

## *Amy Wisserkerke*

### **Walking Home**

I found your note on the counter this morning, so I've taken the car into the shop. Safety recall. It was such a formal note, "Dear Maddie:" with a *colon*, like a business letter. But you were so polite, Daniel, as if I might have plans, and that was thoughtful of you.

I'm going to walk home from the shop. Two miles. It's good exercise, good to be out in the world, you said, and really, I'm glad you suggested it. My chest is tight with cold, but I don't believe in asthma anymore. That's just drama. What's wrong with brisk? What's wrong with icicles, glittering along the gutter of the car shop? Just like that magnet on our fridge says—there's beauty everywhere for those willing to find it.

I drop the keys into the technician's hand and see his palm is stained and creased. He really works for a living. When I open the door to leave, January wind shoulders its way in, rattling the keys on the pegboard. The tech shivers then, and laughs. The scar that drags down one of his eyelids disappears when he smiles at me, broad and beaming—fatherly, almost.

Take care now, sister, he says. Won't get higher than freezing today!

Sister. This is what my friend Fred calls me. I haven't told you about Fred, but I know I should have. The first time I met him was back in October, when he knocked on our front door.

I see you have some weeds, he'd said, smile lines creasing his blue eyes. Let me take care of this for you, sister.

I saw then how I'd really let things go, how high the weeds were, and I felt bad. You'd been working extra since I got downsized. I could at least take care of the house and the yard.

I'm Fred, he said, and put out his hand to shake, gave a confident smile. Fred Carpenter, and I'm looking for work. I can weed this real good. I'll do it by hand for you.

No, that's all right, I said. I'm going to do it myself. It's kind of my job.

He gave me a look, like he was sorry for me for missing such a good opportunity. He opened his mouth as if to speak, and shut it again. His eyes took in the yard, the tall house, the polished car in the driveway. He tipped his baseball cap. I'll be around, he said. I rake, I weed, I can haul. You supply the equipment, I supply the labor. Keep me in mind.

Absolutely, I said, but I knew what you would say. We don't hire strangers off the street to do yardwork. We take care of our own business.

I cross the street, jogging a little, surprised by a gust of wind strong enough to push me out of the crosswalk. Nature is so powerful. Uncontrollable! I think of the tech back at the shop, the wind coming through the door all day. He deserves better, something warm. Less exposed. In Finland they say there is no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. Maybe it's Sweden. My own coat is puffy and warm, a ski jacket with fur-lined hood. Like Dr. Wells says through that beard he uses to hide his too-young face—turn guilt into gratitude.

The clouds are low and heavy, loaded with snow on the way. The little lamps lining the library stairs are glowing even though the sun is up. So cozy! I think of my fat little boy, Winston Churchill, purring at home, his white ruff and belly warm and soft, his claws like hooked needles, clear as glass. I can see the tissue, pink meat inside, so I know where to stop the clippers when I trim. We do that job very efficiently, I think. I clip and you hold and soothe him, but sometimes I think you could soothe him better. Sometimes I think you don't murmur in his ear enough, or stroke him enough, so I have to do both jobs at once.

Your office is so close here, I could stop in. The building is old, brick like everything else, but remodeled inside, strips of metal and cobalt blue and lemon yellow at angles so all the clients know your firm is cutting-edge. Sharp. Architects, they care about how everything *looks*. I imagine running the gauntlet to get up to your office, Misha in her cowboy boots and pompadour guarding the front desk, your

colleagues and their idle glances, wondering what I do all day.

You wouldn't remember the time I almost introduced you to Fred, right out front. I dropped you off but you left your lunch in the car. I called out, Daniel!

You turned, the plate glass door pushing at your back, your lips pursed, that small irritation. I held up your bag.

Morning, sister!

Fred had turned the corner, walking toward me. Touched his cap with two fingers. He had a heavy backpack on, army green, and three plastic grocery bags in one hand. I looked from him back to you, but your eyes were on your phone, impatient steps headed my way.

Fred, this is my husband Daniel, I imagined saying, a cocktail-party flourish of my upturned hand. Daniel, Fred.

But you didn't see him, didn't look at my face. Thanks, you said, took your bag, turned away.

Cold out here, Fred said.

What?

He said it again, kept walking. Cold out! Almost Christmas! He looked at you, sliding quickly through the door as it whispered shut. You take care now, sister.

A truck idles at the back of the Majestic Theater. A dozen roadies wait at the bottom of a ramp, ashy purple hands stuffed halfway into pockets. A black and silver crate suddenly rumbles down, surprising me, and I take a sharp breath. My lungs fill with cold air and I feel them get tight, like in high school, gym class in the winter. Every year the doctor wrote excuse notes, no running outside in the cold. Such unnecessary fuss.

