

The Devil's Churn

Winter storms announce themselves as they gather strength approaching the Front Range. A lone cloud sitting atop Pikes Peak in the morning calls the bitter eastern winds that carry the heavy snows to the plains skirting the mountains. Southern gales yield a yellowish sky forcing the land to appear bruised and beaten before a restrained storm strikes a meagre blow. From the north, winds hold clouds that are cold and quick and blur the land into a muted purplish gray, allowing no distinction between mountain and sky. But when a winter sun rises red, the mountains bleed with color, and an evening storm borne of the western wind is at hand. The air on these days is gentle and warm, and the land seems vulnerable in anticipation of the coming spring. On such days, the farmer may plant early crops, taking advantage of the still weather and pliable earth. The Ute Indian used these days to search the heart in solitude by praying to ancient spirits inhabiting nearby caves. A troubled and tortured mind would be cause enough to rouse the *Great Spirit Manitou* from his wintry sleep, and with careful listening from the prairie lands below, he could be heard moaning and whispering names into the wind from deep within the mountain.

The four arrived together.

Marcus came by foot. He hitched from Pennsylvania to St. Louis, to Kansas City, and on into Colby. Then he walked. He walked through Burlington, around Limon, and past Calhan and Peyton, finally stopping at the Diamond D. Leaning his full weight on the front doorway, he greeted me. "I'm your cousin from Philadelphia. We met about seven years ago when you came for Grandma and Grandpa's anniversary. I'm Marcus, Jess and Joan's oldest. Remember?"

I didn't. I remembered going back east for a Wetherall family reunion when I was in the fifth grade, and I remembered meeting a lot of kids who were all introduced to me as first cousins. There were so many, the faces blurred together, as if someone had placed everyone into a giant bowl, stirred, and out came numerous children who looked and acted exactly alike. "Are we expecting you?" I gave the screen door that separated us a little push. The latch had never worked right, and whenever the wind kicked up, the door would fly open and any old thing would blow right into the front room.

"I'm a surprise." He dropped his duffel at my feet, mixing road dirt with porch dust in the air between us. He took off his jacket and handed it to me. "I've walked all day today and yesterday, and in this weather, too." He wore a tired pair of jeans, faded away to white strings in some places, brand new tennis shoes, and a T-shirt proclaiming that *Reading Rots the Mind* from Kent State University. He hugged himself to keep warm and hopped up and down, making our

porch boards squeak. “The wind is strong today.” Having said that, he leaned all the way through the door and blew inside to the living room. “Nice place. How long have you lived here?”

He was tall, with dull brown hair, a rounded nose, and saw things through classic Wetherall eyes. Tired and faded, just like his jeans. Some ancestor must have passed these eyes to his children as a sort of joke not realizing that he was marking an entire clan. Now, the whole family always looks as if we are in desperate need of sleep. Marcus certainly looked like he was in desperate need of something. Even though he spoke calmly and evenly, his voice seemed to be permanently pitched at a high tenor. He seemed anxious. Not nervous, but anxious, moving here and there, looking at the pictures on the wall, the sofa, the fireplace, darting about like a moth caught between two lamp posts. Not knowing where to stop, or when.

“Planning on staying long?”

“Don’t know yet. Need any work done? I’m pretty handy with engines.” His words spilled out of him, all lumped together, as if they were made of sticky molasses. Syrupy, smooth, practised. “You have tractors or something? I’ve never been on a ranch before, but, hey, there’s a first time for everything. I can stay as long as you want, or I can leave tomorrow. Choice is yours. I’m a free agent, and go whichever way the breeze blows.”

“You’re lucky then. Most of us are expected to stay put.”

“You don’t have to, man. You can do whatever you want. This is still a free country.”

“Maybe it’s free where you come from. Here the country’ll kill you if you let it.”

The wind forced the issue, and the door closed.

The statue came by wagon. Starry Kempf drove the large bronze sculpture all the way from Denver to our ranch. Ever since his accident he’d taken to driving an old buckboard along the sides of the highway. “You don’t need a license to steer a mule,” he said once. “You just have to put up with a lot of shit.”

