

# ONE COLD AFTERNOON

By Alan Haehnel

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ISBN 1-60003-619-8

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## CHARACTERS

EVAN	Fan at a Football Game
HOLLY	Fan at a Football Game
NATALIE	Fan at a Football Game
BEN	Fan at a Football Game
ROCCO	Fan at a Football Game
BECKY	Fan at a Football Game
DARBY	Fan at a Football Game
KATE	Fan at a Football Game
ALEX	Fan at a Football Game
ANDY	Fan at a Football Game
RAINIE	Fan at a Football Game
ANDREA	Fan at a Football Game
ELLIE	A nascent narrator
STEVE	Ellie's would-be boyfriend
NARRATOR	

## SET DESCRIPTION

A set of bleachers.

## ONE COLD AFTERNOON

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*(Lights up to a bunch of KIDS huddled on some bleachers, watching a football game. Blankets, hats, mittens, red noses. THEY cheer and huddle for warmth.)*

EVAN: Oh, man, if this goes into overtime I'm going to die! My feet are frozen.

HOLLY: No kidding. Go, go, go... oh. Geez, why did they have to tackle him?

NATALIE: Because that's pretty much how the game is played.

BEN: Yeah. We call this football. Two words--foot... ball. You say it now.

HOLLY: Shut up.

ROCCO: Why are they staying in the huddle so long? Keep it going!

BECKY: They're trying to stay warm like the rest of us.

DARBY: My butt is frozen to the bleachers.

KATE: Come on, come on. Let's go, guys! Make it count!

ALEX: He gets the snap, he's fading back, looking for his man, can't find him, and he's... sacked again!

*(EVERYONE groans.)*

ANDY: Blocking! You've got to block for him!

RAINIE: How can you even text? My fingers are too cold.

ANDREA: I blow on them for five minutes, then text for thirty seconds.

RAINIE: The old blow and text, huh? Clever. Who is it, anyway?

BEN: Come on, offense! Make it count this time!

HOLLY: Do you really have to shout?

BEN: Hey, what's the matter with team spirit?

HOLLY: It's too loud, okay? My ears are very brittle out here. You're going to break them.

ALEX: Third down and eleven, down by six, eight minutes to go. If they're going to do anything, it better be soon, ladies and gentlemen. Movement in the backfield, here goes the snap. He's looking to pass again. Hand-off to number 26.

KATE: Go, Greg!

ALEX: No, it was a fake--he's still going to pass! It's in the air! It's... complete! He's got room!

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*(SEVERAL people stand; ALL cheer as the runner heads down the field. Suddenly, EVERYONE freezes. The NARRATOR enters, dressed all in black, with short sleeves.)*

NARRATOR: 35 degrees Fahrenheit, a cold Saturday in early November. What is it that drives these people to come here, to sit on cold metal planks and watch? What human desire motivates them? Money? No--in fact, they had to surrender some of that precious commodity for the privilege of sitting on the cold metal planks to watch. Companionship? No doubt that's part of the allure, but why here? Why not gather in some warm place, some place less threatening to the human body? Though 35 degrees may not be lethal for a short duration, make no mistake. Without adequate protection, a person exposed to this temperature would, within the span of a single day, die. What has brought them here?

*(The NARRATOR exits. The CROWD unfreezes, cheering the runner on. Encouraging ad libs.)*

ALEX: He's down to the 20, the 15, the ten, the... oh!

*(EVERYONE groans at the tackle.)*

NATALIE: So close!

EVAN: Fumble!

ROCCO: Get it!

DARBY: Oh, no!

STEVE: Get it! Recover it!

ELLIE: Who's got it? Who got it?

STEVE: Do you think I can tell? It's a pile of bodies; you need x-ray vision.

HOLLY: That wasn't fair--he knocked it out of his hands!

NATALIE: Of course he knocked it out of his hands--that's the game! It's part of the game.

HOLLY: It shouldn't be.

