

Snowfall and Secrets

I flipped on the television where the local meteorologist narrated a streaming radar feed. “This low-pressure system is delivering heavy moisture from the south,” she said. “It will collide with an arctic clipper sweeping down from Canada this afternoon, and create heavy, sustained snowfall tonight throughout the greater capital district.” Her delivery barely concealed the sadistic glee she seemed to feel at being the bearer of this dire news. “Salem, Cambridge, Argyle and Greenwich will see the most significant accumulation, with upwards of twenty inches expected by sunrise. It’s going to look more like Christmas than Easter when you wake up tomorrow!”

I shook my head and slipped a disc into the DVD player. The snow had already started, falling hard since late morning. A Saturday afternoon alone, settled in with Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* and nowhere to go while the snow piled up outside was just what I needed - the perfect “me” date for this old divorced guy. The microwave beeped. I dumped the steamy contents of the popcorn bag into a bowl, plunked myself down on the couch and hit “Play”.

About five o’clock my phone rang. I paused the movie and picked it up. The caller ID showed my father’s number. Reluctantly, I answered.

“Hey Dad.”

“I shot a deer,” he wheezed.

It was unlikely that he had shot a deer. His eyesight was poor. He had always been an avid hunter, but through the years he used his guns less and less as physical and cognitive decline caught up with him. I made myself a mental note to quietly remove his guns from the house next time I was up there.

He had begun showing early signs of Alzheimer’s the previous summer, getting forgetful about simple things – people’s names, the day of the week. Since Mom died, his doctor believed his condition was quickly worsening. We had talked about looking into managed care, but he was stubborn. He refused to consider leaving his home.

“So tell me more about the deer. How did it happen?”

I hoped he didn't hear the skepticism in my voice, but he must have caught it. “You don't believe me,” he said, sounding hurt.

“I want to, Dad. What did you shoot it with?”

“The thirty-aught-six. I saw him standing out by your mother's grave. I've seen it out there many a time. With the freezer running low, I figured I'd take a crack at it. Just opened the door, lined up the shot, and pop! Down he went.” Dad did love his venison. During the winter his freezer was usually laid up with charitable donations from vacationing hunters who enjoyed the thrill of the hunt more than the meat it yielded. But the hunting season had been disappointing that fall. No one had brought anything by for him.

“And you're sure you hit it?”

“Sure as shit! Went right down.”

“Okay. Well – congratulations?”

“Thanks, Harry. So when can you get here?”

“What?”

“It'll be dark soon and I need you to get that deer into the barn before nightfall.”

“Are you kidding? It's been snowing all day and it's supposed to go through tomorrow. I can't come out there now!”

“But you have to come. Elsewise the damn bear'll find it in the night and drag it away. Come on.” He paused. I could feel him sensing my reluctance in the silence. “I'll get dressed and try to do it myself if you don't come,” he added threateningly.

As difficult as it was to believe, he seemed adamant about killing the deer. He did have a black bear that patrolled his property pretty regularly. With this early spring blizzard, it very well could be out of its den already, prowling and hungry, after a fast of four months.

As Dad breathed on the line, I looked out into the fuzzy afternoon gloom. The snow had already made everything round and soft and vague. My Jeep looked like half of a marshmallow sitting on a

carpet of confectioner's sugar. Then I imagined him struggling through the snow and the darkness, trying to drag the deer in alone and realized I had no choice.

"Okay, okay. I'll come over."

"When do you think you'll be here?"

"Maybe six-thirty. Probably more like seven with the storm."

"Okay. I'll see you then. Oh - and bring Evelyn along. Haven't seen her in a while."

"Sure thing. See you, Dad."

Evelyn. She had been gone for nearly two years now, but lately Dad seemed incapable of processing that fact. I didn't miss her often, but she had always had some special connection with the old man. She knew how to talk to him.

If only our marriage had been as easy. Evelyn and I were never a perfect match, deciding to marry only after she got pregnant. Our son Colin had always been the glue that held us together, a bright, funny, and optimistic only child. He was a fiercely patriotic kid, and joined the Army right out of high school. He never made it home from Afghanistan. The shock and grief of his death overwhelmed both his mother and me, and eventually pulled us apart.

