Lake Effect
by Mark Noonan

The high temperature for the week was twenty-eight degrees. Nathaniel Huntington stood in a snow drift up to his knees at the far end of tiny Lakeside Cemetery and stared down at Susan's freshly chiseled headstone. She had died unexpectedly twenty-three days earlier. There was no illness, nor accident; she died in her sleep. The night prior she asked Nathan to spoon with her—even in old age the woman remained hungry for human touch—but when morning came and Nathan awoke separated from Susan he knew something was wrong. He placed his two fingers on her wrist and felt for a pulse; he laid his head against her chest and listened. She had passed.

Nathan quietly descended the front stairs and entered the kitchen. He looked out into the grey morning lake as he phoned his friend Allen Zabor of Zabor and Sons. Allen was himself already awake and clothed after another predawn first call. Nathan told Allen that Susan was dead. His exact words were: Susan is dead. Not Susan has passed, or Susan is gone. He said Susan is dead. Even Allen, long accustomed to hearing just about anything from the other party, was struck by how cold Nathan's statement sounded.

But it was a cold morning. Allen snapped his cell phone shut, paused a moment in his own dark kitchen, and also stared out through his bay windows at the grey morning lake. The Zabor's lived in a big brick house they had built fifteen years earlier when Allen took over the family business from his father, Fred, Nathan's old friend. They lived one suburb over, almost three and a half miles from the Huntington's old Colonial/Victorian mutt house that was one of the last of the great big old wood homes built during the nineteen twenties along the lake. Before Nathan retired he handled the entire Zabor family's dermatological needs, six kids and the mother. Allen still carried repressed memories from his teenage years of Nathan using a metal device that looked like a tiny candlesnuffer to pop the tender zits along his chin. Allen sipped his cold coffee and thought a moment: he knew that these things, death unfortunately, for some strange reason always came in threes. He freshened his coffee mug, sat down at his kitchen table in the half-morning darkness, and waited.

The days that followed adhered to custom: children, grandchildren, relatives, long lost friends drove and flew in from all over the country; Susan was waked for two days; Father McChrystal celebrated the funeral mass; and finally, she was buried in the family plot in Lakeside, the lot directly next to the Huntington house. During these difficult days Nathan's five children and twelve grandchildren offered support and love for the family patriarch. As did his many close friends. But after a few days his kids had to return to their lives and aside from biweekly lunches with Danny, Nathan's oldest friend (who also lived on the lake, two point three miles away, in one of the last ancient houses), he was left alone.

The day Susan died the high temperature was thirty-four degrees, just above the freezing mark. But in the three weeks thereafter the lake effect snow machine kicked up and complemented by a lack of gulfstream from the south sent the temperature dropping. This was normal; it was early February after all. Twenty-eight inches of snow fell in three days. After that the low temperatures dipped below zero. For the time being, Nathan and Danny's lunch dates halted. As the temperature plunged so did Nathan's spirits. Trained psychologists report that the dark, cold winter months are harbingers of depression. Poor Nathan was ill-equipped to fight off their brutality. He and Susan had been married for forty-seven years; meaning for forty-seven years he had never been alone. Their big blue and white house was always full of their kids and friends of their kids or friends of their own. Even after everyone was grown and gone there was

still Susan's voice, a high squeal, that bounced off the walls and found Nathan's ears no matter where he was hiding, comforting him to the fact that he was not alone in the great big house.

It wasn't that Nathan was unprepared to deal with Susan's death. He had thought about it—figured if it happened he would move to Florida (where most of his friends retired to already) or the Caribbean and live out his remaining days bathing his pasty white skin in the warm ocean and hacking away on the golf links. The only reason they hadn't moved to warmer environs together was that Susan actually enjoyed the cold weather and she adored the lake. All she had asked for and wanted as far back as Nathan could remember was a big, full house on the lake. She got her wish and wanted for nothing else.

Ideally, Nathan had hoped and even prayed, yes prayed, that he would go first. That seemed the best scenario for all involved. (Truth be told, his best scenario involved the two of them simultaneously spontaneously combusting at the climax of their lovemaking. It would leave no mess, no unfortunate ugly bodies, and it would appear to all perplexed family members that they magically disappeared or were abducted by extraterrestrials. Since retirement from his dermatology practice, Nathan had a lot of time to let his imagination roam. A little too much time, he thought.) But, that ideal scenario was impossible so Nathan hoped and prayed that he would go first. Women, he knew, had a longer life-expectancy than men and he also knew they were stronger emotionally (especially Susan) and better able to deal with a spouse's death. Of the three options: death together, him first, or her first, he had received the one third he didn't plan for, and unfortunately, it was the only option of the three that he needed to plan for. A former Boy Scout troupe leader, his lack of planning made him feel stupid.

