

# Cold as Hell

Story by Michael C. Heffernan

John Drover woke and the world was red. The emergency lights had gone on and it looked as if the place had been painted in blood. After a valium and two cocktails he'd fallen asleep for hours. He knew because the plane had landed. Rubbing his eyes he looked up and down the rows of seats. They were all empty. Oxygen masks dangled down from above like snakes. Up at the front the seatbelt indicator flashed at regular intervals. Blinds were drawn down over all of the windows. It was cold, too. He could see his breath form in thick plumes out in front of him. Goose flesh covered his arms. His teeth began to chatter like Morse code.

"Hello," John called out. There was nothing. The air was still and quite. Rubbing his arms, he got up from his seat and went down the aisle. The stewardess' station was neat. Bottles of liquor and plastic cups were staked on a trolley. Small red towels were there. Stenciled on them was American Airline's slogan: "We know why you fly with us!" John opened the bathroom door. It was small and cramped. He could smell disinfectant. A roll of toilet paper was still in plastic rap on the spool.

Someone had cleaned it recently. He knocked on the cockpit door. His knuckles made a hollow sound on the fiberglass. "Is anyone in there?" No one answered.

Turning the knob, John found that the door was open. It was dark inside and empty. On the console the autopilot indicator was solid yellow. A thick sheen of frost covered the windows, making it impossible to see out.

A mixture of fear and confusion began to creep around in his stomach. He was sweating despite the cold. When he had left for Las Vegas it had been the first week of September. There was no way that it was this cold this early. We've landed in Canada, he told himself. But he'd never been informed of a stopover. The airline was going to get an earful, he was sure of that. His lawyer was hear about it, too.

He'd told Margaret that the trip was for work. Truth be known, he just wanted to get away from her. For the past year John had kept an extra Visa in his desk

at work. The bills were sent to a P.O. Box downtown that she didn't know about. He'd paid for the trip to Las Vegas with it. Gambling wasn't his thing. Sure, he'd sat at the blackjack table for a while and had lost a few hundred. But that was pennies for the big boys. During the week, he'd spent maybe two or three evenings all told at the hotel bar - sitting, drinking. Three prostitutes had solicited him. At first he'd felt a little anxious and ashamed.

The only woman he had slept with in the last six years was his wife, and since then he'd felt uncomfortable when an attractive woman would come on to him.

Really, all that had held him back was getting caught, and once he'd convinced himself otherwise he was eager to for it. After a few drinks he'd approached one of them who was still in the hotel casino playing the slot machines.

She wasn't some highway street hooker though - thirty for half and half, straight up - and she didn't come cheap. But for once, during the forty-five minutes he had spent with her, there were no worries about how Margaret was doing or if she'd want him at the house tonight. Not one single thought of her had come to mind. Not for a single solitary second. It was a relief. If you'd ask John he'd say that it was worth it, every last goddamned penny of it.

Towards the end of last winter - it had been a late Saturday morning and they were both in bed reading the paper - Margaret had told him that she was pregnant. Two months along by her calculations. At first it had been wonderful news. He'd always wanted a child. It never mattered to him whether it was a boy or a girl. They'd been fighting off and on for a little over a year - sometimes he'd spend so many nights sleeping in the office that he'd forget that he was married - and it seemed that the baby would change all of that. But then there had been the miscarriage. She'd been somewhere between five and six months along.

Margaret had woken one night with terrible cramps. Clutching at her stomach she ran to the bathroom. A few moments later she was screaming and

crying hysterically. John went in to find her weak and disoriented. Blood had been everywhere.

Their relationship quickly deteriorated beyond the point of no return after that. Margaret began to leave the apartment very infrequently and she quickly made the couch into her nest. She gained considerable weight and became increasingly irritable. Their sex life came to a standstill, not that it was much to begin with. At first he'd tried to console her and to be patient with her.

She'd have none of it. After a few months he grew tired of it and found that he hated the sight of her. "It was my baby, too," he'd told her. "If I can manage to put things together again, so can you." Two weeks after that he'd gotten the credit card and began to talk to women on the internet. It gave him some amount of satisfaction to know that women still found him desirable. But it felt hollow and detached and it quickly lost its novelty. It wasn't too long after that when he planned the trip to Las Vegas.

