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A Fugitive from the Law
Kathleen Lilly

The mailbox had no name - just numbers, hand-painted and faded and covered with snow. The driveway was one-eighth of a mile long and narrow, with deep ditches on both sides. Of course there were no vehicles in it - a “fugitive from justice” had no business owning a car. That would only draw attention, and besides that, where would he go? The more places he went, the more people he would meet, and with every new acquaintance came a chance of being found out. So Van would remain, at least until this whole mess was straightened out, carless and friendless.

The winter of '77 was long and cold - in the month of January the temperature stayed below freezing for thirty days straight. Without a glimpse of the sun, the snow piled up, and at night the Hunger Moon illuminated the landscape, and the Great Lake remained frozen and ominous. The small cottage sat on a bluff right on the lakeshore, all windows facing the lake, as if the place had been built before the roads came in. With the long driveway and heavily wooded area all around it, the house was not visible from the road. It was the summer vacation home of the landlord, who lived far away, so it was furnished, complete with dishes, pots and pans, and even food. The place was secluded, the rent was paid up through the winter, and in many ways it was the perfect place to hide out.

They were married on January the twenty-sixth, by coincidence the same day that Dina's parents had been married, all those years ago. They bundled up and walked hand in hand down the snowy driveway to be picked up at the corner by a cabbie who they had given a fake name and address. He drove them to the courthouse in the next county where Van would not be found out. The ceremony was “short and sweet” - the judge had postponed his fishing trip by a few hours already to perform the service and was in no mood to make small talk. Because two witnesses were required, her parents had to be told. They had questioned the wisdom of marrying a man who was “on the lam,” but dutifully showed up anyway, with two bags of groceries and a ride home as a wedding gift. The newlyweds paid the cabbie and the judge with a rubber check and off they went.

Later, back at the house, Van got drunk on a whole bottle of tequila left behind by the previous tenants, slammed into the china cabinet and knocked it over, breaking all the landlord's crystal glassware inside, and then passed out. Somehow the broken glass was like an omen, and Dina cried herself to sleep on her wedding night. She didn't really know why she had married him anyway, except for the fact that he had asked, reasoning that if he did get caught and end up back in court, they might go easier on him if he had a wife. She always was one to help out a needy cause.

Having done this before, Van had the fugitive lifestyle down to a science. He had few possessions - just a change of clothing and no personal belongings of any kind. No wallet, no identification, not even one photo - one pair of shoes and one coat. His clothes were kept folded in a cardboard box that fit under the bed, so if the police came with a warrant the box could be hastily stashed, and explained away as being forgotten by the former tenants. Laundry and dishes were kept up with diligence to hide the fact that more than one person was living there.

The living room had a red brick fireplace with a false front made of wood that was used to cover the opening and keep the brutal wind from the lake from making its way into the house when the fireplace was not in use. The piece of wood was painted just like the red brick and looked almost real. They discovered that if he scrunched himself up real good, long legs drawn up and knees under chin, Van could fit in the fireplace and hide if need be. They practiced a
few trial runs, timing themselves on how fast the wooden insert could be removed and replaced with him inside. He would come out covered with black soot every time and they would have a good laugh over that.

In the early Spring there was a thaw - the driveway became passable and one day the police came around asking questions. Seems the cabbie had become suspicious when the check they had given him bounced, and ran his mouth to the cops. Somehow the hapless couple had been traced to the lakefront cottage. Dina held them at bay the first time by answering all questions at the front door, but she knew they would be back with a search warrant to come inside. Extra care was taken to make sure it looked like she lived there all alone. Laundry became a major issue - if she was washing his clothes, he was wearing her tattered blue terrycloth robe, so that the same clothes could be put back on immediately after laundering. They would look through the dirty laundry for evidence of a man living there, he assured her; and he knew what he was talking about.

Two more times they came back, asking more questions and nosing around, the second time with a search warrant and drug-sniffing dogs. Van barely made it into the fireplace in time, and he was curled up in there so long, when he came out he could hardly walk. It was enough to fray a woman's nerves, and Van was about to jump out of his own skin.

Besides the front door, the cottage had another door, out the back, facing the lake. The door looked like it was an afterthought; it opened to a drop-off of about three feet, like someone had meant to put on a back porch with steps or a deck someday, but never got around to it.

As the days grew warmer, Van watched the icy lake melt away, and prayed for the temperature to rise. If they came looking for him again, this time he would bolt out the back door and run as fast as he could to the bluff, where he would take a flying leap into the lake. That stretch of time he did in County Jail had left a taste in his mouth so bitter, he knew he could swim and swim, and keep on swimming until he made it all the way to Canada.