

## The Winter Police

I'd been storing rainwater for months. Mom's old rain barrel, half the height of the house, was full. Hops that refused to die covered it completely. Three trees shaded it. Only a little healthier than the others, those three would become conspicuous when all else yellowed. They survived because of my scant watering, but also because they were bunched together. Like Kent, Mitch and me.

No ice for thirty years, no snow for twenty, we'd lived with the water rations for a decade. My rainwater contained too many toxins for human consumption, but the trees welcomed what I could spare.

The thin squeal of an electric golf cart alerted me.

"Get in, quick," I said, checking for eyes in the back alley as Kent trundled an antique refrigeration unit into my greenhut door.

"Anyone out there?" Mitch said from inside, taking one side of the box to help Kent.

"Only a magpie," I said. The last kind of city bird, saved by an ability to eat anything.

"Hey sis, you got enough water?" asked Kent.

"Shh." I whispered at Kent despite the possibility of sound biters or photo prods even in our residential lane. I closed the door. "Enough for four solid inches."

"I did the math," Mitch said. "We siphoned a sample with old garden hose last night. A little green with algae buildup, but Sonia's bleach got rid of it."

I'd saved the bleach, now contraband, from Mom's things, along with our skates, woolen socks, shovels and skis.

"I brought paint for the lines," Kent said. His wife Maggie painted. It helped keep her sane because she hardly left their apartment.

As a registered grower, I had a greenhut covering most of the yard and regular drop-offs of plant liquid (that's what they called grey water) for the crop, mostly marijuana, because it had the best value. People were less interested in eating than staying high. Without water or wind, all food production happened indoors: hydroponics like my greenhut and indoor animal sequestration yards. Outside, a few untended trees with deep roots survived each drier, warmer year ("warmer" was a euphemism). Air conditioning was outlawed, as was refrigeration, so everybody lined up for half-rotten food doled out at central "cold" stations. Food lost its nutritive value by the time we procured it. Getting high to feel hungry enough to eat was the new normal.

Mitch, Kent and I had built my greenhut over Mom's outdoor swimming pool. Dry for years, of course, and illegal way before Mom got sick. Near the end, her only solace was floating in that pool, her red bathing cap on, her wiry body always tanned, one of us on the lookout. The pool, only filled to three feet, remained covered at all times, even with her in it. Especially with her in it.

We waited until the red and blue lines dried and then Kent turned on the refrigeration unit and flooded the pool floor.

The plan came to me when, at the bottom of Mom's skate bin, I found my double-bladed toddler skates and hugged them to my chest and sobbed. All through the rations, impositions,

fines and fault-finding, I hadn't cried. Those rusty little skates gave me the guts to build the rink for Kent's daughter and my niece, the only grandchild. Mom never met May.

We opened a trap door in the corner of the greenhut and descended a vertical swim ladder seven feet to the pool floor. It had been a lane pool, so there was no deep end, perfect for a rink. No one, not even Kent's wife, knew. Only us three.

Mitch decided to video the process: loonie at centre ice, oldtime slogans painted on the walls (remember Mountain Dew, Molson Canadian or Air Canada?), and one raggedy net we liberated from the dump by feeding potcookies to already lethargic watchdogs. I repaired the net; Mom, who taught me to sew, guided my hand. Mitch uploaded his video on an obscure revolutionary platform, *Winter*. To us, winter meant falling snow. The flicker of flakes on our tongues. We loved the fresh promise of snow. As children, we made tracks with our boots on fantastical sparkling crystals. We made paths with our shovels, creatures from snow boulders and ice slides with our sleds. In winter, children could alter the landscape. We wanted to share that magic with May.

As kids, Kent and I and Mitch played hockey on Dad's backyard rink. Mitch hung out at our place in summer, too, because of the pool. Mom taught us all to swim, even though it was obvious to her that neither swimming nor skating had any future as recreational sports. For a time, the very elite were chosen for government careers—not the exorbitant sums of the old hockey leagues, but a circus job at low pay. People did it for the love of the game. I sure would have if they'd asked me. But now pools and rinks were completely outlawed. To swim now, people had to walk out many kilometres from the crumbling coastline to the stinking ocean (iceberg melt had long ago raised sea levels, and dropped equally fast when worldwide precipitation dwindled). To avoid garbage and plastic islands, a full drysuit, oxygen tank and

sealed headgear were required. Only the very wealthy ever ventured out. Rivers were bare rocks. Lakes, cracked mud. The words for creek, pond, stream, waterfall, glacier, iceberg—hardly used—became endangered.

Because of Mitch's video posts, the ice room meme went viral within minutes and thousands of people requested guides on how to build one.

Mitch provided information without revealing our location.

But people found us anyway. The kind in uniform, envop cops, checking this and that with vague non-orders.

"They have memories, too," said Mitch. "Some are old enough, and the younger ones have all heard stories." Ever the optimist, Mitch. That's why I loved him.

