

## Aneli's Short Stories

#1:

The snow had arrived in the night. Billowing grey clouds, cloaked in the navy blanket of night sky, finally let go of their heavy burdens after weeks of patient waiting. Bleak rays of morning light peeked through the curtains as Joy tugged them open, exposing the white covered scene to the room and its audience of one. Joy turned on the coffee pot and looked out at her small front yard. She pitied the magnolia tree, whose hopeful buds -- covered in pale brown fuzz -- had sensed the spring weather too soon, light pink flowers beginning to emerge shyly from their long winter rest. The tree was part of the reason that they had bought the house so many years ago on a sunny April day. How happy they were, everything new and exciting, young and fresh, just like their life together. These flowers were now trapped, unable to escape the embrace of heavy white snow and left to shiver in the cold, wilting into brown.

The smell of coffee began to drift through the kitchen, and Joy went about making her breakfast: a toasted english muffin with *I can't believe its not butter!*, half a banana, and a cup of blueberries. Joy knew that the blueberries were not in season, but at her age, she allowed herself this small luxury. Today, she added a bit of blackberry jam to her toast. He had loved blackberries. She remembered, when the kids were growing up, they would go berry picking sometimes, and he and the kids would stuff their faces with the fruit, making a game of who could fit the most in their mouth at once. Now everyone was gone. The kids, and their kids, lived far away, leaving her alone in her house of memories.

Looking through her window, Joy watched as a figure began to come into view, trudging up the street. As the figure approached, dressed in something red (perhaps a snow suit?), she could see they had something in their hand: a large snow shovel. The figure, a boy, began stopping from house to house, only spending a few minutes at each one talking with the owners before continuing to the

next. By the time Joy finished off her english muffin and her first cup of coffee, the boy was on his way to her house. She put her coffee down and started towards the front door as the doorbell rang. As she opened it, she found that the boy was, indeed, wearing a red snowsuit, zipped up to the beige scarf around his neck, interesting gear for a boy of his age to be wearing these days.

“Hi, I’m Zeke!” He gestured to the shovel in his hand.” Would you be interested in having your driveway shoveled? I’m charging 5 dollars for every driveway.” Last year she had shoveled the driveway, and the year before that, well, he had done it, like he used to every year. He never complained, even after that horrible blizzard in 1997, which had them stuck in the house for days. Joy smiled. Five dollars was a good deal for a driveway. “That sounds wonderful!” She said. The boy’s brow, which has been crinkled with concern as he looked down at his boots, softened immediately, and he looked up at her. “Really? You’re the first one on the street to let me, I mean, to say yes.”

The boy was probably about 10 or 11, close to the age of one of her nephews. Joy had never had someone she did not know clean out her driveway for her. It felt a little bit strange, or no, new. In her life of routines, she supposed, everything new felt a bit strange. Even everything that was now not so new felt strange, the empty space by the bed next to her slippers, the kitchen table set for one, now cold and hard without the warmth of two steaming plates of food, the restless silence that filled the house, louder than any volume she could crank the radio up to. Yes, five dollars was a good deal.

The wet grey gravel of the driveway was dark under its cover of white snow. Joy watched the boy finish up as she wiped the kitchen counter clean, pushing small english muffin crumbs into the sink with neat swipes. She pictured the snow outside covering her counter, the paper towel in her hands whisking it away like those crumbs. Humming softly, she walked to the cabinet and reached around for some fresh boxes of cookies she always kept in the back just in case. Joy paused.

“Would he even want cookies?” Children had so many allergies these days, she didn’t know if he even could eat them. Her thoughts wandered to past conversations with her kids about the dangers of accepting food from strangers, of cautionary tales about poisoned halloween candy, and she wondered if the boy might feel uncomfortable if she offered him something. In the end she took the boxes out. There was no harm in trying.