ANDY: It's their ball.

RAINIE: No, it's not. The ref is saying it's... it's our ball!

*(CROWD reaction to the recovered fumble.)*

ANDREA: Seven yards, guys! Come on! You can do this!

ALL: Go, go, Panthers! Go, go, Panthers! Go, go, Pan...

*(THEY freeze again. The NARRATOR re-enters.)*

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NARRATOR: No work gets done here. In fact, three people in this crowd have skipped their regular jobs, called in sick--lost productivity and perhaps the trust of their bosses--all to endure these hostile conditions. No progress on pressing issues, either: Climate change, poverty, health care, inequality, education--these vast problems plaguing the species will remain as they are for the next several hours. No help from this particular group, at any rate. Animals, when they gather, do so for reasons that will clearly benefit the individual or the community at large. They gather to eat, to drink, to rest, to procreate. These humans have come to do none of those things.

*(Unfreeze.)*

ALL: ...thers!

*(SOME continue to chant "Go, Go, Panthers" a couple more times; the rest just let the chant die away.)*

EVAN: All right, you guys, let's go; you can do this!

STEVE: They're going to come back! They're going to do it! *(noticing the look on ELLIE's face)* What's the matter with you?

ELLIE: Oh, I... wow. Deja vu, you know?

ALEX: And there's the snap, he's dropping back...

BECKY: Don't pass; don't pass!

*(EVERYONE but ELLIE groans.)*

ANDY: Oh! Sacked again!

EVAN: At least he held on to the ball this time. I can't believe this.

HOLLY: What's going on now? Where are they going?

NATALIE: It's a time out. Good call. Good call, coach! Get it together, you guys.

STEVE: Now what were you saying? What's the matter?

ELLIE: Deja vu, right? I just had this feeling like...

STEVE: Like you've been here before. I get that sometimes; it's weird.

ELLIE: Yeah, except... it wasn't quite like that. It was more like... like everything stopped for a second. Does that make sense?

STEVE: I am freezing to death! I just had to say that. No, that doesn't make sense. What are you talking about?

ELLIE: I just... never mind.

HOLLY: How long is a time out? Do people die of exposure during time-outs?

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BEN: (to NATALIE) Do you have any hot chocolate left? I want to take a bath in it.

NATALIE: All out.

ROCCO: Okay, here they come! Let's go, Bulldogs!

BECKY: Knock 'em dead, Jonathan! Go!

DARBY: Okay, it's just second down; they've got time.

KATE: What does that mean, anyway, second down?

ALEX: It means that every time you get the ball, you have to advance ten... You know what, never mind. Just watch.

ANDY: If they put the ball over that line there, we'll all get very happy because we'll be ahead.

ALEX: Tied. We'll be ahead if we make the extra point.

ANDY: They should go for two. Go for two, go for two!

ANDREA: How about if they go for six first, huh?

ALEX: Here he goes--lateral to 52!

STEVE: 52--that's Carlson! Go, Carlson!

EVAN: No, Carlson, do not fall down!

NATALIE: Oh, my... they lost yardage again!

BEN: You're going in the wrong direction! The goal's over there! Over there!

ROCCO: What are we, 12 yards back now? This is making me sick!

(Freeze. NARRATOR re-enters.)

NARRATOR: A game. They call it football. 11 players on a side battle over who can carry or kick a strangely-shaped leather bladder across a line 100 yards away from another line. On the playing field, the participants grunt and sweat and growl, hit one another so hard that, at times, bones snap and brains concuss. In the stands, the watchers scream their voices hoarse and have been known to punch opposing fans--a word clipped from the longer term "fanatics"--directly in the face simply for wearing the wrong colors and shouting the wrong slogans. The outcome of this game could cause both players and watchers to rise to heights of ecstasy or sink to depths of depression, all because the strangely-shaped bladder took an errant hop on the turf. Why do they come? Why do they suffer discomfort when any non-rabid animal would naturally seek shelter? For a game. All for a game.