John opened the overhead compartment above his seat, and his luggage was there. He hauled it down. He opened a few adjacent to his own. They were dark and empty. He went up and down the aisle opening more of them. There was nothing.

Clapping his hands, the cold was starting to get to him. He felt numb all over. In his suitcase was his sports-coat. It helped little. Beneath the seats were smooth gray cotton blankets and he wrapped three around his shoulders like a shawl.

Maybe they've just forgotten me, he told himself. His pulse was running hard. Somehow he knew differently.

Up towards the front of the plane John tried the door. The stainless steel latch was icy. Pulling on it, the door slid out and across and a rush of bitter cold air flew at him like a wave. For a moment his breath was taken away, and a piercing white glare blinded him. John threw his hands up to cover his face. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. The runway was covered in a foot of fresh snow. The terminal was dark. Some of its windows were broken

out and doors were left hanging open. Patches of ice had crept up the side of the building. Drift was untouched and in some spots was as high as the roof.

The wind howled in between the empty hangers off to his left. The nose of an airplane stuck out from one. The windows were dark and it looked empty. The sky was heavy, gray and oppressive. The sun had been erased. It was going to snow again soon.

John made his way down the service ramp and trudged through the deep snow. It was up to his knees. Wearing thin soled leather shoes, his feet and ankles quickly began to burn with the cold. He pulled the blankets up around himself tighter. As he stepped inside the terminal, there was a haunting stillness to the air. Turning, there was a ragged path leading back to the plane and a waving line where he had dragged his small suitcase.

The terminal was a large tomb. John's shoes clapped loudly on the marble floor as he walked around. Luggage was scattered around and carts were tipped over. The kiosks had been ransacked. Magazines and chip bags were strewn everywhere. It looked like a riot had been through. Up behind the information counter, the electronic board that had once displayed flight times was black. There was a water fountain, too. It had frozen over. "Hello," he called out. "Is anyone there?"

Inside a black leather suitcase he found a pair of sneakers and some sports socks. He peeled off his own. Underneath his feet were pink and the hairs at the bottom of his legs stood up. There were a few cotton shirts and a sweater in another. They were warm but he knew they wouldn't last long out in the snow.

It took John twenty minutes to get to the other end of the airport. He'd tried a few trolleys along the way. Pressing down on the red ignition button, they were silent. The small electrical engines were all frozen through or the batteries were dead. He guessed that the cars sitting out in parking lot were like that, too. Either way, they wouldn't be able to get through the snow. He'd have to walk. It was a fifteen minute drive from the city when the traffic was at its best. Twenty miles, he guessed.

John had no idea how long it would take on foot. Frostbite was going to be a real problem. He was warmer now,

but outside it was different. First his clothes would soak through and then they'd freeze. His skin would begin to burn and then go numb. After that pieces of him would begin to peel off. Now, standing at the revolving glass doors of the entrance, he could see out past the highway to the city. John dropped his suitcase and stood there staring. His breath became short and ragged. His heart seemed to stop between beats. "...Jesus," he moaned.

The city looked desolate, as though a glacier was on the verge of erasing everything that man had created there. Cars were half buried in the parking lot and they were backed up for miles on the overpass. Some had plowed straight through the guardrails and had come down crashing on the street below. Others were piled on top of one another and smashed. Against the horizon he could see a dozen skyscrapers shattered and wrecked with their jagged walls reaching up like stalactites. Had the wind been that strong to rip them apart, he asked himself. In his mind he could see office furniture - desks, filing cabinets, computer monitors - falling from the sky like rain.

The streets would be clogged with deserted cars and debris. He then thought of Margaret. If she was out there somewhere he had to find her. Regardless of what had happened to them in the last year, she was still his wife. Maybe the blizzard had left the city no choice but to declare a state of emergency, he thought. Maybe she's safe inside somewhere. He wondered for a moment if he'd see arms and legs poking out from the snow like markers or ghost faces half-covered in white. He knew he wouldn't. Everyone was gone.

