he finished chopping, laid the logs neatly, turned, looked in the window

he could see her in the rocker, by the lamplight, chin on her chest, smiling, murmuring something

he dreaded leaving, with the baby so small and the others really not much bigger

he tipped his hat back, looked up into billions of swirling flakes, smelled the cleanness of that hill the pines the stream

he put his axe away, squared his shoulders with a quick, quick prayer, smiled at the heavens and hoped they were smiling back

he came to the door, pulled on it and felt the tremor of warm air scurrying out to him, put his head in, “it’s time”

“ah hell, we been down this road twice and come to the same place: we can’t eat if I don’t.” he too averted his eyes, drinking up the texture of the broad ceiling beams, wide floorboards, wood stove…

he laughed with joy and sorrow at the odd poetry of her heart, he knew somehow without knowing why that the road ahead would be very hard, harder than he could now imagine, but

he would come back to her, no matter what it would take, whatever it would cost him, he would come back, to her, to them, to home

he loved her, above all else

she sang him softly, his eyes closed, small fingers wrapped around her thumb

she started to smile, felt something, looked out, past the big snowflakes drifting with a hush, and saw him

she could feel him leaving, though his feet were planted square, she already saw him riding down that road

she heard the crackling bump of burning logs settling, the quiet hiss of the lamp, the dog moving in his sleep, the laughter of daughters readying for nighttime

she was afraid this moment couldn’t last, this peace, this fullness, could not last, she wanted to put it on ice to still the hurrying on of time, relentless pitiless time

“can’t you,” she urged, “can’t you just this once not go?” she gently buried her face in the baby’s sleeping stomach, smelled his scent, blotting out other senses, erasing any reason for urgency and departures

“yes I know I yes okay but keep me in your heart and” she sighed, “go with god, okay?”

she could feel him gather wind to set sail and she wanted to stay him for one forever time, because the journey would bring changes, but

he would come back to her and she would keep the fire alive, the children fed, the home safe against all others

she loved him and would be strong

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