He showed up wanting to unload his debt to my father, hoping to find a spare bottle in the kitchen. Starry was an artist. A good one, too. He cast bronze sculptures, and quite a number of them found their way into museums, fine art galleries, and private collections. If he had been able to keep his earnings instead of drinking them away, he would have been considered eccentric. As it was, he was simply a talented bum, whose art paid his legal fees to my father. He had been out to our place many times and didn’t even bother to knock anymore. He just opened the door, leaned his way through, and made his way to the liquor cabinet.

We needed to fix that door.

“Here’s for the divorce.” Starry had hold of a large bronze statue, about three feet high and cast into the smooth shape of a whale’s tail. The head of the whale was non-existent, or had

disappeared moments earlier, plunging downward into a small bronze boat, casting bronze timber and bronze men into a wild bronze ocean. It was named "The Devil's Churn," and on the base were small faceless men carved in pain and wretched with fear, frozen in a perpetual bronze hell.

"Who the hell are you?" Starry, hands artfully curved about a bottle of Haig and Haig, finally noticed that there was another person in the room. Mom used to say he could sense things. But then she'd add, he'd have to because his eyes were always mostly closed and they probably couldn't focus too well anyway.

Too much bronze work would be my guess.

"This is Marcus. He's my cousin from Philadelphia."

"Hi, glad to meet you." Marcus extended his hand, but withdrew it and waved it at the statue when Starry upended the bottle, making small clicking noises as his ring hit against the glass whenever a big swallow hit his throat. "Did you make that?"

"What's he doing here?" Click. Click. Click.

"Don't know. He just came a few minutes ago."

"I'm not doing anything here. You a cop or something?" Marcus walked in a tight circle around the table that held the statue. "I can be here if I like, man. This is a free country. I can be here if I like."

"We'll be the ones to decide that."

He walked a faster, smaller circle.

Starry's stare was as quick and cold and certain as the bronze he had made.

My father came by car. His practice was in Colorado Springs, but many of his clients lived south, in the Cucharras Valley. Several days a week he would make the drive down to Walsenburg in his rusted-out '62 Scout International and set up a makeshift office at the local Republican headquarters across the street from the courthouse. There he would organize his papers, make his phone calls, type his own motions, and hope for better things than divorce cases or collection work.

"Officer on deck. Man the bar."

For as long as I could remember, my father greeted his home this way. Just for the record, I've never saluted him.

"Starry," he said, smiling. "What have you brought us this time?"

"You bastard." Click. "I give you my best works. And I know you can't appreciate 'em." Starry forced his sleeve cuff between his mouth and the bottle to catch the extra liquid that washed onto the side of his chin.

Maybe this is why he never changes his shirt.

"Not here at the house. Starry, I'm on my own time now. Save that lawyer lingo for

town.” My father admired the statue. He ran his hands over the tail, stopping just short of those damned faces circling the base. Those coarse hands travelled up and down the smoothness of the whale, delicately traced the curves of the fluke, warmed the cold lower body of the whale, and tested its heft against his own by slightly pulling the tail toward him. Up and over the whale, and back again, coming close, but not a finger clipped the bronze boat. Not once did he ever touch the rough faces at the base of the statue. Staying out of the sea altogether. My father was like that with art. He felt a need to touch it, caress it, soothe it. He had to handle everything. Even paintings. Before he could stand back to look at it, take it all in, he had to feel his way over the piece. Whenever Mom would finish a work, she would hide it for a few weeks until it was completely dry. Only then would she allow his fingers to flow over the thick, dried lumps of paint piled high on a cloud, or trace the outlines of the grooves and ridges flowing near a river bank. One of the few things that I remember about her was that she was afraid Dad would rub all of her colours away. To some extent that happened. In the six years since she left, he has practically rubbed her out of the family portrait.

“We have a guest, Dad.”

As if on cue, Marcus walked out from the kitchen, holding a sandwich in one hand, a beer in the other, and his face in an obviously practiced grin. Not quite a full smile, but enough teeth showing to make a photographer and a pushy mother happy. His chin pushed forward and up, away from his chest, and then he tilted his head, slightly, to one side. He posed upon the floor, chin out, head tilted, and teeth showing. I recognised him then. It was the grin. He’d smiled that way for every photographer, each year since he was in third grade. Aunt Joan always included a set of school pictures with her Christmas cards. She must have considered it a tradition, just like it was a tradition from schools to take pictures of toothy kids, tilting their heads to one side, wearing green plaid shirts. Marcus probably practised his grin for weeks before his picture was taken.

