I reach Snoqualmie Pass on Sunday afternoon. Snow has been falling intermittently throughout the day and there are wide, lighted signs along the highway that read Caution, Mountain Pass. Traction Tires Required. I am 22 years old, newly divorced, and driving back to the Pacific coast after visiting my family in eastern Washington. I've driven this route dozens of times before but this is the first time I will be crossing it in winter.

Snoqualmie Pass is the widest and most traveled pass across the Cascades. More than 27,000 cars drive across the mountains on Interstate 90, a broad roadway that stretches from Seattle to Boston, the longest interstate highway in the United States. I-90 nearly bisects Washington state, providing a route for travelers coming from the populous west side to the resorts and hunting destinations in the eastern interior.

My hometown of Moses Lake sits directly in the middle of the Columbia Basin, a wide, arid plateau that extends from the Cascades in the west to the Rockies in the east. The area is sparsely populated, mostly used for farmland and hunting. Despite numerous irrigation projects, the basin remains incredibly dry and hot in the summer and blisteringly cold in the winter. Most of the yearly precipitation comes in the form of winter snows. I remember storms that were so bad that my family had to exit our house through the windows and dig paths to the doors through ten foot snow drifts. I know how to drive in the snow, how to slow down but not so slow that the car gets stuck in drifts, and I know that, despite what driver's education teachers say, one should turn against a skid, but only enough to straighten the car out and not so much that it fishtails. These things have become second nature to me and I approach Snoqualmie with confidence, eager to return home.

Snoqualmie Pass today bears little resemblance to the impassable track that it was 150 years ago. Then it was nothing more than a horse trail, avoided by wagon trains for the easier Oregon Trail and forgotten by railroaders in favor of the broader plains to the south. Now the divided highway widens shortly after the tiny town of Cle Elum into four lanes, winding among gentle slopes that ascend in stages across the Cascades. The yellow and brown scrub brush and prairie grass of the basin falls away to be replaced by stately Douglas fir and Ponderosa pine. The green is a shock after being so long in the arid colorlessness of the inland region. Even covered in snow, the Inland Empire is mostly flat and featureless. Now, the Cascades rise above me, gray basalt cliffs covered in evergreen and emerald and sage. Even the snow cannot disguise the verdancy of this land. I am reminded of Persephone passing from Hades into the riotous green welcome of the world above.

Traffic begins to slow as the flurries that have dogged my trip become real snowfall. I tightly grip the wheel of my 1983 Toyota Starlet. I am fiercely proud of my little car because it is the first vehicle I have bought with my own money, the first thing that is really mine. The radio, which I have kept tuned to NPR for the last three hours, turns to static and I switch it off. The snow is quiet. Along the roadside are wide tracts of new fall, untouched by footprints, making the world look new-born. The cars that pass me are slowing as ice begins to accumulate upon the road, dirty brown slush cut through with tire tracks. The brown and white meet at the edges of the road, and the brown plastic mile markers soon become the only delineation between lane and shoulder.

The snow is falling faster and thicker now, cocooning my little red Toyota so that it seems like it is the only car on the highway. I am forced to slow down in order to see where I am going and to keep the windshield wipers on full blast. The steady back-and-forth is the only sound: swish-swish, swish-swish.
have become so used to the constant chatter of news that, without the radio for company, I find the silence eerie. I pull into the rest stop ahead, the last one before the pass, and am heartened by the dozen other cars I see there.

I don a scarf and gloves before leaving the bubble of warmth in the car. The cold hits me like a fist as soon as I step outside. The snow, which appeared stationary when I was driving, is actually being driven by a stiff wind that rips the breath from my lungs. I shake the hair out of my face and scurry for the cover of the squat, brown brick rest stop. A handful of women wait there, swathed in layers of sweaters, coats, gloves, hats. They are a cluster, huddling in the lee of the building.

"Is there a line?" I ask the woman nearest me, gesturing to the bathroom. She nods, breathing out a plume of warmth that fogs the air around her face.

