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## The Snowman

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recollections  
of things past  
—a story

GEORGE GARRETT

*The Snowman*

It had been a day of doctors. The first attack had come early in the morning, and they arrived soon after. They had come up the walk from the driveway, under the gnarled expansive shade of the liveoaks, quickly, but noiselessly, on catfeet, each with a small shiny black bag and the unsmiling but unworried concern they had learned to wear like a badge. There had been whispering at the foot of the stairs, in the hallway. The door into his room had opened and closed, each time with no more than a little click, discretely. All morning and part of the afternoon he was alive, and then, it must have been close to three-thirty, Mary was going down the stairs to tell Hattie to put on the water for tea when she heard one high shriek, her mother, the first indecorous action of the day, and she knew that her father was dead.

She stopped for a moment, gripping the bannister, and listened to that lone cry, the only cry of grief she had ever heard, echo sudden and naked in the house, then die away. She knew she must go on and she went through the dining room, opened the kitchen door. Hattie looked up from where she was sitting at the kitchen table with her Bible already open and her index finger, which she always trailed slowly from word to word, still pointing emphatically into the heart of the text. There was nothing written on Hattie's round black face, no sign of any emotion, but tears as rich and thick as raindrops fell from her eyes and splashed on the open pages.

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*"The Snowman" is from George Garrett's new novel, The Finished Man, issued this year by Charles Scribner's Sons. It is used here with the permission of the publishers. Recently returned from a year in Rome, where he and his wife "managed to get through the year with our two sons, 2 and 3, who are pure activity in any country or language," Garrett teaches English at Wesleyan University. His story, "My Picture Left in Scotland," appeared in the Summer 1959 NMQ. A volume of his stories is scheduled for publication by the University of Texas Press next year.*

"I think there will be tea as usual," Mary said. "Would you put the water on?"

"Yessum."

Mary returned, mounting the stairs slowly, catching a glimpse of her unchanged profile in the hall mirror. One of the doctors, the eldest, met her at the head of the stairs.

"We've given your mother something," he said. "She's lying down now. She ought to sleep for a while."

"Fine."

"There will be a number of things you'll want to do," he said. "If I can be of any help. . . ."

"That's very kind of you to offer," she answered. "But I can manage."

"I have taken the liberty of calling the undertaker."

"Thank you."

"You're absolutely sure now?" he said awkwardly. "I mean I'd be glad to stay until someone can come."

"I'll manage perfectly," she said.

Then they all filed out of the house as quietly as they had come, declining in courteous whispers her offer of a cup of tea. When they were gone, she sat in the dining room, alone at the big table with a pen and pad beside her, listing the names of people who must be called at once. Hattie entered with the silver service.

"Would you bring me a slice of lemon?" Mary asked, glancing up briefly from her list.

"Ain't that a shame? After all this time I can't even remember you always takes lemon."

And then Hattie began to sob, her great strong heavybreasted body heaving.

"Never mind, Hattie. You go and sit down and rest yourself a while. Everything is going to be all right."

That was to be expected. Hattie would cry, and afterwards, after the funeral she would be gone. It was lucky, Mary thought, lucky that somebody in this little family, this household, had enough self-control to cope with an emergency. Suppose she allowed herself the luxury of strong, undisguised emotion? Even her father—and she could picture him perfectly on his death bed, lying smallboned, strangely tranquil in the blue silk pajamas he had always loved—could not, never could, meet a crisis with simple rationality. She had seen him actually shed tears. A creature of moods, male moods to be sure, he was racked

by sudden enthusiasms, angers, depressions, and even, sometimes, pure sentimentality. He could stir admiration and, she thought, like a frail old king, the desire to protect, to shield his innocent flesh and spirit from the rude wounds of the world. But respect? The best thing, after all, that she had was her self-respect, a discipline which did not permit her the license of a variable temperament.

In an hour she had called everyone who should be notified at once, checked off neatly one by one the names on her list. The undertaker had called her, saying he would come for the body, as was customary, after dark. The Episcopal minister had also phoned to say that he would be there as soon as he was able. She had been upstairs and seen her mother sleeping deeply, her drugged pretty face as still as a child's. She had paused with her hand on the doorknob outside her father's room, wondered if she should go in and see that everything was all right. She decided against it. The doctors would surely have left the room in impeccable order. Still, it was strange to stand just outside the door and not at least hear the sound of his breathing. She went down again to the kitchen and found Hattie rolling biscuits for supper. It had not, any of it, been really as difficult as it might have been.

"You better see to the guest room. Uncle Bill and Aunt Louise may be driving down tonight."

"Is Mister Henry coming?"

"Yes," Mary said. "He will try to get here tonight too."

"That's good."

"I just hope he's sober. I hope he has sense enough not to come here drunk."

"Oh, Henry wouldn't do something like *that*."

