

## THE DAY IT SNOWED

Suddenly people began to disappear. First it was his Aunt Wilma who looked like his mother except that her eyes were soft and pale blue, like two pieces of sky lifted from the morning horizon. Aunt Wilma was tall and straight and quiet, and she seemed like she had spent all her life looking at the elm tree in front of the house and trying to be like it. She was the first to disappear and all the people but Sydney had cried for many days because they missed her, and Sydney had not cried because he thought that maybe Aunt Wilma would come back again. Uncle Carl was the second to disappear and everybody but Sydney cried for him too. Uncle Carl was a fat man with rolls of fat around his neck and when he was a little boy he had lived in St. Louis. Nights in the smoky kitchen he told everyone in a voice as thick and lumpy as hot cereal about St. Louis and how he had been born there and brought up there. Uncle Carl talked like it had been fun even though he had worked hard for only twelve dollars a week. Nobody would have cried so much if Uncle Carl were just going back to St. Louis, so it seemed that he was dis-

appearing to some other place. Maybe Aunt Wilma would meet Uncle Carl on the way back and bring him home too.

People all still had thumbprints around their eyes from crying about Uncle Carl, when the third person disappeared, Sydney's stepfather. Sydney's stepfather was a man with a brown mustache so big that it seemed to hold up his nose. When he disappeared Sydney began to cry with the rest of the people. He did not like any more people to disappear, especially when no one seemed to want to come back.

Never before had Sydney been allowed to stay in the house alone, but when Aunt Wilma disappeared his mother told him that all the people would be leaving the house for the day and Sydney would stay alone, and Sydney asked where everybody was going and his mother began to sob and it was then that he first found out about Aunt Wilma.

"Aunt Wilma—Aunt Wilma has disappeared, Sydney," his mother told him, and then she cried so loud it sounded like a laugh, and it made Sydney feel icy and raw as though he had put on his skin inside out. At first he didn't know what his mother meant when she said that Aunt Wilma disappeared, but he didn't ask his mother because of her crying, and he didn't ask his stepfather because his mother was the one he was supposed to ask questions of.

Sydney was scared to stay alone after Aunt Wilma disappeared, especially since the house was too big with no people in it, but when the third time came for him to stay alone he almost didn't mind it any more. When he was alone the first time he wondered about Aunt Wilma and why she had just disappeared without first telling anyone. Maybe Aunt Wilma had some place she had to go where she didn't think anybody else should follow her. But then why didn't his mother say that Aunt Wilma ran away instead of saying she disappeared? Sydney had heard of kids running away from their parents, and so he finally decided that when kids do it it's called running away and when big people like Aunt Wilma do it it's called disappearing, and

also if you disappear you probably do it faster than if you just run away. Otherwise it's all the same. Sydney's mother didn't say why all the people had to leave for the day, so maybe they all decided to go out looking, like a posse looks for a criminal, and search for Aunt Wilma. They should have let him go along because he was good at finding people.

The second time, nobody told Sydney he would have to stay alone. There was just the crying again like when Aunt Wilma disappeared, and there was his mother whispering to his stepfather as if she had a secret, and from the look on her face when she whispered, Sydney could tell the secret was about Uncle Carl. Whenever she saw Sydney watching her she would stop telling the secret, but once Sydney did hear her say to his stepfather "Don't be a fool—at least let us spare the child," and so nobody had to tell Sydney that Uncle Carl had disappeared too. When all the people left the house to go looking for Uncle Carl, Sydney wasn't too scared and he didn't ask any questions about why he had to be alone.

Once, after Sydney had crossed the street without first asking his mother and someone had squealed on him, he had hid in the hall closet all day so that she wouldn't find him. Only when he heard her crying and calling the police on the telephone did he finally come out of the closet. She had beat him because of it. The day all the people left the house to go searching for Sydney's stepfather, Sydney looked in all the closets to see if maybe his stepfather was hiding too. At first Sydney was cautious and he walked on his toes and he opened the doors very slowly and peeked in, but by the time he got to the last few closets he threw them open loudly and shouted into them "Boo!" He half expected someone to shout boo out at him, but nobody did, and it seemed that his stepfather had disappeared outside the house.

