The Wedding and Snow and Ice

In 1957, on the rim of the Cape, a small town often didn’t feel small until the first snowfall of the season. In those muffled first moments, in the hush and stillness before the flakes began and the anticipation of the mess that’d be to dig out afterward, people congregated in the general store, there to stock up on candles and flashlights, franks and beans and loaves of bread. People regularly knew each other’s business, now they also could recite what was in their neighbors’ refrigerators and cupboards. Then and there, the world shrunk and became smaller thing, simple as a driveway, a red wicker basket filled with bread and milk, a cleared road, a light in a neighbor’s window, a snowglobe on a child’s shelf.

At the Farrells’, they were taking down the barn, and when the first big flakes began to fall all work had to stop. There was no point in risking a slip on the roof and the possibility of a broken arm or leg. The Farrells, after all, were a cautious breed. The father, Jim, and the two boys, Hank and Jamie, trooped in to the kitchen, their faces ruddy, hands frozen in spite of woolen gloves. Grace Farrell had been listening to the weather reports on the radio and had made soup from the canned tomatoes left from last August’s garden. The bowls of rich broth were so hot and delicious it made tears form in Jim’s eyes, although, frankly, the boys preferred Campbell’s.

Still, at fourteen and seventeen, the Farrell brothers knew enough to compliment their mother’s soup. When they’d foolishly made their preference known in the past, their mother most easygoing but with occasional frightening spikes of passion that surprised one and all, had spilled the entire contents of the pot down the drain. She, who liked things homemade and was known for her grape jam and Christmas pudding, announced she didn’t know why she bothered with any of it. She might just get herself a job and then where would they be? Eating bread and butter and soup right out of the can. She’d been a nurse when Jim Farrell met her and she’d given it up to take care of them and did they even appreciate what she’d sacrificed? Why, next summer she...
might even let the garden go wild if that was how little they thought of the work she put in. The garden was a trial anyway, a constant war against the naturalized sweet peas, vines so invasive Grace Farrell yanked them out by the handful. In the early fall, she'd had the older boy, Hank, hack down the vines with an axe, then build a bonfire. The smoke that arose was so sweet Grace Farrell wound up crying. She said there was smoke in her eyes, but she got like that sometimes, as if there was another life somewhere out there she might be living, one she might prefer despite her love for her husband and sons.

The sweet peas in the field were thought to have been set down the first inhabitant of the house, Coral Hadley, who lost her husband and son at sea. Coral was said to never look at the ocean again after that, even though it was little more than a mile from her door. She dug in tightly to the earth, and there were people who vowed that her fingers turned green. When she walked down Main Street acorns fell out of her pockets so that anyone following too closely behind was sure to stumble. Coral certainly did her best to cultivate this acreage. All these years later her presence was still felt; odd, unexpected specimens popped up on property, seeming to grow overnight. Peach trees where none belonged. Hedges of lilac of a variety extinct even in England. Roses among the nettle. The two acre field rampant with those damned sweet peas, purple and pink and white, strong as weeds, impossible to get rid of.

Grace Farrell had stated publicly that she would swear that Coral Hadley came back from the dead just to replant anything that had been ripped up. Surely a joke, considering that Grace was one of the most sensible individuals around, the last woman you'd ever expect might believe in ghosts, the first a body could depend on in times of trial and strife. She'd had her hands full with the boys of hers: Hank was the dreamer who didn't pay attention to his schoolwork. Jamie was the wilder one who simply couldn't sit still. In grammar school the fourth grade teacher, Helen Morse, had tied Jamie's left arm to the desk in an attempt to force him to improve his penmanship by using his right hand, but Jamie had simply walked around the room dragging the desk along with him. He remained victorious, stubbornly left-handed.

He certainly had energy, that boy. He had to be kept busy, for his own good as well as for the peace of mind of those around him. Thankfully, they didn't have to think up projects. There were endless tasks around the house. The shaky old barn pulled down for safety's
sake, for instance, though the boys had loved to play there when they were younger, swinging from the rope in the hayloft, nearly breaking their necks every time. New kitchen cabinets had just been put in, and Jamie had helped Jim with that job as well. He'd been just as helpful when the dreadful stained carpeting was at last taken up, exposing the yellow pine floors that were said to be soaked with Coral Hadley's tears.