"Let's hope not." She smiled tolerantly.

Whatever Henry did, had done, might do was all right. He could, did flunk out of college in his senior year, marry unwisely and unfortunately, find himself divorced at twenty-one, squander what money he could get from the family, money which, it turned out, could, might have sent her to college, in a half-dozen ill-conceived, ill-fated business adventures, and, reduced of talent and confidence, find at last a niche for himself as a radio announcer, a glib disc-jockey with an all night jazz program in a small town radio station upstate. Simplified at last to the fine, mellow, disembodied voice that charmed, like a magician's sleight of hand, with absurd bountiful promises of the virtues of hair-straightener, skin tint. Even his looks had gone. Henry had been hand-

some. She remembered that as a little girl she had been awed by what could only be called, then, his beauty. Somehow everything had softened and weakened. It was as if he had been a wax figure placed too near a flame. But, after all, to the dying day of all of them, it would still be Henry who could do no wrong. Even the gonorrhea had been an accident, a trick of Fate, and (how astonished, ashamed she had been) her mother met her adolescent tears of chagrin and disappointment with him with no sympathy, only a slight wise smile.

"After all, Mary," she had said. "Your brother is a grown man now. These things happen."

"What if it happened to me? What would you say then?"

"Hush up, child. You have the strangest ideas."

These things happen, but they had not happened to her, neither the chance to flunk out of college, to marry foolishly, nor, for that matter, the risk or even the occasion of contracting a "social disease." She had been taught, above all, to be a lady, long after first the Depression and then Henry had dissipated whatever actual claims the family might have on the title of gentility. Life is invariably shot through, threaded with ironies, she thought. The only thing was that it took time for the pattern of irony to become manifest. If Henry had melted, his early beauty and promise vanishing like a sigh, she had come through the fires of her hunger and deprivation with a kilned finish. Now at thirty-five she might have been a lithe bronze figure of Diana. Since she had been bruised into the beauty she now possessed, she took it lightly. She was not likely to be wounded by anything.

Just then the doorbell rang as the first of friends and relatives arrived, putting an end to her reflections for the time being.

The late afternoon, the early evening weren't easy. For one thing there was a sudden summer shower. It flashed brightly among the oaks, tossed the palms on the driveway, pelted the stricken azaleas. It made a kind of theatrical background for the guests as they stood in the living room, the dining room, the hall, a few in the library, subdued and wooden with sympathy. While outside the lightning flashed in vivid tines, they seemed to huddle together against the storm. But it ceased quickly and the late sun came again with a purer light, rinsed now. The yard steamed and seemed to swim in the last light. Everything was softened as if seen under water.

Her mother had come down, already in black, her pale face composed, to be comforted by women. And the men stood stiffly, holding on to their hats, as grave and clumsy, Mary thought, as boys at dancing class. Later there was supper and a few close friends and the Episcopal minister remained and sat around the table to be served by Hattie whose sobs had dwindled to mild sniffing. After that the undertaker came, and he might as well have been a thief, it was so quiet, so swiftly done. And then her mother took another pill and went to bed. The last of the guests departed, protesting their willingness to stay, to serve. Alone and quiet at last, Mary went into the library to read a book and wait.

She sat in an armchair and picked up the first book she found on the table, a detective story. He loved them, had loved them, rather. Here was this one, dogeared before the final revelation of innocence and guilt, the spectacular denouement. She began reading where he had left off, wondering as she read how he had managed to exercise the patience to get even this far into the story. On the other side of the room the grand piano stood, black and shiny, its dusted keyboard like the finest smile. That had been his pleasure too, to hear her play, not hers; for though she had begun early, even before she was of school age, and having some talent, had progressed quite adequately, there was always the specter of his insistence that she play, practice, improve. She had weathered the scenes, the tears and self-pity, and by adolescence was able to please him without effort, with perfect dispassion playing whatever he wanted to hear while the little metronome, tense in its wooden cage, ticked and tocked. All that was hard to forgive, but, then, there was no cause for forgiveness any more. It was remarkable to realize that now she was free to choose to play or not.

Half-dozing over the open book, she heard the heavy brass knocker pounding against the front door. That was something she had forgotten, black crepe for the door knocker. And that, of course, was Henry who never used the doorbell.

"Hello, Mary," he said, taking her stiffly in his arms. He had been drinking, but only a little, she guessed. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Everything is very much under control, but I'm glad you could get here."

"Mother?"

"She's fine, Henry. She's sleeping now."

"Have you got any coffee? I'm half dead. Wouldn't you know it?"

Just my luck. I had a blowout up the road, right in the middle of all that rain."

"Come in the kitchen and I'll make some. Hattie's gone home."

They sat on the high kitchen stools and drank black coffee, Mary answering his vague and wary questions, studying him as she might have a stranger, Henry looking troubled, but, like himself, unaware yet of the reality of the situation. It would probably dawn on him at the funeral. He would more than likely weep. Well, that was a bridge she would cross when she got to it. One thing at a time.

