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Degrees of Cold

Holly Baker

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I sit on a snowy bank, my legs wet up past the knee and my hands bare and red. Beside me, Jen lies on her back, her soaked coat on the ground beside her and her boots a few feet away. As the seconds tick by, my clothes stiffen against my skin, hardening as water turns to ice in the frigid air. I can see crystals forming in Jen’s long braid and thin lashes. She is not shaking. Not yet. Just breathing, deeply—long, rasping, steadying breaths. Then
she coughs. Her breath escapes in visible puffs of air. The car rests at some distance up the hill, a distance that seems so much longer because of two-feet deep snow. I don’t know if I can stand, but I know I can’t carry her there. It’s too far. I have to wait until I can feel, until I can move.

Above and surrounding us, the sky is gray and has no warmth. The sun a distant orb, paler than the moon. The lake looks like hardened fog, its surface dusted white and smooth but for one break in the field of white: a jagged hole that reveals the thinness of the ice so close to the shore. That’s where she fell in. I can see it from where I sit, see the trail cut through the ice, broken as easily as glass. The water is dark and laps slowly against the shards. Our gear still lies on one side
of the hole: one pole and a kit. A line still runs into the water. The other is lost. I know I will not go back for any of it—eventually, it will all be lost to the lake.

I had taken off my gloves to fill the sinker. My fingers were already stiff and cold beneath the gloves, but I could not manipulate the tiny rubber plug through the thick finger padding. So I had set them aside, knelt by the tiny hole we had carved, and released the plug. The shock of pure cold bit through the flesh of my hand and straight to the bone, stealing my breath away in a gasp. The pain was real, but the pleasure also to feel something so potent, so unequivocally genuine as pure, unalloyed cold. Five seconds. Ten seconds. The cold began to burn. I screamed and laughed, watching the air rise from inside the sinker in tiny, fluttering bubbles and knowing I had to hold my hand there for seconds more, until the last of the bubbles had escaped and burst. That’s when I heard the ominous sound of splitting ice. A frightened gasp. A frantic scramble. A scream. In one, inconceivable instant, I watched Jen’s head disappear beneath black water.

Now Jen moans. I see she is shivering violently, and at the same moment I begin to feel the battle of heat against cold enter my fingertips as
I press them against my chest beneath my sweatshirt, under my coat. My heart pumps warm blood to my legs, my toes, and all is torture. As the heat at last manifests itself, I know the horror of cold.

Softly, it begins to snow.

*Children are born true scientists. They spontaneously experiment and experience and reexperience again. . . . They smell, taste, bite, and touch-test for hardness, softness, springiness, roughness, smoothness, coldness, warmthness. . . .*

~ Richard Buckminster Fuller

“I remember that winter well. Oh, it was cold! Your shoes would freeze to the pavement if you stood in one place too long. And it was impossible to get the Buick running before sunup. That’s how cold it was. Of course, we couldn’t get very far, what with all the storms and snow. A typical Wisconsin winter, I suppose.”

I grin as my mother tells the story I have heard more than twenty times, once a year, and I know that the next line will start, “Sixteen degrees below.”

“Sixteen degrees below,” she continues, shaking her head as if she still can’t believe the
temperature could drop so low anywhere but the Antarctic. “That’s how cold it was when we brought you home on Christmas Eve. Such a wonderful Christmas gift, our little Holly berry.”

On the nineteenth of December, 1983, I entered the frosty world and found my first home to be the upper-Midwestern town of Oconomowoc. That’s probably when I developed my tolerance and love of winter, of snow and cold and ice. As a child in grade school, I looked forward to the summer vacation only because it meant no more school—the heat of summer was never my friend. The Midwestern humidity left me feeling sticky and unclean, and I never liked the feel of sweat on my palms or hot blood in my cheeks. On sultry days I sought out shade or kept indoors. Or, if I had to go outdoors, I sought out other ways to keep cool: running through sprinklers in the front yard, sucking popsicles bought for fifty cents from the ice cream truck, and racing my bike down steep hills just to feel a breeze on my face.