People had left things behind in their cars on the expressway. John had poked through some as he sat and rested. Baby car-seats, disposable coffee cups, rosary beads hanging from the rear-view mirror - they reminded him of old photo albums.

It was colder in them than outside though. But there was no wind, and he was thankful. There had been thousands of cars piled onto the highway in an uninterrupted ragged line of broken glass and twisted metal, but the city was worse. An endless sea of them had flooded the main roads and the sidewalks. Buildings had come down leaving mountains of debris. Piles of metal beams and broken brick were as large as houses themselves.

Some of the streets were chocked off and entire sections of the city were now completely impassable.

Telephone poles had been snapped in two, and electrical wires lay across the snow like black snakes. John had read somewhere once that crows were the harbinger of disease and death. He had half expected to see them lined up along the buildings, cawing to announce his arrival to the dead city.

But they were gone like everyone else. At the centre of the city most of the skyscrapers had been miraculously saved. With the power gone they were towering black monoliths. Walking across the tops of cars, the bonnets popped under his weight. A few still had their lights on and he could see their soft glow beneath the snow. They reminded John of some ghost car in a cheap drive-in movie racing through thick fog on a bending road. As he climbed up over them he expected to see pale blue faces, frozen in some ghastly death mask, staring up at him. But they were empty. Everything was empty. There was no life hear to speak of.

John had gone into a grocery store along the way. A pick-up truck had been heaved through the front doors and the back of it poked out like some crazy display. His stomach ached and he was getting weak. He had to eat. Most of the shelves inside were bare. What was left was smashed and strewn on the floor. He found a box of candy bars in the back storage room. They were frozen and hard as rock. He managed to chew threw one and stuffed his pockets full with the rest.

The newspapers and magazines up at the cash registers were silent about what had happened to the city or whether or not the rest of the state was like it, too. John quickly flipped through the New York Times. The front page covered the continued attacks by insurgents in Iraq, peace talks were finally underway between the Palestinians and Israelis and the Patriots had won the Superbowl, again. Half-way through he saw that the predicted forecast called for sunshine and light rain. John looked up at the top right hand corner of the front page. The paper was two days old.

For a moment he stood frozen like the cans of peas and bottles of busted orange juice on the floor. The paper fell from his hands, and a cold shiver ran up his spine. He found it hard to breath. Looking out at the street and the empty

dark cars his mind raced. Where has everyone gone? he asked himself. They couldn't have all just disappeared. There has to be a way to explain all of this. He ran out screaming in desperation.

"Hello!" His voice echoed horribly through the ruined city. "Please answer me, anybody!" There was no one.

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Standing on the hood of a Hyundai Sonata - at least he thought that's what it was, most of it was buried in snow - John checked his watch. Since the grocery store he'd been walking for an hour. The sky was getting dark. It would be night soon and much colder.

He guessed there were about a half dozen blocks between him and his apartment complex. But he really had no idea. Only a few of the buildings were recognizable. Most of the sign posts had been uprooted and flung across the city like pieces of a highway truck stop in a tornado. He was going on memory alone. He now knew what it was like for a blind man trying to make his way around his own home - bathroom ten steps from the couch and three right; kitchen twenty steps and four left; front door ten straight ahead. If anyone's left they'll be here he tried to convince himself. Apartment buildings lined the streets. Up above on the balconies sliding doors were open. Snapped clothes-lines hung down and whipped around in the wind. A few shirts clung to dear life. One read

"Jesus Saves!" Flour pots had crashed down onto the streets and plastic patio chairs were strewn about.

"Is there anyone left here?" John called out, cupping his mouth with his hands as he walked across the cars. "Hello, anyone?"

For a moment there was only the sound of his shoes crunching on the frozen snow. Thick white flakes were falling slow and long. There was a storm coming. Something rustled in one of the buildings. John turned and his eyes grew large. For a second he held his breathe so he wouldn't miss it if it came again. To him it had sounded like a kitchen table being pushed across a linoleum floor. It couldn't have been an animal. He hadn't seen a dog or a cat since he'd gotten to the city.

They were gone just like everything and everyone else.

