slamming of the door shut. It had been a long, drawn out day, and the children were fatigued from the holiday festivities including hot chocolate drinking, ornament shopping, and strolling along Michigan Avenue. Each year, a beloved Christmas tale was illustrated through ornate decorations sprawled out along the Macy's storefront windows. Although the children were never able to get close enough to actually read the text, attempting to decipher the general gist of each window from atop the shoulders of their father was exhilarating enough. Warm and cozy now in the blasting heat of the car, the soft smiles of the children gradually faded as they sank into a gentle slumber, and the car shifted into gear. The father rested his head against the window and drifted off himself. Excluded from the luxury of being able to sleep the whole way home, the mother kept her eyes intently focused on the road in front of her. Snow flurries began to swirl.

*The frozen wind lashed against my cheek, leaving its searing fingerprints on my skin in its wake. Snow and hail pelted my wet face like small bullets. My eyelids fluttered, blinking back burning tears, snot joining the river now streaming down my face. Splatting onto the white snow. Red. My hand jolted to my nose in shock. Pulled away. A swipe of deep scarlett now lined the back of my hand. Staring, I slowly turned it over, palm up, and brought the pads of my forefinger and thumb together. Squeezed- and felt nothing. I continued down my line of fingers. All numb. I felt a cough brewing deep in my lungs but feared if I started I wouldn't be able to stop. I couldn't afford to stop. Placing one black tattered boot in front of the other, I trudged on through the vicious storm.*

The car jerked to a sudden halt. The father's eyelids fluttered open, and he resumed his upright position. "Oh no. The weather's gotten worse. How far from the highway are we?"

"Without traffic probably fifteen minutes, but we've been at a standstill for about thirty now," his

wife replied with a yawn. She raised her glasses to the center of her forehead and vigorously rubbed her eyes before putting them back into place.

Her husband's focus sharpened. "Honey- wait! Weren't we supposed to exit at I-95?" The wife snapped out of her thoughts and jerked her head side to side, attempting to decipher a road sign. "This will add *at least* an hour to our drive!" her husband proclaimed. "The kids need to get to bed! We have early church in the morning!" One of the children in the backseat awoke at these last few words, and the father's voice instantly broke off. The condensation had accumulated on the window, and the child gazed at it, still half asleep, before placing a finger against the cold pane. She began to slowly spell out her name when her father glanced back at her from his rearview mirror. He reprimanded her, claiming he had just cleaned the windows yesterday. With a restless, dissatisfied sigh, the child removed her finger, placed both of her hands back in her lap, and drifted off once more.

*Although my skin was soaked, the inside of my mouth remained bone dry. I desperately needed a drink of water. I hesitantly stuck my tongue out into the frigid air, hoping to catch some snow, still barreling down in droves. I wasn't sure how long I had been out here; there was no way to keep track of the time. I had made it to the median of the multi-lane highway by darting between gaps in traffic. So many cars had sped by in a blur of lights, but now they were all slowing to a halt. I felt a surge of hope. My heart rate escalated in response. It pounded as I took a wavering step off the median and towards the first lane of cars. My knee buckled. My hand darted out, submerging in freezing slush to break my fall. Quickly standing back up, a wave of dizziness washed over me. I forced my gaze forward and dragged my feet through the snow, towards the closest stopped car. "I just need to find someone to help," I whispered to myself. I barely recognized the sound of my own voice.*

When the Christmas CD began to restart from the beginning, the mother sighed and pressed the eject button. They had gained about ten feet in the past hour. A second child yawned and pointed his small finger out the window. "Mom, who's that lady?" The mother strained her eyes and squinted. The rapid

motion of the windshield wipers was reminiscent of a pendulum, and for several seconds she was sucked into a state of hypnosis. Something stirred in the distance, snapping the mother from her stare. A woman was emerging from the storm. Her outline grew clearer as the space between them subsided. She approached a window several cars over from where the family was parked at a standstill. The mother watched as she knocked on the window. The driver turned to look and waved her away. She repeated the same attempt on the next car, resulting in a disinterested glance that monotonously returned to the road ahead. Their car was next. The woman stumbled around the back of their car and reappeared on the driver's side window. Head bent over, the knock was lifeless. The father's head jolted up in surprise. At this, the wife realized her entire observation process had been internal. She had not even audibly pointed this woman out to warn him. The woman in the snow motioned for the mother to roll down her window. She then brought her palms together, in a pleading gesture. The mother's hand floated to the button to the left of the steering wheel and pressed down.

*Finally someone was going to help me! I squinted at the woman sitting behind the steering wheel. She seemed to come in and out of clarity- my eyes like a camera trying to focus in. But then my surroundings began to wobble and shift. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to regain stability, and became aware of my heart beat gradually slowing. Panic washed over me. I took a deep breath to steady myself. Swallowed. Opened my eyes. A car. With a woman sitting in the front seat. Looking up at me expectantly. She had said something. She must have. The woman was giving me that look signifying it was my turn to respond. I cleared my throat. "My car broke down," I croaked. I pointed across the median and into the darkness beyond. "I think the weather must have stalled the engine or something. I've been out here for...I don't know how long." My voice cracked, and I felt my hands begin to tremble uncontrollably. "I need cash for a tow truck. I left my wallet at home. Please help me."*

The mother turned her gaze to the road in front of her and then back to the woman in the snow. She cleared her throat, "How much do you need?" she asked, remaining calm. She felt the pressure of her

husband's hand on her wrist. Out of her peripheral vision, she could sense the three children behind her, all alert now, leaning in to get a better look at the woman in the snow.

