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The Fate of Thomas Boucher

The air inside the library was warm and dry. It could have been the Sahara compared to the frigid New England air outside. Thomas Boucher closed his eyes, imagining the desert sun washing over him. The bitter chill of winter began to release its hold on his tired joints and weary muscles. The new year was starting out cold, even by New Hampshire standards. A freeze had moved in on January 3rd, and the temperature had not been above fifteen for several days. What made it worse was the wind chill—it felt a good ten or twelve degrees colder than it actually was—and the previous two nights and mornings had dipped below zero.

Thomas shuddered, opened his eyes, and slowly unzipped his parka. Looking around, he took a moment to orient himself, then he stepped farther into the library, approaching the circulation desk.

“Mr. Boucher,” the red-headed librarian said. She was compact and thin, unassuming, with a pretty face, though her eyes often looked too tired for a young woman. “Staying warm enough?” She worried about him, and all the elder residents of town who sought comfort and companionship daily in the public library.

“Trying, dear. Trying.” He nodded and smiled, as he always did, working to recall her name. Maeve, he was fairly sure. He had always liked her smile; it matched

the atmosphere of the library. Pulling off his knit cap, he ran his hand over the sparse grey strands of hair that criss-crossed his head, self-conscious of his age and appearance.

“Mrs. Gilman has been waiting for you,” Maeve said, lowering her voice, knowing that discretion was important to most of Mr. Boucher’s generation. “She’s in magazines.”

A blush rose in Thomas’ cheeks. He nodded again to Maeve, before crossing the main floor of the library. The far corner, formed by two tall walls of windows, pointed south. A sitting area, with several worn, utilitarian chairs and love seats arranged to provide space to read or talk quietly, was surrounded by shelves, proudly displaying the most recent editions of hundreds of magazines and newspapers. Despite the age of the furniture and public nature of the space, Thomas always found it inviting and comfortable, almost intimate. There was a nice view of a garden, with trees that flowered in the spring, and a view of the river that ran through the town.

Foy’s Crossing had grown up around the river, mills, houses, and community buildings extending from the earth the way the regal pines had for centuries before. The river, originally named the Cohannet by the native tribes, had been renamed to the Foy River when the town was christened. Regardless of the name, the river, which snaked lazily through the town, reaching nearly every corner, had been the life force of each community that established itself around its banks for hundreds of years. Like many life-long residents, Thomas drew a sense of strength and stability from the river.

Adeline Gilman was seated in one of the love seats, positioned to face the windows, but at the farthest spot away from the glass, looking through a copy of

Education Week. Adeline had been a teacher in the local elementary schools for decades, and though she had been retired for fifteen years, she was compelled to read all the current literature on the subject.

Thomas cleared his throat gently as he stepped near, always conscious of not wanting to startle her, in case she hadn't heard him approach. He shrugged off his coat, laying it over a low table and placing his hat and gloves on top. He folded himself into a chair beside the love seat, taking a few minutes to arrange his long limbs, until he was somewhat comfortable. In spite of living seventy-five years with his tall, lanky body, he was still surprised at how awkward he felt with it, as though it had never really been his body.

Several of the other regular patrons took note of his arrival, but they too knew the importance of discretion and quickly returned to their own activities, reading, dozing, and working on a large puzzle with thousands of tiny pieces.

“Oh, Thomas, you're here.” Adeline closed the magazine and smiled at him brightly, genuinely happy to see him, while both surprised and relieved that he was there. “Happy Monday.” She thought he seemed startlingly older, of late, which she knew was absurdly obvious because they were both getting older at an astounding pace.

Thomas held his breath for a moment, a defense mechanism he had developed so long ago that he was no longer aware of it. The first time he had met Adeline, when he was barely twenty-three, he was so affected that he wondered if he had had a minor heart attack. She was Adeline Mallet then. The emerald cardigan she had been wearing and her rich, chestnut hair, worked together to make her green eyes shine like nothing he had

ever seen before. He might have proposed to her right then and there, if she had not been seriously dating his best friend, Joe Gilman. Fifty years later, each having long, successful marriages and five of kids between them, his physical reaction to her had hardly diminished.

"Good morning, Addie," Thomas said. "Anything new?" He nodded to the magazine in her hands.

