

The Anniversary

by Kimberlee Smith

Brenda peels back the stiff black wipers that are fused to the old Honda's windshield under a sheath of ice. She squints through her dead husband Martin's glasses—they're not her prescription, they're just a hair off—and the world is distorted in a trippy, fun-house kind of way, without the fun part. She clenches the scraper and stabs its perfectly jagged yellow teeth at the window to break up the ice, thinking it might just be possible to crack the safety glass. Anything's possible now.

“It would have melted on its own if I warmed up engine, but now we'll just have to make do,” says Brenda to her daughter Lettie, who's been waiting in the car for ten minutes already. Brenda chucks the ice scraper, with its newly busted teeth, on the floor behind the driver's seat.

“Maybe it's time to put the car in the garage again, it's just too cold out here,” says Lettie, but Brenda just blinks hard and stays quiet.

The garage is a place Brenda maybe won't *ever* go back in, unless she has to, for packing up and moving someday. She forces the comfort on herself that Lettie must know some guys from the high school who would jump at making a few bucks to load up a U-Haul when it comes time.

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She sees Martin in her mind's eye, envisioning when it happened, just that New Years Eve. After shutting the car door, the keys fell out of his hand. He collapsed, slapping flat on the concrete garage floor, splayed like a facedown snow angel. Lettie bent over him, hinged at the waist at a 90-degree angle, screaming for her mother, even though Brenda was right there. She tripped jumping towards Martin, nearly landing on him.

Brenda's glasses flew off her face then she slammed down flat on her knees, crushing the lenses into thousands of shards that

embedded in her skin. She was wobbly in the dressy black pumps she never got used to walking in—never mind hurdling stacked paint cans, a toolbox, and a fifty-pound bag of cat food in them to reach her unconscious husband.

She shook Martin by the shoulders, then pressed her face against his flat-lined heart.

After the EMT arrived, strapped Martin to a gurney, and wheeled him into the ambulance, someone rolled the garage door shut. Neither Brenda nor Lettie has gone back in since. Not even for the jumbo bag of cat food. Along with the steady stream of sympathy casseroles and cakes, a jumbo bag of cat food was delivered anonymously to their door. The neighbors had been kind.

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“Lettie, if you remind me while you're eating breakfast, I'll come out and start up the car earlier. Not quite used to this routine, not *quite* yet, “ says Brenda. She restarts the engine that is already revving and it grinds at her.

The engine coughs and chokes and they're off.

Brenda leans forward and presses her palm on the windshield, rubbing the frost in a circle to clear a small spot for a smidge of visibility. The coffee mug wedged between her knees jerks free and bounces across her lap. The tan liquid gurgles between her meaty thigh and the cracked upholstery, like sludgy water in a backed-up tub.

“Damn it,” Brenda says, “I told Martin it was penny wise and pound-foolish of him not to make plastic tumblers with those screw lids for times like this. But now of course that can't be changed. You can't ask your dead husband any favors. I couldn't get him to change his mind then anymore than he's likely to change it now.”

“I would have held it for you, mom,” says Lettie. Her tangled, sandy hair tumbles past her shoulders like a cape, pouring down out of the rabbit fur trapper hat she wears. She tugs down on

both earflaps and says, "Not that it's any great consolation, but it smells delicious. Beats dropping a tuna sandwich between the seats."

"You've got a point, there. Honey, you mind reaching back for a towel? There might be a rag behind your seat in the pocket." Brenda runs the car up on the frozen grass and rights the wheel with a jerk.

Lettie holds the mug tight with one hand, steadying it in the center console, and reaches back to dig around in the pocket for the rag. She plucks it out of the pocket and wipes the perforated vinyl in a figure eight just like she does to the deli counter she cleans as part of her job most days after school.

The sun tears through the windshield as if it were an six-foot wide magnifying glass and for a moment it feels to them both as if they are in a manipulated universe of fire and ice, storm and heaven, as it does when the skies crack and spread open a cobalt blue and the temperature drops ten degrees below freezing there in woody New England some time before Valentine's Day, the day Martin and Brenda were married twenty years before.

