

On Weather: Winter in Chicago

written by Guest Contributor | August 28, 2016



Lanie trudged home in boots gray with salt and snow. Her eyelashes were frozen together and she could no longer feel her ears under her hat. She counted her steps, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, not quite believing she'd ever reach her front door.

The day she moved into her apartment there were buds on the branches outside her front window. The sky was blue and flowers poked up out of the dirt. Lanie remembered doors opening all up and down the street as her new neighbors stuck their heads out like moles, squinting at the new spring sun and breathing air full of promise.

But after a humid summer and a brief, riotous fall, it was winter. Again. Once the temperature started dropping, Lanie swore that colors faded from buildings and billboards until the whole city was reduced to black, white, and grime. She couldn't stop thinking about how far away the sun was from the earth. And from her. She hoped that stupid sun was partying it up in Australia or New Zealand or wherever it was summer that day.

Three hundred and four, three hundred and five. It wasn't just her ears now. Lanie had lost feeling in her fingers and toes too. Her neck itched under her scarf. Three hundred and eighteen, three hundred and nineteen and she could see her apartment building, square and squat, right on the next corner. Finally.

At the door, Lanie took off her mitten and exposed her bare hand to the cold, which felt ridiculous, like being pantsless in a dream. She attempted to grip the icy key with her numb fingers. The worst part was that she had to stop moving. The second her blood stopped pumping her whole body started to shiver like it was going to keep fighting even as she surrendered.

In her apartment, Lanie stomped the snow off her boots and unpeeled herself from her layers of jacket, scarf, gloves, and hat. She caught her reflection in the hall mirror. Her skin was dry, her lips were chapped and peeling, and her hair stood up from static where it wasn't mashed down from her hat. Her eyes were yellow and glassy like she'd been fighting a cold for six weeks,

which she had. She marched over to the radiator and sat on it, hoping to absorb some of its warmth into her body before it dissipated, useless, into her chilly apartment.

Lanie flexed and unflexed her fingers, encouraging the circulation to come back. She peered down the hall at her bedroom door, waiting. After a moment, she was rewarded with the sight of a small pink nose, whiskers, and finally, an entire calico cat face peering out of the doorway at her. "Hi Marbles!" Lanie cried, her voice echoing in the empty apartment. Marbles ducked back into the safety of the bedroom, probably to the dark under the bed. Lanie doubted if she'd see her again that night..

When Lanie first moved, she used to say "living alone" all the time. She loved the way it sounded. So independent. Like a person who had it all together. "I'm living alone," she'd say, tossing her hair back like it was no big deal. "Yes, my own apartment. I live alone." But she was unprepared. She'd imagined more of the living and less of the alone.

Lanie had only been home for ten minutes, but it had been dark for hours. There was no discernable heat coming up from the radiator. No one walking outside. No busses, no cars, no noise at all. She knew what would happen next. She fought the instinct, even as she picked up the phone.

"Mom? It's Lanie." The receiver was cold in her hand.

"Hi sweetie! It's so good to hear your voice." Her mom sounded happy. Lanie tried not to take it personally.

"How are you?"

"I'm great. We're great!" Everything about those sentences stung. The ringing honesty of the word "great." The giddy amending of "I" to "we." The goddamn exclamation points.

Of course, her mother was great. She was in Florida, a move she'd been talking about for years. She finally did it, with Lanie's half-hearted encouragement, and told anyone who asked (and several who didn't) that it was the best thing that had ever happened to her. New house, new boyfriend, new attitude.

"You okay, honey?" Lanie wished she hadn't called.

"I'm fine, Mom. Cold, but fine." She contemplated hanging up and blaming it on a bad connection. She could just tell her mom that the phone lines froze.

When Lanie was a kid, she and her mother used to huddle together, both of them hating winter equally. Lanie remembered the long walks to her bus stop on frigid mornings, her mom picking her up, opening her jacket and wrapping it around the both of them. She remembered how protected she felt with her mother's warm body next to hers under the ugly puffy coat. They used to be two of a kind, but now Lanie was just one pea in a freezing cold pod.

"I'm so cold." She couldn't help it, couldn't stop the words as they came out of her mouth. "My hands and feet are like ice cubes." Stop, she told herself, just stop talking. "The sun hasn't come out in over a month. The heat in my apartment isn't working right. The cat's water dish froze over yesterday."