There's a poster on the wall of the theater—a parody of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, naked legs and a tie. It catches me off-guard, that poster, the idea of sex and laughter together. I try to remember the last time sex was funny, the last time the stakes were not quite so high. I'm surprised by a memory of us all tangled up, and how you laughed when I tried to kiss your arm and kissed my own by accident. I make myself smile, an

exercise of cheeks and lips and eyes. Smiling can be a spiritual practice. I read that in the book you left on my nightstand. You're like Winston Churchill, always leaving little presents. I can tell how much you want me to be happy.

The downtown Episcopal church is next, modern concrete and stained glass. They serve a hot lunch in the basement every Tuesday, did you know that? I know, because Dr. Wells said, do something for someone else, focus on something outside your own problems, so I joined one of the serving teams. But just that one time.

A small, dirty man came in late that day, demanded two hot dogs at once.

I didn't know what to do so I looked around. There was a team leader in a button-down shirt in the corner, a thick man with coke-bottle glasses. He shook his head without looking up, one finger scrolling on his phone.

I just work here, I said. I put a tray with side dishes and cookies and one hot dog up on the counter.

All these people already ate, he said. Who you saving it for? His eyes were dark and wild, Rasputin eyes.

A goth girl with a lip piercing and an eyebrow piercing and a ring through her septum came up behind him. Why don't you give him his food, she said. It's just a fucking hot dog.

I passed my tongs to the person next to me and untied my apron. Walked into the back and hung it up next to a pile of plastic trays smeared with ketchup and baked beans. It's funny, I imagined telling Fred about it, because there are things I think he would understand. Things he probably knows all about. I should have stayed back there, washing trays, but I couldn't. I slipped right out the back door.

Now, in the cold, I see a stout man with a bristly beard standing at the side entrance to the church. He is bulky with layers. I say, Good morning! I can get it back, that good feeling I had with the tech at the shop, but this guy looks in my eyes and blows me a soft, wet kiss I can

feel sliding down my face like an egg.

That's not fair, when I've been doing good work. Hadn't I raked all the leaves right after Thanksgiving? Leaves bring out children everywhere, scooping them up and tossing them in the air, burying themselves in the piles, and they laugh that gurgling laugh that sounds like a drain in their little throats. But that day the yard was silent, most of our neighbors at their jobs, and only a few leaves drifted down.

Fred had stopped by that same afternoon.

You did all this yourself? he'd asked, smiling. His skin looked grayer than last time, deeper lines from his nose to his chin.

Yes, I told him. I thought to myself, Fake It 'Til You Make It. I could see it, like a cross-stitch, hung by the door.

Fred took his cap off, rubbed his hand over the gray stubble on the back of his head.

I would have done this for you, you know. I really need the work. Fred looked at the ground. I need a place to sleep for tonight, he said. You can just call it in, you know. You call in to a motel, pay for it over the phone. There's lots of cheap places to stay, ain't no holiday, ain't no football game. You don't have to give me money. I don't want money. I want work and a place to sleep.

Do people do this, I wondered. Pay for strangers to sleep in hotels? But I thought of you, Daniel, and your money that you earn, and I knew what you would say. And just for a second, I wanted to slap your face.

I said, I'm sorry, Fred. I don't think I can do that.

He shook his head. Deep bags pulled at his yellowed eyes.

I have some food—do you want something to eat?

Food won't get me a place to sleep! Everybody says, come back when the leaves are falling, I have work for you then. That doesn't help me tonight. Ain't no more leaves falling *tonight*.

What about a shelter? I asked.

Fred snorted. I can't stay at Salvation Army. I went in there one night and saw someone walking around wearing all my clothes. He looked at me, his eyes bulging. You know what it's like, see someone

wearing your clothes? Nah, it led to a...an altercation. I can't sleep there.

He put his cap on and wiped the back of his hand across his lips. Come on, sister, in Jesus' name?

I told him to wait and went back in the house, rummaged in my purse. I had a five-dollar bill, more cash than I usually have. I ran back out with it. Take this.

He looked at me quickly then looked away, even as his left hand reached out for the money.

I didn't ask for money, he said, I asked for work. But thank you, sister.

That was back around Thanksgiving. Now it is January, and every lamppost has big silver snowflakes on it left over from Christmas-time, different shapes, all six-pointed stars.

It bothers me when people make snowflakes that have four or eight sides, because they're just not *accurate*, they're not a real representation of water freezing.

The way things are shown should be the way things are.

