

He smells it coming. Not the powdery flakes with lacy patterns that children stick out tongues to taste, the kind of fluff that has fallen from November through early December. No, what's coming is wet, heavy quicksand-snow, the kind to bury a person. Window-blocking, roof-crushing, mad snow: the snow of nightmares.

The short, fat man sniffing the air is the last male in the Crawley family line. He stands alone on a cabin's porch in the fading light. Although his first name is Willard, no one has ever made the mistake of calling him Will or Willy: not his parents, not the neighbors from his early childhood, not even himself. He has never managed to earn affection.

A heavy metal bucket, held by one hand, drags down his left shoulder. Brown liquid slops over the top of the bucket with each step he takes. He searches the landscape of bristling evergreen trees and outbuildings about to collapse that hem in the claustrophobic cabin. His small, closely set eyes are on high alert. Although Willard has been isolated in the wilderness for most of his life, he always feels spied-upon and always senses danger. His fears are not unjustified; there are Crawleys left alive who'd like to see him beaten to a pulp or buried feet-first in the suffocating snow. There are Crawleys who would do the job.

Willard does not believe his family's accusation that he is a killer. He does believe other nasty things about himself, however, convinced by the grandfather who stole him away from the family and raised him. Willard is a greedy-guts, a lazy-bones. It's true that he resists doing simple daily tasks. He should empty the bucket of washing-up water in a spot away from the cabin, but Willard feels sluggish. He spent hours quietly tending the fire, anxious that movement would wake his grandfather from his afternoon nap. Willard sets down the bucket that's biting into the soft skin of his palm. Daylight is fleeing fast, adding to his sense of unease.

The sound of howling triggers a cramp of anxiety. It could be coyotes celebrating a rabbit kill, or wolves chasing down a deer. Willard hates wild animals and their freedom. The old man does

not allow card games, frivolous talk, or adventures beyond their cleared land. The food the old man buys in town is plain: beans, wieners, white bread, butter and onions to fry in margarine. There are apples and oranges, one each day to keep their gums from bleeding, and a single candy bar to set Christmas apart from other days. The years pass without celebrating birthdays.

Willard senses a shadow near the door. It's all that remains of Terrance, the Crawley boy their grandfather didn't save. Although he died in infancy, today he appears as an eight-year-old, wearing over-sized boots and a wool coat that belongs to their grandfather. As always, his skin is tinged blue, his lips bloodless. Because Terrance was last in the family pecking order before his death, Willard tells him to dump the slop bucket. Instead of obeying, the traitor fades away.

Willard kicks the bucket. Dirty water splatters over rough boards. He chases the bucket, bashing it again and again, making dents until his toes hurt. Only then, he realizes tomorrow morning his grandfather's eagle eyes will see what his deaf ears have missed this evening. Willard picks up the bucket and with cold fingers desperately tries to press the dents out of the metal. There are tools he could use in the shed, but the key to the padlock is on a chain hung around his grandfather's neck.

The howls start up again, as close as the edge of the forest. Willard flees back inside the cabin. He conceals the bucket from his grandfather's view and crosses the small room to hide the evidence in the sink. He pauses a moment, with both hands on the bucket's dented sides. His fingers itch to swing the bucket by the handle, to--

"Chores done." His grandfather's voice is the sharp edge of an ax. It's a statement and Willard knows better than to respond. Although Willard is nearly forty, the saying "Children are to be seen but not heard" still applies in this household. Willard failed to fetch enough wood to last the evening. As punishment, his grandfather moves his chair directly in front of the fire, hogging all of its warmth for himself. Although it's too early for sleep, Willard crawls onto his bunk fully dressed. He pulls his blanket up around his neck.

The shadow of Terrance, this time a blue-faced toddler of two or three, appears huddled on the far end of the bunk. He's dressed in summer pajamas and trembling with cold. Willard doesn't offer to share the blanket because he's more in need of the warmth. Even so, the boy's big blue eyes shine with brotherly love. The loss of Willard's baby brother is a source of never-ending pain. If the living Terrance was here it would ease the boredom. They could share in the hard chores and the harder punishments. Willard would not feel alone.

Snow smacks the cabin's roof with such force the deaf old man looks up as if expecting to see the roof blown off. Willard's fists clench beneath the blankets. In the years since his grandfather brought his five-year-old body, more dead than alive, onto the property, Willard has not once imagined leaving his grandfather's protection. But now, as the shrieks of the blizzard rise to match the panic inside Willard's head, he knows what he wants more than anything: To kick, kick, kick until everything he hates and fears is kicked to smithereens. That and to bring his

baby brother back to life.