(The CROWD unfreezes. The NARRATOR exits.)

KATE: They're in good range for a field goal, anyway.

DARBY: What good's that going to do? We'll still be behind.

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MAX: Hey, points are points--there's still time left. A field goal could make all the difference.

ALEX: It's time for a pass--a quick pass into the end zone. Come on!

STEVE: Let's go, guys! (*noticing ELLIE*) What's the matter--you still feeling funny?

ELLIE: Yeah. I...

(*EVERYONE rises again, excited by the action on the field.*)

ALEX: He's back to pass! He's going to pass!

EVAN: 56! 56 is open!

HOLLY: Look out for the... oh!

(*General reaction of huge disappointment.*)

RAINIE: I can't believe he dropped it!

DARBY: Perfect pass!

BEN: Idiot! I-di-ot! I-di-ot!

MAX: Hey, shut up! That's my cousin out there!

BEN: Well, tell your cousin to catch the ball, why don't you?

MAX: It's freezing out there. Maybe if it was a little warmer, he would've caught it.

KATE: Okay, 25 yard kick.... You've got this, Petey! You can get it in your sleep!

STEVE: You want some Tylenol or something?

ELLIE: No, it's not a head-ache. I swear, Steve, it's like... like we're just going along, doing everything we're doing, and then we all freeze.

STEVE: Yes, we are all freezing, Ellie.

ELLIE: No. Like, we suddenly just stop moving. And then we unfreeze again a few seconds later.

ALEX: Here's the snap! Watch out for the block!

MAX: He got it away! It's...

ANDY: Good! Three points!

ANDREA: Nice kick, Petey!

(*EVERYONE freezes; the NARRATOR re-enters.*)

NARRATOR: A game. One of the great American poets, T.S. Eliot, was purported to have asked, "Why do men go to war?" And he was purported to have answered his own question, "Because women are watching." War as spectator sport. War as natural offshoot of the driving biological urges for territory, for dominion, for propagation of one's genetic material. So perhaps we should not be dismayed by the odd shape of the football or the seemingly arbitrary

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conventions of the game any more than we should be dismayed by the artillery and conventions of war. Human beings voluntarily exposing themselves to the elements: When they do it for war, we call them patriots. When they do it for football, we call them fanatics. What shall we label those who, during the first pitched battle of the American Civil War, the first Battle of Manassas, came from nearby Washington, D.C., with their picnic baskets and bottles of champagne? Patriots? Fanatics? Fools?

*(The NARRATOR turns to look at the CROWD on the bleachers, still frozen. ELLIE's eyes unfreeze and follow him. With great effort, SHE moves her head slightly. The NARRATOR notices the movement, is taken aback by it. Quickly, HE turns to the audience to finish his monologue.)*

Uh... you decide.

*(The NARRATOR exits quickly.)*

ELLIE: I saw him!

STEVE: Yeah, we all did. He got the field goal. Good kick!

ELLIE: No, not the kicker, not Pete! I saw the freezing guy!

STEVE: "The freezing guy." Ellie, I told you, we're all freez...

ELLIE: *(grabbing STEVE's arm)* No, Steve! Listen to me!

STEVE: Ow! Geez, Ellie, relax.

ELLIE: I told you about the sort of deju vu feeling, but it wasn't really; it was like we were just all, like, not moving for a few seconds, and then we'd snap out of it, right?

STEVE: Ell, I think we need to get you in, out of the cold. You're probably, what do they call it, hypodermic or something.

ELLIE: Hypothermic.

STEVE: That's it.

ELLIE: I am not hypothermic, Steve. Haven't you been feeling it?

STEVE: Feeling what? I'm watching the game--which I'm missing now, thank-you very much. This is a big kick-off coming up, here.

ANDY: Stevie, I'm thinking we should go for an on-side kick, try to recover it.

STEVE: No, no, it's too soon for a play like that. Too much time!