"Oh, sweetie." Wait, what was that? Lanie heard something new under the concern in her mother's voice. "Have you called the landlord about the heat?" It was impatience. Lanie made a fist so hard she could feel her fingernails digging into her palm.

"I called!" Lanie knew she was overreacting. "I left a message. He hasn't called me back!" She didn't want to sound shrill, but too late.

"That's good, honey. I'm sure you'll get it straightened out." Lanie had been prepared for a lecture, but this was worse. Way worse. This was the kind of thing her mother would say when talking to relatives she didn't want to deal with anymore. Something vague yet supportive, then she'd change the subject.

"How's work going lately?" There it was. Lanie felt a little part of her heart freeze over, too. She wanted a lecture. What happened to the lecture? What happened?

"It's fine, Mom. Everything's fine." Her voice was calmer now, but dull. "Anyway, I'm going to meet up with some friends. I just wanted to call and check in."

"I'm always happy to hear from you, sweetheart. And remember, if you can't stand it there, you're always welcome here in sunny Florida!"

Lanie had no desire to go to sunny Florida. Wait. Not true. She had lots of desire to go to sunny Florida and sit by the pool, sipping drinks and gossiping with her mom. What she had no desire to do was tag along behind her mother and Marty the Dentist, her new boyfriend. Marty the Dentist and her mom playing rummy by the pool. Marty the Dentist and her mom at a matinee. Marty the Dentist and her mom eating lunch at an outdoor mall in Boca. Lanie couldn't insert herself into that picture. It wasn't that she didn't like Marty the Dentist. He seemed fine. It was that she couldn't stand to see her mom with him. Her mom wore eye shadow now, played tennis, and had her teeth whitened. That blue-white dazzling smile in her mother's familiar face was more than she could take. She blamed Marty for that. Her mother's smile was just fine before.

Lanie walked back over to the radiator but barely sat down before she stood up again.

"Screw this," she mumbled. She couldn't stand the thought of shivering at home all night, watching bad TV until she could go to bed. Her pretend plans to meet friends sounded more appealing than her actual plan of staying home alone, so she decided to follow through.

Back on went the boots, the jacket, the mittens, the hat, and the scarf. Lanie looked at her bundled up reflection in the hall mirror.

“I need a drink,” she told herself, although it came out damp and muffled through her woolly scarf. She took a breath, hunched her shoulders, and stepped out into the cold night.

The tiny bit of warmth Lanie reclaimed in her apartment was gone before she made it down the front stairs. The wind found its way from the tiny opening at the top of her tightly wrapped scarf, down through her jacket and layers of sweater and t-shirt, to settle like a practical joke against her naked skin. She couldn't feel her feet in her heavy boots even as stomped them down on the sidewalk as hard as she could. She cursed the moment she decided to go for the fur-lined but slightly too loose mittens, because the wind blew right up them even though she had her hands jammed in her pockets. No matter what she did, whenever she moved just slightly she created a gap between her glove and the sleeve of her coat, that terrible bracelet of exposed flesh barely holding up under the abuse.

At the end of the block, she saw the neon light of the bar glowing against the snowy sidewalk. Gray, matted snow covered one of the letters on the “Pickwick” sign, so it read “ickwick.”

“Whatever, as long as it's heated,” thought Lanie, as she felt the cold seep into the hairline cracks between the sole and leather of her boots. She concentrated hard on the light of the bar like it was a mirage that might disappear if she blinked.

Lanie wasn't in the habit of going to bars by herself. But as she reached the end of her 20s, her single friends dropped off the urban landscape one by one. Lanie remembered the early days of city living, all her friends sitting around someone's tiny studio apartment, doing tequila shots and vowing to stay in touch forever. Each of them was young, single, ambitious, underpaid, and obsessed with overpriced coffee and unavailable men. But then her friends got married, got promotions, got pregnant, and moved back to the suburbs where they all were from in the first place.

They all swore to keep in touch and Lanie was good for a while. She sat in bright living rooms and listened politely to talk about commutes and ovulation. She sipped the drinks and nibbled the appetizers. She even brought a boyfriend once, but not twice. Eventually she started making excuses. She

let the voice mail pick up a few too many times and allowed herself to forget to call back. The phone calls slowed down until they stopped completely. Lanie thought she'd be relieved but she just felt antsy. She knew she didn't want to live in the suburbs, but she didn't want to be in the city, either. She didn't want to be home, she didn't want to be out, she didn't want to be at work. She didn't want to be anywhere.

