

Whump, thump, whump, thump, whump, thump . . . the windshield wipers swiped at the falling snow in a relentless attempt to clear the glass, but the road—and the world beyond—remained concealed in a blanket of darkness and swirling snow. Beth took a deep breath and consciously loosened her 'ten and two o'clock' death grip on the steering wheel. She was three hours into a commute that should have taken less than an hour and a half, and she just wanted to be home. She'd seen the forecast and had been aware of the approaching snow, but as usual the forecasters had been way off in their reports, and the two inches of a dry, powdery snow they'd predicted was now buried beneath an additional four inches, with no end in sight. To make matters worse, she hadn't seen a snowplow in more than an hour; even they had given up and gone home to wait out the storm.

Her cell phone, an antique compared to the smart phones that every teenager now carried in their pocket, was resting on the passenger seat, its cord plugged into the car-charger and 'at the ready'. The soft glow from its screen illuminated the vehicle's interior without being a distraction. The time in its display read 10:43; Beth squeezed her eyes shut for a brief second before forcing them to focus on the white curtain that swirled beyond her headlights and the laboring wiper blades. It was hopeless; even traveling at twenty-eight miles per hour, she couldn't make out where the pavement ended and the shoulder of the road began. With a heavy sigh, she pushed in the clutch and guided her 1995 Bronco to the white-on-white area where she believed the blacktop gave way to gravel. She took the vehicle out of gear, set the parking brake, turned on her flashers, and pried the curled fingers of her left hand from the steering wheel. Her butt ached from too many hours in the well-worn seat, and her shoulders felt like they were on fire. With yet another sigh, she closed her eyes, rolled her head from side to side to sooth her aching muscles, and began an honest assessment of her situation. It wasn't good.

Beth was a seasoned driver; she'd lived in northeastern Wisconsin her entire life and had been driving its roads, in every season, for more than thirty years. She didn't particularly like winter roads, but they were a fact of life if you lived in this state year-round. Still, she could not recall a snowfall like this before. Visibility had rapidly dropped from a mile, to a half mile, to one hundred feet, to twenty feet, to 'guess where the end of your vehicle's hood is' in less than thirty minutes. Now, as she stared out into the darkness and watched the swirling flakes that were momentarily captured in the Bronco's headlights, she was disoriented and overcome with a feeling of 'wrongness'.

Something about the snow didn't fit. Sure, it was late December, and Wisconsin was known for its howling nor'easters—storms where winds drove the snow perpendicularly from the northeast for hours on end. Four and five foot drifts were not uncommon, making travel all but impossible. Adolescent males, confident that they were invincible in their four-wheel drive Dodge Rams, hit the roads in such storms as a rite of passage into some aspect of manhood. Later, with their trucks buried in drifts that exceeded the height of the vehicles' doors—let alone the axils—they somehow made their way home on foot, wiser if not older.

But this storm was not the standard nor'easter. For one thing, the wind was wrong. It was directly out of the south, not the northeast. Still, snowstorms with prevailing southerly winds were not unheard of. No, Beth decided, it was more the wind that was wrong. It sounded crazy, she knew, but it was Stephen King snow. It belonged in one of the author's far-fetched novels that Beth so enjoyed; a novel where a car, or a dead cat, or a dead child, somehow came to life for the grisly purpose of terrorizing some small town.

Whump thump, whump thump, whump thump, the swiping blades managed to clear two symmetrical half-circles of glass on the windshield, but the side windows were quickly growing opaque under layer upon layer of relentless snowflakes. Beth took a deep breath and continued her assessment.

In addition to the storm feeling 'wrong', she had no idea where she was. Oh sure, she was headed north on highway 32, but that was all she could be sure of. Was she safely parked on the shoulder of the road, sitting in her own lane, or parked in the middle of the blacktopped area strictly reserved for oncoming traffic? Worse, if she stayed where she was, would the county plow that eventually happened along even see her, or would the driver's first indication of the parked vehicle be when the two-ton blade impacted with her vehicle and sent the Bronco flying?

She took a deep breath and glanced down at the fuel gauge. With a sense of relief, she noted that she still had three-quarters of a tank. Stopping to gas up at the last filling station she'd passed had been a good idea; however, the large cup of coffee she'd bought to help her stay awake had not been. Her straining bladder was protesting the 16 ounces of caffeinated liquid and the unending stretch of road. She threw her head back hard against the headrest. Once again, as she had many times in her life, she questioned the advantage of being a member of the 'softer' sex. If she were a man, this wouldn't be any problem. She'd simply step out of the vehicle, turn her back to the wind, and relieve herself without a second thought. Hell, she'd probably write 'I was here' just to kill time as she completed the task. But no, as a woman the process was slightly more complicated. She'd have to hunker down on the leeward side of the Bronco and hope that no wayward vehicle, or snowmobile, or snow-blind owl, happened along while she was frozen in place with her nether-regions exposed to the biting wind and snow. Why again, exactly, had she chosen to live in Wisconsin her entire life? Peeing in the dark on the side of a county highway in the middle of a nor'easter was certainly not on the list.