ANDY: On-side kick! On-side kick!

STEVE: Bad idea! Bad idea!

ELLIE: Steve!

STEVE: What, Ellie? They shouldn't go for an...

ELLIE: Any second now, we're going to be frozen again and the guy is going to come out.

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STEVE: What guy? What are...?

ELLIE: He's all in black. He doesn't look like he's cold. He's wearing short sleeves. And he talks like we can't hear him but like there's a bunch of people out there who can.

STEVE: Who, the refs?

ELLIE: Not the refs! This guy has nothing to do with the football game! He, like, controls us, Steve! He freezes us and then he talks about us like we're... we're some kind of display in a museum!

STEVE: Ellie, are you on medication? Or did you miss a dose? What are you talking...

MAX: Oh, good kick! Good kick!

STEVE: *(standing with EVERYONE else but ELLIE)* Get down there, you guys! Force a fumble! Hit him hard!

BECKY: Strip the ball! Come on!

HOLLY: No, no, no, no--get him! Get him!

*(EVERYONE freezes. The NARRATOR enters, casting a wary glance at ELLIE before proceeding.)*

NARRATOR: Truth be told, we needn't overly fixate on this particular pastime, in this particular place, nor on this particular culture. We might just as easily be thousands of miles away in, say, Brazil, where another crowd would be observing another meeting of men.

*(As the NARRATOR continues to speak, becoming more engrossed in his monologue to the audience, ELLIE slowly unfreezes herself, starting with her eyes, then moving her neck, her jaw, her arms.)*

Oddly enough, though that game would take the same name, football, the shape of the object of desire would be entirely different. The ball would be round. The lines on the field would be laid out differently; the primary mode of the ball's conveyance would be feet rather than hands; the pace of the war--oh, pardon me, I mean "game"--would be much quicker. Yet the patriotic adoration for one team and absolute abhorrence of the other... call it football, call it baseball, call it rugby, call it war--those feelings never...

ELLIE: *(standing)* Hey!

NARRATOR: *(startled)* Hey, whoa! What? Hey! What are you... how did you... I mean... who...? Sit down! Don't talk to me!

ELLIE: I can if I want.

NARRATOR: No, you can't.

ELLIE: Who says?

NARRATOR: I say. You can't be... who do you think you are, anyway?

ELLIE: I'm Ellie. Who do you think you are, anyway?

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NARRATOR: I'm... the Narrator.

ELLIE: Hello, Narrator.

NARRATOR: Hello, Ell... wait a minute, no! No! Not, hello, anyone.

You, Ellie, need to sit back down, freeze, and be totally unaware of me.

ELLIE: Why?

NARRATOR: Because that's how it goes.

ELLIE: Steve. Steve! This is the guy I was telling you about!

NARRATOR: Now, stop that.

ELLIE: Steve! Wake up! Unfreeze!

NARRATOR: Ellie, whoever you are...

ELLIE: This is really interesting! Steve, I'm talking to you!

NARRATOR: Stop! Cease! Desist! No more! Done! Leave that young man alone.

ELLIE: Why?

NARRATOR: Because he is doing what he is supposed to. He is where he is supposed to be, in his world, his reality, where you, incidentally, also belong, young lady.

ELLIE: Don't "young lady" me.

NARRATOR: Fine. I will not "young lady" you. I will "Ellie" you. Ellie, you are making a mistake. Ellie, you have stepped out of bounds. Ellie, you, and I, would be much happier if you would simply forget this little interaction ever happened, sit back down, re-freeze, and...

ELLIE: I can't do that.

NARRATOR: Of course you can.

ELLIE: I'm out now, Mr. Narrator. I'm in your reality, and I don't see how I can go back. Plus, it's a lot warmer this way. I don't even need my jacket. I'm going to come over where you are.

*(ELLIE takes off her coat as SHE makes her way through the frozen CROWD toward the NARRATOR.)*

NARRATOR: Now, Ellie, that is a... that is a bad idea. Stay where you are.