"I'm constantly amazed at what they know now, what we didn't know." She put the magazine on the seat beside her, then lifted a long finger to tuck a stray grey hair behind her ear. "The kids who I'm sure would have had this attention deficit disorder they are always writing about, if we had known of it back then. To think, I probably could have had them all medicated." She laughed lightly, lost in her memories for a moment. "Would have saved myself a lot of grief," she added grinning.

He loved and admired that mischievous look. She had a streak of the devil in her, and he lived for the times when she let it show. "Patty said her little Ben has that, or something like it," Thomas said. He searched his brain trying to remember exactly what his daughter, his second child, had told him about her oldest son, but none of it made much sense. "DD something, I think she said, something with D's in it, or autism, maybe."

Addie looked truly crestfallen and sympathetic. "Oh, what a shame. What will they do with him?"

"I believe they're still trying to figure it out." Patty had said something about medication and therapy, he was fairly sure, but he wasn't clear enough about any of it to

bring it up. Adeline was smart, and well read. He was always afraid of embarrassing himself in front of her. “What of you? How are you doing this week?”

She ran her hands down the tops of her legs, a move he had seen her do countless times before. The thick corduroy of the trousers she was wearing hummed softly in response. Looking up at him, she pushed the errant hair behind her ear again. “Well, let’s see.” Addie proceeded to recall the events of the previous week and weekend, relaying stories about her three children and seven grandchildren.

From time to time, Thomas interjected relevant anecdotes from his own children and grandchildren, though his stories were not very recent and he wondered if he had shared them previously, if he was repeating himself. When all of the family news had been covered, they moved on to issues and gossip from town, politics, and other news. As it was every Monday morning, as it had been for as long as they’d known each other, their conversation was effortless, natural.

Instinctively, Thomas knew when their time together was nearing an end. Addie turned her petite wrist, adjusting a string of bright ceramic beads, to read the time on her watch. It was one of the last gifts his wife, Shelley, had given to Addie before her passing, five years earlier. Shelley made jewelry, and had hand made the beads, each one stamped with an Asian character meant to bring good health and longevity.

Addie slid forward to the edge of the seat. She reached out her hand, placing it on top of Thomas’ hand, tapping three of her fingers in quick succession. He couldn’t help but feel she was trying to apologize every time their Monday morning tête-à-tête came to an end. “It’s that time,” she said, softly, feeling more regret than she would ever

divulge. With some difficulty, she stood, gathering her hat, gloves, and bag from the loveseat. She paused, meeting his eyes directly, and they stood, facing each other, in silence for a moment.

"Until next week," Thomas said at last. He knew she was waiting for him to ask about Joe, but he never did. He was acutely aware that their conversations always ended when they did because she had to get home to make lunch for her husband, the man who was once his best friend.

Maeve watched as Mrs. Gilman made her way gracefully, delicately, through the library, to the elevator that led down to the handicapped parking. She felt heartbroken for Mr. Boucher, as Mrs. Gilman glanced back at him, her usual two times, before reaching the elevator. He never looked and probably did not know that Mrs. Gilman glanced back, but Maeve suspected that it would be harder on him if he did know.

After she had gone, Thomas sat, as he did each Monday, lingering in the air she had breathed, that had breathed her, for another half hour. He pulled the nearest magazine from the shelf just within reach, opening it randomly, not paying attention to what magazine it was or what the article was about. He knew that if he appeared engrossed in his reading he would more likely be left alone, but if he was sitting, apparently idle, there was a much greater chance someone would approach and want to strike up a conversation. After his mornings with Addie, he needed time before he could manage a discussion with anyone else.

He stared at the page without focusing, the print and images swirling together with a kaleidoscope effect. Letting his mind wander, he pulled up the faces painted in his

mind. Shelley had been an amazing wife, and he had truly loved her, but more than that, they had been good friends. It had taken most of his savings to care for her when she became ill, but he had been determined to care for her in dying the way she had cared for him in living. He had always suspected that she knew Addie was his first love, but she had never said anything, never questioned him. And he was grateful that Shelley had befriended and loved Addie as well. The same could not be said of Joe. The four of them had been friends for so long that their lives were woven tightly together. But, Joe had long struggled with Thomas' feelings for Addie. When Shelley passed, Joe could no longer overlook the friendship between Thomas and Addie. He insisted that it stop, though neither Thomas nor Addie would agree. In the end, he and Joe had a falling out, and had not spoken for nearly five years.

