

## Dashing Through the Snow

by John Patrick Tormey

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The Quinn family trudged up the three flights of stairs to Uncle Terry's apartment. They climbed single-file in order of age from oldest to youngest: Dan and Pattie, Molly, Chris, and then Brendan. All stepped quick to escape the cold December night at their backs. As the family crowded onto the third floor landing, they removed their hats and gloves, put their hands to their mouths and blew hot air on their fingers.

Dan had not worn a hat or gloves and was anxious to get where it was warm, so he knocked on the apartment door. Hearing no response, he waited a minute before giving the doorknob a cautious turn. He took a single, small step into his brother-in-law's apartment. Heat gusted out into the hall. Radiators were whistling.

Dan, still holding the doorknob, scanned the empty living room, hoping their visit had been forgotten and they could go home, when Terry came exploding out of his kitchen, a plate full of holiday desserts balanced in each hand, screaming at the top of his lungs, "You're here!"

Dan jumped back a step.

Terry's pupils were dilated wide as dimes, his skin pale, his teeth grinding, sweat running across his temples, his Hawaiian shirt unbuttoned and baring an emaciated torso. Terry was high and Dan knew it.

Dan almost turned the whole crew around and drove home, ending this Christmas Eve ritual once and for all. But his wife and kids swept him inside, forcing Dan to stay and participate.

Once the Quinns were inside, Terry told the kids and Pattie to sit down, sit down, and slung the two plates full of cookies and brownies onto the coffee table. A cigarette dangled out of his mouth and bobbed up and down as he spoke. Dan opened and closed his fists. He took a deep breath and let it out.

When he leaned down to where Pattie sat on the couch, Dan told his wife that he would be in the kitchen until she was ready to go.

"I want no part of this," he said. "He's your goddamned brother."

Meanwhile, Terry stood in front of the TV, facing his sister and her children, and pointed down at the coffee table full of desserts. "Eat this shit, will ya? It's the fuckin' holidays!"

Dan sat down at the small kitchen table. He opened the window and lit a cigarette. Dan exhaled smoke and watched as Terry came into the kitchen, grabbing more plates full of junk food off the counter and leaving, sprinting around the living room, slapping the plates down on top of radiators, the TV, and the already loaded coffee table.

Dan Quinn and Terry Burke shared a history that went back further than family by marriage. The Quinn and Burke families were neighbors on Siemont Road in Dorchester, and both men were sons to Irish immigrants from Galway. The families became friendly living side by side, and the solitary Quinn boy was folded into the Burke house where three boys and three girls all but burst out of the walls and windows. Terry and Dan were the same age and shared the same class at St. Mark's, and so it wasn't long before the boys rarely left each others sight, playing street games like Half Ball and Columbia.

Later, fueled with testosterone, they began terrorizing the neighborhood together. The teenagers drank at Wainwright Park, stole cars in the suburbs, fought rivals, and blew lines of coke off of urinals at the Blarney Stone Pub. Everywhere they went, the boys could be found cackling at the top of their lungs, arms slung around

each others shoulders.

In his criminal days running with Terry and the rest of the Burke brothers, before he fell in love with Terry's little sister, before the kids came, Dan never really considered what might lie beyond the trouble he and the rest of his crew might find. Thinking of the future, the boys used to tell themselves, will get a guy killed. And then they would all laugh.

What a stupid fucking kid I was, Dan told himself. He lit his second cigarette, leaned back in the chair and waited for the night to be over.

2.

Pattie sat up and rearranged the plates on the coffee table. Some of the cookies had fallen off; she set them right. Next to her, Christopher sat forward with the television remote in his hand. He flipped through the channels, looking for something to hold his interest. He found a basketball game. Brendan sat on her other side, sinking deep into the cushions of the couch.

For a few seconds Pattie's eyes followed Terry as he crisscrossed the apartment. He ranted and raved about the food, sucking down cigarettes as he spoke.