There was always something gone wrong with a house as old as this one. Maybe Grace should have said no when Jim first took her to see the place. It was the week before their wedding, and Grace was still living with her parents up in Plymouth. She recently given up her job at the hospital. Isn't it gorgeous? he'd said of the farm. It looked like one of those tumbledown places you saw in the news magazines, with hound dogs lazing around the front door. The fields were so thick with milkweed back then that a thousand goldfinch came to feed every spring. Anyone wishing to reach the pond had to use a scythe to cut a path. All the same, the look on Jim's face had made Grace say yes. It had made her throw all good sense away. For an instant the house did look beautiful to her, all white clapboards and right angles; the milkweed was shining, illuminated by thin bands of sunlight, an amazing sight if you looked at it the right way, if you narrowed your eyes until everything blurred into one bright and gleaming horizon.

Jim Farrell had grown up in town. His father had been a carpenter, and Jim, wanting steadier work, was the chief of the public works department, the chief of three other men, at any rate. He was a good man, quiet, not one to shirk responsibility. People said he could smell snow, that he could divine a nor'easter simply from the scent in the air. The biggest storms smelled like vanilla, he'd confided to Jamie, the small ones like wet laundry. Tonight, Jim seemed antsy. He got like that when he simply couldn't tell what the snow was up to, when the whole damn thing seemed like a mystery. His job, after all, was a cat and mouse game against nature and fate. Did he get the town plows out early? Did he conserve sand and salt for the next snowfall? Would the storm carve away at the dunes, which were already disappearing all along the shore?

When Jim finished his soup and had taken this bowl to the sink, he stood at the window facing west. The field of sweet peas was already dusted white. Snow made him feel like crying sometimes—just the first flakes, the purest stuff.

Behind the hedge of hollies the Brooks house next door was dark.
“Do you think I should go over there with some soup?” Grace had come up behind her husband. She liked the way he looked at snow, the intensity on his face, there when they made love, there whenever he was concentrating and trying to figure things out. “Hal might be away. I think he might still be working on that house in Bourne. She might be alone there with Josephine.”

The Brooks were their closest neighbors, right there on the other side of the field, but there was no camaraderie between the families. Hal Brooks was a shit, there was no other way to say it, and even Grace, who was offended by bad language, would nod when someone in town referred to her neighbor that way. Lord, he’d been a mean snake all his life, the way Grace had heart it. Even as a boy, he’d shoot seagulls for sport, and once or twice a stray dog had disappeared on his property, only to be found strung up from one of the oak trees. Hal hadn’t changed with age, and people in town all knew what was going on over there. You could see it when the Brooks name came up. A nod. A stepping back. Some people had seen what went on with his wife, some had heard about it. The rest would simply cross the street when the Brooks were in town.

“If she needs something she’ll come and get it, won’t she?” Jim said, although they both thought this probably wasn’t true.

The boys were in the living room watching the new TV; they would watch anything that flickered up in front of them, and for a while at least Jamie, always so restless, would settle down. They boys didn’t need to know what went on the Brooks’. When Grace and Jim had first moved in, Lionel Brooks was the only occupant, a widower, a hard-working fisherman who kept his boat out in Provincetown. Hal had inherited the house from his father and had come to claim it after the old man died. He’d arrived home from the Navy with this wife of his, ready to make enemies left and right no matter how many welcome baskets were brought over and how many women in town sent over pies. Jim Farrell didn’t want his wife next door for any reason, not ever to take over a bit of soup.

“Stay away,” Jim told Grace. “We all decide our own fates, and what they do is their business.”

“Well, of course I won’t go over. But I might send the boys to shovel snow.”

Jim couldn’t say no to that. Just last year, Mattie Hammond, eighty-
four years old and all on her own, had been snowed into her cottage during a blizzard. The drifts had been so high, Mattie couldn’t open her front door and had nearly starved to death before Jim came to plow out the street. Thankfully, despite the blanket of white that could cause semi-blindness in some men while they were at the plow, Jim had noticed the square handkerchief Mattie had taped up in a window to signal her distress. There were some things Jim Farrell couldn’t deny a neighbor, particularly on a snowy night, and other situations Grace couldn’t turn away from either, and because they didn’t like to argue with each other, no matter their differences, they left it at that.

