

Before the Snow Melts

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Durward LePaysan was not a coffee connoisseur. He drank plenty of it, sure, but it was never high quality. He would have a cup of coffee in the morning to start off his day right—and to take his pills. And he would also have a cup of coffee around lunch. And he would also have a cup or two in the early afternoon. And if it was a tough day, he might have a cup in the late afternoon. In truth, if Durward was near coffee, there was a strong chance he would come to drink it—and this morning was no different.

Outside, the snow that once clung to the dirt roads, naked trees, and sap lines now resided in scattered patches. A week and a half ago the snow was as soft as lamb's wool, mountains of ornate flakes gently balancing on one another and air. Seas of green salt have beaten back the snow that now houses rocks and frozen leaves. Icy clusters are all that remain, hard and unloved and slowly being pushed into smaller and smaller crevices in the ground by each successive spraying of road salt.

Coffee finished, Durward cleaned his dishes and downed a large glass of water before starting his long day. The water was always a bit of a treat. It was well water, as many houses in Vermont have. Alice always said this well produced particularly sweet water.

Durward settled down into the old chair he set beside his door. It creaked with enough violence that a passerby might think a pig was getting slaughtered, but the chair held together. It had been squeaking and squawking for years now—but no significant crack had been seen yet. Lacing up a pair of battered leather boots with tread worn down—to the point of looking more like a painting someone had cunningly put on so that the boots would sell for a dollar more at a yard sale—

Durward noticed a Hermit Thrush bouncing carefully across his porch fence. Every so often it would chance across a loose seed that had fallen from the bird feeder above—which hadn't been filled in months. By this time, most of its brethren have traveled south, as perhaps it should. The south would be warmer, and food would be far less expensive. If it had only joined the rest, the Thrush wouldn't have to desperately fly from porch to porch hoping for a charitable portion of seeds. Still, the Thrush on the porch didn't seem so bothered by the condition others might call hopeless, dancing about on the old wood looking for a kernel more before taking off down the road, further into home.

Stepping at last out of the house, Durward shut the door behind him with a gentle click—and gentle it had to be, as the door was becoming less and less formidable with age. While the house itself had been made near the turn of the 19th century, Durward's father had replaced the door some 40 years ago. Only, the door wasn't 40 years old, it had been salvaged from one of the leaning houses not so far from the town green. Durward's father had thought it solid enough at the time, but now it shuddered distastefully with every swing. The porch too had been replaced by Durward's father, around the same time—from the rubble of one of those same leaning houses, one of the houses that had leaned too far.

The truck started on the first key turn, a welcome surprise to Durward. After letting the engine sort out its sleepiness, he took off toward the town center. New leaning houses lined the dirt road—dirt being the better option between that and cracked pavement. Between the once-lively houses lay well-kept black top driveways stretching sometimes a mile into the woods before they end in richly-adorned double garages.

Durward parked beside a shiny Porsche twenty-something. With a painful hiss he ambled out of his truck and made his way to the Center Store, which itself

was the third oldest standing building in town—behind the Community Church and the Daigle’s house. Durward had grown up knowing the Daigle kids, and he knew the house well. Folks talked about the age of the house with some reverence, but for all Durward could see it was nothing special. Fairly standard for the older houses of the town, though he did recall that they had a particularly fancy wood stove—newer than the house, of course. But the Daigle kids were long gone now. One was in New York City, one was in California somewhere, and one was just down the road under an engraved stone roof—had been since high school.

The Center Store, on the other hand, was something—groceries, news, clothing, mail, pharmacy, all inclusive. The downstairs had never been living quarters, so it was spacious with a high ceiling. At least, if it was empty, it would be spacious. Half-empty, half-dusted, half-expired shelves made the space a cluttered maze.

Durward strode through the aisles to the register—behind which stood leather-skinned Don Daso, long-time owner. Without a word or thought, Durward grabbed a newspaper and pointed to the tobacco wall. Don shot Durward a curious look as the younger held out twelve dollars.

“That’s not enough D—”

“I won’t be needing any meds today, Don,” Durward cutoff the elder. Don’s head tilted slightly as he made a small nod and took Durward’s cash before handing over to him a pack of Marlboro Reds. Durward had smoked Golds in high school, as had George. But George wasn’t smoking anything nowadays.

“Well...best of luck then,” the old man said softly.

Outside, two men sat thoughtfully at either side of a weathered checkerboard. Some might say that the greatest mystery of the town was just how many games of checkers had been played in that spot; some might say it was the most played checkerboard in Vermont. John Roy, who sat with his back to the

door, was clearly losing this game. Somewhat a rare occasion it could be noted; John had grown up on the other side of the green and had been playing checkers since the Center Store accepted ration cards. Across from him sat Earl Smith, who had moved from the south of the state back in the '60s when he married his late wife, whose family had lived in these parts since this state was a Republic.

“I don’t suppose I’ve seen you often enough around here to have you judging my playing from way up,” John spat out the words with half-harshness and half-remorse. It had been far too long since Durward had taken time to idle around the Center Store. Long enough that he had somewhat forgotten how strongly John still held on to the old accent. “I’s” becoming “Oi’s” in a high pitched ramble carefully developed by generations of poor farmers.

