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then deposits the pill onto the back of his tongue.*

## SNOW MONSTERS

Shane sits in his blue Impala at the curb. His wife's shift at the mall is over in nineteen minutes, not that she ever clocks out on time. He didn't mean to be this early to pick her up, is sure he's forgetting one of his errands, but even if he remembers it now, there won't be enough time for it. Best to be satisfied with the few he did remember, he tells himself.

After picking her up, too, saving her from the bus, there's the kids at three-thirty and three forty-five. Nolan from his school, Samuel from the corner just down from the junior high; Samuel insists it's faster like that, and that he doesn't care if it's snowing, or whatever.

Shane remembers being thirteen, yeah. All too well.

The corner's fine, even on a day like today, where if you let the delay on the wipers space out too far, a crust of ice will form on the windshield, and, bam, like that, twenty dollars for new blades.

Behind him in the parking lot are the mounds of dirty snow, months of it already. On Saturdays, when Nolan's here with him to pick Mommy up from work, Shane always pretends to have just seen a miniature door kind of embedded in one of those big snow piles, or a window, and—is that a chimney? Is somebody living there?

Each time he circles slow around the mounds, trying to stay ahead of the security Jeep, Nolan's head will track those igloos, his mouth held in that doubting, pre-smile mode. Because what if, right?

Shane doesn't remember exactly what it was like to be eight, no. But he knows what he would have liked it to have been like.

He plans, one day, to come out here, fix some mock window—just a pipe, even, up top—into the snow, watch Nolan's chest swell with magic, but it's always cold, wet, impractical.

Like the man coming into focus by the empty fountain.

Shane waits for the wipers to sweep the snow dust away again before leaning forward from his magazine.

Yep.

Guy's standing there in short sleeves, the cuffs of his jeans rolled and hanging loose, cigarette dangling from his lip like this is an audition for a fifties musical.

Except the bowler hat, Shane supposes.

Is this the new breed Molly's been calling 'hipster,' maybe? And, aside from being famously poor tippers, are hipsters impervious to the elements as well?

Shane smiles to himself, goes back to the article.

It's something about current trends in education. He flips through to the end—four pages—gauges that against the time left: thirteen minutes. Three pages every thirty seconds, then, with time to keep an eye out for Security.

Golden.

It's a word that hipster should know, and use.

Shane looks up as if to tell him that across all this distance, through all the glass and steel and unfamiliarity, and sees him instead in the rearview mirror. The back seat.

"Hey—!" he blurts and pushes on the brake for some reason, cringing up against the wheel in a way he's already ashamed of.

The hipster isn't hip anymore, either.

Instead of a t-shirt and jeans, it's now a shabby three-piece suit with an antique wool overcoat, like one of Shane's professors used to wear. The only thing the same as before's the snugged-down bowler, the snow on it not even melting yet. And the eyes. They penetrate, don't look away. Are amused somehow, at how Shane's swaying his back in, preparing himself for the gun, the knife, even just the hand, reaching all the way to him.

"If you have a minute," the non-hipster says, making a production—elbows, three layers of sleeve—of opening the leather briefcase

now on his lap.

"What are you—you can't just—" Shane tries, his heart beating again now, and the non-hipster waits this out, his hands still holding the briefcase open.

Is he wearing eyeliner too?

"You can't—" Shane says again, still stuck on that.

"It's about your, your . . ." the man begins, shuffling through papers in the briefcase. ". . . *Nolan*, is that his name?"

Shane fixes his eyes into the rearview mirror against this man.

Is this how it starts? Ransom situations? And what kind of competent kidnapper would target *him*, Shane?

But never mind all that right now.

"What about him?" Shane says, the world narrowed down to just the two of them now.

If need be, he can drop the Impala into gear, bound ahead twenty yards in one surge, through the glass doors of that store that keeps changing names every season.

It'll accomplish something, surely.

"I'm sorry to tell you this," the man says, and hands a stiff brown paper over the top of the briefcase to Shane.

No, not paper at all, but—film? Like an x-ray?

It makes a noise like small, fake thunder when Shane tries to flap it straight enough to read.

It is medical film.

Only, this isn't—the skull's shaped all wrong. Not like Shane's seen before. He angles the film to the side, turns it all the way over, and finally sees it: the skull's not the same because the shot was taken from above, some angle like that. Looking down. The shadow of a backpack zipper floating at the bottom of the sheet.

