

Winter on the Inside

*An adult's season of snow
in New England*

Colin Fleming

I have never slept well. As I child, I was terrified of the dark and had to enter into negotiations with my parents—which consisted of promising not to listen too closely to the television—so as to be allowed to lug my Spiderman sleeping bag downstairs and sack out in the living room, while they watched *Hill Street Blues* in the happier glow of the family room.

You learn various tricks when you can't sleep. One of mine was to try to guess how many little red digital bars, all notched together, there were in the numbers of the clock by my bed at whatever time I happened to look at it. My game for the bulk of the winter of 2014-15, here in Boston, was to guess what words, in the middle of the night, the Hallmark Channel would feel a need to edit out of rerun episodes of *Frasier* and *Cheers*.

"Ass" was always censored, sometimes "hell," occasionally "damn." I don't think the context had anything to do with it. By then, it would be four in the morning, and I'd be up for the day, after sleeping about three hours. In December, when the snow really began to batter the Northeast, there were no *Frasier* and *Cheers* reruns because that's the month Hallmark airs nothing but oversugary, mostly vapid Christmas shows.

I've watched them all. They're awful. I can quote them, though, and I've even sat in bed with my phone doing Google searches on just who the hell these actors are. Like, are you on the way up if this is what you're appearing in, or were you someone who never made it, and this is the best thing on your CV, or were you someone more successful in a different decade and it's come to this?

I find that I ask myself questions of this nature more often in winter, and during last winter in particular. Normally, I like winter. Even Boston winter. I like that the wind howls harder here than anywhere else in the country, and I like knowing what streets have the most intense wind tunnels in the city, and walking through them

nonetheless, as if saying to myself, “okay, you’re all right, braving the elements. You must be in reasonable shape to do so, day after day. When life turns around, you’ll be in good shape to enjoy it.”

I’ve actually said words aloud to that effect to myself, but hell, it’s not like people are clamoring to line up behind you in those wind tunnels down by the harbor. I like, too, that when I’m walking—which I do a ton of—in a wind tunnel I have more sidewalk real estate to myself, and if you get hold of a round rock, you can have a pretend game of soccer that lasts several blocks, and you don’t have to worry about how wildly you’re zigzagging all over the place.

I’ve never walked more than I walked that winter. The winter that drove so many people inside, and which prompted my bartender friend, who is also in property management, to weekly launch into his pet theory, as he poured me free beer after free beer, that come the spring, people would be leaving the area in droves, because this was the winter that went too far and annoyed the fuck out of everyone and did a lot of spirit breaking.

I’ve been walking like I have for three years now. A good day, such as it is, is when I get to the George Washington statue in the Public Garden by 4:30 in the morning, a time which, if you’re counting digital bars in the middle of the night, you will find has fifteen of them.

Twenty miles is an impressive day, all the more so if there’s snow. I started walking like I do because there was an incident, after life had come apart, when I was on a bathroom floor, a long, long way from home, barely clinging to life as my face contorted and I forgot my own name.

I used to ride the blood pressure machines whenever the woman who was my wife and I went to a CVS. She’d stand behind me, and I’d take one score after another, and the numbers were outrageous, stuff like 200/130, so that you could practically feel the Reaper walking over from behind the cleaning supplies aisle.

“It’s fine, you’re nervous,” she’d say.

“I should be fucking nervous I’m about to fucking expire in the fucking CVS. I should take it again. It can’t actually be this high.”

And then it would, not surprisingly, go higher.

She eventually left. My blood pressure issues, presumably, continued on. I didn’t take it for a while. Instead, I walked, thinking maybe that would be, if not a cure-all, at least something that would do something positive. Grasping at straws, you might say, by moving your feet.