“Been busy I s’pose,” Durward grunted. “How’s—” He cut himself off as someone well-dressed came out the store and slid into the shiny Porsche. Durward waited until it turned down the road.

“Who’s that?”

John and Earl both grumbled, a grumble just a bit too long and anger-filled to have to do with the game in front of them.

“Some newcomer—just moved into a new house built by the Wheeler’s old farm. I’m not sure young Jack ever fought for the place when old Henry and Evelyn died. Damn shame. They built a big ugly grey house, I can tell you that. Whole field’s just a big green lawn now—when in the hell do they get the time to mow that?” John answered in a voice that started low and slow, but picked up in volume and pitch as he continued.

“These flatlanders want every bit of this state to be a big green lawn I’ll tell ya,” Earl chuckled as he spoke, but his eyes screamed worry.

“Well why didn’t Bob try to get it? Hasn’t really got much a home now, does he?” Durward asked.

“You’re damn right he doesn’t, but do you know how much that land sold for?” John spared at most a second before continuing, “seven hundred thousand and seven. Dollars! For a house—not even, for land! Land!”

“The Clark’s also sold,” Earl chipped in. “Couldn’t keep up with payments. New house going in there costs over a million! Or will be, once it’s finished. A million dollars. I don’t know what I’d do with a million dollars, but I wouldn’t build an ugly house—and so far from town too. Must be two miles of driveway, that’s a right and veritable road.”

Durward shook his head. Both families had been in the town for many generations, at least as long as his had. Worst of all, he wasn’t even sure these newcomers would really live here. They might only come up for leaf peeping or when the snow was deep.

“I think Earl’s got you beat John, and I think I’ve got to go. Too much talk of home to be away from mine.” Durward pushed a smile through his words as he made his way back to his truck. Hoisting himself into the driver’s seat, a flash of pain shot through his back. Durward grunted as he white-knuckled the steering wheel before turning the key in the ignition. It’d been a good number of years since he had hurt his back from felling a tree. He had gone to Dr. Johnson, but that poor woman was snowed in with injuries from the six towns she serviced; it took two months after the incident until he could finally meet with her. Short meeting too at that, as she told him it would heal in time but hurt like hell. She prescribed him Percocets, and while the pain had faded, he soon found the pills couldn’t do the same.

Durward drove down the road to the town cemetery, where he gently got out of his truck and hobbled first to his father. The crash happened not over two years ago, after a long night of drinking and long-winded night-talks.

The sun had reached its peak; from now, the day could only fade. Half-melted snow made walking about the graveyard a muddy affair. But Durward had more stones to see. His grandparents were close enough to his father's grave.

Then came George. He had shot himself back when the two were freshly 18. In the last decade, it had been Durward's habit to say hello to his old friend. Though visits had become rare in the last two years, life had become too blurred.

Mucking it back towards the gate, Durward stopped at a smaller stone, with a flat face at a slight angle. "Alice" was the name it bore, clear and unmarked. Not much could hurt the granite in under a year. Durward knelt, his knee sinking into the frigid mud. But he didn't spare a glance down, or a wince at the biting cold. He extended a hand, slowly, as if he were reaching out to pet a wild animal. Six years ago, Alice had badly hurt her hip and needed treatment—a long-lasting treatment. She wasn't in pain now anymore. Durward sat on his knees as the day dimmed, watering the stone. He wouldn't make any more stops. He couldn't. He only worked his way back to his truck.

Outside the house, Durward surveyed the valley below him. The land tilted slowly downwards for a good hundred yards before dropping sharply into a small stream that trickled far below. Across the valley another mountain rose—taller than the one behind Durward's house, and more striking. A small cliff face reflected the sinking sunlight back to Durward's mountain. While maples, oaks, and birches stood now naked across the base of the mountain, spruce, cedar, and fir adorned the peak with the tenacity of old actors whose hair should've faded years ago.

Durward gazed down the road, framed by stark trees. It held the way to the rest of the world, to every future decision.

Durward opened the old door with considered care and stepped into his home. Sitting down on his old chair, the familiar creak once more sounded about the room. Boots off, he made for the basement.

A few well-gifted bucks lined the walls towards a locked door. Inside, a small collection of hi-vis vests and camo jackets hung besides a shotgun, two rifles, and four pistols. One pistol was more of a collectible than anything, barely the size of his wallet. Two others were somewhat unremarkable. But the fourth was a revolver Durward had gotten from his brother a few years prior. A fine gift, its craftsmanship was unrivaled in Durward's collection. The walnut grip bore a dark finish that brought out thick chatoyancy. Durward popped out the wheel. Two chambers were filled with brass, unmarked.

Durward sat out on the salvaged wood porch and stared down the road ahead. Sat long enough for the sun to start to hide behind the rival mountain, casting a warm glow over the familiar landscape. Not more than a yard away from Durward, the Hermit Thrush landed on the porch fence. It hopped about twice before turning one of its wise eyes towards Durward as if to agree,

Yes, today is a good day for it.