INGOB

by Wendy Wimmer

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When Chief went missing, most of the town thought he'd maybe wandered off onto the ice and froze to death. It wasn't unheard of. People had done it in the long and storied past of Death's Door, particularly during the weak light of February, when the snow and cold and ice feel like a personal affront. Chief was a funny kind of sort, the locals all agreed.

You could always tell when Chief was driving the county snowplow because the mailboxes were all askew. Chief thought it was funny stuff. All the locals rigged their mailboxes on swing arms so that when the plow hit it, the mailbox would arch out and then pop right back, like a screen door. A mailbox could last five, maybe six seasons on a good swing arm, but without one, that sucker would be lucky to last until Christmas. During the summer, you can always spot the houses of rich people from Chicago, just by looking at their mailboxes -- fancy hammered copper or hand-painted with loons and seagulls. You'd think the locals would have been mad at Chief for not being careful, for damaging the private property of people who paid their high waterfront property taxes, paid for the free school lunch program for the Door's kids, but the locals just kind of chuckled. Chief was doing what we all were thinking. A copper hammered mailbox, who had time for that much pretty on a damned mailbox? Chicago people, pretty much. Besides, waiting for these pretty little boxes to take a fall, it was something to occupy the mind when everything went all white.

On the last day anyone saw Chief alive, he was waiting for me in the parking lot of the Sons Of Utwe and Daughters of Mis-no-quo-que Door County Tribal Recreation Center. The county snowplow growled way back in the distance, fresh from having plowed out the Bingo and Casino lots. In such weather, good parking spots were

worth every additional yard saved walking to the building, so he parked out back near the tree line. Chief was a good guy.

The only thing I said to him that morning was something like “That your handiwork in my drive this morning?” I had woken up early to dig myself out. The weatherman had forecasted a good four inches, but it was eight at least. I braced myself for a sore back, but when I trod out in my old roommate's Sorels, the snow had been cleared, leaving a neat little wall of snow next to my car for me to knock over when opening the door. There was a little joy in that moment, knocking that whisper bank over, but at the same time it seemed a shame to sully such a nice plow job. Something so pure sure makes a heavenly mess but it's pretty at least.

I forgot to look at the temperature when I passed the digital clock at the bank but it must have been negative something because Chief's boots were making that negative zero squeaky sound, like Styrofoam rubbing together. You'd think that winter would be quiet, without the Muffys and Tads beeping their Beemers at every little thing. And I suppose that it is quieter. But there are also sounds that can chill a person much more than the cold. The ice groans and creaks and I can hear the Bay from my bed at night, the moaning as water rolls under the surface.

And it was Chief too that had dug me out. He said “Ain't nothing, Mabe. Plow's used to doing much bigger work than that, your little drive is no problem for her.” You should note that it was a pretty heady number of words from him, especially so early in the morning. I made a mental note that he anthropomorphized his plow like it was a horse and he was the rider. I added it to my mental file folder labeled *Chief (No Commonly Known Last Name).* Then we walked into the bingo hall together, stamping the snow off our feet on the vestibule rug like chickens scratching in a yard. Chief held out a hanger and waited for me to take off my parka so that he could shelve it.

I just remembered, he also asked me if I was going to call.

“No, I'm the money today,” I told him. Due to the gaming commission, we can only pull the balls and call or we can sell cards

and dole out prize money. I guess that's to keep everyone honest, but I've yet to see anyone hit the big time with a bingo heist.

The Sons Of Utwe and Daughters of Mis-no-quo-que Tribal Recreation Center is one of the few places in the Door Peninsula that's open year round. Some time in the Eighties, a group of locals nabbed themselves a true official Indian Gaming center through a weird loophole that left everyone in Bemidji standing around with their mouths open, a bunch of blond Belgians claiming to have indigenous ancestry. The government contracts were rewritten right after that, which just goes to show that it's a good thing to be the first. Remember that.

Chief was known as the only actual Native American in Door County. His real name wasn't Chief -- I found out by accident, when he paid me for a bingo sheet. Saw it on his county ID, but I didn't share it. I don't talk much to the other locals and they returned the favor for the most part. I figure that the reward for being observant is getting these little jewels all to yourself. The Sons of Utwe and Daughters of Mis-no-quo-que had tried and tried to get Chief to work for the casino. Maybe the bosses figured his dark skin and eyes added a little authenticity amidst the sea of pale Northern complexions and save them from having to tell the story of how a Native American tribe occupied a patch of land near Jacksonport for about nineteen months between 1805 and 1807. Just the one woman stayed and married a Norse settler and had the normal brood of eight or twelve kids, half of them with dark hair and blue eyes, the other with blonde hair and brown eyes. Genetics at play. In the long expanse of dark winter hours when there's no work, most residents of Death's Door like to do crafts. I read genetics studies. It's some fascinating stuff. You can't talk about that stuff with the locals over lingonberries at the diner, though, unless you could break it down to counted cross stitch samplers or something.