The white-carnation sprays died a month ago and after pressing a solitary flower in a book, Brenda tossed the rest, smelling of funk and death, in the town dump while Lettie was at school.

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There won't be any more flowers, no more hokey dozen red roses in a cone of cellophane that Martin picked up at the gas station and bought in a panic before racing home to the heart-shaped meatloaf Brenda cooked every Valentine's Night. The thought of it makes Brenda's heart wilt and her spirit drag.

There isn't so much a *dinnertime* for them any longer; it's more a marker of the turn from day into night. A meat and root vegetable stew was the last dish she plows her way through that had been gifted in the wake of Martin's death looks like congealed, clotted oxblood. A charred half loaf of frozen garlic bread Brenda left in the oven too long is what she ate with it. That and three tumblers of scotch on the rocks was her night. Lettie was out at the

Chinese buffet with some girlfriends, silently shuffling in a line and hunkering over metal pans of brown noodles and orange chicken steamed to sponge in tepid water baths.

Brenda hadn't known when Lettie came home because she was out cold with spittle dried up in the white, cracked corner of her mouth. Her eyes crusted shut. What she did know is that by the time she woke, Lettie must have cocooned her in the acrylic Afghan blanket knitted by Martin's mother decades before, in mustard, red, and royal blue acrylic—when was that color combination ever in style? Not even in the seventies when Gloria knitted it—because after the fire went out in the hearth she never felt cold, never felt anything until the sun startled her, knocking its way through the thin air and straight into her brain's gray matter that throbbed and swelled, pressing against the cage of her skull.

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The maroon four-door Accord with over a hundred-fifty thousand miles on it jolts and bucks as if it's bottoming out on a speed bump but there are none of those on the curvy, rural roads. The white porcelain cup jumps out of the console and to the floor, all the way to the back, cracking into thick chunks and tick-sized shards among the seat-high detritus of recyclable cans, a broken umbrella, and stained advertising flyers that Brenda transferred from the heaving mailbox to the backseat. The black logo of a bicycle messenger with the words *Martin's Messengers Delivers Through Wind, Rain, and Snow In All Five Boroughs* on the shattered mug that Martin refused to upgrade to a travel tumbler now just looks like fragments of a spider's web. When Brenda and Martin met, all he had was a bicycle and a messenger sack. Now all Brenda has is a busted coffee mug.

"Good god, we hit something. Did you see it? The damn sun was right in my eyes," says Brenda as she flips down the visor.

"You've got to get your own glasses," says Lettie.

"These are mine, now." Brenda harrumphs.

Lettie saw the critter zigzag into the middle of the road, hesitate for a second, and bolt under the driver's side front wheel. It

pinwheeled out from the undercarriage, jerking and flinching, then pitched through the air, landing on a mess of thorny bramble frozen in the ground on the side of the road. It twitched until it became nothing more than a speck in her side mirror.

Lettie hunts out the porcelain chips and wishes she could piece it back together like a wood-block preschool puzzle. Instead she puts the pile of glass in her lap and works to hold it in but cuts her palm by accident. She makes a tight fist to stop the slight trickle of blood and turns to press her forehead against the passenger window, shielding the left side of her face with her good hand in a shadow, and glues her eyes to the animal in the road.

"It was only a raccoon. It looks like it already was totally dead when we hit it, flat as a pancake," says Lettie as her mouth fills with salt and saliva and her stomach lurches.

Brenda taps her fingertips on the steering wheel and her eyes draw down to her knuckles encased in worn brown leather. Her left glove's ring finger is molded into a hump where her wedding bang fits snugly beneath.

Lettie she rubs her temples with her pointer fingers as if she's got a gun barrel in each hand pressing into the soft tissue.

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The milky sun gives up, drawing beneath the blanket of gray clouds as they head home at the end of Lettie's shift some afternoon. The winter hangs on with indifference.