"Cold out here," she observes.

"Oh yeah!" I agree heartily and her broad face breaks into a grin.

I go to the concession stand where local charities accept donations from worn travelers in exchange for coffee and cookies. I am in luck—there is no line and hot tea, which I prefer to coffee, is being served. The old women behind the counter hands me a Styrofoam cup and I hold it between my hands, the warmth soaking through my gloves. I dig through my coat pocket, looking for some change to add to the donation basket, as I ask, "Have you heard anything about the pass?"

The woman nods, her grey hair flopping down from inside the knitted purple beret she wears. "Chains required on the summit," she says, "but may be closed in another hour or two."

"Really?" asks a man with black hair standing near the corner of the stand.

The old woman nods and he whistles to himself in the queer way that eastern Washington farmers sometimes do—lower lip sucked in between his teeth on a low, descending note. "Well, I best turn around then," he says. He kicks at the snow with leather-tooled cowboy boots, looking glum.

"Where are you heading?" I ask.

"Was going to Seattle to get my wife a birthday present. But I guess maybe I'll go to Spokane instead," he says.

I nod. I know that there are no good shopping malls between Seattle and Spokane. "I just came from Moses Lake and the roads were good there. Not even snowing."

The man gestures to the heavens to indicate the perversity of the weather and the old woman and I both laugh. I nod goodbye to them, adding a quarter and three dimes to the collection dish, and decide to skip the bathroom. The pass closes for avalanche control at least once a year, leaving travelers stranded for hours and sometimes even days in the tiny, overpriced hotels that dot the ascent. Once, as a teen, I rode a Greyhound bus from Moses Lake to visit a friend in Seattle and was forced to stay two extra days due to pass closures. I loved the city so much that one night, in a fit of desperation, I packed my car and moved there. Seattle is my oasis, freedom from the small-town that my divorce had made inevitable. Freedom too from dependence on my disapproving family. Such a nice man, they would say of my ex. Why couldn't you make it work? They mean well but they want me to be something I'm not—a happy Hestia instead of the Artemis I am.

I settle into the driver's seat and flip through the stations on the radio again. Really I am just killing time, pretending to think through a decision I've already made. I did not want to have to turn around and make the two hour trip back to my parent's house. Always stubborn, I now decided to push on, weather be damned.
The couple in the car next to mine must have come to the same conclusion. The tall blonde driver gives me a jaunty wave as he backs his red SUV out of its space and drives down the ramp onto the interstate. I follow behind, using the red hatchback like a beacon to guide me. Either he'll lead me off the road or we'll make it through together, I think.

Such is the camaraderie of the road.

We begin the slow ascent, he with his four wheel drive and me, trying to keep up in my tiny Toyota. The snow is coming so fast now that I am trying to drive in his tracks and I can see, in the rearview mirror, the cars behind me doing the same, like a row of ducklings following our mother. Braver drivers pass our caravan in the left lane, SUVs full of Seattle drivers that don't know that snow means 'slow down.' The ditch beside the road is soon full of cars like these, drivers that have spun out or collided as they changed lanes—the casualties of snow. These cars serve as a warning that our caravan heeds, slowing down even more, barely crawling along now as we make it up the first, winding ascent to in a relatively flat, broad stretch of road.

Up ahead a sign announces, Chains Required, Chain up zone 50 feet ahead. Dozens of cars have turned off onto the wide shoulder, heavily muffled men tromping irritably from the driver's side to the trunk pulling out boxes that held chains. Just as many stand staring at the sign and shaking their heads. These are the ones who will turn back and spend the night in a hotel. I pull over, bidding goodbye to the red SUV and the ducklings, which keep on my gloves

My mother purchased chains months ago as part of an emergency travel kit she gave me after my divorce when I'd moved to the coast, needing to get away from everything I knew and just out.