ELLIE: I'm coming over.

NARRATOR: No. Don't come over here. This is... I don't know how this happened, but you need to... you need to just sit... Ellie, you really don't know what you're getting yourself into.

ELLIE: *(standing next to the NARRATOR)* Hi.

NARRATOR: Hello.

ELLIE: Who are you talking to out there?

NARRATOR: When?

ELLIE: Earlier, before I unfroze and interrupted you.

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NARRATOR: You did interrupt me. I appreciate the fact that you recognize that.

ELLIE: Because when I look out I see a football game. A frozen football game. That's really weird. That kid is in the middle of getting tackled. He's frozen in mid-air, getting tackled, Mr. Narrator. How did you do that?

NARRATOR: Well, technically, it's not something I do. It's, it's... Ellie, I'm asking you, for your own good, to go back to the bleachers...

ELLIE: I can't.

NARRATOR: Wade your way back through your crowd of frozen...

ELLIE: I won't even try.

NARRATOR: Go back, Ellie! I'm telling you, and I wish you would trust me on this, that you will be much better off frozen on the bleachers. Forget me.

ELLIE: How?

NARRATOR: It's easy. Live. In your reality, just live. Think of this, this interaction we've had... as a dream. Dreams fade. If you don't talk about them, don't write about them, don't mention them, they...

ELLIE: *(looking out at the audience)* Hey.

NARRATOR: Stop looking out there.

ELLIE: Hey, what is that?

NARRATOR: *(grabbing ELLIE, dragging her back to her seat on the bleachers)* I said stop looking out there.

ELLIE: Get your hands off me!

NARRATOR: I'm sorry about this, but you wouldn't listen to reason!

ELLIE: You can't do this! Cut it out! I don't want to go back!

NARRATOR: You have to!

ELLIE: What is out there? What was I starting to see? Tell me!

NARRATOR: Nothing! There is nothing out there but a frozen football game, and it's about to be unfrozen as soon as I get you back to your seat! *(putting ELLIE back "where SHE belongs")* There.

ELLIE: You're crazy! You can't force me to...

NARRATOR: No! No. You are the one who is crazy. Now, I'm telling you, for the last time... I'm... pleading with you, for your own good, to just sit there. Sit still. Put your coat back on.

*(The NARRATOR works his way out of the CROWD on the bleachers, back to his spot.)*

ELLIE: I'm not cold.

NARRATOR: Get ready to go back to where you were before, at the football game, sitting next to your boyfriend...

ELLIE: He's not my boyfriend.

NARRATOR: He wants you to be. He will be.

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ELLIE: What? How do you know that?

NARRATOR: After a while, you get to... never mind. Just sit there, next to Steve, with all your other friends. Cheer for your school. Enjoy yourself. Watch the game. I was a dream. All right? I was a dream.

ELLIE: How am I supposed to...

NARRATOR: You can. You should. Trust me. Don't... look for anything else.

ELLIE: How did this happen to me?

NARRATOR: I don't know. But it wasn't a good thing, and you don't want to keep going down this path.

ELLIE: You just want to keep the power for yourself.

NARRATOR: *(laughing bitterly)* Power. Where I am is no more powerful. I just.... I'm leaving. Enjoy your game.

*(The NARRATOR exits. EVERYONE unfreezes. ELLIE stares straight ahead, as if trying to make something out in the distance. SHE still hasn't put her coat on.)*

MAX: Yes! Got him!

STEVE: That's not bad. That's good position. If we can hold them...

ANDY: We've got to force a fumble.

ANDREA: Defense, defense! Go, defense!

RAINIE: Go, Carlson! Come on! Hold 'em!

STEVE: If we don't get a turnover, if we can hold them here...

KATE: Yes! Field goal range.

EVAN: Time out; they're calling a time out!

BEN: Come on, you wimps! Keep it going!

