

touch my shoulder. I turned, thinking it might be one of the women, intent on apologizing, but there was no nail polish on the hand touching my arm. The hand was large and calloused, marked by raised splotches resembling coffee stains. A bearded man held my forearm; he called me “ma’am,” though it sounded like “Mom.” “I’ll watch over your pa,” he said before darting back to join his family.

I wonder what my father had wanted to tell me, but couldn’t, right before he’d boarded the plane. More of his classic lunch-box wisdom? “Learn all you can” or “Save your money” or “Don’t eat too much late at night”? More than twenty years later, as still I mourn, I wonder if he was trying to impart some eternal verity before his final flight home to Minneapolis. This would be the last time I saw him alert. Within a day Dad slipped into a coma. Within a week a fast-growing brain tumor took his life.

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Block Busters

BEFORE THE ALARM CLOCK GOES OFF, before the smell of coffee or bacon finds its way to your bedroom door, there’s often a sound outside your window that jolts you out of slumber during winter months in Minnesota. It’s the scrape of a snow shovel against wet cement. I know the sound so well. The thwack of the blade cutting through snow, the drag of metal across pavement, the thump of the payload landing somewhere on the lawn.

Thwack, swoosh, thud! Three steps in four-quarter rhythm, over and over, until the job is done. The thought sends an all-too-familiar ache through my shoulders. All the same, in my house as a child, I myself rarely awoke to the sounds of snow being shoveled. I listened to it going on outside my kitchen window while wolfing down Malt-O-Meal or scrambled eggs. You see, by the time the rest of the neighborhood began their collective assault on the snow, our walkway was already whistle clean. That was a point of pride for my father. When the Westvigs and the Murrays and the Bowmans and the Pratts ventured out of their stucco homes, they would look over and see that the sidewalk around Belvin and Betty Norris’s lot was already free of snow and ice. Dad would be in the house, sipping coffee, a self-satisfied grin on his face, tiny icicles still