

The Driven Snow

by Gabriel Gregoire

Lucas wasn't one of those people who anthropomorphized cars, but on this particular January night it crossed his mind that the Subaru had it in for him. He tossed the tire iron on the snowy pavement and started walking while it was still ringing. Interstate 95 was lonely this time of night this far north. A few sets of headlights swooshed by in the other lane, glaring points of light softened by a million downy flakes. He thought about crossing the wintry, wooded median to flag one down. Instead, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and headed north on the shoulder of the highway.

He listened to the hush of the snow falling and thought about Jessie. He knew it was futile to try to understand how she came to certain decisions, but he couldn't help wondering, especially after the bomb she'd dropped that evening. How could she be so emotionless? He knew she was capable of warmth, of giving without reservation, but she could swing to the opposite extreme at a moment's notice.

He was shivering and starting to think about frostbite when a trailer rig blew by him and came to a lumbering stop a hundred yards ahead. He trotted up to the truck, holding his hands to his mouth and breathing on them. The passenger door of the tractor was already open. Lucas beat on his shoulders, trying to get his circulation back, and peered inside. The driver was a bearded man with a craning neck and lines around his eyes.

"I'm offering you a ride, son, I ain't gonna bite," said the driver.

"Thanks," said Lucas. "My spare was flat. I'll call Triple A when we get to Bangor, if

you're going that far."

"No need. My cell's charging up right now."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. I figured you belonged to that Subaru. Japanese, huh? Well, they got us beat in technology, I guess. Drive a Ford myself."

"Solid truck," said Lucas. He climbed into the cab. It smelled of tobacco and days on the road, and it was warm, almost close. The driver didn't have his seatbelt on. Lucas didn't put his on either.

"Yep. Planning on stopping in Bangor anyhow. Jim Corson."

"Lucas O'Callaghan. Nice to meet you."

"Lucky I saw you, in the snow. Cold as a witch's tit."

"In a brass bra," said Lucas. Jim's hands were sure on the gearshift. The truck growled forward. As it gathered speed, the snow seemed to come sideways, assaulting the windshield a thousand flakes at a time. Lucas peeked at the speedometer and estimated that they'd reach Bangor in an hour and a half.

He needed to gain some perspective on what Jessie had told him. They'd had an argument on the phone, and Lucas had driven the two hundred fifty miles from the University of Maine campus to Boston just to settle it. He'd done the same thing a few times before, only not during a snowstorm that was supposed to dump a foot of fresh powder on three states. As it turned out, the fight had only been a symptom of a larger problem. This was no surprise; Jessie could be oblique sometimes.

They'd been in Jessie's room at her employers' house.

"Thanks for driving all the way here," she said.

"No problem," said Lucas. "I know something's bothering you."

"I missed my period."

"How is that possible? We always use protection."

"It's not foolproof. You know that. I can't believe I tell you I'm pregnant and you instantly go into denial mode."

"Wait. How long ago was your last..."

"I took a test, Lucas. I'm pregnant."

"Okay. So the question becomes..."

"Obviously I'll get rid of it. I already made an appointment."

Lucas had never seen her so cold before, but he didn't ask her to cancel the appointment. He wanted to stay the night with her, but tomorrow he had to present his Master's thesis, which he had already rescheduled once. She didn't kiss him back when he kissed her goodbye.

Jim pulled a can of Skoal from a cranny in the dash and held the steering wheel with the hand holding the snuff while he put a pinch in his cheek. "You hunt, Lucas?" he asked around the tobacco.

"My grandfather used to take me," Lucas lied.

"Same here," said Jim. "Bagged my first deer when I was eight. Six point buck. The two of us had to go back to the house and bring my dad out to help us carry it. Damn, that was a long time ago."

"You got any kids?" said Lucas.

"Two of 'em," said Jim. "Son and a daughter. They'll be asleep when I get home tonight,

but I've got three days off starting tomorrow. Way it looks now I'll be snowblowing for two of 'em."

"What are their names?" said Lucas.

"James Junior and Taylor," said Jim.

"Taylor's an awesome name for a girl."

"My wife's idea. You a student, Lucas?"

"Yeah. English, up at University of Maine. I was in Boston today visiting my girlfriend, Jessie. She's a nanny for a family in Waltham. She goes to BU."

"I wanted to go to college," said Jim, "but then little Jim came along. Says he wants to be an astronaut. I didn't tell him he'd have to join the Air Force first. Figure he'll change his mind, which don't matter. Long as he doesn't end up like his old man." He spit tobacco juice into an empty Pepsi bottle and put it on the seat between his legs.