But winter was my haven season. As October approached, I would begin to search the skies for the first snow clouds—I learned early to identify them. And then, when the first flakes of the season began to fall, I raced from the warm house to catch the crystallized rain on my tongue, and
once enough had landed on the lawn I balled it into my fist to feel it harden and begin to melt at once, wetting my palm with frigid water. I liked it. The cold. Every time I touched it felt like the first time, and I was a scientist learning its properties and intensities.

A snowball became the base of a snowman. I crunched through six inches of snow and called to Meredith to bring the midsection. Our creation would stand no higher than three feet tall once we were finished, but for eight-year-old girls it was an impressive statue of snow.

It wasn’t long before the snow had seeped through my thin, blue knit gloves. I pulled my flesh and blood fingers out of the knit ones and curled them against my palm, trying to warm them again and make them mobile. Suddenly, from behind, a ball of ice struck the back of my neck and slipped down my back as if I weren’t wearing any coat at all. I screamed, more in offense than in pain or discomfort. As Meredith laughed behind me, I shoved my fingers back into place inside the gloves, stooped down to gather a handful of perfect packing snow, and lobbed one back.

We played for another half an hour, but my fingers only lost more and more heat. Soon, I could barely move them at all, and we called a quit
to our play. We stomped our feet on the porch and stepped into Meredith’s warm house, shucking off our hats, coats, and scarves and letting them dry in the entryway. I spread and clenched my cold fingers, willing them to warm up.

“Holly, warm up your fingers at the sink,” Mrs. Olson said.

I went to the kitchen sink and pulled the tap all the way to the left. The hot water hit my hands, and pain shot through my knuckles to the very tips of each finger. I gasped through my teeth and withdrew my hand. Mrs. Olson appeared at my side.

“You don’t want to do that,” she said, pushing the tap the other way. “Warm them up with cold water.”

I was in the drug store the other day trying to get a cold medication . . . Not easy. There’s an entire wall of products you need. You stand there going, Well, this one is quick acting but this is long lasting . . . Which is more important, the present or the future?

—Jerry Seinfeld

The November of my sophomore year of high school started off unusually warm. I was un-
happy. We had seen snowfall in early October, and I had entertained hopes of a long, white winter. But warm weather invaded shortly thereafter, and it lasted. The Woods had even refilled their back-yard swimming pool.

“We’re going swimming this weekend,” Scott Wood told me. “My place.”

“It’s November,” I countered. My mentality did not allow for a warm November.

“It was seventy-eight yesterday,” he said.

And so it was that I found myself changing into a swimming suit in the Woods’ bathroom on Friday night. With plans set firmly in place, no one had bothered to attempt a readjustment as the temperature dropped to fifty degrees on Thursday. Chantell, noting this right away, had already backed out, and Becca used a family get-together as an excuse. That left me, Scott, Chris, Clark, and Stew. I pretended that I didn’t notice—or care—that I was the lone girl in this group, as I was secretly pleased, and there was no way that I was going to back out now.

The boys were laughing together when I finally joined them, fighting to show no fear of appearing before them in a swimming suit. There was a nip in the air and the effect showed in their shirtless skin. I wondered if they could see the
same through my suit.

"Who's first?" they said.

"Holly! Holly!"

I knew I'd be volunteered even before the question had been asked. No fear; I told myself, and with a grin, I nodded and said, "No problem."

On the side of the pool was a low diving board. I couldn't dive straight to save a drowning child, so I opted for the male favorite, a cannon ball. The water was bound to be more than just a little chilly, but I didn't even think before leaping, tucking my knees to my chest, and screwing my face up in anticipation of the impact. The water hit like a wall of ice and then engulfed me, stinging my bare skin and seeping straight through my suit to regions that should never know such cold. I came up gasping and heard the laughter all around me.

"You're next!" I cried, keeping my jaw from trembling with some effort.

