

Winter

By
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The snow came while they slept, and he wakes to nothing but white outside his window, so bright it makes him squint, snowflakes settled on the ground to become cruel little mirrors into his morning eyes. The storm knocked out his alarm clock, and the sun is high enough to leak through the trees, butter-yellow; a warm lie to make you step out and breathe in deep, so tempted by that stark look of clean, only to realize too late that it's cold enough to crack your lungs and then you're dry-hacking on the frost.

Over two feet of snow fell in just less than five hours, and the pass is closed off for sure now, the little four by four trail that winds up the mountain from a town of three bars and two churches. They're cut off until the melt, just like every year, and down in the town their isolation comes with only a shrug of shoulders. Never mind that it's been eight years since their parents rolled their car off of the trail and two since their uncle packed what he could and left before the snow could keep him.

The boy standing by the window is only eighteen, but not young; he and his sister quit going to school shortly after their parents died, and alone on the mountain, with no youth to measure by, they quickly became ageless. He turns his sandy blond head at the sound of dog toenails clicking across the hardwood floor and says, "It's cold out," to his sister, Mara, who gives him the finger, *I know that you shit*, and heaves her way out the door.

After she's gone, he turns his face back to the winter, back to the bright, angry day, but nothing has moved.

It's two days before the freeze breaks and he can ride up to the North barn to check on the bull. Two long days spent tolerating Mara, who was irritated that the cold kept her inside, forty-eight hours of tight lips and plates slammed down hard enough to make his eggs cower closer to his ham. But she was polite. They were both carefully polite, because it was just the two of them, and a temper once released had nowhere to go but tearing through the house and then back again, neither one able to escape the other.

So the ride up the powdery trail is crisp and welcome, if not fast; his horse is buried up to her belly, his feet getting wet as they drag along. It's warm, twenty-eight degrees at least and she's sweating, steam curling up off of her neck like smoke in the absence of a breeze, and he has to unbutton his coat.

When his horse stops suddenly, coming around a sharp bend in the trail, what he sees is so unexpected that at first he doesn't know what he's looking at; it's lying with its neck stretched out along the ground, on its belly with its hind legs splayed out underneath. A caricature of a deer, like Bambi looked when he fell ice-skating.

He clicks to his horse but she doesn't move, just blows out hard through her nose in a white cloud and paws the snow. So he gives her the spur and she picks her way closer, close enough for him to see the deer's frozen eyes, bugged out in fear, and then the belly, and the blood soaking through the snow like cherry syrup.

The animal has no stomach left. He leans down closer to squint at the bright red slices that emptied it of entrails, numerous quick slashes and he sits up fast, looks up into the trees for the cat with his fingers on the pistol in his saddlebag. But there's no movement besides a few brave birds in the bare branches.

After a minute or two he dismounts, holding his horse tight by the reins, and looks more closely at the deer. It's frozen, which doesn't make any sense; pumas will drag a big kill off into the brush, not leave it in the open for anyone to find. Looking around he can't see any tracks, although he figures that they could have been covered by a breeze. But there are marks around the deer itself; a wild spattering of snow and deep grooves cut from claws or hooves, where the deer fought and lost.

When he takes the pistol and a length of rope out of his saddle it's second nature, just a chore, and he ties the deer's legs together without looking at the rest of it, trying to ignore the looseness of the hide, and the funny yellow foam around the wounds. It has to be moved off of the trail, up farther into the mountain where hopefully the cat will find

it and stay, and the cows will be safe. He mounts again and secures the rope to his horn. For several long minutes they drag the kill up the slope, leaving blood and little chunks of meat behind them in the snow, salty pink.

That night they sit in front of the TV, M*A*S*H reruns flickering on the screen and peppering their evening with dry humor and laugh reels. He told her about the deer over dinner, asked her to stay close to the house for a few days and then promptly shut up while she sulked.

Now dinner is done, and she lets the dogs back in, all put out while they eat except for the little shaggy black one with the bad paw. They burst into the space, all five, wet feet across the wood floor and flinging melting snow chunks out of their fur that will later form puddles to soak his socks. He has an urge to kick one as it scampers past, but it's the little one with the tender paw and he picks it up instead, shaggy black bundle, and watches it as it watches the others play. Out of the corner of his eye he catches his sister smiling, staring blankly at the TV but paying attention to him, and he thinks that with her golden hair and green eyes she should have been gone years ago, down into the town and straight through it to something better. She would have been gone, too, if it weren't for him, him with his own golden hair and green eyes, and he's staying, thinking it's better to be smart on his parents' mountain than stupid anywhere else.

