



The Blizzard Of 1959

a short story by GRAHAM HEWSON

Photos: (left) Roy Arenella, (right) Craig J. Satterlee



As night falls the February blizzard slips through the streets and avenues, to Montreal's outlying districts, to Pierrefonds and the last line of houses on Pierre Lauson, where the backyards give way to the eastern woods. Some hours later, after midnight, the boy, Kevin Bourque, wakes sweaty in his bed as the snow ticks against the window of his room. He has a fever, one that will last as long as this three-day storm, and he's lightheaded, can't make sense of the cracking, splitting sound of the wind through the woods behind the house. Out of bed, he stands at the window and

shifts from foot to foot on the cold, bare floor. His breath is there on the glass, puff by puff, and he wipes a smudge of it away with the sleeve of his pajamas, sees the general darkness of the woods, then, as his eyes adjust, a riot of movement, the trees buffeted by gales of snow. (He'll see, the day after the storm, the litter of fallen limbs on the floor of the woods, and their neighbor, a man he's supposed to address as Uncle Freddy, will tell him to call them widow makers. "Like your father," the neighbor will say and then spit in the snow.)

In the hallway outside his room, Kevin sees that his sister Sylvie's door is closed, and down the stairs he can hear the murmur of his father's radio. His mother works for the Canadian National Railway and is away at a conference in Toronto, and his father is restless, though he seems to spend more and more nights with the radio and the sofa even when she's home. At the top of the stairs Kevin's feet are numb, and the wood banister is so cold he can't help but touch it out of curiosity; he's never felt a bite like it indoors — not so much a quality of temperature but an unusual hardness. The banister holds his attention until he can't recognize it for the thing it is anymore — the wood, the brass brackets, the slope of it down the dozen steps to the living room — and he wonders if he's still dreaming, and at that moment the fever shivers him.

Downstairs his father is asleep on the sofa. The portable radio, a Zenith, is on the coffee table, its snakelike cord disappearing behind the sofa, and it's tuned to a Montreal station Kevin still doesn't quite understand because although he covets French, the secret language his father uses only with him, he cannot comprehend it spoken by another voice. His mother is Irish Canadian, speaks only English. So does Kevin's sister, whom his father has never brought into their whispered world; Sylvie is ten to Kevin's four, and she's like a small adult, humorless, poised, wary. The yellow light from the Zenith's dial flickers onto the coffee table, the sofa, and when Kevin touches the top of the radio the plastic is warm. Heat, now that he feels it in the frigid room, is suddenly the odd condition, and he shivers again, startled by this reversal of hot and cold, the simple right and wrong of things. He sits on the coffee table, his hand still on the radio, and watches his sleeping father: the angle of his bent legs under the afghan, his hand and wrist in the sleeve of his robe that's soft and thick as towels; the robe is open at the neck, and Kevin can see the rise and fall of his father's breathing, the slow rhythm of sleep in the weak shadows caused by the Zenith's light. He places his hand on his father's chest, in the v of the open robe, and he remembers the moment he could no longer touch his mother like this. (No, she told him a month ago on a Saturday night. She wore a black strapless evening gown as she and his father dressed in their room, and she removed his hand, a small fist of sudden anger that she opened finger by finger until he laughed and she tickled his palm with one of her fingernails; then she called out and handed him to the baby sitter. He'll carry this confusion of sensuality and sexuality with him all his life, and he will always love a woman who will let him rest his hand there.)

Now, in the dim light from the radio, his father blinks, wakes, looks at him for an instant as if he doesn't recognize his own boy, as if he might choose not to recognize him, and in the hesitation Kevin feels a stir of loneliness that's foreign to him.

His father quietly asks what's wrong — “Ç'è va pas bien?” — and props himself up on an elbow. He brushes the hair from Kevin's eyes and touches his forehead, feels he's

sweating, draws him in and under the afghan.

“Fièvre,” he says, and he seems more troubled by the fever than Kevin is.