Molly? Pattie leaned forward and looked around for her daughter. There she was, in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the livingroom, a full glass of red wine already at her lips, a hand on her full hip. She's gained weight, Pattie thought, and it looks good on her. Dan was in the kitchen.

Pattie turned to Brendan. She said, "Could you put the coats on the bed in your uncle's room?" Brendan said nothing and stood. Pattie craned her head up to see him as he extended to his full height. He was as tall as Terry and in his second year of high school. The boy would be taller than his uncle by the spring, she guessed. In the past few years Pattie had witnessed, awestruck, as her youngest child was transformed into this new creature here, stalking across the room. Christopher instead was more like his father, short and thick with tense muscles, which gave him the speed he used on the wrestling mat. In the past two years Brendan had grown tall and wide; his face long, his features sharp enough to cut. Molly was tall too, but it was in the boy that Pattie saw her brothers and her father, a man that the union had called King Pat, tall and wide and raven-haired. She followed her son's careful movements as he collected the coats from the back of the couch and brought them into Terry's room.

Pattie lit a cigarette. The glowing red tip shook a little between her fingers; an imperceptible buzz. She had yet to inhale a second puff when invisible hands seized her by the shoulders and set her off. She threw empty beer cans in the kitchen trash, plucked soiled laundry off the back of the couch and stuffed it into the overflowing hamper in the bathroom, removed the dishes topped with holiday junk food from the whistling radiator and the TV. She righted the small plastic Christmas tree, her brother's only visible decoration.

She let out a sigh. Her thin shoulders fell. Pattie scanned the room for more mess and found none. She put an elbow on the TV and leaned against it. She touched her forehead with the cool skin on the back of her right hand. She took a drag off her cigarette and hoped it would clear her head of this need that had possessed her, this urge to scream from room to room in a cleaning frenzy. Pattie exhaled through her nose, two slim, strong streams of white smoke. When she looked up, she saw Molly and Chris watching her.

She knew her unrest worried them. They'd like her to be able to rest a minute and let her body unwind itself from around its spool of worry. Soon, very soon, she expected one of them to confront her. They were not children anymore. Molly was almost done with college. Chris would move away next fall.

Brendan was not an adult yet, but he wasn't a child either. He would join his siblings, eventually. And what then? Her parents were four years dead, suffocated by smoke as their house burned on a warm night. Pattie bowed her head at the thought of a united front, the three of them. Her gaze touched the floor. A large white t-shirt lay in a heap in front of the television. She bent down and picked it up. Pattie folded it at the sleeves, then in half. On her way to the bathroom she made sure to take strong, deliberate steps and to look her daughter and son in the eye. Halfway to the bathroom, under her children's stares, she lost her strength. Her shoulders fell. Her steps became quick. She hurried into the bathroom.

3.

Molly watched as Pattie scurried into the bathroom with the folded t-shirt across her arm, so desperate to set the apartment right. When Pattie came out Molly chided her, trying to keep her voice playful. "Take it easy, Ma," she said. She sipped her wine. Her mother buzzed by and resumed her seat on the couch. "It doesn't have to be perfect. This isn't our house."

Pattie didn't turn around. "I just like it to look nice, hun," she said. There was a tremor in her voice, almost hidden beneath the cheery tone she had conjured up.

Molly finished off her wine. After this she was going out to one of the tourist bars in Faneuil Hall or to a trendy place in Jamaica Plain. It didn't matter to her. She had a month to spend with her family and then it was back to Holy Cross, the real world, away from the city, the neighborhood, and the house. But she was here now, and it wasn't so bad. Uncle Terry was high off his ass. Dad was pissed and Mom was breaking down. Something funny could happen. The night held potential. Still, she couldn't wait for school to start.

4.

Chris watched the Celtics thrash New Jersey on Uncle Terry's old TV. The picture was small. He munched on celery from the small plate in front of him. He had to make weight when he got back to practice on Monday. He chewed on a green stalk and tracked the action on the screen, but he was only half there. He envied his older sister and her escape. He would taste it soon. Brendan would remain alone with their parents and whatever was happening between them.