About a year after Colin's death, one day she just walked in and announced, "I'm sick of upstate New York, and I'm sick of you." Truth be told, by then the feeling was mutual, and I didn't have the energy or the will to put up a fight. So we divorced, sold the house and split the proceeds. I gave her half of my 401K, and she packed up her old Camry and drove to Clearwater, Florida. I imagined her now, sitting in a low-slung beach chair, sipping a margarita and watching a rosy sun sink into the Gulf of Mexico. I cursed her as I jammed my arms into my coat, and set out into the worst storm of the season to check on her old pal, Dad.

The snow was falling steadily as I pulled out of my driveway a few minutes later. It grew noticeably heavier with every mile. My headlights turned the storm into a solid curtain of white, making it impossible to see anything further than twenty yards ahead of the Jeep. Snowflakes streamed into the windshield in a perpetual flow, creating the surreal sensation that the car was actually sitting still, while the storm and the world outside flowed around and swirled past me.

On a clear day, it was a forty-five minute drive to Dad's place in Argyle. After an anxious hour and a half drive, my headlights finally illuminated the spectral outline of his mailbox, and I made the turn up his driveway. It was just after dark when I pulled to a stop at the end of his walk. Looking up at the house, I saw his silhouette move across the dining room window. I got out of the car, and a wedge of light fell across the snow as he opened the kitchen door. He stood propped in the doorway with one hand on the knob, while the other held his old sweater together in front.

"Hey there, Harry. Come on in!"

I stomped into the kitchen, shaking the snow from my coat. The door slammed closed behind me.

"Where's Evelyn?"

"Oh – I forgot, tonight is her book club night. She says hi."

"Too bad. Well thanks for coming out, son" he said, grabbing his cane and clunking toward his favorite chair.

"It's okay Dad."

I glanced around the room and saw his thirty-aught-six leaning against the wall near the door. I recognized a CVS bag on the kitchen counter. It was sitting exactly where I had set it down when we returned home from the pharmacy a week earlier. I picked it up and found an unopened prescription bottle of Donepezil, and a similarly intact box of Exelon patches inside. He was supposed to be taking the pills and wearing the patches every day to help with his symptoms. I shook my head and put the bag down.

"You said the deer was standing out near the cemetery?" I asked, bending slightly and squinting out his back window. A flood light mounted at the peak of the barn illuminated the dooryard and my Jeep with hazy filtered light through the falling snow. The family cemetery lay out beyond the back yard in the darkness near the edge of the woods.

"Yup," he said, dropping heavily into his chair. "Damn thing's been hanging around quite a lot out there the last few months. I've thought about shooting him before. I guess I just figured today was the day to get it done." His voice tapered off. He nodded his head a little and grunted softly. "Uh-huh."

His lips moved as if there was something else to say, but he only stared silently at the wood stove. His rheumy eyes reflected the flames flickering behind the isinglass vents.

As I looked at him, drawn back into his own thoughts, it struck me how small his world had become. It hurt to think of how it must feel for him, born to a family of seven siblings, with no one left now but himself. His last surviving sister had passed away in a nursing home a few months before. His life had mirrored the lives of so many of his boyhood friends; he had come home after the war and married his high school sweetheart, built a house, and raised a family.

Mom had passed away the previous summer. They were more in love than any two people had a right to be, and her death relegated him to a sort of half-life. He had a neighbor, Gregory Chambers, who lived on the next farm, but their relationship had always been strained, and they never were any help to each other. Now it was down to just Dad and two or three of his closest friends. And none of them were doing very well either. Longevity is a mixed blessing.

“Well. I guess I’ll get out there and see what you’ve done then,” I said, reaching for the heavy sealed beam flashlight he always kept near the door.

“Here,” he said. “Take this with you.” He held out his .45 caliber revolver wrapped in its holstered gun belt. When I hesitated, he leaned forward with a stern look and hefted it toward me at arm’s length. “Take it. You never know.”

I reluctantly took the gun belt, strapped it on, and pulled the pistol out of the holster. I flipped open and spun the chamber - six bullets loaded and ready. I holstered the gun and looked back at Dad. His attention had already returned to the wood stove, so I opened the door and headed back out into the night.

There’s a certain sound the snow makes in a storm like that one. It’s a quiet hiss that I usually find peaceful and soothing, but that night there was no comfort in it. Maybe it was the weapon at my hip or the prospect of the bear prowling out in the darkness. I shrugged and zipped my storm parka all the way up, pulled the hood over my head, and waded away from the house toward the barn.

