

Phone Tree: Inclement Weather

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The storm worked through the streets from Abraham to Zebra. The streets, A to Z, were all supposed to be named after famous Americans from town. But after planning the tribute, it didn't take long to figure out that a town this size didn't produce many famous Americans. Some streets had leftover, placeholder names, like Zebra, while some were named after mayors, like Jack Abraham. Sometimes people thought that a successful mayoral campaign had at least something to do with whether you could fill in a street name. Two Xaviers were born shortly after the street-naming scheme was announced, but one did only as good as staying out of trouble while the other didn't even do that.

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The City Manager digs out the phone tree from inside his desk drawer. He's used the same sheet of paper for years, green with cracked ink, his scratchings covering and recovering names and numbers. He sits up late putting the numbers for coworkers into his phone. He's the top of the phone tree. In the morning he'll have to get up early and make the calls. He'll have a coffee and then come back to bed. His wife is jealous that he can do that. The minute coffee touches her lips, she's up for the day.

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The City Administrator is out hanging lost cat posters. He doesn't think the cat is coming back. He's even less convinced after losing one of his gloves and feeling the wind cutting at his skin. But it's easier to hang signs in the weather than to explain to his kids why he didn't.

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The last time it snowed like this was the last time the Executive Assistant ate grilled cheese. It's something she forgets about, five dollar bill left in a coat pocket. She sets a pan on the stove and starts it warming.

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The City Recorder lives in the old suburbs. His boy won't learn that the smell he thinks of as snowfall is really the smell of wood in fireplaces around the neighborhood until years from now. He'll backpack in summer and smell the winter coming from the campfire. This time, when he opens his window and dusts flakes off the sill with one finger, he's sure the smell that burns the back of his throat is of the storm.

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The Clerk's mom was a single parent. Now that he lives on his own, he likes to slide the thermostat all the way right and sit around in shorts, eating cereal at the TV. Sometimes he feels bad, like he's melting big chunks of ice somewhere. Sometimes he feels bad like he should call his mom.

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The DCD's uncle used to do this thing when it snowed. He would go out and collect some of it in a metal bowl. Then he would add something, vanilla and something else, and make ice cream from the snow. It's the kind of thing uncles know how to do.

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Code Enforcement's son hustles snow angels into life. On some of them he only moves his arms, though. He says the boy angels don't wear dresses.

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The City Planner's daughter always does her math in front of the window when it snows like this. She figures that maybe, before she starts the next problem, she'll look up and see deep piles, cars wading up to their bellies, and be sure enough to rest her pencil on the desk.

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The Fire Chief spreads trucks out around town. One near the bowling alley. Another one at the 7-11.

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Goddamn. Goddamn, goddamn, goddamn, the Parks Specialist says out loud. He drives the snowplow with its heavy blade in rows, pushing out aisles of lower ground in the school parking lot. It wasn't until just now that he remembers, as a kid, shoplifting a box of needles and meaning to find the place where they kept the snowplows. He was going to push the needles through frozen peas and use his blowgun to pop every tire in the place. And goddamn, look at him go now.

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The Director of Public Works isn't comforted by the snow in any way. He knows that every inch means getting up a little earlier. Nights like these, when he crawls into bed too angry at the lost night to fall asleep, he hates the move into his new home with its dark finishes and real wood fireplace so far from the office.

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Mrs. Director of Public Works is very much comforted by the snow. Her husband is already in bed, and it's unusual for her to get the evening to herself. She wants to go into the bedroom and get her pajamas, but that isn't important enough that she needs to get up. The cop shows are terrible, but she can follow them when she's watching alone.

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The Utility Billing Clerk brushes his teeth and then his head starts to hurt. Not like a headache, but stinging on top. He feels up on his bald head and it's crushed with cold. He waves a hand around in his bathroom, feeling for something until he touches the outside air flowing through the fan on the

bathroom ceiling. He stands on the toilet and taps the fan's cover. Flakes of snow spin down to the floor.

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Three boys wrapped up in black on black layers shovel snow around a Seasonal Worker's car, burying it deep and then whacking the piles down with the broad shovel heads. Two of the boys pull water jugs from inside another car and start dumping them out on the packed snow. The third boy opens his trunk and pulls out a traffic barrel with the light still blinking and sets it on top of the whole mess.

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The Director of Community Development risks smoking in his apartment. His landlord stops by what seems like every day to do small chores, check meters, but mostly to see what everyone is up to. Tonight it's too cold, an emergency situation. It's a fucking blizzard, so the Director of Community Development sets a chair next to the window and blows smoke straight through the screen where it mixes with the warm air chugging from a dryer vent on the wall.