Before he left the house empty, left her empty, she always had a couple boxes of cookies open, placing them on one of the small plates she kept in the china cabinet, and they would share a few for dessert after dinner. His favorites were ginger snaps, the chewy ones that were crispy on the outside and a little soft of the inside. Her favorites were the Italian almond ones she found in the baked goods section of the super market. Joy took one of the small plates out from the china cabinet, left unused since Christmas, and placed a variety of cookies on it from the different boxes. She began to hum again, the tune of *Pennies from Heaven*, the version with Frank Sinatra and Count Basie.

*Every time it rains, it rains, pennies from heaven,*

*Don't you know each cloud contains, pennies from heaven*

The doorbell rang. The boy must have finished. She put the plate down and hurried to the door. The boy’s red snowsuit and shovel were covered in a dusting of white snow, and the edges of the curls peeking out of his hat were damp. But he looked up at her, struggling to fight the pride in his voice with a formal tone, and there was warmth. “I finished the driveway. Does it look ok? I can clean up the edges more if you want?” He tried to lean on his shovel nonchalantly, then, afraid to try it, settled with just a firm hold on the handle instead. “The driveway looks amazing! You did a great job on it! I hope it wasn’t too hard to clean?” She turned around and fished for the five dollars in her purse. He smiled with pride. “Really? No it wasn’t too bad at all. Much easier than mine. My parents

made me clean that one first.” She held out the money “I bet they didn’t pay you for it either.” He fumbled with his thick gloves before gingerly accepting. “Nope.”

Joy watched as he tucked the money in his pocket. His bright red snow suit, like the driveway, had turned a shade darker with the wet snow. After making sure the money was safely stored, he shifted his gaze once again to his boots. He didn’t turn around, shifting softly from one foot to the other, unsure of what to do. She continued to hold the door. After a few seconds “You said your name was Zeke?” He looked up, “Yeah, Zeke.” He looked around. “Zeke, do you want to come inside for a minute? You must be freezing, all that time working in the snow!” The boy thought for a moment, sneaking a glance past her shoulder into the brightly lit kitchen. She added “I was just taking some cookies out for a midmorning snack, and there are too many for me to eat myself if you would like to have some?” Joy thought back to the poisoned candy. Maybe she should not have brought up the cookies. But after hearing about the cookies, the boy perked up. “Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to bother you.” Joy tried to take on a calm tone as she hid the excitement bubbling up inside of her. “Of course!”

She held the door out a little wider. The boy hesitated for a moment, then started through the door, jumping a few times on the doormat to agitate the layer of snow settled comfortably on his boots before stepping inside. “I’ll just stay for a little while.” He stood just inside the house, staring down at his wet boots and snowsuit, unsure of what to do. “You can leave your boots by the door if you want. Don’t worry about the floor getting wet or dirty!” It had been so annoying at the time, but she missed the days when that floor was always dirty, when there was something to clean on the kitchen counter, something more than just a few crumbs of english muffin. Joy headed to the kitchen as he took off his boots and some of his snowgear, turning the coffee pot on for a second cup of coffee. She placed the small plate of cookies on the kitchen table. In that moment, it didn’t seem so cold and hard. In that moment, for the first time in a while, her house was warm. She asked the

boy all kinds of questions about his family, his school, his hobbies, his snowsuit. They talked for more than an hour, the boy, content with the cookie selection, surprisingly as happy for someone to talk to as she was. Five dollars was a good deal for a driveway.

#2

“I feel like we should stop.” The snow was falling faster now harder too, with thick clumps of flakes hitting the window like soft drum beats, the tap of a finger. “We’re fine. We only have like two hours left until we’re home.” In the last hour, they had passed a *Red Roof Inn*, a *Marriott*, and a *Comfort Inn*. Kat thought of the fake plants in the lobby, the dim fluorescent lights, the crisp, pressed, white, sheets, the miles of carpeted floor.

She shrugged and looked out the window at the dark outlines of trees, the snow dancing around in the wind. She picked at a scab on her arm. It had begun to heal. It was probably the cream she put on it the other night, the one her mom had given her. It didn’t take long for Cass to notice. She always noticed. “Stop picking Kat! Do you want to be covered in scars your whole life? Kat didn’t. It might be kinda cool actually, make her look tough, turn her inside out and show how she was coping with her life. “Maybe I do.” She turned up the radio. *Take on Me* by Ah-ha ricocheted through the car. She mimicked the techno beats, furiously drumming imaginary drumsticks against her dashboard drumset and bobbing her head to the music.