One by one, they each dove in, and one by one they each surfaced with curses and screams on their lips. But we were all laughing. For several minutes, we swam around that cold pool, our skin paling and our lips turning blue, but I found that I was able to bear it easier with each
passing minute. The cold was strangely invigorating, and I actually felt warmer putting my whole head under the surface than I did when the air touched it. Above all, I was determined to stay longer in the water than any of the boys, who continued to yip and splutter and grind their teeth as they splashed water into one another’s faces. Yes, it was cold, and I would never deny it, but the cold was worth gaining their admiration. If I backed out now, if I backed out first, I knew I would somehow be diminished in their eyes. I would be somehow weaker, lesser, more a girl, and I refused to allow myself to be seen in such a way. The future was more important, after all, than the now.

“That’s it, I’m done,” said Chris, and the others wasted no time in following him out. Smiling to myself, I completed another lap or two before I, too, left the pool. They smirked and guffawed and attributed my tolerance to higher female fat percentages, but I knew they were impressed. I was, too, for that matter.

The next morning I awoke with a cold.

Truly to enjoy bodily warmth, some small part of you must be cold, for there is no quality in this world that is not what it is merely by contrast. Nothing exists in itself.

~Herman Melville, Moby Dick
Few pleasures equal that of sitting in a steamy, frothing hot tub. Of course, that experience is made all the more potent if there is snow on the ground. And on February the fourteenth, my junior year in high school, the skies did not disappoint. That night, I found myself surrounded by cloud-white snow and sitting in a hot tub with my friends. Not one of us had dates for Valentine’s Day, so this seemed like appropriate compensation for a faulty love life. It had been snowing all day, all week, really, and there was fresh powder on the ground. My first suggestion had been to build a snow fort, but my friends—apparently unimpressed with this childish suggestion—opted instead for Chantell’s hot tub. We sat there for twenty minutes or so when I suggested that we run through the yard, in our bare feet, through the snow, and then hop back in. After five minutes of persuasion I had them convinced, and on the count of three we all jumped out of the hot, bubbling water and, squealing and shrieking, we sprinted through the snow.

The cold was biting but exhilarating, stinging toe to ankle to calf, and the cold air met wet hair and skin with a ruthless malice. But I was smiling. Not shrieking, not even gasping. Just running and allowing myself to feel winter’s purity.
JoAnna, I noticed, refused to leave the pool and so denied herself the experience. Ellen slipped and fell face first into the snow, hollering something horrible, and then returned as quickly as her stiffening limbs would allow. Soon I was the only one still bearing the contrast. Grinning, ambling back to the hot tub without care—so as to demonstrate my unusual and most unfeminine tolerance—I stepped back into the pool. The hot water enveloped me at once with a thorough and wonderful relief. I was the only one there who truly understood the joy of heat.

*Patience serves as a protection against wrongs as clothes do against cold. For if you put on more clothes as the cold increases, it will have no power to hurt you.*

― Leonardo DaVinci

We had heard about Chinese torture methods from my older brother and his friends. How they knew about such methods I don’t know, but they derived a certain pleasure out of tormenting little sisters. Jacob threatened me with bamboo shoots up my fingernails, electrical wires in my chest, and water dripping onto the center of my forehead for days until the skin wore away. I never believed he would actually do any of that of
course, nor did I believe any of it was real. The idea of torture and the horror of pain nevertheless fascinated my seven-year-old sensibility, and I convinced a few impressionable friends of my same young years to try one with me: ice cube on the forehead.

“Mind over matter,” I told them wisely, quoting something I must have heard on TV. It sounded clever enough.

We each took an ice cube, lay down upon the living room floor, and placed the ice between our eyes. “First person to quit loses,” I reminded them.

The cold cube against my warm skin wasn’t too bad at first; but it quickly became rather uncomfortable. It was melting, the freed water dripping into my eyes. Patience, I coached myself, you can beat them. It’s only water.

“Ow,” Gina groaned next to me. “That hurts.”