My feet plunged down through the new snow, now up to my knees. At the barn I grabbed the cast iron handles of the large sliding door. Its rusty hardware squealed on the rails as I pulled it open. Inside, our old toboggan leaned against one wall. I grabbed it and laid it down, the flashlight gleaming on patches of worn varnish stubbornly clinging to its weathered slats.

Seeing the toboggan took me back to the winters of my childhood, when Dad and I would drag it out to Gibson's Hill on nights just like this one. He'd sit behind me, with his arms around my waist. I'd sit between his big strong legs, and we'd streak down the hillside, our happy hearts racing and tears streaming down our cheeks. It seemed another lifetime now, but it was the same old toboggan. I sighed and pulled it behind me back out into the dooryard, then turned right and trudged out of the flood light into the darkness toward the cemetery.

Traversing the hundred or so yards to the edge of the woods from the barn, the flashlight's glow glistened on the nearly featureless blanket of new fallen snow. I had covered this same ground hundreds of times in my life, but with the storm and my anxiety, it all seemed strange and other worldly.

Ahead, through the haze of the storm, the gravestones of my family resolved in the near distance as I approached the plot. They looked taller and soft around the edges and seemed huddled together, as if to provide each other some relief against the foreboding weather.

I approached my mother's grave and stopped there for a moment, brushing the snow away from her stone. *Helena Jeanne Gibson 1928 – 2016*. As my hand rested on her marker, I closed my eyes. In my memory we sat together in a field of spring grass and clover. A mother and her only child, her smile radiating love and joy. That was who she was to me. That was how I always choose to see her in my memory. Nothing like the haggard, pain-wracked thing she was the night we said good-bye. So it was the sunshine on her cheeks, the blue-white of her gingham blouse, and the smell of crushed dandelions under our knees that I chose to remember.

With a thickness in my throat I returned to the moment. I patted her stone, then began my search in earnest. Dad had said the deer was standing near her grave, so I started by slowly sweeping my flashlight beam back and forth in an outward arc from where I stood. Fairly quickly, I noticed a depression in the snow that began a few feet from me and proceeded like a shallow trough towards the woods. I stepped to the depression and scrubbed my boot back and forth, uncovering some bright red blotches just below the surface. As unlikely as it had seemed, apparently Dad's story of poaching a deer from his back door may not have been a figment of his imagination.

Following along the trough, I found that the blood trail continued and thickened until just before the edge of the woods, where it ended at a large lump in the snow. I nudged it with my toe. It was firm, but soft. I bent over and wiped away some of the snow to reveal what looked like a boot and some

fabric. My pulse quickened as I brushed some more and confirmed that it was, in fact, a boot. And the fabric was part of a man's trousers. My disbelief was instantly overwhelmed by a rush of horror.

I fell to my knees beside the figure, rapidly clearing with both hands. Gasping, I sat back on my haunches to examine my discovery - the body of a man in a light brown overcoat. He was lying on his side, with his head turned, facing downward. A brown knit cap pulled low over his brow and ears covered his head, leaving some tufts of grey hair sticking out around the edges and the back. A large puddle of blood had pooled in the snow under the body.

I rose up onto my knees, took off my gloves, and hesitantly pressed two fingers against the side of the man's neck. His skin was cold. I was sickened but not surprised to feel no pulse. I paused for a moment, unsure what to do next. My first instinct was to call 911 right away, but what would I say? What, exactly, had happened here?

I set my flashlight on the toboggan and tried to gently roll the body onto its back. With the deep snow and the dead weight of the corpse, I found it was not going to be easy. I pushed hard with my legs and managed to finally flip the body over, but lurched forward awkwardly, landing chest-to-chest and nose-to-nose with him. Horrified, I immediately scrambled away, crab-walking backwards and kicking up the snow around me. Then I grabbed the flashlight and trained it on the man's face.

Right away, I thought I saw something familiar there. I wondered if it might be someone I knew. Leaning forward for a closer look, a creeping feeling crawled up my spine. It was Gregory Chambers, my father's neighbor of over sixty years.

Breathing hard, I leaned back and looked up. Falling flakes from the charcoal gray sky lit on my nose and eyelashes. What would I do? What *should* I do? Apparently Dad had killed his neighbor. But was he really convinced that he had been aiming at a deer? Was it murder, or an accident? Was this a crime scene? Should I move the body? Or would the police want to see things as I had found them? A flood of questions overwhelmed my mind.