Cass sighed and looked ahead at the road, an endless sea of headlights. In the dark, the headlights were neon bright, glowing red against the fabric of the night sky. Kat looked over at Cass. “Remember that time we drove out to visit that college in the middle of nowhere and got lost on the way to the hotel? We were driving around on those dark windy roads and I was panicking about getting kidnapped by a serial killer? Mom and dad didn’t know what to do with me. I was so worked up. But you calmed me down. I don’t know how you did it.”

A small smile crept across Cass's face. "Yeah, we thought you had really snapped that time." Kat laughed. "You dealt with it though. You always manage to calm me down. I can't imagine how it'll be when you aren't living with us anymore. We'll probably kill each other."

Cass kept her eyes fixed on the road. "You'll be okay."

Kat wasn't dancing to the music anymore. Her nails, covered in a thin layer of peeling polish, dug into the rough fabric of the car seat. "I won't be okay! When have I ever been okay, Cass? I've tried so many things, so much talking about myself, about my feelings, about my dreams. By myself. In a group. With mom and dad, with strangers, therapists, doctors! What has changed?"

The windshield wipers squealed as they pushed their way through the piling snow, struggling to make their way across the glass of the window and to clear a space for the night sky in the wave of white snow. The wind weaved their surroundings into a frenzied collage, pieces of bright tail light and dark sky thrown together with white confetti.

And then, a streak of light brown and white, something, was in front of the car, inches, away. And then, it wasn't. Cass's Bean Boot pushed hard against the brakes. The car was immediately met with a cacophony of furious honks. Cass turned on the hazards and put the car in park. She sat for a moment, frozen, her hand still tightly gripping the clutch. They turned their heads and looked at one another. Kat's eyes were wide. Her mouth opened but no sound came out. Cass didn't wait for words to gather their courage. She unbuckled her seatbelt, and with one last glance at Kat, opened the door and stepped out of the car.

There it lay, enveloped in the thin blanket of bright yellow light. A crumpled heap of smooth, light brown fur, and boney legs. Strong legs. Hooves caked with a dusting of dry dirt. The deer lay on its side, dark red slowly seeping through the wide of its underbelly. It wasn't moving.

"Is it ---- dead? " Kat had gotten out of the car, eyes still wide.

Cass took another small step towards the heap. She bent down closer, searching for something, anything. The subtle rise and fall of a chest, a small sound, the twitch of an eye; anything at all. But there was nothing. In just a few seconds, she had ended a life. Life was drained from the creature and snatched away by the wind.

Kat walked over to the heap and bent down next to her sister. The deer's eyes looked as though they were made of glass, forever fixed in place, like two glistening dark marbles that seemed to stare straight through her. "What are we going to do?" she asked. She had seen plenty of deers in her life, from a distance, in videos on the Nature Channel, when she was younger. But they had never prepared her for something like this.

Cass didn't respond. She just stared. She knelt there in the snow, staring at the deer for a long time. Tears began to stream down her face, already damp with the settling snow. Kat ran to the car and found a tissue packet in the glove compartment. She came back and handed one to her sister, who took it gingerly. "It's so hard to drive in the snow, especially at night!" Kat tried. "You couldn't see that well, it was an accident."

Cass sniffled, dabbing at her face with the damp tissue. She wasn't usually like this, not in control, unsure of herself. Kat wasn't used to seeing her sister cry. She was usually the one crying. "I'm so sorry Cass." Kat wrapped her arms around her sister, trying to hug as much cold and dark and wet and worry out of her as she could. They stood there, holding one another. Leaning on each other for the first time in a long time. Finding warmth in the snowy night.