And I began to feel it, too. Like a knife sinking between my eyes. The discomfort intensified into a pressure that seemed to have very little to do with the cold. I squeezed my eyes shut as the seconds passed. My skull was being cleaved in two. Tears of pain spilled from my eyes, mixing with the drips from the ice cube. Melt, I thought. Melt!
Gina screamed, and Meredith sat up quickly, throwing aside her ice cube and pressing a warm palm against her forehead. “Oh,” she moaned.

The ice cube was torture—I had not known that simple cold could be so painful. My senses were splitting just as surely as the space between my eyes. Then Gina rolled over and was out of the game.

I screamed. I won.

Cold feet are often symptomatic of a legitimate intuition that you may be heading for the wrong place at the wrong time.

~Suzanne Fields

The spring of my senior year of high school was wet and green in Indiana. With May approaching, the one thing on every senior’s mind was the upcoming prom. I had not been asked as a sophomore, nor as a junior, and I had little hope of being asked in this third and final year of eligibility. My guy friends were just that—friends—and saw me as nothing more than another one of the guys who was forbidden to use the same restroom. Those I did secretly eye were perfectly oblivious to my interests, and I lacked the courage to enlighten them.
So it came as a supreme shock when Alek Andrisani, a tall young man with broad shoulders (on account of the swimming team) and Greek ancestry (on account of his mother), invited me to Columbus Park to have a picnic with him on Saturday before a friendly game of ultimate Frisbee, the default good-weather activity of half the high school. Instantly I said yes, remembering, of course, that he had broken up with Nicole Pearl the week before. Had he had his eye on me the whole time? My spirits soared, and I at last had confidence that I was not, after all, the school’s number one reject.

Saturday morning, an hour before we were to meet, I began to rethink my hasty answer. Why had Alek invited me? When I said yes, I thought that, at last, my overlooked qualities were beginning to shine through and had caught the eye of someone I had before considered a shallow, self-involved pretty boy. But, as the week progressed, the reality that he was a shallow, self-involved pretty boy regained my attention. I had no choice but to question, repeatedly, why, of all the more beautiful, flirtier, wannabe supermodels he had singled out this plain, quiet (relatively), mouse of a girl. It was a miracle he even knew my name. With painful realization, I decided that I had probably misunderstood.
“Maybe I just won’t go,” I commented casually to my mom.

“It’s just cold feet,” she assured me. “Go! Have fun.”

And so, twenty minutes later, I found myself sitting on a stone bench in Columbus Park, waiting with dreaded anticipation and a fluttering heart. Above me, dark clouds began to crowd in from the west. A stiff wind blew, and I turned my head to keep my hair out of my eyes. I wondered if the untamed hair, tossed about in the wind, would prove alluring, and so I tried to remain perfectly still and unperturbed by the maddening strands whipping my face.

Slowly, my toes began to hurt with cold, then my fingers and ears. I looked down at my watch and read 1:13. He had said 1:00. Traffic, I assumed to ease my aching conscience. He does live on the other side of the county.

At 1:24 I checked my watch again, and a single drop from the sky splashed against the watch face. Another struck my wrist, my head, my lap. Within moments, it was a downpour. I shot up from the bench and ran to a nearby tree trunk. It was at that moment that I saw, further down the path, two boys about my age shoot out from behind another trunk. I recognized them as Chuck Powell and Wes Jacks, two of Alek’s friends from the swim team. They were struggling to remain
upright for the fits of laughter that were forcing
them to run doubled over.

I understood.

*Every man has his secret sorrows which the world
knows not; and often times we call a man cold when he is
only sad.*

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I never told my mother that I had been
the object of some jock’s joke. When I returned
home, three hours later, I was soaked through and
told her through white teeth that I had had a blast.
No one asked me to prom that year. I didn’t date
at all in high school. My brother Jacob, ever the
observant one, once explained to me why.

“The boys all think you’re cold,” he said.
I suppose I am.