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The Custodial Coordinator is looking for the chains he bought for his car. He's in the garage where he thought the floor warm enough for bare feet. He looks in another cabinet, then closes it and opens another, dancing from one foot to the other. He keeps saying, If they're not in the next one, I'll go in and put on some shoes. He keeps opening cabinets, dancing foot to foot in front of whatever's inside.

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The Lead Custodian puts a coffee can on her windowsill. It's not like her to waste, but she dumped the last few spoonfuls of coffee so she could empty out the can. It's nearly full with snow, and once she sees it curved over the top she'll seal the lid and put it in the back of the freezer with the others.

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When he turns out the light, the Director of Business Administration thinks about the small differences it makes to do small things. He doesn't think about it in an abstract way. He's thinking about how it would have made a small but really nice difference had he turned his boots upside-down when he left them outside on the back porch the day before.

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A skylight pops in the night. The rest of the roof holds just fine, but the skylight, it's plastic bubble worn out by years of sun, implodes all at once and drops snow in the kitchen, the same amount that could be collected if you'd turned the bubble upside-down and used it as a dish.

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The Customer Service Clerk can remember asking his dad what happened to the fish when the lake

froze. Did they stay frozen, waiting to thaw? Did they sleep, like the bears? Or were they awake and held still by the water, the same way it would be if the air turned solid and you didn't know when it would turn back. His dad didn't know, and now the Customer Service Clerk wonders if they go deep where it's not frozen, or bury themselves in the mud, or if they freeze and their fish brains shut off and don't make them think much.

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The Accounts Payable Clerk is glad he repainted the stoop in the fall. He mixed in just a little sand with the paint to make sure the stoop didn't turn into ice capades. He is curious to go out the next morning and see a difference.

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The Seniors Coordinator never saw such a fraidy dog before. The dog outright refused to pee in the snow. It wasn't the coldest night of the year, not by a long ways, but something about the snow piling up over the grass convinced the dog there was a safety to peeing inside. The Seniors Coordinator even went so far as to pick the dog up in his arms, carry him out onto the patio and setting him on the ground. The dog stood still, then made three big leaps back into the house without letting loose a drop.

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The Seniors Facility Cook found a girl who had more movies at home than he did, something he didn't think possible. Most of them he'd seen, but they spent one of their first nights together going through her collection while he made a list in his mind of all the ones he wanted to see. They would have plenty of time tomorrow, and he was looking forward to suggesting they make a dent in the collection if they were going to be stuck inside anyway, and he hoped that a lazy day on the couch would turn into her asking him to stay the night again. He wouldn't ask to stay, but when she offered he wouldn't say no.

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The Utility Billing Clerk is used to starting the dryer and then setting a blanket on the floor so that she could lean her back against the tumbling warmth of the machine. She doesn't have any clothes that need cleaning, but she doesn't mind staying up a few more hours to wash sheets and pillowcases.

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Cars are pulled over all up and down the street. How everyone got home isn't clear.

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The Court Coordinator is stuck behind a line of slow-moving cars. After a half dozen turn off to the side streets she sees that the holdup was a cyclist in the road. He's trying to pedal with one leg while dragging the other foot on the ground for stability. He wipes out, tips over and picks himself up and starts again. She turns on a side street. She doesn't want to watch anymore.

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The Court Outreach Administrator walks the circle in his place made from kitchen to living room to dining room to kitchen. He's talking to himself, which he hasn't figured out yet. He leans low and looks out the very bottom of his window. From that angle he can see the flakes pouring down past the street lamp and be sure it's still snowing.

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The Court Clerk is used to the cold and saving on the gas bill. She rolls up towels and sets them on the floor, pushed up against the cracks where the door meet the outside. Then she turns on a space heater in the room upstairs where she spends the evening, closes the door and pulls a second set of curtains over the window. She doesn't have much need for the whole house.

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Sophie isn't around anymore to complain about the Evidence Custodian's boots. Swamp ass, she said. Those things smell like swamp ass. They did smell pretty bad, but it was because they were so warm that the Evidence Custodian's feet started to sweat. He only wore them when he really had to. He thinks how he's never once guessed right on the things he misses about someone after they're gone.

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The train horn blasts down through the streets, into neighborhoods, places so far away that they never needed to worry about its warning or its heavy wheels slicing twinned lines through the snow.

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The Office Assistant sets her alarm for very early. Days like this are her favorite. They work for her. She has a hard time waking up most days, but when everything is frozen and cold and broken she can feel okay about being the one who gets up early. She'll shower and have time to eat and plenty of time to let her car warm up instead of scraping clear a small porthole out of her windshield. She sets out her boots and packs another pair of shoes to wear inside the office into a plastic bag. She'll leave extra early to get coffee and donuts for everyone. People will need coffee and donuts tomorrow. They will call her sweetheart and lovely and lifesaver.