

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

PETE
HAMILL

SNOW IN
AUGUST

WARNER BOOKS 0-446-67525-3



"Magic.... This page-turner of a fable has a universal appeal."
—*New York Times Book Review*

PRAISE FOR PETE HAMILL'S

SNOW IN AUGUST

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—**Fort Worth Star-Telegram**



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big heart the vulnerabilities and inevitable oneness of humankind.”

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“Hamill is as readable as ever... the time-warp element and terrific descriptions will appeal to many

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“With a mastery of language and imagery that has made him the journalist-editor-novelist he is, Hamill meshes several disparate works seamlessly, in lush colors.”

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—*Winston-Salem Journal*

“Delightful... endearing... absorbing... Hamill has written a telling episode of faith, a faith which professes that major or minor miracles might readily occur along the streets of ancient Prague or modern Brooklyn’s East New York.”

—*Midstream*

“Re-creates the Brooklyn of days gone by lovingly.... Hamill, the journalist, puts just the right amount of realistic detail into the time and place and characters to make this story burst with life.”

—*Kliatt*

NOVELS

A Killing for Christ

The Gift

Dirty Laundry

Flesh and Blood

The Deadly Piece

The Guns of Heaven

Loving Women

SHORT STORY

COLLECTIONS

The Invisible City

Tokyo Sketches

NONFICTION

Irrational Ravings

A Drinking Life

Tools as Art

Piecework

Why Sinatra Matters

Diego Rivera

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

On Writing Snow in August

my brother John

AND IN MEMORY OF

Joel Oppenheimer

who heard the cries of

“Yonkel! Yonkel! Yonkel!”

in the summer bleachers of 1947.

*Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.*

HEBREWS 11:1

A Jew can't live without miracles.

YIDDISH PROVERB

Once upon a cold and luminous Saturday morning, in an urban hamlet of tenements, factories, and trolley cars on the western slopes of the borough of Brooklyn, a boy named Michael Devlin woke in the dark.

He was eleven years and three months old in this final week of the year 1946, and because he had slept in this room for as long as he could remember, the darkness provoked neither mystery nor fear. He did not have to see the red wooden chair that stood against the windowsill; he knew it was there. He knew his winter clothes were hanging on a hook on the door and that his three good shirts and his clean underclothes were neatly stacked in the two drawers of the low green bureau. The *Captain Marvel* comic book he'd been reading before falling asleep was certain to be on the floor beside the narrow bed. And he knew that when he turned on the light he would pick up the comic book and stack it with the other *Captain Marvels* on the top shelf of the metal cabinet beside the door. Then he would rise in a flash, holding his breath to keep from shivering in his underwear, grab for clothes, and head for the warmth of the kitchen. That was what he did on every dark winter morning of his life.

But this morning was different.

Because of the light.

His room, on the top floor of the tenement at 378 Ellison Avenue, was at once dark and bright, with tiny pearls of silver glistening in the blue shadows. From the bed, Michael could see a radiant paleness beyond the black window shade and gashes of hard white light along its sides. He lay there under the covers, his eyes filled with the bright darkness. A holy light, he thought. The light of Fatima. Or the Garden of Eden. Or the magic places in storybooks. Suddenly, he was sure it was like the light in the Cave of the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man. That secret place in the comic book where the faceless man in the black suit first took Billy Batson to meet the ancient Egyptian wizard named Shazam. Yes, the newsboy must have seen a light like this. Down there, beyond the subway tunnel, in that long storeroom cave where the white-bearded wizard gave him the magic word that called down the lightning bolt. The lightning bolt that turned the boy into Captain Marvel, the world's mightiest man.

Michael knew that the magic word was the same as the name of the wizard: *Shazam!* And he had learned from the comic book that the letters of the name stood for Solomon, Hercules, and Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury. Ancient gods and heroes. Except for Solomon, who was a wise king from Bible days. Mighty symbols of strength, stamina, power, courage, and speed. They weren't just names in a comic book either; Michael had looked them up in the encyclopedia. And their powers were all combined in Captain Marvel. On that night in the mysterious cave, the wizard named Shazam told Billy Batson he had been chosen to fight the forces of evil because he was pure of heart. And no matter how sinister his enemies were, no matter how monstrous their weapons, all he needed to fight them was to shout the magic word. *Shazam!*

Alas, on the streets of the parish, the magic word did not work for Michael Devlin and his friends, and for at least three years they had debated the reasons. Maybe they needed to get the powers directly from the Egyptian wizard. Maybe the word didn't work because they weren't pure enough. Or because, as his friend Sonny Montemarano put it, Captain Marvel was just a story in a fucking comic book.

Still, Michael insisted, it might be true. Who could ever know? Maybe all they had to do was believe hard enough for it to happen.

Michael was snapped back into the present by the sound of the wind. First a low moan. Then a high-pitched whine. A trombone choir, then a soprano saxophone. Tommy Dorsey's band, and then Sidney Bechet. The names and music he had learned from the radio. It sounded to Michael like the voice of the light. He sat up, his heart pounding, wondering what time it was, afraid that he had overslept, and swung his feet around to the floor. They landed on the *Captain Marvel* comic book.

I wish I didn't have to do this, he thought. Sometimes being an altar boy was a huge pain in the ass. I wish I could just lie in bed and listen to the wind. Instead of dragging myself all the way to Sacred Heart to mouth a lot of mumbo jumbo in a language nobody even speaks. I wish I could fall back into this warm bed, pull the covers around me, and sleep.