There never is enough time to do things properly.

Without taking his hands off the statue, Dad looked up at Marcus on the landing above the fireplace and said nothing. Well, that’s not completely true. He stared Marcus down to his level, giving him the best John-Wayne-I-can-kick-your-ass look that I’ve seen for a long time. Marcus just grinned through his sandwich and beer, missing most of what Dad said with those tired Wetherall eyes, but getting enough so that he began to flutter about the room again.

The wind rattled the shutters, and we could hear the branches of the old cottonwood sway out into the force of the wind, then snap back into place.

Rotted to the core.

The storm came by nightfall. An Albuquerque Low had settled in and pulled warm, moist air up from the Caribbean. A Cheyenne High pushed cold, dry air down from Canada, and both

met together along the Front Range. It was already snowing on the Peak and we could see swirls of wind and snow change the shape of Mt. Manitou. Puffs of snowy cloud contorted the old mountain into a grizzly, mean sort of creature. Out east of town, on the high prairies, it was still warm, but the wind had changed, coming from all directions at once. Swirling. Dirt and hay devils appeared and disappeared before my eyes. Just beyond the barn and the trees, I could see demons twirled in a hellish dance to a mournful tune, just as the snow began. Stockman's warnings played on the radio. Outside, the wind whined and wailed through the caverns on the west side of the ranch, like restless spirits looking for a bit of peace before continuing their long search for a way back to their mountain home.

My father stared at Marcus, Marcus stared back, Starry stared at the bottle, and I went upstairs.

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The *Great Spirit Manitou* commands the winds. The downward *Zephyr* is a warm and welcoming harbinger of Spring. The inward *Notus* is still and silent, and calms Summer anxieties as the night slips by. *Eurus*, hot blooded, bitter, and bad tempered enough for Autumn, fights an unending upward battle with the mountains. *Boreas*, cold and hard, skips sideways along the front ranges before turning outward toward the plains, and gives troubling impetus to any winter storm. The four winds meet each other at the base of the Rockies, spinning and twirling in a complex dance. Magic can happen when they come together, or else the four forge themselves into a demonic force that man, forever grounded in reason, could never hope to untangle. Legend holds that the *Great Spirit Manitou*, when roused from a deep, cold sleep, rides these mighty winds down onto the plains, creating miracles or mischief as whim and wind desire. In the dark, these winds tumble about the snow, watching for *Manitou*, and hoping.

They danced.

Spinning downward into the cold, hard waters, the whale destroyed the small bronze boat. The mast and sails folded across the bow of the splintered craft. Men, naked and thin, hard as metal, clung close to the sides of the ship with a desperation that only the doomed understand. Beneath them, beneath the icy waters of the ocean, beneath the whale's beginning, laid the faceless horrors of hell. The devil himself held onto the whale, forever spinning him, and through this craft, created more demons, reaching for more souls willing to sell an eternity for a better lot in life. "That statue moves," I said, as I walked a circle around the living room, around the bronze. "It moves, Starry."

Marcus fidgeted. His own fault. Instead of taking one of the over-stuffed chairs, he chose to perch on the piano stool, and his legs pushed him first one way, then the other. Never daring to spin around entirely, but just enough so that his hair slapped at the sides of his face, giving him an off-balance, dizzying sort of appearance. "Where did you get the idea?"

To Marcus this was probably an innocent enough remark for small talk after dinner.

Starry has never liked that question. He told me once that art was a personal experience. More than likely he was right.

"Make your own trip to hell to find out." Click. "Until then, leave me alone. I don't cast bronze just for you."

He was probably right about that, too.

Dad said nothing. Nothing through dinner and nothing now. He just tapped his pipe, cleaned it, filled it, smoked it, tapped it, and so on. The Meerschaum was a rich dark colour, carved into the shape of an old man with a flowing mustache and beard. When he first started smoking this pipe, it was nearly white, and I thought the man's head looked like God. But, over time, and as I grew through my teenage years, Dad smoked it into a deep, dark brown. Nearly black, in fact, and God began to look like Satan, with hot puffs of gray smoke rising from his head. A primitive sacrifice to appease a more primitive god.

