

PLOW SHARES

STORY: ERIK ESCKILSEN IMAGE: SUSAN NORTON

Ned took the liberty

of throwing a log onto the fire crackling in Keller's living room, although the party had migrated to the kitchen. He walked past a man who'd introduced himself as Adrian, a new associate in Keller's law firm. One hand in the pocket of dark corduroys, another holding a wine glass, Adrian was talking to one of the caterers, a woman in her twenties with long, red hair gathered in a braid. Ned counted four caterers this year, up from last year's three.

Peering into the kitchen, he looked for Fiona's cranberry cashmere sweater among the crowd. She'd engaged him in a bitter argument while preparing to leave for the party — in response to his suggestion that Naomi, their 14-year-old daughter, might be just as happy at Rice Memorial High School, where he taught social studies, as at the expensive boarding school she was attending downstate. The exchange had made him eager to enjoy other company for an evening. Especially Keller's. He took a spot against the refrigerator next to the host. "Never fails," Ned said. "A roaring fire, but we're in the kitchen." Keller clinked his glass.

"Listen, Jeff," Ned continued, "About those tickets..."

Keller rolled his eyes. At a dinner party the previous night, at Keller's law partner Clay Bemis' place, Ned had asked Keller for tickets to a sold-out show at the Flynn that the firm was underwriting — a Roma dance troupe that Ned knew Naomi would enjoy. Just before Thanksgiving break, she'd emailed him a research paper on Gypsies that had earned an "A." She was due in on the morning bus from White River Junction, and Ned wanted to tell her he was taking her to the show. Keller was an old friend, going back to their days at BHS. Surely he'd hook them up.

"Make a deal with you," Keller said, nodding toward Adrian, who was now joining the party in the kitchen. "We'll talk afterward." He waved Adrian over. Ned sighed into his wine glass.

"Really coming down out there, isn't it, Adrian?" Keller said.

"Not quite a... what do you call it, a Nor'easter," the young man said. "But close, right?"

"Ask the man here," Keller nudged Ned's arm.

Ned downed his wine. "Lake effect," he said. "Yes, and with that, I'm afraid duty calls."

Adrian gave him a puzzled look, beyond which Ned caught Keller's wink.

Ned removed his parka from beneath a pile of overcoats on the pegs beside the kitchen door. "When it snows like this..." He gestured toward South Union Street as he tugged his coat on. "...someone's got to drive the plow."

"You're a snowplow driver?" Adrian said. "But I thought you said —"

"In my spare time." Ned shook his hand. "Well, to all a good night, then." He shook Keller's hand. "My thanks. Best party ever."

"Very sorry you can't stay," Keller said. "Thanks for keeping the roads safe for democracy."

That's how the holiday party joke worked. Ned would walk around the block, during which Keller would confabulate a story for a newcomer — invariably, a new associate — about the

oncoming cars, a light clicking on in the second-floor room above him — Keller's den — drew his attention. He looked up to find a familiar cranberry sweater pressed to the glass. In the glow of a desk lamp, he spotted Bemis wrapping his brown-tweed arms around Fiona's waist, drawing her close.

Ned coughed as the chill air gripped his throat. "Bitch," he muttered.

He began to walk but hesitated, realizing that he now had nowhere to go. Surely he wasn't going to follow through with this tired joke. Neither could he go back inside and confront Fiona, not without making a scene he knew he'd regret. And, of course, he could forget about the dance tickets. The only viable option was to simply walk home. He and Fiona lived about a mile away, in the top block of Loomis Street, on the bottom floor of a weathered Victorian.

The siren howled just behind him, and blue light flashed in the brown film of coffee on his windshield. He jabbed the plow toward the hill.

