

The Thief of Always

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Harvey, Half-Devoured

The great gray beast February had eaten Harvey Swick alive. Here he was, buried in the belly of that smothering month, wondering if he would ever find his way out through the cold coils that lay between here and Easter.

He didn't think much of his chances. More than likely he'd become so bored as the hours crawled by that one day he'd simply forget to breathe. Then maybe people would get to wondering why such a fine young lad had perished in his prime. It would become a celebrated mystery, which wouldn't be solved until some great detective decided to re-create a day in Harvey's life.

Then, and only then, would the grim truth be discovered. The detective would first follow Harvey's route to school every morning, trekking through the dismal streets. Then he'd sit at Harvey's desk, and listen to the pitiful drone of the history teacher and the science teacher, and wonder how the heroic boy had managed to keep his eyes open. And finally, as the wasted day dwindled to dusk, he'd trace the homeward trek, and as he set foot on the step from which he had departed that morning, and people asked him-as they would-why such a sweet soul as Harvey had died, he would shake his head and say: "It's very simple."

"Oh?" the curious crowd would say. "Do tell."

And, brushing away a tear, the detective would reply: "Harvey Swick was eaten by the great gray beast February."

It was a monstrous month, that was for sure; a dire and dreary month. The pleasures of Christmas, both sharp and sweet, were already dimming in Harvey's memory, and the promise of summer was so remote as to be mythical. There 'd be a spring break, of course, but how far off was that? Five weeks? Six? Mathematics wasn't his strong point, so he didn't irritate himself further by attempting-and failing-to calculate the days. He simply knew that long before the sun came to save him he would have withered away in the belly of the beast.

"You shouldn't waste your time sitting up here," his mom said when she came in and found him watching the raindrops chase each other down the glass of his bedroom window.

"I've got nothing better to do," Harvey said, without looking around.

"Well then, you can make yourself useful," his mom said.

Harvey shuddered. Useful? That was another word for hard labor. He sprang up, marshaling his excuses-he hadn't done this; he hadn't done that-but it was too late.

"You can start by tidying up this room" his mom said.

"But "

"Don't sit wishing the days away, honey. Life's too short."

"But-"

"That's a good boy."

And with that she left him to it. Muttering to himself, he stared around the room. It wasn't even untidy. There were one or two games scattered around; a couple of drawers open; a few clothes hanging out: It looked just fine.

"I am ten," he said to himself (having no brothers and sisters, he talked to himself a good deal) . "I mean, it's not like I'm a kid. I don't have to tidy up just because she says so. It's boring."

He wasn't just muttering now, he was talking out loud.

"I want to . . . I want to . . ." He went to the mirror, and quizzed it. "What do I want?" The straw-haired, snub-nosed, brown-eyed boy he saw before him shook his head. "I don't know what I want," he said. "I just know I'll die if I don't have some fun. I will! I'll die!"

As he spoke, the window rattled. A gust of wind blew hard against it-then a second; then a third-and even though Harvey didn't remember the window being so much as an inch ajar, it was suddenly thrown open. Cold rain spattered his face. Half-closing his eyes, he crossed to the window and fumbled to slam it, making sure that the latch was in place this time.

The wind had started his lamp moving, and when he turned back the whole room seemed to be swinging around. One moment the light was blazing in his eyes, the next it was flooding the opposite wall. But in between the blaze and the flood it lit the middle of his room, and standing there-shaking the rain off his hat-was a stranger.

He looked harmless enough. He was no more than six inches taller than Harvey, his frame scrawny, his skin distinctly yellowish in color. He was wearing a fancy suit, a pair of spectacles and a lavish smile.

"Who are you?" Harvey demanded, wondering how he could get past this interloper to the door.

"Don't be nervous," the man replied, teasing off one of his suede gloves, taking Harvey's hand and shaking it. "My name's Rictus. You are Harvey Swick, aren't you?"

" Yes ..."

"I thought for a moment I'd got the wrong house"

Harvey couldn't take his eyes off Rictus's grin. It was wide enough to shame a shark, with two perfect rows of gleaming teeth.

Rictus took off his spectacles, pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his waterlogged jacket, then started to mop off the raindrops. Either he or the handkerchief gave off an odor that was far from fragrant. The smell, in truth, was flatulent.

"You've got questions, I can see that," Rictus said to Harvey.

"Yeah. "

"Ask away. I've got nothing to hide."

"Well, how did you get in, for one thing?"

"Through the window, of course."

"It's a long way up from the street"

"Not if you're flying."

"Flying?"

"Of course. How else was I going to get around on a foul night like this?"

It was either that or a rowboat . We short folk gotta watch out when it's raining this hard. One wrong step and you're swimming." He peered at Harvey quizzically.

"Do you swim?"

"In the summer, sometimes," Harvey replied, wanting to get back to the business of flying.

But Rictus took the conversation in another direction entirely. "On nights like this," he said, "doesn't it seem like there'll never be another summer?"

"It sure does" said Harvey.

"You know I heard you sighing a mile off, and I said to myself v There's a kid who needs a vacation." He consulted his watch. "If you've got the time, that is . "

"The time?"

"For a trip, boy, for a trip! You need an adventure, young Swick.

Somewhere ... out of this world."

"How'd you hear me sighing when you were a mile away?" Harvey wanted to know .

"Why should you care? I heard you. That's all that matters."

"Is it magic of some kind?"

"Maybe . "

"Why won't you tell me?"

Rictus gave Harvey a beady stare. "I think you're too inquisitive for your own good, that's why," he said, his smile decaying a little. "If you don't want help, that's fine by me."

He made a move toward the window. The wind was still gusting against the glass, as though eager to come back in and carry its passenger away.

"Wait," Harvey said.

"For what?"

"I'm sorry. I won't ask any more questions."

Rictus halted, his hand on the latch. "No more questions, eh?"

"I promise," said Harvey. "I told you: I'm sorry."

"So you did. So you did." Rictus peered out at the rain. "I know a place where the days are always sunny," he said, "and the nights are full of wonders."

"Could you take me there?"

"We said no questions, boy. We agreed."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Being a forgiving sort, I'll forget you spoke, and I'll tell you this: If you want me to inquire on your behalf, I'll see if they've got room for another guest . "

"I'd like that."

"I'm not guaranteeing anything," Rictus said, opening the latch.

"I understand."

The wind gusted suddenly, and blew the window wide. The light began to swing wildly.

"Watch for me," Rictus yelled above the din of rain and wind.

Harvey started to ask him if he'd be coming back soon, but stopped himself in the nick of time.

"No questions, boy!" Rictus said, and as he spoke the wind seemed to fill up his coat. It rose around him like a black balloon, and he was suddenly swept out over the windowsill.

"Questions Trot the mind!" he hollered as he went. "Keep your mouth shut and we'll see what comes your way!"

And with that the wind carried him off, the balloon of his coat rising like a black moon against the rainy sky.