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WISCONSIN

This article won third place in the Young Writers contest sponsored by the Milwaukee Journal in 1988. Charles Kuralt judged the contest.

'This is what fear looks like'

Writing honors are nothing new for third-place winner Catherine Stover of Waunakee. This. she says, is her fifth such award. In 1986, she won the Academy of American Poets award of excellence. A free-lancer, she writes fiction and poetry as well as prose. She's a 1982 UW—Madison graduate and earned her master's degree in creative writing last year at UWM, where she taught composition and creative writing. Of her prize-winning story, Kuralt says: "When Catherine Stover describes the fear, loneliness and pain of her experience, she makes the reader feel afraid and abandoned and tortured. You can't ask much more of a writer than that."

FEB. 12, 1986: The stars were sharp in an unfriendly sort of way. Lying on my back on the icy sidewalk, I kept thinking, *Those stars are too sharp.*

I closed my eyes when the wind blew, but I could still see flashes of raw-edged light cut across my eyelids like fireworks. Whenever I moved my right knee, it felt like broken glass was grinding into my veins. But I knew I *had* to move.

It was 10 below zero, my face felt raw and I was alone.

I thought about the newspaper article I'd read the day before: "Unconscious Woman Freezes on Sidewalk." She had fallen, hit her head and was dead when they found her.

What would the article say about me? "Woman on Way to Mailbox Falls, Wrecks Her Knee, Dies a Slow Death."

I wondered how long it would take to freeze to death. It was 8:30 and my husband, Mark, would be home from his night class in two hours. Having just arrived home from school myself, I was going to get the mail before fixing something to eat. Surely I wouldn't freeze in two hours, would I?

I wondered if someone would happen to drive by. But that was unlikely because not many people on our quiet street went out on cold nights like this. Besides, no one would see me. Between the street and me, three-foot snowbanks arched their backs. Covered with an icy glare from an ice storm a few days earlier, the snowbanks seemed to glow wickedly, with the moon's approval.

I wondered if someone would happen to walk down the sidewalk. Maybe a neighbor would have to take the dog out or get the mail. Our mailboxes lined the street like flags — and I imagined them waving in the wind, signaling hope. Then I wondered whether I was losing my mind. Who would go out to get the mail at this time of night except me?

I watched the way my breath hung in a quiet cloud. *This is what fear looks like,* I thought.

I REALIZED I was going to have to drag myself to my house. It meant going 15 yards, up two steps, then reaching the door handle. I tried moving my left leg. It was fine. My arms were fine. I would just have to sit up, put my hands behind me and scoot my body backward.

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Catherine Stover: "It was 10 below zero, my face felt raw and I was alone."

Brent Nicastro

I could bend my good knee and use that leg to push. It might hurt a little, I thought, but my knee is such a small part of my body, I can handle it.

First I had to sit up. I brought my arm back and was ready to lean on it when a bolt of pain shot through my body. As I fell back down, my lips felt instantly cold. I had bit my lower lip and the wind found the wet spot immediately.

I tried again. This time the pain hit me like a slap.

I would have to do better. Again I tried and this time a wave of wind and hot scraping pain knocked me back down.

I realized that I was breathing heavily. Cloudy breath swirled wildly above me. I closed my eyes and saw sharp stars float by that looked like fragmented kneecaps. I would never make it back to the house!

I opened my eyes so I wouldn't fall asleep. With the snowbanks hunched on either side of me, I thought of what it would be like to be buried alive in a grave — but covered with frigid air instead of dirt.

The full moon was touching everything with a white light, as though it were pleased. How could this be happening to me?

My thoughts kept returning to the woman who had frozen. I remembered that I had felt impatient when I read her headline. I did not want to read the facts about her life because it bothered me less when things like that happened to complete strangers. I didn't want to find out if she was my age or lived where I once lived or was in my line of work.

But many people love the shivers of nearly shared circumstances. What would the article say about me? "Catherine Stover, 27, of Waunakee, fell to her death yesterday evening on the sidewalk in front of her house."

Would the article say that I was a graduate student who taught writing courses at UWM, that I dreamed of writing The Great American Novel, that I was wearing a pair of new boots I had planned to have for many years?

Sighing, I looked at the toes of the boots. They looked as unscuffed and promising as they had in the store. I curled my toes — they were cold and hurt a little. Then I noticed that I must have dropped the mail when I fell. Scattered envelopes looked like absurdly large snowflakes. Is this how I will be remembered?

I picked up a large envelope and held it next to my face for protection from the wind. I listened to the other pieces of mail scrape along the sidewalk, drifting with the breeze. I wondered what would happen if we lost bills and letters and chances to win sweepstakes. Or if it would ever matter.

RESCUE

When I slipped and fell, the color I saw was black and the word I thought of was death. But now, trying to move my stiff toes, I refused to think about death or pain.

A normal person would scream, I thought, but I come from a long line of Norwegians who just bit their lower lips and frowned. The people I grew up with didn't cry in dark movie theaters or talk about "feelings." We didn't wince in front of dentists or walk around whistling. We never admitted we had headaches, but we took a lot of aspirin.

I didn't even want to think that I was afraid of dying. Instead of seeing my life pass in front of me, as they do on TV, I felt as though this moment was a focal point and all my dreams and hopes and plans were spiraling away from me, dissolving like steam. I had always worked as hard as I could to get things right. I had a lot left to do. I couldn't just lie here thinking I was doomed. I needed a distraction.

THEN I had an idea: I would stay alert and focus by reading the mail. I would read it out loud. I lifted the large envelope away from my face and held it so I could see by the moonlight. "You may be an INSTANT WINNER!" it said.

Suddenly, our neighbor's door opened and I saw Ron Anderson, a teenager, go down his steps. I felt a surge of blood rush through me.

"Help!" I shouted. "Help me!"

Ron turned and looked in my direction. He paused, then kept going straight to the street.

"Help!" I screamed again — my breath pouring into the air.

He turned around and started coming in my direction. "Is someone down there?"

"Yes! Help me! I can't get up!"

"I thought I heard something," he said, approaching me. What happened?"

"I smashed my knee. I thought I was going to freeze to death."

"Naw," he said. "Put your arms around my neck. We'll be in the house soon."

I awkwardly held onto the boy next door who had saved my life.

"Do you know I'm a volunteer in the Emergency Medical Service? I know what to do."

He half-dragged, half-carried me to the house. I occasionally hopped on my good leg. I could feel my right kneecap bounce around as though it wasn't attached to anything.

When we got into the house, Ron sat me up, put ice on my knee and called an ambulance. It took all my strength to write a note to my husband while my face felt like it was burning.

Soon the ambulance arrived and the rescuers pulled off my boot, cut open my nylons and put my leg in a splint. They took my blood pressure and it was double its normal reading.

When they carefully put me on a stretcher, I didn't scream, but I felt hot tears running down my face.

I wondered how I could cry in front of people I didn't even know. A woman rescuer held my hand and they slid me in the ambulance.

I was no longer cold. I was no longer afraid of freezing. I knew I would not die.

I did not know then that I was going to have knee surgery to take out thumbnail-size splinters, that I would have physical therapy for six months and then more surgery to recenter the kneecap and realign the bone.

I did not know then that I would never be able to jog or kneel or walk comfortably down steps again.

I knew only that I was lucky. As I watched the moon through the ambulance's tinted glass, I imagined that I could feel the white light, hold it in my heart, express my gratitude to something so pure, so raw, so kind. W