



*Contributed photo*

**The author's parents, shown circa 1960 in Seoul, Korea. The family emigrated to Canada a few years later.**

# Man of Winter

**E**arly morning, white sheet covering the world, the seasons roll on. But, for me, it is the shoulder, the space between seasons, that makes me lie in bed desperately trying to remember the dream I had about my father, the one where he is talking to me, and I'm listening. And he is so real.

"I want to tell you something," my father says in these dreams that feel like missed episodes of old television shows.

Inside the dream, we speak an unknown language.

I remember fragments when I awake: the light pooling on the ceiling, the rhythm of the morning sounding through the house.

Where are you, father? My father comes to me.

In winter.

As a boy, he dived for abalone on the island of Cheju, a tropical oasis between Korea and Japan. Cheju is centred by a dormant volcano. Things grow well there. Lush.

The boy runs without shoes. He delights in fishing, in fighting other boys with flying kites, crushed glass glued to kite string, and he dreams, too.

Does he dream of me? Does he dream of the son that will grow up in a cold country far away from the comfort of his native tongue, far away from salted fish that his mother grills over fruit wood?

He is a man of winter. His coolness astounds me.

In dreams, we speak on buses. We are in Seoul in the morning, dressed in office suits. "A man keeps his word," he begins, and then the dialogue fades.

My father, I realize, is giving me more than advice now. He is telling about the nature of coldness, about human separation, about the temperature of families.

Oh, this coolness - why does he tell me he loves me only after he is gone? Oh, this coolness. I know he loves me by the way he lets me forget him.

He is December, chickadees on the line, pine boughs under weight, of your future blanketed with white.

In winter, things are different. No green shots, twirling leaves or high noon.

In winter, things are different. My father arrived in Canada in 1965, a man without good English or a good coat, studying theology at UBC.

In a bent photograph, the surprise of snow registers in his eyes. Snow covers the curves of cars, blankets arbutus trees and accentuates his loneliness. What was he doing in this strange country, studying German, Greek and Latin? Sorting out Tillich, Marx, and the word he whispers to me still - phenomenology.

God, he says, feels like doubt. Doubt feels like being. Chew your food. Love sorrow.



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**My father, I realize, is giving me more than advice now. He is telling about the nature of coldness, about human separation, about the temperature of families.**

Feel the wind bend your body.

His impatience and ambivalence remain with me. He is a wanderer, never staying anywhere for long. Always living in the shoulder season, planning his next transition.

Did he die a little bit every Canadian winter? Even though he was drawn to wilderness, drawn to the hardness of life as a voyageur. Even though he was drawn to brown down jackets, vast snow drifts in Maryfield, auger breaking through ice in Lac La Hache - kokanee and kim chee - he still found in winter a kind of paralysis, a slowing of the heart.

Ten years ago, I was teaching English to forestry students up north. It was a dark afternoon, the colour of pulp smoke.

We might have talked about punctuation, but instead we shared stories. One of the students, a bespectacled young man in a loose flannel shirt and unlaced boots, told of his trap line.

"Sometimes though," he said quietly.

"Sometimes, the trap doesn't kill the beaver."

"What do you do then?"

"I don't know if I want to say," he said.

"Please," we said.

"You don't want to waste a bullet. You don't want to ruin the pelt. So you hold the wounded animal in your arms," he said.

"You put your hand over its heart. You press down. It takes a while, but soon it stops beating."

We know, the whole class knows, that

this young man knows something about life that we rarely talk about.

That this young man has shared something cold and true with us.

Hunter and hunted are one. Human and animal are one. Life and death are one. Past and future are one. Father and son are

In Maryfield, my father tried curling once. The curling boots became home to a family of mice. He never skied. He never played sports. He never came to the ice rink to watch me play hockey. He never went for long walks with my mother.

He wanted to hunt though. And I followed him around, carrying a 12-gauge shotgun, wearing an impossibly orange vest, picking up animals by the leg.

I delighted in winter as a boy.

Doing angels. Making forts. Sliding in the night under the stars. Lying under falling snowflakes, aiming my tongue at the dark sky. Wondering while lying in the snow what it might be to fall asleep, what it might be to remember these feelings, hang onto them so tight that future generations would remember me remembering.

My son and daughter shovelled our long driveway this week. Did they remember me?

During the winter, my father would sit downstairs in his study.

He read serious books, novels by Updike, commentaries on the Bible, the Observer magazine (edited by Jim Taylor), Christian Century and a small magazine called Upper Room. This magazine helped ministers come up with sermon ideas.

He sat in his office six days a week, my father, perfecting his sermon, warming his feet on the electric heater, a brown cardigan with leather buttons and suede patches covering his shoulders, and, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, he would pad upstairs, his brow wrinkled, still lost in thought, and sit in the living room looking out at the street.

I didn't know at that time that he was thinking about me and my sister, how we were faring in school, what we wanted for Christmas and what kind of people we would become.

I am sure of this now.

In our strange dream language, we are laughing about our parallel lives. You knew that? Yeah, dad. Really? He tells me things that I do not understand yet, but I know by his bright eyes and quiet voice that the time of understanding will come.

This understanding will come mostly in the heart of winter. When the world is cold. And dark and still.

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