Chief and I never really said it out loud, but whenever we spotted each other, we tended to linger until interrupted. We might have stood together a few more minutes that day if the vestibule doors hadn't opened, hitting us with a blast of heat and cold as the two

temperatures rushed in to fill the vacuum. That's when the tall man walked in wearing a long dusty overcoat that was far too thin for the weather. You know how coats can take on a different feel when they're worn, as though you can almost sense the aura of their owner still clinging to the lining? This coat didn't feel like the tall gentleman, like maybe it didn't belong to him, like maybe he found it in the back of a car or maybe left behind in a lost and found box.

He had black scarf pulled over his face, which wasn't odd in itself, given the weather, but he had two different colored eyes, like you sometimes saw on dogs, one brown and one icy blue. There's a double helix that would have to happen to make such a striking pair of eyes. Sometimes it's a sign of Waardenburg syndrome, usually accompanied by weird patches of hair and hearing loss. I read that on Wikipedia, during a late night research session on seemingly unconnected physical traits being linked to the very same genetic fluctuations. Fascinating thing.

I would have been a good geneticist maybe, if I had taken that scholarship to that school in California or hell, even the UW. I think I would have figured out how to save babies or maybe flipped a switch inside the DNA strand to make you immune to AIDS.

“Bingo?” The stranger had a strange kind of feminine voice. I made a mental note to reread the Waardenburg entry on Wikipedia.

“Right in there, sir.” I broke out my summertime tourist voice. “We're not quite open yet, but you can come in and warm yourself—“ He stomped his boots and then walked through the doors into the hall. Chief rustled inside his big county-issue coat and flexed his fingers. Chief's fingers fascinated me — they were something you'd see on a tree instead of a person, thick and rooted at the base, gnarled and tapered with half moon nails shining off the tips.

That was another thing Chief said to me that day. He said “Ya. I think I'll just watch today.” I didn't think anything of this because I know that Chief liked hearing the numbers read more than he liked the possibility of winning the bingo wad. Once Chief had told my coworker in the blackjack pit, Nils, that he could see colors when people talked. Nils had replied that he was full of bullshit, but then a

few days later, Nils asked me if I had heard about such a thing. I explained that it was really a thing called synesthesia where people swap one sense for another, have touch sensations with taste or hear colors. Having someone interested in my genetics hobby was a novelty, especially one as good looking as Nils, so I indulged in a few more sentences than normal, explaining that it is a very rare neurological condition, affecting only about one in every 27,000 people. Nils chuckled and said, “Just what I thought. Bullshit.” I felt a little guilty, like it was my fault for not explaining it good enough, like I didn't agree that Chief was maybe a little special. Like, I should have mentioned that sometimes on a slow shift, I noticed Chief had missed some called numbers on his card because he was just staring off into space. When I told him to pay better attention if he wanted to win, he replied “Sometimes, Mabe, the numbers just look so pretty.”

They think Van Gogh heard music when he looked at his starry nights. Working at a Bingo parlor, you get to believing in a one-in-a-million shot just as much as you doubt the rarity of a sure thing.

I only worked part time at the bingo parlor because I need something for the winter. The Bingo gods wouldn't let me off in the summer to rake in the tips slinging wood fired goat cheese and cherry pizzas to the rich people, so it had to be part time not full. During the summer, I mostly worked at D'Amico's, but it didn't bother staying open past the tourist season. Half the locals call it “that Eye Talian place.”

On Death's Door, there were two kinds of people. Rich people and the locals. Listening to how they said things like “Italian” was usually how they tipped their hand. From a genetic standpoint, the townies were probably the weaker of the two, breeding more townies. More cheap summer labor to man the ice cream parlors and clean the hotels, until that's all anyone will be able to do, until everyone thrived under cyclic periods of extreme activity followed by eight months of hibernation. Everyone told me I should have been in the group that was smart enough to leave. I probably should have been. Aunt Sharon, who raised me, needed help at the pie

store, so it seemed smart to wait a year, and then another year, and then came the strokes and things fell into place. As they do. It's funny how you can't see the moment in your life when everything changed until a decade or more down the road.