Outside the house was very big and Sydney did not believe that the people would be any luckier finding his stepfather than they had been looking for Aunt Wilma or for Uncle Carl. Sydney's stepfather knew all the streets, besides, and would be able

to go far without being lost. Aunt Wilma would only take Sydney around the block for a walk, but when his stepfather took Sydney for walks he took him very far and sometimes so far that he told Sydney he should not tell his mother or she would be worried, and he said that if Sydney didn't tell maybe one day he would take him downtown to see the big white buildings and perhaps one fine day the two of them might go out to the country and walk, and taste the country air, and make whistles out of acorns. Sydney's stepfather knew how to make those kind of whistles. But Sydney knew that the people wouldn't come back with his stepfather and there was no sense thinking about the whistles. When a smart man like that decided to disappear, you just knew that he wouldn't get caught.

But he was a good man too, and it didn't make any sense to Sydney why he should do something like this in the first place. He saw how everybody cried when Aunt Wilma and Uncle Carl disappeared, so why did he have to make everybody cry all over again? His stepfather did not like people to cry. Times when Sydney asked the wrong questions or did something that was bad for himself and his mother had to hit him for it, his stepfather always looked sad and shook his head, and sometimes he ran his fingers over his mustache as though the skin underneath the mustache itched him badly. He liked people to be happy, so why did he disappear and make everybody cry and be sad? His stepfather was cruel to disappear on purpose. Sydney suddenly felt very alone in the big house, like one yellow leaf on a giant tree, and he cried.

When he awoke, for the crying made him sleep, Sydney knew that in a while his mother and all the people would come back and they would sit looking at each other, too tired to cry from searching, but wanting to cry because they had not been able to find his stepfather. Everybody would try not to think how cruel it was for Sydney's stepfather to disappear on purpose. It was always saddest trying to do that.

Sydney walked his way down the street wanting no one to see

him. It was only a little beyond noon, but a dark winter wind was rising and for a moment it shook the thin naked trees and it made Sydney shiver too. He should go back and get a sweater or else he would get a cold; but Sydney did not want to go back to that big house until there were people in it, and maybe not until his stepfather was in it. He only hoped that his stepfather had a sweater, so when he found him he would let Sydney wear it. Even if he found his stepfather he knew that his mother would beat him because he should never have left the house in the first place, but there were reasons that he had to go looking for him. One reason was that he decided he loved his stepfather even if he had acted cruel by disappearing. And another reason was that maybe his mother would disappear soon too and surprise everybody and then he would be so alone and he would certainly have to have his stepfather. His mother never acted like she was going to disappear without telling, but as far as Sydney could see that was part of the plan, not to tell.

The streets that Sydney knew unfolded in front of him, and he looked up and down all the alleys and he searched the doorways of the houses but he did not see his stepfather. As he walked beyond, to streets he had walked with his stepfather only a few times, he did not look for his stepfather in alleys and doorways, but in the branches of trees, and on roof-tops, and behind a fire hydrant, and in the curb, and once he looked in a bush, and one time he even turned over a rock. And still he did not find his stepfather, so he walked on to streets he had never known or seen, and soon he was lost. There were big white buildings all around him and no trees but only sidewalk, and the street was growing cold and windy. Never had he seen such buildings before, and he was looking at the buildings when he spotted in the distance a tall man with a brown mustache, and he thought that this must be downtown and there he is. Sydney raced toward the man, screaming "Poppa, Poppa" and when he was almost close enough to reach out and touch the tips of his fingers, the man looked back over his shoulder and Sydney saw

that it was not his stepfather after all but only another man with a mustache. The man started to walk faster and in a moment Sydney was once more alone and cold. There was a little park ahead and Sydney began to walk to it, thinking that it might be warmer there, for it was late afternoon and the light was thinning. Suddenly he didn't care about his stepfather, but just about getting warm.

Sydney sat down on a bench next to a man reading a newspaper. It wasn't any warmer in the park and Sydney began to shake and the man reading the newspaper saw him shake and so he gave Sydney his scarf for a moment to keep him warm, and then he read his newspaper again. All around the park there were men sitting on benches; they were all old and bald and some looked like they had never moved in their lives, and Sydney wondered where they went when it snowed.