Marcus still tried to make conversation. "When was the last time you spoke to my father?" Maybe the silence bothered him. Maybe it was the wind.

Although Dad was silent, the draw of his pipe was not. Whenever something really upset my father, he would suck hard on his pipe, and it would make a whistling sound. When I was younger, I learned to stay away from him whenever I heard that whistle. His voice may have been calm. Even. Deceptive. But beneath the surface, he seethed, churned, stirred the waters. "Four days ago." Whistle. "I heard from my brother for the first time since Pop died. Just four days ago."

The storm took the power out. Marcus stopped fidgeting and spinning, and it was cold in the house.

Our barn smelled good. Even when the animals were inside for the night, it smelled good. Outside, the snow smothered all scents, but in the barn there was hay and oats and leather and smoke from the kerosene lantern mixing with the steam from our breath. Even with the animals inside for the storm, it smelled good. It smelled like childhood when mothers brought koolaid in metal-rimmed canteens so that I could continue being an American pilot shot down over the Philippines. It smelled like it was past midnight when my older brothers set-up a ham-radio station and spoke to someone far away in Australia. A little rattle every now and then, but mostly just the

quiet good smell that took me back to calm winter mornings before Dad took up the pipe. With the storm winding into a fury, the inside of the barn was quiet.

“I can’t take much more.”

“Can’t you carry another one? If we get a little more we’ll be good until morning.” I couldn’t tell if Marcus was overloaded yet. I had no idea how much wood he could hold. He looked pretty scrawny, especially when he tried on Starry’s parka for size. A bean pole buried in a cloud, but since he had nothing but that thin jacket, he had to make due on a borrower’s lot.

“Not this,” Marcus said, cocking the giant parka hood toward the woodpile. “Your Dad and his friend. I can’t take much more of them. They’ve hardly said a dozen words to me all night.”

“Well, what do you want them to say? What do you want me to say? You show up unannounced, and say you want to stay here like we have no choice but to take you in. Aren’t your folks missing you in Philadelphia? What are you doing walking all over the country anyway?”

“They don’t know where I am. They only know I was supposed to report to Biloxi last week.” Marcus unloaded his arms, dropping everything at my feet. “I left, but didn’t go to Mississippi. My folks probably found out when the base came looking for me.”

“Great. Thanks. Thanks a lot for telling me. Give me that wood.”

“What’s the matter?”

“If I knew that this afternoon, I’d of told you to shove off.”

“I should’ve guessed. A farm boy like you would never think of doing anything right. Always doing what you’re told, huh? You might as well be in the army now.”

“I’m not *for* any war.” I bent over and loaded Marcus’ wood atop my own. “We have our own problems around here. I don’t need any yours. Just go to Canada and leave us alone.”

“Look, I’m not sure if I want to do that yet. I think I do. It’s just that leaving the country seems so final.”

Probably not as final as dying in Vietnam, though.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do? I mean, if your number comes up?” I had. Often.

He stooped to gather a few logs in his arms. “You could come with me. Canada, I mean. We could go up there together.”

“C’mon Marcus, let’s head back. Without us there to ignore, they’ll end up talking to each other.”

The wind ripped at our faces and blasted our backs with powdered ice-pellets. Snow drifted against the house, so we waded our way to the front door. Marcus stayed close beside me. I was afraid of the storm, too.

On one side of the room sat Starry. His arms were crossed over his chest, layered one on the other like logs in a wood-pile. The room without electric light had a sleepy look to it, and Starry's eyes were slowly drooping to half-mast. Directly opposite him was the fire, cracking loose the bark off the pine logs and hissing black shards that dipped and danced their way to freedom up the chimney. Dad stood by the bay window and every time he moved, the four candles on the sill bobbed after him in unison, like a crowd of yes-men cheered by small gusts of tobacco smoke. Their life was tenuous. Marcus crossed away from him, toward the front door, where the floorboards had worn themselves so loose in spots that every footfall registered hollow creaks to the four corners of the room. In the firelight, the statue moved in the space between us, as if the bronze had been liberated by the fire that spawned it. Behind us the fluke flickered and fell across the walls. The light bent shadows to fit the room, blurring the wall with the ceiling, till no one could tell where one stopped and the other started. The men moved in their own small circles, crossing each other's paths and forging a heavy chain on the shadows of the floor from one end of the room to the other. As the circles grew smaller, the chain tightened and secured them to the center of the room, near the statue. Leaving no firm ground to stand upon.

