

WINTER

by **Julie Jensen**

We are in the cluttered living room of an upper middleclass home. A half dozen boxes litter the floor. It is night.

ANNIS, older, appears in the doorway, she looks frightened, confused. She checks the windows and moves across the room to the study where she finds ROBECK, also older, ensconced behind a wall of books, strangely lit by a small lamp. She watches him for a moment. Nothing. She moves back into the living room.

ANNIS

I had that terrible...dream again.

ROBECK

Huh? Oh. Sorry. I'll be right with you.

ANNIS

It's actually clearer to me now than experiences from my life. Frightening.

ROBECK

(Preoccupied.) Just let me finish this...one thing.

ANNIS

You know what it's about, don't you?

ROBECK

(Preoccupied.) Mmmm?

ANNIS

Having to find a new place...to live.

ROBECK

What's that?

ANNIS

One should not have to find a new house...in old age.

ROBECK

You do not have to find a new house in old age.

ANNIS

I do, if we do not get out first.

ROBECK

You're just obsessing, Annis.

ANNIS

Obsessing, compressing, distressing, regressing.

ROBECK

It's a dream, for god sake. A figment. A nothing.

ANNIS

Then explain why the boy are coming.

ROBECK

(Lecturing.) They come every year for Thanksgiving, dear. They've been doing it for twenty-two years.

ANNIS

They don't stay a full week.

ROBECK

I think it's nice of them.

ANNIS

They've got work to do this time.

ROBECK

(Returning to his work.) They're busy with their own lives. They don't have time to worry about us.

ANNIS

They're...worried about me. I know Roddy is. He asks questions.

ROBECK

What kinds of questions?

ANNIS

Leading.

ROBECK

Such as?

ANNIS

"Mother. Why don't you take up golf?"

ROBECK

(Lecturing.) That's not a leading question. That's an idle question. Leading, idle, two different--

ANNIS

He's thinking about that damn Crown Princess Palace place. With the golf course and the goose poop on the patio. I am not...moving there.

ROBECK

Well, neither am I.

ANNIS

Good. We can both...refuse together.

ROBECK

Whatever you say....

ANNIS

Because we will be...making our own way out.

ROBECK

Of course we will, one day.

She moves to a box, making sure the tape is sticking.

ANNIS

I have boxed up everything from my desk.

ROBECK

That's good, very responsible.

ANNIS

And I've taped up all the boxes. I don't...want anyone in my drawers.

ROBECK

(Chuckling.) I should hope not!

ANNIS

("Oh-him" look.) I don't want them going through my notes, my papers. It's a vindication. Violation. Validation. (Smiling.) One of the above.

ROBECK

They would never be interested in your notes, your papers.

ANNIS

Roddy's wife would be interested.

ROBECK

Maybe if you had less to hide, you'd be less worried.

ANNIS

Everyone has something to hide. It's our God-given right to have something to hide.

ROBECK

I have nothing to hide.

ANNIS

That makes you less interesting. It does not make you...morally superior.

ROBECK

You're prickly tonight. Cactus in winter.

Pause.

ANNIS

When will the boys be here?

ROBECK

(Back at his work.) I don't know.

ANNIS

But it's tonight?

ROBECK

Yes, it's tonight.

ANNIS

I wish Leah were coming. She would keep her brothers from driving into the ditch on...this subject.

ROBECK

Maybe so--

ANNIS

She was a sure and settled person.

ROBECK

Sure and settled?

ANNIS

I could tell that when she was a child. She was a sure and settled...child. She was a comfort to me.

ROBECK

(Absorbed in something else.) I guess she was.

ANNIS

When she died, I understood death...as the other half of a breath.

ROBECK

Ummm.

ANNIS

How long, I wonder...how long does it take...to get over such things?

ROBECK

Forever, my dear, forever.

ANNIS

Forever....

She crosses to the fireplace.

You've never had one of these, have you?

ROBECK

(Absorbed elsewhere.) One of what?

ANNIS

Repeated dreams.

ROBECK

No. I don't think so.

ANNIS

Roddy's wife meets me in a big driveway and tells me to go into this very large house....

ROBECK

Wait. What does this have to do with Roddy's wife?

ANNIS

In the dream, Grace meets me in the driveway and tells me to go into this very large house and figure out where to live in it. I go in. There are people in cages. Shivering, huddled together...moaning. And I cannot figure out...where to live.

ROBECK

Oh yes, the dog pound dream. (Chuckling.)

ANNIS

It's very cold. Snow blowing under the doors. And I have no shoes.

ROBECK

You're just an anxious ant tonight. Take a Xanax, why don't you?

ANNIS

I don't need a Xanax.

She moves to the door of the study.

What are you doing in there? It's very...late.

ROBECK

One of the mice is dead.

She's playing with him during this scene.

ANNIS

Did one mouse kill another? Cain kill Abel?

ROBECK

Looks that way.

ANNIS

Did one mouse eat another?

ROBECK

Eviscerate.

ANNIS

Eviscerate, obliterate, regurgitate. Regurgitate, abdicate, depopulate!

ROBECK

Something like that.

ANNIS

What does that mean about the generous gene?

ROBECK

Too early to tell.