"Stop looking at me like that, Cole," she says without returning his stare. "This isn't 'Flowers in the Attic.'"

"Funny," he says even though it isn't, because after long winters of just the two of them, it's actually a little uncomfortable. He tosses the dog to her and she takes it into the kitchen to check on the pie. Almost instantly he wants it back in his lap, something warm and familiar, something with little loyal teeth to help him shake the image of that kill; he sees a red, wet belly every time he closes his eyes.

"What else is bothering you about that deer," she says, returned from the kitchen on padded feet and reading his mind in that strange way that she has, as if being the only two brains for miles has bridged the gap left by solitary wombs.

"It wasn't normal," he says softly, and his eyes flicker to the door and focus on the lock like he's waiting for it to click open. "There wasn't any meat gone. It was more like it was field dressed."

"But it wasn't," she says conclusively, her eyes flicking to the door as well, and they both know that this is dangerous territory in which to be talking during this time of year, now, with nowhere for their minds to run. "Nobody's out there, Cole. And besides, you said they were claws. Not bullet-holes." She turns around and goes back into the kitchen for the pie, and he can smell the cinnamon now, their mother's recipe for homemade apple.

"No, not bullet-holes." But, he thinks, it could have been a knife. Clumsily wielded and making too many cuts, except that there's no one here to do that, no one who *would* do that. No one comes up the mountain until the early spring, and then it's only Mr. Bateman, on his snowmobile, a wary look in his eyes like every year he expects to find their bodies instead of their smiling faces.

The black dog is back in his lap and Mara's got pie for both of them and for a few minutes they just eat and watch M*A*S*H and then she gets this sly look on her face and says, "Maybe it's the Wendigo, Cole."

There's an almost imperceptible pause in his eating and he has to make himself cut through the crust, resentment quick up in his throat. It's winter and she should know better than to say something like that.

"You remember," she says, smiling, and hooks her hands into childish claws. "The Wendigo. It wanders the mountains in search of flesh, born in the moment that a human becomes a cannibal." She laughs, because he's stopped eating his pie and is staring straight ahead, parody of the Korean War reflected in his irises. "Come on, you remember? That used to be Dad's favorite to tell us when we ran off during the summer."

He rolls his eyes, but he hates that story, has always hated it, and now hates her for telling it. The Wendigo. The thing with grayed skin and yellowed eyes; the fast thing on sinewy legs. The thing that was once human but tasted human meat and became something different. Just a Native American spook story to keep the kids in line, or for a little bit of fun around the campfire.

"I'm just kidding, Cole," she says over a mouthful of apple. "Don't get so scared."

And he glares at her, because he is scared, and he'd like to scare her too; he's the one who had to see that shredded deer, and she knows nothing, but all he can think to say is, "Grow up, Mara."

She smiles sweetly and finishes her pie, and on her last bite the TV clicks out with a robotic burp, the lines gone down somewhere, and they stare for awhile at the last bright spot, right in the center.

That night he can't sleep. He thinks continually of the deer, that dead, cold thing lying somewhere up above them, and when he dreams he sees it, sliding slowly down the mountain towards them on its torn belly, coming at him with warning eyes.

When he finds the bull dead a day later he doesn't dismount. His horse is shying and pawing nervously even though she's dragged at least twenty dead cattle in her lifetime, and been there for the slaughtering.

His mind is made up in an instant as he looks at it. He's going to abandon the North barn to the cat until spring, and pray that there's enough game to keep it in the hills. The bull alone should feed it for a month.

He's ignoring the frozen, yellow foam around the bull's belly skin, ignoring how the hide has been pulled loose and the organs strewn out. He's trying to ignore it, even though he's butchered enough cattle to know that it's all still there, that nothing has been eaten. But his brain doesn't like it, and his horse doesn't like it, stomping in the snow, and he pulls the pistol out of his bag and says out loud, "What kind of a cat would take on a two thousand pound bull?"

His words die in the still without an echo and they sound anything but brave, and the voice that comes back at him makes him shiver.

"It's not a cat, Cole. It's the Wendigo. And the deer, the bull, they're not what it wants. It's coming for us."