"I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't."

"You have to go." Whistle. "It's the right thing to do."

"Killing is never right." One candle blew out.

"You may not have to kill." Click. "You may not even have to go." The poker fed a flurry of sparks to the darkness of the chimney.

"How can killing ever be right?"

"Don't make moral choices out of legal issues, son." Whistle. "It never works." The floor shifted from our weight, the storm, or the shadows.

The circles tightened.

"What if I leave and don't come back?"

Two candles out.

"I'll go after you." Whistle. Click.

"What if I go and don't come back?"

Three.

"I'll bring you home."

The chain laid heavy and dark on the floor, beneath the whale's shadows, beneath the roughened timber of the roof, beneath the storm.

All its life the cottonwood had been sculpted by the wind. On one side, the tree pointed thick, stubby fingers toward Pikes Peak, and on the other, the branches flowed away from the trunk, like a woman's hair imprisoned in the water by unseen currents. During the summer

months, I sat beneath its branches and listened to the leaves clap together in the breeze. An ovation of thousands at the foot of the Rockies. In winter, these branches thrashed about in the wind, fighting for their freedom from the parent tree. Some have succeeded. The trunk bore scars where earlier branches won their liberty and snapped away from the main trunk. Nothing more than a foolhardy dash for glory. A dash to death. The branches all died, of course. Not one was able to grow without being rooted in the soil. A lesson lost on others. Every now and then, when the wind was particularly tempting, and the chore of holding snow away from the trunk weighed too heavily, another branch made a bid for freedom and broke away from the parent, only to die in the snow drifted at its base. In the spring, the bark healed, and a new scar was formed. I've seen trees that have lost all their branches. In springtime, the tree dies.

The Meerschaum whistled from one side of the room to the other. Starry's snore hummed beside the shadows of the whale. Marcus stretched his frame across the couch, and I stoked the fire to see the sparks dip and dance their way up the chimney. And to keep warm.

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The *Mighty West Winds* can be heard thundering down mountain canyons long before they tumble over the foothills and rush out onto the plains. For reasons unknown, they will whine and wail above the prairie, stretching downward to fan the heads of the tall grasses. Wave after wave of blue-stem and prairie-doc crash into mounds of snow drifted against wrecks of broken fences, forgotten cabins and lost homesteads. Scattered derelicts ground into the land. Some pioneers survived by abandoning ideas of taming the country and only dreamed of living with it. Others struggled and lost ground to the seasons, growing mad at the wind. Day upon day, loneliness stole their spirits until the wind was the only voice they heard on the prairie. Most left, but some of them grew mad. The Ute believe that each soul is granted one wish, and to waste that wish is to throw life away, as to scatter seeds upon the winds. According to legend, the *Great Spirit Manitou* can know a person by examining his secret wish. Should the wish be frivolous or without just cause, he will leave it to weaken and wither within the winds. But should the wish prove worthy, *The Manitou* will cherish it, and take it back with him as a special treasure. Warming him while he sleeps though the winter, deep within the mountain.

They broke.

Just as night visions invade the day, so too, does reality slip into dreams. I remembered thinking that I had heard a great crash, but instead of waking, I let go my hard grip on the world and slid beneath the waves of sleep into a warm and welcoming ocean that harbors

dreams side-by-side with nightmares. I saw hundreds after hundreds of bronze soldiers thrashing through the water. Some clinging to barrels or buckets or long pieces of wood. Some grasping hard to each other. Some going under our ship's wake, creating a low hum rising from the water as if the devil himself controlled the machines of death. I looked in the sky and saw the rising sun through a swirl of dark tobacco clouds casting a bronze glow over the ocean and churning under a yellow peril with blood and ash. My arms rested upon a large, gray gun, and I kept aiming at the water prisoners and felt a thrill as I sent one after another beneath the waves, beneath the ship, beneath everything. I was afraid of myself. I was afraid that war would teach me to smoke a pipe. And I would like it. I shivered, but before I could take up the gray gun again, I woke to a cold fire and a large limb from the old cottonwood crushing part of the roof to the floor.

