

# Almost Like Texas

From “Snot Lake” A collection of short stories

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Tall Tales of Michigan and Beyond

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Abstract (short overview)

A sidewalk snow and ice removal compliance officer goes to the home of a local socialite and gets caught in a three day blizzard of passionate transformation.

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He was told the work was seasonal. If winter had only spread its wings about five months more he could have been vacationing in Traverse City eating cherries and spitting out the seeds. Instead he had set up his table in front of Foster’s Coffee Shop and was staring at two things...the latte he was sipping and people’s shoes.

He wasn’t looking at style, although he couldn’t help but notice he was more concerned with salt lines. This was the big event. “Pieces and puzzles” brought in puzzles, card games, and anything you would sit at a table to do. The coffee shop was packed and no one was barefoot. There were many shoes to look at. Two parts water and one part vinegar with a little elbow work and he could remove their salt line and dry it with a towel. He thought first of using saddle soap but decided it may be a budget buster.

His thoughts went back to winter, before the city told him “the work is seasonal, find something to hold you over. That’s the way the rain falls.” He had been a code enforcer. He had power. Sidewalk snow and ice removal policy had to be implemented and he was the one to spend 60 hours a week doing exactly that but it was July now and the summer seemed like it would go on forever. His eyes were down focused on shoes. He was looking for abnormal white lines on leather. One thing was for certain sandals would do him no good and running shoes were not much better. It was leather he was after. He saw shoes and hands carrying games to the event inside. In a town of fourteen thousand the event could draw 70 people. It was a big event for this town.

His gaze was broken by the sound of a woman’s voice, “What the...,” the voice said. The contents of what she was carrying were displayed on the cement sidewalk....checkers (still in the box) Yahtzee, Uno, Skipbo and a deck

of cards that had Olympic National Park on the back. He got up from his chair behind his table with its “Salt Lines Removed” sign and looked up and saw her again for the first time since last winter’s great blizzard.

It had been raining on the 20 inches of snow. He was making the rounds for “City Code Division 3, clearing,” when he saw the violating residence. There was a name on the mailbox that appeared to have been blackened out by felt pen. Carefully he maneuvered to the door following existing footprints that had been punched through the snow. She answered the door, “May I help you?” This wasn’t his normal greeting from homeowners which set him back but he was able to refocus. “I do believe you have a failure to clear in violation of Section 29-227 of the city code.” She looked at him waiting for an explanation. “You haven’t shoveled your sidewalk,” he said. “Wasn’t planning to, it’s gonna snow again so why bother,” she shot back.

“I’ll help you,” he said going for the Yahtzee materials that were causing people to walk around the papers on the sidewalk. She was wearing running shoes. Not a potential customer. He put Yahtzee back in its box and handed it to her. “How have you been?” is all he could come up with.

Time seemed to stand as still as it did last winter. He had read that in Korea there is a superstition that if you are out in the first snowfall of the year with someone you like true love will blossom and you will fall in love. The problem was she was not Korean and she did not like someone coming up to her door to tell her about the sidewalk snow and ice removal policy. The first snowfall had passed as he stood in a cold rain. He told her she had 24 hours to clear or the city would hire a local company to clear the walk and according to section 10.7 of Charter Code 1977 4.76, she would be stuck with the bill.

“Y’all coming in for the event?” His shoe cleaning stand had only been set up for two hours. He had done a bikers boots and had been waiting for his second paying customer for about an hour. The coffee shop was filling up. “Y’all really should, it’s a lot of fun. A community event you know.” He felt in a ways like a kid sitting at a lemonade stand in the middle of a crowd that didn’t want lemonade or simply didn’t want to fumble with the exchange of money.

“Sure. I’m not doing much here,” he said as he folded his table, gathered his rags and vinegar and water and put them back in his car. Once inside he followed her to a table that had a stack of puzzles. Over on another table there was a chess match going on. He didn’t consider Chess a board game but if it isn’t what is it? There was Stratego at another table, several Monopoly games going on, a dog eared Risk, Scrabble, Battleship, Clue and something called Ticket to ride. Why she wanted to do puzzles he couldn’t see unless if she wanted to isolate herself and talk.