I know you didn't want me to tell your mother what was going on, not during the holidays. You said, She'll make a production out of it, and It's a very common thing, and besides, let's try to enjoy Christmas. But at the party she kept saying, There's something wrong. She passed me a red cocktail, her green eyes like truth serum, the smell of her face-powder soft and comforting. Why do you look so sad? she asked. I thought I'd been doing a good job, big grins, cooing over your sister's feather-headed twins. Let's not talk about it, you'd said on the drive over. We could use a little less drama. And it's true, I could. That was a dramatic moment, when we went in for the ultrasound, the one where we hoped to hear our baby's heart beat for the first time, but then we didn't. We expected a little limb-budded, teddy-bear-looking baby, blinking gray and white on the screen, a fast *whup whup whup*, but instead there was only a perfect, empty sac, a black circle with nothing

inside it, no explanation, no sound but the space wind that comes out of a black hole.

I would like less drama, too, but your mother always pushes. I said, I was pregnant, and now I'm not. At that moment I saw myself again, driving home alone after they gave me the medicine because I couldn't stand the waiting, the towels I put down on the car seat that got ruined anyway, soaked with sad, bloody leftovers.

She held me hard, her arms solid as a container.

But Christmas is over and it's easier now to find beauty. I've been keeping my journal and I find one beautiful thing a day, a dark-eyed junco by the birdfeeder, a frozen puddle with a crack in it like a jagged star, a tree gleaming with bare, white branches. I get out of bed every day, in time to see the sun rise, and Dr. Wells says we are getting the dosage right. He can see the signs.

I see our house over the next hill, our kitchen glowing against this gray day like a lit-up pumpkin. My hand searches in my pocket for keys. Then I remember I left them at the car shop. I didn't lock the door.

But I am still stunned to find Fred sitting in the kitchen.

Lady, he says, standing up, what you doing home?

This is my home, I say. I open the back door wide, thinking someone has to leave, and cold air washes in. My hand flies to my mouth to catch a bark of laughter; for a heart-stopping second, I thought he was you.

I thought you'd be at work, he says.

No, I say, defeated. No, I—

I freeze, breathing fast, eyes on his face. I know what to do. Pretend it's normal. He is my friend, dropping by.

It was so cold, he says. And my father just died of prostate cancer, now I got prostate cancer, got to go to the hospital every day now.

Oh, I'm sorry, I say. I force a sympathetic nod, keep watching. Inside there is a flood of cold fear through my chest—I don't understand him. A cruel voice in my head: *Idiot. You never did.*

Look, I'll go, he says. I shouldn't have come in here, I know that. He puts his hat on and shuffles to the open door. The kitchen smells of him, of unwashed clothes, old cabbage and cigarettes.

Wait! I say. I want to tell him something—I don't know what. He turns. The smell of smoke, the cold—a hitch in my throat. I start to cough, too hard. I can't catch my breath.

Suddenly there is no more air. I gasp but only cold seeps in, little bits, no oxygen. This doesn't have to be dramatic, I think, I just need an inhaler but I don't even know where one is.

Fred looks worried. You okay? I nod, coughing. My lungs begin to burn. I hear the sound, the worst sound, coming from me: the high whistle, a keening pitch. I bend over, hands on my knees.

Fred clutches my shoulder, fingers hard, and bends down close. You dying, lady? I feel his eyes moving over my naked face, seeing everything, a year's worth, you and me. You dying, he says, like a pronouncement, and I nod again, gripping his arms. Tears leak from my eyes, a flood of relief to finally be allowed to admit it.

Give me your phone, where's your phone, he says, panicked, and I fumble it from my pocket. He starts tapping the screen. What's the passcode, lady? What's the *number*, but I can't tell him anything, I can't talk and now I feel my eyes opening wider, as if I can breathe through them. I sink down to the floor.

Nonononono, Fred says, bracing me against the descent, arranging my arms, a tenderness. He hands me the phone, his hands shaking. You do it. Do the numbers.

A dispatcher. He tells them the street, his eyes blank when they ask for the house number. He stares at me.

I'll get help, Fred says. I'll get them here, I promise, lady. He dashes out the door, racing, and I believe him. I see the street through his eyes, the empty houses on the block. He breaks into a run and I feel his feet slapping the ground. We are one. We surge over the sidewalks, past the church, the library, we run and run. I can almost see you, sitting at your desk. Your patient eyes and your lips that you think are too red. But all I want is to keep running, a river that never stops, that cannot,

will not, be anything but what it is.

When I am far from you, the snow comes at last. Each flake touches down and dissolves, clean and true. Turn your eyes to the white sky and watch them fall—beauty, infinite and effortless. Everywhere.