

## The Rabbit

A muffled grinding woke Pete before dawn. It could have been a snow shovel on concrete but for the roar of a truck engine and the constancy of the scraping. Besides, Pete was the only one in this house who shoveled snow.

From the top bunk he pulled aside the curtain and saw the plow's flashing yellow light reflect off the neighbor's house. The chill from outdoors brushed the back of his hand. Even without his glasses he could tell that there must be a half-foot of new snow. He might as well start digging.

Pete reached down and picked up his clock radio. With the volume at a whisper, he waited for a list of school closings. A minute later he smiled, pulled back the covers and slid gingerly to the floor. In the bottom bunk, Glen didn't move. So far, so good. Now, to let the girls know about school.

An alarm buzzed in the parents' room, and Diane opened her door as Pete entered the girls' room. He went to the top left bunk and tapped Karen on the shoulder.

"No school today," he whispered. "We had six inches of snow." Karen smiled, yawned, and turned over. He turned to the top right bunk and whispered the good news to Beth.

She smiled too. "Don't forget to water Thumper," she murmured.

Pete nodded. "Sure will." He left their room, pleased that they would sleep instead of wandering outside when they heard him go out.

Dad was up, stretching and running a hand through his curly black hair, by the time Pete headed for the back bedroom to wake Deanne and Dana. The parents had picked up the dishwashing argument as soon as they awoke.

"He should have cleaned up the kitchen before he went to collect for his damn paper route," Diane said.

“He says dinner time is the best time to find people at home. He would have washed the dishes when he got home.”

“He knew I’d make one of my daughters do them.”

“Deanne doesn’t do them half the time when it’s her turn anyway.”

Pete cringed. He decided not to wake D & D. If they went outside, their footprints on the sidewalk would pack the snow. He closed their door and went to his room to put on his shoveling clothes.

Diane came into the room while he was in his underwear. Pete held his pants in front of himself.

“Shovel the driveway before you go sledding or anything. And shovel the sidewalk double-wide. And water Thumper.” Pete nodded.

When she left the room, he made a face. “*Water Thumper.*” He knew he had to water Thumper. Thumper wasn’t even his rabbit. He was Beth’s rabbit, for a Girl Scout project. She was eleven, old enough to take care of Thumper in the summer and too wimpy to do it in the winter.

Only Pete was responsible enough to take care of Thumper in the winter, because Diane thought he could remember to check the water often. Pete was great at remembering everyone’s order when the parents took the kids to McDonald’s, better than McDonald’s employees were at getting them right. So, when the dangerous cold came, and the caregiver had to thaw the water bowl morning and night, Pete was the man for the job.

The rabbit, dark gray with liquid black eyes, would hop over to the bowl and begin to sip the warm water. When it was warm enough outside for Pete to take his glove off and pet him, Thumper would shiver under his hand, though not only from the cold. Pete thought the hutch must be a lonely place to spend a winter.

When Pete stepped from the warm house into the dying storm, the wind cut through his down coat. Snow blew off the branches of the giant yellow birch and into his face. He tied down his hood until only a small bull's-eye of flesh showed.

Out here, it looked more like nine than six inches of new snow. A black ribbon, barely visible in the watery dawn, showed the plow's path through the virgin whiteness.

The plow would have built a formidable dam at the end of the driveway. *Like the end moraine on a glacier*, Pete thought. He smiled; that was his Earth Science book talking.

He grabbed the shovel and scooped quickly and quietly, stepping only where he had already shoveled. By the time he reached the driveway, he was sweating. Mucus had frozen on his upper lip, and his glasses were icy cataracts. Wind reached behind them and stung his eyes.

Pete started clearing the driveway at the curb. He crouched over a white boulder and hoisted it. He walked it over to the yard and tossed it with a grunt. By the third trip he was beginning to feel woozy from heat and hunger.

When the drive was passable, he shoveled a channel behind each wheel of the station wagon. He thought he should clean off the back patio, too, but he was so hot and cold and hungry that he just could not bring himself to do it now.

This snowfall would make his paper route miserable today. The old snow had finally crusted over enough to support his 105 pounds and the thin weekday papers. Today he would sink to his knees as he trudged to the seventy-five houses on his route, and snow would fill his boots. The walking would be as bad as on Sunday mornings, and not even the sunshine would make it better.

Pete hurried inside, frantic to remove his boots and

gloves. Diane and Dad had segued into the favoritism argument. Pete made himself invisible as he cooked himself some oatmeal. He put a teaspoon of sugar on the cereal, and he thought about adding a second. He glanced at Diane, who was watching him as she groused at Dad. The rule was one spoon of sugar per bowl, and she would give Dad grief if Pete used two.

Dad had on a sweatshirt and not his coveralls, so he wasn't going to the plant today. That was good. Pete hated babysitting the other kids. They went crazy when the adults left, and Pete's only weapon was to list their offenses and tattle. He rarely dared do that.