"Where is this?" Sydney asked the man reading the newspaper.

"Homestead Park," answered the man, not looking up. He was a little tree stump of a man whose feet almost didn't touch the ground and whose hands looked to Sydney like lightning had struck them and made them lumpy and full of ridges.

"Where?"

"Homestead Park," the man said again. Sydney had never even heard of the place and he didn't know where it was; suddenly it was like somebody stuck a pin in a balloon that was inside him and it popped and he was afraid.

"Where is that?"

The man peered at Sydney a moment, long enough for Sydney to see his reflection in the small, round eyes, and then he pointed a lumpy finger at the ground like he was going to take a shot at it. "Right here," was all he finally said. That made Sydney feel better.

"I'm looking for my stepfather," Sydney said.

"Lost?"

"No," said Sydney, and so the man started to read again. "He

just disappeared and now everybody's out looking for him. But he's not lost, I don't think, because he disappeared on purpose. I'm supposed to be home," Sydney added, "but I want to look too. Every time somebody disappears I'm never allowed to look."

"Every time?"

"When Aunt Wilma and Uncle Carl disappeared I mean. They never found them neither. I'm good at finding people, that's why I decided to look." He stared into the round eyes. "I don't like everybody to disappear on me."

The man stopped reading and he asked Sydney, "Where does everybody go to look for somebody if they disappear?"

"Out," said Sydney.

"Where?"

"Out. All different places. I don't know, nobody tells me. Everybody just cries."

"And when somebody disappears, does everybody go out to look together and come back together?"

"Yes," said Sydney, "everybody excepting me. And you know what?"—the thought had just come to him—"everybody wears black, everybody always wears black."

The old man stood up and, as if he didn't want the men on the benches to hear, he whispered, "So the world will know they're out looking," and Sydney said, "Oh." The man did not seem so old when he was reading, but standing up he was the oldest person Sydney had ever seen.

"I am going," the old man told Sydney.

"Why?" Sydney asked.

"I must," said the old man and he started to move away. "You keep the scarf." The old man looked at the sky, and so Sydney looked too. "Maybe it'll snow today. Look, you find a policeman. I have to go." And he trudged away, stiff legged, lifting his feet like two thick stones, and when Sydney saw him leave he was frightened, so he ran after the old man.

"What about me?" Sydney yelled. "What about everybody—"

“I have nothing to do with that. Find a policeman. I can’t pay attention to that.”

“Why? Why not?” Sidney screamed. The man kept walking. “Come back, I want you to help me look for my stepfather. You’re old, you could help. You’re old, you’d know where to look. . . .”

The old man had been moving as quickly as he could out of the park, but he stopped. He was round and gnarled and tough like a tree stump, but in that second a summer wind might have carried him from the ground. The old man stopped and so Sydney waited for the old man to answer, but there was no answer and so Sydney asked again.

“Would you help me look?”

“What’s your name?” the old man asked.

“Sydney.”

On all the benches the men sat stiff and still, like people sleeping and waiting in a train station. The wind blew a little stronger.

“I’ll take you to your stepfather, Sydney,” the old man said.

Sydney didn’t know what to do, he was so happy, and so he just threw himself on the ground and did a somersault through a pile of old leaves and he kept shouting to the old man “Will you, will you?” all the time they waited for the bus that was going to take them to the country, and when the bus finally came he looked back at the park and he asked the old man where all the men went when it snowed, and the old man said he wasn’t sure, and Sydney never thought to ask him where he went. On the bus Sydney never asked the old man who he was either or how he knew his stepfather, and so the ride was silent as midnight until big oak trees started to roll by the windows and the old man looked at Sydney and asked, “Did you like your father very much?”

“I don’t have a father. I have a stepfather,” Sydney answered, his mind not on the question, but on the oaks and acorn whistles.

“But you did have a father.”



“No, I didn’t. I only got one, a stepfather.”

“Before your stepfather, Sydney,” the old man began, but he stopped when he saw Sydney shaking his head. “Sydney, hasn’t your mother ever talked to you about your father—I don’t mean stepfather, I mean father, plain old father?”

“No,” answered Sydney. He looked up from the trees. “Why, did I have one of those too?”