"Another road kill. It's a *huge* buck. Looks like it's sleeping," says Lettie, leering at the carcass. Her mother stares straight ahead and doesn't consider taking a sideways glance.

"I thought I didn't have a choice but to let your dad come home. He plain-out refused to stay at the rehab facility. My god, who could blame him? Six months in that damn place! And all those sick, paralyzed, dying people around. He would have died right there, I bet, if he stayed one more day. I think bringing him home gave him a little more time with us. We could look at it that way," says Brenda.

“He could have spent the holidays there, we could have been with him. The New Year's even thing was too much stress, even though he's the one who insisted he felt fine to go out for dinner. He always had to be in charge, even after the stroke,” says Lettie, shaking her head with a laugh that sounded as if she were clearing her throat instead.

“He was in charge because I let him be. He couldn't have made that decision unless I allowed it, that's the thing,” says Brenda.

“If you say so,” says Lettie.

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The next morning, they take the same road, just like every day. It's the only way. The buck looks as if it's frozen in place or taxidermied, clean, pure, supine, antlers like bleached bone and splaying like a hand with fingers spread, not a fragment splintered from their vantage point.

“Just because he wanted to come home doesn't mean it was the right thing to do, for us to cave in to him. He should have just stayed there until he was a little better stabilized. Hindsight. You know all the right things to do in hindsight. I don't mean you, personally, I mean people in general,” says Lettie.

“Hindsight. Correct.” Brenda's lips turn down and shake like crazy, and then the waterworks start.

“I wonder if the antlers keep growing, like hair or nails, after it's dead? Because that thing, it looked perfectly healthy. Just like dad was, except for his limp. And his eyes

looked a little loose, like from since he had the stroke, a little wobbly, wandering like, but just a little,” says Lettie. Then she opens the window a crack, pulls a pack of cigarettes out of the glove box, and sticks one in her mouth. She flips her wrist towards Brenda, offering her a smoke. Brenda just shakes her head violently as if someone were beating money out her.

“I only smoked right after because of the stress. I don't want to pick that habit up again. And since when do you smoke in the car?” says Brenda.

“Since I was fifteen. Since dad started letting me smoke in the car, I mean, he smoked every morning in the car. No big dif. Secondhand smoke is just as bad they say,” says Lettie.

Lettie takes a long drag and the menthol smoke is pulled out the window like a wispy funnel cloud.

“If it bothers you that much I can put it out,” says Lettie.

“Nope. Too late now, I suppose. You go ahead, just don't blow it my way,” says Brenda choking on her words.

Brenda wipes her cheeks, gulps for a breath, and snuffles like a cold sounds.

“That's interesting, that thing you said about the antlers. Could be they keep growing, like its still alive, or at least a little part of it? I think I'll look it up as soon as I get home,” says Brenda as she pulls to a stop in front of the school. Lettie opens the door, flicks her cigarette butt onto the pavement, then leans over and kisses her mother's cold, damp cheek.

“You just did what dad wanted to do. Celebrating and all that, his feeling better. He probably would've died anyway. Even the doctors said he was too young to have a stroke like that out of the blue. And we just pretended he would get better as fast as it hit him...like it was just something you could skip right over, like it was just a bump in the road,” says Lettie, who shrugs, climbs out, and pushes the door behind her with such a weak hand that the latch doesn't catch. Brenda leans over, reopens it, and slams it shut.

Lettie hoists her backpack over her shoulder and shuffles up to a boy who stands at the bottom of the stairs waiting for her. They melt into the crowd of teenagers pouring through the school doors, not one of them looking back.

“We were having a heck of a time. He sure did look like he was on the mend. All dressed up in his good blue suit at the Wharfside, that lobster he ordered, like some prehistoric red dinosaur on his plate. And hell, that blue suit. The one he's fitted in for eternity. Got our money's worth. Wore the damn thing to death, literally. *That's* what he did, alright,” says Brenda, not realizing she's

talking out loud to herself until the carpool mother behind her leans on the horn to hustle her along.

