

## The First Snow

This was the night before the first snow. The cousins were visiting from down South, and they'd all piled into the house. Multiple cousins. Indistinguishable cousins. Just a mass of youth. Mother bedded them on any horizontal space she could find with blankets from the basement, laundered specially last weekend, some with only wads of socks stuffed in spare cases for pillows. Cacophony had ruled for hours on end that Saturday, and evening, descending, felt alien. No: magical. No: holy. One of these three but not the others.

Bodies wound like clocksprings, barely twitching eyelids. Jill was the only one up, looking at their faces, this or that feature betraying kinship. Her father's jaw, her mother's short upper lip. The weird fuzzy hair that appeared in one of four siblings per generation. (Not a family stingy with siblings.) The light to study their faces came from the moon, early and blinding. The cousins had flawless skin and fine brushed eyebrows. Jill's own arm, in that light, was freckled and sprouting with dark hair, like a boy's. Mother told her this would pass. She'd been embarrassed about her own arm hair at fourteen but it had thinned and blonded out with time. Jill nevertheless considered sloughing it off with a razor, though this seemed too odd to mention to Mother, either as request or decision.

At school, on Friday, Hunter had asked her to come. He'd asked her to bundle up and meet him at midnight Saturday. It was his birthday Sunday morning, and he understood they couldn't be together because of the cousins, but he asked her to stay up late and when the moon was bright, to come across the lane and across the cleared land where Mr. Zavodnik kept his bee boxes and across the little copse where that boy had gotten lost when she was a very little girl. Hunter asked her to meet him at the edge of the woods by his daddy's place and give him a kiss as a birthday present. His first birthday present for his fourteenth year. Right after midnight. It would be romantic, he said.

She sat up in a twin bed that cradled two other bodies Tetrised together, lengths and widths balanced inside the narrow rectangle, and peered out the window. No snow yet. Just the impalpable sound of its approach, the muffled middle C of an orchestra tuning. The tension of the sky, clouds massing.



The older boys told Donald that the best place to kiss a girl for the first time was someplace high up. The highest place Donald knew was the bell tower at his church, which had a black iron spiral staircase that shrieked worryingly, metal-on-metal, above and below you but not under the step on which you stood. Donald had been courting Patti Kellerman in every possible way for two full weeks now, and she had laughed at his jokes and accepted his sweaty palm against her cool dry one, accepted his arm draped across her shoulders with all the casualness of a wire spooled away from a stick of dynamite, while they sat in his mother's car at the drive-in with his sister Meredith chomping popcorn in the backseat, the paired stench of salt and butter turning his stomach, Patti's soft cool dress brushing his chest as she turned to snag a few kernels and chat to Meredith (she was a grade above them at school and thus possibly more interesting to Patti than he, Donald, the boy with his arm across the pink cardigan thrown over her very shoulders, was), and when the man in the movie kissed the woman in the movie, and then the monster jumped out of the shadows and knocked her down and threw her over its shoulder and carried her off, he shifted just slightly and came away with Patti's sweater stuck to his arm, the fabric's heat derived from his skin and not hers. She went on chattering to Meredith with bare shoulders. Her body, inside its dress, pressed back against him as she turned further around in the seat, as if he were a part of the car, a bony cushion with explosives embedded in the upholstery. The cardigan fell and squashed between them.

So he imagined that asking Patti to go up to the bell tower with him might push things along. He invited her to church with his family for the following Sunday and she cooed with delight. "Your family sounds *divine*," she said. *Divine* was big just then: malteds, new 45s, and handsomeish teachers all sheltered under its umbrella. She took his arm and squeezed it like a nurse checking his blood pressure. Her high, flowery perfume addled his senses.



Earlier in the afternoon, one of Jill's uncles had set rabbit traps in the yard. Mother had been trying to grow a vegetable garden throughout the fall, but rabbits had devoured every zucchini bud, every lettuce leaf. "What's the point now?" she asked, leaning against the railing on the back steps. "Frost's come and gone."

"It'll show 'em," said the uncle—Jill had just as much trouble distinguishing him among Mother's brothers as she had attaching her cousins to the correct parents—and snipped off a bit of wire smartly with red-handled

cutters. The trap had a noose of wire meant to close around the rabbit's unlucky foot, biting into it, holding the animal there until its captor woke in the morning and ambled out after coffee to turn it loose.

"It'll show 'em. Teach 'em all a lesson."

"I don't think rabbits learn like that," said Mother.

"All animals learn from pain, Merra," said the uncle.

"That's nonsense," said an aunt, distracted from refereeing a game of Red Rover nearby. The family dog, a barrel-chested Rottweiler mix named Michael Jackson, kept trying to play along, such that much of the aunt's work consisted of keeping him from knocking anyone over. "In experiments, those mice keep pressing the button over and over. They never learn."