"They've noticed the energy spike," I said. Electricity, exclusively solar powered, was strictly monitored. I wish we'd had the materials to set up our own, off-grid energy, but solar panels were no longer being produced, nothing was, so we had no access.

"Turn off your grow lights for a few hours a night. That will confuse them. Sun's freaking hot enough," Kent said.

But the same two guys, a rookie and one my age, came back. They sampled the weed. (Mitch, Kent and I never did, but I kept a stash for when any of us faced the end; I'd bought it for Mom to relieve her pain, which generated the decision to grow it). The cops hung out for hours, watching me work, getting in the way. I pictured May the first time we took her down to the rink. How her eyes had twinkled! Her hands clapped the faded mittens knitted by Mom for Kent, lifting up scrapings from the shovel Kent used to smooth the surface of the ice. I so wanted to let her lick them, but gently redirected her handful of ice to her cheek instead to feel the coolness, the wet. The rising colour in her face, the same hue as the mittens. A mitten fell off and the

crystals melted into droplets in her little hot hand. She pushed a chair across the length of the ice, then pulled off her kiddie skates and her socks and shoes and squealed at bare feet on ice before Kent scooped her up and pretended to nibble her chilly toes. I kept May's giggling in my ear now to keep me calm, fight fear.

In prison, there were no fans. They were legal in your home, as long as you kept under your kilowatt max. In prison, part of the punishment was roasting like a meat on a stick (totally illegal now, a carbon crime (wieners did not exist because there was no processed food). The penal code had narrowed exclusively to environmental infractions. People could do whatever they liked to each other, and some did, but most were occupied by subsistence. There were no schools or hospitals anymore, but most folks helped each other because that was the only way to survive. Our refrigeration unit counted as an earth crime, bad as the retro chest freezers some oldsters kept plugged in during the heat of the day, and climbed into at night for a few hours of cool rest. There was zero tolerance for the ultimate form of greed, staying cool from energy-sucking air conditioning or possessing carbon-emitting refrigeration. The penalty comprised a short stint in prison, fed only from waste trucks and work without rest on the power stations until demise.

“What's this?” One of the officers fingered Kent's red plaid jacket, once our Dad's, hanging from the hook on the wall, not properly hidden by my silicon apron. About twenty-two, the curious one kept a carefully trimmed beard. (Shaving was no longer permitted, along with baths, showers, diuretics including coffee, tea and alcohol of all kinds. And children.)

“My brother's. A relic. He wants me to make a pillow out of it,” I said. Reuse of any kind was not only promoted but essential because manufacturing, innovation, industry—all of it—halted.

The cop sniffed the jacket. “It’s been worn recently.” He handed it to his partner. This one, bald with a Santa beard, was old enough to recognize the smell of wet wool.

Kent had recently left after putting down another layer of rink water. The plaid sleeve must have come undone at the cuff and dipped in the hose.

“Yup.” The old guy took another whiff and was gone, remembering. His eyes fluttered closed. His stern mouth relaxed into a grin.

“I’m sorry. I must have spilled,” I sputtered.

But it was no use. The hoses gurgled, dripping plant liquid from a computerized tank. The system was ultra-efficient, designed not to waste a drop.

“Her juice,” Mitch said. Fruit juice was legal, if you could find a bearing tree. Most people drank the hydration concentrate supplied by the government. No one knew what was in it, but a chemist on another website, *Black Hole*, had done a test and found six hundred substances, many unrecognized by her.

“What kind of juice?” the younger one asked, salivating.

“Apple,” Mitch continued, showing the heritage tree we’d moved inside the greenhut to prevent it from scorching. The healthy specimen graced a huge pot that covered the trap door. Mitch pointed out seven apples, almost ripe.

“Want one?” I asked.

The young one wrote that down and ignored me, but the older one flinched, reaching his hand out involuntarily, tempted.

“What do you do about bees?” he said, feeling the apple, its weight, its gloss. Fondling it, but careful to leave it on the branch. Old enough to remember the magic of bees. I showed my pollinating brush. It used to be for makeup. That became an off-list manufacturing item rather

late; women didn't want to let go of cosmetics, but I had, long before the change in my own body (a heartbreak after many miscarriages), never mind the parching of the world. The old guy stood uncomfortably close to me.

“She's got ketones.” He was smelling my breath; everyone smelled of ketones because of universal dehydration. “Not apple juice.” He was salivating.

“Let's look around some more,” said his partner.

Mitch and I stood as far away from the apple tree as possible, trying not to cling to each other. I mourned those seven apples. They'd be stolen before we were strapped in the barred police van. They were meant for May.

The officers searched the floor. It was made of scrap wood. The younger one felt, on his hands and knees, for drips, which led him to the trap door, not entirely covered with the tree pot as I'd instructed Kent, over and over.