The tall gentleman had his coat on Doris' chair and had pushed a second chair into the spot we always left open for Bernard's wheelchair. The other bingo players elbowed each other and nodded toward the violation. During the summer, it was useless to maintain lucky seats because tourists have eminent domain by virtue of their exotic license plates. However, during winter, the locals rescinded their largess and took back what they considered theirs by birthright — from stools at Al Johnson's to preferred parking spots. I could already tell that this was going to be what we call in the bingo trade “a situation.”

I went about my opening duties, counting out my cards and wads of singles, tens and twenties. Chief took up his favorite position, a table that was equidistant between the coffee machine and the snack table, where Ida was kneading mashed potatoes into lefse for the lunchtime bingo.

I started the blower on the Bingo King and unwrapped the tray of fresh numbered ping-pong balls. We got new balls each twenty-four hour period. It seemed like such a waste, but so ordered our lord and masters the Gaming Commission. Carol from the nightshift used to take the used balls home and fashion them into wreaths by spray-painting them gold and silver, then sold them to the tourists for $34 each plus tax. Each wreath was embossed with letters and numbers. I used to think that people who came to Door County were just rich and stupid, but then I went to Key West five years ago and spent $60 getting my hair braided with a bunch of little shells at the end of each strand. Now I just think something comes over people on a vacation. We all have that brand of stupid embedded in our DNA somewhere.

Doris walked in and stopped short, giving the stranger a cocked eyebrow, specifically the way he had claimed most of her preferred Bingo real estate. She wriggled her stout body, as though gearing up

for a fight and then bee-lined to her usual chair, now occupied by the gentleman's black dusty coat.

Doris cleared her throat, drawing the new guy's attention. He reminded me of a grackle, the way they delicately dip their heads to drink while bobbing around to watch what the other grackles are doing, never really concentrating on any one thing, one eye always following the action. He flapped his long hand at her, a spidery incantation with his fingers, and turned back to the Bingo card menu. For a second, I could see the little girl Doris might have been half a century ago, sitting in the corner with wet underpants, scolded by an uncaring authority figure. It was a solid picture there, right on her face. She spun on her heels and hurried to the opposite side of the hall to sit with the smokers. They regarded her like she had three heads, but made room for her in their area just the same.

Chief was watching too. I shrugged at him and smiled. His brow creased and he went back to studying the tall gentleman.

The money shift, which I was working that day, was a fast ordeal. It's just you out there, making change in your head, playing tricks with numbers, addition and subtraction, carrying the one and then jockeying for singles through of field of raised wrinkled hands blooming with green. Whenever I watch the money person from the calling tower, I always think they look like a fancy dancer; splays of colored Bingo cards twirling in the air.

So I got busy, juggling cards and special games, the Mega Bux and the Imperial Blackout, the Big X and the Dirty Dozens. The Bingo hall was beginning to fill up with bodies and coats and wet boots making squeaks against the linoleum and I didn't even realize where I was on the floor until I was standing right in front of the tall stranger. “What can I get you, Sir?” I always reverted to my waitress mentality. The formality was one of the reasons that the regulars like me, I think.

“Give me one of everything.” He looked up at me that time, his strange eyes seeming to move independently, one slow and one fast, as though he belonged to two different, separate wild animals. I'd read once about a phenomenon where things that were not quite

right, like very realistic human-looking robots, that caused a sense of revulsion and dread. I'd never quite understood that fear, before. Certainly we know that we are real and the wax figure or animatronic mechanism was not? Yet, watching as the tall gentleman's face tried to work itself into something human, as the eyes rallied to focus and the corners of his mouth twitched out of time, I understood. It's not their unreality that is terrifying, it's ours.

“Everything.” He handed me a fifty, seemingly withdrawn from nowhere. That's it. He reminded me of a television magician, the kind that claim they know how to levitate or suddenly develop stigmata on camera. His voice sounded like rustling leaves or maybe a rusted chain dropping to the floor. And then his face was just normal and somehow very appealing. I felt warm, like I had just sipped the most delicious hot chocolate, the way it blossoms in both your stomach and your brain at the same time. It was like falling asleep in the backseat of your parents' car, knowing that the best way to pass the time was to just sink into the darkness and be rocked by the road.

His fifty was in my hand but I didn't remember taking it from him. I reached for my change belt and in the process, I dropped every carefully collated pack of Bingo cards in a flurry of pink and blue and electric orange. Far across the Bingo hall, Chief pushed his chair back, the chair making a tremendous squeak, and he headed toward the coffee pot.

“Fuck!” I squatted beside the chair to pick up the cards before the floor boss saw it on his camera. I'd have to get a new pack and then stay after my shift to reconcile the shuffled bundle if anyone saw the pack leave my possession.

