

Frozen Out

by Stuart Millard

The rhythmic crunch of my footsteps on the half-inch of freshly fallen snow were broken by the sound of a voice so needy and pitiful it caused my entire skin to tighten around my body, like a frightened child clinging to its mother. *"Excuse me! Could you help me?"* I just kept on walking, kept my head down, my eyes not leaving my shoes until I'd gotten around the corner, just how you do with beggars. Thanks to the unusually harsh winter, this had become a pretty common hazard. An Arctic wind blowing in from Siberia had prevented the temperature from peeking above zero for weeks, keeping the fields white, the sidewalks slippery, and the entire Eastern seaboard home to a small population of desperate, aging Snowmen who couldn't die.

Some found themselves smashed by vandals, their heads hooved under the wheels of passing traffic and recorded on a cellphone; others met their peace alongside camp fires set by good Samaritans who wanted to end their suffering - those were the lucky ones. But most, like the pale wretch who was hassling me on my nightly route to work, spent the lonely days preying for the sun to break the clouds, and their nights weeping frozen tear-drops that scattered on the ground like cheap gemstones from a bungled home invasion.

The following night, to my dismay, he'd managed to drag himself six inches closer to the footpath, heaving his mass bit by bit across the slush on one stumpy, twigged limb. I was so taken aback at his desperate resolve that I accidentally caught his gaze. *"Please, sir..."* he'd said. I told him I was late for work, and that I couldn't stop, throwing up shrugs and melodramatic what-can-you-do's. On the way back home, he was waiting for me, his arm grasping out towards the path, eyes of a slumdog child leaning into a taxi window. I had no choice — I'd been bullied into stopping.

The Snowman was bordering on the grotesque. They're a transient people, not meant to last beyond a day or two's frivolous fun and games before the real world comes calling again. Without that joy of first life, the playful laughter of friends, they're just cold relics, and over time, they lose their twee Christmas card charm, and the top hats, scarves and big smiles become warped into something else. Gentle thawing leaves them stooped and slouching, their bodies sinking down into themselves, with extra snowfall adding awkward shape to their frames and leaving them a warped version of what they'd been in their prime, freshly patted into existence by the excited hands of children. Who wants to deal with that? So, they're left in half-melted fields, alone and afraid, scarred with muddy handprints and begging for death. The sustained cold snap had not been kind to my new acquaintance.

"It hurts..." he said, through a mouth that had slipped halfway off of his face; loose, dark rocks that were pushed into an unlucky horseshoe of misery. I asked him what hurt, and he just said "everything." It's a funny thing, watching a Snowman shiver, hearing him chatter out the words "I'm so *cold*," like a fish calling out for a lifeguard. Once the chill of their own bodies sets in, there's no escape, and no way back, and they just shamble towards a lonely, confusing death. Deeply uncomfortable and desperate to get away, I told him I understood. I too, I said, suffer through the chronic dull ache of perpetual loneliness. I squatted down and scrunched a handful of snow in my palm, telling the Snowman I'd make him a friend to keep him company.

"I don't need any friends!" he snapped, his face contorting out of self-pity for the first time, and into an expression of impotent rage. I just shook my head. Didn't need friends? We should all be so lucky. My landlord doesn't even allow pets. Every night I go back to an empty apartment where I sit by myself in front of the TV until I fall asleep. As small, white flakes began to drop from the sky, the Snowman cried so hard and so deep that I heard myself softly telling

him I'd be back tomorrow. It was as hollow as a parent's 'maybe' as you drive past a sign for ice-cream, but he sighed with relief and gratefully brushed the tail of my jacket with his hand.

When I got home I couldn't get him out of my mind. I thought about how we were similar, how we'd both become defined by our isolation. Him, out there; me, in my own home, neither of us knowing how we could carry on, mired in a life that wasn't like as described, with no hope in sight, and nobody to come along and drive a steel bolt through our fucking heads and just put an end to it all. Eating silent dinners off my lap and making sarcastic comments that nobody hears - I didn't sign up for this. We weren't so different, that Snowman and I. I knew that I had to do the right thing, for the first time in my wasted, barren life. Maybe then, I could really start living, like everyone else. Ten minutes later I was back in the snow, where I scooped him up in my arms and carried him home like a fat toddler. He wetted my chest as he lightly thawed against the warmth of my body and dripped silent tears of gratitude, and I told him everything was going to be okay.

"There you go," I said, placing him down inside and closing the air-sealed glass door. I'd gotten it from work when they did the refit; one of those standing chiller cabinets where they keep all the turkey wraps and Red Bull, the dial turned down to zero degrees. I'd planned on stocking it with Pepsi, handily in reach right next to the armchair for long sessions on the PS3, but this was way better.

"Settle down," I told him, as he howled from inside the freezer, "I'm gonna put a DVD on, it'll be fun..."