Jim went out to his truck at four in the afternoon, headed for the department of public works. It was the hour when everything turned blue—the snow, the white fences, the white clapboards of the house—that luminous time when the line between earth and sky disappeared.

“I want you boys to go shovel over at Rosalyn Brooks’,” Grace called into the living room. She had ladled out a separate pot of tomato soup despite what Jim had advised. “Take the shovels and bring this soup with you.”

When there was no response Grace went into the living room and stood in front of the TV. The boys would watch just about anything, but their favorite show was You Asked For It, on tonight at seven. There were the most amazing things out there in the world, and all you had to do was ask and you’d see it right in front of you, on your very own screen.

“I’m turning this off,” Grace announced, then did so. “I want you to shovel.”

“At the Brooks’,” Jamie said. “We heard.”

“Can’t. I’ve got a history paper,” Hank said. “Sorry, Mom, but it’s due tomorrow.”

Hank was having his troubles in school, so Grace let him stay and sent Jamie on his own, making sure he bundled up, handing him his hat, which he often managed to forget, watching to make certain he pulled on his scarf and his leather gloves. The pot of soup was under one arm, the shovel carried over his shoulder. He was a quiet boy, not much of a student, but loveable to his mother in some deep way, so that she worried about him as she didn’t anyone else in this world. Perhaps it was true that mothers had favorites, at least now and then. Grace watched Jamie disappear into the blue of the field and felt a catch in
her throat. Love, she presumed. A moment of realizing exactly how lucky she was, of being grateful that she was not Cora Hadley, that her son was not out on the ocean, but was instead trudging through the snowy reaches of their own familiar acreage.

When he was alone, Jamie tended to hum. His mother was a fan of musicals, particularly *The King and I*, and Jamie found himself humming *Getting To Know You*. His mother loved Yul Brenner, for reasons Jamie couldn’t understand. The king he played was bald, for one thing; he was bossy as all get out for another. All the same, the song stuck. Sometimes when Jamie walked though this field, in winter, at exactly this hour, he would see deer. There were wild turkeys too, crazy birds that have very little fear of humans and would run straight at you if you invaded their territory. There was a short cut to the Brooks’, through the winterberry vines. The berries were shiny and red; sometimes you’d happen upon a skunk as you made your way thought the brambles, and that skunk would just go on feeding, calm as could be, rightfully assured that no creature on earth would be stupid enough to interrupt or attack.

Jamie was in the winterberry, thinking about deer, singing softly to himself, when he heard it. A clap of thunder. A snowplow on the road. A firecracker. He stopped for a minute and breathed in snowflakes. When he breathed out it was a like a steam engine. It melted the snow off the winterberries. He listened. He was good at that, but heard nothing, so he went on. He was that sort of boy, intent on his task at hand. He knew what his mother wanted him to do: shovel the Brooks’ front door to their driveway. He and Hank had done it before, last year. Mr. Brooks hadn’t been at home, but Mrs. Brooks had made them hot chocolate, which they drank out on the front step. Now, alongside the Chevy there was Mr. Brooks’ truck, a wreck of a thing, battered as all get out, leaking oil into the snow.

Jamie tried to balance the soup on the front step, but the step was made from of an uneven piece of stone. He went up to the door then, to deliver the soup before he started to work. His breath did the same thing to the glass window set into the door as it did to the winterberries, melted off the snow, then fogged it up. But even through the fog he could see Rosalyn Brooks, right there on the floor with no clothes on and something red all over her face. He should have backed away; he should run home, done something, anything, but he had never seen a naked woman before, and it was as though he was hypnotized,
frozen in place while his breath kept melting the snow. One minute he had been fourteen year-old boy with nothing much on his mind. Now, he was someone else entirely.

He was still holding on to the pot of tomato soup when he opened the door. People didn’t lock up much in their town; there was nothing to steal and no one to steal it. Jamie walked in as though he’d been drawn inside by a magnetic force. The Brooks’ house was an old farmhouse, like the Farrells’, but it hadn’t been updated. It was cold and empty and the only light turned on was in the kitchen, all the way down the hall. Everything looked blue inside the house, except for the thing that was red. It was blood that was all over Rosalyn Brooks, but when she looked up and saw Jamie she seemed most panicked. That was what Jamie realized. That was the sound.