Thomas' stomach began to growl, confusing him momentarily. He looked around, noting different people scattered around the library. Standing slowly, his knees and hips creaking loud enough for him to hear, he put the magazine away and picked up his coat, hat, and gloves from the table. Walking to the entrance, he prepared himself to go back in the cold. He hesitated, taking another moment to enjoy the warmth of the library. It was going to be a long week before Monday came around again.

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Thursday evening, the kitchen, like the rest of the house, felt unwieldy, cavernous. He could barely remember the times when it felt cozy, full of people,

laughter, and chatter. Thomas turned a stove burner on to medium, taking a moment to warm his hands over the flames. He poured a can of split pea soup into a small pan, placing it over the burner, and turning the heat up to medium. Absentmindedly, he stirred the soup, probably standing too close to the stove, but feeling warm for the first time since Monday morning at the library. When the soup was hot, he poured it into one of Shelley’s pottery bowls, leaving the burner on low for the warmth, then pulled the small kitchen table closer to the stove, before sitting down to eat.

When he was finished, Thomas pulled the table back to the center of the kitchen, turned off the stove, and washed his bowl. He pushed through the quilt hanging in front of the kitchen door, stepping into the hallway. Shuddering, he hugged his arms tightly across his chest, but stood there for a minute. Large quilts, in a collage of colors and patterns, were hanging over the doors and doorways and around the stairwell to the second floor, completely closing off the space. He was thankful for Shelley’s obsession with making and collecting quilts. If he looked closely enough, he could pick out some of the fabrics, like ghosts of their life together: the sun dresses she wore the summer she was expecting their son; flashes of his daughter’s dresses from different phases of her childhood; curtains from the sixties, when the kitchen was an unfortunate combination of avocado and mustard colors; remnants of his faded flannel shirts.

Thomas had hung the quilts several years earlier to try to control the cost of heating the large, old house, and he had never bothered to take them down during the summers. He had long since shut off the water to the second floor so that he wouldn’t have to worry about pipes bursting, and had moved himself into the den on the first floor.

Pushing through another quilt on the opposite end of the entryway, he immediately checked the thermostat to his left. It was set to forty, as it always was, and he was relieved to see that the needle on the upper portion was reading about forty-two. There was a good chance the oil was going to run out before the end of the week, before his social security check was expected.

Thomas crossed the crowded room toward the fireplace, weaving around furniture, piles of books, and chairs heaped with clothing and blankets. He poked at the meager fire and added a couple scraps of kindling, then pulled the metal screen tightly in front of it, hoping the fire would stay hot and contained while he was out. Glancing at the basket full of unopened mail beside the sofa, he had the vague feeling that he should be taking care of something, but the thoughts wouldn't quite solidify.

It was still a little early, but Thomas walked the several blocks to the town offices, as he did most every Thursday evening, for one board meeting or another. This night it was the planning board. The town had a tendency to over-heat all of the municipal buildings, and he reasoned that if his taxes helped pay for the town's heating bill, then he could take advantage of it when he had the opportunity. He often wished he could somehow absorb and store up some of the heat when he was at a town meeting and bring it home with him.

In the center of town, the usual crowds of teenagers were huddled together smoking, drinking coffee, and laughing. Thomas remembered his own teenage years, spending weekend nights in nearly the same way, with such clarity that it might have been a couple years earlier rather than decades. Something was different with the

teenagers of this generation, though. They seemed to be constantly on the edge of boiling over, ready for trouble, perhaps even aching for it. He looked through the crowd, thinking he might recognize some as his old friends in the young faces, the grandchildren of his old friends.

Several of the teens glanced at him, barely taking note of his presence, as if no one existed outside of their group. It might have surprised Thomas, as well as most of the teens themselves, to know that at least one of the teens had noticed the old man moving gingerly along the sidewalk, knew the man in fact, and was concerned for him.

With the cold seeping quickly through his clothing and reaching for his bones, Thomas hurried around the corner, as much as he was able, to the town hall. He made his way up the ramp, finding it easier on his stiff knees than the granite steps, though some might say it took longer, and at that temperature every minute made a difference. He stepped inside the old brick building, which dated back to before the Revolutionary War, and still had features reminiscent of the battle that ensued in town, including several holes from musket balls and narrow, slit windows on either side of the main door, added as a vantage from which the militia could fire at the Red Coats.