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Elvis the Pelvis is spitting mad. He's also punching mad. The apartment is a one-bedroom and Gabriel Wheeler squats on his bed with his back pressed against the living room wall, even though it doesn't make him safer. To his eight-year-old ears, it sounds like there's a war going on in the bedroom. The fists of his mother's boyfriend explode like bombs each time they hit the wall. Celine and the Elvis she's been dating since Thanksgiving are fighting over medicine again. Elvis tries to make Celine share. Celine screams that she can't work because of her head cold and won't give his lazy butt even a taste of her dwindling supply.

"Spreading your legs for creeps isn't work," Elvis says. He's practically a giant and Celine is small, but her voice is the loudest when she shouts back. "Neither is moaning like a cow while you jerk your fat hips. You're a disgrace to the memory of the King. I want you out of my apartment. Get out now."

"Dumb cunt," Elvis says as he pounds the bedroom door open so hard it bounces off the wall. He bursts into the living room where Gabriel has nowhere to hide except under a blanket. Elvis holds a ball of crumpled tinfoil high in a fist over his head. He's still wearing work clothes and a fire-breathing dragon claws the air on the front of his white jumpsuit.

"That's mine, you bastard," Celine shrieks as she stumbles after him. She has bare feet and is dressed in the flannel pajamas she saves for sick days. Because she's not wearing makeup and has a red nose and eyes, she looks less like Gabriel's mother and more like a teenager. She cries as she lunges for Elvis's arm.

They shouldn't be fighting in the middle of the night and the next-door neighbor hammers on the wall. The neighbor is usually nice, sneaking Gabriel cookies when Celine isn't home, but tonight she sounds spitting mad like Elvis. "Some people have to work in the morning, assholes," she shouts. "Shut up or I'm calling the cops."

More than anything, Celine hates and fears the police. Even so, she shouts back a lie that she doesn't care who the neighbor calls, she'll shut up when she's damned well ready.

Elvis tells Celine to shut it because he's on probation. He lowers his arm and Celine collapses against him. "You bastard," she says in her little girl voice. "Give me my packet."

"Sharesy?" Elvis says.

"Okay, shit. Sharesy."

Even though nothing's funny, they both giggle and collapse against each other to keep from falling down. When Elvis notices Gabriel watching from under his blanket, he stops laughing long enough to say, "Need me to wipe that smirk off your face, kid?" Celine frowns at Gabriel, then tugs Elvis by the hand that's holding the packet until he follows her back into the bedroom.

Gabriel's dreaming about dogs when a loud rap on the door wakes him. A mean voice shouts, "Police. Open up." Gabriel scoots up on his cot as Celine opens the bedroom door while pulling a housecoat on over her naked body. She tries to run her fingers through her snarled hair as Elvis steps into the doorway. Glaring at Gabriel, he slices a hand through the air, then whispers, "I wasn't here. Got it?"

Instead of going to the door, Celine stumbles to the kitchen table and sits half on, half off of a chair. "I'm too fucking strung out for this shit," she complains. She pours blue liquid from a bottle into a dirty glass, then takes a sip. "Go on," she hisses at Gabriel. "Open the door before the nasty pig breaks it down."

The wood floor is cold. Gabriel's glad he's wearing his mom's warm, pink socks, even though she'll be mad if she notices. He's also glad he's wearing his Superman pajamas. He ties his blanket around his neck, hoping it will look like a superhero cape. The policeman hammers on the door and repeats his command. Celine hisses at Gabriel to "hurry the fuck up."

Gabriel stands on his tiptoes to slide the high deadbolt. He turns the door handle, then gets ready to run as he pushes the door open.

The frowning policeman is covered with snow. He's a lot shorter than Elvis the Pelvis, but he's scary in other ways. He has black hair, black eyes, brown skin, and is wearing a black hat with a sharp rim. His thick coat is covered with badges. Pouches and dangerous-looking objects hang from a wide belt. He stuffs a flashlight into a pouch on the belt, then moves his open hand near a thick stick.

The policeman looks down at Gabriel and smiles for less than a second. The smile becomes a frown when his attention turns to Celine. He looks hard at the closed bedroom door. Gabriel

darts back to his cot, then wraps himself up in the blanket. "Who else is here, ma'am?" the policeman says.