“I brought you soup,” he said. “It’s from my mother.”

Mrs. Brooks looked at him as though he were crazy.

“She makes it herself.” Jamie felt like running, but he didn’t seem capable of turning away. He had the feeling he might be paralyzed. “Are you all right?”

Rosalyn Brooks laughed, or at least Jamie thought that’s what Jamie thought it was.

“Just stay there,” he said. “I’ll get you something.”

He put the soup on a tabletop and went to the hall closet, grabbing for the first thing he felt, bringing back a heavy black woolen coat.

“It’s okay,” he said, because of the way she was looking at him. As though she were scared. “It’s a coat.”

Rosalyn Brooks stared at him, then took the coat and put it on. Jamie Farrell looked away, all the same he glimpsed her breasts, blue in the light of the house, and her belly, which was oddly beautiful. She had bruises all over, that much he noticed as well, on her legs and shoulders especially. He now saw that her lip was split open and she could barely see through the slits of her eyes.

“Do you want me to heat you some soup?” It was so cold in the house that Jamie’s breath came out in billows, and he was embarrassed by his own heat. When Mrs. Brooks didn’t answer, he figured she wanted him to take the pot in the kitchen, but as he turned to head down the hall, Rosalyn lurched from her prone position and grabbed his pantsleg.
She did it so hard and so fast he almost fell over. She looked at him in a way that convinced him that something really bad had happened. Somebody else might have taken off running, back through the winterberries, snagging his clothes as he raced through the bushes, but Jamie crouched down beside Mrs. Brooks.

"Where's Josephine?" he asked.

That was the Brooks' five-year old daughter. Josephine liked to pick the sweet peas in the field. She liked the pears that dropped to the ground from the big tree in the Farrells' yard. Rosalyn looked up the stairs.

"Is she in bed?"

"Asleep."

At least Mrs. Brooks could talk. That was a relief.

"My husband had an accident."

"Okay," Jamie said. "Should we call my Dad? He could help."

"No. You can't call him."

He could tell that whatever happened was bad from her tone. Still, he stayed. Maybe Jamie felt he owed Rosalyn Brooks his allegiance because he'd seen her naked, or maybe it was all that blood, or the way his breath was so hot and the house so very cold.

"In the kitchen?"

Mrs. Brooks nodded. She was not yet thirty, a young woman, pretty under other circumstances.

"I'll just go in there and get a dish towel to stop the bleeding," Jamie said, for her lip and her scalp were oozing.

But when he rose, she grabbed his leg again.

"It's okay," he assured her. "I'll be right back."

The hallway was even colder. The old houses had no insulation and the kitchen was especially chilly. There was even more blood on the floor, especially around Hal Brooks' body, which was right in front of the stove. Jamie tried not to look too closely. He grabbed a dishtowel, ran cold water over it, then brought it back to Rosalyn. He wondered if he had stepped in blood and if it was on the soles of his boots, if he'd left tracks down the hall. Then he stopped wondering. He put those thoughts aside. Rosalyn was sitting on the floor now, the coat buttoned; when he handed her the dish towel, she held it up to her lip.

"What do you want to do with him?" Jamie said.

Outside, the blue was turning into darkness. A black night. So quiet you could hear the cardinals nesting in the hedges outside the Brooks'
The snow fell harder. Jamie figured his father was up on the main road with his plow by now.

They sat there in silence in the cold house.

"I'll shovel your path, and then I'll come back," Jamie said. "You think about what you want to do."

"Okay," Rosalyn said. "I will."

Jamie went out and shoveled hard and fast. It was heavy snow, thick and dense, the kind he would have thought was good for snowball fights on any other occasion. He wasn't thinking that way now. He was thinking of the pond beyond the field. In the old days food could be stored in the summer kitchen right up until July if enough ice was stacked against the walls. He'd heard the old woman who'd lived in their house a while back had hauled blocks of ice from the pond until her horse, the one who'd lived in the barn they'd begun to tear down, slipped through the ice and drowned.