Chris looked over at his mother. She sat rigid on the edge of the cushion. A dull thud hit his chest. He leaned close to her. He gagged a little from the smell of her cigarette. "No one gets mad if it's a little dirty here, Mom. Chill," he said. She smiled. Her eyes never left the screen. Chris doubted that she heard him. He sat back. He'd be going to college next year, or joining the Marines. He had yet to decide. He was gone, that is all that was certain.

5.

Brendan dropped the bundle of coats on Uncle Terry's bed. The door closed on its own, shutting out the noise of the living room. He put his hands into the pockets of his jeans and looked around, enjoying the quiet darkness of the room.

The minimal light of the room was soft. It came from a dying bulb in the lamp on the dresser. That short dresser was the only furniture in the large room besides the king-sized bed that was covered in a rumpled white sheet in the corner. The sliding doors of the closet were shut. On the wall over the bed was a single picture set in a black frame, the picture of Brendan and his cousin Colin, Terry's estranged son, when the boys were young. Maybe seven.

Terry burst into the bedroom behind Brendan, raging. The boy jumped and whirled around. Terry thrust a beer into Brendan's hand and wrapped an arm around the boy's neck. Brendan smiled and looked at his uncle. "Hey Terry," he said. This year, Brendan could look his uncle in the eye. That was new.

Terry didn't ask Brendan what he was doing in the room. He kicked the door shut behind them and just started talking. "Those fuckin' Brazilians are surrounding me, kid. They've pushed all the Wops and Micks out." When Terry spoke, he declared, assuming an authority that wasn't natural to him. Brendan, still trapped in Terry's chokehold, found himself jealous of this ability. Terry put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with his free hand before he continued his speech. "I'm one of the last normal people left. This street is filling up with yuppies. Probably a bunch of faggots." Terry shook his head, as if he were amazed at his own bad luck. "I can't decide who's worse, kid: those jungle-dwelling tree-niggers or those Volvo-driving cocksuckers. One of these days I'll just snap. I'll grab my gun, walk out into the street, and unload"

Brendan nodded. He attempted a serious, knowing expression. All four of Brendan's grandparents were immigrants. They escaped Ireland in the sixties as poor invaders with silly accents, locked into the neighborhood with their own people, a whole population made of city dwellers, laborers, factory drones, criminals and addicts, like these newer arrivals. But Brendan let his uncle rant. The old man was too high to help himself.

Terry's face had gone dreamy for a second, lost in racing fantasies of ethnic justice. Brendan strained against his uncle's arm. He couldn't break the hold. Terry's chemical-red eyes went wide as he turned and looked at Brendan. Before he could decipher what had happened in his uncle's addled brain, Terry released his grip and pushed the boy down onto the big, dirty mattress. Brendan flailed his long arms back and grabbed the sides of the bed to keep from falling to the floor among the empty beer cans, full ashtrays, and dirty laundry. When Brendan looked up, the big guy was smiling. "Hang on there, kid, I just remembered," Terry said. "I got something special for you."

Terry turned and flung open the closet doors. He bent his large frame down and started flinging t-shirts and mismatched sneakers into the room behind him. Brendan had to bob and weave to keep from getting smacked in the forehead by a stray Nike or a pair of worn boxer shorts. When Terry stood up and turned around, he squeezed a basketball between his palms. His eyes were locked on the ball. Brendan could have sworn that tears had welled up in Terry's eyes. Brendan leaned forward on the bed, his elbows resting on his knees.

Terry took a big step forward. If there had been tears in Terry's eyes, they had dried. "You know what ball this is, buddy?" Brendan shook his head.