"Driving a truck's not so bad," said Lucas. "My uncle did it until he was sixty-seven. I guess flying a space shuttle would have been more prestigious, but he always took good care of my aunt." Lucas unzipped his parka. He looked into the truck's side mirror. The highway behind them was dark as far as he could see. Everyone with any sense was already home, waiting out the blizzard.

The CB crackled to life. Happy Jack was looking for Nemesis. Jim picked up the handset.

"You got Nemesis here, Happy Jack. Come back."

"Southbound on Ninety-five, just past the Waterville exit's my ten twenty," said Happy Jack. "Got a broke down Subaru in the northbound lane. Might need help."

"I got him," said Jim. "Young man on the way home from his ladyfriend's place."

Dropping him off once we hit Bangor.”

“Ten four,” said Happy Jack. “Ran into Tyson and Ladykiller at the Travel Stop. They’ll both be there all night. Don’t think they’ve eaten yet. Your guest hungry?”

Jim looked over at Lucas, who nodded and rubbed his belly.

“Affirmative,” said Jim. “We could both use a bite. Over.”

“Have a good one. And give Julie my best. Over and out,” said Happy Jack.

Jim put the CB back on its hook. “The Travel Stop’s at the Oakland exit,” he said. “Just a few miles from here.”

“Sounds good,” said Lucas. “Cool handle, by the way.”

“Nemesis? Yeah, it’s my email address, too.”

“Mine’s just my first initial and last name. You have to take what the school gives you.”

“You could get a Hotmail account.”

“That’s what Jessie has.”

“You gonna get married?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

“Should be, if you love her.”

“How could I not? Here, look.” Lucas dug out his wallet and took out the picture he carried of Jessie. It was a head shot in soft focus. The photographer had really captured Jessie’s alluring look, the eyes that were deep pools of green, the lips that were somehow pouty and prim at the same time. Jim took the photo and glanced at it.

“She’s a looker, all right.”

There was a glint of light in the road up ahead. Jim dropped the picture on the seat and

gripped the wheel with both hands, but it was just a sleek-looking doe at the edge of the road. She bounded off the highway, tail flashing, and brushed into the woods. Jim smiled. He grunted and spit into the bottle.

“Reminds me of my wife,” he said. He picked up Jessie’s picture and handed it back to Lucas. He chuckled. “Here’s the exit.” He pulled the truck onto the off-ramp. In the mirror, a maelstrom of fresh snow billowed in the truck’s passage.

The Travel Stop was an island of light in a sea of darkness, visible from Jim’s truck first as a glimmer, then as a fortress of brightness staving off whatever dark things moved in the blizzard. Lucas couldn’t help feeling that he was about to enter an unfamiliar world, where whatever happened would change him forever.

Under the towering lights of the parking lot, the snow swirled and eddied as if each flake was struggling to avoid coming to rest on the ground. A couple of pulp trucks, blanketed in silent white, idled near the diesel pumps not far from the entrance to the Travel Stop. As Jim piloted his rig alongside, Lucas watched a man of about his own age cavort with a yellow curly-tailed dog in the snow.

“There’s Bob, and it looks like Mack’s decided to hang out for a while. The food here’s not bad for a truck stop,” said Jim. “I’ve been craving a cheeseburger for about a hundred miles.”

“Make it two. Is Bob the guy or the dog?” asked Lucas,

“The guy. Don’t get too close to Mack. He doesn’t like strangers.”

Bob got Mack in a headlock and rolled in the powder with him, then let him go. The dog reared up on his hind legs, barked, then followed Bob to the entrance to the restaurant, tail wagging. Bob walked inside the truck stop, stomping the snow off his boots as he entered. Mack

sat outside the door, panting. Lucas could see Mack's warm breath making little clouds in the frigid air. It looked warm inside the Travel Stop.

Jim reached into the back of the cab and produced a Hewlett Packard notebook computer. Lucas opened his door and hopped down. The snow crunched under his sneakers and gathered in his hair. He tipped his head back and caught a few flakes on his tongue. Jim came around the front of the truck. They crossed the parking lot together. In front of the restaurant a Buick was spinning its tires, the driver trying to coax it out of the parking spot. The driver's window was open.

Jim shouted, "Hey, Mabel! Looks like there's a spot of ice under all this!"

Mabel was a gray-haired lady with a tall smile. "I should have brought my truck," she said. "It's got four wheel drive."

