

## Fourteen Days

Doakie and I'd been sitting around for more than a month. First it was the blizzard of the century and then the Olympics and after that even *Judge Judy* was good enough. Every day a new drama developed that we could sit through. Doak would hit the stash in the freezer and serve up two bowls of ice cream and we'd scoop it into our waiting mouths, Doak in the Ikea chair and me on the love seat, watching whatever the cable world had to offer. It was nice for the first few weeks. It's great to watch life unfold without having to change out of your pajama pants; fewer clothes to wash and why brush your hair? It makes a person wonder what all the fuss is about.

Doak had checked the internet and made a few calls, but the only places hiring were ski slopes and nursing homes. We'd always tried to keep our expenses low – even when he was working overtime and I had that long run as a barista at C&T's – so once the unemployment checks kicked in we didn't worry about money. We used less water, kept the heat low, and rarely guzzled gasoline or bought anything from the mall. We kept the internet and cable going but dropped our cell phone service because we never left the house. "It's a good life," Doak said to me one morning as he licked the ice cream off his spoon.

When Kingdom Kold downsized its QA department, Innovation and Design offered the laid-off workers as much of the rejected ice cream flavors as they wanted as a bonus. Finally the deep freezer Doak's mother had given us for our wedding had a purpose. We'd eaten through Quaint Quinoa and Palatable Pomegranate (which was really good until you got to the aftertaste) and started on the Avocado Apple. It wasn't

the muddy-green color that turned off the taste-testers, according to Doak. It was the consistency. Even though there wasn't a dime's worth of real avocado in the recipe, there was something about the flavor that made the lips and tongue and gullet suspect.

Al Roker had just kicked it back to our neck of the woods when Doak came into the living room carrying our terracotta-colored bowls and a bag of tortilla chips. "In celebration of Mardi Gras," he said, doing a few two-step moves he'd learned in marching band. "Fat Tuesday, and tomorrow we shall fast."

"Really?" I took the bowl but waved away the chips. "You mean no snacks on Ash Wednesday?"

"No snacks for forty days," Doak said. "I've got to drop ten pounds. I think I'll stop watching the telly, too." He dug the pointed corner of a corn chip into the mound in his bowl. "Of course, you can do what you want."

I floated a spoonful of green ice cream around in my mouth, but the gullet had too much time to consider its plight. I swallowed it down. It came back up. I managed to get it down again. "I'm in," I said, my words sounding gurgly.

We watched the rest of *The Today Show* – all three versions – and then witnessed the snow piling up in Boston; dogs parading in front of a line of judges from the ends of their leashes; two local house fires that had broken out overnight; and five politicians, each claiming their plan was the only way to stop terrorism and get the middle class going again.

I turned off the TV right before *Jeopardy* got started. Doak and I stared at the black screen for a few minutes. Outside a dog barked, obviously at the end of his leash.

When I got out of bed on Ash Wednesday, Doak was watching Norah O'Donnell interview a politician with bad hair. "Mor-ning," I sang, thinking this would encourage Doak's mea culpa. Instead he just said, "Hey."

"What's this?" I asked, my hand open to the TV like I was Vanna freakin' White.

"I decided to go with CBS today, change things up." Doak tapped the arms of his chair. This told me he was aware of his indiscretion.

"Ash Wednesday. No telly for me." I passed through to the kitchen.

"Oh that," Doak said. I could hear the remote scrape along the coffee table, but instead of the air going quiet it switched over to the dulcet tones of Natalie Morales.

Doak watched TV the rest of the morning while I holed up in the bedroom, sulking and sorting through clothes. Eventually, the house went silent and Doak appeared in the doorway. "Lunch?"

We were both thinking about ice cream. All meals either started or ended with ice cream and neither of us wanted to admit it was gone. "I'll pass. Maybe supper."

Before long, sounds from the TV filled the house again. I spent the rest of the day scrubbing the bathroom and rounding up more clothes to wash or donate. Even though he was watching TV, I knew Doak didn't eat any ice cream. I'd lived long enough with the sounds of the freezer opening, scoop in carton, spoon in bowl. Doak stayed clean.

Later, Doak made a pot of spaghetti and sat down in front of the *Nightly News*. I started to eat in the kitchen but then he called out, "Okay, okay. It's off." I wandered into the quiet living room and we sat in our chairs, opposite sides of the room, looking up at the blank screen out of habit. It was almost as depressing as the terrorists.

"I'm giving up ice cream," Doak said, "but not TV."

“Fine,” I said, winding the noodles around my fork, “but I’m giving up TV, too.”

I reminded myself it was day one. “At least I’m going to try.”