"Wait there," someone called from the apartment building to his left. John looked up. "Please, I'll be there in a second." It was a woman. Her voice was anxious. Standing a dozen stories up and waving her arms frantically, she was like a dot.

From the moment she stepped out through the broken glass of the entrance, John could see her bulging stomach. She was young and had once been beautiful, but there was a darkness around her eyes that made her look old and used. Her face had a waxy appearance too and her skin hung from her cheekbones like wet linen. John figured she hadn't eaten much of anything in a week. It was obvious that she'd been living out on the streets. Women like her - pregnant - were the worst. Their bodies sick and their faces like shadows, they'd stand at the corners by the banks and the coffee houses begging for change.

Their clothes would be stained and dirty and hanging loosely around their bellies. Their hair was always matted and dirty like some old costume wig. In the summertime you could see the deep bruises running up their arms like black holes. When John and Margaret had first moved to the city he'd gone from horror and deep sympathy - he'd never imagined, having come from a small town, that this many homeless women were on the streets - to sheer revulsion that God had given them that precious gift which he'd robbed from him and Margaret. But there were fewer of them when it got cold and he was glad.

John didn't think much about that now. He stood there clutching at his suitcase breathing hard. He was just relieved to have found someone, anyone.

"Dear Christ, I thought I was the only one left," she said. "I stood up there for hours screaming out for someone. I was too scared to leave my apartment."

"Do you know what has happened to everyone?" he asked. His eyes were large and staring.

"No, I woke up this morning and everything was frozen over. I didn't hear a thing. How could this all happen without hearing a thing?"

"I guess we're in the same boat then. I was coming home from Las Vegas when I woke up and the plane had landed. The passengers had all dis-

appeared besides me."

"What did you see? Is it all like this?"

"There's nothing - just empty cars piled up and wrecked on the highway."

"The phones are all dead," she informed him. "Electricity is out, too."

"There were a few newspapers at a store back a few blocks," he said. "There was nothing in them. Maybe its only here that it's happened to."

"No, I think it's everywhere." She rubbed her belly with her hands in a circular motion. Her eyes were glistening over. They were bloodshot. She'd been crying. "Think there'll be people looking for us?"

John sighed. "I don't know. I just can't explain any of it. Maybe we're the only ones left. But we can't be the only ones. Millions of people don't just up and disappear overnight."

"I don't know. I don't know." Staring at the ground she cried and shook her head back and forth.

"You should come with me. It's best if we stay together. I'm going home and it's only a few blocks."

"Trying to find your family?" she asked.

"My wife."

"Think you'll find her?"

"...no," he said. "I don't think we'll find anyone."

"My name's Elizabeth Cozbi."

"John Drover."

Smiling, she looked down. For a moment he saw her teeth. They were dark gray and spotted with black. "This is Michael."

She looks sick, John thought. He hoped her baby was fine.

"How far along are you?"

"Five and a half months, I think"

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The cars started to thin out considerably on the side streets. But it was still slow going. Snow was up to their waste at times and the wind whipped around, picked up loose drift, and

lashed at their exposed skin. Neither of them had eaten much of anything. Elizabeth had said a few times that she needed to rest.

"Where are your family?" he asked her, digging one of his shoes out of the snow.

"I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to them in years now, since I came out here from New Jersey."

He hesitated for a moment.  
"Why did you come?"

The back door to a bar was open. Inside it was dark. A musty smell - rotten wood and wet carpet - came out at them. The windows up above were broken out and the roof had caved in. Long thick beams poked at the sky. Glass and splinters of wood were stuck in the snow all around them.

"I really can't remember," she said. Her voice was low and weak. "I dream that I was going to become something. Those were just dreams though, I guess."

"Was there anyone to help you?"

"It wasn't always like this. I worked for an escort service. My clients were rich businessmen. That's how I got the baby." Her voice was muffled beneath the thick wool scarf. There was a dark wet ring where her mouth was.  
"I couldn't bring myself to get an abortion like some of the other girls. Sometimes I wish I had though. It would have been easier. Do you have any children?"

"No," he said. "My wife - Margaret - and I lost our baby."

"I'm sorry."