ANNIS

It could mean there is no generous gene.

ROBECK

It does not mean that.

ANNIS

I think it does.

ROBECK

But you don't know what you're talking about.

ANNIS

I do know what I'm talking about. (Reciting by rote.) "There is a behavior in all species, that when faced with over-crowding, will exhibit generous behavior."

ROBECK

Yes.

ANNIS

(Smiling.) The Jesus gene!

ROBECK

This not a joke, Annis.

ANNIS

Well, mice are not generous; I can tell you that.

ROBECK

It can also be called self-sacrificing behavior.

ANNIS

Self-sacrificing behavior. I like that. Let us now discuss self-sacrifice.

ROBECK

Annis, please. An end to this.

ANNIS

Yes, right: an end to this.

ROBECK

Hush now.

ANNIS

The mice died in that other study. What's his name? That other...studier?

ROBECK

(Back to his work now.) Calhoun.

ANNIS

Calhoun, balloon, baboon, buffoon.

ROBECK

This is not Calhoun!

ANNIS

In the Calhoun study, didn't the mice...die?

ROBECK

They did.

ANNIS

And didn't they eat one another?

ROBECK

They did.

ANNIS

Disproving the theory...of the generous gene.

ROBECK

Calhoun was reinterpreted and disproved. This is not Calhoun.

ANNIS

Of course not.

ROBECK

This is not a replication of Calhoun.

ANNIS

Whatever you say. Calhoun, harpoon, lampoon, raccoon.

Pause.

Can I see it?

ROBECK

See what?

ANNIS

The dead mouse.

ROBECK

What for?

ANNIS

I find I am more compelled of late by dead things.

ROBECK brings out a dead mouse on a board.

This is a cheese board.

ROBECK

Now it's a mouse board.

ANNIS studies the mouse for several moments.

Pause.

ANNIS

What... is the reason we're not already gone?

ROBECK

Annie, I don't want to keep repeating this.

ANNIS

You don't understand what's going on with me.

ROBECK

Of course I do.

ANNIS

You are not inside my head. You don't know.

ROBECK

It's just the holidays. They always upset you.

ANNIS

I am losing my moorings, Robeck. I could end up like my mother. I will not end up like my mother.

ROBECK

You will not end up like your mother.

ANNIS

She was violent at the end....

ROBECK

You are not violent, please....

ANNIS

(Singing.) "Threatened a nurse with a paring knife."

ROBECK

She was long gone by then.

ANNIS

I do not want to be...long gone.

ROBECK

Please, Annie, think about something else.

ANNIS

You promised, Ro. We'd go out together. Help one another.

ROBECK

And I'll keep that promise.

ANNIS

You said a year ago we'd go on Solstice, then you postponed it to Equinox. It's winter now. You keep moving...the goal posts.

ROBECK

I want to finish the study.

ANNIS

Just so you know...I'm waiting, Dr. Godot.

ROBECK

Hush now, please.

He pats her and returns to his study.

ANNIS

I'm making a list of all the things I'll be happy not to do again. Getting on the scale, I'll be happy not to do that again. Doing the income tax, I'll be happy not to do that again. Listening to the tales of the mice, I'll be happy not to do that again.

ROBECK

I thought you liked the stories of the mice.

ANNIS

It's an impossible notion, marriage: put two people together...to see the same movies, read the same books, listen to the same music, and then ask them to remain interested in one another....

ROBECK

The mice are compelling, I think.

ANNIS

...Little wonder marriages don't last.

ANNIS picks up the cheeseboard with the wrapped mouse on it, and moves to the fireplace.

Cremation: the act of making something into cream.

She lets the mouse slide into the fire.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

She hums "Taps." Then she stops abruptly, the board slips from her hand. She stands frozen. It's one of her "episodes." Something in the house might change. Maybe there's snow. Maybe something moves. The boys might move some things. When it's over, she looks confused, frightened. Pause.

I want...to put our plans in writing, Ro.

ROBECK

(Involved in his work again.) Not yet. We don't have to do that yet.

ANNIS

I think we do.

ROBECK

Then you put it in writing. You're the writing person.

ANNIS

I can't remember how to type!

ROBECK

Then I'll write it. When the experiment is done, I'll write it all down.

ANNIS

This matters to me, Ro.

ROBECK

It matters to both of us.

He comes out of his study to comfort her.

ANNIS

When...are the boys coming?

ROBECK

For Thanksgiving.

ANNIS

*They're not coming **for** Thanksgiving. They're coming for to go through our thing **on** Thanksgiving.*

ROBECK

Hush now. (He sits on the arm of the couch.) Listen to this, they called me from the lab today. Wanted to drop off thirteen boxes of books. I said, "I don't have room for thirteen boxes of books," and they said, "What about your garage? We can leave them anywhere." "Very well," I said, "leave them where they are."

He laughs. She laughs.

ANNIS

And they did not find that funny.

ROBECK

They don't have room for my books!

ANNIS

We are living in the post-book era. Libraries are becoming extinct.

ROBECK

It's barbarous.

ANNIS

It's necessary.

ROBECK returns to his study.

ANNIS moves to mantle, grabs four books, takes them to a window, opens it.

It is the end...of the written word, as we know it.