Oh no. Kent. I had mentioned my brother, and he had an illegal child, which is why his wife Maggie never went out and had never seen or heard of the ice room. If Kent was caught, he and Maggie would be shipped to hard labour. May had pale hair and skin but strong limbs from an inside exercise gym created by Kent, a skylight and the baby veggies I cultivated in pockets between the marijuana. May, not a chosen child permitted to the wealthiest, healthiest and smartest people alive, would be executed.

The officers reached the bottom of the ladder.

Mitch moved to lock them down there.

I shook my head. We couldn't have another charge against us. And they had zapguns, which stunned through doors, walls; they had camera optics to call the street unit in milliseconds even if they were killed.

So we went down the ladder, too, to feel the cold for the last time.

“Saw this on *Winter*,” said the young guy, impressed.

“Me, too,” the old guy said. Most of the world’s population had access to Internet, but only thirty percent had water. “It’s beautiful. You’ve done a remarkable thing.”

“Too bad it’s going to cost you. Never been on a case like this before—could be fatal.”

Mitch and I had calculated our risk as twenty-five years each—more than we expected to live, so we had accepted it for the sake of our niece. But Kent was only forty-five, his wife thirty, May two.

Mitch said, “You want to shoot a few while you’re here?” He pointed to the hockey sticks, taped and retaped, the puck, hockey gloves, the restrung net.

“Oh, yeah,” said the old one.

“This could be like an interactive hyperexperience. VR isn’t the same at all.” The young guy swung for a slap shot, and it hit the boards.

“The sound. It’s the same sound!” The older officer laughed. He threw off his police hat, as if he’d scored a goal, dropped his gloves, pumped the air with his fist.

Kent’s skates fit one, and Mitch’s fit the other, but both stumbled numerous times and had to hold on to us. They were both working so hard that they didn’t cool down right away in the subzero air. Euphoria glazed their eyes; glee pitched their calls and echoes. The officers’ exuberant, spread-eagle hilarity pitted the ice, and I made a mental note for Kent to repair it. Then I remembered our fate. When the winter police emerged from their skating party, Mitch and I would lose this tiny world. We’d lose each other.



The bald one leaned on his stick as if listening to the pre-game national anthem and studied the artifacts on the walls: snowshoes, ice auger, toboggan, figure skates. “You know, Jake,” he said, “this is a living museum.”

“People would pay to come here,” said Mitch. “They’d come from long distances.” Mitch still tried. I loved that he tried to save the underground rink.

The cops suddenly stopped playing. They stood tall in the skates.

Especially Jake. He had gained enough balance to look us up on his phone. An NHL referee now, wide stance, checking facts via his screen. “They have 80,000 followers. This could be your retirement project, Buddy.”

I said, “How did you find us?”

Without looking up from his phone, Jake said, “Your brother. He confessed when we questioned him in the lane. Wet shirtsleeve.”

“He’s in the van,” Buddy said without looking at me. I melted to mush inside.

I wished Kent was on Hell’s Subway by now (a last-ditch effort to save families, connected by cyberthwarts and safety phishnets). Maybe he got a message to Maggie to run with May.

“Why would he turn in his sister and brother-in-law? Because it turns out, he has a kid.” Jake said it with envy and awe, as if a child, any child, could save the planet.

“We need him, too.” Ruddy from the refrigerated air, Buddy looked at me directly and said, “We didn’t take away his phone.”

I almost collapsed from gratitude, but Mitch pulled me to him.

As relief flooded our bodies head to toe, Buddy, with new energy of a person half his age, paused from lacing his boots. “So I protect us from the high-up heat, you two and your brother

work on water, machinery and ice maintenance and whiz kid here brings in the customers.” He pointed to Jake. They locked eyes like two men jumping off a cliff.

Mitch clasped my hand. “People need this,” he said.

A shiver, a really good one, went up my spine. This one cooled me right to my scalp. Maggie and May must be gone. With them went our purpose for the ice room. May’s red mittens, strung together, hung around a framed photo of Wayne Gretzky, Mom’s favourite hockey player.

But this was for everyone. I should have known that from the beginning. I squeezed Mitch’s hand with all the passion I had for him and our worn world.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s get Kent.”

We didn’t argue about the money. People threw it around like dead leaves now. The winter police shook freezing hands with us, then led the way back up the ladder.

They never did find out why Kent was no longer in the van. I found a message in our designated place under the three trees that hid the rain barrel. He’d slithered out a poorly patched rust hole under the floor mat and took Maggie and May to the mountains. If there is one place they could live, it is there. Many have tried.

When we were all underground on the rink, the cops were friends with Mitch and me, as if we were able opponents, which we were, at least, on skates. Off the rink, we remained business partners. Until one day, when a guest warned that someone had snitched on us. Mitch and I hastily packed to find Kent in the mountains and Buddy agreed to come, too. But Jake said we’d given him back his youth.

“The rink keeps me alive.” He stayed behind to cover our tracks, lay low and someday reopen the rink. “Take care of May.”