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Pierre's Snowstorm

(Approximately 2,500 words)

Wine spilled over the fountain's low cement wall as Pierre steadied himself against it. He swayed a little, surprised by the splash of his drink hitting the dry ground. The slick rubber of his wet suit slipped beneath him, and he fell clumsily, end over end into the empty basin beyond. Over the far edge he could only barely see the top of his truck, still running and covered in beach sand. His diving equipment was strapped to the roof and his father's rusty old helmet peered over at him.

A sudden belch shook his limp form, jerking his vision directly upward. There, standing above, watching over the town that had forgotten him stood the image of his father. The once-great mariner had been a hero, but now his name commanded only the memory of an old fountain in the town square, broken and dry as his legacy.

"Isn't it my luck? I finally get something right, and you're not even here to see it," he said. He lay quietly for a moment, enjoying the notion that he wouldn't be pitiful Pierre anymore. *A laughing stock finally succeeds*, he thought. *A lesser son redeemed*.

Beyond his father's beautiful bronze figure, the weather grew darker. Ribbons of dark gray hid most of the stars. He gazed up into them. For a few moments, the gathering clouds swallowed all of his mistakes. Each disappearing speck of light took another bit of shame away. Once the last was gone, Pierre fell asleep, his shiny right flipper hanging over the fountain wall.

A tiny white flake landed silently on his chest, and so began the first snowstorm his town would ever see.

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Out on the beach, Pierre's small life boat was almost entirely out of the water. The tide had fallen and now only the strongest waves lapped against the stern of the vessel. The snowfall that fell softly further inland was followed by a dark and deepening storm from the sea.

The lifeboat sat near the end of the beach, just before the sand met the rocks of a long jetty extending out from the town, sinking into the sea. Straight out into the water, several hundred yards from the lifeboat sat Pierre's old dive ship. The snowflakes landing on the water around it hardly left ripples in the sea's growing swells.

Empty wine bottles and beer cans rolled rhythmically back and forth with the rocking waves, and the clouds sent their stormy gusts whisking over the deck. The snowfall thickened and the waves gathered strength from the approaching squall. The roll and crash of tin and glass against the ship woke the two drunken sailors inside.

"Where's Pierre?" Jon asked, wiping his eyes as he searched for his captain. By now the waves were so strong that their bedside pictures had fallen to the floor. "Well, that's a nasty storm, isn't it?"

"When did he go?" Edward's raspy voice slurred as he spoke.

"I'm not sure." Jon walked to the cabin door and surveyed the scene outside. "The lifeboat's gone, so he must have rowed in," he said, rubbing his aching head. The door to a locker beneath the dive equipment swung open as the boat rocked. "And he took the damned helmet with him."

"Leave it Pierre to lose the one thing we came her for. We're going to have to pull up anchor. It's blowing hard out here."

“I doubt we’ll find our way to shore in this god damn-”

The boat lurched, and Edward threw a hand against the wall to brace himself. “He better not try to row back in this or he’ll drown.”

At that, the wood of the hull let out a shriek and the boat shuddered. Edward launched into the wall. Jon fell back to the floor, crashing about among the bottles. They both rolled out the cabin door.

At once the commotion ceased, and the boat was as still as the rocky shore.

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Pierre woke to the clanging of metal and the scream of a teapot. A man marked with late stubble and wearing a filthy coverall crashed clumsily around his kitchen, paying little mind to the waking diver on his living room couch. Pierre looked toward the window to find his bearings, but felt even more disoriented. He was sure he’d been taken away, far outside his sunny, southern fishing town. Snow fell steadily outside.

“You up already? You were out cold when I found you.” The man from the kitchen had entered the living room with a steaming bowl of soup. He was the local tow-truck driver, who Pierre regretted having dealt with several times before. Pierre’s notorious mistakes often required such assistance. He set the bowl down beside Pierre, right next to his neatly stacked flippers.

“Ralph.” Pierre still felt little drunk and even more confused by the weather. “What is going on out there?”

