

JAMES BROWN IS ALIVE AND DOING LAUNDRY IN SOUTH LAKE TAHOE

Stefanie Freele

Stu is driving to South Lake Tahoe to take his post-partum-strained woman to the snow, to take his nine-week-old infant through a storm, to take his neglected dog in a five hour car ride, and to take himself into his woman's good graces. And he's hungry. Even though Stu has considered, more than once, stopping the car on the whitened highway and plunging himself over a cliff so he could plop into a cozy pile of snow and hide until his wife is logical again or the baby is able to tend to itself, he's not dressed warmly enough for months or years in a snowbank, he has no snacks in his jacket, and he must focus on The Family. The Family is of all four: the woman, Stu, their baby, the dog. It is almost blizzarding, the windshield-wiper fluid is frozen, the window is frosted, the dog is antsy, the baby is whimpering, the woman – who should be happy, she nagged for days to go to the snow – is intermittently admiring the snow and whining about cramped legs. Stu is trapped by the car, The Family, his own legs, and the snow, which is falling falling falling.

Megan's legs are killing her, mostly because her shoes don't fit. Her man thinks that her feet will go back to a previous size after she loses the last eleven pounds. No shoes fit and she just knows her three-hundred-dollar ski boots will be terrible. She removes her shoes – she should have done this miles ago – and feels instant relief. She is also relieved that the baby is calm. The baby coos and says “eh” and “oooh” and wiggles his little fists. The dog lies with her head on the baby's car seat. Megan remarks that this is adorable. Her man grunts.

Phillip, who is nine weeks old and does not have control of his muscles just yet, sees the dog's head and would like to touch her, especially the black

circle around the dog's eye; however, Phillip's little fists go every which way, but not that way. He grunts little noises when his fists don't do what he wants them to do.

The snow is falling, falling, falling, and he thinks he might just have to pull over, run out into the snow and scream into the darkening forest.

Beebop, the dog, wishes she had a yellow squeaker toy. Like the one at home. The yellow one sitting on her roundy bed. If she had the yellow squeaker toy, she would squeak it and thrust it into the fist of the baby. Perhaps the baby would throw it for her, because her man and woman never throw anything anymore.

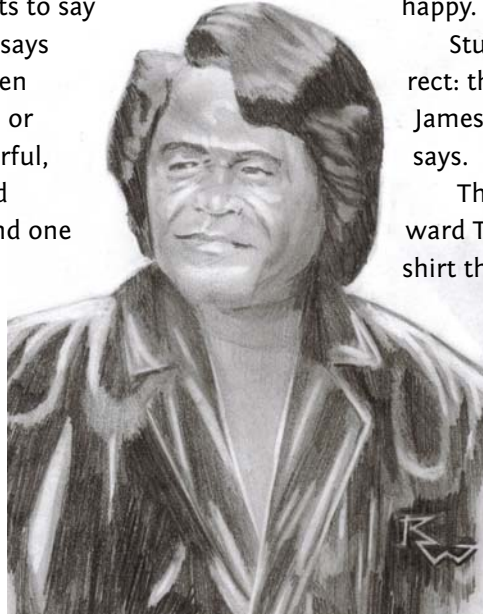
Stu is afraid to talk because his woman might cry again. She cries a lot lately, even though he is working harder than he ever has before, is bringing in a good paycheck, and is taking The Family on their first vacation. Instead, he is silent. The snow is falling, falling, falling, and he thinks he might just have to pull over, run out into the snow and scream into the darkening forest. But then he might get lost and have to eat his horse, like the Donner party. But he doesn't have a horse, and the Donner party ate themselves and their horses in North Lake Tahoe, not South. They didn't have cell phones.

Megan is trying not to cry. She is sick of being fat, sick of being a milk machine, sick of not having her own income, sick of being dependent on her man, and sick of not knowing what to do when the baby cries. It is her first baby and sometimes she doesn't think she has any idea of what she is doing. She feels like an imposter and is terrified someone will catch on very soon and point at her, yell at her, and take her child away from her, because she is a crybaby. She knows this is stupid and feels even more like crying when she realizes the stupidity of her stupidity.

Phillip watches the dog blink and this is interesting. But a flailing fist pops up and punches Phillip in the eye and he lets out a cry.

Beebop curls into a ball away from the crying baby who has just punched himself in the eye. The cries are a lot like the sound of her squeaker toy and Beebop lets out a world-weary sigh. Stu hears the dog sigh, the baby cry, and notices his woman's discomfort. He is helpless and wants to say something, but knows if he says anything, anything at all, even something he thinks is nice, or helpful, or pleasant, or cheerful, his woman might weep. And then he'd have two criers and one sigher.

Megan squirms and through the snow reads the signs on the hotels and restaurants. The car stops at a red. In front of a laundromat, on the sidewalk, stands a dark man with black hair in a leather jacket. He wiggles thick eyebrows up and down and squints in the snow



as he smokes a cigarette. Megan speaks. "Hey, look, James Brown."

Phillip hears his mother's voice – her happy voice – and pauses.

Beebop lets her tail wag once and sits up. Mom's happy. Mom's happy.

Stu catches sight of the man. His woman is correct: there stands a guy that looks just like a happy James Brown. "He's alive and doing laundry," Stu says.

The man's eyebrows wiggle. He looks over toward The Family and opens up his jacket revealing a shirt that reads glittery, "Giving Up Food For Funk."

Stu's woman grins. "It is James Brown, downtown."

The dog studies James Brown while whapping her tail on the baby's car seat.

The baby says "oooo, oooo."

"Right on, right on." Stu presses the button, lowering the windows. Cold pine air drifts in.

His woman lets her arm out and brings back snowflakes on her sweater to show everyone.



STEFANIE FREELE



Stefanie Freele was born and raised in Wisconsin and currently lives on a river on the west coast. Her recent fiction credits include *American Literary Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Permafrost*, *Westview*, *Hobart*, and *Contrary*. She will have forthcoming work in *Talking River*, *Etchings*, and in a speculative fiction anthology titled *Futuristic Motherhood*. She has completed a novel and is working on her MFA thesis with the Whidbey Writers Workshop in Washington.