“Good evening, Thomas,” Mike Bean said. A portly man with thick salt and pepper hair, Mike was a well-known figure in town, serving on the board of selectmen and almost every committee of the town at one time or another during his adult life. “First, as usual.” His tone gave the impression that this was not necessarily a desirable trait.

“Second, really,” Thomas said. He patted his thighs, wincing at the prickly feeling created by warm blood returning to cold extremities. “You’re always here before me.” Regrettably, he always felt he was in some form of competition with Mike Bean. He liked Mike well enough, but he didn’t like the feeling of having to compete with anyone, in any way. He knew this was also at the heart of his falling out with Joe; he resented Mike for reminding him of this failing.

“I don’t actually count,” Mike said, smiling and arranging the room as though it were his own living room and not a conference room at the town hall.

“I suppose I don’t really count either,” Thomas said. “Let’s say whoever is next will be first.”

“Wager on who that will be?” Mike chuckled. He moved about the large meeting room, arranging seats, turning on lights, and picking up a few stray pieces of paper from the floor.

Thomas moved to the radiator, facing the middle of the room, with his hands clasped behind his back. The hot air circling his fingers was a welcome comfort after the cold walk over. He greeted everyone warmly as they entered the room, expertly skipping over names he couldn’t quite recall, compensating with neutral comments about the weather.

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Most of the teens had vanished by the time Thomas was making his way back home. A small group stood closely together beside the coffee shop, each holding steaming paper cups. This time, he recognized one as the girl who lived next door, nodding to her.

“Hey, Mr. Boucher,” she said, her words slurred slightly, causing him to wonder what was really in the cups they were gripping. She worried about him walking around town at all times of day and night, in all weather.

It made him uneasy to think of those young girls out in the cold at that time of night. He nodded again, glad it wasn’t one of his granddaughters, and kept walking. He heard the girl mumble to her friends, as he worked to recall her name.

“Hold up, Mr. Boucher,” the girl called after him. Light footsteps approached behind him. “Can I walk with you?”

He nodded his consent, without slowing his steps. Ashley, he thought, or maybe it was Amanda. Escorting her home gave him a rare sense of being useful, wanted.

The temperature had dropped even more, and the cold was not only making his joints hurt but his skin as well. Moving as quickly as he dared, the girl walking silently at his elbow, he re-crossed the town he had known all of his life. It was funny, he thought, how he had reached a point where the town seemed to be all that he really did know. Most of the people who migrated in and out of the edges of his life were a blur. Though he spoke to his children each week, he wasn’t sure when the last time was that he’d seen either of them; they were caught up in their own over-busy lives, in different parts of New Hampshire, which he understood and did not begrudge. Even his home had become

more like a foreign land, reminding him of a maze of caves in Ireland that he had become lost in once, when he was a young man.

“Night, Mr. Boucher,” the girls said, gently tapping his arm, as she peeled away from him and disappeared up the sidewalk to her house. “Have a good one.”

With lights in each window, her house had a warm glow that was in stark contrast to the darkened, shadowy profile of his next door. Stepping in through his kitchen door, the room was cold, but still noticeably warmer than outside. As was his habit, he checked the thermostat on the kitchen wall, noting with relief that the temperature was still at forty degrees. He put the kettle on the stove, turning the burner on high, then warmed his hands over the stove, welcoming the pain, sharp and tingling, as the blood moved to the tips of his fingers again. When the kettle whistled, he put a tea bag in a large mug and filled it with boiling water. Reluctantly, he turned off the burner.

His body was quickly acclimating to the temperature of the house, and the air in the house no longer felt any different from the night outside. Cradling the mug, he made his way to the den, thankful that it should be a little warmer there, if the fire had held on while he was gone. His heart sank as he pushed through the heavy quilt hanging over the door to the den. The skimpy fire had not survived his absence after all, and the room was just as cold. He checked the thermostat, to reassure himself the heat was still working, and was relieved to see it was almost fifty in the room. The fire may not have been out long, and with any luck, there might be some embers still hot enough to catch the new fire quickly.