"Eighty dollars," the woman responded in a staccato manner. Her voice grew bolder then. "I just need eighty dollars to get home. Give me your address, and I will mail you a check when I get home. I have money. It's in my wallet at home. I left it at home which is why I can't pay for a tow truck. But my car won't--"

"I apologize," the father interjected from the passenger's seat. "We really can't help you. We don't have that kind of money on us. Wish we could do something for you, but..." He reached across his wife's torso and began to roll up the window, figuring the woman had gotten the message.

*My life flashing before my eyes, I thrust my hand into the rapidly abating space. Clenching both my eyes and jaw tightly shut, I mentally prepared myself for the blinding pain, white as the snow encompassing my frail body, that would surely ensue. When I felt nothing, I slowly opened my eyes. The father had removed his finger from the button. I pounced on the opportunity, reached further inside the vehicle, and grasped the mother's shoulder. "I have kids in the car!" I cried in despair. The mother's mouth opened and closed, utterly speechless. I barreled on. "I don't know what to do! I don't want them to freeze out here all night. They're just children." My voice echoed off the car walls, desperation lacing every word.*

The mother glanced back at her own three children, while her husband's entire demeanor hardened. The tension in his jaw became pronounced, and his eyebrows pulled together, creating an indentation in the center of his forehead. The wife broke eye contact with me and reached her hand into her pocket. Pulling out a wad of cash, she sifted through the dollar bills with her thumb. Each time she passed a twenty, she removed it from the stack. When she had collected four twenties, she held them out the window to me.

*"Thank you!" I exclaimed. "Thank you! Thank you!" I choked back a sob rising up in my throat.*

*I felt a surge of adrenaline coursing through my body as I pivoted away from the car and trekked back in the direction I had come. My numb, shaking hand gripped the quickly dampening cash. "She believed me. She believed me," I repeated until it sunk in. A relieved, gleeful laugh erupted from my lips. "Just a couple more steps now," I assured myself. My body wanted to collapse, but I forced each foot in front of the other. Everything was going to be okay.*

The window crawled up to a close. Silence pervaded the car. No one took the honor of speaking first. The father turned his body away from his wife in a stone-cold manner. As his wife reached out to caress his knee, he slapped her hand away. "Don't." The wife felt his word like a bullet splicing through the air and nailing her right in the side of her head.

"I'm sorry," was all she could manage to produce. "I wasn't going to help her, but she--"

"You weren't going to help her?! You shouldn't have even rolled down the window! You do realize you put all of us in danger, don't you? What if she had had a gun? You rolled down your window and let her talk you into handing over eighty dollars. Eighty dollars." He abruptly stopped speaking and returned his gaze to his window. The silence had a heartbeat of its own. The wife let several moments pass.

"She had children in the car."

"She also had blood coming out of her nose. Dilated pupils," he spat. "And she was barely standing up on her own. The car was completely supporting her," he retorted sharply. "She was a drug addict. And you just funded her next bender." More silence. As the wheels continued to roll along, picking up minimal speed, a bright exclamation point lit up on the dashboard. "What is that?" the husband interrogated. "Are we...low on gas?" The wife frantically checked the gauge, and the realization washed over her. She had intended to fill the tank before leaving but had forgotten in the frenzy of getting the children bundled up. Over the next several minutes, her heart rate escalated. They weren't going to make it. The car inevitably came to a halt. She pressed her foot against the accelerator repeatedly before giving

up. She shifted into neutral. Her husband exited the car and pushed it to the side of the congested train of vehicles. She inhaled deeply, told the children to sit still, and joined her husband outside.

*I was almost there. My entire body was shaking ferociously now. I inhaled one last rattling breath before reaching out my arm, wrapping my purple fingers around the car handle, and yanking it open with my last drop of energy. My foot reached inside the vehicle, and my body quickly followed, collapsing back into the seat. My trembling hand pulled the door shut behind me with a weak click. "Mom?" I heard the timid whisper coming from behind me. I forced my mouth into a smile, feeling my lips crack open in multiple places, and stiffly pivoted my torso around.*

*"Hi, my loves. I'm back." I gazed at my two boys, huddled together in the back seat, eyes wide with shock and worry.*

*"You don't look so good, mom," my other boy chimed in. "Your lips are purple!"*

*"And you were out there forever!" His younger brother added. "We were so worried about you!" A tear trickled down his cheek. "Why didn't you let us go with you?" His eyes pleaded.*

*"Because boys, it's dangerous out there. The snow and the ice and the wind...and all the cars. You don't know what kind of people are inside."*

*"But you went and talked to them!" The older boy stated adamantly. "Why did you do that if it was dangerous?"*

*"Because my biggest and only priority is you two- keeping you both safe," the woman said, turning back around. Her hands continued to tremble as she opened the glove compartment and pulled out the number of a tow truck company.*

*"Well, we need to call a tow truck," her husband stated shortly. "Do you have cash?"*

*His wife inhaled sharply. "I gave it-" She cut herself off. Slowly glancing up and connecting gazes with her husband, she raised her hand to her forehead, sighed, and shrunk into her frame. Without a word, she pivoted around and began walking towards the train of cars, in search of help. Within moments,*

her husband watched her silhouette disappear into the snow.