“Did you ever pay that fine?” She seemed to ignore the question. “Look a Civil War puzzle,” she said with excitement, “and no I didn’t. Did I leave you a bill for lodging at my house during the Great Blizzard and if I did would you have paid it?” He opened a 1,000 piece puzzle called I Love Michigan and started to gather what could be pieces of Mackinaw Island.

He really hadn’t liked delivering this news to her or anyone else especially when it was raining. “We have a list of contractors for you to choose from,” he threw in. He could tell she was not pleased. He could also tell she was not intending to clear the sidewalk or hire anyone to do it. He was very perceptive.

“I don’t like to be in the cold. It hurts my skin,” she said in her defense of her violation. He drifted away from the sidewalk snow and ice removal policy that he had memorized and was carried away back to the summers of his early childhood where his parents and he would spend vacations on Saginaw Bay. It must have been her eyes, blue like the bay on a July morning with a pleasant breeze. He thought he could even smell Coppertone.

“I will have to come back for a re-inspection in two days.” She spoke to break the tension. “It’s nasty out here would you like to come in for some coffee?” “I can explain the assessment of costs if you have failure to clear,” he offered as he was led into her kitchen. At that time the Lake effect off Lake Michigan dropped the air pressure, clouds moved in and there was intense hail and then light snow. “Re-inspection is found he section 3.30,” he said. “Do you take cream and sugar,” she answered.

At this point of the story I could mention that it snowed hard, relentlessly for the next three days. I could take the reader through details that one could imagine (as I'm sure some will) that would have the reader so worked up that one would have to wean off the topic of sex casually, starting by reading *50 Shades of Gray* and working one's way back to *The Bible*. Fortunately that would require a novel and this is a short story so bear with me.

This I can tell you. They did have time to talk. She told him all about her childhood in Virginia, which she referred to as "Ginny." He told her about the times he canoed the Shiawassee from Oakland County with his brother and did not speak a word until they became stuck on the bottom near the "weirs" in Owosso near the sluiceway. This required a deal of canoe carrying and talking at length with words I prefer not to print. This kind of talk continued for the next two hours until the Six Mile Creek Iron Bridge almost eight miles away. They silently glided up the Shelter Channel into Saginaw Bay. He could see his canoe within her eyes, her Saginaw Bay blues.

It was right about this time that the Department of Public Works came into play. Gavin Gates had been a tough sell to public works, and especially to Human Resources due to his brother Gunner who had worked five years as city code enforcement officer. Nepotism was something that was frowned upon. This was the third straight day of Gunner's absence with no call in, no return text, not answering his phone, pretty much abandoning his job. The snow had let up and no action taken by H.R. to Gunner's absence could be considered a conflict of interest. Gavin had to do something.

Down at the precinct things were slow as they should be in a town of fourteen thousand after three days of blizzard conditions. Captain Danville had been postponing investigation of the calls he received over the last three days complaining of screaming and animal like noises coming from Ridge Street. "Jones, find a way to get over to Ridge and check out these complaints. You can take a squad car and take Ryan Lee with you." "It's probably nothing more than downed power lines," Sergeant Jones Johnson said not moving from his

chair. Jones maintained an unusual amount of swagger even after being put on probation after assaulting the Snot Lake mascot after the high school football game with our local Trojans. “What do you want me to do when some guy goes into the Rainbow after the game dressed as a Black Fly and starts pushing people around,” he said in his defense. It was good enough to get probation and stay on the force.

Officer Ryan Lee was another story. He had a knack for storytelling to the point that Captain Danville had doubts if he would make it on the police force. Danville was so tired of hearing him talk that he had him write everything down. Officer Lee had spent the morning editing a story in which he was concerned about his transition from present to past tense. After his paragraphs he had placed a “P” for Present and a “P” for past. He had been at a standstill in his head for over an hour trying to figure out what to do with this information.

