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The morning sky lightens, and snow falls on the cottage. It falls on the thatch, concealing the moss and the mouse damage, smoothing out the undulations, filling in the hollows and slips, melting where it touches the bricks of the chimney. It settles on the plants and bare soil in the front garden and forms a perfect mound on top of the rotten gatepost, as though shaped from the inside of a teacup. It hides the roof of the chicken coop, and those of the privy and the old dairy, leaving a dusting across the workbench and floor where the window was broken long ago. In the vegetable garden at the back, the snow slides through the rips in the plastic of the polytunnel, chills the onion sets four inches underground, and shrivels the new shoots of the Swiss chard. Only the head of the last winter cabbage refuses to succumb, the interior leaves curled green and strong, waiting.

In the high double bed up the left staircase, Dot lies beside her adult daughter, Jeanie, who is gently snoring. Something different

about the light in the room has woken Dot and she can't get back to sleep. She gets out of the bed—floorboards cold, air colder—and puts on her dressing gown and slippers. The dog—Jeanie's dog—a biscuit-coloured lurcher who sleeps on the landing with her back to the chimney breast, raises her head, enquiring about the early hour as Dot passes, lowering it when she gets no answer.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Dot jabs at the embers in the range with the poker and shoves in a ball of paper, some kindling, and a log. She feels a pain. Behind her left eye. Between her left eye and her temple. Does the place have a name? She needs to go to the optician, get her eyes checked, but then what? How will she pay for new glasses? She needs to take her prescription to the chemist, but she is worried about the cost. The light is wrong down here too. Lowing? Owing? Glowing? She touches her temple as though to locate the soreness and sees through the curtains, in the gap where they don't quite meet, that it is snowing. It is the twenty-eighth of April.

Her movements must have roused the dog again because now there is a scratching at the door at the bottom of the left staircase and Dot reaches out to unlatch it. She watches her hand grasping the wrought iron, the liver spots and crosshatching seeming peculiar, unlike anything she's seen before: the mechanics of her fingers, the way the skin on her knuckles stretches over bone, bending around the handle. The articulation is alien—the hand of an impostor. The effort of pushing on the tiny plate with her thumb seems impossible, a bodily weariness worse even than when her twins were three months old and didn't sleep at the same time, or the terrible year after they turned twelve. But with great concentration she depresses it and the latch lifts. The dog pokes her snout through, the rest of her body following. She whimpers and licks

Dot's left hand where it hangs against her thigh, pushes nose into palm, making the hand swing of its own accord, a pendulum. The pain increases and Dot worries that the dog might wake Jeanie with her whining, Jeanie asleep in the right-hand dip in the double mattress, first made by her husband, Frank, long dead, and on the rare occasions when her children were out of the house, by that other unmentionable-at-home man, who is too long for that old short bed so he cannot stretch out, and then hollowed further by Jeanie even though she is a wisp of a thing and ate only a tiny slice of the Victoria sponge they made for when Dot herself turned seventy last month and had at the little celebration here in the kitchen with Bridget taking telephone pictures of Julius on his fiddle and she on her banjo and Jeanie on the guitar all singing after a drop of port to lubricate the vocal cords Julius always says and how the sensation Dot has now is similar to the way she felt following her third glass clumsy and blurred with her thoughts diffuse dizzily leaving the remains of the cake on the table so that dog naughty stood on her hind legs and yumphed it down and them scolding and laughing until her sides . . . yurt? kurt? . . . all her loves but one, there with her, and the dog barking and jumping and barking too excited and noisy like she'd be in the snow waking Julius who sleeps so lightly and stirs at any noise.

All these thoughts and more, which Dot is barely aware of, pass through her mind while her body slows. It is a wet coat she wants to shed like the chickens with their autumn moult. An unresponsive weight. Leaden.

Dot falls back onto the kitchen sofa as though someone had reached out a palm and pushed on her breastbone. The dog sits on her haunches and lowers her head onto Dot's knee, nudging

her hand until she places it between the animal's ears. And then all thoughts of chickens and children, of birthdays and beds, all thoughts of everything, vanish and are silent.

The worries of seventy years—the money, the infidelity, the small deceits—are cut away, and when she looks at her hand she can no longer tell where she ends and dog begins. They are one substance, enormous and free, as is the sofa, the stone floor, the walls, the cottage thatch, the snow, the sky. Everything connected.

“Jeanie,” she calls but hears some other word. She isn't concerned, she has never felt such love for the world and everything in it. The dog makes a noise that isn't like any noise a dog would make and backs off, so that Dot is forced to remove her hand from the bony head. She shuffles on the sofa, she wants to touch the animal again, put her arms around the dog and fall inside of her. But as Dot leans, she tips, her left foot turning on its side and sliding along the floor. Her balance is upset, and she pitches face-forward, her right hand going out to break the fall, while the other catches under her chest, the finger with her wedding ring pinned beneath her. Dot's head goes down and her forehead hits the edge of the hearth where a flagstone has always been slightly raised, shifting it so that the fire irons, which hang beside the range, fall. A last lucid fragment of Dot's mind worries that the clatter of the metal pan and brush might shock her daughter's heart from its regular rhythm, until she remembers that this is the biggest lie of all. The poker, which has fallen too, rolls away under the table, rocks once, twice, and then is still.