At first he managed: he ate bran flakes for breakfast, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or kosher hot dogs for lunch, and frozen pizzas, frozen dinners, canned soup, canned ravioli, or spaghetti for dinner. He didn't much care what he ate. Eating was now simply something he did out of habit, three times a day, at six, noon, and six again, as he had for the last forty-seven years.

Because of the snow and cold and frozen roads and grey days, Nathan stayed indoors. He kept the den television turned on to the History Channel, volume blaring twenty-four hours a day, because he couldn't stand the sound of the house completely quiet. The silence sent a shiver of fear up his spine and amid all the other issues he knew he was in some way dealing with subconsciously, he didn't want his own wild thoughts to be a contributing factor to his emotional instability.

In the two weeks after Susan's death, Nathan left the house everyday at one o'clock. But only once did he pull the Mercedes out of the garage and go to the supermarket for provisions. The other times he trudged through the snow across his front lawn to the next lot over, Lakeside Cemetery, to visit his wife. Everyday he retraced his footprints in the snow, "to hide his numbers," he joked to himself quietly as involuntary tears slid down his face.

At her gravesite Nathan talked to Susan, everyday, about his day and his thoughts. It was part of their routine and he couldn't break it. They told each other everything. He had to talk to someone and she was, even in death, still the closest person to him. He would tell her about whatever book he was trying to read (C.S. Lewis's A Grief Observed came up; he had nine brand new identical copies of the book given to him by well wishing friends. "I could easily wallpaper the downstairs bathroom with Lewis's words," he joked). He asked her what she thought of their son, Michael, still a bachelor at thirty-eight, and if she reckoned he would ever get married. She didn't answer him, obviously, but she didn't have to. After forty-seven years Nathan knew what her response would be to such questions: "He's insane," or "He's a bit too narcissistic," or "He's too picky like his father." He told her about world events: another suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, or massive mudslides in Ecuador, or Prince William says he doesn't want to be king (she had a

guilty obsession with the inner turmoil of the British royal family). Or he described the news on the local level: a shooting last night on the east side, two dead; the school board wants to cut funding for the music program; a three month old baby was found wrapped in a blue blanket in a dumpster behind Stop N Shop, she was alive; the Cavaliers lost their seventh in a row (she didn't care about sports but Nathan kept her up to date on the scores anyway). The stories were always pretty much the same, news never changed that much from day to day, it just plodded on at a lumbering pace like the cold dark weather.

Most of the time Nathan described the lake. Her grave (and his future plot) were only twenty-five feet from the forty foot cliff that separated the shore from the lake. When they purchased the plots ten years ago he urged her to take the only two remaining that were close to Lake Road, allowing about a hundred feet of space—the rest of the cemetery—for erosion. But she insisted that they take the last two plots closest to the edge. When he pushed the erosion issue she responded, "So we fall in the lake, sounds good to me." Nathan reminded her that the city wouldn't let their caskets fall in the lake, they would have to be moved of course. "Oh no," Susan responded, "let's stipulate in our contract that once we go (she pointed over the edge) we go."

"They can't do that," whined Nathan.

"Sure they can."

"No, they can't."

"Honey," she took his hand. "At that point I don't think we'll really care, will we?"

Her eyebrows raised, she smiled up at Nathan. He looked down into her brown eyes and a smile slowly developed across his red face. That mischievous look of hers always made him smile.

Though Nathan tried to diversify his descriptions of the lake and show the day to day differences that only Susan seemed to notice, after nine days of wild variants of the same theme, he finally laughed to himself and simply told her, "It's grey. All grey. Light-grey. Dark-grey. Grey-grey. From left to right, the sky down to the lake, all is grey."

On the twenty-third day after Susan's death, Nathan stood before her grave bundled in a puffy gore-tex coat, wool hat, and thick gloves. It was seven AM and the temperature was only twelve degrees. He looked down at Susan's sharp granite headstone. There was no epitaph; she didn't want one. Just her name and dates. Without spasms, gasps of breath, or even scrunching up his face, Nathan cried involuntarily. Tears slid out the sides of his eyes and glided down his cheeks. He could not control the steady flow; as he looked up to the grey lake he felt the tear-water freeze in two thin strands down both sides of his face.