I had big plans for 2015. In those three years since my wife left, I had become someone who could write on anything, doing a work on Russian poetry in the morning, hockey in the afternoon, a short story at mid-day, and an essay on jazz at night. Otherwise, the lights would be shut off. It is always that close. If I don’t publish my eighty things a year, the fridge won’t work anymore. I suck at most things. You know that Stephen Crane line, “The things I can’t do, I can’t do at all?” That’s me. I have a friend named Heather, who manages a Starbucks, is a single parent to two kids, and who is a ghost writer, writing up to 15,000 words a day. She had to make me a video teaching me how to fold up the hood of this kind of rain jacket we both have, after I had tried, unsuccessfully, to figure it out every night for like three months. She also had to make me a press pot tutorial video, but I still haven’t mastered that yet. But I can write, I can talk on the radio, as it turns out, and I can walk, even in the worst weather, and even, I learned, after my winter breaking point, which came in the first few months of 2015, when I thought, *fuck this, I’ve had enough*. What was interesting was that you could feel how everyone, everywhere around here, had had enough too, in ways that they hadn’t before. It was palpable.

The day after Christmas 2014, when I was still enjoying the snow and hadn’t yet reached that fall-to-bits phase, I met a brilliant musician who lived in the middle of the country. I had just spent Christmas alone for the third year in a row. I grew up a Christmas fiend, and when I was married, my wife, around, say, May, would lean over in the car and say, “You know, it’s not that far off, really.”

“What?”

“You know what.”

“Hmmm...are you talking about...”

“You know I am...”

“Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Brilliant. I cannot wait. Fucking Christmas and cheer and the 1742 version of the *Messiah*.”

“What is it with you and the original score?”

“I need that original score.”

Half a year later I had my first Christmas alone. That was the day I started coughing up blood. I worked on a novel and I spit into a cup. I didn’t walk that day. Christmas 2013 was much the same, minus the blood and the book, but on Boxing Day 2014, a presence entered my life that was more...I guess you’d say, vernal, than you expect at the end of the year. Even my nightmares, which I always remember, abated, and my walks would begin later, at more standardly human hours, like seven.

I had a brief fling with winter then, before that particular one broke me. The Public Garden, bedecked in snow, made it look as though you were inside of an aquarmarine crystal, and the concomitant memories of exploring the woods behind our house, as a boy, warmed me. I used to set out with a chisel and a hammer, and when my dad asked what I was up to, I’d say I was going geologizing, which must have made him wonder about me, but I’d sit out there for hours in front of those rock walls that crisscross the woods of New England, carving out bits of garnet and quartz, as the occasional garter snake came darting out of a hole. But I liked them, too.

Everyone on the news was referencing the Blizzard of ’78. I remembered that winter well, even though I was just three at the time. The snow made absolute mountains, and the daughter of our neighbors went out for some reason—must have been on account of a boy—during one of the worst storms, and she couldn’t find her way back to her house. I think she was a high school student at the time.

You couldn't even see where you were walking, and my dad was the one who found her and helped her get home, and that just always stuck with me, long after the girl had died, and my dad, too. That's ultimately what you're after, in a grander sense, someone to take your hand and take you home. No, not in some weird ass philandering married guy courting high school neighbor teen way, as my bartender friend insisted, when I stupidly told him this story just to get him to stop talking about that Stephen King one where everyone is walking in a line to some place and if you stop you get shot or some shit like that.

My friend is right in many matters. We're the same age. Forty. He was an English major. We talk books. He is always pushing Stephen King on me. His last name kind of sounds like Triscuit, and he showed me a form once that he filled out for this apartment he wanted to rent, and for some reason he just put his first and middle initials along with his last name, and then expressed consternation that he wasn't approved.

"Dude, you wrote that your name is M.C. Triscuit."

"My last name isn't Triscuit."

"It's close enough. They think you're like this weird Nabisco fan boy-cum-club DJ."

"It's not pronounced that way."

"It is. I'm not pronouncing it your way."

"Cum."

"Okay then, Stephen King. More free beer, please."

But for a while the snow was beautiful and so were the memories, as that is how life tends to go when you're feeling hopeful. Thoughts I'd have considered inconceivable began to pass through my mind as January 2015 went on, and the snow banks grew higher. I had had a wife, a life, a house by the sea, and my health, and all had been taken from me without any indication that they might be. As full stop as anything can be, like you're cruising along and someone who is smiling at you up until that point hits the breaks on the rocket and

you're launched out into a dark universe by yourself, with no explanation, only that smile left so vivid in your head, as if it had been painted there and the paint was still wet. You have that happen to you, you have the misshapen face thing go down, too, and you have your Christmas blood cup, you don't really expect to have someone else come along, day after Christmas, no less, and make you think that maybe, good God, all of that was worth it, if it led to here.