Suddenly, the world of Gregory's body and my bewilderment and the snowflakes and the storm and the silence was interrupted by a loud rustling sound in the woods nearby. My heartbeat raced. I sat bolt upright, grabbed the flashlight, and swung its beam toward the sound. I saw some young saplings moving in the near distance and I heard a chuffing sound.

I wondered if might be the bear, attracted by the scent of Gregory's blood, so I drew the .45 from its holster, aimed, and fired at the ground in the direction of the disturbance. Then, just for good measure, I stood to my full height, yelled as loud as I could, and fired another shot. After more frantic rustling and cracking of saplings faded away into the distance, I sat down hard in the snow, exhausted.

My sense of relief from immediate danger was quickly replaced by the realization that I had a dead body to deal with. There were still troublesome questions to be answered and choices to be made, but the incident made one decision for me fairly easy. Just in case that had been Dad's bear, I needed to get Gregory's body safely inside the barn before the prowler circled back for another try.

"Harry? You okay?" The hiss of the storm was suddenly broken by my father's voice.

"I'm fine!" I shouted. The shrouded grave stones and tree trunks around me seemed to swallow my voice. "Be in shortly," I added, a little louder.

I caught my breath and got my feet under me. Then with no small effort I laid Gregory's body out on the toboggan. I towed it back through the snow and dragged it inside the barn. Before I left to return to the house, I paused for a moment at the door and turned to look back at him. Gregory seemed so small lying there.

As I stood in the doorway looking back, a memory filled in my mind. I was sitting beside my mother's hospice bed. "You have to believe," she rasped. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I was lonely all the time, and still so young. Daddy was away a lot." A tear rolled down her dry cheek. "Never stopped loving your Dad. But Gregory was always around. One thing led to another. It was wrong. But Harry, to me you're our son – your Dad's and mine. Whatever the truth is. That's all that matters. It's what I choose to believe, anyway. Please don't hate me."

My childhood memories of Gregory weren't much beyond those I had of any other adult that lived in the area - waving at him from the car while he mowed his lawn, or seeing him on his way out to the mailbox or passing him in an aisle at the local grocery store. I remember once when I was about seven, seeing Dad frown when he noticed me waving at Gregory. One time we passed him on the sidewalk downtown, and I said "Hello". Gregory smiled, but Dad acted like he wasn't even there. He just put his hand against my back and kind of ushered me along for a few steps.

Gregory never married or left the neighboring farm where he had grown up. He cared for his widowed mother until she passed away a decade or so before, then stayed on there to live out his days

in solitude. I never reached out to ask him about what Mom had told me. What was the point? I could just as easily have been Dad's son as his. So I kept her secret, and chose to stay clear of Gregory. I shook my head and headed toward the house.

When I stomped back inside, Dad started in his chair and looked over his shoulder anxiously. His eyes opened wide and he gasped, "Gregory?" He lurched to his feet, his red-rimmed eyes sparkling with anger. "How dare you?" he shrieked. He took a wide but feeble swing at me, which threw him off balance. I caught him under his arms and helped him back into his chair.

"Dad! Stop it! I'm not Gregory. It's Harry, Dad. Your son."

"Harry? Oh, yes." He chuckled awkwardly while he caught his breath and settled himself. "Of – of course. Harry. Sorry, son. My mind was wandering. Are you all right? I heard gunshots."

"I'm fine. Good thing I had this with me," I said, patting the .45. "I think your bear was snooping around out there. I had to fire a couple of shots to scare him off."

"And what about the deer?" He asked, looking at me tentatively. I glared back at him and waited a long moment before answering.

"There was no deer, Dad."

"Oh," he said flatly. "That's – that's too bad. I could have used the meat." He fidgeted uneasily, shooting a furtive glance in my direction but not making eye contact. He pushed himself back, leaving one hand on the worn arm of his rocker, his skinny arm jutting out at an angle.

"There was no deer, but I did find something else," I said, studying his reaction. He returned my gaze for a few seconds, then turned away again. He shook his head slightly. His lips moved, but he said nothing.

"Don't you wonder what I found, Dad?" My pulse pounded in my throat. He shook his head harder. "Why not? Why don't you ask me what I found?"

"I – well, of course I wonder. Just tell me, why don't you?"

"I found Gregory Chambers."

"Are you sure? Is he all right?" he asked, looking up at me like a child who got caught stealing candy.

“No. No, Dad! He’s not all right,” I nearly yelled. “He’s dead. He appears to have been shot.” I dropped onto the old couch across from him.