The kitchen floor at the Brooks' was already clean when Jamie came back inside. Rosalyn Brooks had mopped up, then washed her face and pulled back her honey-colored hair. There were still streaks of blood in her scalp, but Jamie Farrell didn't have the heart to tell her. Rosalyn went to check on her daughter, then came back downstairs and put on her husband's workboots. She looked even more delicate wearing them. She didn't bother with gloves. At least there was a blanket around Mr. Brooks, and Jamie was grateful for that. They tried to pull him along the floor, and when that didn't work, Jamie went and got the wheelbarrow from the garage. He was so hot he felt like taking off his hat and scarf, but if he misplaced them, his mother would have his head.

It took all their combined strength to push the wheelbarrow through the snow. The thick, heavy snow that they quietly cursed. They stopped for a break halfway across the field; they both looked up at the falling snow. Rosalyn put her arms out, and tilted her head back. Jamie had never thought about the future, who he was, what he would do. It had all been a haze. Now he saw that blood was still seeping through Rosalyn's hair and he thought she probably needed stitches. He saw that his future was almost here.

There were pine trees and holly around the far side of the pond, and that's where they went. They had to drag him along over the frozen weeds. They had put stones in his pockets, heavy black stones, the kind...
Jamie and Hank liked best for their slingshots. Rosalyn took off the workboots she'd been wearing and filled them with stones as well, then put the boots on her husband, laced them and carefully tied a knot, then a double-knot.

"Your feet will freeze on the way back," Jamie whispered.

She did not seem to care. She closed her eyes and when she opened them they were still slits. The snow was making things quieter all the time. They pulled him into the pond and watched him sink. There was a gulping noise at first, then there was nothing. Only the quiet.

"You go home," Rosalyn said to Jamie. "Go on. Your mother will be worried."

He hated to leave her like that, barefoot, bleeding.

She leaned over and kissed him, on the lips, in gratitude.

Jamie Farrell ran the rest of the way, his hot breath rattling against his ribs. His boots and pantsleg were wet and mucky. There was pond water in his boots, fetid, cold stuff. He was shivering and couldn't stop. Worst of all, his mother was waiting for him.

"What took you so long?" Grace demanded. "It's after eight. You missed your T.V. show." Then, looking at him carefully. "Where's the shovel?"

"I forgot it," Jamie turned back to the door. "I'm sorry. I'll go get it if you want."

His mother stopped him. She looked at him harder still. "I'll go. You do your homework and get ready for bed."

"I can get the shovel in the morning," Jamie offered, an edge of panic inside him, but Grace was already getting her coat. She had stepped into her warm black boots. After she left, Jamie went up to the bedroom he shared with his brother. It was as though he'd just walked out of a dream and here he was, melting in the over-heated second floor of his family's house. He thought of all the wounded people there were in this world, people he'd never know, and he felt helpless.

"What if I was an accessory to murder?" he asked Hank, who was already in bed, more than half-asleep as he gazed at his history book.

"What if you were the biggest moron that ever lived?" Hank shot back, a question for which there was no answer, at least not on this night.

It was nearly midnight by the time Grace came home. The snow was tapering off and she brushed the flakes from her coat and stomped
on the welcome mat to dislodge the ice from her boots. Usually, Jim didn’t get back until dawn, but tonight he’d come home earlier. The storm wasn’t as bad as the meteorologists has predicted. His men could take care of the rest and clean up.

“Where were you? The boys are in bed, and you weren't here, I didn’t know what to think.”

But that wasn’t true. For a moment, what he’d thought was that she’d left him. Just disappeared into that other life she seemed to be thinking about sometimes. They stared at each other now, their breath hot. Outside the drifts leaned against the house; winter here stayed a long time.

“I went over and heated up the tomato soup for Rosalyn.”

“Did you?”

Grace sat down at the table. Everyone had known what was going on, and no one had done a damn thing about it.

“Hal up and left. No money, no warning, nothing. She thinks he might have re-enlisted.”

Jim was looking out the window; two deer had just now wandered into their field. Hopefully, the snow wasn’t so deep that it would prevent them from unearthing the last withered sweet peas, thought to be delicious by anything wild. “I guess it’s none of our business,” he said. From this distance, the winterberries almost looked tropical, the fruit of another place entirely.

“So you say.”

Grace Farrell still had snow in her hair, but it would melt when they got into bed and she’d never even know it had been there. When she thought back to this night she wouldn’t even remember it had been snowing, she’d only remember the look on her husband’s face, the concentration she loved, the man she could turn to, even on a night as cold as this.