Brenda rolls down her window and blows out a breath of frosty hollering.

"I'm dropping my kid off, calm the fuck down!"

The carpooling mother behind her sticks her hand out the window and flips Brenda the bird.

The mass of pimple-faced, shuffling students filing into the rectangular brick building now turn and stare. Brenda throws the door open with such hatred it bounces right back and hits her on the ass as she stomps out of the car then proceeds, speed-walking, with hips swaying like a pendulum to the car with the finger-flipping, horn-beeping mother. She taps her pointer finger at the window, the vibrations running up to her elbow. Her knees shake and she falters for a moment, thinking she might collapse like an accordion in the street.

The woman, with a saggy, bleary face and dirt-water colored ponytail, draws back as far as she can from the window as if her car is being attacked by a hyena at one of those drive-through wild animal parks.

"My kid has a dead father. I have a dead husband. It's all brand new, so I — *you* have got to...calm...the.... fuck...down."

She barely finishes her words before she's back in the driver's seat and slams the door shut with all her might, which isn't so much right now.

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Later on when Brenda picks Lettie up after her shift at the deli ends, they pass the buck again. The two have a brief argument about a party the previous weekend where the hostess's parents were out of town and there was a lot of liquor and kids throwing up in the bushes. When Brenda arrived to pick up her daughter, her only child, she smelled like booze and slurred her words.

"I wasn't going to bring it up again, but it's been eating at me," says Brenda.

"I'm *sixteen*. I'm not supposed to behave like you. I made a mistake. I'm supposed to be Miss Responsibility now? I'm the other grown up in your relationship now that dad's gone? Well I'm not, I'm not grown up, not at all," she says.

"Oh, bullshit, Lettie. Don't turn this around and punish me. Believe me, I torture myself all day and night over what happened to your father. It was a poor judgment call is what that was, Martin and I both just got all excited about him coming home, we just jumped the gun, we did what we thought was right, and that was all of us to be together for the holidays. That's all that was," says Brenda meaning it as a barb but it comes out instead like she's pleading.

A neon yellow zip-tie bracelet encircles the buck's left ankle. An antler has snapped off.

"And one more thing, please don't talk like that. We don't have room for it, neither of us do. You need to take into consideration that now this is it for me, it feels like this is all there is," says Brenda.

"Maybe we should move somewhere else, somewhere where there's no winter. Not soon, though, not this year. After high school," says Lettie.

"Maybe someday that would be a good idea. Your father, you know, he took out a life insurance policy when you were born, not right after because we didn't have the money then, but by the time you started kindergarten, I think it was. So we have a little nest egg, enough to get you to college and what not. But it's not money to waste. He worked so hard for it," says Brenda.

"Since when have we ever wasted any money?" asks Lettie.

"I didn't mean it like that. I'm having a hard time getting the thoughts from my head out of my mouth, know what I mean? It's just that the thought creped in that there's no point in staying around here just because we've always been here," says Brenda. "Your father and I thought this would be a good place to settle in our roots, raise a family. But I don't feel so settled any more. Do you?"

"It's different for me than it is for you," says Lettie, "but it's still more shit than not."

"It's never easy, starting over, I imagine, not that I've ever had to in my adult life, but especially when you have to start over it in the same place you're already at, well, you know," says Brenda.

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Two weeks go by and it's Valentine's Day but they don't say so. Brenda dumps a packet of instant coffee into a cup and Lettie slaps down a red heart-shaped box of chocolates on the counter.

"It's for you," is all that comes out of Lettie's mouth.

"That's sweet," says Brenda, shaking her head and smiling with her lips broken like a snapped arrow.

"Let's eat them in the car, for breakfast, that'll be fun," says Brenda.

Brenda and Lettie are on their morning drive to school and Brenda clenches between her thighs a silver metal drink canister that looks like a bullet with a black rubber screw top as they drive by the buck again. She plucks a chocolate square from its plastic divot in the heart-shaped box then sinks her front teeth into it and scrunches up her face.