"It's just little old me," Celine says, "and Superman over there."

"Please step away from the kitchen, ma'am."

"I'm comfortable where I am."

"Move, now," the policeman barks.

Celine finishes her drink and slams the glass down. She dawdles as she crosses the room, then plunks herself onto the couch in the living room. "This suit you better?" she says.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," the policeman orders. He inches towards the bedroom door, stands to one side, then shoves it open. The room doesn't have a closet and Elvis wouldn't fit under the low bed, so Gabriel guesses he climbed out the window. The policeman checks the empty bathroom next. Keeping his eyes on Celine, the policeman goes into the kitchen. He opens drawers and takes out two sharp knives, which he drops down the gap between the fridge and the counter.

"God, you didn't have to do that," Celine says. "Do I look like I'm gonna go postal on you?"

"Safety first," the policeman says. He brings the blue bottle with him when he backs into the living room.

"This is fucking overkill for a noise complaint," Celine says.

"I'm responding to a report of domestic violence. Do you have any other weapons?"

Celine laughs. "God, that's rich."

"Your neighbor heard a male shouting threats. She also said she heard you screaming."

Celine picks up her sequin-covered cell phone from the coffee table. She taps it with her long purple fingernails. "Ever heard of speaker phone, officer? The kid's old man is locked up tight in a psychiatric hospital, but the tricky devil manages to get a hold of a phone from time to time. To cure the fantasy that his dad is a saint, I let the kid listen in on this latest call. If you don't believe me, ask him."

The policeman approaches Gabriel's cot then crouches down. His eyes are sad and droopy like a Basset Hound's. He doesn't ask if Celine is lying, which she only sort-of is. The call from his father came a few days before. Instead, the policeman asks if Gabriel is hurt.

"Get away from my kid," Celine shouts. "You can't talk to him without my permission." The

neighbor raps on the wall again and Celine shouts at her too: "Fuck you."

Before he straightens up, the policeman waits for Gabriel to shake his head. He takes out a book and pen from his belt. "I'm going to need to see some ID," he says to Celine in his tough voice. "I'm issuing you a noise citation. Expect someone from Social Services to drop by in a day or two to see if you or Superman need support."

"Fuck you, too," Celine says.

"And, ma'am, if your boyfriend hasn't deescalated when he crawls back through the bedroom window, call 911. You'll get a better response if your call is taped."

Gabriel pretends to be asleep when Elvis comes home through the front door, wet from the snow. He's still spitting mad, this time about his ruined costume. "This was your fault, bitch," he says, slamming the door shut. Gabriel watches through a slit in his eyes as Elvis grabs a can of beer from the fridge, then snaps off the lights in the kitchen and living room even though Celine is still up watching a woman sell diamond rings on TV. Elvis pumps his fist in the air before going into the bedroom. He locks the door behind him. The TV gives Gabriel enough light to see Celine, who stays on the couch, bouncing a leg up and down and smoking a cigarette.

After she butts out the stub and shuts off the TV, instead of making Elvis let her into the bedroom, Celine comes over to Gabriel's corner of the room. The cot sinks when Celine sits down beside him. "You asleep, baby?" she asks. When Gabriel doesn't answer, he feels Celine lean over to look at his face. After a moment, she sighs, and then lies down beside him even though there isn't enough room for two people on the cot. She smells like cigarettes and perfume and the sick of her cold. When she tugs the blanket to cover herself, Gabriel's front is exposed a bit. With his mom's body against his back, though, he feels warm enough for the first time all night.

Celine's breathing slows down. As Gabriel joins her in sleep, he wishes the Basset Hound policeman would come back and make them both safe.

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Harvey Sam, Fenny's only aboriginal police detective, chomps into a red apple. He needs the crunch to keep him alert until he reaches home after a twelve-hour shift. Slushy drizzle splatters against his Tahoe's windshield, making the wipers hypnotic. With the exception of the potentially dangerous "quiet on arrival" domestic at 2:00 a.m., the shift was a bore. Harvey can't say he wasn't warned before he accepted a job in his small, nothing-ever-happens hometown. If attending calls without backup doesn't kill him, boredom will.