"Hold on a minute," said Jim. He and Lucas braced themselves against the curb and gave a good hard shove. "We're gonna have a bite," Jim said. "Don't you want to hang around?"

"No, thanks," said Mabel. "That dog scares me, and you know why. There, I think I can make it from here. Thanks, gentlemen."

"You bet," said Jim. In a moment the blizzard swallowed Mabel's Buick. Again Lucas felt that the Travel Stop was part of another world, something more ancient and primal than he'd ever experienced before. He shivered.

"Remember," said Jim, "Give Mack a wide berth if you like your life."

"Right," said Lucas. He stared at the spot where Mabel had disappeared into the storm. His blood felt charged with warmth and energy, and the air was cleaner than he could ever remember it. "Right."

They turned toward the restaurant and Jim gave a start. Mack was standing directly in front of them, barring the way in. But he only wagged his tail and sniffed at Lucas' feet.

"Well, I'll be," said Jim. "Either you have a steak in your shoe, or Mack has taken a liking to you. Haven't seen that happen since- Well, it don't happen much."

Lucas put a tentative hand on the dog's head. Mack licked Lucas' hand and sat in the snow. He barked.

"Easy, boy," said Lucas. "You have to stay outside."

"This is turning out to be quite a night," said Jim. "Come on, Lucas, I'll introduce you to some folks."

Lucas opened the door to the restaurant and held it for Jim, who stepped inside and shook the snow off his jacket. A vivacious-looking blonde who was working behind the counter said, "And the legend of the Yeti is proven true once again."

Jim smiled and said, "Hey, Kara. This here's Lucas O'Callaghan."

Bob said, "Shot of whiskey, Kara." His friend beside him laughed, then took a sip of coffee and cleared his throat.

"Two cheeseburgers, please," said Lucas.

"And fries," said Jim.

"Coming right up," said Kara. Lucas and Jim hung up their coats and went over to sit at the counter next to Bob.

Bob shook Lucas' hand. "Hey, Lucas," he said. "You met Kara. This is Harold." Bob wore a green John Deere cap and a greasy nylon vest. Harold nodded, wiped his hands on his jeans and mumbled into his coffee.

“Ladykiller?” said Lucas.

“No, that’s Harold here. I’m Tyson.” He grinned, showing a gold incisor.

Jim said, “Mack came right up to Lucas here and got to know him.”

“I’ll be damned,” said Bob. “I knew this was going to be a hell of a storm, but... He didn’t growl at you, Lucas?”

“No, not at all,” said Lucas. “He seemed really friendly.” The other three men laughed nervously. Kara went back to the kitchen. A minute later Lucas heard meat sizzle on the grill. Jim picked up a menu and crinkled his brow. While the burgers cooked, Kara came out and played hostess. Jim bought a key code for the wireless network and checked his email. Lucas stared into the side of the napkin dispenser.

There were a million reasons that an abortion was a good idea for him and Jessie. They weren’t ready to start a family. *He* wasn’t ready. He just couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea of ending that tiny life. He could barely fathom the fact that she had made the appointment without even talking to him first. Something inside him growled, and he tried to convince himself it was just hunger.

Desperate for something to take his mind off Jessie and their unborn child, he asked Kara for a Pepsi. She smiled and said, “He knows the ‘no milkshakes after ten’ rule.” When she handed him the soda Lucas noticed a series of four small bruises on her upper arm.

Jim said, “How’s Officer Asshole?”

Kara stepped back as if she’d been slapped. She hugged herself for a moment. “He’s not that bad,” she said. “He just can’t hold his liquor.”

Harold mumbled something, stood and headed in the direction of the lavatory. Bob said,

“That’s just one of his problems.”

“Mind your own business,” Kara pouted.

“Remember the time in fourth grade when he shoved a firecracker down a frog’s throat and lit the fuse? I could have told you right then, the guy isn’t fit for human company,” said Bob. He tapped a toothpick out of the dispenser and chewed on it.

Kara smiled, but her chin was trembling. “But you were still his friend,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Bob, “I’m a sucker like that.”

“Well, he’s coming over when he gets off duty tonight, so be nice,” said Kara. Bob grunted and inspected his toothpick. Harold appeared, wiping his hands dry on a paper towel. He looked around for a minute, then stuffed the paper towel in his pocket and resumed his seat.

“Excuse me,” said Lucas, “I have to use the facilities.”