"If you're going to be driving across these mountain passes, you should be prepared," she said, pressing a cardboard box full of things like a tire jack and flares into my arms. "God knows you don't have a husband to help you anymore!" I rolled my eyes, ignoring the crack about my singlehood, and mouthed 'paranoid' at my sister, who snickered. It was a well-known fact that my mother never drove anywhere alone after dark because she thought it was too scary. It figured she'd make a big deal out of this too.

Now I silently thanked my mom for her forethought, watching the car nearest me, a green Honda Civic, as the driver laid a length of silver chain on the snow in front of each tire, then slowly inched the car forward on top of the chains, then getting out to attach them to the wheels. It looks easy. I get out, the wind instantly pummeling me as I struggle to the rear of the car, pulling a black plastic box out of the trunk and snapping it open. Long coils of chains spill out and I turn the box over and dump them out onto the maroon carpet of the trunk, untangling them with clumsy, gloved fingers. After a few minutes, the mess resolves itself into four sections of chain, each two strips of heavy metal links about four feet long, attached by a ladder of thinner links. I brave the wind and snow again to lay a strip of chain in front of each tire, then inch the car forward. Finally, I get out and kneel down in the snow, stretching the chains around each tire and lashing the ends together with the hooks that come with the set. Satisfied, I get back into the warm car, discarding my soaked gloves and waiting my turn to pull out onto the freeway. See mom? Nothing to worry about.

As I begin to drive, the chains make a steady thump-thump-thump noise as they hit the ground, rocking the car with a peculiar rhythm. I watch the cars in front of me cutting paths through the snow on the roadway, kicking up trails of white behind them. Traffic is beginning to move faster now, bolstered by the extra traction from the chains and the thought that we are only 20 miles from the summit. I speed up too, listening to the thump-thump-thump of the chains on the pavement and feeling pleased with myself for...
putting them on without help. Unlike my mother, I am not afraid of the snow or the dark. I can survive on my own.

But, as I hit the next ascent, I hear the jangle of chains and then a horrible metal-on-metal scrape. My car abruptly lurches towards the median and I correct quickly, barely missing a semi barreling past me in the left lane. The tepid rest stop tea that I’d forgotten to drink sloshes onto my leg and I curse, feeling my heart jump into my throat. I turn on my hazard lights and coast onto the shoulder, parking behind an 18-wheeler. I get out into the ankle deep snow, neglecting my soaked gloves and bend to survey the damage. The chains that I had so carefully installed have come apart, wrapping themselves around the front and rear axle. I groan, kneeling in the snow and wondering how I will ever get them unwound and back on the tires now.

“Looks like you put those on wrong,” a voice says from behind me. I turn to find the trucker from the 18-wheeler squatting near the passenger side front tire. He is wearing a black coat with ‘Swift Transportation’ embroidered in red thread on its breast and, underneath, ‘Ernie.’

“Yeah,” I affirm dryly. I lay my forehead against the cold, dirty wheel well.

“I can get these on right for you,” he says, already half under the car.

I perk up. “Really?”

A muffled grunt from under the car is my only reply. A few minutes later, Ernie climbs out, and, with a rasp, pulls the chains from beneath the car. He shakes them out with a practiced flick of his wrist. “Pull forward a little,” he says and I get in and follow his hand signals.

“See, the problem is that most people don’t cinch ’em tight enough,” Ernie tells me, a Southern drawl appearing in his words. “You gotta really pull ’em hard and then clip ’em up.” He demonstrates on the tire nearest him.

“Thank you so much,” I say sincerely as he lashes the last one. “Really, you saved my life.”

He shrugs and looks away, as if embarrassed by my thanks.

“Ain’t nothing,” he says. “I got a young daughter your age and I’d hate to think of her, stranded out in the snow.”

I smile at him, thanking him again and waiting until he pulls out before I get back into my car. As I drive I think of the many times I have driven this road in the year since I moved to Seattle, ignoring the hundreds of people around me, safe in my own little world. Since my divorce I have been trying hard to prove to my family and to myself that I can survive on my own. I have forgotten how essentially good people can be.

I notice the red SUV from the rest stop pull out behind me. We drive across Snoqualmie Pass together.