It's his father's story in his sister's voice, that same low, playful voice from the night before, so clear and close that she could be there on the back of the saddle with him.

"It could be anywhere, you know, watching you, so thin from the side that you can't even see it. . . That's how they hunt, so fast and so thin; it could be standing right in front of you and you'd never know, not until it turned, and then it would be too late. . ."

He's sweating, and backing his horse away from the carcass, feeling stupid but too scared to care, just wanting to get to the gate and go through.

He thinks he can feel it, feel something come up, rise up behind him out of the snow, but he won't look back, won't look back to see if that dead bull has jerked to life on bloody legs, nor will he look to see if there's something else coming on elongated limbs, something with gray skin and bleary eyes.

Instead he kicks his horse hard and she tosses her head and tries to run, his fear leaking into her through the leather, but the snow is so deep, and no matter how hard he kicks, she can't manage more than an awkward, leaping canter. It's too slow, and he knows that if he looks back he won't even see it closing in; it will be there already, right over his shoulder with yellow, foamy teeth. He kicks her again, and she plods on, and her legs move like legs in a dream, working hard but never as fast as the thing trying to catch up.

After that, Cole doesn't leave the house, and he won't tell Mara why, just sits on the couch with a book that he isn't reading, the little black dog sometimes in his lap. He told her about the bull, and she takes his pistol with her now when she goes to feed the cows and dogs, and he can tell she's worried, because she does all of his work without complaint. She can't imagine that it's her story that's keeping him in; to her it was only a tease, just five minutes on that one night. She never heard her voice ringing off of the inside of his head out on the mountain. She never felt anything running up fast behind her.

"Don't go out," he says to her as she pulls on her parka and she sighs.

“Look, I have to check the fences,” she snaps. “It’s just a cat, Cole. We’ll shoot it this spring, or I’ll shoot it now.” She’s got all six dogs with her, even the little black one huddled in the crook of her arm, and she feels safe.

But he can think of nothing but animals with open bellies and staring eyes. “You won’t come back,” he says as she shakes her head and walks out.

That night he stays awake with the house lit, his ears straining in the quiet to hear her footsteps, but there’s nothing. Not even a gunshot.

After two days he tells himself that she left. She was sick of him, had made some pact with a neighbor boy who had taken her away on an Artic Cat, or that she’s just choosing to stay out, to take a break from him, like she used to when she was a little girl. Their father told her once that she wasn’t a little girl at all, that she was a tree sprite, possessed by the spirit of the woods, and Mara had liked that so much that she tried to prove him right. For three days they had called for her in the dark, with dogs and neighbors and flashlights, only to find her happily playing in a cave, wearing a grin and dirt and torn pajamas.

That’s what he thinks about when he rides the fences on the third day, his horse puffing at his constant kicks and a rifle tucked in the crook of his arm. He thinks about his sister, gangly blonde ragamuffin with moss on her face. And when he finds her, he thinks of those three days he spent inside while she was freezing, and he thinks that if he’d gone with her that day that she would have been safe. No cat or man or goddamn Wendigo would have touched them if they had been together.

He looks down at her without blinking. She’s on her back in her blue parka, big green eyes frozen wide on the sky, and blood in a perfect dot in the snow around her middle, like she laid across a bulls eye. Beside her are the six dogs, protectors to the last, and each one torn to bits.

She’s not like the deer or bull; there are pieces of her gone, some of her thigh and a chunk off of her side, the wounds caked with yellow foam.

She is meat, Cole thinks, and lurches, vomits quickly off to the side of his horse and comes up crying.

A cat didn’t kill all six of my dogs, her voice says inside of his head. A cat didn’t take that deer, or cleave that bull from ass to throat. It was looking for something and now it’s found it. Leave me for it, Cole. Leave me here, and get down the mountain.

But after a few minutes he dismounts and gathers her up, pulling what’s left of her parka gently closed and trying not to feel the jab of her bared ribs, pushing against the fabric like a pile of broken twigs.

That night the wind howls. He has placed Mara on the couch and sits on the chair opposite. He has closed her eyes but can’t imagine that she is sleeping, even though her face is softening as it thaws.

Outside he hears his horse screaming loud up over the wind and he picks up his pistol. He holds his breath until the horse stops screaming, and then stares at his dead sister, waiting for the gray face to creep up to the window.