He thought of Margaret with her soiled nightgown. Wet and sticky, it had clung to the skin of her stomach. Blood had been smeared all over the white tiles of the bathroom floor. He'd found her holding the bath trying to prop herself up. Her red hand prints were smudged all along the edge. The image of the slight bulge in her stomach was what he remembered most. He didn't revisit the memory often, and kept it put away in the hopes that some day he'd just forget. But John couldn't. He'd found their baby that had been growing inside Margaret lying at the bottom of the toilet. To him it looked like something rotten in a public stall. Seeing it had changed him, like a light had been

switched off inside.  
"So am I."

The young woman rubbed her belly and looked towards John. "I suppose you must think I'm a terrible person or something now?" She pulled the scarf down and ate a handful of snow.

"No. I don't really care either way. It doesn't make much difference what we've done, does it? Just look around you."

"Everything matters in the end, John," she told him.

The main entrance to his apartment complex and the ground floor windows had been buried in drift. Standing up to his waist in snow, it had taken John an hour to dig through with his hands.

Elizabeth had sat in one of the wrecked cars left in the middle of the road. She'd complained about cramps in her stomach once or twice along the way. John knew that if he didn't find some warm clothes and food neither of them would last long in this. It was twilight and much colder now. The snow had stopped but freezing rain had started up intermittently. Both of them had gotten soaked through. At first his legs felt like they were on fire. Now they were numb. He feared frostbite.

Inside past the front foyer it was dark. The only light that got in was from the windows of the apartment doors that hung open. The air tasted of spoiled meat. The hallways were cramped like coffins. It was suffocating and John felt his breathing get quick and short. An inch of water had frozen on the carpet.

Clothes, books and children's toys were stuck down into it. Dark brown patches had gathered on the ceilings forcing them to dip down. John figured that at some point the hot water boilers must have busted. The stairwell was solid black. Neither of them could see anything more than a few inches in front of them. Elizabeth had one hand on the railing and the other on John's shoulder as he guided her along.

"I'm not well, John," she told him as they climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. "There's a sharp pain running up my side. It's been there for a while now. I just didn't want to say anything to you."

"When we get to the apartment I'll find some aspirin. There'll be warm clothes and food there, too. Maybe we can

start a fire." His words sounded flat in the stairwell. John was anxious. He hoped that her baby was fine. Margaret had complained of the same pain the night they'd lost theirs. To be safe, she had wanted to go to the hospital. But John had told her that there was nothing to worry about. For months after that she had blamed him for it all.

That had been the trigger that had really ended things between them. But she had been right, hadn't she? If he had just gotten dressed like she'd asked everything might have been fine between them, whether they'd had the baby or not. He wouldn't have gone to Las Vegas then and he'd have been with her when the storm had come. Upstairs it was same: dark and frozen.

The doors to most of the apartments hung open. They were all empty. He was the third to the left. Inside everything had gone untouched. It was like he was staring at a photograph that had been taken of the place months ago. Magazines were neatly arranged on the coffee table, breakfast dishes were staked in the strainer and the vacuum was still plugged into the wall. John saw that Margaret's jacket was hung on the coat rack and her running shoes were on the doormat.

"Margaret?" John called out desperately. He put his suitcase down.

"Are you here?" It was quiet. He could hear the faint howl of the wind beat against the side of the building. The windows rattled in their frames. He went to the bedroom. The bed was made and the sheets were pulled down tight over the mattress and tucked in. Inside the closet her clothes were hung in neat order. Some of Margaret's things were scattered around on the dresser: perfume, a small wooden jewelry box he had given to her early in their relationship, an address book.

There was a picture of them from last Christmas stuck down in the corner of the mirror. They were smiling. John looked up at himself. His face was red and raw and his eyebrows were white and crusty. A whip of his hair that was stuck out had frozen onto the side of his hood. He looked like a stranger. It frightened him to see himself like it.

John wondered how much longer he could have stayed out in the storm. He guessed a few hours if he was lucky. Probably pass out first, he thought.