#3:

*Dear Miss Molly,*

*My name is James and I am 6 years old but I am almost 7 years old because my birthday is soon.*

*Romper Room is my favorite show to watch on television, and I especially like the songs and dances.*

*Sometimes I get in trouble but overall so far this year I've been a good Do Bee. I also like to draw and I drew a picture for the show. Thank you.*

*Love, James.*

James didn't know if *love* was the best way to end the letter, but that was the only way he knew how. He had seen his mom write it when she signed her names on the back of cards they sent to his grandma or his uncle and aunts, so it had to be the right way, or at least one of the right ways. But how many ways were there? Maybe he would ask Kiki.

Kiki was eleven years old. This meant she was pretty grown-up, and sometimes she got annoyed with James and yelled at him, or sometimes she told on him when he was doing something he wasn't supposed to do, like double-dipping. But she was also good at helping him when their parents were busy, which was a lot of the time, so that was nice. She was the one who had written out his letter to Miss Molly, since she had nicer handwriting and he didn't know how to write that well yet. He had told her exactly what he wanted to say to Miss Molly, and she had written it down in her neat handwriting.

That was around an hour ago. He had spent a while sitting on his bed, thinking about the letter. It wasn't very hard to find her. There were only a few rooms in their small apartment that she could be in, unless she was outside. James looked out the window of his bedroom. Thick white snow had settled comfortably along the edges of the window and nestled comfortably in the corners. It reminded him of a dress that his mother wore when she used to go out, knee-length, the bottom lined with beautiful white lace. Every time she wore that dress, James's mom took extra time to carefully clean the lace so that it never got dirty. She had not taken that kind of care cleaning his white socks, which somehow always got muddy or stained, no matter how many puddles he avoided.



Kiki was in the living room, reading a magazine. "Do you think the love part at the end sounds alright? He asked her. Kiki looked up. "Sure, why not?" James shrugged and looked down at his white socks, which had turned a brownish-grey. "I don't know." The letter needed to be just right. *Romper Room* was on channel 7 every Tuesday at 3:00 p.m. sharp. Each Tuesday, as soon as school ended, he would gather all his books as fast as he could and run home, taking the stairs up to their apartment two at a time if he was in a real rush. James and his mom used to watch the show together. Sometimes she would join him, dancing along with Miss Molly and the kids on the show. When he did something bad, or made his sister annoyed, his mother would say, "Are you being a good Do Bee?" The Do Bee was a character on *Romper Room*. Miss Molly always talked about manners and how to be nice. She would say things like "*Do Bee kind to others,*" or "*Do Bee polite at the table!*"

Now, James just watched *Romper Room* by himself. He didn't see his mom too much anymore. She mostly stayed in bed or sat at the kitchen table, staring into the air. Sometimes his Aunt May would come over, and they would talk for a little while, but most of the time she was just quiet and they knew not to bother her. She kept a lot of orange bottles with white caps in the kitchen, and she would take little pills out of them and swallow them down with a glass of water. Sometimes she would just swallow them without anything at all. It had gotten worse a couple of weeks ago when a small paper arrived on their kitchen table. On the paper there were big, dark red, scary, letters. James sounded out the words on the paper like they had taught him to do at school and like his mom had him do when they used to read together. "E-VIC-TION NO-TICE." Any words with big scary letters must not mean something too good, but James was not sure exactly what they were saying. He asked his sister, but she wasn't sure what they meant either. He thought about asking his mom about the paper, but it didn't seem like she was in the mood for questions. Not that day, or the next day, or the next.

James folded the letter up as carefully as he could, making sure that the edges were lined up and even, the corners of the paper perfectly straight and pointy. He found the envelope and gently slid the letter inside with his drawing. Kiki had helped him with the envelope a few days ago, writing down where they lived and writing where they said to send the letter.

Every week, at the end of the show, Miss Molly would sit down with the Do Bee and all of the kids on the show and she would say “You know what? I think its time to see the friends at home in the magic mirror!” Then she would look through her big magic mirror and say the magic words “Romper stomper, bomper boo. Tell me tell me, tell me do. Magic mirror tell me today. Did all my friends have fun at play?” She would talk about the kids that were having a special day, saying the names of all of the children she saw through the magic mirror and showing some of the drawings that they sent in for the show.