But he did not sink back into the warmth. In his mind, he saw his mother's disappointed face and Father Heaney's angry eyes. Worse: he felt suddenly alarmed, as if he had come close to the sin of sloth. Even Shazam warned against sloth, listing it among the Seven Deadly Enemies of Man, and Shazam wasn't even a Catholic. The word itself had a disgusting sound, and he remembered a picture of an animal called a sloth that he'd seen in a dictionary. Thick, furry, nasty. He imagined it growing to the size of King Kong, waddling wetly through the city, stinking of filth and laziness and animal shit. A dirty goddamned giant *sloth*, with P-38s firing machine guns at it, the bullets vanishing into the hairy mush of its formless body, its open mouth a pit of slobber. Jesus Christ.

So Michael did not even raise the black window shade. He grabbed his trousers, thinking: The antonym for sloth must be self-denial. Or movement. Or a word that said get off your ass, get up and go. When the priests, brothers, and nuns were not drilling them in synonyms or antonyms or the eleven times table, they were forever hammering away about self-denial. And so, buttoning his fly in the dark, he refused himself the pleasure of pulling the shade aside, or rolling it up, and thus revealing the source of the luminous light. He would wait. He would put off that vision. He would offer up his discomfort, as his teachers commanded him to do, for the suffering souls in Purgatory. Be good. Be pure. Accept some pain and thus redeem those who are burning for their sins. He could hear the chill orders of his catechism teachers as clearly as he could hear Shazam.

Shirtless and shoeless, he hurried through the dark living room and past his mother's closed bedroom door to the kitchen, which faced the harbor of New York. The fire in the coal stove had guttered and died during the night, and the linoleum floors were frigid on his bare feet. He didn't care. Now he would deny himself no longer. He lifted the kitchen window shade, and his heart tripped.

There was the source of the light.

Snow.

Still falling on the rooftops and backyards of Brooklyn.

Snow now so deep, so dense and packed, that the world glowed in its blinding whiteness.

The thrilling view pebbled his skin. It had been snowing for two days and nights, great white flakes on the first day and then harder, finer snow driven by the wind off the harbor. The boy had seen nothing like it. Ever. He could remember six of his eleven winters on the earth, and there had never been snow like this. This was snow out of movies about the Yukon that he watched in the Venus. This was like the great Arctic blizzards in the stories of Jack London that he read in the library on Garibaldi Street. Snow that hid wolves and covered automobiles and crushed cabins and halted trolley cars. Snow that caused avalanches to cover the entrances of gold mines and snow that cracked limbs off trees in Prospect Park. Snow from a mighty storm. The night before, someone on the radio said that the blizzard had paralyzed the city. Here it was, the next morning, and the snow was still coming

down, erasing the world.

He stepped into the narrow bathroom off the kitchen, closing the door behind him. The tiles were colder than the linoleum. His teeth chattered. He urinated, pulled the chain to flush, and then washed his face quickly in the cold water of the sink, thinking: I will go into it; I will face the storm, climb the hard hills, push into the wind of the blizzard to the church on the hill. Father Heaney, a veteran of the war, will celebrate the eight o'clock mass, and I will be there at his side. The only human being to make it through the blizzard. Even the old ladies in black, those strange old biddies who make it to church through rainstorms and heat waves, even they will fail to make it through the storm. The pews will be empty. The candles will flicker in the cold. But I will be there.

His heart raced at the prospect of the great test. He didn't care now about the souls in Purgatory. He wanted the adventure. He wished he had a dogsled waiting downstairs. He wished he could bundle himself in furs and lift a leather whip and urge the huskies forward, shouting, *Mush, boys, mush!* He had the serum in a pouch and by God, he would get it to Nome.

He combed his hair, and when he stepped out of the bathroom, his mother, Kate, was raking the ashes in the coal stove, her flannel robe pulled tightly around her, worn brown slippers on her feet. Steam leaked from her mouth into the frigid air. A teapot rested on the black cast-iron top of the stove, waiting for heat.

"Let me do that, Mom," the boy said. "That's *my* job."

"No, no, you're already washed," she said, in her soft Irish accent, a hair of irritation in her voice. Raking the dead ashes was one of Michael's chores, but in his excitement over the blizzard, he'd forgotten. "Just go and get dressed."

"I'll *do* it," he said, taking the flat shovel from her and digging the ashes out of the bottom tray. He poured them into a paper bag, a gray powder rising in the air to mix with the steam from his breath, then shoveled fresh coal from the bucket onto the grate. The fine ash made him sneeze.

"For the love of God, Michael, get *dressed*," she said now, pushing him aside. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Back in his room, at the far end of the railroad flat, he pulled an undershirt over his head and a dark green shirt on top of it, shoving the tails into his trousers. After tugging galoshes over his shoes, he finally raised the blackout shade. The snow was piled against the windowpane at least two feet above the steel slats of the fire escape. Beyond the steep drift, snow swirled like a fog so dense he could not see across Ellison Avenue. He hurried back into the kitchen. A fire was burning now in the coal stove, its odor staining the air like rotten eggs. He wished his mother would buy the Blue Coal advertised on *The Shadow*; it was harder—*anthracite*, they said in school—with almost no smell. But she told him once that they couldn't afford it and he never asked again.

"I'm sure you could stay home if you like, Michael," she said, the irritation out of her voice now. "They know how far you have to come."

"I can do it," he said, combing his hair, choosing not to remind her that the church was eight blocks from 378 Ellison Avenue. From the backyards he heard a sound that he was sure was the howling of a thousand wolves.

"Still," she said, pouring water for tea, "it's a terrible long way in this storm."