Dad pulled the remnants of the door-jam over to the bay window. "Lend a hand, son. If we can't move this beast soon, the cold will freeze us out."

Noises from the kitchen told me that someone was rummaging through the ice-box. Probably Marcus. It had been hours since he'd eaten.

Walking around the statue I stood shoulder to shoulder with my father, and braced my weight against a splintered post that threatened to give up and bring the roof down. "Where's Starry?"

"Checking the barn for broken bottles. Hold steady now while I break this branch away." Snow drifted into the house, riding the wind as far as the couch.

"We could use Marcus out here."

"I want nothing to do with that boy. He's walked away from his folks when they worried over him. He's walked away from his country when it claimed him. No way in hell am I ever going to let him walk away while I need him. We can do fine by ourselves. Just like we've always done."

Right. We're doing just great. I can tell by the snow piling up inside the house how well we're doing.

"What did Jess have to say?"

"Only that after he'd been drafted, Marcus played right along, signing up, getting everything in order. They threw a big party for him, and the next day he even had them drive him to the bus station." Dad nodded toward the short, thick branches on one side of the limb. "I'll need to saw those off. They'll make good whittling pieces. Remember?"

I blew a puff of steam into the air and watched the cold sell my breath to a gust of wind.

"You okay?"

I was great. Standing in six inches of snow in stocking feet, no coat, with my back literally flat against a wall, holding up the front part of our roof, and an older cousin eating my breakfast. "Yep. I'm okay."

The snow had drifted onto the base of the statue, covering everything beneath the whale. Take your time.

The only warmth came from the stove, so I stayed in the kitchen hoping that the heat would warm my feet enough for me to feel them again. I propped them upon a short stool Mom used to hang pictures and waited for feeling to return. I could hear humming in the next room. Dad on the hammer and saw and Marcus blowing into the chimney, trying to catch a fire from last week's newspaper. Hunched into the hearth, he sounded like a wiffen-poof, puffed against the cold and blowing his song to some stone-deaf thing. He sputtered and it smoked, and I could tell that both never caught on. The snow drifting in beside them made them panic together; the hammer, the wiffen-poof, and the curled rips of glowing newsprint. Sunlight broke through the clouds. Patches of blue drifted in and out of the billows, and the land changed from last night's stormy purples to this afternoon's bright, clear crystals darting in and out of the shadows. In and out of the sunshine. The wind picked up, coming straight from the north. Hard, sure, frozen breath whistling past Starry, who scraped out the dead core of the limb and left the snow blackened and charred with rot, past Dad nailing grayed barn siding to the house, past the whale's tail perched alongside the hearth as a paper weight, and into the fireplace, sending crimson tinged newsprint flying around the room.

"I can't see a thing."

"Hang on. I'll get it." The breathless wiff-poof-poof stopped.

"Not you. Nothing from you."

"What is your problem, man? What have I ever done to you?"

"Get out of here and get Starry. Hell, drunk he's twice what you'll ever be."

"And what's that? What do you know about me?" I heard heavy metal dropping onto wood. Tools, probably the hammer, testing the hollow spaces between the floor-boards and the dirt foundation.

"I know you're a coward. Running. You'll always be a coward, and you'll always be running."

"And you never ran?" A log scuffed across the hearth, dragged over the brick and toppled the brass poker, shovel, and broom near the sofa. "You ran. You ran as far as you could. They bombed Pearl Harbor, and you ran to enlist. Then, you ran as far away from Philadelphia as you could get. All the way to the Philippines. Running, and then running back again. Grandma said that after the war you didn't even come home. You just sent her a postcard telling her that you were going to live out west."

Marcus sounded out of breath.

"She cried telling how you ran to Colorado. As far away from family as you could get."

Newspapers and snow crunched beneath three or four thick boots, and the match-box gave out a small rattle.

“You’re right. You’re an expert at running, so I guess you should know all about guys like me. But I don’t want to end up like you and Starry. Always running away from yourselves and into a bottle or a run down old ranch in the middle of nowhere. Do you think I want to go to war and end up like you? Do you think I want to run away from my family or have my family run away from me?”

The roof creaked over the floor jack, and I heard the now-familiar groan of the ceiling beams as the jack was twisted up a notch and snapped into place.

“I have to get this done by sunset.”

A nail was squeaked out of one board and blasted into another. The wiffenpoof song turned over in my head and my feet ached.