"Want this one?" says Brenda, holding it out between her thumb and pointer finger like she's about to squash a bug.

"No way. It must be orange or raspberry crème," says Lettie, "Nobody likes those."

"I know. That kind is gross. But I love the caramels and the ones that are chocolate all the way through. And the ones with the nuts, especially the macadamias," says Brenda, tossing the fruit-crème filled candy out the window. She picks another, but this one is drizzled on top with golden caramel.

Lettie pops one with a split walnut on top into her mouth, then balls up the velvety bow in her fist.

"Why is that poor animal still there? It's like time's standing still," says Brenda.

"And something's been picking at it. Look. Crows maybe," says Lettie.

"Maybe they're waiting for Ted Nugent to come by and whisk it away for his own personal use. So this Podunk town doesn't have to pay for its removal," says Brenda with a resigned laugh and smile as shattered as that old coffee mug.

"Who's Ted Nugent?" asks Lettie as she stares down at her lap, fingertips tapping out a message on her phone.

"*Cat Scratch Fever*, that one was his biggest hit. He's a Southern Rock legend, from my time. He's a big hunter. Uses every part of the animal he kills, not a scrap goes to waste. He's famous for that these days, and for railing against President Obama. Pissed a whole bunch of people off. You didn't hear that in the news?" asks Brenda.

"Nope. Hadn't heard," says Lettie.

The buck is mangled by cars that have clipped it as they've careened down the road. A wobbly pink organ protrudes, looking like a finger jutting into the air. Its legs and torso are as twisted as a Noguchi table base shrink-wrapped in cream and stone velvet.

Neither address it. Minutes go by and the only sound in their world is the shearing whistle of wind.

"I have a date tonight, if that's okay, if you don't mind me going out," says Lettie.

"Mom? asks Lettie.

She makes a humming sound that lets Lettie know she is.

"I'm going to the movies with Dylan," says Lettie, shifting in her seat like her rear end is covered in hives.

"I don't think you've mentioned any Dylan before," says Brenda.

"He's the guy who waits for me before school, you know, the one at the steps every morning?" asks Lettie.

"Right! Now I remember seeing him. You two need a ride?" asks Brenda, then she slaps Lettie's knee. Twice. Hard.

"Nope. He has a car."

"Well have him come and introduce himself when he picks you up, will you? I'd like that. I'd like to meet your date, that'd be

fun," says Brenda, her eyes batting and watering as she tries to focus in the rearview mirror.

The car behind her beeps and swerves when she hits the brakes.

"Will do," says Lettie, grabbing the dashboard and wincing.

"Tell you the truth, Lettie, my mind's been going a mile a minute, that is, when it's running at all. I was thinking, I'd like to plan a road trip for us...how about a hotel with room service, somewhere with miles of white, sandy beach and turquoise blue water. I think that'd be neat," says Brenda.

"Sure," says Lettie with a voice like a flat tire.

"What if we went to Hawaii where they make those chocolate-covered macadamias? That'd be something else," says Brenda as she tears her thumbnail cuticle between her teeth until it bleeds.

"I'll just stick with the plan for making a meatloaf for dinner, for now," says Brenda, clapping her hands together as if she just came up with the world's cleverest idea.

"Dylan's picking me up at eight. You sure making dinner is what you want to do tonight, I mean, this night of all nights?" asks Lettie.

"Of course! It's been our tradition, every anniversary since your father and I married. You know that. And besides, we ran out of all the prepared dishes the neighbors brought over, finally. Can you imagine?"

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The doorbell rings and Brenda steps back from the kitchen sink, wipes her brow with a yellow rubber glove dripping with tepid soapy water, and looks at the clock on the stove whose hands are on seven and six. She rolls off the gloves and dries her hands on her apron. She speed walks to the bottom of the staircase.

"Honey, your *friend* is here," she singsongs louder than she means to.