Doak’s eyes looked dull. He took a deep breath. “I’ll miss you,” he said.

“Try to keep it turned down.” I took his plate into the kitchen. Before the orange sauce swirled down the drain, the television-talk started back up. I could tell something was being said but not the words. Irritating as hell.

“Stupid idea,” Doak said to me when I passed through to the bedroom where I crawled into bed.

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A few days in, the house felt airless; cold despite heat pumping through the pipes, stagnant despite all my moving from room to room. One day, I refolded t-shirts and shorts that I wouldn’t wear for months; another day, I tossed out jars of makeup and toe lotions. Occasionally, I’d pull back a curtain to see what I could see. Snow. Snow. More snow.

The television’s drone provided constant background; a fluctuating hum of judgment like some snarky ghost had invaded our home. Oh, there were times when I felt superior to the TV and the man watching it non-stop. He wasn’t fortified with four garbage bags stuffed with donations for the Salvation Army, supplying perfectly good sustenance to people who happened to be thinner than me. Doak’s prescriptions for rash cream and antibiotics past the expiration date had been shoved into their own little corner of the bathroom cabinet, pitifully obsolete, while my old meds had been dumped into a Ziploc bag, waiting for their demise in the pool of medical waste in the lobby of the police station across from Sheetz.

By the end of the first week, a collection of my outdated, outmoded, outgrown possessions was piled into the corner of the spare room, which really wasn't so spare; Doak and I used it for CDs, books, mementos, an oak end table with a wobbly leg, two mismatched filing cabinets, Doak's old tuba and my clarinet. I suppose the entire room could've been considered obsolete, but keeping that stuff seemed to give my life purpose. It gave me something to dust.

It was a Thursday, fourteen days in, when I passed through the living room to the kitchen for a cup of morning coffee. Past Doak with his feet up on the coffee table, past the 55-inch flat screen, barely taking a glimpse at the square-headed sports announcers yelling at each other in murmured tones. It wasn't until I was at the sink pouring coffee that I noticed the snow. Snow coming down in flakes that looked like God's angels were freeing wads of cotton from the mouths of outdated aspirin bottles. Don't get me wrong, snow was nothing new. Snow had been in our lives every day since, well, since long before the forty day moratorium. For some reason this snow, falling poetically to the ground, made me furious. Hot in all the wrong places. Crazy-sick for ice cream. Just like that.

"They're naming them now," Doak said, bare heels stepping on the frayed bottoms of his pajama pants as he made his way to the coffee pot. "Like hurricanes. Winter storm Larry, I think this one is."

"Seriously? Larry?" I wasn't sure whether Doak was trying humor on me or not. He'd made a habit of sharing with me various details he'd seen on TV throughout the day, as a way to make conversation and stay connected, I suppose. We actually talked more now. In the past we'd both watched the same things, so there wasn't much to say.

Every once in a while an opinion would pop out, but generally we'd sit on our opposing chairs silently. I looked out at the falling cotton balls. "Seems to me we should be at Zeke by now," I said, "or Donna Diane."

Doak nodded. "Double letters," he said, and I don't think either of us knew whether our conversation was genuine or not. "They don't name all of them, although I haven't heard the criteria yet."

The ghost was spouting some weird reverberations, and I couldn't figure out what Doak had been watching. I wanted to ask, the origin of the sounds unfamiliar and disturbing like noises in the middle of the night. But not only did I not want to refer to the television – a sign of weakness – but I wanted to pretend I'd obliterated it from my consciousness. Like the ice cream. It should be easy to stop cravings for Avocado Apple ice cream.

"I'm going out," I said.

"Really?" I hated the way Doak said it, like it was breaking news, something to be applauded or capable of causing alarm.

I didn't offer any explanation. I gathered up the garbage bags, dropped the baggie of pills into my purse, slipped into my winter coat with the mittens in the pockets, and headed out to the front porch. The bright light did to my eyes what the first bite of ice cream does as it courses through the brain and jaws; it was an invading force.

Three feet of snow surrounded the car parked along Benton Avenue except near the trunk where there were four feet. I dropped my purse and the garbage bags onto the least-snow-covered part of the porch and grabbed the shovel leaning against the house. I dug my way along the vague hollows from what was once the mailman's path. It

occurred to me we hadn't gotten mail for days. Maybe the wayward dog had broken from his leash.

Even though the snow around the car was deep, I convinced myself it was a surmountable obstacle. Shoveling made me warm up considerably, and by the time I made it to the car, the wind felt good on my neck where I'd unzipped the collar on my coat. If I could just get inside, I could drive my way out. I jammed the shovel into the pristine snow-mound near the driver's door. But even though the snow was white and fluffy and innocent-looking on top, what emerged after all the fluff fell away was dirty rotten ice.