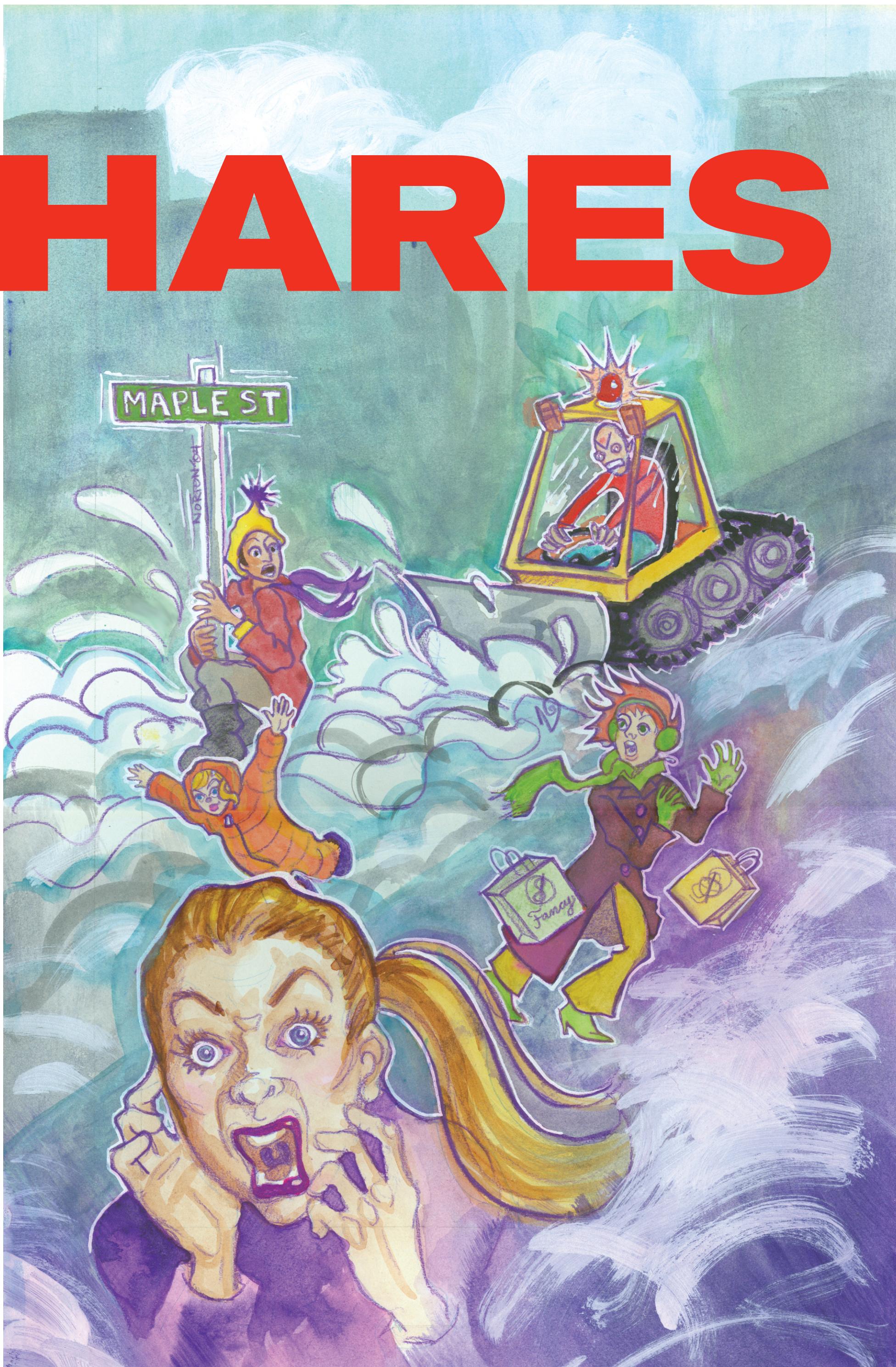
perverse pleasure Ned derived from plowing snow. And then, 10 or 20 minutes later, depending on the temperature, Ned would return to say he'd been called off at the last minute, being only an alternate driver. Whereupon a long pause would allow the butt of the joke to cement his gullibility with such words as, "Oh" or "Hmm" or "Well, you lucked out, then."

Laughter would follow, much more than Ned thought the joke merited. For five years running, starting with the very first holiday party Ned and Fiona attended after returning to Burlington, the joke had gone off without a hitch. He'd been hoping to skip it this year.

Ned walked down

the driveway and mentally charted a course: Head north on South Union, turn up Maple, double back on Summit, descend Cliff, and loop back to South Union. As he checked for

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light beam and pretended to be searching for something in the snow. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the driver lean out from the rig, one hand gripping the underside of his doorframe. "Contact lens," Ned said. "Got to be right here. The headlights help, thanks."