*If I accept the fact that a god is absolute and
beyond all human experiences, he leaves me cold.*

~ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*

Only March, and the sun beat fiercely down
upon the island of Fuerteventura. Forty-five de-
grees Celsius. I could not do the conversion in my
head, but I knew that it was too hot to be wandering these dusty streets, looking for somebody to talk to. And I didn’t want to talk to anyone. It was our sacred charge to share this message of hope and happiness, but all my feeling had been sapped by the heat. At one o’clock in the afternoon, we had another hour to go before mediodía and the respite of indoors—still hot as a furnace, but at least out of the sun. And then it would be back on the sun-scorched streets for another five hours. The dread of it already filled my stomach. I could scarcely recall the enthusiasm I had once felt in becoming a missionary, some nine months ago. It felt like a lifetime. My watch slipped over the sweat on my wrist, reminding me of the languidly ticking seconds, but I refused to look at it. Somehow, it was always worse when I looked.

My companion, the girl I had to study with, teach with, live with, and suffer with, walked haggardly at my side, no happier than I was. No one had allowed us in their home in over a week, and even then it had been only out of pity. No one had willingly looked at us since church on Sunday. The Canarians would see us coming, two instantly recognizable figures that patrolled their streets every day with an objectionable blue book in hand, and quickly cross to the other side, warn
their neighbors, and hide behind their doors, over which hung a sign: Somos Católicos—No cambiamos. No insistan!

I repeated the words dejectedly in my head: “We’re Catholic—We won’t change. Don’t ask!”

I turned my water bottle upside down over my open mouth, and groaned. I had emptied it ninety minutes ago. Now my lips, tongue, and throat were desiccated, as though I hadn’t had any water in days. I considered insisting that we stop inside a locutorio and buy more, but I was down to my last few euros for the month, and I knew I could wait another sixty minutes.

My eyes began to burn, but with a heat quite disparate from the sun. Why had he sent me here? Why had he chosen me for this desert place, a place he himself had forsaken and forgotten more than ten years ago? I felt utterly alone, stranded in the middle of the Atlantic, and friendless. My companion knew how I felt—she felt it too, the isolation, the emptiness, the purposelessness. But it was a feeling one could not share, only understand. Despite the wretched heat, my soul felt cold, and I could not believe that he would abandon me like this. Not now. Not when there was such work to be done and I needed him so much.

We turned on the fans the instant we got
back to our piso, but all they did was blow around warm air. As soon as I had taken off as much clothing as possible and still remain decent, I put my head inside the freezer. The relief was artificial, and I knew it.

Two hours later, we left again. The temperature had climbed to forty-nine.

*Nothing is lost yet, nothing broken, and yet the cold blue word is spoken: say goodbye now to the Sun, the days of love and leaves are done.*

~ R. P. T. (Robert Peter Tristram) Coffin

I don’t know how the conversation started. We were all sitting around the dinner table, my family and I, just talking. The meal was finished and the remains were left to harden to the plates. I cherished these times, even though they came nearly every day. We would sit and chat away the hour, arguing the difference between antiperspirant and deodorant, championing salad dressing over mayonnaise, quoting Seinfeld, and it never mattered what was said or who said it or how long we sat there.

Tonight’s topic had somehow drifted from candied apples in Estes Park to old Halloween
costumes to snow days.

"Remember that Christmas break when it snowed three feet?" I said. It had been one of the best Christmases of my life—school had been cancelled for nine days in January and I spent hours outdoors building snow tunnels and a veritable maze. Our dog, Gus, had gotten lost for almost a full hour.

"Two weeks off of school," my brother Colin said with relish. "But not church. Why is it they never cancel church?"

"They do, sometimes," Dad replied, "if it's bad enough."

"Like that one time, remember?" said Mom, and Dad nodded soberly. I was always amazed at how little they had to say to one another to be understood.

"What time?" I pressed.

"Oh, it was years ago. You were only a baby when it happened. We were living in Wisconsin. Wakesha Second Ward, wasn't it?"

"No, it had split by then."

"The third ward, then. With Bishop Ulridge."

These details meant nothing to me. I crunched the leftover ice from my glass and waited patiently for the story to continue.
“Anyway,” said Dad, “it was a bad winter. Saturday night the temperature had dropped to ninety below—”

“Oh, it wasn’t that cold,” Mom interrupted.