It's not quite an x-ray, though. More about soft tissue.

The brain.

"I don't know how you got in here," Shane says into the rearview mirror.

The man nods, acknowledging that difficulty but not bothering to address it, and then cocks his left arm up, for his watch.

Shane studies the film again, touches it with the pad of his index finger, half-expecting his finger to dip into something syrupy, or for the image to flicker, slide like a touchscreen.

It's just what it is, though.

"Do you see it?" the man says, clicking his briefcase shut now, leaving it on his lap, the base of it angled up.

A gun in there, pointed at Shane? A pinhole camera?

"How do you know his name?" Shane says.

And no, he can't see it on the film.

The man smiles with one side of his mouth, watches a tall woman in tall boots walk by, her purse slung all the way around to her back.

Shane looks to her too but she's nobody.

"Security will be here in about half a minute," he says. "They make rounds every—"

"A bike rack turned over in front of the foodcourt," the man says.

Silence, silence.

"What is this?" Shane finally says.

"This is opportunity," the man says, knocking on the plastic back of the passenger headrest.

So he's real, then. At least that.

Shane breathes in, breathes out.

"What is *this*," Shane says, waggling the film.

"Glioblastoma multiforme," the man shrugs. "That would be a type four. Basically inoperable, at least when situated like that."

Shane feels his face heat up. He doesn't know if that means the blood's all left at once, or if it's all swirling there under the skin.

"What are you saying?" he asks.

"I'm going to need that image back, of course."

"Who?" Shane shakes the film for emphasis. *Doesn't* give it back.

The man purses his lips, looks out the window again. This time there's nothing. Just not-Shane, Shane suspects.

"Nolan," Shane says.

The man does his shoulders in apology.

Now the heat's all in Shane's eyes. Going to spill out.

"What are you?" he whispers.

"Not who?" the man says, a flicker of a grin there.

"I don't—" Shane starts, can't finish.

"Tumors like that are unusual in a boy his age," the man anticipates.

"But, you know. It's a crazy world, right? Anything can happen."

Shane's studying the film again.

This is Nolan?

In twenty-two minutes — no, fifteen, now — he'll be standing at the curb in the hug 'n go lane, his insulated hood pulled up over his head. He'll be doing what he calls 'switching feet' — going back and forth in a stationary waddle, to keep warm. The whole way to the junior high he'll be looking around the side of the passenger seat, to be the first one to see Samuel.

"No," Shane says.

The man just nods, though. "Fourteen months," he says. "Not all of them good."

"But I can—"

"Even if you take him to the hospital today. Right now. Last week. I'm sorry."

"Who are you?"

"And if I said you just get one more question here?"

Shane says it to himself, in his head: *Think*.

"This is what you would ask," the man offers. "Not who I am, but what I can *do* for you."

Shane nods. Yes, this. My one question.

"How long we got here?" the man says then.

Shane does the math in his head, off the radio clock. It hurts.

"Eight minutes?"

"Ten if she's still got a table," the man says, opening his briefcase again. Shuffling, shuffling.

It's what Shane had been about to say: ten if she's still got a table.

He realizes then that he's crying. Either on the outside of his face or the inside, he can't tell.

Nolan.

"Opportunity," he remembers the man saying.

The man nods as if in response, still picking through his briefcase. Refiling a piece of paper nearer the front.

"I didn't say that out loud," Shane says then. Out loud.

The man keeps nodding, smiles, whatever he was looking for finally there in his hands. He closes the briefcase in victory.

"You might call this a special deal," the man says, "a one-time offer. You understand we don't provide it to everybody?"

For a moment Shane's heart leaps, a woman cresting the stairs, but then it's not Molly. Just Molly's hair.

"You can't even have gotten into the car," Shane says into the rearview mirror.

"Of course not," the man says. "Neither could I have a magnetic resonance snapshot of your son's limited future, but, well—"

"That's not how MRIs work," Shane interrupts. "They're at—they're at hospitals."

The man smiles wide this time, doesn't disagree at all.

His teeth are watery brown. Years of coffee, cigarettes. In the fifties they didn't know.

"What can I do?" Shane says.

"What would you do?" the man asks back.

Shane laughs through his nose, both hands still to the wheel.

"Trade," he says.

"Yes," the man says. "Trade. Exactly."