"You got the driveway shoveled?" Diane pulled uncombed brown hair out of her eyes.

"Yep. I'll do the back after I eat."

"Don't bother now. It's really cold. Just as long as we can get out of the driveway, it's fine."

"Thanks." Pete's heart pounded. When Diane wasn't in a horrible mood, she could be a good mom. He scrubbed his pan and went to get a book from his room. After about ten minutes of reading, he grew restless. He decided to shower and mess with his baseball cards.

Pete thought he could take more than a three-minute shower today, since no one was in a hurry to leave. His back itched from the morning's sweat. Two minutes into his shower, someone knocked on the door.

"Pete, I have to go potty." He sighed. Glen had just been trained, and he couldn't hold it too well. Pete stepped out of the shower and unlocked the door.

"Mommy says don't lock the door."

"Okay. Sorry, Glen." Pete hurried to finish his shower. When he emerged from the steamy bathroom, everyone was up. Three kids were staring at Captain Kangaroo. Deanne and Dana were pulling on opposite ends of a teen magazine, their faces red and tense. Pete

would get killed for fighting like that.

If everyone was too busy to notice him, this was the time to start his baseball-card project. He had ten thousand cards, and keeping track of which ones he still needed was becoming a problem. He wanted to organize them alphabetically so he could find players easily. The hard part of reorganizing was unpacking and repacking his cards. He couldn't leave them spread over his desk; their place was under his bed, in his card boxes.

The summer before, Pete had gone to camp for a week. The last three days before he left, Diane had put him to work mowing, weeding, painting, scrubbing and pruning. On his second workday, three 1956 cards came in the mail from a card dealer. With all his chores, he had no time to file them. He crawled under the bottom bunk and left the package on top of his card boxes, where it would get in no one's way.

When camp ended, he came home to find the cards missing. When he asked about them, Diane told him she had thrown them away because they weren't inside the card boxes.

Pete looked at her, stunned, and she went about her business as if she didn't know anything could be wrong. Pete spent the next couple of days punching his pillow and muttering, but he had learned a valuable lesson.

He could not let his whole collection go into the garbage. His 1961 Hank Aaron card was supposed to be worth five bucks, and if Aaron beat Babe Ruth's home-run record in '74, it might double in value. He started alphabetizing quickly.

Dad had gotten that '61 Aaron for Pete from a card shop. Sometimes, when he thought about it, Dad bought packs of new cards for Pete, too. Pete made little dots on the backs of cards Dad got him, so he would know not to trade them. Diane didn't know Dad bought cards for Pete.

Pete finished the Braves and moved to the Cubs, and he came upon one of his sentimental favorites, the 1963 card of second-baseman Ken Hubbs. Pete fished it out of the pile and smiled sadly. He liked it because it was the last Ken Hubbs card, almost the only Ken Hubbs card, because after just a couple of seasons Ken Hubbs had died . . .

Pete's mind froze, and Ken Hubbs slipped from his fingers and fluttered to the carpet.

*It's not my rabbit*, he thought. His lips formed the words without sound. Thumper might not be his, but guess who would get clobbered if something happened to him? Pete glanced out the window. The sun was brilliant now, masking the implacable truth of sub-zero weather and a lower wind chill.

Slowly he bent to pick up Ken Hubbs, then he took Hubbs, all of the Hank Aaron cards, and his 1910 card of Tim Jordan, and hid them in the back of his desk drawer. He jammed the rest into his boxes and shoved the collection under the bed.

Pete went to the closet by the front door and pulled on his coat and his boots. The boots were dry from his morning's work; Pete didn't want to think about how much drier Thumper would be.

Diane put a lot of faith in Pete's good memory, but Pete had come to realize that there were two types of memory. There was the list-remembering type, and the harder one, when you had to remember to do something, like the times Diane told him in the morning to throw a load of white clothes in the washer after school, and he didn't remember until she and Dad were pulling into the driveway after work. Then he would jump up in a panic and start the washer, but there was no way to hide the fact that he had forgotten his duty. Then he had to listen to a lecture about how he could remember the stats on his baseball cards but not chores like washing clothes, which

must mean he didn't care about his family.

He had never forgotten to take care of Thumper, because Thumper really suffered if he did. Pete had mentioned to his dad once that Thumper shouldn't have to spend the winter outside, and his dad had agreed, then asked him where they would put the cage.

Pete had looked around; the cage wouldn't fit on the floor in the room he shared with Glen; in fact, every bedroom was jammed with beds and dressers. That was what happened when you decided one day to put together two families in a house big enough for one, and then add three more kids. The only room where there was any floor space at all was the living room, and that didn't seem like the place for a rabbit. Pete had gone back to his dad and recommended that Thumper be given away. Diane had heard that and asked Pete why he wasn't willing to take care of the rabbit. Pete had not answered her.