The Travel Stop bathroom was surprisingly clean. Lucas washed his hands and dried them. He stared at the figure in the mirror, wondering what Jessie ever saw in the angular face, what mystery lie behind the hazel eyes and why she thought it might be worth solving.

“Obviously I’ll get rid of it,” Jessie had said. He repeated the words to the mirror. “Get rid of it,” like it was a typo. The growling in his innards turned to a dull ache. He splashed water on his face and concentrated on breathing.

When he went back out to the dining room, he heard Bob say, “We’re not telling him, and that’s that.”

“Not telling him what?” asked Lucas.

“Nothing,” said Jim. “Here, you can go check your email if you want.” He pushed the HP over toward Lucas. Lucas thanked Jim, took the computer and carried it over to a booth. There

was a website already on the screen, called The Legend of the Lazarus Dog. It showed a large dog baring its teeth under a full moon. Lucas moved the cursor over a button that said,

'Eyewitness accounts,' and read:

"I knew the day he was born, that dog thought like a man. Once every few generations it happens. Whether it's a lucky thing or a curse I don't know, but I'll tell you that I wouldn't have sold that dog for a million bucks. He could take down a deer in a heartbeat, but he wouldn't unless you told him to. Years ago, the time we got in our wreck, Rex wouldn't let the other driver come near our car. It turned out later that the guy was wanted for armed robbery! Then, one day, Rex just up and left. It's like that with the Lazarus dogs. If they decide they don't like you, or they see someone that needs them, they won't think twice about moving on. Never seen a bad-tempered one, and I hope I never do." The picture showed a fifty-ish woman next to a cabin with a teen-aged boy.

Lucas clicked on 'Home' and studied the fierce-looking dog. Its eyes were amber, like a wolf's, but full of wisdom. Lucas felt a chill, feeling that he was at the center of something that whirled fiercely, like he was at the eye of a vortex that had the power to destroy everything. His stomach still hurt.

He logged onto the UMaine homepage and clicked to the student email section. He entered his password and found a few spam messages plus something from Jessie. "Hi," she wrote, "Sorry about today. You can understand why I'm a little out of sorts." He loved her talent for understatement. "Call me when you get this, I have something to tell you." She signed with her initial. He saved the message and logged out. He went back over to the counter.

Jim took the computer back. "Anything from, what was her name?"

“She wants to tell me something important,” said Lucas. Jim nodded.

“Oh shit,” said Kara. “The burgers.” She dashed back to the kitchen. She brought out two huge cheeseburgers and placed them in front of Lucas and Jim. “Sorry they’re a little charred,” she said.

“I like mine well-done,” said Lucas. Jim shut down his computer and rubbed his hands together. They both dug in. Bob reached for the bottle of Heinz in front of him and passed it over.

After he ate, Lucas went to the pay phone. “Sheesh. I left my wallet in the truck,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“It’s open,” said Jim.

“Take your coat,” said Kara.

Outside, Mack followed Lucas to Jim’s rig. Another half-inch of snow had accumulated, and the storm showed no signs of letting up. Lucas opened the passenger door and reached up for his wallet, which had fallen on the floor. He searched through it, looking for his Triple A card. He looked up when a set of headlights materialized out of the gloom. A police cruiser swung into the aisle between the gas pumps and the restaurant. The officer turned off his engine and lights and climbed out of the cruiser. He took off his hat and tossed it into the car, revealing a balding head. He was wearing a pair of aviator sunglasses.

Kara came out of the Travel Stop. The officer said, “Hey, baby. You been good?” A low growl emanated from Mack’s thick throat.

“Easy, boy,” said Lucas.

“I’ll be done in an hour,” said Kara. “You want some coffee?”

“Damned if I don’t,” said the cop. “Go on inside. You know how I like it.” Kara nodded and turned around. “Hold on a minute,” said the cop. “Come over here and fill up my tank while I make sure your no-good friends are behaving themselves.”

“You leave them alone, Steve. And no, I’m not pumping your gas. It’s freezing. Do it yourself.”

“I was just kidding. Come here. Come on.” Kara approached the cop. He grabbed her by the throat and said, “Now you do what I tell you, or there will be consequences. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

Lucas shouted, “Hey! Leave her alone!” Mack growled and raised his hackles.

Steve pointed at Lucas with his free hand. “Mind your business, boy!” he yelled. “And keep that dog away from me.” He threw Kara to the ground. Her head knocked against the curb and Lucas’ stomach turned.

Mack leapt forward, barking and snarling, and shot toward the cop, who drew his gun.