The driver grumbled something indecipherable, climbed down from the rig, and trudged toward him.

"Sorry to hold you up," Ned said.

The plowman, short and featureless inside tan, hooded coveralls and a balaclava that covered his entire face, said nothing as he bent over. His outerwear creaked like armor.

Ned quickly assessed the man's size. "Any chance you could back onto the street and go around?" he asked.

The driver stood with another creak. "What?"

"Yeah," Ned said, pointing to the idling vehicle. "Back out of that driveway."

Heavily insulated against the elements, the driver had to turn his whole body, even his boots, to look in the direction from which he'd come.

Ned drove a shoulder into the man's side, just above the hip. The driver flew back, his boots doing a little step dance in the powder. Ned shoved him with both hands, and the man fell onto the peak of the snow

Burlington.

She hadn't wanted to leave Ann Arbor. Neither did he, being just a year away, he speculated, from heading the social studies department at East Huron River High — a fine school full of motivated, civic-minded kids.

But Fiona, a Maine native, insisted that he gun for the Rice job. She'd been itching to move back east from the day she finished her Master's in library science at the University of Michigan. She'd found the Rice job notice — along with an attractive part-time opportunity for herself at nearby Brownell Library. "Go blue!" she'd taunt Ned, tweaking his disdain for Ann Arbor's municipal obsession with U of M football. It wasn't much of an argument, he knew, but in the end it worked. Truth was, he agreed that Naomi would probably like Vermont more than Michigan, once she got settled. His own childhood here had been pretty good.

But what, exactly, had he gotten in the bargain? The question pricked at him as he blustered up Loomis Street's south sidewalk. He'd gotten a chance to start from scratch — new school, new curriculum, new administration. He'd gotten stiff supermarket-checkout reunions with high school classmates just as paunchy and bland as he'd become. He'd gotten an adulterous wife.

For five years running, the joke had gone off without a hitch. He'd been hoping to skip it this year.

bank, where he teetered, limbs flailing like a turtle on its back, before sliding down into South Union. It was all the time Ned needed to slip-slide over and commandeer the vehicle.

He pushed what looked like a gearshift lever, and the machine lurched. He pressed the gas pedal and plunged into the white chute.

Ned drove all the way to Main Street, propelled by adrenaline, before he considered a route. Though he regretted neglecting to smash Bemis' red Saab parked near Keller's house, the oversight gave him an idea.

The snowfall had intensified since his arrival at the party. The streets were empty save public works trucks. The drivers gave Ned a curt wave — flashes of orange glove behind windshields caked with snow. As he cleaved a path linking one sidewalk to another, he imagined himself as a tunnel-dwelling animal — a prairie dog, a naked mole rat, a hamster. Did hamsters tunnel? He tried to remember Naomi's hamster, Snicket, which he'd given her the week they moved to

Tunneler or not, he thought as his scraping advance framed familiar homes in streaked glass, even the industrious Snicket couldn't match his progress tonight.

Checking his watch as he rolled into his driveway, he calculated that it had taken him roughly five minutes to get here. He spent another 15 scraping Fiona's Jetta down to sheet metal with the outside of his plow blade.

He was really beginning to get the hang of snowplow driving, he observed, as he sailed along South Prospect, thinking he'd zip down Cliff and attend to Bemis' Saab. Hearing a police siren flare in the distance, he made a graceful, rounded turn down Main instead, and floored it.

By the time the cruiser had caught up to him, he'd reached the Church Street Marketplace, so he threaded around the vehicle barricade and barreled up the pedestrian mall. While the city streets were deserted, the Marketplace was not, and he startled several shoppers and revelers as he slalomed around

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them, moving at what he gathered, from the onslaught of profanity and coffee cups hurled at him, was an excessive speed. Still, the holiday lights were pretty, and it cheered him to see couples strolling hand in hand, swinging parcels. He was sometimes nostalgic for pre-Marketplace Church Street — and some of the old businesses, such as Charlie's Red Hots — but Naomi loved to shop here. He hoped she'd let him accompany her this season.