"No?" Terry smiled. His teeth were white and brilliant. "This, buddy boy, is the ball I took home from my last game of high school, a hundred years ago. It was with this ball we played BC High for our last game of the year. They had this real hot shit power forward from Roxbury, Chauncey Jones. He played on all the big city league teams. The kid was great, though. Really. He ended up playing for North Carolina, I think. Anyway, this hot shit and me, we're going back and forth, back and forth all game. Chauncey was great. He had lift and control like nothing I've ever seen. And could that little nigger pass? Shit, the boy had eyes in the back of his head. But! He

was just 6'2" and had no idea how to play against this big white boy, know what I'm saying? Couldn't handle all 6'5" of the Irish Thunder. I swatted him, stuffed him, drained threes, drove to the hoop. I did it all. And when it was over, four quarters later, we had beaten them, and I was the high scorer with 22 new notches carved into my belt. I took the ball home with me so I could one day pass it along." Terry held the ball out in front of Brendan. "I just hope some of the magic is still with it."

For most of his life Brendan was small, thin, a quiet kid, too shy, the last to open his mouth or get into trouble. In the past two years, however, he had been altered by a flood of hormones that had turned him into a towering giant.

He grew into physical grace. Brendan had made the basketball team that year, one of only two sophomores to make the varsity team. In everyday life, he was still withdrawn and unsure. But on the court he was fast, strong, accurate with a pass, deadly with his elbows while bringing down a rebound, unafraid to be loud with insults and shit talk, and eager to get nose to nose, to ask the opposition what his fucking problem was, punk motherfucker.

The boy loved himself under the hoop, in the thick of flying sweat, muscled arms, and the noises of exertion and battle.

This other persona was not greeted with much excitement by his parents, especially by his father, for reasons which until now had been unclear.

They saw someone familiar in this new thing inhabiting their son's body.

Terry had come and watched him play. He knew what Brendan was thinking. He had known a long time.

Brendan's fingers gripped the cold leather of the ball and brought it down to his lap, as careful as if it was a sphere of crystal. A priceless heirloom. No one had ever given him a gift like this. Here was the antidote to the worried looks from his parents after victories that should have been celebrated. The validation was in his hands.

Brendan could not fully enjoy the moment. His heart was beating hard and his stomach tingled like he was about to puke. Something nagged at the rear of his brain. He looked up. Terry had put his hands on his hips and was grinning. Brendan turned the ball over in his hands, tracing over the "Spaulding" letters scrawled between the black lines.

"Terry" Brendan said. Words perched on his tongue, ready to fly out. He turned his head to try and kept them inside, and ended up staring right at the picture of him with his cousin when they were boys, right there, three feet over the mattress. He was about to ruin the moment.

"Terry," Brendan said. "What about Colin?"

Brendan winced as his uncle's grin broke. Terry blinked. His long arms came off his hips to sway limp at his sides. For the only time that night, the man didn't look cooked with drugs. "I'll be honest with you Brendan." Terry said. His voice was flat. "I haven't talked to my son in a long time."

Brendan nodded. He looked down at his stomach. He had hoped for something more, a reward for sticking up for the right thing, words from Terry that would beat away any guilt he had over taking the ball. The words were not there. He held the ball in his lap and waited for the awkward moment to be over. Colin would never even know about this, Brendan thought, as he watched Terry turn on his heels and leave the room in a blur.

6.

Molly jumped back from the bedroom door as it opened and Terry crashed through the house again, through the living room and into the bathroom.

Pattie and Chris were absorbed completely by the TV; they hadn't noticed a thing. She couldn't believe what she had heard. Molly poked her head in, saw Brendan alone, sitting on the bed, staring down at the old basketball in his lap. He didn't seem upset. You couldn't tell with that kid, never.

"Hey," Molly said.

Brendan looked up from the ball.

"You hear all that?" he said.

Molly nodded. "It was nice of him," she said. "That ball must be important to him."

"You think so?" Brendan said. A thin smile cracked wide on his face.

"You don't?"