“Now Mabel, you shouldn't use such language.” The gentleman clucked his hand under my chin and tilted my head up. He smiled then and I saw exactly what it was that had sent Doris running. His eyes were somehow not there, the way a dead raccoon on the side of the road is both something and nothing, an empty place. He was a trickster, playing trickster games. Something elemental inside my nethers buckled. I had a feeling that if I said anything else, engaged

him in any way, he'd get me to say something that I wouldn't mean, some kind of bad thing. I could feel the animal part of my brain light up, start hitting all switches on the “fight or flight” response. Sweat tickled my cheek.

“I'm sorry, Sir, if I offended you.”

“No, it's not me you have to worry about, darlin'. The good Lord doesn't approve.” The skin of his hand was oddly textured, a chameleon, pebbly and room temperature.

I said nothing, racing against the likelihood that I'd hear Lars' squeaky crepe-soled shoes against the Congoleum bingo hall floor. The gentleman shifted in his seat and I could picture how it looked on the security cameras, me kneeling at his feet in flat black and white videotape.

“You don't believe in the Lord Almighty, our Father who Art in Heaven?” For a second, I thought he had asked me to wash his feet with my hair but then I realized that he had not asked this, had not even said anything that could be confused with the words “feet” or “hair”. I shook my head to erase such wild imaginings. Then he leaned toward me, so close I could only focus on either his one dark eye or the arctic ice blue one, rimmed in an aurora of black. He rubbed a lizard thumb against my lips, then let his hand drop.

“I can see that you are a non-believer, so I will offer you some divine inspiration. *Inspiratus*, since you pride yourself on knowing how things came to be — from the Latin meaning *inflame* or *to inhale*. I prefer the fiery version myself.” He raised his hand to my face and splayed his fingers. “Watch the first five balls called. You will then have your proof.”

He turned to the darkened flasher board, as though expecting the first called number to appear at any moment. And with that I was released. I would have died right then, just to know if his thumb tasted salty or sweet, but I fought the urge to run my tongue against my lips. The stranger's fifty was still crumpled between my thumb and forefinger. I was still thinking about how looking into his chalk blue eye reminded me of the time I was climbing a barbed wire fence as a child and stuck my hand directly down onto a twist of

sharpened wire. For a moment, there was no pain, just the sickening feeling of being trapped, caught and irreversibly broken.

Chief had come over and was swiping up the fallen Bingo cards. I didn't realize until that moment that I needed saving, but he pulled me to my feet and took the fifty from my hand and thrust it at the tall stranger. “Your money isn't good here. I think it's time for you to leave.”

The strange gentleman regarded Chief's six foot six, 400-plus pound body slowly. His face features shuddered, eyes blinking out of concert with each other. He had lost his interest in me and instead it was like a greenish swampwater light was shining directly on Chief. Chief planted his feet at shoulder width, as though gearing for a fight and then somehow diminished with a slight shrug.

Then the gentleman smiled, gathered his coat and Bingo menu as though it were his own idea, and slowly bundled back up. I could still feel the heat of his gaze against my cheek. I studied the buttons on Chief's county issued snow parka and wait until I heard his footsteps get further away.

I wanted to cry, the way you do when your car slips on a patch of black ice and does a sickening tumble and then suddenly, against all reason, you are able to right the car and drive on as normal. I managed a nod, which Chief returned. He looked across the floor and shrugged. Lars was already on his way over.

One more thing I forgot Chief said to me: “Sorry Mabe. His words were oil and smoke. I didn't notice at first, but when he started talking to ya, I saw it. There ain't nothing in there. If Lars yells at ya for the mess, you can tell him it was me.” He zipped his big county-issue coat, buttoned the storm flap, put on his gloves and walked out the door

Lars was there, mouth already moving faster than his feet. “What is going on out here? What did you do to the pack?”

For the rest of my shift, I kept thinking winter thoughts: frozen pipes, tongues glued to flagpoles, and the ice fishermen on the Bay, pulling a fish by its lip into a foreign, waterless nothing where their fins flex futilely against the air.

At the end of my shift, I had to count and recount my bingo card pack and then talk with the auditors as they watched the security tape to make sure no one had managed to pocket any cards. All the cards were still there. No bingo heist on the day that Chief went missing. It's all in the records, every form filed and signed in triple. When I left after all the extra paperwork, it was dark again, still dark it seemed, and for a moment, it felt like the day never happened. Especially because Chief's plow was still there, waiting in its courteous parking spot.