Reaching the top of Church a good block ahead of the police cruiser, he turned left at Pearl and scuttled right onto Elmwood. As he plied the streets of the Old North End, he tried to remember the last time he'd taken a close look at the neighborhood. It was during the house hunt, more than five years ago. In the years he'd been away, property values in the South End, where he'd lived as a kid, had outstripped Fiona and his budget. He'd tried to convince Fiona that the Old North End would be a fine place to live. "This is not Vermont," she'd huffed.

"Oh, you want to live in Vermont?" he'd responded, not concealing his bitterness about the relocation. "Well, then, what are we doing in Burlington?"

With the siren whirring just out of view, Ned cut a few quick turns through the maze of streets. It was actually a lovely part of town, he noted, especially tonight, with snow hooding everything in white and making the ward look truly old, in an authentic, post-war sort of way.

Ned crossed North Avenue at North Street and rolled into the parking lot of Burlington College, where a little-used road led down to the lake. The siren howled just behind him, and blue light flashed in the brown film of coffee on his windshield. He jabbed the plow toward the hill.

His wheels gripped well on the steep road, and he fishtailed only once before rolling onto

the flat terrain at the bottom. Glancing back, he saw the cruiser taking the slope cautiously, still a good 30 yards away. Ned cranked the wheel to the right and, skidding to a stop, pushed open the door and spilled out. He ran for the lake, jumping down onto the narrow beach. He slipped on the snow-covered rocks, tumbled onto his side, and gathered himself into a crouch, out of view.

He crept south, thinking that he could dash across the park and down the train tracks behind Union Station. He peeked and saw the cruiser had stopped at the bottom of the hill. The patrolman stood outside his vehicle, talking to a woman in a long coat with a baby carriage. Ned hadn't seen her on his descent, and he shuddered at the thought that he could have hit her and her child.

The plow driver emerged from the cruiser and began circling the plow. After two or three revolutions, he climbed into his rig, lifted the blade, and chugged away. The woman pointed north, away from Ned's roost, and shrugged. The cop got back into his car. Ned ducked down. Hearing the fading whir of tires, he looked to see the cruiser's taillights drifting uphill. The woman watched the lights retreat, then turned to Ned and waved.

He scrambled up the bank and approached her. She began pushing the baby carriage toward a strip of scraggly woods along the hill that backed up to Battery Street. He drew alongside her, thinking he'd help push.

"Got it, thanks," she said.

Ned followed her. At forest's edge, he saw movement among the branches — bodies milling about — and the orange glow of flame. The carriage wheels sank into the ground, so he stepped around to pull from the front.

Ned and the woman dragged the carriage to a clearing against a rock face jutting from the hill, where half a dozen people stood

around a trash-barrel furnace. A bearded man in ripped ski pants and a barn jacket hauled the carriage up closer to the barrel. He dumped the contents onto the ground — pallet boards and empty cardboard beer cases — and tossed the load into the barrel.

No one spoke right away, and as the fire shot starry embers into the bare treetops, Ned thought he recognized some faces, mostly young people he'd seen hanging around City Hall Park. A man closer to his own age, wearing a camouflage Army jacket and a nappy Boston Bruins toque, looked at him. "You the guy who drives the plow?" he said.

"Not anymore," Ned said.

The woman who'd been pushing the baby carriage chuckled. "The guy jacked it, Pete," she said to the man in the toque. "The plow."

"Nice one," the man said, nodding at Ned. "We're anarchists." He pulled off his glove and rummaged in his pocket for a package, roughly the size of a cell phone, which he handed to Ned. "Merry Christmas... or whatever."

Ned held the object in the fire's glow. It was a sealed package of cheese and crackers, the kind with the well of processed cheese on one side. "Thanks," he said.

The bearded man pointed a gloved finger at the man in the toque. "We could use some more wood," he said. "Your turn, Pete."

Pete turned his back to the fire. "In a minute," he said.

Ned stepped closer and raised his hands to the flame. He glanced at his watch. Naomi's bus was still six hours away. Surely the station would be closed now. He'd stay here, warm up a bit, and then go wait for her. She'd be glad to be home for the holidays. Her break would be a busy one — with parties, shopping, catching up with her friends — but Ned knew she'd make time for him. She always did. He'd be very happy to see her. ⑦

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