"Check it out," Brendan said. He held the ball out so Molly could see the letters scrawled in marker below the "Spaulding" letters.

"D.O.C.," Molly said. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Department of Corrections," Brendan said. "He must have pinched it the last time he was inside."

Molly shook her head, trying to clear the fog of wine.

"Maybe the story was true though, about the basketball game," she said. Molly knew she was grasping at anything to make this latest lie forgivable.

Brendan shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. He meant what he said, either way."

Molly walked into the kitchen with her glass empty, her cheeks rosy, and her steps a little sloppy. Brendan followed her. Dan saw that his youngest son had a basketball cradled under his left arm. As he passed, Dan wrapped a hand around the wrist of his boy's right hand. He saw something written on the ball, and he hoped it wasn't what it looked like.

"Where'd you get the ball?"

Brendan's eyes shot down at his father.

Dan didn't give him a chance to answer. "What are those letters written on it? Did your uncle give that to you?"

"What does it matter?" Terry said. He had come in from the living room. Dan's grip tightened on Brendan's wrist.

"It matters to me," Dan said. He looked into the eyes of his old friend. "Where'd the ball come from?"

Pattie's face peeked out from behind Terry's back. "Everything OK?" she said.

"Give it back, Brendan," Dan said. He had to squeeze the words through his teeth.

"I gave it to him, Dan." Terry's voice had sunk low into his throat. The chemical edge was gone from it. His eyes were clear. "Just let him keep it."

"I don't want him to have it. I can see where that fucking ball came from. I can read, Terry."

Chris had appeared behind Pattie. He could see what was about to happen. He took her by the shoulders and pulled her away from the kitchen. Brendan moved too, his father still holding his wrist, twisting his arm until his wide back was shielding Molly where she stood against the counter, eyes wide with excitement.

"What did you think?" Dan said. "You think I want him ending up like you? A man who abandons his son? He's halfway there now, you know. Playing that nigger's game

the way you did. That's what you want for your nephew, Terry?"

Dan laughed. A hard sound, devoid of humor. A sound that let everyone know what a tragedy it would be if anyone on this wide, lonely Earth ever ended up like Terry Burke.

Terry took in the sound. He closed his eyes for a second, inhaled a short breath. Then he smiled at Dan.

"As long as he doesn't end up like you, you fuck, that's fine with me."

And with that Terry bent down and picked up the table where Dan sat, sweeping the ashtray onto the floor. Dan was knocked backward in his chair but kept his balance. Terry drew the table up with his big, strong arms, and flung it into the window that overlooked the fire escape. The glass boomed as it broke. Everyone covered their faces. The window was very small, so the table didn't make it all the way through. It just bounced back and landed on the floor among the broken glass that hadn't fallen into the alley.

7.

Pattie watched from the passenger seat as Dan got in and tried to start the car, which was having a hard time because of the cold. She ashed her cigarette out the window, her fingers still shaking from the hurried escape.

There was a loud, hollow crash as something fell onto the hood of the family station wagon and splattered up against the windshield. Pattie felt everyone in the car jolt. When she dropped her arms away from her face, the windshield was covered with something brown and greasy.

"It's just the turkey, Ma" Brendan said.

Pattie turned. The Quinn family vehicle was an old Chevy station wagon. Beyond the back seat, where Molly and Chris sat, was the cargo section of the wagon. Brendan, as the youngest, had been regulated to this place, doomed to always face the way the family had already come. When Pattie craned her head around, Brendan's whole body was twisted around, his body hung over the back seat, his long arms dangling between his brother and sister.

"Terry threw the Christmas Turkey at us."

Pattie fought for the words to keep her children calm, stammering, producing anxious gibberish. The young Quinns were stoic, more amused than frightened. She was interrupted by a second thud against the station wagon's hood, a loud thump that echoed off the car and across the narrow expanse of Madison Street.