“No! Don’t shoot!” Lucas shouted. He tried to run after Mack but slipped and fell down, catching himself with the heels of his palms and sliding a few feet on the icy pavement.

Steve fired his weapon. The report echoed in Lucas’ ears. He tried to stand, but couldn’t regain his footing in the drifting snow. Steve fired again. Mack, unhindered, had covered the distance and sprang upward, knocking the gun away and colliding with Steve’s fleshy throat. Lucas yelled as the cop went down. Kara moaned, still unconscious. The restaurant door flew open and Jim, Bob and Harold emerged. Jim dragged Kara inside. Mack was the fury of the blizzard in animal form, biting again and again. The cop fought desperately to free himself from the dog’s jaws. Crimson blood spilled onto the pristine ground. Finally, Steve’s shriek turned to a

gurgle, and he stopped moving.

Lucas regained his footing and ran, slipping every few feet, to where the dead cop lay on the ground. Bob and Harold stood to one side, silent. Mack's muzzle was soaking red. He pawed at the snow. Lucas gagged at the sight of Steve's mangled head and neck. He fell to his knees. The dog sidled up to him and sniffed at his hands. Lucas took a handful of snow and used it to wash away the blood on the dog's face.

"You shouldn't have done that, boy," he said. Pink melting snow trickled down his wrists into the sleeves of his jacket.

"He had it coming, if you ask me," muttered Harold. Bob coughed and spat. "I'm serious," said Harold, "I ain't calling it in."

"We gotta do something," said Bob. "Question is, what."

Lucas had the dog's face relatively clean. He stood, and Mack sat beside him, panting. Kara came out of the restaurant, leaning on Jim, and wailed like a child when she saw her boyfriend's body. She turned away and Jim held her head while she sobbed. "What happened?" she asked when she caught her breath.

"He's dead, honey," said Jim.

Lucas took a step forward. "There was a wolf," he said. Harold started to say something, but Bob jabbed him in the ribs. "It came out of the woods," Lucas continued, "and attacked him. Bob's dog fought him off, but it was too late."

"That's how it happened," said Bob. "I saw it."

"A wolf came?" said Kara, between sobs.

"Yup. Killed him," said Harold.

“Nothing any of us could have done,” said Jim. Bob took off his coat and placed it over Steve’s chest and head.

“You’d best get going,” said Bob. “Harold and I’ll tell the cops about the wolf when they get here.”

Jim said, “Go on inside, Kara. Call Mabel to come back and close the restaurant for the night.” Kara nodded and stumbled through the door. “Come on, Lucas,” Jim said. “We don’t need to stick around for the paperwork.” He looked at his watch.

Lucas scratched behind Mack’s ears. “You’re lucky you didn’t get shot, boy.”

“Luck, nothing,” said Harold.

“Shut the fuck up, Harold,” said Bob. “Lucas, Mack ain’t my dog anymore. He wants to go with you.”

“But...”

“No buts about it. Mack wants to be your dog, you count yourself lucky. I’ll be seeing you. Come on, Harold. You’ll freeze your nuts off out here.” Bob went into the restaurant.

Harold said, “Don’t worry about feeding him none. He’ll go off every once in a while. When you need him, he’ll be there.”

“Like tonight,” said Lucas.

“Tonight he fought off a wolf. We’ve all got to remember that,” said Jim. He shook Harold’s hand and started toward his semi. Harold nodded at Lucas and went inside.

“We can’t just leave him here, can we?” asked Lucas.

“Look up,” said Jim. “The storm’s over. Let’s get to the truck.”

A pale crescent moon hung over the Travel Stop, bathing the fresh snow in light blue.

Mack found Lucas' wallet, and they all climbed into Jim's eighteen-wheeler.

"Bangor bound," said Jim as he pulled the truck onto the road. "Cell phone's charged, if you want to make a call."

"Thanks," said Lucas. He took Jim's phone and punched in Jessie's number. She answered on the third ring. "It's me," he said.

"I'm glad you called," said Jessie. "I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"I have, too. You may not believe this, but I want you to cancel that appointment. Tonight I felt something I've never felt before, and it helped me realize..."

"It's okay," said Jessie. "I wasn't going to go."

Far away behind them, Lucas could see blinking red and blue lights approach the Travel Stop. Jim guided the truck onto the highway, and Lucas felt as calm as an undisturbed pool of deep water.

"So we're going have a baby?" he said.

"Yes."

Mack laid his head across Lucas' lap and closed his eyes.