A match was struck.

Night ran over the house, with the moon racing so fast that it left a sprinkle of stars in its wake. The sky was clear and cold and quiet, and the wind had drawn back to a whisper. Sometimes it was there. Sometimes it was not, and I could hear my heart beating but couldn’t feel my arms as I carried load after load of wood into the house. We had finished boarding up the hole in the porch and had hung the blankets over our handiwork to keep the night outside and the fire in. The wiffen-poof was replaced by Starry’s imitation of a bellows. Wheeze-in. Wheeze-out. A few heavy breaths. Wheeze-in, and so on.

I don’t know whether the fire started because of his expertise or the alcohol on his breath. Marcus and I hauled nearly a third of the wood-pile into the house and stacked it between the wall and the couch. In order to make enough room, we moved the sofa right next to the table that held the statue. By now, there was a steady roar in the fireplace.

I also will never know what really happened when Starry and I went back to the barn to check his mule. I don’t remember hearing anything more than a slight rattle of wind, but then the barn was always so quiet. When I returned to the house, Dad was sitting on the floor propped by the couch with a deep gouge cut into his arm and blood flowing down the side of his head, moulding the hair to his ear and casting the fire-side of his face in dark red shadow. The statue lay on the hearth, and one of the thin flukes of the whale had broken off and was in the fire.

Marcus was not in the house.

I had always operated on the basis that the movement of time was a fact, and I was a part of that fact. One planned on it, for it, and because of it. There would always be a sunrise followed by a sunset. No matter what happened during the night, morning would come, and the

sun would move across the sky, sometimes dragging clouds behind it, sometimes not. But it would move, and time would continue, just as it always had. No magic formula, nothing special or grand. It would simply be. Tomorrow would always be with me, just as yesterday always had. I never considered the possibility that the next minute might not exist. That time would stop. Not just for me, but for everyone. For everything. We would simply stop moving, changing. The whole world would be frozen and silent. No gains, no losses. We would simply exist for that one particular moment. Like soldiers before a battle. Like statues. Certain of only one thing, but nothing beyond. Both heaven and hell would exist within that one moment. Telling Starry would be hell. I could live forever in that moment before I would have to tell Starry about the bronze.

I imagine Starry could, too.

There was nothing else to do but wait until morning. Even if the roads weren't cleared by then, Starry could drive Dad into town.

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Late winter storms are sometimes chased by the swift warm winds from the lands beyond the mountains. The Mexicans called these winds *Santana*, the Breath of Satan, and they claim that you can smell the heat of hell in the dead of winter. The soft-strong winds were called *snow-eaters* by the pioneers, for it was not uncommon to go to sleep with two feet of snow on the ground and awaken the next morning without a trace remaining. The Ute Indians called them *Chinook*, *The Mighty West Wind*, and held that *The Great Spirit Manitou* would escape his cave and ride these winds down to the prairie-lands below. Legend says that if a wish were thrown into these winds when he was riding his *Spirit Horse*, by morning that wish would come true. As a child I can remember casting my wish into the *Chinook* and secretly praying that *The Great Spirit Manitou* would catch it. One night he did.

They drifted.

“He’s going to be just fine. It’d take a lot more than *that boy* from Philadelphia to lay your old man under.” Starry had finished checking to see if the kitchen towels we used as bandages were tight enough. “Best to let him sleep.”

Dad was looking pretty pale. We positioned his arm high over his head so that the blood would have to fight its way out of the cut. It was his head that had me worried. It took us a while to figure out that there was a large, deep scrape behind his ear. When I poured cold water over his head to clean him up, I could see a piece of Dad flap sideways away from his scalp, taking hair and skin with it. I could see bone.

He had to handle everything, and now, color was leaving him, too.

“Starry, I’m sorry about the statue.” I said, turning away from Dad and toward the fire. “I don’t suppose there’s anyway to fix it.”

“Nope.” Starry looked down at the statue sitting by the stack of wood. It was getting warm by the fire, but not warm enough for his forehead to send a steady stream of sweat down his cheek. “No sirreee-bob. This is bronze, boy. Once it’s broke all you can do is melt and recast.”

“Do you still have the mold, then?”

“They break when I take ‘em out.”

“Dad’s hurt pretty bad, isn’t he?”