I asked them to let me watch the tape, wanting to see the exchange with the strange gentleman again, to see if it had really been only a minute or if it had taken the hours that it seemed. Lars said he'd see what he could do, but then Chief went missing and it became police evidence. In fact, Chief's plow was still there three days later when the cops come looking for it, and by default, Chief. As far as the Sheriff could tell, nothing in Chief's little bachelor's apartment had been disturbed since he left it that Wednesday morning. They studied “the incident tape”, as they called it, the one that showed things from all angles, but from the gossip I heard in the break room from the auditors, the only thing it showed was me and Chief. The gentleman's face was always obscured, from every which way. In fact, he had somehow lucked into one of the only camera blind spots in the entire bingo hall. Somehow his face had become a blind spot in my brain too. I kept trying to pull it forward and came up empty, just a blurry shadow, a moving set of features belonging to the whole of humanity. The eyes, I just remember the eyes. I felt bad for not being much help, but Doris didn't even remember seeing the guy.

Naturally, the Sheriff questioned me too, asked me about the tall gentleman, asked what he said and why Chief had stopped midway through filling his coffee cup to rush across the hall to help me pick up dropped bingo cards. They speculated that maybe the tall gentleman was my boyfriend and that we had a racket going. I admitted that it does seem odd, but really, they'd seen too many

casino heist movies. In the process of the investigation, they found out that Chief was actually from New York and not Native American at all, but rather Italian. They pronounce it *Eye Talian*.

The one thing that I never told them, though, was the thing about the first five bingo balls that Nils pulled that morning. They were I 23, N 45, G 59, O 70 and B 3. I didn't write them down and normally wouldn't have remembered them at all, except that later, when Nils had asked me why I had to stay late and audit the dropped cards, I had told him the entire story. Then Nils had checked the session's history and looked it up. “Huh.”

“See… nothing. The numbers are just numbers.”

“Yeah. The numbers ain't shit. But the letters spell out **In God**.”

“No they don't. They spell out ‘**IN GOB**'.” I had twisted my face at him then.

“Maybe that's because there's no D in BINGO,” he had laughed. “Or INGOB is something else?”

Eventually, there were missing posters about Chief in local gas stations, and a reward offered by the county. The posters had his strange name that no one ever used. No one ever came forward with anything. I got called in to talk to the FBI in spring when the ice was shoving toward the shoreline. A jacket had washed up, county issue and size 5XL, but there was no concrete proof that it belonged to Chief, no DNA evidence or any fingerprints. They eventually discounted the possibility that it was his because he would have had to throw it from a plane for his jacket to catch the open water in Lake Michigan. When I had read that in the newspaper, I got a chill, instantly picturing him flying through the air captured in the talons of a giant grackle.

Eventually, the posters withered and yellowed. Chief's picture took on an antique quality and you just started to know that the no one really cared about Chief, they just wanted to solve the mystery. All the sudden, people who never even uttered my name in my entire life were acting like my best friends. They all wanted to know the full story, first hand. I obliged once or twice, but it felt like feeding hungry ducks — they only like you because you have corn. Then the

posters disappeared, covered with fliers advertising trout boils and authentic Amish quilts and winery tours.

And once again, the Lake and the Bay crusted over and now I am left to my space heaters and heavy socks.

There's a new plow driver now, who fills the base of my driveway with heavy sodden ice chunks and takes care not to destroy mailboxes. The summer people will undoubtedly approve. No one would ever dare say anything but we're all a little disappointed.

In the night, when I listen to the creaks of the ice, sometimes I imagine that I hear his economical phrases, hear him say “Mabe”. The ridge sticking out into Bay can alarm a person in the winter. Tourists pay big bucks to watch its leaves turn orange and die but during the off-season, it looks like the brow of a man whose hair is all but lost. You can't help but want to turn away, embarrassed by what you shouldn't be seeing.

When I pass the quiet stands of leafless trees, it feels like I'm being watched. There's a birch standing like a ghost among a grove of hickories, with their furry sloppy bark and gnarled limbs binding them to the here and now. I spend a lot of time walking through that grove and decided that the birch should be his memorial. Now when I pass by, I can feel the hair on the back of my neck stiffen and I think I must have it pretty right.

The winter is barren, so stark, that it is easy to imagine that this time and place have slipped away and we are ageless and without technology. Him and I, we don't belong here, and never did, and now nature had naturally selected its own. If Chief hadn't stepped in, it would have been my Casino Employee Badge picture staring out from the curling Missing posters, me without even so much as a memorial service. There is nothing for him even now, just a weak sun and a quiet clearing and a landscape that is open and without comment.