"Things are looking up at the station," he was saying. "I've shaped-up, cut down on the drinking and so forth, and the manager says the sky's the limit as long as I keep treading the straight and narrow."

"Do you like your work?"

"Oh it's all right," Henry said. "I mean just plain announcing is for the birds, but once you can get above the peon level, it's all right. If I can just wrangle a promotion out of them I'm all ready to settle down and be somebody." He giggled. "I might even get married."

"Do you know," she said tiredly, "this is the first time in years and years we've had a chance to sit down alone and just talk. Isn't it too bad?"

"We used to," Henry said. "I'll never forget when you were just a kid I used to have to come in and tell you a story in the dark before you went to sleep."

She remembered for the first time in years those nights, that voice, rich and implausible even then, coming from the close darkness with improbable plotless tales which rambled on until she'd finally fall asleep. She remembered, too, Henry coming home from his first year in school in the North. How had she forgotten that? Bright he had seemed then, touched with a mystery, shining with a surplus of promises. And on that first night he was home she had asked him to talk her to sleep as he had always done when she was a child. Henry told her about the snow which she had never seen except, longingly, in pictures, the whiteness of it, the ineffable silence of snow falling, the chill architecture of snow on the landscape, how everything under the sun was changed by it. And he told her about the snowman they had made in front of his dormitory in the early morning and how it lasted a long time, melting, but still recognizable as a work of art, the image of a man, after the rest of the snow had vanished and the familiar landscape had reappeared, unchanged. For some reason, and she would never

know why, that single image of the snowman slowly dwindling while the snow around him, substance like himself, melted, broke up into gray-colored patches and puddles, and he alone, left at last on the grass like an alien beast, something unimaginable tossed up from the deep sea on some shining beach to die, that image had touched her then with the keen unspeakable sadness of things. She remembered now (ashamed) that she had wept when Henry left the room, thinking she had fallen asleep. She had no idea what she had been weeping for, what loss, what grief or wound.

"I've still never seen snow."

"What?" Henry said. "What's that?"

"It just struck me that I've never really seen snow in my whole life."

"So what?" Henry said, laughing. "What do you expect living in Florida? You can't have everything."

"I'd like to see the snow falling sometime," she said softly, completely serious. "I want to see snow."

"Well, maybe you will one of these days, Mary. Who knows?" Henry said. Then: "I think I'd better turn in."

She rinsed out the two cups and walked with him to the foot of the stairs.

"Are you coming too?"

"No," she said. "I think I'll wait up a while longer."

Impulsively he clasped both her hands in his, his sad weak mouth trembling, his eyes suddenly brimming with tears.

"It's hard to realize," he said. "I can't believe he's dead."

"Goodnight, Henry," she said. "Get some rest."

Halfway up the stairs he stopped.

"Mary," he said softly, not looking back, "have you heard anything about the will?"

"Nothing," she said. "But I don't suppose there's much, do you?"

Henry shrugged and continued to climb the stairs.

She had done everything she could do. Now there was only the waiting, but, of course, there had always been only waiting. She opened the front door and walked outside in the lukewarm summer air, seeing through the dark oak limbs, the moss hanging loose like the hair of archetypal grieving women, the far bright stars and a new moon thin as the edge of a blade. The air was sweet with summer's richness and slow decay. If she tore off her clothes and shook her hair free and ran, ran, ran over the grass still damp, pearled from the afternoon cloud-



burst, among the hard oaks as crude as stone figures, under the wide bowl of the sky, would anyone see her fleeing, fleeting whiteness except God. Would God care?

Just then she heard a car in the driveway, and then she was running toward it. She saw the light inside go on as the doors opened, saw her Uncle Bill, tall and tired from the long drive, and her aunt. She came running on and threw herself into his astonished embrace.

"Oh, Uncle Bill!" she heard herself saying. "My daddy is dead. My daddy's dead and I don't know what to do."

"Hush, baby," he said. "Don't you cry. Everything's going to be all right."

#### FOR A PIECE OF DRIFTWOOD

$e = mc^2$ , and so I praise  
this piece of driftwood  
to the square of light,  
this mute gray marriage of dead cells,  
once fleshed with tissue,  
once wind-warped, rain-stroked, frost-furred,  
once cyclically buried by the mindless snow  
until the sun ran hot and close again,  
once warm and moving with the green-sweet sap.  
My touch crumbles  
the sand-worn wood to dust,  
drifts from my hand,  
sifts  
down  
to the arched and sun-warmed back of earth,  
litters a hand's-breadth of soil,  
gray crumbs glinting with the vast equation  
 $e = mc^2$  — is this  
the resurrection and the light?

—RICHARD CURRY ESLER