

Fiction Passage

“A Winter’s Drive”

It was raining ice. He flinched every time a hard pellet hit his windshield, threatening to crack it. They were like stones, or worse, because they were frozen. He wondered how many of them would have to strike the same spot to bore a hole in the glass. Michael was approaching the Canadian-U.S. border at Plattsburgh, in upstate New York. He hadn’t left the United States in nine years. He fingered his new passport, its pliant navy cover, and marveled at the date printed inside: it wasn’t expired. How long since he had had an unexpired passport? He did not even know. He had thrown the last one away.

The lines of cars advancing toward the customs agents in their boxes were long. Michael knew he would choose one and immediately regret his decision. No matter which queue you chose, the other one, the one you hadn’t chosen, would suddenly pick up speed, and begin to move at an incredible pace. There was no way around it. His father had always told him to aim for a female agent, that the female agents were nicer. His mother had always told him the opposite: the men are less likely to give you a hard time. It seemed, now, that he and his car were headed for a tall woman with a blonde ponytail.

What would he tell her? Michael realized that he had rented a car, packed a day’s worth of clothes, picked up a lunch, spent countless hours reviewing what he would do when he arrived in Canada, but he hadn’t for one second thought about what he might tell the border patrol officer. He searched his brain and found nothing. The cars inched forward. In three cars it would be his turn. In one hour, if the agent let him pass, he would be in Montreal. He ate the last of the cold French fries he had picked up from a drive-through earlier that morning and crumpled the paper bag.

It was his turn.

“Passport?” the agent stuck out her hand.

He gave it to her, the new and unexpired little book, full of empty pages.

“Where are you coming from?” she asked.

“New York City,”

“Where are you going?”

“To Montreal, Canada,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

He looked up at her and then glanced into the rearview mirror at the muddied beige minivan behind him. “Visiting some family,” he lied. His parents had moved, with him, to New York

from Montreal more than a decade before. “Some cousins,” he lied again. He had no cousins. His parents both were only children.

“For how long?”

“Two or three days,” he said. The customs agent turned to her computer with a small flip of the ponytail, stamped his unstamped passport and let him through.

He was in Canada. Before the border and after the border looked just the same—it was an imaginary line, after all—but he felt different. He turned the radio off and drove in silence for close to 30 minutes. The windshield wipers had stopped swinging from one side to the other, counting time. They were stuck, solid, to the glass, shuddering lightly in their icy casing. Michael pulled onto the shoulder, jumped out of the car and tried to pull the wipers from the window with his gloved hands. They wouldn’t budge. Bits of hail stung his uncovered face. He took the scraper from his trunk and began to assault the front of the car.

When finally he pulled up to the house where he was born, he was too tired to wonder at the fact that it had been painted blue from grey or that the door was a dark wood or that the basketball net had disappeared.

Michael rang the bell. The man who bounded down the stairs and answered the door had a thick reddish beard and dark eyes that were too close together. He was 40, 45 at the most.

“Can I help you?” he asked, before the door was entirely open.

Michael had practiced. “I’m so sorry to bother you,” he said, “but I used to live here. I’m in town from New York and was wondering if I might look around for a few minutes? Or I could come back later if now’s not a good time.”

The man was pretty pleased, it seemed. He gave Michael a tour of the house leading him from the vestibule through the kitchen, living room and dining room, then down into the basement. Michael nodded all the while, pictured himself running through these hallways, sitting cross-legged on these floors. Next, the man—his name was Earl—brought him up the carpeted stairs, to the bedrooms. First to the master bedroom where his parents slept, and then onto the next biggest room which was his sister’s; and then to the smallest one, now a study, that was Michael’s childhood bedroom.

Michael asked if he could have a few minutes alone there. “This room was mine,” he told Earl. Earl smiled, backed out and closed the door behind him. The bunk bed was gone, of course. So were the fluorescent constellation stickers from the ceiling. The room was painted a dull burgundy and all it contained was a desk and a standing lamp. But the wood floor panels were the same his family had left behind, as he had hoped. As quickly as he could manage, heart rate rising, he moved to the back right corner of the room and crouched down. He poked at one wooden strip, then another. The strip he nudged on a fourth try gave way.

He had come here for this, but still he was slightly surprised, mostly at the fact that the floor hadn’t been repaired. The piece of wood came completely loose with one hard tug, and Michael

peered into the shallow hole he had created. There, inside, was a small metal box covered in dust and cobwebs. He cleared the box's cover with his hand and without so much as opening it up, stashed it away in the knapsack he had carried in.

Earl was in the kitchen, boiling water. Michael thanked him profusely and gestured toward the door.

"Stay for tea?" Earl asked. But Michael declined.

He drove three or four blocks and parked by a snow bank. The street hadn't yet been cleared. The knapsack was bulging with his spoils. Pulling open the box, which smelled of must, made the back of his head tingle. And then, there they were. He couldn't believe how easy it had been. The hockey card collection he'd left behind when he had moved to the United States. The Wayne Gretzky rookie card alone was now worth over \$1,500. He had been young and afraid to bring his prizes with him to the new country, the strange country, across the imaginary line.

Michael wondered if 10 more years would pass before he came here again. He wondered if he would ever show this city to his children, when he had children. The cards were all that remained of his attachment to this place, and soon they would be sold. He restarted the car and tried to reverse, but the wheels were stuck in the snow. Michael rocked the car back and forth, back and forth; as his father had taught him the winter he first learned to drive. With a squeal, the car surged backward. Now he would head home.

Poetry Passage

“Remember,” by Christina Rossetti

Remember me when I am gone away,

Gone far away into the silent land;

When you can no more hold me by the hand,

Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.

Remember me when no more day by day

You tell me of our future that you plann'd:

Only remember me; you understand

It will be late to counsel then or pray.

Yet if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

For if the darkness and corruption leave

A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,

Better by far you should forget and smile

Than that you should remember and be sad.