“With the wind chill, it was. Anyway, it was cold. The bishop and his counselors decided that it was too cold and dangerous to go to church in the morning. We had eight o’clock church—”

“No, it was nine,” corrected Mom. “No one has eight o’clock church.”

“Nine, then,” Dad conceded. “So they cancelled it. Called all the high priests to call the families they home taught and let it trickle down through the phone tree, as it were, until every member was called. I guess a branch got broken off somewhere, because the Binghamhs were never called.”

Mom was shaking her head slowly from side to side.

“So they got their kids up in the morning—four of them, I think it was—”

“Three.”

“Three. Got in the van, and rode to church.” He paused. “Their van broke down on the road. Country road. And no traffic that early, especially in that weather. They couldn’t leave the
van. There was nowhere to go, and anyway it was too cold to walk anywhere. And these were the days before cell phones. . . . They all died. Froze to death in their van.”

The story finished, and my brothers and sister started asking questions. But I sat silent, transfixed, unhearing. The broken ice slipped down my throat, unnoticed. Such a thing could not have happened to a righteous family on their way to worship services. God would not allow it! But more than this, I was horrified by the prospect of sitting in a van I could not leave, slowly freezing to death. What had they been thinking? Had they known their end was near? What had the mother done to comfort her children, or what had the father said to assure them that things would be all right? But they hadn’t been all right. They had all died, and I could not keep myself from imagining those final moments in the isolated van. I saw that van, encased in a thin layer of ice and dusted with snow on the side of an invisible road. The world was still and empty, and for miles in any direction all I could see was white, as if there existed nothing at all. But inside that veritable coffin, there was darkness and merely the shadows of bodies. I could not stop myself from wondering what it had been like for the man who discovered them.
In my own head, I did not hear children crying, wind howling, or mother and father asking one another what they would do. I did not hear the final I-love-you's. All was silent.

*Oft expectation fails, and most oft there*  
*Where most it promises; and oft it hits*  
*Where hope is coldest, and despair most fits.*  

~ William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*

"Where do you see this going?" he asked, almost timidly, as though this were a question he had been dreading for a long time now—two months, probably, if he was anything like me. And all the evidence suggested that he was.

I offered him an apologetic smile. "I . . . I don't know."

"I mean, if we don't really feel anything for each other—"

"There's no sense in forcing something."

We spoke in unspecific terms, but we each understood exactly what the other meant. That was what our relationship had always been. It was familiar, easy, and without any true warmth.

"You know, I really do think you are a great girl."

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“Oh no, I totally get it. I know. I feel the same about you. It’s just not—”

“Right. I mean, you’re right.”

Silence invaded the car for a few seconds, and it was the first time I had ever felt uncomfortable around him.

“I just don’t want things to get weird, you know?”

“Oh no,” he agreed quickly, “of course not. We’re still friends.”

“Yeah. We can still talk and all.”

From the viewpoint of a textbook, he was exactly right for me. And I for him. So why was this so wrong? But it was. I had known it for five months, only I had neglected to tell myself. I guess I had convinced myself that this was my only shot, that if it didn’t happen with him, it would never happen. Not for me. But try as I might, I could not love him. Not like that. Not even close. I allowed him to put his arm around me on the couch, hold my hand as we walked, and even kiss me at the end of the date, but I had felt nothing. Mom kept asking if my heart ever skipped around him. I didn’t know hearts could do that.

When he pulled up to my apartment, I smiled at him and permitted myself the question
I had sworn I would never ask. "Is there—just be honest, okay? I'm not saying I don't completely agree with this, because I do, I'm just curious. Was it something about me? Something I did?"

He smiled back at me, and I could tell he was debating how to say it, whether to even answer at all. At last, he answered, as I knew he would. "I don't know, I guess I just felt like—like you weren't really into me, that's all. I held your hand, but you didn't hold mine. I'm sorry, does that make sense?"