He followed her glance to the wall clock: seven twenty-five. He had time. He was certain that she also looked at the framed photograph of his father. Thomas Devlin. Michael was named for his mother's father, who had died in Ireland long ago. The photograph of his own father was hanging beside the picture of President Roosevelt that she'd cut out of the *Daily News* magazine when he died. For a moment, Michael wondered what she thought about when she looked at the picture of his father.

The boy didn't remember many details about the man she called Tommy. He was a large man with dark hair and a rough, stubbled beard who had gone off to the army when Michael was six. And had never come back. In the framed formal photograph, he was wearing his army uniform. The skin on his smiling face looked smooth. Much smoother than it actually felt. His hair was covered by the army cap, but at the sides it was lighter than the boy remembered. That brown hair. And a deep voice with an Irish brogue. And a blue Sunday suit and polished black shoes. And a song about the green glens of Antrim. And stories about a dog he had as a boy in Ireland, a dog named Sticky, who could power a boat with his tail and fly over mountains. His mother surely remembered much more about him. The boy knew his father had been killed in Belgium in the last winter of the war, and thought: Maybe the blizzard reminds her of Tommy Devlin dead in the snow, a long way from Brooklyn. Maybe that's why she's irritated. It's not my lollygagging. It's the snow.

"I wish you could eat something," she said, sipping her tea, but not pouring a cup for Michael because she knew he could neither eat nor drink before serving mass.

"I've got to receive Communion, Mom."

"Well, hurry home. There'll be bacon and eggs."

Usually he was famished and thirsty on mornings before mass, but the excitement of the storm was driving him now. He took his mackinaw from the closet beside the front door.

"Wear a hat, lad," she said.

"This has a hood, Mom," he said, "and it's real warm. Don't worry."

She took the starched surplice from the clothesline and covered it with butcher paper, closing the wrapping with Scotch tape. Then she kissed him on the cheek as he opened the door to the hall. Halfway down the first flight of stairs, he glanced back, and she was watching him go, her arms folded, her husband smiling from the wall behind her, right next to the dead president of the United States.

I wish she wasn't so sad, he thought.

And then, leaping down the three flights of stairs to the street, he braced himself for the storm.

As the boy stepped out of the vestibule, into what Jack London called the Great White Silence, he felt as if his eyes had been scoured. Down here, in those first moments on the open street, the snow wasn't even white; here in its whirling center the storm was as gray as the crystal core of a block of ice. Or the dead eyes of Blind Pew in *Treasure Island*. Michael blinked again and again, his eyelids moving without his command, as the tears welled up from the cold. He rubbed his eyes to focus and felt cold tears on his cheeks. He rubbed until at last he could see. The only thing moving was the snow driven wildly by the wind.

He plunged his hands into the mackinaw's pockets. And his gloves were not there. Goddamn. He remembered leaving them to dry beside the kerosene stove in the living room. Wool gloves, with a hole in the right forefinger. Thinking: I should go upstairs and get them. No. I can't take the time. I'll be late. Can't be late. And wishing he had a watch. I'll just keep my hands in my pockets. If they freeze, I'll offer it up.

Then he started to walk, the wrapped surplice under his right arm, hands in his coat pockets. In this block of Ellison Avenue he was sheltered in part by the four-story buildings, and he stepped lumpily through the drifts piled against the tenements, wishing he had snowshoes. As he squinted tightly and saw better, a phrase that he had memorized from Jack London rose in his mind—*sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world*—and he tingled with excitement. These were ghostly wastes. This was a dead world. He was the sole speck of life.

The fallen snow was up over the tops of parked cars. It covered the newsstand outside Slowacki's candy store, which for the first time in memory was dark. All the other shops on the block were dark too, their doorways piled with snow. There wasn't even a light in Casement's Bar across the street, where Alfred the porter usually mopped floors before the start of business. Michael could see no sign of a trolley car, no traffic, no footprints in the snow. Somewhere, the wolves howled. Perhaps, up ahead, he would find the Male-mute Kid. Or Sitka Charlie. He would build a fire on the frozen shores of Lake Lebarge. Up ahead were the wild bars of Dawson. And the Chilkoot Pass. And the lost trail to All Gold Canyon. Here on Ellison Avenue, Michael Devlin felt like so many of the men in those stories: the only person on earth.

He was not, however, afraid. He had been an altar boy for three years, and the route to Sacred Heart was as familiar as the path through the flat he'd just left behind. Wolves howl, the wind blows, there's no sky. But there is no danger here, he thought. Here I am safe.

Then he stepped past Pete's Diner on the corner of Collins Street and the wind took him. No simple wind. A fierce, howling wind, ripping up the street from the harbor, a wind angry at the earth, raging at its huge trees and proud houses and puny people. The wind lifted the boy and then dropped him hard and tumbled him, whipping him across the icy avenue. Gripping the surplice with one hand, Michael grabbed with the other for something, anything, and found only ice-crusting snow.

He rolled until he was thumped against the orange post of a fire alarm box.

"Holy God," he said out loud. "Holy God."

He gasped for breath, sucking in darts of snow, his nose clogged with ice. But if he was hurt, he

was too cold to know what part of him was broken. Still holding the surplice, he skittered on hands and knees and braced his back against the leeward side of the fire alarm box and huddled low, where the wind wasn't so strong. No pain. Nothing broken. He looked around, keeping his head down, and realized he'd been blown across all six lanes of Ellison Avenue. He saw the heavy neon sign above the entrance of Unbeatable Joe's bar dangling from a wire, tossing and shaking in the wind, then crunching against the side of the building. But he couldn't see very far down Collins Street, not even as far as home plate on the stickball court. Everything was white and wild. Then he saw that his mackinaw was coated with snow, and he remembered how characters in those Yukon tales always froze to death if they remained still, or if they fell asleep. They huddled with dogs, they held tight to wolves; anything for warmth. Or they rose and walked. I have to get up, he thought. If I don't, I will goddamn well die. Michael shoved the surplice under his mackinaw, stuffing it into his belt. Then, crouching low, he began to run.