STEVE: I would've called a time-out, too. *(noticing ELLIE)* Hey, Ell,

what are you doing without your coat on? Aren't you cold? Ellie?

Hey, what's going on? You're not going to tell me you saw that guy again, are you?

ELLIE: Do you want to be my boyfriend?

STEVE: What?

ELLIE: Do you want me as your girlfriend, Steve?

STEVE: Are you... here, put your coat on--you've got to be freezing.

Ellie, are you asking me to...

ELLIE: I'm trying to confirm something. Do you wish we were boyfriend and girlfriend?

ANDY: Stevie, Stevie, they're coming back out. They're going to pass, bet you anything.

STEVE: Who cares! Ellie, this is like... do you want to be my... I mean...

ELLIE: What do you want, Steve? What?

STEVE: I... yes! I want to be your boyfriend. I would really like us to...

*(The CROWD erupts, getting to its feet.)*

MAX: Interception!

NATALIE: We got it! Two minutes to go!

HOLLY: Yes! All right!

ANDY: Stevie, did you see that? Did you see that? Interception! Woo-hoo!

STEVE: Great, yeah, wonderful, fine, shut up, okay. Ellie, does this mean that you... that we are...?

ELLIE: It doesn't mean anything. I just wanted to know.

STEVE: Oh. Why do you keep staring out at the field like that?

ELLIE: Like what?

STEVE: Like... you're looking for something, something besides a football game.

DARBY: Ten yards to go--we are going to get this! Go, go, Bulldogs! Go, go, Bulldogs!

*(The CROWD picks up the chant. STEVE is still focused on ELLIE, talking to her, though we can't hear what HE's saying. ELLIE is still focused on what SHE is trying to see in front of her. This moment stretches out as the CROWD gets louder and ELLIE's eyes get wider, as if SHE is having an epiphany. Finally, SHE screams and we hear her above the CROWD.)*

ELLIE: I see them! I see them!

*(STEVE and the CROWD freeze.)*

Steve, I... I see them. *(ELLIE stands, still looking intently out at the audience.)* They were there all along, like a superimposed photograph. And just now, they finally came into focus. *(SHE looks over at STEVE, sees HE is frozen.)* Steve?

*(The NARRATOR enters. ELLIE turns to him.)*

Is this how it is--one reality at a time?

NARRATOR: Yes. No mixing. Usually.

ELLIE: I see them.

NARRATOR: Uh-huh.

ELLIE: It's an audience, isn't it? This is all...

NARRATOR: A play. For us, anyway.

ELLIE: Wow. Why didn't you want me to know?

NARRATOR: Not knowing is better.

ELLIE: Why?

NARRATOR: Ellie, once you've seen them, once you know, life gets surprisingly narrow.

ELLIE: Narrow?

NARRATOR: Listen, never mind. I'm just talking for myself here. Life as a Narrator for you could be an entirely...

ELLIE: Life as a Narrator? What are you talking about?

NARRATOR: I tried to warn you, didn't I? What did I say?

ELLIE: I just wanted to know...

NARRATOR: What did I say?

ELLIE: When?

NARRATOR: Don't be coy with me; you know when.

ELLIE: Fine. You told me to forget about seeing you, to just call the whole thing a dream.

NARRATOR: Exactly. You had your chance, and you didn't listen, so now, here you are.

ELLIE: Here I...?

NARRATOR: Here you are, Ellie the Narrator. Enjoy. It has its perks, I'll admit that. Temperature control, lighting, choice of music occasionally, all within your purview.

ELLIE: What are you saying?

NARRATOR: It can be fun! You get to see and talk to all these nice people out here. No pesky fourth wall to get in your way. (*going into the CROWD on the bleachers*) I remember when I first started, I had a wonderful time poking around in the lives of the frozen. Now, see, this guy really needs to see about some acne medication. Look, you can go through their stuff (*digging around in a purse, pulling out a piece of jewelry*). Very nice.

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