

January Winters

By

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January winters in North England can be cruel. Especially when you live alone in an old house. I was sitting curled up on my couch, flicking through my book and sipping at my cooling cup of tea, as the world turned sullen and dark outside. The winds, as if kept back only by the meagre warmth of the pale sun, began to prowl the streets in its absence. I could hear its fury rattling at my old window frames, and somewhere in the distance, opening and slamming the wooden door of a hidden neighbour's shed.

I pulled the fleeced throw closer about my neck, as if at any moments some persistent tendrils of that outer chill may breach my home, and find their way to assault me. I tried as much as I could to just focus on the words laid out on the page before me, desperate for them to offer a gateway into a different world. I needed it.

Last year was rough, and I suffered the loss of my fiancée. I'd spent near every day since then reflecting on the void such a loss of love and routine can inject into your life and prospects. There are no words to encapsulate it, so I won't attempt to. It was only recently I could try, alone, the activities we used to do together.

I relied on the warm glow of my lamp which sat on my end table, as it was energy efficient, and I wasn't doing too well financially having lost half of the income- not in this market, not during these times. The rest of the house was as dark and cold as the world outside. It was almost impossible not to feel incredibly lonely when-

A sudden noise buzzed around the house, or rather, lack of noise. The lamp went out in tandem with the silence. I knew instantly that the electricity had gone. There was no general hum of background noise that you can only notice when it suddenly fizzles into nothingness.

In some houses, the older ones, bills aren't paid once per month. But rather, you have meters, in which you take your gas card and electricity key to a shop, and top them up with credit. If you don't keep on top of it, you can find yourself in a situation like mine, even if you're practicing an economic lifestyle- my way of avoiding the admission that I've been forced into parsimony by circumstance.

I could feel tears storming to my eyes, a stinging of bitter frustration festering about my nose, and a hollowness clawing back any normality that the tea and book offered. It was his job to keep the meters topped up. He had a routine, he had a set time to check. I was never on top of it, I could never remember.

Using the torch on my phone, I guided myself up to our- my room, feeling that weight of misery when all you want is for the world to swallow you up, for life to pause for a while so you can sob your way to catharsis, but incessant necessity tears you from the pursuit of numbness into dreaded action and responsibility.

I could have called my parents, or my in-laws, or even my brother – but that meant sitting in the darkness as I waited for them, their veritable burden of duty, until they came over to sort it for me. I didn't want to be a nuisance, and, honestly, I didn't want to deal with the company. I did better processing my emotions alone, or escaping them. I wanted to force myself to read.

The house was indeed chilly, and removing the throw inflicted instant regret. But, I soldiered on. Dressing myself in jumped, coat, hat, scarf, gloves, trying to ignore the sentimental value of each one. The scarf was a gift from him, the coat I bought when with him, the- the tears

would freeze on my cheeks as soon as I left, so I gently brushed and rapidly blinked them away.

As soon as I stood foot outside, I felt odd. The street was empty and dark. It was nine at night, so I didn't expect them to be filled, but, it was a different emptiness, a sheer lack of life. It felt like what I'd been harbouring within, had now reflected without. There were no kid's toys left in gardens to be picked up and played with the following day, no scooters or bikes left on their sides, no gates ajar. Just silent, quiet, closed gardens.

I started on my journey to the shop, with the key, card and wallet tucked away in my inner pocket. And as I walked, I felt a distinct eeriness steal over me. My footsteps were soft and scuttled from my old shoes, and the wind whipped in wild waves, sometimes slowing my steps. I could hear it rush past me in a sudden gush, and the whispering taunts slipped into my ear.

Every now and then, the wind was overpowered by the melodic, steely clang of turbulent wind chimes, or the hollow, softer clink of their wooden counterparts. And the darkness was interrupted by sudden sensor lights in the gardens, that would offer a moment of clarity against the shadowy streets.

It was strange to take note of the same streets I knew, when they were under the blanket of night. The beautiful flowers in the gardens were all muted and monochrome, each one hushed and strangled by the darkness. The trees that bloomed from the pathways were lacking vibrancy, and in their nude winter's state, held solid like petrified lightning bolts. Perhaps because it was the first nightly walk without him, or because I had felt something was off since I left the house, I had a sense that I was walking in a different world, an unfamiliar, unsafe world. A distortion of what once was.

I continued down the roads, heading toward the garage – the place I went to top up. And, down this road, a row of lampposts marched on either side. Each one leading the way like a column of soldiers, their lamps spilling quaint patches of orange light before me – two of them ahead flickered in a menacing manner, a constant battle of on and off. And a third, almost the same, kept losing power and regaining, but not in a flicker, but more a slow, steady metronome.

Something about it made me feel incredibly uneasy. I felt like, as much as I was keeping an eye on it, something else was keeping an eye on me. In spite of the clear emptiness of the long road, I glanced up and down to make sure there was nobody else around. Checking in the gardens, letting my eyes stroke across the windows, only to find them all blocked by curtains.

I was just being stupid, I was just tired, cold, and anxious to be back home. I was projecting a mood of uneas-

The light flickered on once more, and I could see, standing directly beneath the lamppost a single figure. A silhouette. Unmoving. Dark, undiscernible features. But, I knew it was facing me. It's shoulders broad, and stance strong. I froze, perhaps matching its rigidity, but a thousand thoughts betrayed my outward stability, racing through within, until the light snapped off.

I began to backtrack, slowly and steadily, keeping my eyes directly on the same point. As if the sudden shroud of darkness will allow whoever that was to steam ahead, but, there was no sudden movement on either side of the street through the other orange puddles, nor could I see anything limned in the road.