He ran into the wind, and made it across Collins Street, grabbing for the picket fence outside the factory of the Universal Lighting Company. The building rose above him like an ice mountain from the Klondike, one of those treacherous peaks that killed men in winter and drowned them in spring, washing their bodies into the Yukon River. The black iron pickets were so cold they seemed to burn his bare hands, and he was afraid the skin would be torn off his palms. But his skin held, and he pulled himself along until he was free of the hammering force of the wind.

At Corrigan Street he repeated the process: head down, crouched, falling once, then up again, until he reached the shops untouched by the wind. Away off, about three blocks, he could see the ghostly shape of a trolley car. Its lights were on but it wasn't moving. High above the avenue, the cables that gave the trolleys their power were quivering like bowstrings. Michael paused under the shuddering marquee of the Venus, gazing at the showcards offering *The Four Feathers* and *Gunga Din*. He'd seen both at least three times and tried to conjure warm images of India or the vast deserts of Africa, with Fuzzy Wuzzies charging in the dust and British soldiers sweating in the heat. The images only made him feel colder. And for the first time, he was afraid.

I have to go now, he thought. I have to turn this corner and go up Kelly Street, past the armory, past the Jewish synagogue, have to cross MacArthur Avenue, have to turn right at the park. I have to do this now. With the wind at my back. I must go. Not just to serve mass. No. For a bigger reason. If I turn around and go home, I'll be a goddamned coward. Nobody will see me turn and run for home. But I'll know.

He turned the corner into Kelly Street. There were three-story houses to his left, the humped shapes of parked cars to his right, and around him and under him and above him he heard a high, thin, piercing whine, the savage, wordless wolf call of the wind: penetrating him, lifting him and dropping him, driving him past the soaring drifts that concealed buried cars. The whine was insistent and remorseless. Who are *you*, Michael Devlin, the voice said, to challenge *me*?

Then he looked up and his way was blocked. A giant elm had been smashed to the ground from the front yard of one of the houses. As the tree fell before the wind, it had crushed the fence of the house and collapsed the roof of a parked car, and it was now stretched out to the far side of the street. The branches of the tree seemed to reach toward the white sky in protest. Snow gathered on the dying trunk. The windows of the crushed car had exploded, and snow was drifting onto its seats. The boy thought: If the tree had hit me instead of the car, I'd be dead.

Holy God.

He pushed through loose waist-deep snow between two parked cars and crossed the street, skirting the murdered tree, until he reached the side of the armory. This was no refuge. Behind its barred

windows, the armory housed a boxing ring and dozens of old jeeps and National Guardsmen called “weekend warriors.” But its sheer redbrick walls rose a forbidding six stories above the street, and no doorways offered shelter. The boy saw now that the armory’s copper drainpipes had burst. High above the ground, shoving their way from the ruptured seams of the drainpipes, giant icicles stabbed at the air, defying the wind. They were thick, muscular icicles, a foot wide at the root, sharp as spears at the tip. Michael Devlin remembered photographs in the encyclopedia of stalactites, gray and dead; these icicles looked just as primitive and ancient and evil. And all of them were aimed at him.

He turned his eyes away from the icicles and trudged on, wishing again that he had a wristwatch. Seems like hours since I left the house, he thought, but maybe it’s only been minutes. I don’t really know, and the storm doesn’t care anything about time. He thought: Maybe this is crazy. What if the church is closed too? What if Father Heaney took one look at the storm and decided to celebrate mass alone in the rectory? What if the electricity has failed and the altar is dark? And suppose another tree falls, or a monster icicle, and hits me? Without warning. Nobody to shout: Watch it, kid. It would just happen. And I’d be left here in the drifts, without a dog or a friend or a scout from the mining camp. My mother would have to bury me and she’d be left completely alone. Or I’d end up crippled, a drag on her and everyone else. In one of the Jack London stories, a prospector broke his leg in a storm and his best friend was forced to obey the wisdom of the trail by shooting him in the head. Otherwise both of them would die.

Then, moving over a piled ridge, Michael imagined his father in the snows of Belgium. Many Americans had been killed there by the Germans in what was called the Battle of the Bulge. Thousands of them. He saw his father in full uniform, with a helmet and heavy boots, carrying a gun, and the snow driving even harder than this Brooklyn blizzard, and the wind whining, with the goddamned Germans somewhere up ahead in the blinding storm: as close, maybe, as MacArthur Avenue, as near as the synagogue. Unseen. Hidden. Ready to kill. Did Tommy Devlin think about turning around and running home? Of course not. He wasn’t a goddamned coward. But did he have a friend with him? Or was he alone when he was shot, his blood oozing red into the white snow? Had he lost all feeling in his hands and feet before they killed him? Did he cry? Did he hear wolves? Did he think of Mom? Home in the top-floor flat on Ellison Avenue? His blue suit? Did he think of me?

Suddenly, Michael Devlin heard a voice.

A human voice.

Not the wind, but the first real voice he’d heard since he left home.

He stopped and gazed around at the deserted world.

And then, through the slanting sheets of icy snow, he saw a man peering from a door on the Kelly Street side of the synagogue. A man with a beard. And a black suit. Like the man in black who called to Billy Batson from the dark entrance to the subway. He was waving at Michael.

“Hallo, hallo,” the bearded man called, his voice seeming to cross a distance much wider than the street. “Hallo.” As if coming from another country.

Michael stood there. The man was beckoning to him.