Domestic disturbance calls are the sad core business of Harvey's precinct. He's seen enough to know the story: an abused partner, usually the woman, covers up for the abuser. Sometimes the situation becomes violent. The need for attending officers to secure the scene by identifying and moving easily-accessed weapons, such as kitchen knives and bottles, is all too real. More than one cop has died at the hands of a wife-beater's victim. Harvey doesn't plan to join their ranks.

He turns down his driveway, lowers the Tahoe's window, and tosses the apple core into a bush where birds often come to feed. He doesn't buy Celine Wheeler's story about a phone call from a lunatic ex-husband put on speakerphone. Some jackass fled the scene, a boyfriend probably, maybe even one of the woman's johns, if she's reckless enough to bring work home. Celine, with her filthy mouth and harsh attitude, wasn't a surprise. Hardened druggie pros are a dime a dozen. The surprise for Harvey was the boy. If not outright abused, Gabriel Wheeler is certainly suffering from parental neglect. A poor diet and stress show in the circles under his eyes, the scabby skin, and the dirt that doesn't cover fading bruises. Even the child's Superman pajamas were at least one size too small. Yet, despite living in squalor with a shrew for a mother, and despite almost certainly witnessing violence, the boy met Harvey's gaze with curiosity and trust.

Lights are on in the small bungalow where Harvey was born and raised. He parks the Tahoe beside Pam's new Jaguar. Living with Pam has some expensive consequences. He mentally boxes up his concern for Gabriel Wheeler as he shuts off the ignition. Then he heads inside for a

few minutes of quality time with his kid before he hits the sack.

"Good morning, Merry Sunshine," Harvey calls as he secures his gun and belt in a hall closet safe, then hangs up his coat and hat. His stepdaughter, seven-year-old Effie, calls back a muffled hello. Harvey heads down the hall that leads to the open-concept living room and kitchen. His adorable redhead is seated on a stool at the kitchen island eating a bowl of cereal. Dressed for school in a yellow leotard, tutu and tights, she's pretending to feed cereal to Mr. Turddy, her stuffed turtle.

Instead of giving Harvey her usual gap-toothed morning smile, her eyes are sad as she looks past him into the living room. Harvey follows her gaze and sees a blanket and pillow dumped on the couch. He turns back to Effie and tries to fake humor when he says, "Looks like your mom's on the warpath again. Should we get out our tomahawks?" Effie confirms Pam's wrath with a sad nod.

Whatever has upset Pam is an adult problem and Harvey doesn't ask Effie to elaborate. Instead, he pours himself a coffee, and then slices a banana into Effie's cereal bowl. "If you want your turtle to be invincible like me one day, kid," he says, "he has to eat a hearty breakfast." This earns Harvey a smile, so he keeps the banter going by asking about Effie's plans for the day.

"My class gets to practice for the Winter Extravaganza," Effie says. "I'm bringing my ballet shoes to school." Effie shoves her toy into Harvey's arms. "Mr. Turddy's going to sleep with you," she says.

"Sounds good." Harvey takes a drink of the coffee that will put his ass-backwards body to sleep as Pam enters the kitchen. Her blond hair is up-swept and shiny with product. The new navy suit and ivory silk blouse she wears is expensive and the expression on her face is ice-queen cold. She instructs Effie to clean up her mess, including her dad, then get her backpack and coat.

"That was uncalled for," Harvey says, after Effie leaves the kitchen.

Pam crosses her arms across her chest in a power stance, though not tight enough to wrinkle the fabric of her blouse. "So was locking away \$20,000 of our money in an education fund without consulting me first."

Protecting his dwindling savings was a desperate move on Harvey's part. In the five years they've been together, Pam burnt through most of Harvey's inheritance from his deceased parents and all of his bi-weekly paychecks. "The money will be there when Effie's ready for college," he says. "That should be what matters."

Pam packs her usual lunch of a meal replacement bar and carrot sticks. "Obviously you don't trust me, Harvey. And, after this, I can't trust you. So where does that leave us?"

Harvey has a dozen answers on his lips, none of them kind, but he's silent as Effie rejoins them

in the kitchen with her backpack hung from one slight ballerina shoulder and downcast eyes. Pam isn't screaming or hitting, even so Harvey feels as though he and Effie are trapped in a scene of domestic violence. To keep Effie, he'll have to stay with Pam, but it's already too late for any of them to survive their dysfunctional family unharmed.

"Don't bother answering," Pam says as she grabs her designer purse from a counter, then heads towards the door. "Because honestly, I don't care enough to bother listening."