

# HOUSE MADE OF SNOW

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Stewart pictures things to make himself stay awake—a lion roaring into his face, a leopard chasing him in the night. The theater is warm and his eyelids are heavy. He draws a hand over the velvet covering of his seat cushion, grazing the bristly texture. Bristly like a seal’s gray skin or the soldiers’ red vests or his father’s wiry beard.

His father looks like a walrus. Stewart wants to pet his face, rub his nose and the top of his head. He wonders what his father would do if he reached up now and brought a hand to his skin: touched the hair on his cheeks and under his chin. Before his father could grab him and spank him, he’d jump out of his seat and leap onto the stage. The men with black boots would give him a sword.

He could make his father sit still, train him to balance a ball on his nose. Make him keep both flippers down to his sides.

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As they cross the pavement, Stewart’s mother holds his hand. “Are you warm enough, *mein Schatz*?” she asks. He looks up at her, still thinking about the dancers’ bright swords. “This jacket he has is too thin,” she says to his father, who’s two steps ahead, the collar of his coat turned up over his neck.

His mother rubs his back with her hand. “Tonight, we turn on the heat.”

The car warms up fast, and they start the drive back to his father’s house in the forest. Each time Stewart drifts into sleep, he catches himself. He knows his father doesn’t want to have to carry him into the house. “You baby him too much,” his father always says to his mother.

A few months ago, Stewart was visiting his father for the night, and they went to see *Mary Poppins*. His father bought him licorice and soda and told him they could sit in any seat Stewart chose. “I bet your mother doesn’t buy you licorice when you go out,” his father said. And then later, he asked him a question: “Your mother still taking baths with you?”

Stewart didn’t respond; his eyes were closed, and he was starting to dream. “Stewart!” his father shouted. “Wake up! Don’t be like your mother now—give me

an answer.”

Stewart wasn't sure what to say; he was thinking about the bubbles that piled up like snowdrifts on top of the water. He liked it when his mother put a beard on his cheeks or a hood on top of his head. He was thinking about pouring the green gel into the water—slowly—as it filled up the tub, gel that turned to bubbles that were lighter than air.

“It's okay, son,” said his father. “I know this hasn't been easy on you.”

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The freeway is empty and open. Stewart likes to watch the countryside speed by outside. “I love *The Nutcracker* so much,” his mother says. “They play it so beautiful.”

“*Beautifully*,” says his father. He has a mad sound in his voice.

Stewart wonders whether his father will say something mean. When they were still living together, his father yelled all the time. “*English, Edda*. You're in America now. This isn't some hut in the mountains.”

“Beautifully,” she says. Her voice is soft and quiet and almost invisible. Stewart repeats the word silently.

There were times when they had company and she was trying to talk that his father stared at her in a way Stewart knew meant *Be Quiet*; afterward his father made a list of his mother's mistakes. He wrote down on a lined sheet of paper what she had said and then, in the next column, the list of corrections. His mother saved the sheets in a large envelope, and sometimes she sat in the kitchen and read his father's versions aloud. Stewart sat on her lap and she held him, repeating the words. “It is so nice to finally meet you,” she said to him. She repeated the phrase again and again, alternating between high and low voices, until Stewart started to laugh.

Sometimes, when he and his mother are driving at night, Stewart will point out things he sees in the distance. A caravan of elephants. A haunted castle. A giant octopus moving toward a river. Usually she'll play along, pretending to see the things Stewart describes. Now, though, there is nothing outside. The moon is low, the world frozen and sleeping.

Stewart tries to find shapes in the white, open fields—once or twice he thinks he sees something big and alive, crouching out in the snow or dashing for cover—but after a while, it becomes harder and harder for him to keep his eyes open.

“Stewart,” his father says. “Wake up! Don’t make me say it again.”

It is past midnight when Stewart’s father turns onto the dirt road leading out to his house. His house is small, with thick concrete walls and a roof made from old wooden beams. All around are bushes and trees.

“There is nothing to be afraid of,” his mother once told him. “The forest is full of magic and wonder. When I was a girl, Omi and I hiked for hours in the woods, collecting blueberries and strawberries and then, at the end of the summer, raspberries so ripe, they turned to juice in your fingers. When we returned home, Omi put the fruit in a pot on the stove and boiled the berries with sugar until the house smelled like it was made out of candy.”

“Stewart?”

“Yes?” he replies, making his voice sound awake.

“Just checking.”

Once they're inside, Stewart’s mother gets him ready for bed. She folds his clothes and helps him put on the pajamas she brought over in a grocery store bag.

“Can’t he do that himself?” his father asks.

“I just give him a little help.”

“Did he do his reading today?”

His mother hesitates. “Today? Not today, but every other day we have been reading.”

“Well, it has to be every day. I do not want an ignoramus for a son.” His father is standing in the living room in his undershirt and his briefs.

Stewart knows what his mother is thinking. *First thing in the morning I must read with my son. There will always be groceries to buy and pants to wash out. Already his Walkjanker is getting too small. I should have bought him something warmer in wool.*

“Stewart,” his father says, “come over here.” He steps to the bookshelf and picks out a book of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. “Why don’t we read one of these stories.”

“But, Raymond, look what time it is. The boy should be already in bed.”

“Quiet, Edda. Come over here, son.”

He looks at his father and walks toward him. His father’s undershirt is white and tight across his chest and his arms. They sit on the couch, and his father asks which story he wants to read.

He shrugs.

“Which story, Stewart? Look at the table of contents.”

Stewart takes the book and studies the page. It takes him a moment to focus.

“How about *Hansel and Gretel*?” his father says. His mother has told him the story many times. Each time she tells it, it comes out differently.

“They have *Hansel and Gretel*?”