“Hallo, please,” the man shouted. “Please to come over...”

The voice sounded very old, muffled by the falling snow. A voice as plain and direct as a spell. Michael still didn’t move. This was the *synagogue*, the mysterious building in which the Jews worshiped their God. Michael had passed it hundreds of times, but except for Saturday morning, the doors were almost always closed. In some ways, it didn’t seem to be part of the parish, in the way that Sacred Heart was part of the parish, and the Venus, and Casement’s Bar. The synagogue rose about three stories off Kelly Street, but Michael always felt that one dark midnight, it had been dropped on

the corner from somewhere else.

That wasn't all. To Michael there was something vaguely spooky about the synagogue, as if secret rites, maybe even terrible crimes, took place behind its locked doors. After all, didn't everybody on Ellison Avenue say that the Jews had killed Jesus? And if they could kill the Son of God, what might they do to a mere kid in the middle of a blizzard in Brooklyn? Michael had a sudden image of the bearded man tying him up, then heaving him into an oven, or bricking him up behind a wall, like the guy in "The Cask of Amontillado." He saw a headline in the *Daily News*: BOY VANISHES IN STORM. And started to walk on.

The bearded man called to him again.

"Please."

Michael stopped. There was a note in the man's voice as he said the simple word *please*. The sound of distress. As if a life could depend upon what Michael did next. There was pain in the word too. And sadness. Maybe the bearded man was just that: a bearded man, calling for help in a blizzard. Not some agent of the devil. They were like two men in the trackless Arctic, specks in the ghostly wastes of a dead world.

If I walk away, Michael thought, it will be for one reason: I'm afraid. The Malemute Kid wouldn't walk away. Neither would Billy Batson. Shit, if Billy Batson had walked away from the man in the black suit he would never have become Captain Marvel. And my father, Tommy Devlin, he would *never* walk away. Not from a thousand goddamned Nazis. And definitely not from a man who said *please* in that voice.

The boy crossed the street, struggling again for balance, found the wall of the synagogue in the twisting snow, and inched his way to the side door. The bearded man's face was clearer now. Under his heavy black hat, he had blue eyes behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. His small nose made his beard seem larger, more solid, as if it were carved from wood instead of made of hair. The beard was dark, with touches of rusty red and gray, but the boy could not tell how old the man was. He was standing just inside the door, a heavy dark tweed coat hanging loose over his shoulders. Everything else he wore was black.

"Please," he said. "I am the rabbi. I need a help. Can you give me a help?"

Tense with fear, Michael stepped closer. The wind abruptly died, as if pausing for breath. The boy stared at the bearded man, noticing his dirty fingernails, the ragged cuffs of the tweed coat, and wondered again if dark secrets lay behind him in the synagogue.

"Well, you see, Rabbi, I—"

"One minute, it takes," the rabbi said.

Michael fumbled for words, trembling with fear, curiosity, and the cold.

"I'm an altar boy up at Sacred Heart," he said. "You know, a Catholic? And I'm late for the eight o'clock mass and—"

"Not even one minute," the rabbi said. "*Bitte*." He pulled the coat tighter. "Please."

Michael glanced past him into the unlighted vestibule. Wood paneling rose about five feet from the floor, topped by a ridge. The rest of the wall was painted a cream color. He could see nothing else in the gloom. What if he's Svengali, he thought, the bearded guy in the movie who could hypnotize people? Or like Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, who made the kids steal for him? No: his voice doesn't sound like those bastards. The wind suddenly attacked again, like a signal of urgency. Besides, the boy thought, I can always push him down the steps. I can knock off his glasses. I can kick the door open. Or kick him in the balls. One false move. *Boom!* Knowing that he was talking to himself to kill his fear.

“Okay,” Michael said abruptly. “But it’s gotta be fast. What do you want me to do?”

The bearded man opened the door wide and Michael stepped in, suddenly warmer as he left the wind behind. There were three steps leading down. The boy stood uneasily on the top step.

“A little light, is good, yes?” the rabbi said, waving a hand around the dark vestibule.

“I guess.”

“There,” the rabbi said. “You see?”

Michael moved down a step and peered through the dimness toward the wall to the right. A switch was cut into dark wood paneling. The rabbi gestured nervously, as if flicking the switch, but he did not touch it.

“You mean turn it on?” Michael asked.

The rabbi nodded. “Is... uh... it’s dark, no?”

Michael was suddenly wary again.

“Why don’t *you* turn it on?”

“Is not... permitted,” the bearded man replied, as if groping for the correct word. “Today is *Shabbos*, you see, and—is simple, no? Just—”

He brushed the air with his hand to show how easy it would be. Michael took a breath, stepped down, and flicked the switch. The space was suddenly brightened by an overhead globe. They were in a small vestibule; three steps up on the far side, there was another door. The creamy ceiling paint was cracked and peeling. The boy exhaled slowly. No bomb had exploded. No steel walls had descended to imprison him. No trapdoor had opened to drop him into a dungeon. The light switch was a light switch. The rabbi smiled, showing uneven yellow teeth, and looked pleased. Michael felt loose and warm.

“Thanks you, thanks you,” the rabbi said. “A *dank*. Very good boy, you are. *Du bist zaier gut-hartsik... Very good.*”

Then he pointed to the ridge along the top of the wood paneling.

“Is for you,” he said. “Please to take. For you.”

It was a nickel, gleaming dully in the light.

“For you,” the rabbi said.

“No, it was nothing, I don’t need it....”

“Please.”

Michael was anxious again, about the time now and the four blocks he still had to journey through the blizzard. He picked up the nickel and slipped it into the side pocket of his mackinaw.