“He’s tough, even for a man his age.” Click. “But, yeah. He’s hurt pretty bad.”

I felt as if I was going to start sweating, too.

By midnight, a *Chinook* wind had ripped our makeshift wall to shreds. The fire had blown out, but the air was warm enough that it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered much. Starry and I decided that since the roads had cleared a bit, we were going to take Dad into town. It was still very warm in the house. The wind was strong and carried the barn-smell with it. It also carried Marcus.

“I don’t suppose you’d believe me if I said it was an accident.”

“Marcus, I don’t care. I just don’t care.” I pulled another blanket down. “Here, fold this around a cushion. We’re going to have to wedge Dad into the back seat.”

“It was an accident.”

“Okay. It was an accident. Are you going to help us or not?”

“Are you going to turn me in?”

“Look, if you’re not going to help, then get out of the way.” I charged passed Marcus so fast that he had to take a step back to hold his balance.

He followed me to the car where Starry was piling blankets and pillows around Dad. Even the blankets looked gray and colorless.

“I want to know. Are you going to turn me in?”

“For what? Running or causing this accident?”

The snow had melted away in enough spots that we could see the outlines of the road. There were still high drifts, though. Mounds of dark, purplish-blue snow, piled high around snow-fences and stands of scrub-oak. In the rear-view mirror, Marcus looked at the house, then at the barn, then smaller than he really was.

“I’ll be checking on your Dad on my way through to Denver. I’d have to take the highway anyway. None of these side roads are clear enough yet. Probably be a couple of days before I’d

be able to get through Parker.” The statue, without its missing fluke, was tied down to the back of the wagon. I guess that Starry thought it was too much trouble to dig the broken fluke out of the ashes. The rough twine looked unravelled but held the heavy whale in place. The small bronze men were laying on the floor, covered over with an old bathroom rug.

“Thanks, Starry.” For the first time without my Dad standing over my shoulder, I put out my hand for another man to take. “He’s going to like seeing you.”

“I suppose that your SOB cousin is gone.”

“Haven’t seen him since we got back.” I almost told him about the tracks I saw out back. They were really no more than large ovals in the snow by now, but before everything had melted, I could tell that they were footprints. They headed due north. Out the back of the kitchen, around the barn, and toward the Black Forest. Straight to the North. I was sure that Dad’s big down coat was missing, along with some canned goods and any money we might have had laying around. I was also sure that if I wanted to, I could catch up with him.

“Well, he seems the type. He didn’t even come with us to the hospital.”

“Hey, be fair. He was afraid that we’d turn him in. You know, Starry, you and Dad were pretty rough on him. He’s just a scared kid.”

“We were scared, too. Fighting in the Pacific wasn’t a high-school basketball game, and your Dad and I were younger than you and Marcus are now. We were scared, too. Don’t kid yourself. He’s no different than we were. He just has more options.” Starry scraped the mud from the bottoms of his shoes onto the edges of the wood that used to be the porch.

He hoisted himself into the wagon and clicked to his mule. “Your Dad’s going to do fine, now. Taking him into town was the right thing to do. It wasn’t easy, driving those roads at night, but you did it. Feels good, huh?”

I couldn’t feel anything.

When I came back from the hospital later that night, the snow was completely gone. The only trace of the storm was the gash torn out of the front porch. The only blankets I had to patch it with were stained with Dad’s blood. I tried to hang one, but the grayish-green blanket just deepened the color of the dark-black blood stains. It would be a few more days, yet, before they would be able to fix the power lines between here and town. Dad was going to be fine. In fact, the doctors think that he could probably come home tomorrow or the next day.

It was already getting cold. The *Chinook* had chased the storm away, melted the snow, and left the prairie clear and cold. The mud-ruts from Starry’s wagon were going to freeze overnight. Marcus’ footprints had all but disappeared. Dad’s big coat was gone, and so were

twenty dollars that I had in my dresser drawer. There was no trace of Marcus, like he had never been here at all.

I brushed out the fireplace, set new logs on the hearth, and lighted the fire. I up-ended the couch so that I could brace myself against it while laying on the floor, creating a pocket of warmth against the night. I watched the fire.

I watched the fire.

I saw that the piece of bronze was gone.

It was cold, and I watched the fire.