But you learn, as you go along, that there are two kinds of winter. There is the winter on the outside, which can be dangerous if you're lost in it, or just crazy fun, if you're a kid and on a hill with a sled, not sure in your mind which prospect is more exciting, this hill you're about to go bombing down, or the hot chocolate that will await you when you get back home. And then there is the winter on the inside, storms of a different sort, where one is not so much blasted by the winds, as by that icy feeling that comes so often in mid-stride, for some reason, as you walk like I walk, that makes you say, "Oh yeah. That actually happened."

I kept walking on into February. It pleased me that I knew, with utter certainty, that in the history of art, the three best walkers were Dickens, Van Gogh, and me. And I was no worse than in second place. Van Gogh would walk forty miles a day sometimes. My one day record was thirty-one. But, to me, his victory came with an asterisk because he was doing it to punish himself, and wasn't really working on anything but punishing himself as he went. Me, I wrote in my head, as did Dickens, entire stories and articles which I could just type out later. I think Dickens was more consistent with his distances, doing at least ten miles every day, whereas a lot of my weeks would top out at fifty or sixty, but still, good company.

I booked a trip to the middle of the country, to be with the brilliant musician who had come to Boston and gone on some walks with me. She wore my Bruins cap so as not to freeze, which seems an obvious gesture, right? Like one I had to do? Yes, but still, I wouldn't give out the Bruins cap lightly. The night before I was to leave, I was on deadline for *The Washington Post*. Some painting thing. The

storage unit where the bulk of my books and records and all of that are kept called to say that I needed to come down, that they had flooding on account of it being so cold the pipes had burst, and I should check if the contents of my unit were destroyed.

You'd think certain things just wouldn't be possible in a storage facility. You can't have fire, you can't have floods, and you can't have theft. Anything else, pretty much, you can have. I was wrong in this assumption. I had to ride the T, which is what everyone calls the subway here. I hadn't been on the T in an age, because I'd become a guy who could just walk across three towns in a go, but time was of the essence, if I was going to get my assignment in and get my ass out to Logan bright and early in the morning, so, panicked, I got on the Orange Line at Haymarket for what is normally a twenty minute ride, but which took two hours, on account of the weather.

I knew people had already had enough of this winter, that they were sick of their cars not starting after they had dug them out and their pipes exploding and probably, if we're being honest, their kids home from school yet again. But the T was insane. You can usually sit or stand in some comfort, but it was wall-to-wall people. Everyone seemed to accept their lot, namely, *this sucks, what is the deal with this awful, awful winter, oh well, this is how it goes, freakin' New England*, etc., save this one woman who clearly had already hit her breaking point.

She kept screaming at everyone, "Are you jostling me? You're pushing me, sir, you're pushing a woman."

She clearly relished this in some half-mad, maniacal way. No one was pushing anyone. It was this sardines situation that sucked for all. But for forty-five minutes, she had the personal crusade going. "Do you think you can push me because I'm a woman?" Then some guy yells out, "Shut up you stupid cow."

Things rapidly devolved. The woman—who was decently fullbackerish, to be frank—starts trying to push her way through everyone to maul this guy, who had this *fuck it, let's do this* look in his eye, as I suppose I probably did, too, by that point. The world

was grinding me down. In every last quotidian detail, it seemed, something made more obvious to me when confined with a group of people. I'd wonder, "why does no one care how they treat other people? Where is conscience? Why do so few people feel bad about not feeling much for anyone else?"

Anyway, I got to the storage unit, had to see things I won't see again, really, until I have my house back. Movie posters I had on the wall, books I love, boxes of records that bring me, in a sense, home in a way few other things do. That disconnect now, which even has a geographical disconnect, is always gutting, so that's why I never go. Then I had to get insurance for a shitload of money, so that meant more pitching and also the begging of famous magazines to pay me the money they have owed me for months.

But I hit upon the solution, in that moment, of writing my assignment, packing, and departing: After the T debacle, I figured I'd try and take a cab home. Mistake. Twenty dollars to get to Copley, near the Marathon finish line, which I regularly walk over in reverse, and we were still stuck in traffic and I was not close to home. The cab driver was ready to fall on his sword. "I let you down, my friend. We were in this together."