His father finds the page and puts the book on Stewart’s lap. His hands are already sweaty. He knows he has to do his best to read well.

“Once upon a time,” he begins, “there was a poor woodcutter who lived on the edge of a big forest”—he sounds each word out slowly, even the words he has seen before—“with his wife, who was not . . .” Stewart pauses when he comes to the word *especially*.

“Sound it out now,” says his father.

“Es-pe-k-a-ly,” Stewart tries.

“*Especially*,” his mother says quickly. She’s standing a few feet away.

“Don’t help him now, Edda.”

The next word is just as hard: *beautiful*. He isn’t sure how to say it.

“No,” his father says. “Do it again.”

Stewart says the sounds to himself, but he can’t figure out which word he is reading. He knows what goes on in the story. It’s about a mother and father who are poor and can’t feed their children. The father takes his son and his daughter into the woods so they can’t find the way back to their house.

“Stewart, you’ve got to pay attention now. This is only the first sentence.”

“B-eeee-aaaaa-ow-t-i-f-u-l,” he says, sounding out the word again—almost inaudibly—as the letters begin, magically, to float up off the page.

“I can’t hear you,” his father says. “What did you say?”

He tries again, using all of his strength. He struggles to hold the pages in place, wills each letter to stay still.

“B-EEE-A-OW-T-EEEE-FUL is not a word, Stewart. Do you know what B-EEE-A-OW-T-EEEE-FUL means?”

Stewart’s body is hot. His father’s arm is resting across his shoulders; he feels the man’s hair rubbing the back of his neck.

“Raymond,” his mother says quickly. “Please. This is too hard.” She is standing a few feet away, holding her nightgown, gripping it tight. Stewart knows his mother wants to say more. Earlier today, she told Stewart that his father had promised to give her a check. If she had gotten the money this afternoon, she could take Stewart and leave. *Why did I not ask for the rent when my lipstick was nice and my hair had not flown away? Today was so windy. It made me a mess.*

“Shut up, Edda!”

Stewart’s throat contracts so he cannot breathe. He knows if he tries to relax, if he lets air into his mouth, he’ll start to cry. He keeps his eyes open wide.

“Don’t cry now, Stewart. Start the sentence from the beginning and try to think about what word would make sense in context.”

He reads the words to his father, one by one, making sure no letter moves. When he gets to *especially*, he freezes. He knows his mother just told him the answer, but he doesn’t remember the word. He makes the “E” sound and the “SP” sound. Then it happens again—the tail of the *y* begins to curl up from the paper, reaching out toward him, like a long tail: the tail of a lizard or an iguana or a black dragon. It lassoes his neck, tugging the *l* and the *a* and the *i*, pulling the word up off of the page. Stewart watches the letters peel up—the word, then the sentence itself, like a streaming ribbon, slippery as a minnow.

“Stewart! Don’t fart around now. You just said it.”

He’s crying now. He can’t help it. His breaths come short and fast.

“Okay. That’s it! Go outside until you calm down.”

“Outside?” says his mother. “He can’t go outside! It’s the middle of the night!”

He’s afraid his father will hit her. When his father starts yelling, his face can turn the most horrible red.

*“Outside, Stewart!”*

He feels the sounds coming out of his father’s mouth. He gets up from the couch, his pajamas wet from sweat. His mother looks around for her shoes. He walks toward the front door, and she hurries over to him. She puts his arms in the sleeves of his jacket, then helps him open the door. She steps outside with him, but his father says, “No, Edda—you stay in here.” She pauses and looks at the man, then back at her son.

“You be okay,” she says. “Nothing will happen. Think of what Mommy has said.”

The air surrounds him like a cold river; his eyes adjust to the night. Above him, the sky is full of bright stars and the luminous moon: large and white and perfectly round.

*Once there was a boy who was lost in the woods, and he walked and walked in the night. The villagers all thought he would not find his way home, and they took lanterns and went out into the forest to look for his footprints. Hour after hour, they searched for their Bübchen. The later it got, the brighter became the stars and the moon. They made light so the boy could see in the night, and they kept him company out in the snow. The boy did not grow afraid—he sang songs to himself and, as he sang, the animals came out of the forest. The owls and squirrels and deer brought him baskets of food. Do not be afraid, the moon said to the boy. I am here to protect you.*

Stewart watches the moon. His mother is right: if you look closely enough, you can see the moon’s face. It smiles at him. He sees the stars stretching out toward him, reaching down through the trees.

Inside the house he hears his mother crying. “Why are you like this to us? I made myself beautiful. Is this not the outfit you thought I should wear?”

He listens for his father’s response but hears nothing at all. He wonders whether his father is standing on the other side of the door, listening to Stewart’s tears. Maybe his father has gone into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Maybe his father will change his mind and make his mother stand outside too. If they both have to

sleep in the woods, they can build a house made of snow, like the Eskimos do in the North. They can use branches from pine trees to keep themselves warm.

In the distance, the ground spreads out like a carpet of silver. The moon begins to approach very slowly. *Come closer*, it beckons. *It's okay*.

Stewart sees the branches in the woods sway back and forth. He wonders whether the reason the trees move in the wind is that they are trying to stand close together, for warmth, or whether they are trying to dance. *Each tree in a past life was a famous ballerina who was graceful and nimble and beautiful.*

Stewart is at the far end of the gravel driveway when he hears his father call out his name. He stops. The voice is distant and far. "Stewart?" his father repeats. "You still out here, kiddo?"

He turns and sees him, in socks, at the doorway. A man looking out in the night. "You better come back inside. It's getting late. I made up your bed."

*Don't worry*, he hears the moon say. *There is nothing to fear*. He decides to walk quickly. His father's voice grows faint until it is only a speck.