There was something dark and almost unrecognizable in his eyes. It was like a shadow had been cast over them. He'd seen it once before - when he'd been on the plane coming back. It was the last thing that he could remember before waking up. Sitting and staring out the widow, he had thought of what he'd done to Margaret. For weeks he'd been trying to convince himself that he needed to be away from her and that all she brought to him was misery. But while he was on the plane he'd felt weighed with guilt for having left her alone at a time when she had needed him most, when her life was coming down around her like a dark wave and the child that they had both dreamt of having was gone.

"John..." Elizabeth moaned from the living room. He rushed out. She was on the couch rubbing her side. Her breathing was quick and shallow. "I need some help here," she said. "Something's wrong."

"What is it?" he asked. "Is it the baby?"

"I don't know. I think so."

He went to his suitcase. Margaret's podiatrist had told her that some slight cramping was normal early on, but this was different. There wasn't much he could do for Elizabeth besides give her some painkillers and hope for the best. He always kept some on hand. They helped him sleep. The metal latches snapped as he undid them. Holding it against his chest, water began to pour out from the sides and down his pants. He let go. As it hit the floor it fell open.

He stepped back. His hands clutched at his mouth. His heart felt like it had been stuffed in his throat and was stuck half way down. He couldn't breathe. From inside a half-dozen dead eels spilled out and slid across the linoleum kitchen floor. They were long and oily. A few were at the bottom of one half of the suitcase and wrapped around one another in dark coils.

There were rotten fish there, too. Lying flat, their eyes were blank and their bellies were swollen out. John could smell the salt water off of them.

"What's happening?" he screamed. "None of this is right!"

Elizabeth was silent for a moment and then began giggling like a little school girl. "Poor John," she said softly. "We've been playing such terrible games with you."

He looked towards her. She was standing there half-naked. Her clothes were gone and she now had on an old blue faded nightdress. There was a design of a penguin on it playing in the snow and wearing a matching set of hat and mittens. The caption below read "Winter Fun." Margaret had worn one just like it. Dark thick blood was running freely down from between her white legs like a river. It made a wet dripping sound as it hit the floor. A pool of it was spreading out on the carpet. The front of her was covered in it and he could see her stomach sticking out.

"Some men love pregnant women," she said. "Don't you, Johnny?" His wife was the only who had ever called him that.

"Who are you?" he demanded. His voice was choked with tears. "What's going on here?"

"You've kept us entertained. We're so glad that you haven't remembered." Elizabeth bent over and reached up beneath her nightdress. Smiling and staring at him from the tops of her eyes, she groped with her hands. After a moment she held them up, and it was like she had dipped them in red paint. Sliding out between her fingers was a glistening mass of wet tissue. Steam came off of it like a hot pie. She let it fall to the floor. John stepped back. "Where is Margaret?" he cried.

"You know that you left her when she needed you most. Even when you deserted her she still wanted you. You're a pathetic and selfish man, Johnny. But you must know that by now."

He hit the wall as if he'd been struck and fell against the floor. "This is all a dream," he cried. "It is."

Elizabeth went and sat next to him and put her arm around him. She stroked his cheeks gently, leaving a fine trail of blood across his face. Her fingers were ice cold. "You died while you slept, Johnny. The plane hit the Atlantic and you drowned like the rest of the passengers. We're surprised you never figured it all out."

Images began to flash before his eyes like a slide show. It was like he was on the plane again. He could see himself sleeping. It shook violently as turbulence threw it around like paper. Passengers were in hysterics and crying. A baby wailed behind him. Someone was quietly praying close by.

Up at the front a stewardess banged on the cockpit door screaming. A red light flashed at short intervals and then went solid. Oxygen masks fell down from above the seats and swung around as people grabbed for them in desperation.

The plane then took a nose dive. Out the window the dark cobalt ocean was coming up hard and fast. There was a sudden jolt like he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. Then the images were gone as quickly as they had begun, and John was in the apartment again.

"You're being punished, Johnny. Over time, when we play this game some more, we'll get to know one another much better."

John tried to push himself back but she had her arms tight around his shoulders. The color in his face had drained. He could taste salt water in his mouth. "No!" he screamed. "You're not real!"

"In your heart you know it's all true, Johnny," she chided, whispering in his ear. "Who said hell couldn't be a cold place, anyway?"

