

It was a silent winter, and everyone carried a chisel. Not only were doors and letter boxes constantly in need of a sharp whack, but toward the end of December, words began freezing too. I remember at the Christmas Eve service that year, all the carols coming much slower than normal, so it must have been on the 27th or 28th that the words began to freeze. After that, when anyone said anything you had to chip away enough ice to read the words frozen and hanging, like a speech bubble. I guess if water freezes really quickly it's all cloudy, but if it freezes slowly it's clear as glass. Like the difference between ice at a restaurant and in your freezer at home. Same with words.

Like with most things, at first it was a nuisance, especially on New Year's. Man, everyone hated that. And that was so early that no one had thought of the chisels yet, and no one was used to it either. Imagine: silent, freezing parties of everyone in dazzling suits and cocktail dresses, all shivering and sipping martinis, lovers kissing briefly at midnight to avoid any tongue-and-telephone pole situations. A few here and there forgot and whispered sweet nothings which were more cold than sweet and were most definitely a block of something very quickly.

We learned that volume didn't affect any aspect of the phenomenon pretty quickly. Whispered words were just as frozen and just as foggy as shouted ones.

I had just started dating a girl at Thanksgiving. I seem to do that a lot. Something about the impending winter makes me want companionship, I guess. Anyway, at New Year's we were those lovers with frozen sentences hanging between us and no chisels to open them up.

I'd taken to carrying a notepad and pen and I wrote, "I'm so happy to be with you." But, look at those words on this page. Now remember when those words caressed your ear in the middle of a crowded room. Writing them to here, even there, was not the same as whispering them while I squeezed her hand would have been.

I don't want you to misunderstand what I said about the cold driving me to find a companion. This was no biological impulse and what I wrote on that pad of paper was not cheesy line to try to get her into bed with me. This was genuine affection and the beginning of something.

At first, the progress of our relationship was inhibited by the silence. I would go over to her house when we'd both gotten off work a couple days a week. Then, we'd just sit there and look at each other, unable to listen to music or talk or watch TV. We tried to play cards once, but the cold made the paper so brittle all the cards broke when I tried to shuffle. All of them just snapped in half.

I almost broke up with her a few times in the first half of January, but even in the silence, I enjoyed just sitting at her house, exchanging coquettish smiles like preschoolers unsure of an appropriate vocabulary for their new emotions.

We tried kissing one day, but our lips got stuck together from the cold, like a tongue on a flagpole and it hurt when they came apart. So all I could do was graze her cheek with my lips. The texture and temperature were like ice cream.

Then, on a Wednesday, we were out driving. The silence was a wall between us, solid and impassable and impossible. There is a series of old, dirt roads just outside of our town, only a few minutes' drive from her house. One of my favorite things to do is to go drive around on those roads turning at random on a whim, here or there, until I could not recognize where I was anymore. Then, I'd try to find my way back to something familiar.

Now might be a good time to explain the nature of this cold a little. You may be thinking that a cold so intense that it froze our words would be one of those colds that froze deep inside of you, making your bones hurt. But it wasn't like that. It didn't make you ache or dry out your

skin. Maybe it was just me, but I even enjoyed walking in it, being outside and seeing the world's reaction to such a phenomenon. Also, there was little snow, but sheets and sheets of ice.

We were driving, down frozen silent dirt roads, somewhat enjoying each other's company, by that I meant that I was enjoying her company a lot, but felt self-conscious about my choice of activity. I was thinking about ending things with her for that very reason. That and that things are made infinitely more complex by not being able to talk or kiss or even touch much at all.

Her silence confused me even more at that moment. I sometimes, even without looking at her, got the impression of her contentment in my presence and at other times was aware of some deep frustration within her. But the cold kept me from asking, from even making an attempt at understanding.

I had tried once around the first of the year. Alternating between opening my mouth and swinging my hammer. I, of course, cracked open her words as well, trying to maintain chivalry in this small ice age. But the effort wore me out.

I just couldn't handle that, so I let the silence crystalize between us, both on our own sides.

And we drove.

The landscape passed slowly by in vague white shapes. Mounds of what may have been hay in some farmer's field or disused cars abandoned for a bad transmission, lumpy beside fencepost, too thick under their blankets with icicles like drying laundry frozen between.

It was hard to tell if I was lost, or if the frozen land just disoriented me so that everything looked unfamiliar.

I began to feel the familiar panic of the unknown settle around me.

Occasionally, something stood out that I was certain I'd never seen before only to be followed seconds later by the sycamore that I'd driven past on nearly every one of these adventures, or the rusted out old truck, its faded red paint just showing beneath the thin layer of snow.

