

She lived in a small cottage on the edge of a small town in the mountains of Montana, with three dogs and four cats rescued from the pound. (This was 1984 -- pre-shelter, when strays were put to death within days of capture). She lived alone, relishing her solitude, her books and music, dating desultorily, not really interested; the only one who did interest her was married. So, with her mother worrying her heels, she meandered toward thirty-three alone, neither happy nor sad.

She worked alone in a windowless cube in the basement of the courthouse in the center of town. She had the worst office in the building, everyone agreed. Concrete-block, 8x8x8, on one side, the probation officer, on the other, the jail. Sometimes she could hear the prisoners -- arguing, watching TV, weeping. She had tried, futilely, to lighten the atmosphere with paisley shawls on the lumpy sofa, movie posters on the bilious ochre walls, odd thrift-store lamps to replace the nasty fluorescence overhead, a boom-box to cover the sounds from the jail. She was a counselor for teenagers entangled with the law and drugs. They were as thrilled as she about coming to the courthouse basement, so she often moved the sessions outside: to the banks of the river when it was warm, or deserted coffee shops when it grew chill. Still, she had to spend far too much time in The Cell -- filling out endless forms, trying to document in detail what refused to be categorised, at least in the categories she had been given.

On a hot Friday afternoon in September, scribbling madly toward deadline, surrounded by bulging files, one eye on the clock, one ear on John Lennon, she was interrupted by a short sharp knock and the fire chief, police chief and the building inspector all marched in together to inform her that she must, immediately, remove the lamps and cassette player -- the electrical cord was not up to code, she was disturbing her neighbors and overloading the circuits. Were they serious? She'd known the fire and police chief forever, so she began teasing, cajoling, and tho they smiled, they held their ground, as the building inspector, who(m) she didn't know, had never met, stood unmoving behind them, and quoted the code, verbatim. They *were* serious. They waited while she turned off the music, turned off the lamps, unplugged everything and turned the bad overhead light back on.

After they left, she looked around, then quit for the day, left the mess, locked the door and then stopped by the staff lounge to find out who this latest irritating fool might be. Nobody seemed to know. He wasn't local -- somewhere Back East -- Chicago? Buffalo? Flint? -- people weren't sure; the mayor seemed to have plucked him out of thin air. He was already rattling cages: the Chamber of Commerce was ballistic over his rabid code enforcement -- fire exits, sprinkler systems, yadayada, all sorts of expensive bureaucratic bullshit. One guy, who had expected to inherit the job, showed her a memo that the new man had written -- she saw that it was well-thought-out and well-phrased but geez, what horrible spelling... On Monday, she ran into him in the hall and as they walked, she tried again to explain her position, her work, how stifling the space was. He seemed sympathetic but repeated his mantra: priority of safety, legitimacy of code, the ultimately greater claim of the ethical over the aesthetic. Irritating. She feigned an appointment and turned away. As she unlocked the door to her office, she glanced back at him walking away down the hall. What hideous plaid pants! But she couldn't help notice his bearing and his stride and his ass. Somehow that made the plaid pants even uglier.

She got used to seeing him in the halls and around town, the grocery store, the bars. He'd stop for a minute to chat politics or movies or music before moving on. Her sister and mother wanted to know who he was.

“Is he rich? Is he famous? Is he following you?”

“Oh, no, no ... he’s just the code enforcement guy.”

Winter came. Another Friday afternoon. She had left work early and was perched on a barstool in a quiet bar, sipping wine, and reading Germaine Greer: “If women liberate themselves, they...liberate their oppressors ... Woman is bound by a million Lilliputian threads ...however far we can see it is not far enough ... But desire and companions for the journey is as far as we need to see ... The first task of the free woman is to design her own revolt ...” She smiled and reached for her wine -- and then saw *him* coming in the door. Damn it. She kept her head down, her shoulder up, her book open. He sat down anyway. She set the bookmark, closed the book. He said, “interesting reading” and called for more wine.

“What are *you* reading?” she asked. He opened his book: “ ‘Be ahead of all parting, as though it already were/behind you, like the winter just gone by./For among these winters there is one so endlessly winter/that only by wintering through will your heart survive./... Here, in the realm of decline, among momentary days,/be the crystal cup that shattered even as it rang.’”

The waiter came around lighting candles. It was evening. She looked up and saw the two of them in the mirror behind the bar, everything doubled and reversed, glasses glinting and sparking, bottles of liqueur glowing amber, topaz, carnelian. The moon was rising, it was snowing, it was going to snow, she was of several minds ... He said “Shall we walk?” and they went out into the street and down toward the river, talking of Quan Yin, the Bodhisattva Sister of Compassion, sentenced by her father to serve in Hell and yet playing music which filled the barren Underworld with blossom.

She turned toward him, she saw -- suddenly close and clear in the darkness, just inches from her eyes, inches from her lips -- she saw his ear, and the laughter lines at the edge of his eyes, and his silvered hair, twisting and lifting from his brow, flowing along his temple, brushing his cheek and then back, back round the lustrous rosy spiral of his ear, which somehow caught sound -- music and wind and words, even *her* words -- and took them in, letting them flow, descending down somewhere deep within himself. He reached for her hand and they stepped off the curb, into the gathering dark, into the coming storm, the snowflakes like stars in their hair.