The sofa cushion is rough but doesn't itch like the wool afghan does, and his father's smell is inseparable from his ovenlike warmth. Behind his father's breathing and the voices from the radio, Kevin hears the ticking of the brass ship's clock in the tile hallway by the front door, and coming from the kitchen the sudden stop of the refrigerator; not the normal, regulated pause in its duties, but an abrupt end to its routine whirring. The radio is gone too, the room black without the dial light.

Kevin's father squeezes him tighter. “Le pouvoir!” he whispers excitedly.

Yes, the power is gone — Kevin can feel it missing from the rug, the curtains, the sofa, the hardwood floors — but the glee in his father's voice is somehow false and bothers him. (He's too young to put a name to what he hears: his father is afraid.)

He sleeps then, and he dreams of soft pulsing shapes that match the fever's throb. The shapes drift and float in a thick liquid that threatens to drown him; he feels it fill his nose and line his throat. When he wakes his nose has run, and the liquid, globbed on the sofa cushion, steams hot as something cooked.

His father has left him but reappears with two pills on a small white plate — but they aren't pills; they're cough drops, the lozenges his father likes to pretend aren't really just candy. Kevin's mother, if she were there, would ask him if he was a big enough boy for adult medicine, the bottle of Bayer, one white and chalky tablet of it. When his father offers the plate, the cough drops, Kevin shakes his head no.

“Je ne te blâme pas.” His father doesn't blame him for wanting real medicine, but he simply cannot find the aspirin. “Ta mère” — he sighs, sits on the coffee table, puts the plate on the arm of the sofa — “tout probable qu'elle a les aspirin à Toronto.”

Kevin knows the aspirin isn't in Toronto, that the bottle is in his mother's nightstand, but he doesn't want his father to be wrong, so he stays quiet.

The clock in the hallway ticks, tocks, and his father reaches, squeezes Kevin's hand and smiles, wipes the snot from the sofa cushion with a used tissue from the pocket of his robe.

Insistent, the fever takes Kevin and lolls him back toward sleep. As he drifts he sees the shape of his father sitting on the coffee table, and this familiar shape becomes a stranger Kevin cannot recognize. (His father is a thirty-year-old man with two children in a freezing house and a wife who will no longer tolerate him, no longer ignore what he is. Last Friday, in the grocery, Kevin heard two women behind them in line whisper, “Sinatra.” They were looking at his father, the curl of hair fallen across his forehead, but his father did not see the women; he was fixated on the boy bagging their groceries, and Kevin thought that the boy must've been stealing from them.)

“Je ne te blâme pas,” his father repeats from somewhere far away, and then Kevin hears him blow his nose.



The next morning, the second day of the blizzard, Kevin wakes on the sofa in the arms of his sleeping father. Sylvie is standing at the picture window that looks out onto the street; she has her wool coat on over her pajamas and her auburn hair is wild from sleep. Sylvie has boyfriends who call her on the telephone; once, just after she hung up, Kevin overheard their mother tell her, “You can never be too picky.” Now, at the window, Sylvie beckons Kevin with a finger she curls like a snail. He slips out of his father’s arms and trembles when his feet touch the icy floor. At the window, Sylvie pulls him in front of her and wraps him in her coat. The municipal snowplow is mired in a drift of snow, black smoke rising in curls from its engine. The road behind the plow is temporarily clear, and the lazy snowfall from the relaxed storm has not yet erased the footsteps of the driver.

“There,” Sylvie says, tapping her finger against the window. Down the trail of footsteps in the cleared street the hunched figure of the driver moves slowly away, then vanishes, absorbed into the snowy distance. At the instant the driver is gone, Kevin’s head swims with fever, and he has to lean against his sister.

Their father is up, and when he sees the cleared street he says, “Shouldn’t we go to the store?”

Sylvie sighs, fidgets. “I’ll stay and watch Kev.”

“I don’t think you two should be left alone,” their father says and heads upstairs.

“He’s afraid of going by himself,” Sylvie tells Kevin.

(end of excerpt)