"What?"

"A team. Against this motherfucking snow. The snow is everywhere, I say. Everywhere. And I say fuck you snow. I am sorry. I am so sorry."

I tipped him three dollars.

"I do not deserve."

He then wadded up the bills and threw them out the window. I got out, picked them up. We exchanged a sad glance, and I said, *I'm going to keep these then, good luck, and I think I'll just walk.*

I passed out and got up early and wrote the story and filed it and left for the middle of the country, where the winter was drier, but colder.

I had the best time of my life. But then I have a different kind of relationship with time. Things go at a faster rate in my world. Faster

than it seems they should be able to go. My three weeks has never really been someone else's three weeks. I started writing this an hour ago. We're 3000 words in. I don't really care about how long something takes, or how quickly it goes. What matters to me is the quality of the thing itself. I was once with someone for four years, and we never came close to being engaged. It wasn't right. But everything I knew inside of me said that this was. When I came back to Boston, I was engaged. It was one of the more natural, unencumbered, inevitable things to have transpired in my life. A week later, that was over. She had been drinking in the morning, battling depression, and living portions of a life I was not privy to. Call it the winter on the inside.

My walks took on a different hue. She asked for my help, and I gave it, knowing that we were not going to be together. Or even see each other again. But then she just disappeared. I could live with that, because, well, you have to, don't you? That's life. We can do crimes to each other that are far worse than what you might go to jail for you. It's your right to lie as much as you want, for instance, to anyone you might be involved with. The thinking, I suppose, being that the person you're ultimately committing a crime against is yourself, because it's you, more than anyone, you walk back home with at the end of every day. I just wanted an explanation, because I couldn't go through that whole non-answer bullshit again. And she wouldn't give me one.

Amazingly, it started snowing even more, and now, in my head, along with the stories I'd write, was the torment of replaying whatever the hell mind fuck of a situation had just happened to me. Mind fuck redux.

The average person walks three miles per hour. If you put your head down and really go for it, and you're not on snow or slush, you can do five in an hour. That's a tough pace to maintain, but if you're walking twenty miles in a day, that's about four and a half hours if you're decently quickish about it. But it was at this point that I had my New England winter breakdown, my version of whatever was

happening with that crazy woman on the T, or the cab driver who pitched dollar bills out onto Boylston Street.

I started sleeping less. Rarely more than two hours a night, and I was out on that street, walking, at three in the morning, and now it didn't feel like I was inside of an aquamarine crystal, but rather fronted on all sides with dirty, disgusting looking mounds of putrefying snow, mounds which you later read had things like syringes in them, and I wrote, and I searched for answers that might have been provided in ten minutes, and I thought, fuck you Boston, fuck you New England and your snow as a general status across these six states. Because there can be a moment, and this is why, I have learned, the poets set many of their downcast bits in winter, that the winter on the outside and the winter on the inside rear up and meet, and mirror, each other. And so it went for me.

I went out walking one day when every broadcast you encountered said you should stay in. A proscribed weather-based lockdown. I got to the Public Garden, and rather than cross the bridge over the frozen pond, or walk around it, I walked straight onto the ice. Normally I liked this, because unless you were on the Swan Boats in the summer, or you were a mallard or those foolish dogs who went chasing them, like they'd ever be successful in the hunt, you didn't get to go there. I walked out to the middle of that snow covered ice, and I turned and faced the direction from which I came, which I told myself, as I was freezing, was symbolic, a sort of philosophical non sequitur perhaps not uncommon to walking in blizzards while sleep deprived, and then I just fell back on my ass and back like a child. And I lay there, looking up at the sky.

I could see the needle of the old Hancock Building behind me. It changes color based upon the weather. There's a catechism all Boston schoolboys used to know, I'd sometimes remark to people walking with me, for what each color symbolized—even though I didn't always know the catechism myself. But it came back to me then, on my back in the snow on the frozen pond.

Steady blue, clear view,
Flashing blue, clouds due,
Steady red, storms ahead,
Flashing red, snow instead.