Nathan retraced his footsteps, as he had done for eighteen straight days, back across his front lawn and into his big, quiet house. He walked through the foyer and the living room, past the den sounds of a World War II announcer's voice over Hitler screaming in German, and into the kitchen, leaving a trail of snow behind him from not stomping off his feet or removing any garments. He opened the back glass door and walked out onto the brick patio. The two chaise lounges and other patio chairs and tables wore their brown winter covers which were also covered with snow. The backyard was smooth and white. The cedar shed sat halfway back on the left, full of old bikes, big wheels, tricycles, toys, plastic picnic tables, plastic pools, all stuff Susan planned to donate to charity but never got around to or couldn't bring herself to do. The two oaks and two maples on the left side of the lawn had been in their same spots, albeit half their size, when they moved into the house thirty-seven years ago. On the right side, totally out of place, was the weeping willow tree Nathan planted the year they moved in. Why he chose to

plant a weeping willow Susan never figured out and in fact Nathan didn't know why he chose such an out-of-place tree, but planted it he did and the big knotted roots sprung up all over the backyard. In the summers the tree stood like a huge golden canopy over the everything. Nathan was amazed the tree had survived the lake's strong winds, the lightning, the freezing weather. But it had become the favorite climbing tree for all the kids—Albert, Margaret, Michael, Emily, and Jim—and likewise the main cause of cuts, bruises, a sprained ankle, and two broken bones. But the willow was still there in its thick winter skeleton.

Nathan walked through the knee-high snow directly down the center of his backyard. When he reached the chainlink fence he managed to force open the gate enough with a couple hip checks that he could get through. He stood at the cliff's edge. He placed each glove on the handrails and slowly stepped, one foot at a time, down the wrought iron stairs that led to their small pebble beach and the lake. Not once did he ever allow any of his children to use the stairs in the wintertime alone. "It is far too dangerous," he told them again and again when they pleaded to go see the big frozen mounds of snow on the beachside. "If you tripped and fell that would be the end of you," he explained. His words echoed in his head as he was now doing exactly what he cautioned against. But he took it slow, one step at a time, and in no time he had descended the forty-five steps.

At lake level he heard nothing. All was quiet save the wind. Nathan paused a moment to catch his breath. Once composed he picked up his feet and started walking out onto the hard windswept snow that covered the lake.

Danny left messages on the Huntington machine for three days (Susan's voice still greeted callers: "You've reached the Huntington's. We used to be seven but now we're just two. Two old farts in a big old house. We hope that's who you're looking for. Kindly leave a message and, after our amorous affairs are over, we'll call you right back." Her message made Nathan grimace insecurely every time he heard it, but she didn't care, it made her squeal contentedly whenever someone mentioned it.) By the morning of the third day Danny was worried so though he wasn't supposed to drive unless it was sixty-five degrees, sunny, and one hundred percent visibility in every direction (he had bad eyes), he pulled the Volvo out of the garage and squinted his way down Lake Road for two point three miles. He wasn't concerned about an accident; he knew if he hit anything at least five airbags would deploy, probably saving his life but possibly causing him to have a heart attack and die. But he didn't care, he was worried about Nathan.

For thirty-two years Danny held the Huntington's spare keys. But he didn't use them when he arrived because the front door was unlocked. He called out for Nathan but there was no response. As he explored further inside the Huntington home he heard the History Channel announcer instruct that: the battle of midway was a logistical nightmare for both sides. He couldn't help himself from chuckling when he entered the kitchen and saw all the empty pizza boxes and soup cans on the countertop. A knife stuck out of the Jif peanut butter jar. Danny's momentary amusement shifted abruptly to outright fear when he noticed the back glass door standing wide open.

Danny phoned the police straightaway. Ten minutes later Police Chief Shepard waddled into the Huntington house. Nathan, Danny, and Bill (Shepard's first name) had known each other for thirty-two years. When Susan decided to have a housewarming party shortly after they moved in, the long line of cars parked along Lake Road (a blatant city violation) brought a thin Officer Shepard to their home. In the decades since both Nathan and Danny served on city council and attended local F.O.P golf outings at Bill's invitation.