She reached across and opened the glove box. Too many trips through the Burger King drive-through assured that there were plenty of napkins for just such an emergency. With a loud, almost theatrical, sigh—and the realization that she was sighing far too often as of late—she grabbed a handful of napkins and gathered her courage. She began to open the door, then paused. As a quick afterthought, she reached up and switched the dome light on. This would assure that she didn't become disoriented and wander too far from the safety of the vehicle. Hell, who was she kidding? If anyone did happen along, she was hoping the softly-lit vehicle

would serve as a distraction; she hoped they'd focused on it and not on her, especially if her nether-regions were not yet safely tucked away.

Satisfied she'd thought of everything for this current (and pressing) challenge, she took a deep breath, braced herself for the cold, and pulled up on the well-worn handle. Groaning in protest, the Bronco's door opened into the wind and she had to lean against it to keep it in place as she stepped out. The driven snow, brutally cold, took her breath away and she began to reconsider the prospect of relieving herself, but her bladder would have nothing to do with turning back.

With her back to the wind, she stumbled around the back end of the Bronco and then around to the passenger side. There, in relative shelter from the driven snow, she took care of what needed to be done, refastened her jeans with cold and trembling fingers, and made her way back to the driver's side door. Her upper thighs and buttocks tingled from their brief exposure to the elements, and she was looking forward to climbing back into the Bronco's heated interior.

Through the snow-covered side window, the dome light glowed softly, bathing the vehicle's interior with a soft, yellow light. Relief washing through her, she reached for the door handle and depressed the button with a numb thumb. Nothing. The door refused to open. Refusing to believe the obvious, she pushed in the button again; it stopped without depressing all the way, and she knew what that meant. The door was locked, but it couldn't be. She hadn't depressed the lock when she got out, and the vehicle did not have electronic locks (which were sometimes known to be temperamental and lock themselves); the only way to lock this door—or any of them—was to physically push down on the button from inside. Fighting back terror, she brushed the snow from the glass and glanced at the lock-button which rested on the top back end of the door. The mushroom-shaped knob was definitely depressed; its neck hidden within the door. Her gaze crossed the softly-lit distance to the passenger side, daring to hope. As she'd feared, that button was also in the down position. Somehow, both doors had locked themselves. To make matters even worse, her phone was resting right where she'd left it, on the passenger seat, and the keys were dangling from the ignition—warm, and safe, and dry—and totally inaccessible.

This couldn't be happening. Doors don't lock themselves. For one door to suddenly be locked was more than unlikely; for both to be locked was utterly impossible. She never locked the doors; it was a god-damn 1995 Bronco, who would want it? With 208,000 miles on the original engine and drive train, she couldn't give it away—and the fact that it was all she could afford at this stage in her life was downright embarrassing. But, embarrassing or not, it was the truth; and right now she wanted nothing more than to be inside her aging vehicle with the heat cranked up and the blower on high.

Her heart began to race and panic threatened. It was physically impossible for her to have locked herself out of the Bronco; the doors had to have what—locked themselves? This was crazy! She pushed hard with her thumb against the button and pulled on the door again, wrenching on it with all her might. She swallowed hard, trying to remain calm, to just think. The savage wind bit into her exposed skin and her eyes watered from the cold. She had to get back inside, but how? Could she find a stone somewhere and break

the window? It would be an easy enough task—in July, when the surrounding countryside lay exposed to the warm, summer sun. Now, any suitable rock was concealed under two feet of snow—and could be anywhere. Could she break the windows with her bare hands; would the safety glass yield to a pummeling from her exposed fists? She doubted that very much. Perhaps she could climb onto the hood and kick out the glass. Bad idea; she could hear the news anchorman now—“48-year-old woman found frozen to death with both feet stuck in shattered windshield . . . details at 10.”

“Damn-it!” The curse surprised her, even though she was the one who had uttered it. The words left her and travelled through the darkness with an uncanny and surreal volume. As they faded away, she became aware of the silence that enveloped her. The wind had stopped; the snow had stopped . . . the only thing that persisted was the pounding of her own heart; it reverberated in her ears—a rhythmic, savage tempo that bordered on panic. As though she were a puppet controlled by an unseen master, she turned her head slowly and gazed to her left. Twenty feet beyond where she stood, a fierce wind drove the snow horizontally through the illuminated circle of space created by the Bronco’s headlight beams. The wind was still there, not more than twenty feet away, but she could not hear it.