When she opened the door to the bar and plowed into the wall of heat and noise, Lanie realized how long it had been since she'd actually been around people having a good time. Groups were sitting together at booths, laughing and drinking. Billiard balls clacked against each other. Music she knew and liked pounded the floor under her feet. Lanie thought of her cube at work and her silent office, everyone IM-ing each other with complaints, meeting changes, and bits of gossip. She'd almost forgotten what the buzz of conversation sounded like, how it murmured and crested until she felt her brain humming with humanity.

Lanie ordered her drink, attempting to make meaningful eye contact with the shaggy-haired bartender, but he wasn't having it. So she settled for slouching on her stool, scanning the bar and attempting to look bored.

She was ready to write the night off as hopeless when a sharp elbow nailed her in the side and almost knocked her off her stool. "Ouch!" She rubbed her ribs. The elbow was attached to her least favorite kind of guy. He was big two times over: tall big and fat big. He wore khakis and a baseball cap, sure to be covering a receding hairline. He wore a "U of I" sweatshirt and boat shoes. Boat shoes! In this weather! Who wore boat shoes anymore?

"Oh, oh, dude, I'm sorry," said the guy. But he was laughing. Red-faced and laughing. She didn't think the red face was from being adorably embarrassed, either. He was just drunk.

"That hurt. Watch it." Lanie wasn't nice about it. It *did* hurt, and he *should* watch it. The guy stopped laughing, remembering that he was a human, and she was a girl.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I'm sorry I hurt you." His eyes were big and blinky and Lanie suddenly imagined him as a giant toddler: fat, clumsy, desperate. She started to turn away when, peeking out from the massive side of the big guy, there was another guy. A very attractive guy. And he was leaning over to talk to her.

"Don't mind Solly," he said. "He's still learning how to behave." He turned back to Solly and bonked him with a rolled up napkin. "Bad dog!"

Solly pretended to flinch, then turned to her and grinned. Lanie peered around him to smile at the cute guy. "Thanks," she said, throwing in a giggle for good measure.

Solly stuck up his hands, surrendering. "Okay, okay." He looked at Lanie like she was the one who did something wrong. "I'm leaving."

Lanie moved right over onto Solly's empty barstool the second he walked away, feeling the warmth from it on the back of her legs. It felt good, to go from one warm barstool to another, and it felt really good to be looking into the big brown eyes of the cute guy. Her hero.

"Sorry again about my friend," he said. "We've been friends since college. It's one of those, you were cool in college, and now we're friends because we've been friends since college, but um..." He shrugged, like he couldn't bring himself to say the next part. Lanie admired his reluctance to badmouth his friend, even if Solly was that friend.

"No biggie." She shrugged, too. "I have those friends. They stay home with their babies and watch American Idol and fall asleep at 9:30. At least I watch American Idol and go out after." Oh God, she said too much. She smiled and tried to stick out her chest a little, hoping to save the moment.

"I kinda like American Idol." He looked sheepish.

"Really?" said Lanie. He was adorable. She took a big gulp of her drink, feeling it warming her on its way down. She decided that coming to a bar by herself was a great idea. She decided to do it more often. She decided she might not have to after tonight. Between the drink and the closeness of the cute guy, she almost felt her toes again. She wanted to know his name.

"I'm Lanie." She leaned forward and stuck out her hand.

"Ryan." He took hers and shook it. She couldn't remember the last time she had a guy's hand in hers. The last time a guy touched her, really, besides jostling on the el or bumping her on the street. It felt so warm, that skin on her skin. She peeked down to look at their hands together, his strong, slim fingers holding on to hers, making her regular old hand look special.

"I kinda need that back." Ryan looked down to where she was still holding on. She yanked her hand away, felt herself blush, and hoped it was too dark in the bar for him to tell. He picked up his drink and raised his eyebrows at her.

"Ooops, sorry." She tried to sound not embarrassed. "It's just that your hand was nice and warm. I'm always cold. That's the thing." She was really hoping to pull this off. Maybe he would take her hand again. Warm it up.

"Eh," he said. "It's not so bad."