Jones got up from his chair with an exuberance you would expect from someone in assisted living. Both men sloshed their ways to the squad car. Jones knew Ryan Lee was a big country western fan so he said “You know what Bob Newhart would say? He would say ‘I’m tired of people denigrating country western music fans....and for Country and Western music fans that means look down on.’” Jones broke into laughter. Ryan was motionless and then he spoke, “That reminds me of the time....”.

After his canoe tales the subject of snow removal returned. She came right to the point. “I have acute Ophidiophobia.” They didn’t talk for a while which I can leave to your imagination. When he spoke again it was to say “What’s that?” She explained or is it complained, that she had snakes under her house. She had never seen them but she had dreamed that they were under the snow and because she couldn’t see the ground beneath the snow she couldn’t rebut the validity of her dream. They didn’t like being seen.

“I accept you as you are,” was one of the reassurances he gave her. They were quite close by now. They drank some St. Julian wine as the snow multiplied its depth outside. The Sidewalk Snow and Ice Removal policy was

now being used as a placemat. Wine glasses covered the list of contractors while the blizzard covered the alleged under snow serpent subway.

Gavin Gates had the address of the assignment of brother Gunner was assigned four days ago. When he turned unto Ridge Street he could tell that Gunner would be busy, if he could find him because plowing the sidewalks would be necessary and shoveling the walks would take quite a while probably until assistance by snow melt.

Sergeant Jones Johnson noticed the address as being familiar. "That's the Spillman place. The whole town knew of socialite Coralee Spillman. She had been married years ago to a man who started an illegal fight club downtown. He went by the nickname "Stonehead" Spillman. It was rumored that you could hit him with a sledgehammer and he would stay on his feet. Unsubstantiated reports had him resurfacing after the divorce in Southern California where he would tour taverns taking bets that people couldn't knock him out with various objects. The report last report had a sledgehammer involved and no further reports were ever filed.

Galvin Gates found it odd that the doorbell was so loud but it brought no response. He started banging on the door but to no avail as well. He made his way around the house looking in the windows at pulled blinds and drapes. Snow had been falling off the roof and the sun finally was visible. The city snowplow was trying to find traction coming up the street creating an impressive firm and covering the tops of cars left parked on the street. Gavin quickly got back to the car and drove to a block that hadn't been plowed yet and then tried Gunner's cell again.

"Ryan, Ryan, Ryan Lee, hey, hey," Sergeant Jones Johnson was screaming. Officer Ryan Lee was busy reviewing the present and past tense paragraphs in the letter that he was preparing to give to Captain Danville. Lee had put "P" after each paragraph to separate past and present. "We need back-up, call for back-up," Johnson screamed at the top of his voice. "Get Danville out here now." Ryan Lee reluctantly folded his sheets of paper and placed them in his pocket before picking up the phone.

In his days on the beat for the Detroit Police Captain Danville became famous in 1992 for heading a squad of the Detroit Police Department that rescued a full grown Lioness out of the basement of a crack house and transferring the animal to the Detroit Zoo where it goes by the name Katie. The following year the zoo received a mature Lion from the same squad who found him in the basement of an abandon house in the same neighborhood. He thought his retirement would be rewarding but he thought a transfer to a casual job as Captain in a laid back city. It was the difference between 15 thousand and six hundred seventy-three thousand. Whatever they had found on Ridge, he was the man to bring it out.

As soon as Gavin turned the corner he saw the squad car lights on and was told to stand back by a somewhat frantic Sergeant Jones Johnson. “We have an HS condition. Stand back.” Gavin could only imagine what they saw.

After the caution tape went up Sergeant Jones Johnson noticed Officer Lee fumbling with paper and pen again. “Lee, what the hell are you doing?” “I got my letter finished for Captain.” “Let me see that.” Officer Lee was exhilarated that anyone in the force would want to know what he had to say after Captain Danville said “keep everything in writing. I don’t have time for listening to this nonsense.” “I did some editing,” Ryan explained.