"There's the spice cake, Ma," Chris said as he pointed at the now filthy windshield. Pattie turned and saw the glass covered in meat and vanilla frosting. Molly and Brendan couldn't help themselves and began to laugh.

The wagon went quiet when Dan quit trying to start the car and started punching the steering wheel. When he stopped he had to catch his breath.

"No. One. Speak," he said.

When he was done panting, Dan flicked a switch and sprayed the windshield with soapy blue fluid. The rest of the Quinns watched as the wipers cleared the glass of bones, skin, and cake. Pattie and her children remained silent, all motionless in their seats, except for their eyes, which darted back and forth, tracking the progress of the wipers. The spell broke when more holiday treats began to rain down from above, whacking against the wagon. Plates shattered on the street.

Because of the way Dan had parked the station wagon earlier that night, Brendan's rear windshield faced Terry's apartment. The cookies, brownies, and plates ceased raining down, but Brendan pressed his face to the glass and looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of his uncle in action. Terry was on the third floor porch, leaning against the railing. He held a giant bowl of red punch above his head. Some of the punch spilled over the rim as Terry readied the bowl to be hurled. His shirt was still open. His stomach muscles were exposed and tensed, defined, in the freezing cold air. His chin and neck and chest were slick with blood from earlier when Dan's fist crushed his nose.

From his vantage point down below, Brendan could see everything, even Terry's eyes as they burned. And from the third floor porch, Terry could see his nephew in the

rear window of the station wagon as he was about to hammer it with the heavy glass bowl. Because of Brendan, he hesitated. The snarl across his mouth softened and his wild, burning eyes cooled, finding a measure of control. In this reclaimed clarity, Terry decided not to drop the giant glass bowl onto the car. Instead, he let it tip and fall onto the street where it shattered and covered the tar in sparkling shards of glass and watery red fluid.

To everyone's surprise, including Dan, the engine turned over. He wrenched the shift into drive and pulled away from the curb, tires screeching against the frozen street. Right before the car turned off of Madison Street, Brendan saw the neighbors on the first and second floor of Terry's house come out onto their porches and yell at Terry, shaking their fists at him. He responded by whipping homemade gingersnaps like ninja stars at his assailants.

"Happy fuckin' holidays, you cunts!" Terry screamed, over and over.

The pitch of his voice climbed high, wheedling out of control. The Quinns heard Terry's words ring down the street like an out of tune church bell. As the station wagon took a wide turn, Terry -- his words, his street, and his holiday -- disappeared. He was left behind.

8.

"He's your goddamned brother," Dan said. He jerked the wheel to keep the car rolling straight. Pattie lit another cigarette and said nothing. She kept her gaze forward. Just as they passed Somerville High School, snow began to fall. "Fucking perfect," Dan said.

Pattie watched the snow land on the station wagon's windshield, melting on contact with the glass. In the air the flakes were fat and dry. In the morning, she thought, there will be nothing left of them but wet stains, darkening the streets.

The world was being covered with fast-falling snow. After Terry's street was gone from view, Brendan rolled the ball Terry had given him from one hand to the other. The black lines. The orange pimples. I ruined everything, Brendan thought. This stupid thing should belong to Colin. He squeezed the ball between his palms, knowing he couldn't damage it but wishing he could.

They made it to the highway and headed south over the Zakim Bridge, past the Boston Garden, and through the Callahan Tunnel to emerge on the other side of the city. They sped by the South Boston Yacht Club on their right. The Boston Gas tank was a giant patch of black, darker than the night. The towering IBEW wind turbine spun above them, turned by the wind and snow.

Their exit was close now.

Lulled by the heat of car and the falling snow, each Quinn had retreated into a private world. Brendan had fallen into hoop dreams of perfect three point shots. Molly inspected the red paint on her nails for new chips and searched her cell for the numbers she would call when they reached home. Chris snored, his head resting on the cold window. Pattie smoked. The bruise around Dan's left eye pulsed with a dull, painful heat. He wrung his hands on the steering wheel.