Shane isn't surprised. The only story he remembers from his junior high English anthology is a kid getting into an elevator with an old man, one whose daughter was delivering a baby, only everything was going wrong with the delivery. Somehow the kid got involved in the drama of it all, until, in the bathroom, he hears the old man

offering his life for his daughter's, for his granddaughter's, and then, hours later, in the cafeteria, the kid reaches up to touch the old man's forearm, tell him it's all right, and the old man collapses into ash, and the daughter and granddaughter live, and the kid, he's the only one who knows why.

Shane is that kid now, he knows.

Or, no: he's that old man. Has been all along, ever since his lower lip shook after reading that story.

When Molly gets here, she'll find the car idling, waiting, empty.

"And he'll live?" Shane says into the rearview mirror.

"Have his own family someday," the man in the backseat says, then narrows his eyes, looking at something definitely not in the headrest. "A foreman, looks like." He comes back to Shane. "His crew likes him. Respects him. As they should."

"Give it to me," Shane says, holding his hand up for the paper. Three minutes until Molly.

"It won't be like that, though," the man says. "In stories people can turn to columns of ash. In real life, a person can die for months, for years. Not even know himself at the end."

"But he'll live? Nolan?"

"He'll watch you die, yes."

Already Shane's picturing better ways. Accidents, insurance.

Except—wouldn't that be not treasuring each minute he has left with Nolan, with Samuel, with Molly?

At least this way, the man's way, he'll get to say goodbye. Again and again probably, surgery after surgery, but that's got to be better than a police officer at the door. Doesn't it?

"It'll destroy him, sure," the man says, "but he'll get put back together. Him and Samuel both. Children are made for this kind of trauma, it would seem."

"Two minutes," Shane recites, his voice already dead.

Still, it's been the easiest decision of his life.

What father wouldn't take that bullet for his son?

The man in the backseat smiles with his eyes, in agreement, and begins folding the paper tinier and tinier – all Shane can see, in flashes, is the occasional line of crayon – until it's an eggshell-white origami capsule, every edge smooth.

He hands it over the seat, delivers it to Shane's fingertips.

"Glioblastoma," Shane says, inspecting the cancer from all angles. It's heavier than just one piece of paper. As it should be, he suspects.

"One minute," the man says, tapping his own watch.

Shane swallows the nothing in his mouth, in preparation, then deposits the pill onto the back of his tongue. It's dry, sucks all the moisture from his mouth, but, only gagging once, he gets it down. Tells himself he's grateful for it, even.

"That's all?" he says.

"They won't be able to see it on the machines you have for two weeks, give or take," the man says, "but yeah. That's it."

"She's late," Shane says, nodding to Molly's stairs, and for a shrieking instant he knows this has been a trick, that he should have *read* that paper before swallowing it, that what it had to have said or been a kindergarten picture of was that he was trading *Molly's* life for Nolan's.

But then the man's hand is on his shoulder, assuring him.

"And as you know with blastomas," he says, "the memory becomes unreliable. At some point, you might not even remember me as I am now, would you agree?"

"But we made a deal."

"And it'll hold," the man says, his voice suede now, his hand still cupping Shane's shoulder, "but soon, much sooner than you would think possible, all of your memories, they'll be tinged with foreknowledge of this cancer, as if you were picking up cues – like some part of you saw it coming all along. It's completely natural. And, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're reading about school matters?"

Shane holds the magazine up. "Education," he says.

"So you were already thinking about that story with the old man in the three-piece suit. Add that to the cues you've been picking up,

the signals your body's been sending for months now, and it makes perfect sense for your mind to project someone impossible like me"—to show, he opens the door, the babylocked door—"have him deliver the news to you, perhaps even arrange it such that the cancer is voluntary, a sacrifice, an act of heroism, of—of . . ."

"Love."

"Yes, that."

"And you couldn't have changed clothes that fast," Shane says, playing along with this charade. This fantasy. This joke. Already remembering it as a joke with himself. A coping mechanism. An explanation for why he has to die. A way to shape the past such that he can accept the future.

And the grandfather in the story had been wearing a salesman suit, like he'd come from work, been sitting in that waiting room for days already.

The man tilts his head to the side, in agreement.

"Neither could I know that what Molly wanted you to do this afternoon was get some nail clippers for the dog," he adds.

Because they've been using wire cutters now for all these years. Courting disaster, infection, blood on the kitchen linoleum.

She'd told him twice this morning, before kissing him goodbye.

"Clippers," Shane repeats.