Lanie winced. She was expecting sympathy. Didn't everybody hate the cold? Unless it was summertime and then they were hating the heat? She thought that one of the upsides of living in Chicago was that you could complain about the weather all the time.

"I thought that one of the upsides of living in Chicago was that you could complain about the weather all the time." She felt really lame.

He took a sip of his drink, looked around the bar. "You can't complain about anything *all* the time." He looked bored, done. How did she let this happen?

"Yeah, you're right!" she said brightly and, she hoped, not frantically. "As a matter of fact, maybe I'll turn over a new leaf. I'll try to enjoy the cold. You'll have to tell me your secrets." She smiled and considered sticking her chest out again.

"I didn't say I liked it," he sighed. "I just said you shouldn't complain about it all the time. Besides, it's the price you pay for living here. Chicago is a great city."

Lanie rolled her eyes, then hoped he didn't see. She didn't go to the bar to get an earful of good ol' Midwestern boosterism. She went there to be around other people. Male other people. She pictured her empty, cold apartment. Try again, she told herself. Try again.

"It is a great city!" It came out as almost a shriek. She cringed, then stuck her chest out again, then tried to sit normally, then felt like some kind of weird insecure accordion. Just calm down, she told herself.

"Um. What kinds of things do you like to do here? Museums? Plays? The theater here is great." Good lord, she sounded like a tourist. A stupid, ugly, dumbass tourist. Even her breasts wouldn't save her now. She gulped at her drink and braced herself.

"Yeah, the museums are great...will you excuse me for a minute? I think I see someone I know." He jumped off his stool.

"Yeah, sure, no problem." But he was already gone, talking to a few guys with another girl in their midst. She was the kind of girl cool guys in small bars love: tall and slim, with shiny dark hair and glowing wintry skin, perfectly balanced on impractical boots, looking bored out of her mind. Ryan leaned in to talk to her, almost touching her face with his.

Lanie swiveled away from the crowd and back to the bar. The bartender was flirting with a girl on the other side of the counter. Her drink was down to ice and cherry. She picked up the cherry and put it in her mouth, holding its sickly sweetness there for a moment before she had to put her coat back on and face the chill. What a waste.

She was bending down to grab her coat from where it had fallen to the floor when she heard growling. Not her stomach, not the rumble of the El passing by, not the symbolic growl of old man winter getting ready to attack again—an actual growl in her ear. Lanie looked up and there was Solly, smiling and making puppy eyes at her.

"Hey," Lanie said. She fussed with her coat and avoided eye contact. "I'm

just on my way out.”

“He blow you off?” Solly raised his eyebrows like an old, smug friend.

“What?” Lanie could feel herself blushing. She looked around the bar like she couldn’t imagine who Solly was talking about.

“My man Ryan.” He shrugged, like *oh you know Ryan*. Lanie envied that easy male friendship. The way they just accepted each other. Ryan blew off girls in bars. Solly was his big, dumb dog.

“I guess,” said Lanie. “I don’t even know him, so you can’t really call it a blow-off. We were just talking and whatever.”

“Whatever,” Solly answered, raising an eyebrow again. He took a long drink of his beer and avoided looking at her. The music faded out and started up again. Solly pulled the beer bottle out of his mouth and raised it in the air.

“Yeah, WH0000!” Lanie saw his big mouth open, veins popping in his neck. He turned back to her. “I love this song! Wanna dance?” He tilted his head, excited and questioning, then fanned himself with his shirt where it was sticking to his chest. “It’s really warm in here.” A bead of sweat gathered on his temple and trickled down to his ear. Lanie dropped her coat on the floor and took his big hot hand.

Solly slept like a dog, too, complete with sighs, snorts, and leg twitches. It wasn’t so bad, bringing Solly home. It’s not like he fucked like a dog. Or left the boat shoes on. It was hard not to like someone when you were both naked, even if you had to force yourself a little bit.

Lanie wondered if she would see him again. She wondered if she wanted to. Solly’s mouth fell open and he drooled a little on her pillowcase in a way that seemed more intimate than gross. She thought of all her friends, asleep in their beds with their husbands and babies. She thought of her mother, dozing under a flowery bedspread next to Marty, while the breeze rustled the palm trees in that alien Florida night. She inched as close to Solly as she dared without actually touching him. He was like a big bear in her bed, a rumbling human furnace. Lanie kicked around under the covers, finally finding an opening and sticking her foot out into the cool night air.



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