“Good-bye,” the man said. “And thanks you.”

“You’re welcome, Rabbi.”

The boy opened the door and rushed into the storm, feeling taller and stronger and braver.

Father Heaney looked as if he too wished he had stayed in bed. His halo of uncombed gray hair combined with his wild black eyebrows and unshaven chin to create a vision of distraction and carelessness. Only his eyes seemed to belong to the man whose war record made him a hero to Michael and some of the other altar boys. His slits of eyes were more hooded than ever, causing Michael to imagine him posing as a Japanese submarine commander spying for the OSS. This was not too absurd a possibility; they had heard from other priests that Father Heaney had been a chaplain in North Africa and Sicily and Anzio; he had gone into Germany with General Patton. He had not been in the Battle of the Bulge, although when Michael asked him about it, he said, in a tight-lipped way, that he'd known men who died there. In his sermons, or in the mornings in the sacristy, Father Heaney never talked about the war. But Michael was sure the war hung over him like a dark cloud; after all, less than two years ago, he was giving the last rites to dying soldiers.

To be sure, Father Heaney's silences were not confined to the war. He was silent about most things. In the mornings before mass, he seldom said anything to the altar boys, but on this morning he was more silent than ever. He grunted when he saw Michael arrive breathlessly at ten after eight. He grunted at Michael's apologies. Then he grunted and motioned with his head for the boy to precede him out to the altar.

The priest's style was to say the mass very quickly, like a man announcing a horse race, and the other altar boys always joked that he was in a hurry to get back to his bottle. Michael had never seen him drinking, or even smelled whiskey seeping from his pores, but on this arctic morning, Father Heaney's impatient, hurtling style hadn't changed. He raced through the mass in the cold, empty church while Michael tried valiantly to keep pace. Usually there were two altar boys, but Michael's partner had been defeated by the blizzard, and Michael made all the Latin responses himself. At one point, Father Heaney cut Michael off in midsentence; at another, he completely dropped a long piece of Latin. It was as if even the words of the ancient ritual were more than he wanted to say. Michael moved the heavy leather-bound missal from one side of the altar to the other. He did what he was supposed to do with wine and cruets. As the priest mumbled before the tabernacle, with a plaster statue of the bleeding Christ above him, Michael tried to pray for his father in his Belgian grave and the souls in Purgatory and the starving people in Europe and Japan. But only the impulse rose in his breast; the actual words of prayers did not follow. Father Heaney wouldn't let them, driven as he was to cross the finish line. The priest blessed the great dark space of the church and skipped the sermon, while far above, the steeple of Sacred Heart of Jesus R.C. Church shuddered and creaked under the assault of the wind.

Then Michael remembered the injured tone of the bearded man's voice: that *please*. And he decided that the rabbi had been desperate. That he needed Michael to turn on those lights or he would suffer for the rest of the day. There was raw pain in his voice. Not pain that had to do with the light switch. Some other kind of pain. Coming from that man. That rabbi. That Jew.

Then he heard a phrase: *Domine non sum dignus...*

And a whisper from Father Heaney: "Pay attention, boy. We've got two customers."

They had reached the moment when the priest hands out Holy Communion, and somehow, from the vast wind-creaking darkness, two old women in black clothes had made their separate ways to the railing of the altar. Michael quickly lifted the gold dish called the paten and followed Father Heaney to the kneeling women, wondering: How did they get here? Did they walk through this blizzard that knocked me flat? Did someone drive them in a car? Maybe they *live* here. Mumbling Latin, his left hand holding the gold chalice known as the ciborium, Father Heaney deposited a host upon each outstretched tongue, while Michael held the paten under their chins. This was so that no fragment of the host, which had been transformed into the body of Jesus Christ during the Consecration, would fall upon the polished floor.

The first woman's eyes were wide and glassy, like the eyes of a zombie from a movie. The other closed her eyes tight, as if fearful of gazing too brazenly at the divine white wafer. The second one had a mole on her chin, with white hairs sprouting as if from the eye of a potato. They each took the host the same way: the lips closing over it, but the mouth stretched high and taut to form a closed little fleshy cave. To chew the host, after all, was to chew Jesus. Bowing in piety and gratitude, they rose and went back to the dark pews to pray until the host softened and they could swallow.

Then Michael knelt on the altar, and Father Heaney placed a host on his tongue too. Michael squinted but didn't shut his eyes. He saw that the priest's thick fingers were yellow from cigarettes. And he remembered the rabbi's dirty fingernails. And thought: Maybe the pipes in the synagogue had frozen and burst, like the drains at the armory, and there isn't any water. Maybe he's not permitted to wash his hands. Like he wasn't permitted to turn on the lights. But helping the man had to be what the catechism listed as a corporal work of mercy, right? Even if he was a rabbi. A Jew. That still must count. You were supposed to help the needy. The poor. The sick. The man looked poor, didn't he? And he needed someone to turn on the lights. For some mysterious reason. *Is not permitted*.... The mystery of the brief moment in the synagogue grew larger as Michael swallowed his own softened host. The rabbi wasn't Svengali. He wasn't Fagin. But he was strange and mysterious, like someone from a book, a bearded guardian of secrets. And Michael thought: I want to find out those secrets.

Finally the mass ended. Father Heaney muttered *Ite, missa est*, and Michael answered *Deo gratias* and the priest strode off the altar, with Michael behind him. In the sacristy, with its marble counter and ceramic sink, Father Heaney began removing his garments: the chasuble and stole, the maniple and cincture, the amice and alb. Under all of these, the priest was wearing a tan turtleneck sweater and black trousers. His black shoes were stained from dried rock salt. He sighed, took a pack of Camels from his trouser pocket, and struck a wooden match on the sole of his shoe to light up. He inhaled deeply. The smell of the cigarette filled the air.