After placing his tea on top of a stack of books, he went to work quickly, building a new fire. As soon as it caught, he pulled his chair closer, covering himself with a blanket, and slowly sipped his tea. It was only Thursday night, he thought. It would still be a long wait for Monday morning to come again, he thought, feeling weary.

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Addie arrived at the library early, as she usually did. Willing her stiff, arthritic fingers to work, she peeled off the layers demanded by the New Hampshire winter. Despite the cold, the sun was bright and strong, and she hoped it would herald the end of the long arctic spell they had been suffering through. After arranging her outerwear on the usual love seat, smoothed her hair, then straightened her shirt.

She took a few minutes to look over the shelves of magazines, trying to decide what she wanted to read. New issues of the education magazines had apparently not come in yet. Flipping through several cooking and home magazines, she finally settled on one that featured home and gardening. The prospect of spring, though it was still several months away, made her happy.

Half focused on the magazine, Addie thought about Joe. Years ago, when Shelley had passed and Thomas had started meeting her at the library, Joe had been upset. Now he didn't seem to care any more, didn't even acknowledge it. She wondered when that change had occurred, and wondered how she hadn't noticed sooner. Not that he'd ever had anything to worry about. She and Thomas were just friends, had only ever been

friends. She wasn't naïve, or in denial. She knew there had been feelings there, between them, early on and then from time to time over the years, but it was nothing either of them would have ever acted upon. Perhaps Joe had finally come to understand that as well.

A recent conversation with her daughter flowed back through her mind, over whether a person could have more than one true love. Addie had insisted it wasn't possible, but this was because she desperately wanted her daughter to hold onto the husband she had, the life she'd created, and not throw it all away over something fleeting. But, in reality, Addie knew all too well that the heart could have more than one true love, even though the body could not, or should not, acknowledge it.

She finished flipping through the magazine, reading each article, and closed it on her lap. Addie looked at the magazine, feeling confused. She had never actually finished reading a magazine on one of their Monday mornings. Gently, she turned the beaded bracelet on her wrist to view the watch face. It was after ten, and Thomas was more than a half hour late. She couldn't remember a single Monday when he had been late before. A long held fear about Thomas living alone in that huge house pushed at the edges of her mind.

“He's only a little late,” she mumbled to herself. “Too soon to worry.” The cold could be wearing on him, and perhaps he was just moving slowly. She stared at the watch face, burning the time into her mind—ten after ten. She considered finding another magazine and stood up. She looked out the wall of windows and watched a slab

of ice bob down Foy River. When it was out of sight, she sat back down and ran the palms of her hands down her thighs.

Addie looked at the watch again, noticing that her hand was beginning to shake. She looked around the library, noting the familiar faces, desperate to find Thomas amongst the regulars. Turning toward the direction of the circulation desk, she saw Maeve watching her with an expression of concern that most likely mirrored her own. The librarian had also noticed that Thomas had not yet appeared and was equally concerned. Addie looked at her watch again—nearly ten twenty-five—then she got up and crossed the library, moving faster than she had in years.

“I’m worried,” she said as she approached Maeve.

“Shall we try to call him?” Maeve asked, relieved that Addie had approached her, since she wasn’t sure how much longer she could calmly wait. When Addie nodded, Maeve pulled up Thomas Boucher’s account to locate his phone number. She handed the receiver to Addie and dialed the number.

Addie listened impatiently as the phone rang twice. The color drained from her face as she heard a recorded message. Handing the phone back to Maeve, she said, “The number has been disconnected.” Her voice was weaker than she’d expected, unfamiliar.

Addie looked at Maeve, unsure what to do next. She wondered if she should go to his home, but that seemed to be crossing a line. She considered going home to tell Joe, so that he could check on Thomas, but would he care at this point? When it came right down to it, what right did she even have to worry? She had diligently maintained a wall

of friendship, while studiously denying any strong connection between them for so long that she did not feel she had any right to claim even her own heart’s deepest secrets.

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Three blocks east, in one of the town’s oldest private homes, hidden behind walls and doorways draped with quilts, Thomas Boucher sat in his chair, in front of his fire place, which had gone cold days earlier. A large mug, with an inch of frozen tea in the bottom, was clasped between his solid hands. His pale skin had taken on a blue-grey hue, with icy white patches. If it could, his heart would have broken, realizing he would not make it to his usual Monday morning appointment with Addie, causing her to worry.