Absorbed with trying not to think, not one member of the Quinn family noticed the high headlights gaining ground on the slow moving wagon, edging closer to the car's rear bumper.

The lights cut through the lids of Brendan's closed eyes. He had to squint to see the two bright headlights glaring down. In reflex, his arms rose to shield his face and "What the fuck?" escaped his mouth, much louder than a whisper. Everyone heard him but it was Pattie who turned first, in reflex. She turned away from the lights and looked at her husband. "This one is getting awful close," she said.

"I see him, Pattie," Dan said. He glanced at the rearview mirror. He flipped the directional and brought the wagon into the slow lane. A large red truck roared past them. Its monster-sized tires kicked up melted snow. The Quinns followed the truck as it passed. Brendan turned in his seat to see. The family watched as it merged right, into their lane. They caught their collective breath when the rear lights flared a hollow red and the truck skidded to a halt.

The hood of the station wagon dipped down toward the road as Dan slammed on the breaks to avoid crumpling his front grill into the high fender of the truck. Chris and Molly were thrown forward and stopped hard by their seatbelts, the air squeezed from their bodies in low grunts. Brendan shot forward. He threw out his long arms to stop his momentum. His hands struck against the back of his parents' seats, saving him from flying forward and smashing through the windshield.

"Sit back!" Pattie screamed at Brendan when his face appeared at her left shoulder. She dragged her own seatbelt across her body. Her hands couldn't click it home.

The tires of the wagon slipped from the near collision. The car began to fishtail. Dan turned the wheel against the drift, and the station wagon righted itself as it swerved back into the center lane. Dan hit the gas, sending the wagon flying by the crimson red truck.

The exit was close. Dan switched back into the right lane, hoping the drunk behind the wheel of that big truck had lost interest. He tried to slow his breathing. The pain in his face was forgotten. He checked the rearview. Dan's breath caught. The truck was right on their ass. Brendan threw his arms over his face as the grill of the truck surged forward.

It filled the whole rear window as it closed in and smashed through the glass.

When his eyes opened, Dan saw that they were coasting forward without much speed in the breakdown lane.

Dan stopped the car and shifted into "park." It was all he could think to do. Incoherent screams came from his wife beside him. He hurried to get out of the car, to get away from her noise as much as anything. His shoes slipped on the slick road and he almost fell. When he got his feet under him, Dan saw the truck. It had pulled into the breakdown lane behind them.

Brendan shook glass out of his hair. He blinked his eyes. He picked up his head and tried to understand what his body had done during the blackout of the accident. He was lying prone on the small seat. The basketball was under him and his arms were wrapped around it, as if for protection. When he looked up, his father was staring at him through the crumbling remains of the back windshield. And then he was gone.

Brendan watched his father's boot kick the driver-side door of the truck just as someone started to step out of it. There was a scream of pain. His father backed up a step, eyes wide, teeth bared and shining with saliva, fists closed.

The truck driver got out, holding his leg. The driver was huge, dressed head to toe in a camouflage uniform. When fully upright he was a full head taller than Dan Quinn. Molly and Chris crashed into the seat on either side of Brendan to watch. Their faces were red with cold. Molly's face glowed with drunken fear. In the front seat, Pattie said, "Jesus Christ, Daniel."

Dan wasn't fazed by the man's size. He swung first. His right fist arced high toward the target. It connected with the man's nose. Blood exploded from it. The red spray landed in the slush of the breakdown lane between the two vehicles.

"There are three kids in that fucking car!" Dan screeched as he grabbed the larger man by the collar, pulling him close and then slamming him into his own truck. As the camouflage-man smashed into his hood, he bent backward at an impossible angle.

Pattie lit an unconscious cigarette. She never turned away or averted her eyes.

Dan was now screaming into a face masked with blood. The truck driver had crumpled into a pile next to his truck. To Brendan the man looked like the leafy branch of a tree that has been severed by a chainsaw and left on the ground to wither, grow brown, and die. Dan stood up straight. He started kicking the writhing lump of green, brown, gray and bloody human flesh.