So he never forgot Thumper. He would have remembered him today, but the snarling, swirling wind had frozen his memory. When Pete had staggered in for his bowl of hot oatmeal, Thumper would have been sniffing at his ice, wanting water to fuel his defenses against the cold. For Pete's mistake, Thumper might have paid with his life, and Pete wondered if he would, too.

"I'm going to check the rabbit." Pete didn't wait for a response, but he wanted the parents to notice his trip. He trotted toward the back of the L-shaped house, sometimes falling through the icy crust under the top layer of snow. The wind whipped around the corner as if determined to bury shards of ice in his ears. Pete thought the wind might pull his ears off after they froze; it was five below zero even now, and the wind chill had to be thirty below, at least.

When he turned the corner, the hutch loomed like a casket on stilts. Pete didn't want to look through the chicken-wire door. He banged on the plywood back in

hopes of hearing Thumper's weary shuffle. He got no response. It was as if the hutch had not housed a rabbit for years; even the droppings underneath were enshrouded by snow. Pete groaned.

Snow had blown into the exposed section of the hutch. In the corner there was a white mound. Pete touched it and found Thumper under the snow, his nose frozen to the water dish. Pete took off his glove despite the cold and touched him. His hand stuck to the fur, and for a moment he couldn't shake free. The hair rose on his neck, and with a violent bang he knocked the corpse loose.

He put his glove back on and stared across the backyard. Snow lined bare tree branches, telephone wires and clotheslines, and sunlight shimmered over the opalescent flakes. There was no sound but the hiss of dry snow against the house. If he could choose only one sound to hear for the rest of his life, it would be the sound of Thumper's slurping at the water.

"Damn. Damn! *Damn!*" Pete kicked the hutch. He was going to die. Diane would make him stick his nose on the frozen bowl or give him the blueprints for a boy-sized hutch and make him build it and spend a cold night in it. She might make Thumper into a pot of soup and make Pete eat it all by himself. The wind blasted him to punctuate his agony, strongly enough to make the hutch rock.

Pete stared at the hutch as a way out came to mind. The angle of the wind was wrong, but maybe it hadn't been last night. If the hutch had blown over, Thumper would have died before morning, and Pete would not have been at fault. He might not have to eat Thumper after all.

He moved behind the hutch and gave it a shove. It landed with a *poof!* Something thumped inside. Pete walked to the top of the hutch and looked at the house. Even eight feet farther out, the back corner of the house still hid him

from anyone in the kitchen. He smiled with relief.

He grasped the plywood top of the hutch and heaved it upward. He grunted until he could shift his grasp to the door, then he moved forward, making as many footprints as he could to cover the spot where the hutch had lain for a moment. When the hutch was almost erect, the legs slid back into their holes in the snow. Pete shuffled around a little bit more, then walked to the house with a glum look on his face.

Dad was starting a pot of chili. Pete walked over to him, head down. His nose was so cold he could not smell the sizzling beef.

“The hutch blew over.”

“Did the rabbit get loose?”

“No. The lid didn’t come off.” Pete added a bitter tone to his voice. “It would’ve been better if he got away.”

Dad closed his eyes and sighed. Pete waited for him to ask why it would have been better, but Dad just went back to his chili. Pete took off his boots and sat on his bed until it was time to deliver his papers.

That night, he dreamt of Thumper. The rabbit roamed his cage, unable to decide between the warm straw bed and the block of ice that had been water. His eyes glowed red with panic as his insatiable thirst drove him crazy. Finally he stuck his nose on the ice to try to melt it and couldn’t pull back. And in this dream, Thumper called soundlessly to the bringer of water, the boy who never forgot him.

Pete awoke, shaking, before dawn, to the grinding of a snow plow. He knew he would not be going to school today, even if the others did. He had Dad call the school to report his absence, and Dad didn’t ask why he wanted the day off.

When everyone was gone, Pete pulled Dana’s record

player into his room. He listened to a stack of 45s while he read his French book, then he looked at the two LPs he had bought with his paper route money. The first one was *Elton John's Greatest Hits*, but he was not in the mood to hear Elton. The other was by Marlin Greene, a guy who sang one of his favorite old 45s. On the cover, Marlin was standing on a branch of a big tree. Mountains rose in the background. Pete wished he could climb the birch in the front yard right now, as he did in the summer, and let the cars and the people, especially the kids, scurry like frantic ants below him. He put the album on the turntable on Side Two and lay back. By the end of the last song, "Tiptoe Past the Dragon," he was almost asleep. The tonearm swung back, and Pete let go of his thoughts.

He delivered his papers early and started a new novel when he finished. After dinner, he went out to collect from the customers he had missed two days before. When he got home, Beth was crying.

"Thumper's frozen," she said between sobs. Pete saw reproach in her red eyes.

Pete opened his mouth to say, *You can thank Diane for giving me your job*. He caught himself and just nodded. "Yep."

Dad looked at him. "Why didn't you tell me Thumper froze?"

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

"I thought I did, sort of." He took his collection book and went to count his money.