“Oh.” He blinked hard several times. “And where did you find him?”

“Not far from Mom’s grave. About where you said the “deer” was standing when you shot it.”

“That’s a shame.” He glared at the stove and spoke like a man talking in his sleep. “So, I thought I was shooting a deer and all the time it was my neighbor?”

“Yes, Dad. That’s how it appears. Did you truly believe that Gregory was a deer?”

“Of course I did!” he whispered hoarsely. “Do you think I would have pulled the trigger if I had known?”

After a long pause, I sighed and said, “Okay. Well, we’ve got to call the authorities. You know that, right?”

“But it was an accident. You’ve got to believe that. *They’ve* got to believe it!”

“I want to believe it. I really do. But why? Why, Dad? Did you have anything against Gregory? Any reason to kill him?”

He turned away from me and slumped in his chair. A long moment passed. I didn’t want to be the next one to speak. The fire in the stove crackled and the snow hissed against the roof and windows. He opened his mouth once and shut it and then opened it again. He stared at the stove without blinking and finally spoke in a flat, emotionless monotone.

“Your mom and I always wanted children. But she never got pregnant. Not for lack of trying, mind you. So she got herself checked out, and her doctor said she was all right. Well, I had a regular truck run out to Indianapolis in those days, and I decided to see a doctor, too. Didn’t want Helena to know about it, so I did it out there. Turns out it was me. I was the problem. I was going to tell her, but I held off. Out of pride. Or shame maybe. Then a few months later, she tells me we’re pregnant.”

“She always said that you were our little miracle,” he said, turning back toward the stove. “Maybe she was trying to convince herself. Or maybe she really wasn’t sure? I don’t know. Life is strange, Harry. People seem able to convince themselves of all kinds of things if they want to believe them bad enough.” His voice had grown low and gravelly.

I was speechless. My pulse roared in my ears. Angry and hurt and shocked all at once, without a word, I started moving quickly around the house collecting his guns. I snatched the .30-06 from the corner, and his shotguns and a .22 from the coat closet.

“What are you doing?” he protested.

“I’m taking these away, Dad,” I shouted, shaking the guns at him. “Something I should have done a long time ago! And we’re going to have to talk about your living situation. I think it may be time for a change.” As angry as I was, I also hurt for him. “Honestly, I am really not sure what to do. Right now I’m going out to sit with the body for a while. I need to sort this out. One way or the other, I’ll have to call the sheriff. I’ll see you when they get here.”

I went outside and stashed the firearms in my trunk, then crossed to the barn and stood under the muted circle of the flood light. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and looked at the screen for a moment, then put it away. I had no idea exactly how the call should go, but there would only be one chance at it, and I’d have to get it straight before I called.

I slid the big barn door once again, and went inside. A splash of soft light from the doorway fell onto the floor. I pulled down a lantern hanging nearby and lit it, then went over to the toboggan and sat down on the floor next to Gregory. I drew the tarp back just enough to reveal his face. Holding the lantern close, I studied his features. His tall brow was like mine. Maybe the nose too. Our jaws could have been cast from the same mold. And I wondered if we were alike in other ways. Did we like the same foods? Music? Movies? These and so many other ordinary, wonderful things I would never have a chance to know.

As I took in the details of this face, a strange feeling crept over me. But I didn’t cry. Not yet. It was a feeling that existed somewhere beyond tears - one part loss and two parts resignation. Almost beyond emotion. So much time had come and gone. Months and years and decades had piled up and covered the facts of my life with layers of altered experience. Time and secrets had stolen clarity and changed my course without my knowledge or consent.

I looked out the barn door, across the yard to where the back window of the house cast a hazy glow out onto the snowy night. I imagined Dad sitting inside worrying by the stove, and was suddenly overpowered by the realization that that feeble, sick old man was all the family I had left in the world. With Mom gone, and Colin, and Evelyn – and now Gregory. It was down to just Dad and me. I looked

back down at Gregory's pallid face. It was then that a thick feeling rushed in my ears. My eyes welled with tears. I sat there for quite a while, mourning the father I never knew and the one I thought I knew but perhaps never really did. Sometime later, I sat up and dried my eyes. I pulled out my phone and dialed.

"911, what is your emergency?" the attendant asked.

"Yes, my name is Harry Gibson. No emergency, ma'am. I'm at 247 Valley Road in Argyle. Calling to report an accidental shooting. One dead."

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