"This is Christmas, asshole." Dan was almost singing the words. "This is fucking Christmas!" Kick. Kick. Kick. Hot blood steamed as it spread across cheek and chin and boot.

Brendan felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at Molly. Her wet, brown eyes stared straight ahead. Chris had paled to a shade of gray, the color of the ocean in winter. They knew a true beating when they saw one. Bones got broke, too much blood got spilled out of a body, too many teeth got scattered across a street or sidewalk, and girlfriends and mothers ended up crying as they took speeding trips to the hospital, racing against time and ambulances.

Molly dug her nails into Brendan's shoulder. "Stop him," she said. Brendan almost lost her words in the rush of traffic.

Dan was singing, channeling John Lennon, still kicking at the man wearing camouflage, who tried to crawl under his truck through the grime and ugly snow of the breakdown lane to escape the blows that rained down on him.

"Brendan," Pattie said.

Brendan turned and looked at his mother. "You can't be fucking serious," Brendan said. His stomach dropped through his intestines. Acid spread across the organs in

his abdomen, searing the meat.

"Throw the ball," Chris said. He shook Brendan's shoulder. Brendan stared at his older brother, transfixed by the adult tone of his voice. It was devoid of uncertainty.

"He'll kill me," Brendan said.

Dan had dragged the driver out from under the truck. The man in camouflage bled from the top of his shaved scalp. He made weak attempts with his arms to protect his head from Dan's boot. So Dan knelt, made a fist and started throwing punches. The bones of his knuckles cut the flesh of the man's face. Now the truck driver cowered on the ground, no longer really defending himself.

"He's going to kill him, Brendan," said Chris.

Brendan didn't think about it after he heard the word "kill." He had to end the night he had started.

Brendan picked up the ball and stepped out of the car. Snow stuck to his eye lashes and made it hard to see. His father was just ten feet away. Brendan aimed at the grill of the truck, thinking if he tossed the ball between the two of them it would distract his father and give him a chance to come to his senses, drop his fists, and draw in his anger.

Brendan narrowed his eyes and grunted as he threw the ball. It sailed through the falling snow. From the moment it left his fingers the boy knew he had changed his target at the last second. He closed his eyes. Brendan heard the whispers of passing traffic. Then there was a hollow impact and a muffled yell. Behind him, Chris shouted a warning, too late. Brendan cringed and opened his eyes. Dan had stopped punching the man wearing the camouflage. His hands covered his face. Thin blood rivulets snaked out from the spaces between his old, hairy fingers.

"Holy shit!" Molly said. "You hit him right in the fucking nose, Brendan!"

The man on the ground looked up at Dan and saw his chance. He got up, dirty and bloody. He stumbled past Dan, who was kneeling on the ground, holding his nose, bent like a Muslim toward Mecca. The man jumped into his truck, started it, cranked it into "drive," and joined the swell of Christmas Eve traffic. The truck tires wailed as they struggled to find purchase on the wet highway.

The Quinn family waited. They sat in their respective seats, breathing wispy clouds into the air as the cold wind was sucked through the shattered back window.

Out in the breakdown lane, Dan sat up. He tried wiping the blood from around his mouth and chin but all he managed to do was smear it into his skin. He got to one knee, wobbled a little, stood up. He wavered once on his walk back to the car. He bent over, reached under the station wagon's muffler, and picked up the basketball. "Get in," he told Brendan, who did exactly as he was told. Dan walked around to his open door and dropped into his seat.

Without turning, he tossed the ball to Brendan. The ball was cold and wet in Brendan's hands when he caught it. It was covered in street grime. Dan closed his door, wiped his nose on his jacket sleeve, started the car, and hit the gas. The station wagon merged into the anonymous colors of traffic. The swerving headlight yellows and blinking brakelight reds.

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