"Thanks, young man," he said, his eyes moving under the hooded lids. "And, hey: How in the hell did you make it here this morning anyway?"

"I walked, Father."

The priest inhaled deeply, then made a perfect O with the exhaled smoke.

"You walked, huh? How many blocks?"

"Eight."

"No wonder you were late," he said, his black eyebrows rising. "Well, you can offer it up to the souls in Purgatory."

"I did, Father. During the prayers."

"I hope you included me," the priest said, without smiling. And then grabbed his army overcoat and walked out to cross the snow-packed yard to the rectory.

Michael's duties were not finished. This was the last mass of the day, and so he went back to the

altar to extinguish the two candles with a long-handled device the altar boys had named the “holy snuffer.” ~~The old women were gone. They seemed to have ascended into the darkness like the waxy smoke from the candles after he capped them with the brass bell at the end of the snuffer.~~ For a moment, staring into the darkness, he imagined the rafters full of smoky old women with hair sprouting from their chins. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Whispering in Italian and Polish and Latin about dead husbands and dead children. Like angels grown old but not allowed to die. He could smell them: the odor of candles.

Quickly, Michael came down off the altar, genuflected, and returned to the empty sacristy. He pulled the surplice over his head, hung the cassock in the closet, and changed into his street clothes. Before leaving, he flipped the switches of the altar lights, peering out to be sure he had turned them all off. Then, from the dark upper reaches of the church, he could hear the moaning of the wind. And through the wind, a voice.

Please, it said.

Please to help.

That afternoon in the howling white world, while his mother worked her shift as a nurse's aide at Wesleyan Hospital, Michael Devlin was alone in the living room of the flat, lying on the linoleum floor beside the kerosene heater. A pillow was folded under his head. His stack of *Captain Marvels* was beside him. After mass and the promised bacon and eggs and his mother's departure, he had searched for the issue that told the story of Billy Batson's first encounter with Shazam. Or rather, he found the retelling of the story, because he didn't own the precious first issue of *Whiz Comics*, the one published long ago, near the beginning of the war. In the retelling, for a special issue of Captain Marvel's own book, the man in the black suit was there with his hat pulled down to mask his face. But except for the black clothes, he didn't resemble the rabbi from Kelly Street, and neither did the wizard Shazam. The wizard was much older, with a white beard instead of a dark one, dressed in a long, flowing robe. The rabbi was younger, heavier, and with his blue eyes and horn-rimmed glasses looked more like a schoolteacher from the Wild West than an Egyptian wizard. Somebody who could have taught Abraham Lincoln.

After a while, Michael put aside the *Captain Marvels* and started reading a comic book named *Crime Does Not Pay*, all about the terrible killer Alvin Karpis and his bloody career and bloodier end. This comic made Michael feel very different from the way he felt reading *Captain Marvel*. *Captain Marvel* was about magic words and mad scientists and tigers that talked, about bullets that bounced off chests and a hero with a gold-trimmed cape who could fly through the air. But the crime comic was full of real gangsters in real cities. No capes. No magic words. Just robbing and shooting and dying. Bullets didn't bounce off chests, they went through them; and nobody went flying through the air, high above the skyscrapers. The crime comics were about men who were once good kids in places like Brooklyn and came to bad ends. Like the men from Murder Incorporated, Lepke something and Gurrah. Pretty Boy Floyd. Dillinger. They died in ambushes. They died outside movie houses. They even died in the snow, like Tommy Devlin died in Belgium, but without being heroes. They didn't ever die for their country. They died for money. Or women.

Partway through the story of Alvin Karpis, Michael realized that the wind had stopped. He listened hard, fearing some trick from the storm, and then heard shovels scraping against sidewalks and knew that it was over. He wanted to tell his mother the news, but she was working at the hospital. So he dressed, and grabbed his dry gloves, and dashed down the stairs to find his friends.

Sonny Montemarano was already there, testing the snow with big mittened hands. His dark face was shiny, his eyes bright.

"You ever seen anything like this?" he said.

"Never," Michael said. "They got icicles up at the armory that look like rocket ships."

"We couldn't get out my door," Sonny said. "It's frozen shut. We had to jump out the fucking window."

"This morning, the wind threw me across the street," Michael said. "Like I was a goddamned feather."

"I never seen anything like it. What a fucking storm."

Sonny always said *fuck*. Michael loved hearing Sonny talk, but he still had trouble using the forbidden word, afraid it would become such a habit that he would say it in front of his mother. He used *goddamned*. None of them said the worst word of all: *motherfucker*. Sonny had tried it one time last summer, but Unbeatable Joe, who ran the saloon on the corner, heard him, grabbed him by the shirt collar, and said, “Don’t ever use that fucking word, you hear me? Only *niggers* use that fucking word.”

Then Jimmy Kabinsky arrived, with a big wool hat pulled down to his brow. He was a DP, a displaced person, and a figure of much amazement in Sacred Heart School because he’d learned English in three months. Nobody was more amazed than Sonny Montemarano; his grandmother had come from Sicily forty-one years ago and still didn’t speak much more than *Sonny, come uppan eat o* *Sonny, you shut up*.

“They got snow like this in Poland?” Sonny asked.

“They got snow in Poland goes up three flights,” Jimmy said. They started walking together toward Collins Street.

“You’re shittin’ me,” Sonny Montemarano said. “Three flights? You’d have nothing but dead Polacks, you had that much fucking snow.”

“I swear,” Jimmy Kabinsky said. “My uncle told me.”

