

The sun was bright, if a little bit thin. He sat by himself on the cottage's porch step, absorbing what half-baked warmth the October daylight offered. Today, though, he felt plenty of warmth coming from inside, too.

Pete was alone here, accompanied by a can of stout and a book of crossword puzzles from the grocery store. In his left hand was a lit cigar, halfway burned through, its thick glass ashtray making golden beams of the refracted light. And his iPhone, with Ainsley at the other end of the texting thread, he held in his right hand. A massive volley of celebratory messages were flying between them.

See, after almost a solid year of looking, they'd finally – FINALLY – bought a house. Ten months of Nopes, Yeahhhhhh Nos, and Definitely Nots had finally ended with a 3000-square-foot Victorian Yes. The offer was accepted about 45 minutes ago, and only a little paperwork & inspection stood between them and becoming the proud owners of a 120-year-old piece of Windsor history. The house was on one of the town's oldest streets, about a block-and-a-half from the single-strip downtown core. Cafés and craft breweries and flower shops were all within walking distance. Man, he was going to love it there.

All his life, he'd lived in Halifax, a larger city that just kept on growing. It was a great place to live and work, and Pete had enjoyed commuting to its downtown streets by bike and by bus for over 15 years of his career. It was fun to try and keep up with

the new shops and bars and coffeehouses, even if it was a fool's errand. But he was now self-employed, and didn't really have a good reason to live in the hustle bustle & high costs anymore. Conversely, the Annapolis Valley – which held the town of Windsor, where he'd soon be moving – was a perennial character in his childhood road trips. It was a series of small communities, strung along Nova Scotia's "Harvest Highway", which was a cutesy name for the road that wound through the province's most picturesque farmland. Fertile and warm, you'd find vineyards across the street from cornfields, pumpkin patches mingling with apple orchards. All next to bespoke restaurants, farmers markets, and noodle shops. Every time that Pete passed through the place, he found himself admitting that "it was too pretty a place to not live there at least once". He found himself daydreaming about a slower pace of living, if there was such a thing.

Pete was in the first year of his 40s, and although his separation was about four years ago, it still felt fresh to him. He'd been with Kris for almost 20 years; most of them pretty good. But that life had been plenty restrictive, and he hadn't really been able to prioritize himself once. Since then? He'd finally been giving himself the latitude to find out who he really was. And he genuinely liked who he'd apparently turned out to be. He was kind, curious, and loved taking part in his community. He liked to think, and to consider new perspectives. He met Ainsley very soon after he'd moved into his new apartment, and was taken by her bright smile ever since. They

were both professionals (he in marketing, she in human resources). They both loved sharing simple pleasures. And they'd had the difficult conversation about whether or not they'd have children together, their previous marriages having left that decision on the back burner for far too long. They both agreed that they'd be invariably awesome parents, (and that their kids would, admittedly, be pretty gorgeous); yet they had ultimately agreed to stay childless. For better or for worse, that made their life and path together much, much simpler. Everything was kind of within their reach, now. Planning for the future in short order? Making important decisions faster than before? Being in the moment and appreciating whatever it brought? These things were second nature to him now. And he loved the room that it freed up, for his mind to wander.

Sitting on the step, the decking glowed beneath him in the autumn sun, and he puffed his Nicaraguan cigar (cheaper than a Cuban, but more peppery). He set his phone down, and smiled a little broader as he thought about this new house. A simple realization came to him. See, after living for years in an apartment, he was moving to a house. *A house, man*. With a front door, and a sidewalk, and tulips and stuff. He was probably going to have a mailbox again; and that notion lifted Pete's spirits very, very high. How sweet is that? *A mailbox*. A backwards journey into a simpler time, when the world's idyllic scenery made so much more sense to his tragically 41-year-old sensibilities. "This'll be like moving to the 1980s, man.", he

thought with a grin that only he was privy to. He couldn't wait to feel that joy for real. He looked forward to specifically that.

Weeks wore on, and preparations peppered their passing. Lawyers & lenders. Utilities & U-Hauls. Mortgages & moving boxes. All were a part of his everyday. A month of anticipation flew by in a blur of excitement, and the keys were in their hands by mid-November. It was then that the true reality of this new house, and its small town, became clear to Pete.

He'd always known that Windsor (despite the pedigree of its fancy-sounding name) was a poorer town than many, but he hadn't realized that Canada Post had discontinued door-to-door delivery several years ago. So here he was: a 3-storey house with a stunning façade, and no mailbox beneath its street number. Instead? You're not going to believe it. He had to walk to the Post Office and sign up for a PO Box. Traveling to the Canada Post building was about to be a regular occurrence (only a couple blocks away, but still). No mailbox. No 1980s. A little disappointed, Pete chuckled to himself at how he'd imagined that their new home would feel like that of his childhood. As a private joke, he mused that he'd gotten the numbers mixed up: it wasn't like moving to 1980, it was more like moving to 1890. A wood furnace, cracked plaster, and a giant iron cookstove in the kitchen were now the scenery of his daily commute, which was now only a few dozen steps to his third-floor bedroom-turned-office.