First Danny and Bill checked the whole house for Nathan in case he had accidentally fallen or had a stroke or some other unforeseen ailment. But obviously their search turned up no body. So they followed Nathan's tracks through the backyard to the cliff.

"Oh, my," said Bill.

"What is it?" responded Danny. He squinted down towards the cliff's bottom and feared that the dark blob he saw was Nathan's body. "Is he dead?"

"No. No. He's not dead, but..." Bill's thought, like Nathan's faint footprints, faded off in the distance, straight into the lake.

For ten minutes Danny and Bill sat at the Huntington kitchen table, as they had many Friday and Saturday poker nights, and tried to figure out how to handle the bizarre situation. Finally Danny said, "Well, we have to call somebody."

"Yes, we do," replied Bill. "I'm just trying to figure out who." He puckered his face in pained thought. "I could call the lake patrol, I guess, but I don't know what they could do, there aren't any boats out on the lake." He paused and stared at Danny's nervous hands as they fidgeted with each other on the table. "All right." Bill slammed his fist down on the table and stood. "Let's get to work."

The first two miles Nathan walked in a trance. He thought of nothing, his mind a blank slate like the grey canvas that surrounded him. He didn't know why he was walking, where he was walking, but he kept on walking straight into the lake, into seeming nothingness. He was a man lost at sea but without the worries of treading water or a sinking boat. His only obstacle was the cold weather (fifteen degrees) and the hard wind. But he was well prepared for such conditions. That morning he had put on long underwear, a turtle neck, a blue sweater, and thinsulated jeans, along with his puffy gore-tex coat, his hat and gloves. And his two pairs of wool socks and waterproof hiking boots kept his feet dry and warm. His lucky red scarf, a Christmas present from Susan (she knitted it herself), shielded his face. He was, in fact, too well dressed and the more he walked the more he sweated.

By noon the Huntington house had become Central Command for Chief Shepard's search and rescue operation to find the home's lost owner. Eight of Shepard's men milled around the kitchen drinking coffee (the entire department was only eighteen) as Shepard spoke on the phone with Mr. Chesterton, a local resident who owned snowmobiles. After convincing the miserly Mr. Chesterton to allow him to borrow four vehicles, Bill met with four men from the Lake Patrol who showed up to offer their assistance. They took a meeting in the Huntington den with the television turned off and Danny present but silent.

"What do you mean the lake isn't frozen?" asked Bill.

"It's not fully frozen over—"

"But the high's been in the teens for weeks—"

"Yes. But I'm telling you, according to our measurements it's not frozen over."

"Meaning?"

"That you can't send snowmobiles more than a couple miles out."

"Good lord," interrupted Danny.

"But," the man from Lake Patrol continued, "it's highly unlikely that he's that far out anyway."

A long silence fell over the room as Bill and Danny paused to think and the Lake Patrol officers waited.

"What about helicopters?" said Bill.

"Helicopters?"

"Yes, helicopters," added Danny, "that would work."

"I can see if we can get a police helicopter, maybe, but it's highly unusual to use them out over the lake in winter, it gets really windy and plus this isn't exactly—I mean it's only—You know..." The man stopped before he misspoke. Bill put his hands on his hips; Danny stared the man down. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

Danny wanted to ride on the back of a snowmobile but Bill wouldn't allow it and told him they both needed to stay at Central Command and follow the action over the radios. From the boat club a half mile away four snowmobiles with two officers on each headed out onto the lake and began their search for Nathan. Because his tracks disappeared they had no trail to follow. So they fanned out and pushed on, deeper into the lake. Meanwhile, after Bill exhausted all police favors he had at his disposal, a police chopper was secured and departed from the city fourteen miles away to their position at the Huntington house.

By noon Nathan had been walking for five hours and had traveled almost six miles. He stopped a moment, sat down, and ate some snow. He looked back for the first time in the direction of his house and saw nothing. The wind kicked up snow, making visibility poor, and thus impossible for Nathan to even make out the shoreline. All around him, for three hundred sixty degrees, was grey. They grey sky met the grey lake and it felt to Nathan as if he existed in a world of limbo, a world void of color. He stood back up and continued on his trek.