She released the door handle and slowly turned around. The night air had lost its bite, or perhaps it only seemed warmer without the wind. Her temples began to pound, and she realized that she’d been holding her breath. She exhaled and froze. She drew another deep breath, exhaling more slowly this time. Her breath was not visible; it didn’t form a cloud that quickly dissipated in the cold, night air. How could that be? It couldn’t have been more than fifteen degrees when she’d stepped out of the Bronco to answer nature’s call. What was happening; what was going on? Whatever it was, it went far beyond self-locking Bronco doors . . .

She gathered her courage and took one hesitant step, then another. Slowly, tentatively, she crossed the twenty odd feet to where the storm still raged, captured in the headlights’ glow. Afraid but curious, she held out a trembling hand and reached through the unseen barrier, and into the dark and snow beyond. The air was much colder there, and the wind-driven snow bit at her exposed skin like a swarm of angry insects. She instinctively pulled her hand back and brushed the snow away. Could she be dreaming? Could there have been some kind of exhaust leak and she had fallen asleep inside the Bronco without warning? That type of thing happened in older vehicles that were stranded in snowstorms. Also, a dream state would explain both the locked doors and the pocket of warm, snowless air that now seemed to surround her. She had a thought; she pinched herself, softly at first then with more determination. The pain seemed real enough; she wasn’t sleeping as far as she could tell.

A small shadow appeared in her peripheral vision and floated slowly toward her. A butterfly—no, a moth—butterflies don’t come out at night. But then, moths don’t fly around in Wisconsin nor’easters, either. Still, that’s what it was—or at least what it appeared to be. As she watched it fly, her thoughts were of a monarch—the effortless, flitting strokes of paper-thin wings. The flight of a moth is much more labored, as if the insect were hell-bent on reaching its destination before it ran out of strength or time, often crashing onto

its landing spot and fluttering about, dazed and confused. This ‘moth’ did not labor in its flight, but floated with the effortless strokes of its sun-drenched cousin. Its wings were black, yet iridescent—changing hues as the insect approached the headlight beams. It was, in short, beautiful—and Beth questioned again if she were dreaming. The moth flew in front of the Bronco and disappeared from view. She took a few hesitant steps and peered over the fender. The moth had not disappeared, as Beth had suspected. It rested on the snow a few feet in front of the parked vehicle, slowly fanning its wings.

“Personally, I like the snow.”

She gasped and whirled toward the voice. The vague silhouette of a man stood in the road not more than twenty feet away. She had heard no approaching vehicle and had no idea where he could have come from. She was terrified, yet not completely surprised. The Bronco’s locked doors and the appearance of the moth had already set the stage for a solid dose of the “strange and unusual”. Events were unfolding that she could neither predict nor understand. She retreated—one, quick step—and her back pressed against the Bronco. She could try to maintain her distance from this stranger, but it would be pointless to flee. Where could she run to? Beyond this small pocket of space, the storm still raged in the darkness. It would be hours before help would arrive, and possibly days before anyone would find her if she fled into the darkness. For some reason, the element of time seemed suddenly important . . . was it midnight yet—midnight in the twilight zone? What did it matter? Time seemed powerless now in a world where a storm could be held at bay and iridescent moths came from nowhere to rest on the virgin snow.

She swallowed hard and willed herself to speak. “Who are you?”

“I’ve startled you; I’m sorry, but I suppose it couldn’t be helped.” His voice was deep, but gentle. He began to walk. His slow, measured steps traced the edge of the unseen barrier that was magically holding the storm at bay. She first turned her head, then angled her entire body to follow him. He stopped when he reached the area lit by the headlight beams and allowed himself to be bathed by the light. Turning to face her, he spoke again. “Is that better?”

Beth studied him for a beat, unsure of what to say. He was slightly built and of average height, maybe 5’ 11”. He wore no coat on this mid-winter night, only a Wisconsin Badgers sweatshirt and faded jeans. The clothing seemed slightly too large, giving him the appearance of a one-time orphan that had somehow been spared the task of growing up. His brown hair was shoulder-length, but well-kept, and his face was clean-shaven with a hint of a growth that spoke of the late hour. His nose was straight and narrow, and rested easily between slightly hollow cheeks. On him, lean looked good, and spoke more of self-discipline than self-denial. Overall, she would later recall, he was unremarkable. Except for his eyes. Pinned in the headlight beam, they were sapphire-blue, porcelain pools without bottoms, and Beth had to brace herself against falling in. “What . . . what did you say about the snow?”

“I said I like it. I find it peaceful, don’t you?”

She ignored the question. “Where did you come from? I didn’t hear a car, and you couldn’t have walked here—not in this storm.”

