

My First Winter in Massachusetts

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

My first winter in Massachusetts feels medieval: cold, dark, and endless. I drive to my job teaching English at the local high school early in the morning when only a trickle of car lights crosses the bridge spanning the Boreal's path through the village of Carleton. The road runs alongside the wide, icy river and up the ridge born of it. Below in the village white smoke hangs as if frozen over chimneys. Some windows shine orange or yellow, but most of them are dark. In the weak half-light the houses look like they're made of stone, like tombs, like the dead here outnumber the living thousands to one.

In the village a giant white church sits with authority at one end of the green. On top of the steeple an angel balances on her tiptoes, her wings unfurled like she's about to step off into air and fly. I can see her from a window in my apartment in a Victorian house where my dog and I live on the ground floor.

My landlord is stingy with heat so at night I do schoolwork sitting in bed, the covers up to my neck, my hands stiff. Tonight it feels even colder than usual. Thinking how crazy it is to be this cold inside, I head for the closet to get my gloves.

As I pass the bathroom, I see long white fingers raising the window next to the tub. The fingers cup the sash and lift it as I watch. I run out to the hallway and stairs leaving my dog fast asleep on the living room rug.

Upstairs I bang on a door. A woman lets me in and I tell her someone is breaking in my bathroom. She opens a window and a man looks up. The outside light isn't on and we can't see his face well but snow is falling right in his eyes and he doesn't flinch. The woman yells "Get the Hell out of here!" and he walks away.

Two policemen come. One of them tightens the bulb and the light comes on. My dog wakes and barks. She didn't hear the guy. He was quiet even though he'd forced off the storm window with something sharp. The police show me where the wood has been gouged. On the ground snow falls on footprints and jagged splinters.

Several months ago my landlord had asked me if I'd been unscrewing the bulb to keep the outside light from coming in tiny cracks where the shade isn't quite flush against the window. I hadn't.

The guy has been here many nights, inches away from me while I bathed. If I'd looked behind the shade I'd have seen his breath moving over the glass.

