

3rd Place winner in the 2015 Edition of Short o Words (Adult Author Competition)

**The Snow Man
by MJ Floreno**

(Inspired by Photo #4 – Snow Man)

There he stood amidst the broken concrete that had once been a sidewalk in an affluent neighborhood. It was near the intersection of what his customers referred to as the corner of Love and Destruction. His presence was prominent and his unusual style of dress made him stand out like a sore thumb. It was frigid, under an eerily dark sky, and he suspected business would be more than slow today. Perfect for trying to gather his thoughts, as he had been having the torturous nightmares again, not sleeping well. Pulling his large frame deeper into the sheepskin coat and lowering the brim of the matching hat, he lit a cigarette and let his mind hark back to his childhood.

Raised by a single mother, who struggled to keep a roof over his head and food in his belly, he remembered how much he had adored her. It was his first experience with unconditional love and absolute terror at the same time. Oftentimes, when he returned home from school, he would find her looking sad and could tell she had been crying. He would regale her with the stories of his fourth grade class, but she rarely smiled. Instead she would begin making his customary dinner: one hot dog, without a bun, and a helping of macaroni and cheese from a box. On these days she never sat down with him. Just rushed off to start his bath water. He got a quick scrub and hair washing, put on his only pair of pajamas and then got settled into his bed. She gave him a warm blanket and a couple of books, but didn't kiss him goodnight. Then he waited.

As his eyes became heavy, he would catch a hint of her perfume as she walked past his room, and he knew. As quiet as she tried to be, he could hear the door close behind her and latch tight. In his fear of being left alone, he willed himself to sleep so he could dream of what the next morning would bring. The "mornings after" were always special. Mom would wake him with bright eyes and snuggly kisses. After dressing they would head for the corner diner where he could order anything he wanted for breakfast. Usually those huge, fluffy pancakes were the ticket. Even better than the meal was the time spent with this happy mommy. Holding hands she would take him all the way to the front door of his school and even kiss his cheek before she turned to leave. He anticipated all day, the special surprises

that would be waiting when he got home. Maybe there would be a new book, marbles, or even a gooey dessert for after dinner. Not the hot dog dinner, but something delicious.

He smiled at the memories of mom sometimes turning on the radio and dancing around the living room with him. But the light-hearted moods rarely lasted more than a day or two. As he got older he began to think of his mother as a rollercoaster, with very high highs and very low lows. He never stopped loving her or trying, in every way, to get her to smile. It didn't take long for him to realize that wherever it was she fled to on those scary nights, was the place that held and provided her with more happiness than he ever could. That frightened him even more than being left alone.

A black customized sedan pulled in front of him and broke his reverie. Every race, age, gender and culture had crossed his path in the last ten years, all for the same reason. No one knew his name and no one cared. They just called him the Snow Man. They came to part with their hard earned money in exchange for those small plastic bags containing temporary happiness. Just like mom had exchanged her body for dignity for hers. No words, looks or judgments were exchanged. Watching the frosty breath as it disappeared back into the warmth of the car, he wondered who might find that guy dead some day. Gazing up and down both sides of the street he began to think it might be a hot dog dinner for him. He was used to better dining fare these days, but winter days were often unpredictable in his business. This bleak season had never been his favorite for so many reasons.

By his senior year he had become much wiser to the ways of the world. No more fears, loneliness or trying to decipher his mother's moods. He knew her happiness was artificially induced. The scent of her perfume wafted through his mind and made him remember the day he had finally figured it all out.

On the last day before the school break for Christmas, he walked home surrounded by an air of excitement. Anxious to tell her that he had been asked to the big holiday dance, by a very popular girl, he tried not to allow too much of the freezing temperatures in with him when he burst through the door. Yelling his greeting only made the already still house seem even quieter. After finding nothing cooking on the stove, he left the kitchen and headed for her bedroom.

The sharp blast from a car horn brought him back to reality. Another lazy asshole that didn't want to climb out in the snow pile he had pulled up again. Well too bad. You want the goods then work them. Snow Man held his ground and waited. No skin off his

nose if the car pulled away. There would always be another to follow. After what seemed like a long time the rear door opened and a long, black booted leg stretched out. It was quickly followed by an expensive fur coat with a hood, wrapped around a mass of chestnut colored curls. The look said haughty attitude; and ice queen in the flesh. Every now and then an elitist from the suburbs showed up here in the 'hood'. Wouldn't want the neighbors to find out any secrets. Didn't matter to him where the money came from. Without a word she held out a handful of cash; just enough to buy out his entire supply. Turning on her spiked boot heel she returned to the waiting limo. That was almost too easy. As he slowly walked down the street, contemplating the "whys" of society, he had to wonder if she was someone's mother.

A grand dinner with a slab of chocolate cake, washed down by a hot cup of coffee and he was feeling quite content. He had given up feeling guilty a long time ago. Supply and demand. Walking around the corner, with huge white snowflakes falling around him, he slipped the key into his door, anticipating a long hot shower. Climbing into bed, he fell asleep in a flash.

Then he saw her. Dead. Spoon by her side and needle still in her arm, he froze. She looked so peaceful, as if she were smiling. His initial feeling was anger. How dare you leave me! How dare you love that coveted white power more than me! He lifted her from the floor to her bed and dialed 911. Police came, no one asked questions; it was all pretty matter-of-fact. And certainly no one cared about his feelings.

Sleepwalking through the next few months he finished school. Somewhere along the way he made some decisions. He would never again be hungry, afraid or love unconditionally. As soon as possible he escaped the neighborhood where he was sure that everyone looked at him with pity. Never looked back and landed just where he needed to be. On the street he was silent, respectful and trusted. As word got out, no one had any trouble finding the Snow Man, who kept his demons to himself and just conducted business as usual.