

Drift

by Gary Moshimer

I was at Mike's place when the call came. My brother sounded so accusing that I wanted to punch him in the face. But he was way upstate. "Dad *died* today," he said, as if I could have somehow known or prevented it. It was sudden. A heart attack. He was shoveling snow.

The guilt or the dope we'd been smoking sent my heart rate over 200. Mike took my pulse. We both worked at the hospital. He sat me on the couch. We'd all been drinking rum and cokes and smoking dope all day because of the snow. Drifts were piled outside, halfway up the windows. No one was going anywhere at least until tomorrow. I had my sleeping bag. I was a 24-year-old with a Snoopy sleeping bag.

I sat there on the couch and almost laughed. Just minutes ago we'd been giggling away at the TV. I was not going to cry. My father had sealed his words and emotions in. Over the last few years we'd drifted apart. He'd moved into a different bedroom away from my mother. Inside he churned, and had to be sawing or ripping things or shoveling, as if trying to get to the bottom of something.

"I need some air," I said, jumping up. "I guess I should start driving up there." I walked right outside in my sneakers with no coat. It had stopped snowing but the wind made the world outside into one of those globes. The cars parked on the street looked like a row of white cakes under the streetlights. When I stepped off the porch the snow was over my knees. I had no sensation of cold or anything.

"Don't be crazy, man," Doug said, standing on the porch. The snowdrifts stole his voice, absorbed it into their complete silence. I thought about such a silence I had known one other time, long ago, but couldn't put my finger on it.

"Get a shovel," I told him. "I have to start digging out."

"That's just crazy. Your heart will burst like the old man's." The night was doing its best to steal Doug away, suffocating his words

and footsteps, making him into a ghost behind me. I would have to do this myself.

I charged stiff-legged through the snow to my little Fiat. It was a fluffy snow. That would make it easier. Opening the door made half a snow angel on the street. The inside of the car acted like a vacuum, sucking in wind and white powder. I got in and shut the door. The silence and darkness had the completeness of a tomb. This would be a way to go, sitting in a car as it became just another drift that no one could recognize as a car, gradually going to sleep, going numb like a junkie.

That other quiet time was right on the tip of my brain. Why was I blocking it?

My peace was ruined by the hand brushing snow from my window. It wore the black glove of an intruder. Doug's leather knuckles rapped with the same impatient rhythm as my out-of-control heart. His baritone outside the window was meaningless. He seemed far away. He opened the door.

"Come on. You know we're stuck here." He took my arm. Doug was a big black man, an orderly used to dealing with difficult and frightened people. He pulled me out while making it seem like not pulling. "Come on and tell us about your father." He led me back to the house. I could still feel my heart struggling. I thought that if we could just stop and stand really still, we would eventually be drifts ourselves. But it would take a hell of a lot of snow to cover Doug.

The wind blew crystals against my face and into my mouth. My old man had once worked in a mine, and crystals of something had lodged in his lungs and brain. They had made him drift away from us, into his own silent world, like an autistic man. I wanted to get a shovel and feverishly clear all this snow by myself while raging inside, like he would do. That would be a kind of tribute. But I lost the will under Doug's strong hand.

They took my pants and gave me Mike's terry-cloth robe. They put me back on the couch. It was late. Or early in the morning. Mike's wife was wearing her robe now, which matched mine. I had the embroidered 'M' and she had the 'B.' Doug stood in the hallway

brushing snow off his legs and Mike was talking to him in a low voice. Sitting next to me, Mike's wife hugged me. I rested my head on her shoulder, looking down, away from her dangerously close and beautiful face. Her robe tented out in front and I saw her whole right breast, six inches from my face. This was unbelievable. No one knew but me. Or maybe she did know, and was presenting it as a gift to comfort me. Isn't that what a breast is for, to soothe the crying child? But I would not cry. The breast was still perfectly shaped, even though she was forty. I had often fantasized about her breasts and now one stared me in the eye on the day my father died. Because I couldn't cry I started to laugh. Then I got a boner. On the day my father died I saw my friend's wife's breast and got a boner and laughed.

Slowly Mike's wife began to giggle, and then Mike and Doug started in. We were still stoned, after all. The breast started to jiggle. I put one hand over my lap and pressed the front of her robe closed with the other. No one seemed to notice.

We laughed until tears rolled down our cheeks.

"My father was a jerk," I managed to say, at some point, which made us laugh even harder. "He stopped talking to us years ago."

Finally they stopped laughing, but I couldn't. My diaphragm was in a spasm. I couldn't get a breath in. The edges of my vision started to get dark. Mike's wife came back with a little pill and put it in my mouth. "This will help," she said. When she stretched me out on the couch I didn't know if my boner was still sticking up, but she suddenly yanked the belt of her robe tight, which made me think of a noose around my neck.

Soon that pill kicked in and I started to drift. I fell weightless through the black night like a snowflake. The memory of that other silent place came to me then, as I let my guard down.

There was a snowstorm. I was six years old. Our old garage was one big snowdrift. I tunneled my way inside it and was playing around when the roof buckled and buried me under a ton of snow. Then the roof and walls collapsed, sounding violent, but I didn't feel it with the snow as a shock absorber. When everything was done

falling the silence was complete. An old scrap of car hood held the snow away from my face, but the metal was slowly inching closer to me. I yelled for the longest time, and the metal seemed to amplify my voice. But it moved closer, so I decided to be quiet.

After a while I heard my father calling. "Bud? Buddy!" I was his buddy back then. He played with me ferociously. He wasn't going to lose me. "I'm coming!"

He did it all by himself, driven by the miner's fear of suffocation. Sawing, prying, smashing, digging. When he got close I could hear his breathing, strident like a cry. Light began to filter through the snow, but I was falling away from it. I was going away and almost gone when the black glove burst through and brought me back.