Brenda moves towards the front door and peeks through the peephole. It is as dark as the purplish black orchid she saw on a nature show rerun when the rest of the world was stone asleep or making love like they were savoring the last night on earth while she tussled alone on the couch, unable to return to her marital bed. The thought of falling asleep alone there makes her as anxious as when their cat Mr. Magoo fell in the bathtub full of water.

The young man is rocking on his heels, clutching something in the crook of each arm.

She swings the door open and Dylan stands there, suddenly motionless, then breaks into a toothy smile. He fumbles with one hand, and thrusts a tight, yellow bouquet of lemon yellow roses swirled in cellophane at Brenda.

“Hi, I’m Dylan. These are for you.”

Brenda takes the flowers and holds them to her chest.

“Well knock me over with a feather! I’m Brenda.. How sweet of you, these are just gorgeous.”

His face is red and his breath as thick as locomotive steam.

“Come on in, Lettie will be right down.”

He shrugs off his plaid wool coat and folds it over his arm.

“Let me,” says Brenda, taking the jacket and hanging it on a hook behind the door. Dylan follows her into the kitchen and puts the other bouquet of roses, red ones, on the table.

“I just got off work and didn’t have time to stop home. Didn’t want to be late, figured it’d be better early. Hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Nope, not a bit,” says Brenda.

Five minutes later Lettie clomps down the stairs and stops at the kitchen door, looking at her mom and then at Dylan, who are laughing about something one of them just said. He stands up and offers Lettie the roses.

“Wow, thanks, Dylan. They’re really pretty,” says Lettie.

“Mom, can you put them in water for me?” says Lettie.

"Of course. And I'll do the same for the ones he brought *me*," says Brenda, "Pardon me for just a tic." She disappears into the pantry and unscrews a bottle that looks half-full with maple syrup but is more watery. She puts it to her lips and gulps until her throat burns. When she ducks back into the kitchen, both Lettie and Dylan have their coats on and are standing in the doorway.

"Time to get the show on the road!" says Brenda.

"Don't want to be late, roads are icy," says Lettie.

"Ok, then, be safe and have fun. And Happy Valentine's Day," says Brenda as she watches her baby climb into the car while Dylan holds the door open for her.

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That night when the house is silent Brenda sits swallowed in the lips of the firelight with a map of the entire United States, even Hawaii, across the couch. Martin's glasses are hinged in the V-neck of her wool cabled sweater. She slips them on, cusses at herself then takes them off, folding the tortoiseshell arms flat and dropping them on the table. Mr. Magoo kneads his claws in her lap and purrs so loud he rumbles.

She holds a fluorescent yellow marker and traces route after route of possibilities. She draws a long curve down the Eastern seaboard coastline that meanders south to the tip of the Outer Banks of North Carolina where they might take a tour of the tallest of sand dunes and candy cane-striped lighthouses, then retraces her steps west towards Colorado, perhaps to explore the Arkansas River to search for bands of wild horses.

She thinks of going back to Key West where she and Martin had honeymooned. They stayed at a single-story motel a block from the beach, bringing a plastic cooler full of beer, white-bread sandwiches, fishing poles and a bucket of bait, those folding chairs made of woven nylon straps to the beach and stayed until their shoulders and noses were red and tender and the sun slipped away. They climbed in bed early not because they were tired, but because they had the need to feel the weight of their bodies in and

on each other. She recollects the days as if she were still there, every moment etched under her skin like a tattoo.

In a flash it was over. He took half of her with him. Where does she go from here? Lettie will leave, and then another half of what's left will be gone. That doesn't leave much.

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It would take the whole summer--perhaps a lifetime--to accomplish the adventures she traced on the map. Hell, it could take that long just to gear herself up for it. She picks up the cellophane cone of Dylan's gift of yellow gas-station roses and makes a slow ascent—as if each foot were cased in a block of ice-- upstairs to her bedroom, then places the flowers on the nightstand next to a round, alabaster urn and slides between the chilly sheets and comforter that feel as familiar as one of the motel beds she thinks she and Lettie might visit on their trip, one day.

THE END