Sergeant Jones Johnson unfolded the paper and read as they were waiting for the Shiawassee County Sheriff’s team to arrive...*Dear Captain...I know how we can raise money for the Fall Color Tour Train ride. Me and Sergeant Johnson can get one of those cars out of impound the no one is pickin’ up and drive it and a squad car to the side of Highway 21. I can drive Sergeant back to the precinct and then I can drive the squad car back to the other car and park behind it and turn on the emergency vehicle lighting and wait for cars to pass without moving over. Then I could pull out and give them tickets and then go back and get the next one.*” Officer Ryan Lee

Sergeant Jones Johnson folded the papers up, the handwriting was large, and handed it back. “Ryan, it is Sergeant Johnson and I and I don’t think Danville would ever let you drive a squad car. Nice try though.”

When Captain Danville arrived his support team was split between wearing SWAT gear and haz-mat uniforms. What they saw is disturbing and readers would be at risk of frightening yet discreet, frequent, justifiable and non-justifiable, natural and unnatural human behavior. As I have stated before going into detail would be a treat to the short story form and would be better served in a full novel, a novel that I have no intention of writing. Consider this as one of the few times where your lack of imagination is a good thing.

Mackinaw Island was a problem. She seemed to be having her way with the Civil War puzzle while he was just trying to get Mackinaw Island and then he would deal with the rest of the state. It could have been his diverting of attention to examine what he could see of people's shoes. Summer was tough with a seasonal job that only covered fall, winter and spring.

Gunner gave up on Michigan somewhere near Flint. "You know I could come over and look at that problem under your house. I promise you that would be the sole intent of my visit." Coralee's breathing increased as she exhaled "sure." He noticed that her Civil War puzzle was almost complete. She did the northern states last. She knew the south. "You're not from here are you?" Gunner asked. She just smiled in an adorable style that Gunner knew could blow up a storm that could last for days. "Maybe this time we can take our own sweet time." Gunner noticed his breathing increase.

The next day after a heavy lunch at El Potero's Gunner found himself tapping the palm of his left hand with a baseball bat he held in his right hand. It was a signature model Eddie Matthews bat from when he played with the Milwaukee Braves. Her standing on her porch prompted thoughts like NASCAR racers going through his head circling around endlessly looking for a pit stop or a yellow flag to slow things down. He found neither. Normally he could walk away from a failure to clear violator but she was hot. Her southern belle aura and her adherence to a steady attendance at the YMCA gym rendered him somewhat helpless. The trainers at the Y didn't schedule any sessions with

men during her time with the trainer to avoid distractions that could cause injuries in the weight room. They would also turn the temperature of the gym down an hour before her scheduled arrival.

His thoughts were having trouble racing on the 18 degree banking in his mind. He was no longer slowing down on the turns and the straight-aways were here and gone before he had a chance to adjust. In his pit the crew held up signs as he passed YOU MATTER, WE BELIEVE IN YOU, GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES, COLD BEER WAITING AFTER RACE, PIT CLOSED FOR REMODELING. He had great confidence that his crew could fuel him up and change his tires within 15 seconds but now they were worthless members of the racing team. He would talk to the car owner after the race.

“Y’all aren’t gonna use that are ya?” she broke his excitement like a message from the sponsors of the race. He was still dealing with his racing thoughts trying to avoid collision while tapping his hand me down Milwaukie Braves signature model Eddie Matthews bat. “There are professional companies that do this. I’ve read about them. I’ve read a lot about them. There’s a company in Texas that does venomous and the other kind of snake, snake detection, snake inspection, snake prevention, snake nests, snake eradication, and snake extermination.”

She was almost breathless and he was spellbound just listening to her purge all of her snake information. He lifted the cover to the crawl space that led below the basement. He pulled on his Gilbert Hardware ball cap and looked back at her, his heart swimming in her Saginaw Bay blues. “Well then....this will be almost like Texas.” He ducked under the opening and entered the crawl space trying not to hit his head which might leave a bad impression.