“Oh,” Sonny said, rolling his eyes at Michael behind Jimmy’s back. “Your *uncle*. That makes sense.”

Jimmy’s uncle was a junkman. He made a living picking up old newspapers, broken bicycle wheels, ruined radios, then piling them into a pushcart and taking them off to some warehouse on the waterfront. During the last year of the war, the kids rode him without mercy. For one thing, his arms were very long, his shoulders sloped, and his body was always pitched forward at an angle, even when the pushcart wasn’t dragging him down the hills of the parish. For another, he had no wife and no kids and never went to the bars with the other men. Finally, he was very ugly, or so everyone agreed: his eyes were buried under a clifflike brow, his wide, potatolike nose was always flared in anger, his ears were like a pair of ashtrays, and his teeth were yellow. The kids all called him Frankenstein, except when Jimmy was around. When Jimmy came to live with him, because DPs all needed sponsors, he became Uncle Frankenstein. The kids didn’t rag him when Jimmy was around, out of respect for Jimmy, whose parents died in the war.

“How high you think the snow is in Ebbets Field?” Jimmy said.

“Upper deck,” Sonny said, winking at Michael. “My grandmother heard it on the radio.”

“Upper *deck*?” Jimmy said. “Come on, that’s like, what, six flights?”

“Deeper than fucking Poland!” Sonny said, shoving Jimmy into a pile of snow. “And they got the wind out there, blowin’ to left field. Swear to Christ.”

Soon they were romping in the snow, falling facedown into its whiteness, hurling snowballs at each other and at strangers. Kids emerged from the tenements with sleds, heading for Prospect Park. A trolley car slowly pushed its way along Ellison Avenue. A few cars arrived from nowhere, their tires encased in chains. Then Unbeatable Joe, thick and burly with a fur hat and a heavy army coat, came to look at his saloon, gazing at the sign that was smashed on the sidewalk. He shook his head and kicked the sign. Then he unlocked the door and went inside. He was back in a minute, holding two shovels. He shouted across the street.

“Hey, do you worthless, lazy bums wanna make some money?”

They took turns, two of them shoveling while the other warmed his hands. Michael shoveled around the fallen sign, which was two feet high, three feet wide, about a foot deep. The neon lettering

was smashed, the tin sides bent, the steel cables torn; that was some goddamned wind. Then he started cutting a path for pedestrians, pushing loose snow out toward where the gutter was. That was the easy part. But there was a layer of hard-packed icy snow beneath the fine snow that had fallen near the end of the storm. The packed snow wouldn't move.

"Lemme try," Sonny said. He took the shovel from Michael, forced the blade under the packed snow, put a boot on the top of the blade, and shoved hard. The snow peeled back. "Ya see? Ya gotta get *under* it."

"I'll finish it, Sonny," Michael said.

"No, no, I enjoy this." He laughed. "Help Jimmy."

When the job was done, Unbeatable Joe came out again.

"You bums oughtta sign up with Sanitation right now," he said. He took a dollar from his pocket and handed it to Sonny. "Go get laid."

He turned and kicked the sign one more time.

They went past Slowacki's candy store, which was too crowded, and walked another block to Mister G's. In this smaller, darker candy store, Sonny bought a Clark bar, Jimmy chose a bag of peanuts, and Michael picked a box of Good and Plenty. Behind the counter, Mister G was reading the *New York Post*. He was an old man, short and dumpy, with very little hair and sad eyes behind rimless glasses. He was an oddity along Ellison Avenue; it was said, for example, that he was a Giants fan and that his kids had gone off to college. That was strange; Michael had never known anyone but Dodger fans and nobody at all who had gone to college. It was also strange that Mister G read the *Post* in a neighborhood where men swore by the *Journal-American*. And that he lived with his wife in a tiny apartment at the back of the store. It was said of her that she "went to business," which meant she had a job in an office and rose early and went to the subway in a suit or a dress. It also meant that they could afford a regular apartment but were too cheap to move from the back rooms of the candy store.

Mister G said nothing as he rang up the sale on a heavy gilded cash register on a shelf behind the counter. He gave Sonny change from the dollar while flipping a page of the newspaper in a distracted way. Mister G's silence was not odd, for there was no need for chat. Kids were in and out of the store all day, buying penny candies from the boxes on the counter, or nickel candies from the three-tiered rack. And the store was not only for kids. Grown-ups used the pay phone in the back. Or bought newspapers. And in neat boxes on the right of the counter, Mister G had built displays of cigarettes and ten-cent cigars.

"Man, I hope it snows s'more tonight," Sonny said. "I hope it snows for a *month*. We'd be rich."

He was dividing the change when Frankie McCarthy walked in.

Sonny shoved the change in his pocket and started examining the comics on the standing rack against the wall. *The Spirit*. *Batman*. *Jungle Comics*. Michael was suddenly nervous. Frankie McCarthy was one of the older guys, at least seventeen, and the leader of the gang called the Falcons. He scared Michael. He had dark red hair, wet now from the snow, freckles, slushy blue eyes with very small pupils. He kept his lips pulled tight over his mouth to hide a broken front tooth. The summer before, Michael saw him punch out a drunken man on the sidewalk in front of Unbeatable Joe's, battering him until the man's face was a smear of blood. The scene was terrible, but Frankie McCarthy seemed to enjoy it. So did his boys on the Falcons. They all cheered as Frankie walked away from the fallen older man like he was Joe Louis. And he *enjoyed* it. That's what scared Michael.

"Whatta you got in your pocket, kid?" he said to Sonny.

"Nothin', Frankie."

"You're lyin' to me, kid," he said, turning to Michael. "He's lyin', ain't he? I seen yiz shovel the

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