The idea and the joy of the mailbox faded quickly, but an appreciation for this new (and, ironically, old) way of life began to coalesce. Mature trees were everywhere, standing taller than the houses they grew alongside. There wasn't a stoplight in sight. Evening walks happened, well, every evening. Pete & Ainsley fell into a happy routine of paint, unpacking, and the local pub.

Weeks later, in December of that same year, the snows came. Pete's past life in the city was only about an hour away, and the love of winter was very familiar to him. But he'd underestimated how a different microclimate would make winter weather so unique—in the city, the precipitation had always ended as rain, weighing the snow down and keeping it from getting too deep. Not so, in Windsor. Snowfall that started white ended white. In a single Sunday-to-Monday, the snow fell to his knees on one day, and halfway to his hip on the next. A fan of the season, he was 100% here for it.

On that second day of snow, after shovelling his new-old walkway for the third time (which still held a welcome amount of novelty), he was confronted with one more new revelation; which was, still ironically, an old one, too.

The snow was still falling, though very gently and very peacefully—no more accumulation was expected. The shovel's work being done, Pete had stepped into the house to fetch a joint and a lighter. One of his favourite weed-smoking pastimes was to go for a walk in a new town. This often happened in a

tourist's context, but here, it was with a definite feeling of exploration and openness to the experience. The Monday was basically done – a snow day for students and office workers – and all of Windsor had spent the afternoon clearing their driveways. The piles along the road were waist-high, and the pavement itself was still invisible beneath the packed-down white stuff. Now nearly 5pm, the sky was already turning dark as Pete exhaled his first few puffs of smoke. He stood on the snow-crusted sidewalk, and felt the textured crunch beneath his boots' soles as he turned right and started walking.

50 yards away, the next street corner was an intersection of five roads, each with their own stop sign. There was no vehicular traffic today, even at that usually-busy junction. All was calm as the streetlamps began to automatically light up for the night, one at a time. Straight ahead, he was immediately drawn to a shocking sight.

As he looked on, Pete saw only one source of movement, aside from the occasional falling flake. A child, no more than, oh, eight years old, walked the street slowly, moving stiffly in their bulky snow pants. Their winter gear shone hot pink, and they trudged slowly across the dead centre of the roadway intersection. Their mittens hung from a string threaded through their jacket's sleeves. Behind them, they towed a cheap sled, the kind made of thin plastic and not designed for more than a winter or two's use. In the sled was another child, this one looking more like age four or five. Probably not in school, yet.

Preschool, maybe. This one sat still on his vessel, wearing a navy blue coat-and-pants set and casually dragging a single mitt along the road's white surface. The duo moved slowly, lazily, and looked a little tired.

Another streetlamp flickered on, making the dusky sky seem even dimmer. The kids were completely alone, and walking on a road still semi-blizzard-covered, no less.

Pete had four immediate reactions, very strong and clear, although each one eclipsed the last, and dramatically.

His first thought was that these two kids were clearly lost. Or, at the very least, should probably have an adult with them, right? Were they okay? Where were they coming from? My gosh, it's a cold winter's day, too; do these youngsters need help? He felt his heart beat a little faster with instant concern.

His second thought was that, wait a minute, he and Ainsley'd discovered a hilly park a few blocks away, hadn't they? It was probably covered in snow right now, and a real draw to the kids of the neighbourhood. They *were* dragging a sled, after all. He felt a relaxing dawning comprehension.

Third, a thought that calmed him more than he knew it could. A scenario sprung in his mind, and he realized that it must be true. These kids looked like siblings, and had probably been sledding at the hill. They'd probably pleaded with their parent to stay just a little longer, and had been left there with an

admonition that sounded something like: “alright, you can stay and play, but once it starts getting dark you take your little brother and come straight home”. Makes sense. He felt relief. And he felt love.

Finally, he realized that he’d been right all along. It swept him away. He was reminded of the innocent parts of the childhood he’d been lucky enough to have had. It was a warm rush of idyllic nostalgia, and he hadn’t expected it. But there it was. These kids were safe. They knew their community. They’ll maybe even remember this sort of snow-laden evening for the rest of their lives (I mean, Pete had memories just like that). It truly *was* like moving to the 1980s, after all. With a warmth that radiated from within (that was becoming more and more familiar since the Windsor move), he smiled to himself once more. And he felt like he was home.