He smiled and his voice remained soft. “My experience is that a man can do anything if he sets his mind to it.” His smile faded a little and Beth thought she saw a touch of sorrow in his eyes. “The problem is, that’s true whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing he has in mind.”

Beth tensed, wondering if he was talking about himself—about something he was contemplating—and she involuntarily stepped back. The words tumbled out before she could stop them. “What do you want?”

“Are you cold . . . would you prefer talking inside the vehicle?”

“I’m not getting in any vehicle with you,” Beth replied, no longer concerned with—or even conscious of—the Bronco’s locked doors.

“You misunderstand,” the stranger reassured her with the same even tone. “I was only thinking of your comfort.”

“I’ll bet.”

“It’s sad, the lack of trust among people. It makes it so much harder.”

“What—it makes ‘what’ so much harder?”

“The journey, our lives—even something as simple as this.”

“This?” Her voice went up a notch, laced with fear.

“A simple conversation,” he reassured her.

“I asked you what you wanted.” What had been fear in her voice gave way to anger. She’d never liked being toyed with—not as a child and not later as an adult; this was no different.

“If I offer you a good faith gesture, will that make this easier?” he asked.

She shook her head without even considering the question. “No.”

“Well, let’s try it anyway, shall we? Hold out your hand.”

“What are you, nuts? I’m not doing anything you tell me to do—you got that?!”

He took a deep breath and dropped his gaze; he appeared to be collecting himself. When he looked up again and his eyes met hers, there was no anger or impatience in his gaze. He seemed, what? Amused, she thought, he finds this amusing! Yes, there was definitely amusement there, and something else . . . a sadness, an urgency?

“What harm can come from holding out your hand?” He tried again. “I’m certainly not close enough to grab it, and see,” he held his own hands out before him, palms up, “I don’t even have anything that I can throw at you. Now,” he said softly, “hold out your hand.”

Beth hesitated; what he said made sense. He was too far away to snatch her outstretched hand, and she could think of no other way she could be harmed by giving in to his request. But it was the principle of the matter, wasn’t it? If she gave in to this request, what would come next—was this simply the first step down a slippery slope? She considered the events of the last few minutes—the Bronco’s locked doors, the storm being held at bay by some unseen force, and now this stranger. If she refused to hold out her hand under the guise that she was not willing to give up whatever level of control she still maintained, she was fooling herself. There was no control to be had over the present situation; or, if there was, it certainly wasn’t hers to claim. She had no choice in the matter; not really. She held out her hand.

The stranger smiled. It was not an evil smile, or even a victorious one. It was a simple smile, warm and genuine. He turned to look at the area in front of the Bronco and gestured with his left hand, just a slight flex of the wrist. As Beth watched, the moth fluttered up through the headlight beams. Impervious to the light, it left the lit area and hovered for a few brief seconds in front of the stranger before making its way to her and landing, soft as a whisper, on her outstretched hand.

Beth gasped. The insect was even more beautiful up close than it had been at a distance. The iridescent black wings were adorned with speckles of various colors, and its antennae were covered with fine gold hairs that shimmered even in the darkness. It stroked its antennae first with one forward leg, then the other, preening for her. Beth smiled in spite of herself. Whatever this insect was, it wasn’t evil. Beth wasn’t sure how she knew that, but she did. By extension, the man who had sent it to her could not be evil either. The doubting Thomas inside her head warned her that this was a massive oversimplification of the situation. She told it to shut-up.

“Is this yours?” She heard herself ask without taking her eyes off of the wonder that rested in her open palm.

“No,” he replied. “One creature cannot own another, despite what some men think. Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful. I’ve lived in these parts my entire life, and I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s not from around here, is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Did you bring it with you?”

A hesitation this time, then, “You might say that. It’s complicated.”

“It’s so small, so fragile—how can it survive in this cold?” She wondered out loud.

“It doesn’t feel the cold like you and I do. Temperature means nothing to it. I, on the other hand, am not as lucky.” He looked toward the idling vehicle, then back at Beth. “Can we sit inside and talk?”

She stared in fascination at the moth, and only half-heard his question. “What?”

“Can we sit inside the vehicle and warm up?”

She forced her gaze away from the black bejeweled insect to the stranger, then to the Bronco. “Oh, no. I . . . I can’t get in; it’s locked.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she replied, but she found herself studying the moth again, as though the locked vehicle existed only in memory and held no real value in the moment.

The stranger approached the idling Bronco and grasped the driver’s side door handle. He looked at Beth. “Do you mind?”

“I said it’s locked,” she replied, but she didn’t look up and her response held no agitation or emotion of any kind.

“My name is Peter,” the stranger said, studying her. Then he opened the door.