"Clippers," the man says, one leg down to the snow now.

"And he'll live?" Shane says.

"Two children of his own," the man says, shifting his briefcase across, looking suddenly ahead, to the stairs. "T minus twenty-two seconds," he whispers. Excited in a grim way, it seems.

Before he's gone, though.

"Why me," Shane spouts out. "Why broker this kind of deal just to me?"

The man stops his climb out of the Impala, chews his cheek a bit as if collecting his words.

"Did I say 'broker?'" he asks, a glimmer in his eyes now. "Correct

me if I'm wrong, but brokers are the middle man, yes? The agent?"

Shane nods, a wariness clenching inside him now.

The man smiles, pats the seat he's just sliding away from. "Agents work for other people," he says then, less coy now. "Me? I work for myself, Shane. For me and me alone. To help people like you, in need."

"Thank you," Shane says—an apology, really—and the man tips his hat, steps up into the blowing cold, and is already walking toward the mall, his gait not curt like Shane would associate with an overcoat like that, but young, loose, happy . . . satisfied?

He just saved a boy's life, though.

That has to be it.

He allowed a father to be a hero, allowed a boy to live.

Not a broker at all, but some type of angel. Somebody running interference on Shane's part. Or Death, giving Shane the one get-out-of-jail-free card he has each year.

Or, not free, really.

A life for a life, Shane guesses.

But why? That's what's sticking. Had the man been a broker, then he would take a cut, but if he's working for himself and himself alone, then he must be the dealer himself, the trader.

And . . . why trade?

Why does anybody?

Because they can trade up. Get something better, something they want more.

But how is Shane's life worth more than Nolan's?

It doesn't make sense. But neither does the man being there at all. And maybe that's part of the forgetting him: a logical inconsistency at the center of the experience, that makes it easier and easier to forget, to dismiss, to laugh away, to never tell anybody about, because they'd see the obvious holes in the story.

Shane smiles, rubs his throat with his index-finger knuckle, and then Molly crests the top of the stairs, the wind catching her hair, her scarf whipping up behind her.

Shane smiles—only two minutes late today—is already trying to gather an excuse for the no-nail-clippers thing, and then the man, a hipster in shirt-sleeves again, he steps slightly aside for Molly to pass, and tips his hat to her as well, pinches the cigarette away from his face.

She nods, passes, holding her coat together at her throat, then stops a step or two later, to watch the man recede, like she knows she should remember him, and like that—though it lasts for hours in Shane's head—Shane sees him at one of her booths, sees him talking earnestly of impossible things, sees him telling her that she's the daughter in that story, the one who shouldn't have lived, the one who's number's being called back in now, he's sorry, he really is. The whole time folding a piece of paper, one of Nolan's old pictures, folding it smaller and smaller, then passing it across the table, under his cupped hand. Leaving it there for her like a decision, one she's already forgotten.

She would do anything for the kids too, of course.

The trade wasn't one-for-one, it was two-for-one.

Of course.

Shane closes his eyes, opens them, and, for the first time since he's been picking her up like this, stands from his side of the car, crosses to meet her.

"Um," she says, flashing her eyes around for the security Jeep.

"Moll," Shane gets out, his voice cracky, eyes hidden, then takes her hand, is leading her to her side of the car but then turns around. "I'm saving you from the bus," he says right into her ear, and steps to the side, raises her hand to pull her to him so that she spins under his hand, stops with her back against his chest, her hair against his lips.

"My knight," she says. It's part of their old routine. From some movie.

Shane swallows. They're all alone now, the snow swirling around their feet, some distant mallbound shoppers making their way across the parking lot, their shapes small against the months of mounded snow.

"The kids," Molly says then, because it's time.

Shane nods, knows. Wonders if this is what it'll be like after. If they'll be able to see Nolan and Samuel through the snow, far away, moving into their own lives.

"Wait," he says back to her, and leans forward over her shoulder, squinting. Not at the distant shoppers but at the coffee-colored negative blown from the front seat, sliding across the snow now. Behind it the snow mounds that seem so permanent, so —

Shane smiles.

"See that?" he says to Molly, and she looks down along the top of his arm, his index finger pointing to the top of the tallest, oldest mound. The quiet little pipe jutting up from the snow there.

"What?" she says, and Shane nods to himself, says it like talking from a dream, "Home," and then switches his feet back and forth twice, for warmth, for magic, for everything. ■