“It’s a blizzard! Started coming down just after dark, hasn’t stopped blowing in since,” Ralph said. “Looks like it’s coming in off the water and heading inland. I just hope it doesn’t hang around.”

“But it never snows here...” Pierre rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the man before him. “How did I get here?”

“I fished you out of the old fountain in town. You looked like you’d been having a nightcap with your old man. Your truck was running in the street, so I hauled you back here before the snow hit us too hard. You’re lucky I found you.”

Pierre immediately remembered the fountain. *That’s right*, he thought. After the others fell asleep he’d stolen away to see his father. Then, with a rush of cold shock, he realized- *the others*.

Jon and Edward were still out there. “Jesus. It’s coming in off the water, you say? Where’s my truck?”

“Son, you’d have a time getting anywhere right now. The roads are snowed over, and you were tanked when I found you,” Ralph reminded him. “You can’t be sobered up yet.”

“You don’t understand.” Pierre panicked. “I have to get out there.”

“What’s your hurry? It’s a damned snowstorm.”

“I have to make sure they got in before the storm.” Pierre made for the door.

“Who? You’re not making any sense.”

“My friends are still out on the water. If they didn’t get in and this wind is worse on the water, that old dive boat won’t make it,” Pierre explained.

A gust blew open the window. Ralph rushed over to close and latch it. “Well you can’t drive. You’ll never make it there in your state. I’ll have to drive you. We’re taking your truck, though. I’m not risking mine out there.”

They got into Pierre’s truck and made their way across town, fighting strong gusts

and low visibility. The storm had set in quickly. Layers of snow were stacked on the tops of the cars in the street and on the roofs of the houses. The entire town was transformed by white streaks and shivering winds. The usual tan and brown of the clay buildings was hidden beneath the dirty gray of the night's early setting, which blended with fresh falling blankets of snow.

"Drive down to the inlet. My boat is out there." Pierre shivered in the cold truck. His wet suit was dry but it didn't provide much insulation from the snow.

The truck slid and slipped across the icy streets, kicking up loose snow as it went. Each time they rounded a corner the wheels skidded, and Pierre moaned as his stomach swirled, but hardly spoke otherwise. Ralph eventually broke the silence.

"What were you diving for? And how did you end up in the middle of town if your boys are still out on the boat?"

"We were diving for my father's old helmet. The one he always wore. The helmet people would remember," Pierre said. By now he didn't care about his earlier goals. He just wanted to know his friends were safe. He wanted to know that, after a lifetime of screw-ups, he hadn't just made the biggest mistake yet.

"Out by his wreck on the rocks?" Ralph seemed impressed. Those weren't the safest waters, and those were the very rocks that claimed Pierre's father.

"That's where we're anchored; right above my father's ship," Pierre answered quietly. The discussion was beginning to wear on him. The snow outside was so isolating that he felt they'd never get to the water.

"Well, did you get it?" Ralph corrected his steering when he noticed his attention had drifted from the road.

“It’s on top of the truck.” Pierre slowly rapped his fist on the roof above him. A momentary pride set in at the thought. He’d found it. He’d rescued it from the depths, and he’d found some success of his own. The sensation ebbed, though, as it gave way to the overpowering guilt and worry of the moment.

A patch of ice in the road sent them into a spin, and Ralph jerked the wheel to regain control. They each held their breaths as the wheels spun, the snow around them twirled, and they crashed sideways into the town’s old broken fountain.

The statue of Pierre’s father tilted from its base, twisted in the wind and snow, and landed heavily on the icy road.

After checking that he and Pierre were not injured, Ralph leapt from the driver’s seat to examine the wreck. The fountain was destroyed, as was much of Pierre’s truck. The old rusty helmet sat crumpled and twisted on the ground. He let out a heavy sigh, as if he blamed himself for the ice on the road, or the truck’s blunder.

Pierre climbed from the truck and saw Ralph staring at the helmet. Too hurried to bother with his scattered equipment, he scrambled to find the correct road through the snow. He called back to Ralph as he went.