It was flashing red. So was much inside of me as well. That synching-up of winters. I thought, at first, should we make a snow angel? Then I thought of how this might have all played in Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales," a recording of which—by the man himself—I often listened to on my walks, for it is as musical as anything I know. And it has my favorite line in all of literature, which is also the most gutting when you extend it out past the realms of boys and insects, and into the worlds, and the winters, of adults, and what sometimes occurs there.

"And books which told me everything about the wasp, except why."

I was going numb, no one was out, and I was so tired, and I just thought, right, close your eyes, and—

This should be the part where I say I rallied, rose up and all of that, but that would not be the truth. Because I did close my eyes. I shut out that steady red of the Hancock building, felt myself ease into sleep, and then I snapped forward having had my latest nightmare. Which made me get up and start walking again.

"I am never fucking going walking with you," my friend Triscuit informed me when I unburdened myself of these details the next day, when the bars were back open again. Weather so bad as to shut down all of the bars in Boston is bad weather.

I can't help but write as I walk—stories, things for work, book chapters, essays, pitches to bring in \$200 here, \$500 there, \$75 there, the occasional four figure payment somewhere else, to pay the bills. I write fast, so I can't help having time to dwell on what deductions I could come up with, regarding my life, what I might try next, what could be a solution, solutions, even, and for all of the

writing that ripped through my mind, 6,000 words or whatever piling up just like that, on the solution side of the ledger there would be a blank page. And, if anything, the explanation side of the ledger had a sub-blank page quality to it, a mawness, almost, entirely in white. which didn't add up to much.

Heather, the ghost writer who makes press pot video tutorials if you need them, said, "We don't always get to know. Sometimes you just never know. Like with the weather and the winter."

"What are you saying?"

"The winter. Like this one. It's elemental. You can't predict it or explain how any of it happens."

"Of course the fuck you can. It's science."

"It's elemental. An elemental. Like a haunt. A ghost."

"Because the snow is white, too?"

"No. Shut up. You know what I'm trying to say. You do."

She was right. I did. And that also sucked.

When winter broke, the snow refused to go away. It lasted deep into the spring. In the woods, in the shade, you could still find patches of it in May. In late March, when it was officially spring, I went to this place just south of Boston called the Blue Hills. It is billed, in the local literature, as the highest point on the eastern seaboard, which is super dubious as it takes you all of fifteen minutes to get from the bottom to the top of the main hill. It's the only place in the state, though, that has timber rattlesnakes. The fall before, after watching video of one such creature on YouTube, taken right from the Blue Hills, I resolved to find one, so I got a stick and went off the trails and started poking it under rocks. I had some Benadryl with me in case things went wrong and I got envenomed. I only encountered a garter snake, though, like those that used to come out of the stone walls in the woods behind our house when I was geologizing, only this one bit my shoe, musked, and stared up at me as if to say, "are we really doing this?" and I gave him back a look confirming, yeah, sorry, I guess we are.

But this was supposed to be my big “winter is finally over” outing, save that snow was everywhere, and it took almost an hour to hike to the top of the hill. No one was out on account of the snow, but it was spring all the same, I kept telling myself. Problem was, I couldn’t find a trail coming down, and I got horribly lost. My shoes were soaked through, it was cold, and now it was getting dark, and I was thinking I was going to be that guy who they make fun of on the local news because he got lost in the Blue Hills and had to call 911 and a search party had to fish him out and return him to safety. But eventually I hit a road. Granted, it was six miles from where I should have been, ten from the train stop.

“So you walked it?” Triscuit asked me at our next session at the bar.

“Of course I walked it. What else was I going to do?”

“Fair point. I think I’m going to move to Florida, by the way.”

“You’re not going to move to Florida. No more than I am.”

“True. Winter. You just fucking deal with it.”

He then proposed drinking a toast to nightmares, opining that I’d be dead without mine, logic which I found slipshod but went along with anyway, as the beer was free, and it was the Samuel Adams summer batch, something I elected to think of as warm, vernal. Post-vernal, even. Summer on the inside, maybe, which is what, even in the middle of a miserable Boston winter, you’re always going for, I guess. The converse of that white mawness of the blank page, devoid of the language of explanation. Or overhung, perhaps, with whatever it is that grows when you are more at peace with yourself.