"That doesn't even make *sense*," said the aunt's teenage daughter, draped lazy over a plastic chaise. "You're not even talking about *pain*. That experiment was about *orgasms*."

"Heyyy, Hilary," said Jill's father, tilting his head toward the Red Rovering cousins in earshot.

"Anyway animals can *too* learn from pain," said Hilary.

"And these rabbits are going to," said the uncle. "Mitch, put in another stake over there."

"It just seems a little late, Don," said Mother. "After the frost."

"Never too late to close the barn door," said Father, laughing. Mother shrugged and went in the kitchen and came out with a bowl of carrot and potato peelings, which she emptied into the incinerator across the yard. Hilary wore sunglasses, but she pushed them up on her forehead so no one would miss it when she rolled her eyes at Father's quip.

She was sleeping (or listening to her Walkman, or filing her nails, or whatever) by herself up in the attic. She'd insisted. Icicles presumably hung from her pert little nose by now.

Jill eeled out of bed around its two other occupants and crept into the living room. Children reclined in orderly ranks on the carpet, like mini-soldiers in a makeshift barrack. She tiptoed around their hands and feet and heads. The uncle sleeping on the couch had gone elsewhere, and Jill cuddled under his blanket. She meant to leave at ten of twelve, and it was only 11:20.

Hunter had been patient with her. She was timid. No one had ever even felt her up. It was probably her churchy family, her discomfort in locker rooms, the hard German consonants in her last name. Other girls knew the sinews of boy-bodies, knew their heft and their scarce soft places. Hunter's

body was a strong sapling in JC Penney's clothes. She wanted to spread her hand on his chest and see if his skin was warm. The ferocity of this image, rising like a soda-bubble before she went to sleep, her hand atop his skin, over his beating heart, frightened her. Especially because Hunter said that he cared about the Jill inside her head and heart, not the Jill inside her clothes. Of course she thought that was nice of him, but she cared about the Hunter inside his clothes. She longed to know if, out of them, he was as ordinary, as inconsequential, as she was, or if he was something different altogether.

The moon was now totally obscured. No scudding puffs, but a thick woolen duvet, lighter than gray, nearly the vague watery white of Grandmother's tea set. Yes. Snow. The front had rolled south across Lake Erie and here it was now, the loveliest silence of all, waiting for the conductor to stride out and take a bow and begin.

"Jill?" It was Tina, from the floor. "Is it snowing?"

"Not yet."

"Can I stay up and watch?" She extracted herself from her sleeping bag (actually Jill's sister's sleeping bag, green with a disfiguring paisley rash) and crawled under the uncle's abandoned blanket. "I've never seen snow before."

"Me neither." Jerome, from his own sleeping bag.

"Shut up, dork," said Tina. "Go to sleep."

"Make me."

"You've never seen snow at all?" said Jill.

"It's too hot for snow in Biloxi," said Tina. "Is snow heavy when it lands on you?"

Jill began to say no, but Jerome said that was a stupid question, and they bickered in whispers until the rest of the cousins had popped their heads up, like prairie dogs, to watch the fun.

"It's not heavy by itself," Jill cut in, "but it's heavy in a shovel or on top of a car. The wetter it is, it's heavier."

"Does it come wet or dry?"

"It can't be dry, dummy. It melts, like ice."

"You've never seen it either. I'm asking Jill."

"She could tell you if you'd shut your cake-hole."

And so on. Kids. Jill lost the thread when a clump of cousins from Mobile started up about a broken window for which one of them had been punished severely and unjustly, when really it was Ratface Ben down the street who broke it and ran off, and Ratface's mom lied like a dog when she said he was

at a piano lesson because everyone generally agreed that Ratface couldn't play a piano if he had four grubby hands instead of two. Another clump of cousins resumed a heated dialogue that had been going on for years, apparently, about whether Obi-Wan was a better Jedi than Luke, and Tina and Jerome got going because Jerome hit Tina on the arm and claimed that it didn't hurt, while Tina argued that it did. In the middle of all this getting louder and veering toward physical injury, the uncle walked in with the neck of a kicking rabbit closed in his fist.

It began to snow.



Patti came to church in a sweet little hat and white gloves, like an older or richer girl. The only hats in Donald's church were worn by the wives and daughters of Mr. McDougall, who owned the paper mill. Donald's chest glowed at the sight of her walking toward the church steps, so pretty and well-pressed. Something about her stride, her carriage, spoke of confidence borrowed and donned, like her mother's coat, with only her uncertain body beneath. Unbutton the coat, and you unbutton the girl: so Donald hoped, thinking of the bell tower. The glow moved southward.

The plan was for Patti to sneak away to the bell tower immediately after the service ended. Since this was not her church, no one would notice, or say anything. Donald would linger and make conversation for a little while, and then he would follow her. He didn't have an answer when she asked why the secrecy, or what was so important that he wanted to show her up in the tower. But she agreed.