I took a couple hacks at it. A few grimy clumps hit the snow-covered street and bounced down the hill. After a few more tries I decided I didn't want to dent the car and gave up. That's it. I gave up. My muscles felt like they'd turned to dough; spongy, heavy and worthless. I hadn't worked them too hard; they didn't want to work. Just a few hacks around the ice-packed car convinced me of my inability to take care of things. I headed back along the narrow path I'd shoveled, which was already crumbling at the edges.

Doak had been right; me trying to accomplish something was breaking news. Of the pitiful sort.

*Doakie.* I couldn't bear to go inside and see my failure in his eyes as they looked up from the pale light of the television.

I dug around in the garbage bag for the heaviest clothing I could find and laid corduroy pants and a wool blazer on the top step. Even my purse felt heavy as I carried it to my makeshift perch. I pulled out the baggie, tilting it from side to side to watch the pills slide from one end to the other like a faded kaleidoscope. There were pain pills in

the mix, a couple doses of antibiotics. Maybe something would kick in. I closed my eyes, stuck in a snow-covered mitten and out came three pills.

A couple of snowflakes landed on my tongue when I stuck it out to lick the off-white pill. Bitter. Like the penicillin I used to have trouble swallowing when I was a kid, my mother grinding up the tablet in a spoon to mix with grape juice. It didn't matter what she did, I could always taste it. Now the pill began to dissolve in the pool of snowflake juice on my tongue. I spit everything into the baggie, wiggled the mitten until the other two pills fell in, too, and spit in the bag one more time for good measure.

I was working to quell that old nauseous feeling when a bicycle appeared at the top of Benton Avenue hill, clearly out of control, legs and arms flailing, feet dragging through the slush. As they got closer – there were two pairs of all body parts as far as I could tell, except for two singular cartoon faces jammed under nubby hats – there was something I recognized, something I'd once experienced for myself. The kid up front looked over at me, eyes wide, mouth open, and squealed in that youthful way that could either mean joy or terror or both. I jumped up and hurried toward them, determined to do something.

The bike skidded toward me. Before I could get out of the way, a bare hand reached out and grabbed the sleeve of my coat. It only tugged for a moment, just long enough for me to notice the swollen knuckles the color of Palatable Pomegranate clutching my sleeve before I lost my balance and fell. I rolled a few times. My face met with slush.



The screams continued down and away from me. I looked up in time to watch the tail end of the bicycle careen down Benton Avenue until a mound of piled-up snow seemed to pull it in. The bike swerved toward it and disappeared. Gone. White. Silence.

I sat as still as I could, as if I were waiting on a bird. I heard one. Somewhere up in some snow-capped tree a bird was chirping. Not excited and bubbling like in spring, but a few basic calls. I didn't budge at the scraping sounds from a plow a few streets below. After it passed, I could hear another couple of birds. And silence.

Silence like I'd never heard it before. Silence that wrapped itself around things, around other sounds and walls and trees. It settled deep inside the snow. It was white like the pure stuff. It covered over the earth. Silence came down on me like a blessing. Like an assurance that no matter how I might forget, it was there, in between the spaces, out among the stars.

I dusted off my ass and trudged up to the path I'd made. I took two deep steps into the yard where the snow hadn't been disturbed. I scooped some off the top, gathering it into my mittened hands. Sparkly little caves formed as the glittering snow tumbled from the top of the heap. I carefully shifted the snow into my left mitten so I could turn the knob and get inside the house.

Doak had his feet up on the table, his eyes on the TV and his face far away. He cleared his throat. "You back?"

I held my mittened hands over the 55-inch flat screen TV and opened them, so that loose snow floated down onto the screen. Some of what I'd gathered had clumped together and stuck to the fibers of my mittens, so I picked off the tiny balls and tossed

them, aiming directly at a particularly ugly talking head. I couldn't hear him, though. All I heard was the silence.

I didn't look, but knew Doak had gotten up from the couch and had made his way into the kitchen. I heard scraping drawers and banging cabinets, but then I refused to let it in. I only listened to the snow. I remembered about the silence.

Doakie came back carrying two terracotta-colored bowls. In each was a spoon and a mound of ice cream. He offered one to me, and I gathered it into my mittens. He raised his bowl up near his eyes, as if he were making a toast. "Time to get real," Doak said.

I stood still, as if waiting for a bird. Doak reached down and clicked off the TV. I could hear the silence. It danced with the flavor in my mouth.

And not Avocado Apple, either. Chocolate. Creamy, decadent chocolate.

Doak said it. Time to get real.

The End