“Go find help! I’m sorry to leave you, but I have to find the others!” Pierre took off through the storm, fighting the wind and the cold. Ralph, the fountain, and the twisted trophy of his only success became ghostly silhouettes in a flurry of raging white.

Pierre fought hard, running with his hands before his face to block the sting of the snow that whipped around. He followed the road as best he could, barefoot and freezing, to the inlet. He could barely see where the water met the land, and his lifeboat was buried beneath a lump of snow. He ran along the beach but he saw no dive boat anywhere on the

sand.

He carefully made his way out to the rocks and hugged the edge of the shore as long as he could. The ground beneath him was sharp and wet. His hands and feet were completely numb, so he crawled out to the farther side of the long rock jetty that bordered the inlet. As he went he began to see splinters in the water. A wine bottle crashed on a rock below him as the waves swept in and broke over his legs.

At last, through the snow, he caught sight of the stern of his boat. It was angled up and out of the water, still as the rocks on which he crawled. He frantically hastened his pace, slipping on the slick rocks and cutting his bare skin as he went. He didn't care that he couldn't feel his hands. He didn't care that he might freeze. The sight of the broken ship was confirmation of his worst fear.

When he got there, he grabbed the side of the boat and pulled himself up to look at the deck. A rock shot straight in from the side of the craft, holding it steadily in place.

Pierre climbed onboard and edged around the wreckage to the cabin. He swung the door open, fearing the worst. Inside he saw nothing. Not the horrible sight he'd feared or the wonderful one he'd hoped for. Just an empty cabin and a stack of bottles and cans on the floor. He fell to his knees and wept out of frustration and fear.

Gathering himself, he turned around and headed onto the deck. Out to sea, through his freezing tears, he could see clear early morning skies. The storm would soon pass and this nightmare would end. He wiped his eyes and looked around for any trace of his friends.

Through the thinning snowfall he could make out a groove in the jetty. Two large rocks came together at a point to make an opening at the bottom. He made his way

toward it, climbing over broken boards and bottles, and stopped. There, huddled beneath the rocks, he found Jon shivering, teeth chattering.

“Jon! Thank God!” He screamed over the waves. Jon’s eyes were closed tightly, and he didn’t seem to hear Pierre’s voice.

Pierre’s search continued, climbing on sharp rocks with broken feet. He willed his thoughts from the pain and the cold. Looking around in the windy water, he spotted Edward washed onto some rocks at the end of the jetty. He rushed out, all energies focused on saving his friend. He pulled Edward’s freezing body from the sea and carried him back to the rocks where Jon was huddled and crawled inside.

Edward’s shaking told Pierre that he hadn’t yet lost a friend, and resolved not to let that change. He wasn’t sure he could keep them warm enough to save them, but he was determined to try. He was freezing and shaking, but he collected his friends in his arms and laid himself across their bodies to shield them from the winds and waves. The legs of his wetsuit were shredded, and he was bleeding streams of diluted red from the wounds beneath the torn rubber.

When he finally became too weak to cover them anymore, the storm had passed and the sun was rising. He rolled over to feel the warmth of the sun. Staring out to sea, lying next to his sleeping friends, Pierre’s unease about his failure ebbed. His eyes closed, his limbs halted their shaking, and his broken, blood-drained body gave in to the cold of the ocean.

A few hours later, Jon woke and collected Edward, still unconscious and shaking. They made their way in across the inlet shores, slowly and carefully. They carried the now cold and limp Pierre. His dangling hands and feet were badly slashed and broken,

but bleeding no more. On the beach they were greeted by an entire party of rescuers who had been led to the scene by a snow soaked tow truck driver.

The following weeks were filled with flying rumors and tall tales about Pierre's sacrifice and how he saved his brave crew. The stories about his father even began to resurface, and the broken helmet became an immediate legend.

A year later the town's broken fountain was replaced. The new statue atop it featured a father and his son looking out to sea, and aged, damaged diver's helmet at their feet.