The light snapped back on, and my heart skipped a beat – but, nothing was there.

I took a few seconds to breathe, and decided against my better judgement that I had just imagined it. I had a propensity to let my mind run away with itself, *he* was the one who would always anchor me to reality. But, just in case, I decided to go the long way.

I retraced my steps, trying to act as if I had simply gone the wrong way, and was rectifying it. But, I rushed between the patches of light, even though between them was completely dark, I felt like as soon as I stepped into a more diluted section, I was infinitely more vulnerable.

I realised that the longer way would bring me past the old community centre. When I was younger, it was where everyone went to learn boxing, or share prayers, or whatever else the theme of the day was. But, for years it had fell into dilapidation with the constantly shifted and delayed promise of a wonderful renovation.

It was still used by the youth, certainly, but not in any official capacity. Sometimes you'd see a few glowing, pulsing orbs of orange, and you knew there was a small huddle of teenagers there smoking cigarettes, or whatever else. But, that was always better than the alternative. Like any condemned buildings, in its absence of residents, it had become home to legends of ghost stories, and horror tales in the intervening years. I'd prefer a group of ne'erdowells, over the stresses of my mind.

I thought, given the hollow breaths in my chest, that it may be wiser to just go back into the cold darkness of my home, and force myself into my loved one's nights, asking for their assistance. But, by this point, I was half way to the garage and half way to home. I really didn't want to be a pain, and so, with one more nervous glance behind the street, to see that lamppost flash on, and no distant figure watching me, I decided to stop being ridiculous and carry on.

The road that past the old community centre was wide enough, but very much unlit. I decided to walk in the middle, just as I always did whenever I walked alone, to give myself enough space from either pathway. Like before, my eyes were trained on a certain spot, and that was through the three-pronged railings of the centre.

The building in daytime was colourful enough, with little murals on the walls that the kids painted, albeit clearly left to ruin. But, at night, it was just a series of black blocks, poking in and out from one another. I tried to ignore the stories that were coming to the forefront of my mind.

The caretaker who died there, and could be prowling the perimeter of the grounds checking for any trespasser. Or the three ghastly children that could be heard laughing in the copse of trees, which is where they were last seen alive. Or the widow, the original owner, whose haggard face could be seen watching from the window, basking in some spectral glow. There were too many, and my eyes were darting from window, to trees, to side of the building, making sure none of these were suddenly going to take me by surprise.

That figure had already shaken me up, so much so, that even if were to see a group of miscreants, I know I'd be screaming as I ran back home.

Though, whether lurking in the shadows of the centre, or the darkness of my mind, I couldn't shake this feeling that I was under the gaze of something. Goose bumps had stormed my body, my hairs were standing on end, and I felt flighty and fidgety, as if at any moment I would be confronted by someone.

I watched with a vigilance of a hawk, and from the depths of my fearful mind, my anxiety ran rampant, irritating and exciting my paranoia, so that visions and shapes began to emerge. It was impossible, but it was as if I could see shadows, darker than the winter's night, flitting across the overgrown grass, or lurking from behind trees, or peering from smashed windows.

I bolstered my resolve, telling myself that I was being ridiculous, and pushed onward, still not taking my eyes from the building. Just a few more seconds and I'll be on the main road, in which I could already envision the garish bright light of the garage offering a contrast to the unsettling darkness of this charged night.

A sudden whoosh of wind took me by surprise, and I yelped at the spontaneity of it, and in a panic, allowed my vision to furtively check the grounds and the building, just in case my sudden noise had attracted the attention of these spirits, and gave them all heed to rush me at once. My mind's eye was full of the most tragic countenances slithering across the floor, or gliding from the window, or bounding across the grounds – but, in reality there was nothing.

I decided it was best to stop focusing on it, and just continue ah-

At the end of the street... the figure.

It was impossible, for it to get there before me, it would have to- it couldn't.

I blinked again, desperate to wipe it from the vision before me. But it stayed, solid and stubborn. Just as vague, just as rigid, just as still and menacing as before.

I couldn't move. My feet were rooted to the floor. My bones as petrified as the naked trees that lurked in the distance. I kept my eyes trained on the figure as it continued to watch me, ignoring my wishes, my prayers, for it to dissolve and melt before me. I stared until the wind stole the moisture from my eyes and I had to blink.

Upon opening my eyes. It had closed half the distance in that time.

I could feel a sudden terror unfurling within, clawing about my body with a desperate intensity. And even, from the community centre, an urge, a silent chorus willing me to leave, to flee, to go. But, I couldn't. I wanted to, but I couldn't.

It just stood, watching me. And with this closer proximity, I could see it was taller than anything I'd ever seen before. At least eight foot, nine, ten? In my fear, with my senses heightened, I still couldn't make out any distinguishing features.

But I could hear myriad unspoken orders to run, run, "*run before it comes any closer!*"

The last, though there was no tone, no intonation, was unmistakably my last lover's. That was the catalyst I needed to spin on my heel, unknowing, uncaring, if this was a stupid thing to do.

I ran, faster than I ever had before, refusing to turn around me. Sprinting back through the dark streets, the sound of my anguished breath and screaming lungs dwarfing the howling of the wind, the peeling of the chimes.

I was sobbing, which I didn't realise until I was struggling to get my key in the door, my tears blurring the task beyond its menial obstruction.

As soon as I was back in the house, though dark and dreary, I could tell I was safe. And, ultimately, I smiled, because even alone, even terrified, I knew that my late fiancée saved me that night, from whatever the lurking, menacing presence may have been.