She did not take the hat off during the sermon. Donald could only see Meredith's dishwater blond ponytail on the other side of the hat (polka-dotted, with a tiny, useless net veil). Usually he watched Meredith's nose with peripheral vision and nudged her when it started to dip. Father Bowers droned like a table saw and Meredith rarely slept well, a recipe for napping in church, to their father's ire.

Today her ponytail trembled as Father Bowers declaimed on the foolishness of coveting thy neighbor's anything. Donald had never seen her so cheerful on a Sunday morning. She even helped with breakfast, refused coffee. Their father rewarded her with a kiss on the nose.

When the organ set upon them, Donald whispered, "See you soon," to Patti and meandered with his parents into the cloud of relieved chatter. It sounded like savages' native tongues. Patti's cool dry hand; the crisp wave in

her hair. Her lipstick. Maybe smeared.

Ten minutes later, the staircase groaned. A hiss and giggle floated down the shaft and settled on Donald like snow. Human sounds. He lifted his feet, one and then the other, to the next and the next stair, trying not to shift or shatter the rust that bound the staircase to its girders, its bolts. More reached him: underhum of vocal cord, whisper of cotton. Yes, someone was up there with Patti. Who could it be? She knew he was coming, didn't she? She wasn't with another boy, was she? *All I want is a kiss*, he told the staircase, to shut it up. *I'm not asking for much.*

Shadows moved against the wall. Silhouettes. He climbed. One of the shadows had a sweet little hat, one a ponytail. Donald twisted, near the top, the floorboards at eye level, saw what Patti and his sister were doing, and light struck his retinas from all angles, rendering him some species of snowblind.



"None of you should be awake," said the uncle. The rabbit emitted weak noises. "What the heck are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Jill, did you wake everyone up?"

"No, Uncle Don."

"We wanted to see the snow, Daddy."

"They were curious," said Jill.

"All children are curious," said the uncle. The rabbit kicked air. "They also need their rest. I don't want a bunch of sleepyheads tomorrow morning."

"Let's go back to bed," said Jill. She stood and spread the uncle's blanket back across the sofa. "C'mon, everybody."

"It's snowing!" cried Jerome and pointed out the window. No one looked, except, maybe, the rabbit. Tina crawled into Jill's sister's sleeping bag and the rest of the prairie dogs settled back into their ranks.

The uncle caught Jill's arm. His hand bled freely from a gash across the root of his thumb, and the immediate stain on her nightgown appeared black in the snowlight. "You get back up to bed," he said. "I don't want to hear anything about this tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said Jill. She went upstairs. The other two cousins in her bed were nowhere near awake, but she stood by the bedstead for a moment, looking out the window at the snow falling thicker, quieter still. She ran her fingers over the hair on her arms.

It was 11:40. *I must get dressed. I can't let Uncle Don—*

The kitchen door closed with a thump beneath her. She looked down at the yard. The uncle carried the rabbit out the back door. From above, Jill could see a shiny spot at the back of his head. The snow formed a kind of glitter on his hair.

On the picnic table lay a pair of kitchen shears, Mother's yellow dish gloves, and a black garbage bag. The uncle muttered something that Jill could just hear, but could not comprehend, over the deafening silence of the snow, the sleeping house. Mother's gloves went on one at a time, while he passed the rabbit back and forth.

Then he picked up the kitchen shears and snipped through the fur at the back of the rabbit's neck. The animal kicked wildly. Holding it by the head, he yanked at the bloody opening until he stripped the fur off. The rabbit still lived. It pulsed. It bled. He placed the pelt, almost in one piece, on the black garbage bag and broke the rabbit's neck with a swift twist. The uncle whistled (it came faintly through the glass) and Michael Jackson trotted up to the picnic table. He sniffed the rabbit, glanced at the uncle, and set to. The uncle removed the yellow gloves and patted Michael Jackson's head. Then he tossed the rabbit skin into the garden, among his traps, to be buried by the snow.

Jill sat on the floor, holding the rungs of her bedstead, not yet nauseated. *What animal deserves to be skinned alive?* she wondered, and I wonder that too.



No one saw Patti fall. *I can't imagine who'd do such a thing*, they said, and/or *she had so much to live for*. But no one wanted to ask the kids who were up there with her what happened. Do you blame them? Meredith didn't speak a word for several weeks, and Donald started going for walks after dinner, walks so long and cold that he'd find himself two towns over at dawn with freezing snot on his sleeve. He finally kissed a girl named Bobette, whom none of the other boys wanted to dance with, at a cotillion in the church basement that fall. Everyone looked who'd looked away when the ambulance came for Patti.



The cousins thought they'd dreamed about the uncle in the middle of the night with a rabbit. No one mentioned it. There were snowballs to make, angels to form, before it all melted in the warm afternoon. Mother had found the rabbit skin in the garden, and thrown it into the incinerator with any number of other secrets, by the time someone found Jill, blue and still and perfect, half a mile from the house.