**The Dead of Winter**

It is a bitterly cold January morning. Getting out of my warm bed is pure misery but there are newspapers that must be delivered. Our family has a reputation for being punctual paperboys or should I say newspaper delivery people. My sister, two of my brothers and I have been delivering papers for many years. At thirteen I am a veteran. My younger brother is already out of the house completing his paper route. This is his first week.

With my newspapers rolled and bagged I leave the comfort of my house, stumble down the slippery stairs and shuffle grudgingly into a tunnel of wintery darkness. At 6 a.m. the snow is falling in sharp, icy crystals onto the frozen city sidewalks. The howling wind is muffled slightly by the tightly drawn hood of my hand-me-down parka. The streetlights cast grotesque shadows, first behind, then beside, and finally in front of me as my boots leave faint traces in the drifting, virgin snow.

Half asleep, I trudge robotically towards my first delivery. However, as I round the first street corner I am jolted wide-awake by a kaleidoscope of bright red and blue flashing lights, the crackling of hand-held radios, and the flurry of human activity. Through the falling snowflakes I am able to distinguish a posse of police officers and an ambulance driver. Further back there is an odd menagerie of people standing in a small huddle with gloveless hands clutching at the collars of their coats. I notice that they are still wearing their pajamas. Everyone seems distraught and frantic. Their focal point is a small, human body that is lying inert on the snow-shrouded ground. Strange. I wish I could stay to watch as this drama unfolds but my customers are waiting for their morning news.

With all my papers delivered I arrive back home. I am curious about the police car parked outside of my house. Odd. I am even more puzzled by the swarm of strangers in my kitchen. No one seems to notice me. I feel invisible. My father sits catatonic on a dining room chair. My mother paces in the hallway, rivulets of tears flowing down her agonized face. She is sobbing inconsolably. It is my older brother who finally admonishes me, "Your brother has been murdered. You should go upstairs to your room." And so I do.

Crowding around our communal, transistor radio on our bedroom floor, my two younger brothers and I begin to piece together what has happened, what is happening:

8 a.m. A young newspaper boy was found dead in St-Laurent. Police suspect foul play.

8:30 a.m. A Gazette carrier was found stabbed to death. Police are looking for suspects.

9:00 a.m. Neighbors discovered the body of an eleven-year old boy beside their house this morning. Police say that he had been stabbed multiple times. Presently they have nobody in custody.

Eleven years old. So many thoughts collide in my young mind. Eleven is a prime number. Apollo 11 – the first manned spacecraft to land on the moon. Eleven is sodium on the periodic table. It is a highly reactive metal. Eleven pipers piping – from a Christmas that has just passed.

The next day my brother’s murder is the headline in the newspaper he would never deliver. More details are offered: seventeen stab wounds, footprints in the snow, no witnesses, still no suspects.

Around our house I am exposed to odd snippets of adult conversations: Seventeen stab wounds? Would sixteen have been any kinder?

How many murderous thrusts does it take to kill an eleven-year-old boy? How angry or how demented must one be to stab and stab and stab?

Visitors come to comfort my parents and leave us with debris from their own stage of grief. Some refuse to believe that he is really dead. The open-casket funeral will expunge all of those doubts. A few have progressed to anger but since they do not have a legitimate target for their fury they aim it at the police who have not yet solved the case, at the media outlets that are harassing us or at what they perceive as generalized social decay. Most people appear depressed as they move in slow motion through our crowded hallways. They speak in whispers and they weep openly. For many, acceptance of this senseless crime will never come.

To compound our family’s misery, my father and my oldest brother are taken to the police station for questioning. There had been footprints in the snow but the trail that led to our house had been blown away by the brutal wind. The flecks of red that are discovered on my older brother’s boots turn out to be paint from a construction job that he had completed the previous summer. And my father who worked the night shift, to provide food and shelter for his seven children, had been at work at the time of the murder. The police rule out fratricide and filicide but they have no other suspects.

On the day of the funeral there is freezing rain – heaven’s tears. The chapel is filled to capacity with family members, school friends and others who need to grieve. My mother’s voice quavers as she forces herself to sing Amazing Grace. The hearse spins its wheels on the ice-covered roads as it winds its way to the graveyard. Mercifully the ground is too frozen to dig a hole so there will be no graveside ceremony.

Later in the week the experts offer various analyses of this murder: violent, perpetrated, unresolved, unexpected, the worst kind of death. The unresolved part is the most tormenting. Without the perpetrator in custody there is no chance to make any sense of this heinous crime. There is no escaping the immobilizing fear that there is still a murderer on the loose!

I had read every Hardy Boy detective novel in our local library so I force myself to think like a private eye. What kind of person attacks a young boy with such apparent rage? Who leaves his house on a dark, cold morning carrying a knife, armed with the intention to kill? How premeditated were his actions? Had my brother known him? Had there been a conversation? An argument? Or was the murderer a stranger? Was his victim randomly selected?

I wondered.

And where was God in all of this? My parents and Sunday school teachers had taught me that there was a God who loved and protected us. Until this event, this had been true. Accidents I could understand. However, allowing an eleven-year-old boy to be mercilessly mutilated and permitting the murderer to live freely? This shook the foundations of my young, fragile faith.

Alone with my thoughts I console myself with the belief that there appears to be a strange balance in the universe – a balance that cannot abide unpunished offenses. Clinging to the hope of a joyful reunion with those we love also permits us to fantasize about eternal damnation for those who deserve it most. There is a perverse relief that comes from imagining evil people writhing in pain, under the devil's watchful eye, on one of the lower levels of Dante's Inferno.

No weapon, suspect, or motive is found. It seems fitting that a murder committed in the dead of winter should remain a cold case.

I never deliver another newspaper.

My high school years are a messed-up blur of being pitied and being pointed at. The stigma of being the murdered boy's brother invites scrutiny. Teachers and counselors try to be kind:
"How are you feeling today?"
"If you ever just want to talk, my classroom door is always open."
I feel them looking at me, half expecting me to melt into a puddle of tears on the gymnasium floor, half expecting me to freak out in the middle of math class with a sudden outburst of uncontrollable, Tourette's-like tics and curses!

My parents die of stress and broken hearts a few years after the murder. My brothers and sister pour their energies into helping others. This calamity is the catalyst for their careers as social workers, psychologist, foster-parent, pastor, and teachers. All appear to be doing penance in their own personal purgatories as they each try to tame their demons and work out their own salvation.

We are altered, damaged, and yet somehow stronger. Instead of allowing this tragedy destroy us, we choose to use it as a platform from which we can help others. We are more than survivors. We are overcomers. And life continues.

Almost forty years later I am still searching for the great cosmic lesson that I am supposed to learn from this traumatic event. Each January I experience a dull pain for which time has not proven to be the remedy. And if one of my own beautiful children happens to be a few minutes late coming home from school or from a friend’s house, I worry.