

## El Niño

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*fiction by Cari Scribner*

You feel like shit, so Andy takes you to Lowe's to look at Christmas lights. He likes the ones that sparkle like melting icicles. It is 67 degrees, September in New York.

There are birds flying around the beams of the warehouse store's ceiling. Once they're in, they can't find their way out. They are funny that way.

Andy offers to buy you the glowing igloo with its cheerful mailbox, or the ice-skating flamingo, or the frog wearing pajamas and a Santa hat. You look at the pink poodle with a tutu and wonder what it has to do with Christmas. You miss your dog. When you were home, the dog gave you a migraine. Andy said he wants to set up a camera to see what the dog does when no one's home, as if it might be interesting. When he comes in the front door, the dog runs circles around his legs. Andy asks the terrier if he's cleaned the kitchen or at least made himself useful and done the dishes.

It is your fourth day out of bed, first day out of the house.

The doctor only gave you a script for sixteen pain pills, and they are long gone.

At Lowe's, Halloween is set up right next to Christmas. You look at the purple-striped stockings of the witch that crashed into a cardboard tree. There's a whole aisle of scary clowns, and an inflated skeleton riding a motorcycle, flames flaring out of the tailpipe.

All the seasons and holidays run together. The back-to-school boxes of crayons and spiral notebooks and lunch bags are still on the endcaps.

Hardy mums are wilting in the sun inside the Lowe's home and garden center, crying petals. Andy once bought roses, painfully perfect. They died fast. You never remembered to add the packet of preservative. Or an aspirin. Or something to make them last.

Your first Christmas together, Andy brought home a bag of fabric butterflies to decorate the tree: orange monarchs, yellow swallowtails, and a Queen Alexandra, which he said has the biggest wingspan ever recorded. Also a feathered cardinal ornament in a tiny straw bird's nest he'd heard brought good luck and fertility. The bird was guarding two perfect eggs, painted to look like white marble.

Weathermen are predicting a warm winter in New York because of El Niño.

Andy drove all night to North Carolina last Christmas to deliver presents to his grandson, who is three.

"Was that your first grandpa sex?" he'd asked you when you started dating. He's fifty-two but looks forty and acts like a teenager, which pretty much closes the age gap.

That was eighteen months ago.

You could have had two babies by now.

Andy wants to stop for a panini and the chai tea you like, with skim milk because you don't want the extra fat. In eight weeks, even with the nausea, you'd gained 5 ½ pounds, but he said he loved the shape of your face, all filled out.

"OK, no lunch, bad idea," he says when you start to cry in the Christmas aisle.

There hasn't been a frost yet, so it can't be Indian summer, this spell of warm weather. You were sweating under the heavy quilt you dragged onto the bed, but all you remember is shivering.

In Lowe's, painter's coveralls—dyed a glow-in-the-dark fluorescent—are on sale for \$8.99. A mannequin wearing the overalls startles you because he looks so real, even though he has no hands or feet. His baseball cap is turned backwards, showing his featureless face. You can't imagine him smiling, anyway.

At home, you and Andy both have jeans splashed with yellow paint, a perfect neutral, one gallon—the good stuff that you can wash stains off with water.

You leave Lowe's empty-handed. Andy backs the Subaru out of the parking space. A woman pushing a shopping cart of fertilizer shakes her fist at him, even though he didn't get anywhere near her.

When you first met Andy, you had a Honda with an engine that cut out whenever it rained. He always brought an umbrella when he came to give you a jump start. When you traded it in, the dealer gave you \$400, which seemed too low, but Andy thought it was fair.

The oak tree by your driveway looks spindly and barren. None of the leaves have turned gold. Maybe they won't, on account of El Niño.

You walk up the steps to your porch, turning your face away from the neighbor's yard, with its Playskool log cabin with the plastic chimney made to look like brick. Andy holds the door open for you. The dog has not done the dishes.

Andy slows down, holding a hand out behind his back as if waiting for a child. You reach for his hand to steady yourself.

The flowers out back need watering.