

Fever

by Curtis Smith

The whispering drizzle froze the moment it touched the earth. The glaze thickened on the pickup, its metal and chrome mummified beneath a slick, dimpled skin. Marge sat by an opened window in her son's bedroom. Her breath clouded the moment it plumed through the screen. Mesmerizing, the night's queer colors, the darkness given depth by the earth's crystalline sheen, by a sky choked with a million fleeting prisms. In the woods surrounding the house another branch snapped, a gunshot-loud crack. The echo lingered, captured by the ice above and below.

Marge closed the window and settled into the chair beside her son's bed. The lights had been out since sundown, and in the garage, the generator purred, the house whittled back to its simplest heartbeat of furnace and freezer. A candle burned in a glass jar atop the dresser, a shimmering display on the ceiling that reminder Marge of sunlight on a shallow, rocky creek, an image of the world turned upside down. She brushed a single finger through the flyaway strands atop his head, a touch so light it barely registered. How easy it was to forget the angel inside him. How easy to forget the delicate details of the face and hands so often blurred by the whirlwind bustle of a four-year-old's days. She dipped a washcloth into a mixing bowl and twisted out a rainstorm of cool drops. The water's surface rippled, a network of overlapping circles. She folded the cloth and tenderly laid it across her son's forehead.

Her boy cried out, a protesting, incoherent syllable, his shoulders and torso writhing, exposing a patch of wrinkled, moist sheets. Fever. As an emergency room nurse, Marge has witnessed scores of fevers, and she sympathized with the chaos no doubt playing in her son's head, his flitting between pained consciousness and warped visions, the internal heat that unhinged the glue of comprehension. Ten miles of twisting, dark roads separated her

from the hospital, and Marge knew a night like this would bring a ghastly parade through the ER's doors, bloody gashes and splintered bones, lives forever changed. If his fever reached one-hundred-four, she'd call the ambulance. Until then, she'd sit tight and see what broke first, the ice storm or the fever.

Outside, another branch fell, this one close enough to rattle the windows. Marge thought of her husband, how he'd left on a night sticky-hot and thick with cricket calls, crushed by his discovery of her affair with an intern as shallow as he was handsome. *Stupid, foolish*, she scolded herself, her heart's delirious yearnings as much a mystery as when she was a teenager . . . a child. She stroked her boy's flushed cheek, tasted the salty residue on her fingertips, and wondered how many nights he would spend trapped in a fever of one sort or another, his bearings undone by a fire within, a flame he could no more explain than she could resist.

She pulled back his T-shirt sleeve and placed a thermometer in his armpit's sweaty nook. The thermometer chirped . . . 101.5 . . . 102.2 . . . 103.1 . . . Outside, the storm continued. The trees, dreaming of summer, groaned beneath the thickening ice.