After three hours zigzagging across the lakeshore the snowmobile search had found nothing. Without odometers it was impossible for the officers to tell how far into the lake they had traveled but all were warned not to exceed three miles at the absolute most. Bill remained in close contact with the riders and with the helicopter. After five passes over parts of the lake the helicopter pilot radioed in that with the swirling snow and grey skies visibility was so poor that it was impossible to see anything on the ground/lake except a grey mist. Bill urged the pilot to keep trying but a half-hour later both conceded that continued efforts were pointless. The helicopter was grounded until the next day if the visibility cleared. By four o'clock the snowmobile teams had discovered no trace of Nathan. Two of the teams failed to report in after Bill tried to contact them repeatedly.

Unbeknownst to Nathan, he had walked over twelve miles when it started to get dark at around four forty-five. He remained in a daze but didn't feel drunk or tired or hungry. He actually felt calm and strong and eager to keep walking; so he did just that, passing mile thirteen as darkness fell over the lake and the temperature dropped into the single digits.

Back at Central Command panic had set in. Two snowmobile teams returned to the house but two others were missing. Attempts at radio contact proved unsuccessful on all stations, even the emergency band. Bill feared the worst, that the snowmobiles had cracked through the ice and fallen in the lake. He knew that a nighttime search for anyone was too dangerous and out of the question. He also began wondering if in his adrenaline to save his friend he had blindly overlooked the danger of sending men out on a lake he knew was not completely frozen over. All they could do during the night was wait and pray.

Luckily for Nathan, out over the center of the lake the nighttime winds were calmer than during the day and because he was so well bundled up, the small drop in temperature didn't bother him at all. The one thing that was starting to make its presence known was his empty stomach. Aside from many mouthfuls of snow, the only thing he had had to eat all day was a frozen Snickers candy bar he found in his coat pocket. He had no recollection of putting it there and wondered if Susan placed it in his coat in case of a situation just like the one he was in. She was always leaving candy or peanut butter crackers or nuts in glove compartments, jacket

pockets, or backpacks in case anyone became stranded for some inexplicable reason. Such a situation never occurred but the kids enjoyed finding candy, crackers, and cashews all over the place. It was like a survival Easter egg hunt all year round. By midnight Nathan had walked over twenty miles and his hunger was taking over. Of course he had no idea how far he had walked and though he was starting to question exactly where he was and what he was doing, he knew that he couldn't stop moving. If he did stop he might never get going again. So he kept on steadily walking in the pitch blackness of a moonless night.

All night Bill planned for the search and rescue operation that would start at first light. Twelve more snowmobiles were trucked in (poor Mr. Chesterton)—they would go off in seven pairs of two in case one fell in the others could rescue the men. The police helicopter would return along with its sister copter. Everything, of course, depended on good weather and clear visibility.

First light was at five twenty. By five forty-five Nathan could see the distance and realize that he was only maybe a mile from shore, from Canada. Over the course of almost twenty-four hours, on one Snickers bar and lots of snow, he had walked the equivalent of a marathon, twenty-six plus miles, and had walked all the way across the lake.

The clear day with eighty percent visibility made the search effort much easier than the day before. Within thirty minutes of sunrise the first helicopter found the floating bodies of two of the snowmobile riders. A half-hour later the other two men were also found and retrieved. They were blue and frozen stiff. Once everyone returned to shore Bill decided to call off the search for Nathan. They would look for his body when the lake thawed in March.

Nathan walked ashore in a new country on a new day with, appropriately, a new outlook. Safely on land, he turned around and looked back at the lake wondering what in the world he was thinking the morning before. His stomach grumbled. He untied the scarf from around his face, held it in his hands a moment, and then released it, letting the wind slowly take it out to the lake.

At that moment, in all the world, Nathan Huntington was probably the luckiest man alive. The lake was indeed not frozen over for in spots too numerous to count Nathan had walked in the complete darkness across frozen paths no wider than a sidewalk. Three feet to the left or right, a single strong gust of wind in either direction, and he would have cracked through the ice and froze to death.

His long walkabout over, he walked into the small town that just happened to be before him, and when he saw the big red sign he made a beeline for Eddie's boxcar diner. He sat down at the counter and sighed deeply as every muscle in his body relaxed.

"You look tired," the waitress smiled. She poured him a cup of coffee.

"What's your biggest breakfast special?" asked Nathan.

"That would be the Lake Effect: three eggs, three bacon, three sausage, three pancakes, home fries, toast or English muffin, juice, and coffee."

Nathan chuckled to himself. "That'll be fine."

"How do you want your eggs?"

"It doesn't matter. Surprise me."