The old man nodded.

“Then where is he?” Sydney asked. “Did he disappear too? Did he? You know. I can tell you know. Tell me: did he disappear? What did I do? Why does everybody have to disappear on me?” The old man did not answer. “If they know it’s going to make everybody sad why do all my fathers and stepfathers keep disappearing?”

“We have to get off here,” the old man said, and he pushed the buzzer and he and the boy left the bus and started to walk under the oak trees, up the road toward the cemetery. Acorns crunched under their feet as they walked. Sydney did not forget his question. “Why do they do it?” he repeated.

The old man looked at him and said slowly, “Sydney, they can’t help it.”

“Yes they can! They do it on purpose and make everybody cry.”

“Sydney, they can’t help it!”

“Why?” shouted Sydney, “I want to know why?”

And finally the old man answered, “Because to disappear, Sydney, is to be dead, to disappear is to die.” The old man stopped walking and Sydney stopped too, and they stood together in the dark shadow of the oak trees and in the thinning light of the sun.

“To disappear is to die, Sydney.”

“To die?” the boy repeated.

“Yes. Your stepfather is dead.”

“He died,” Sydney explained to the old man.

“Yes.”

There was silence and the old man and Sydney started to walk again, and soon they turned the corner, and the cemetery, like a brown and green ocean stuck with white buoys, lay before them.

"Then, then he didn't do it on purpose," Sydney suddenly cried.

"No, he didn't."

"And Aunt Wilma didn't do it on purpose, and Uncle Carl didn't do it on purpose. They just died. He just died!" and the boy spurted and skipped ahead, his joy, not his legs, bouncing him up and down. He was ahead of the old man, with his head thrown back, shouting, and his voice was thin as glass and seemed to slide through the leafless limbs of the tall oak trees. "He just died, he just died, he just died." And then he stopped shouting and he ran back to the old man and he grabbed his fingers and said, "I've got to tell all the people. I've got to tell them that he didn't do it on purpose." And as the boy talked and held the old man's fingers, a slow procession of automobiles rolled out of the cemetery gate, rolled slowly out, leaving behind in the ocean of green and brown the body of Sydney's stepfather. Within the cluster of shadows the death-weary family in the automobile could not see Sydney and the old man, but when Sydney turned he saw them, and he yelled, and then he saw his mother sitting in the first car.

"Momma! It's Momma," he screamed. "Momma, stop. Momma stop the car." The car stopped and the door opened.

"Momma!"

"Sydney, what are you doing?"

The boy left the old man and ran to the car. "Momma," he yelled, "Momma, I'm so glad I found you. Everything is O.K., Momma. Poppa hasn't disappeared!"

"My Sydney, what are you yelling!"

"He hasn't disappeared—he's died. He's dead, so it's O.K."

She grabbed the boy's arm. "My God, my God. . . ."

“What’s the matter, Momma? I told you: Poppa died, he didn’t disappear. This man told me.” He pointed to the trees. “This man told me Poppa just died.”

“That man!” screamed Sydney’s mother. “That man told you!” She was waving her arms in the air like some giant snake or octopus was squeezing the life out of her. “No, my Sydney, no, Poppa isn’t dead, Poppa isn’t dead!” She screamed it again. “Poppa isn’t dead!”

“He is, the man told me,” shouted the boy, barely believing the woman in front of him was his mother. She was dressed in a long black dress and a black hat and for a moment Sydney thought her face was black too. Sydney watched her fall back into the car as she pointed wildly at the old man with her two hands and cried, “Get him away! Get him away from here!”

Commanded, the old man trudged away, down the sidewalk, away from the cemetery and the procession of automobiles. For a moment Sydney did not see the old man leaving, and he clutched his mother’s dress and yelled in his thin glass voice, “Momma, he is dead and that’s good. Momma, you can stop looking, I can stop looking!” But then Sydney turned and saw the old man moving away under the oak trees, and he broke for the sidewalk, crying, “Mister, Mister Man, please come back—” but before he could reach the sidewalk, the big black hearse, like an angry whale, came charging down the left side of the road to be first in the funeral line, and it crushed the boy to the ground, like feet crush acorns, and it shattered forever his thin glass voice.