

The Arctic Circle

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by Kristina Marie Darling
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The Arctic Circle

NORTH

A girl drove into a blizzard at sunset. Her fiancé told her not to, and she thought about making tea or cocoa, but she started the car anyway. She did it because the road glittered in the lamplight. She did it because he told her not to.

The blizzard was the exact same temperature as her heart. She kept driving past barren corn fields, watching the snow fall. She felt a numbness in her chest, and when she placed her hand there, the warmth was gone. The girl began to worry and stopped the car.

I could have seen this coming, the fiancé said when she walked into the kitchen.

This didn't happen to you, too? But as the girl began speaking, she sensed the weight of her clothes shifting. Her dress crackled with frost. The frozen part of her fell off, leaving a small scar. The fiancé smiled.

You just became a wife, he said.

VOW

The name I was given at birth was no longer my name. When I arrived at the reception hall, I was mistaken for another bride. Laced into the wrong dress, wearing the wrong shoes.

My husband would later confuse me with his last wife. He thought I was supposed to bring him cigarettes, and for a moment that seemed right. He mumbled as I handed him a purple lighter, and I left behind the only life I'd ever known.

But we were so good together. I never argued with him, afraid for years he'd remember his first wife was dead.

BENEVOLENCE

I stood there in the kitchen, my back to the window. I didn't want to see the snow falling, frost sealing the gates and every door. Ploughs heaving past rows of houses and the strip malls. Then storm sirens, as if warning me to run.

At first I thought my husband locked the windows to protect me. I could imagine the long wait for that ice to thaw. I interpreted his small gestures as kindness, but they weren't. I found out later that his last wife was found frozen inside the house.

Beyond the window, snow keeps piling up. I have trouble controlling the shaking in both my hands.

ARROGANCE

To say I was jealous of your first wife would be misleading. To begin with, I didn't know you'd been married before.

There were a few things I did know about you. One was that you liked cold weather. You talked about it in the most earnest way, so that people thought you really *were* from Maine. You took walks at night as though you wanted to be found shivering in the middle of the street. But I was sure this was not what you wanted. Whether you were from Maine or not, I knew you hadn't changed your mind about that.

I wasn't jealous of your first wife. I wanted to live in her house and wear her clothes. I wanted to place my hand on you and say *husband*. I wanted to steal from her frozen little purse, and I wondered if the cold was a promise or a threat.

NORTH (II)

When the wedding gifts start to come, she's alone. Her husband's shoveling snow. She's just knitting socks. But she understands why the boxes are empty, knows fact from fiction. The mail carrier looks sad bringing them. She calls her husband; he comes in the house.

The wrapping paper sparkles in pieces on the floor. He's still holding the shovel; he says her name. They're standing in the foyer and she's trying to explain to him that it's not what he thinks. She opened the boxes and there was only winter inside. The blizzard did this, with its frost and the dead weight of the snowflakes.

She holds out the smallest parcel, shows him its frozen worlds.

MAGNIFICENCE

You told me a story about the wedding, how on the day of the ceremony, a storm shook the chapel where you where you waited.

You were the oldest of the men she kissed, and there were so many she wouldn't tell you the exact number. Rain smudged the stained glass windows, tore into the dovecotes. You never told anyone about the other men you because you'd started to imagine their faces, their painstakingly starched suits.

The marriage was haunted, no one else wanted it. Still you waited. Then you saw a flash of white at the door, the ghost everyone was afraid of. *That's what I loved about her*, you said.

MERCY

Wind shook the fence around our yard. A shadow appeared beneath the window. But it wasn't the marble statue or a deer. It wasn't the birdbath with its small store of ice. The shadow was cast by your first wife, returning after our wedding. So long after she'd left that you'd stopped watching for signs.

The garden was all thistle and frost. I was surprised she recognized the small iron gate, the iced-over trees. For years I had been living in her house, wearing her clothes, answering to her name.

I could no longer step outside without my hands shaking. Your real wife stood there like a buck, waiting to charge.

NORTH (III)

The white dress felt like the onset of a harsh winter. Her shoulders began to tremble. Her skin looked red and frostbitten. Though the church was warm enough, she shivered and wrapped shawls around her body. The bridesmaids stopped trying to appease her, complaining that her gown drew all the heat out of the room. Her veil blossomed with frost. Sometimes, while waiting for the ceremony to begin, she watched the breath curl from her own mouth in shimmering clouds.

The books about wedding day fashion said that a sharp drop in body temperature was normal. They also said that the bride's desire for bulky clothing should not be indulged.

The fire burning in her room was too small. The cup of hot tea was too cool. Before the ceremony, they brought her warm soup and cinnamon candies. She boiled the broth and ate spoonfuls straight from the bubbling skillet.

She hated to admit the truth, but she'd known it from the start. A marriage isn't the best way to generate heat.

POLAR NIGHT

Even as a wife I had a few friends. Most of them were wives, too, so the fact that I was married wasn't important.

One of my friends was my neighbor's husband. It got cold at night, so I held his hand to keep from shivering. Then dinner, and I wondered what I was doing in his house. I was probably there to keep from feeling lonely. After awhile, we decided to pretend we were engaged. I thought that if we imagined something, we might be happier.

But I still felt alone, even in my imagination. My new fiancé kept trying to make small talk, mentioned the cold weather. Nothing he said really mattered. That was how I knew he must be real.

TRUE NORTH

From the start you made me promise not to ask questions about your first wife. You'd leave for weeks and wouldn't tell me why.

When you finally came home, dinner always began the same way. I'd catch a glimpse of something in the window while warming soup or vegetables. Then I looked out into the yard and saw her face. Sometimes she stood at the door, straightening her dress, about to knock. Most of the time she was out of breath, as though she'd walked a long way in the cold.

No matter what you told me, I was afraid to open the door. She carried no purse, and no luggage, because everything she needed was already here.