I swallowed, but hid the action. "Oh yeah, it makes perfect sense. I'm sorry."

"No, don't. It just felt a bit like..."

Here I provided the term: "Cold shoulder?"

He sighed, the smile never leaving his face. "Yeah. Sort of."

"No, I get it. And I'm sorry. Really, it wasn't you. It was me."

I still can't believe I used that line.

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_I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave—thank God for the quiet grave—O! I can feel the cold earth upon me—the daisies growing over me—O for this quiet—it will be my first._

~ *John Keats*
My Grandpa Baker died on March ninth. It is a significant day for my family, it seems: it is the day my dog Gus died, the day my grandmother was born, and the day I found out that I would be spending eighteen months of my life in the Canary Islands.

We had been waiting for him to pass away for several months, but on the day it happened my father sobbed like a child. I had never seen him like that before. I didn’t know how to react myself. I was an adult, barely but legally so, but I had never lost a close relative before, unless you count losing my grandmother to Alzheimer’s disease. She was still alive, if you could call that living, and not many in my family do.

The funeral took place just two days later. After a service in the church, we drove to the cemetery in Logan, Utah, where Grandpa’s baby sister had been buried in 1921, where his parents’ graves lay, and where he would now join them in the cold earth. The hole had already been dug, a deep, dark depression in the snow, and the headstone had already been placed. It was wide and gray. On the left side, the words John Age Baker had been carved neatly into the stone, along with his birth date and the date of only two days before. The right side of the stone bore the words
Clara Jean Simpkins Baker, with date of birth as well. The death date would not follow for another four years.

My brothers and cousins, each wearing a heavy black coat on which was pinned a snow-white rose, carried the casket from the hearse to the gravesite. It was the first time I had ever seen such a procession for myself, and I thought it beautiful. All around, figures dressed in dark colors stood upon the pure white snow. The cemetery was otherwise untainted by our presence and seemed to offer, in its own way, solace. Soft flakes fell earthward, blanketing the land anew. The world was quiet in the cemetery, still and solemn. Uncle John prayed, we sang, and we said goodbye.

I do not remember feeling cold that day.

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.

~ Emily Dickinson

The fireplace is glowing, warming the whole room, and Jen and I sit on the couch, wrapped in blankets from head to foot. We are silent as we sip the steaming cider, but occasionally we glance at one another and grin ashamedly. Her mother still
doesn't know about the mishap, and I will never tell mine. She pulls her blanket tighter around her shoulders and shivers.

If I think about it, or sit still long enough, I can still feel the poisonous cold in my toes. I can still remember the agony of what it was like to feel again, as if I was experiencing heat for the first time in my life.

I had grabbed the hood of her parka and pulled, but the sudden weight beneath my knees had caused another resounding crack in the ice. I sank up to the thigh before I could fling my body back onto solid ice. Jen was screaming, for the pain, I knew, the very pain that caught my breath in my throat and prevented me from crying out, too. I reached for her again, this time securing my hold on her arm and my feet on the ice, and I heaved with all the strength in me. Another ominous splitting noise sounded piercingly in my ear. In fear and desperation, I prayed. I had just barely reached the shore, dragging her the whole way, when the ice shattered completely along my newly forged trail. It had held just long enough.

The heater in Jen's car had been cranked as high as it would go. I had not forgotten the lesson taught to me so many years ago—Warm them with cold—but Jen kept pleading from the backseat. I can't feel the heat. Please, turn it higher. I knew she was feeling it, though, her blood returning heat to her body. She
was moaning, rubbing her bared skin, and shaking terribly. I can’t feel the heat. Not long after, we had both begun to perspire. I felt slightly ill, but the memory of dipping myself in such glacial water to pull her out still numbed my sensibility. Trying not to think at all, I drove her car down the mountain.

Jen’s home was a sanctuary of warmth.
Now Jen looks at me as if to say, “Never again.”
I offer no response.
Mrs. Hardy comes into the room.
“There’s some warm apple pie and vanilla ice cream, if you two would like any.”
“Just the ice cream,” I say.