I took small glances every few minutes to see if my passenger was enjoying herself, but her face was still and silent as the landscape. I tried to mime our retreat, but she smiled softly and shook her head motioning for me to go on.

I could think of no better way to spend my own afternoon, but had an inkling that I might be alone, or at least among a minority of the population, with those feelings. It might be boring or odd. My enjoyment was tainted by my need to ensure that she was having a good time.

But she waved me on.

So I kept driving.

I made a few more turns and began to be certain that the unfamiliar landscape was an old friend hiding behind a white mask. There was the cow pasture with its pond in the middle long since frozen solid. There was the house whose inhabitants I daydreamed about whenever my path crossed their driveway. And then, around the next bend would be the tree, maybe my favorite tree in the world. I loved the tree, but I refused to memorized the series of lefts and rights that brought me here. Stumbling upon it on accident was one of the best parts of these drives. And recognizing the signs that led to it, heightened the anticipation and made finding it more fun.

But when we rounded the corner, the tree was not there. The fence and field and other foliage were all the same, but where the tree should have been stood an entire grove of trees. In the same way that I had never memorized the route to the place, I had never sought to know what kind of tree it was or what grew in the field with it. Nonetheless, I knew that scene like a

dear friend, one whose chuckle you can pick out from across the room at a party. And this scene was the same in every detail, except for the tree.

Or was it?

I thought back to the landmarks that had led me here. Maybe that cow pasture and frozen pond were not exactly the same, wasn't the pond a bit more oblong and a bit nearer the fence? Isn't it possible that that house was blue instead of green? Was this just some mockingly similar piece of countryside?

But this, this was the same scene I'd expected in every detail except for the focal point. The grove seemed nearly as familiar as the tree would have, except that I'd never seen it before. It was as if every leaf on the tree I knew had sprouted its own tree, and in the intervening time, every one of those trees had grown to the size of the old one.

Out of surprise more than anything else, I stopped the car. All I could do was stare at the change before me.

Still in shock, I tried to speak: "Let's go look," I said, but only a frozen block came out and fell heavily to the center console.

She reached for the chisel waiting in the cup holder, but I motioned for her to stop.

We were still far from the new forest, and the road could bring us a lot closer. So I started pulling forward along the path. She could tell that I wanted to say something, and I was practically aching to get my excitement out. The car was charged with those unsaid words.

When we were as close as the road would take us, I stopped the car again, this time intentionally, and on the side of the road.

I unclasped my seatbelt and motioned for her to do the same. She obliged and then motioned toward the trees and walked her fingers across her hand. I nodded vigorously.

We got out of the car. The day was warmer than it had been when we'd set out. Maybe "less cold" would be a better description, but either way it was nearly pleasant in comparison with the last few months. I walked around the front of the car and took her hand. Together we started across the field that still lay between us and the forest.

She didn't know why I was so intrigued by this flora, and it was too unreal and too cold for me to explain why I couldn't do anything but stare.

It seemed to me that the closer we came to those woods, the larger and more deep they became. What from the road might have been only a large grove appeared from the midpoint of the field to be a small forest -- big enough to appear on a map, but small enough for only the locals to have a name for it. By the time we stood at its brink, it stretched out farther than we could see in both directions and the trees individually were bigger than I would have imagined. Each one towered over us beautifully.

I looked at her to see if she had noticed the change as we walked, and the shock I felt was written plainly on her face.

I squeezed her hand gently, and together we walked into that new and unknown place.

Within what felt like minutes, we were in the world and beauty and strangeness of it. A few times I saw frozen little gasps or giggles fall from between her lips.

At one point she dropped my hand and ran ahead of me into the twilight lingering between the trees, a line of laughter falling behind her as she ran. I followed her trail until it ended, but she wasn't there and the ground was so hard packed that there were no footprints either.

I looked, bewildered, around me and a snowball hit me in the back. I caught sight of her from a large sheet of laughter that fell from her lips and let out one of my own. We started to

play, throwing snowballs and pieces of our frozen panting and guffaws back and forth across the frozen forest.

The movement made me warm and I took off my coat. A few minutes later I found her coat laid over the arm of a tree, too. We kept pelting each other and running and laughing silently and playing dozens of tiny games of hide and seek until we were too tired to move and we collapsed together into a small clear spot among the trees.

We lay panting huge plumes of exhausted breath. And as we lay catching our breath and sweating, the woods around us and the world around that began to thaw with our body heat. It was as if the frozen earth had played all of those games with us and it too needed to shed its winter coat.

The first thing to unfreeze was the noise that had been kept captive since Christmas, and all that we heard as we lay there was our defrosting laughter echoing through the trees.