He looked at the clock. Time had passed fast. The post office would be closing soon. He felt a little pang of nerves in his chest, the kind he got sometimes before the first day of school or when it was his turn to present at Show and Tell. “Kiki, can you please come with me to the post office? It’ll be quick! Kiki didn’t look up from her magazine “I’ll take you tomorrow James. I’m busy right now. Besides, its getting to be late.” It was getting late, James knew that, but he had to get to the post office today, he was sure of it. He just couldn’t wait another day to send that letter. Placing the envelope on the kitchen table, he went looking for his winter gear: the big puffy, dark blue coat his mom bought for him last Christmas, his sister’s grey wool scarf, his red mittens, and the knit cap that his Grandma had made for him and the warmest hat he had ever had!

After finding all the clothes he needed, James prepared himself for his journey to the post office. As he finished tugging his winter boots on, he found himself staring at the half open door of his mother’s bedroom. He wished she would tell him to wear an extra sweater, or to make sure to wear his galoshes instead of his boots, or at least tell him not to catch a cold, or to be safe out there

in the snow and not take too long. But there was only a soft silence, the sounds of creaky floorboards shifting under his boots. James sighed, tucked the letter into his coat pocket, and let himself out.

The post office didn't usually seem too far away when he had gone with his mom or his sister to get stamps or mail an extra big package, but today it felt like miles and miles away. The wind pushed at him, nugging him playfully; little gusts blew snow onto his face, forcing him to squint his eyes. The snow was sticking, starting to pile around the sidewalk. It settled onto the tree branches, on top of the rusty metal trash bins waiting in the alleyways, on the lamposts, even on the mailbox. Everything was wearing a delicate, white hat, a thick layer of white icing like the kind James' mom put on his birthday cake a few months ago, chocolate cake with vanilla buttercream. That had been so good.

It was so cold. He shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets for extra warmth ---- but wait -- his letter? His pockets were empty. The letter was gone! Where had it gone? The nervous feeling came back in his chest. He turned and looked behind him. He turned around in a circle, looking up at the sky, down at the sidewalk, turning and turning. All he could see was snow, layed over the world around him like a heavy white blanket. He began walking the way he came. The letter must have fallen out of his pocket somewhere, it was probably the wind's fault. After walking for a few minutes, he spied it -- the perfect white edge of the envelope peeking out of a pile of snow. He breathed a sigh of relief and picked up the letter, carefully brushing off the snow and placing it once again deep in his pocket. He kept his hand on the letter in his pocket the whole way to the post office.

James got to the post office just as it was beginning to close. When he explained to them how very important it was, they let him in.

Back at home, all James could do was wait. A week passed, or maybe a few days more than that. Every day felt like a whole year. Then it was Tuesday again. Still breathless from his marathon run home from school and up the stairs of the apartment building, James turned on the television. He listened to the songs and danced the dances halfheartedly, his mind on the magic mirror. Finally, finally, it was close to the end of the show, and Miss Molly sat down with the Do Bee and all the kids. James walked closer to the screen. He got closer and closer with each name Miss Molly called. His face only inches from the screen, James felt almost like he was there. He could picture himself there with Miss Molly and friends. Then, he almost missed it, his name was called! He couldn't believe it! Miss Molly had read his letter! James danced around the TV, bouncing and waving his arms, spinning and spinning.

The floorboards creaked. He stopped. His mother had left his room and was making her way across the room behind the couch, waling with slow, careful steps. He watched her for a moment, then looked back at the television and cried out. Miss Molly was showing his drawing. And saying in her calm, gentle voice, "This is a picture that James drew for us. He drew his family!" James couldn't contain himself. "Look Mommy! Look, I drew us. I drew you and me and Kiki!" For a moment, just a moment, his mother turned her head to look at him, a small, familiar smile on her face. That was enough.