

SWING

*a story by veronica
mattaboni*

ALL THE WAY UP

AND
SMACK



“the snow doesn’t give a soft white
damn whom it touches.”

e. e. cummings // [viva]

“the peace of winter stars seemed
permanent.”

toni morrison // *beloved*

// SWING ALL THE WAY UP AND SMACK

The low-burning embers casting an orange haze through the slats in the front of the wood

stove made Martha's stomach churn. The more the embers dimmed, the more she could feel the cold that seeped in through the walls. She had already pulled all the afghans from the loft closet; for a ski cabin, there really wasn't much in the way of insulation. Martha knew she could put on another sweater, or wear one of Gene's if she really needed to, but there wasn't any point. There were only three logs left in the pile inside, and if she didn't burn through them today, they'd be ash by tomorrow. Then she really would freeze. Especially if the snow kept coming down the way it was.

Martha pulled on an extra pair of socks, laced up her snow boots, and braced herself for the snowfall. The clomp of the heavy soles echoed through the quiet of the empty cabin. Outside, the wind sifted flakes through the air like confetti, making it hard for Martha to keep her eyes open against the onslaught.

She walked through the snow the way one might attempt to run through shallow water, slowly and deliberately, one foot after the other, in wide strides. Her muscles strained as she ripped one boot from the grip of the snow, swung the heavy shoe through the air at nearly waist-height, and slammed it down with enough force to keep her stable against the winds. The process was grueling. She was winded by the time she actually made it to the wood block.

Martha, having never had the chance to explore this corner of the yard before the snow started falling, was unsure how to begin. There were full-sized logs stacked in a pyramid, half-buried by the blizzard, and she assumed that the large dune of snow protruding from the ground like a zit had to be the chopping stump. In brushing it off, she found she was right. Martha made eye contact with the log pyramid and steeled herself. If Gene could do it, so could she.

Picking out the smallest log she could discern through the eye-blaring wind, Martha attempted to pull it from the pile. “Just like Jenga,” she chuckled through labored breaths as she tugged at the bark with fingertips. It took some prying, but eventually it came loose. Martha sighed and wiped her hands on her ski pants. *Owen was the only one worth a damn at Jenga in this family*, she thought.

Now that she had a log, she tried to remember how Gene’s uncle had described the chopping process in the brief conversation they’d had when he handed over the keys to his ski cabin.

“I’ll tell you boy, it’s more work than it sounds,” the large boisterous man had laughed, slapping his nephew on the back so hard Gene was still rubbing his shoulder the next morning. “See now what you gotta do, is you gotta line that sucker up on the stump in the middle, making sure it’s real steady. Then you grab the ax—that’s in the shed, I’ll draw you a map. You take that ax and you swing it all the way up and *smack*.” Gene’s uncle slammed an open palm down on the dinner table, shifting every plate. “Crack that sucker open, right down the middle! It’s work, but it’s sure

as hell fun. You should let the little one try some time,” he finished, winking at Owen from across the table. Owen laughed and grinned like any child that young does when spoken to with enthusiasm, and Gene chuckled, shaking his head at Martha with a smirk when his uncle’s attention was elsewhere. It was the first real smile she’d seen on him in weeks and it set off butterflies in her stomach. She remembered thinking it was a good omen. For the first time in the past few weeks of fighting, she felt like their marriage might be okay.

She caught a snowflake on her bare eyeball and cursed. She cursed the weather. She cursed the cabin. She cursed the vacation. She cursed herself for being the one to even suggest it. She cursed Gene.

Martha continued muttering obscenities under her breath as she heaved the log from its hole in the snow. She wished for frostbite, or hypothermia, or pneumonia, while setting the log upright on the uneven stump. She cursed the stump for being uneven. She cursed Gene’s uncle for cutting it unevenly.

“Shit,” she muttered, as she remembered the ax was still in the tool shed. At least it wasn’t very far. She waddled her way over to the shed and crouched in the snow heaped against it to dig the door free handful by handful. Her gloves grew wet and cold. By the time she cleared the door, all feeling had left her fingers.

Nudging the door open with her shoulder, Martha rubbed her hands together vigorously, exhaling warm breath onto them. The air in the shed was dead still. She imagined she could feel the steam wisping from her lips pushing the frozen air, slow and stretching. The ax hung on two nails

on the back wall. When she lifted it, the weight was more than she expected and she staggered a moment before righting herself. She caught herself looking around the shed, as if someone would have seen. *Still waiting for Gene to catch my every mistake*, she thought to herself.

“Can’t ridicule me anymore when you’re dead, now can you?” She grinned at her own cynicism, but she soon felt a somber twinge in her gut. Then, upon really looking around the room, she had a second thought: *This is a perfect place for them*.

It didn’t take much searching to find a plastic tarp in the shed. Martha laid it out flat along the dry planks of the floor. Then she took the spare shovel off the wall and placed it beside the tarp. She could use the bigger shovel to move the snow, but that one was still in the house. The little one would do. For now, she had the wood to worry about.

Stepping back into the whipping wind was like a smack in the face. Martha pulled her hat tighter over her head and arranged her scarf higher on her neck. The log had blown over while she was in the shed, and she had to put it in place again. She stood in front of the chopping stump, boots planted firmly in the snow, shoulders squared.

“All right,” she whispered. “You got this.”

She raised the ax up in a wobbly fashion. She felt its weight much more when it was raised in the air. She rested it on her shoulder a moment, and then in a sudden big swing, she brought the head crashing down. The blade peeled a splinter off one of the log and sent it flying off the block. The ax meanwhile went in another direction, twisting gracefully out of her grip. “Dammit.”

Martha rubbed her wrist as she retrieved and replaced the ax and log. She readied herself for another swing. *Raise the ax. Bring it down. Smack*. This time the blade missed the log entirely, wedging itself in the wood beside it.

"Why is this so difficult?" she growled, swinging the ax wildly over her head and dropping it down, straight past the log and into the block again.

"This was supposed to be *your* job," she muttered. "*I'll take care of it, Martha! It'll be fine!*" her face pinching into a contorted grimace as she mimicked a man's voice. Again she swung and the log toppled into the snow.

"All you had to do was watch him!" she shouted. The weight of the ax in her hands had converted into momentum. She swung in large arcs now, not stopping to aim or retrieve the log. "*This is all your fault!*"

She shrieked and swung wildly, puffing billows of steam like a smokestack. She was an anguish factory. She felt herself being pulled back to that day.

Gene had been calling to her from the other room, but she wouldn't come. She saw the shovel by the front door, leaning against the wall. She moved towards it. Gene was saying her name through hyperventilating hiccups. He crawled out of Owen's room, a blubbing mess. "Ma-Martha, I'm so so-sorry..."

Smack.

In a rage, Martha blindly swung the ax down into the block.

Smack.

Martha swung the shovel with all her might. The metal scoop made solid contact with the upward side of his skull. Gene fell backwards. She swung again and his nose smashed flat like a soda can. He coughed on the blood running down the back of his throat. He didn't speak, or couldn't, but stared up at her with those eyes she had loved for so many years. They were wide and terri-

fied. She swung again and felt something crack beneath the shovel. She swung and swung until her arms were sore, crying, *“You were supposed to watch him!”*

Shaking and sobbing, Martha crumpled backward into the snow. She cried and coughed and sputtered until her tears froze on her cheeks. She wanted to go back inside and be warm again. She picked up the mostly intact log, and gathered the several others that she’d clumsily knocked out of the pile, and carried the armload back to cabin.

Inside, she shoved an unsplit log into the stove. From the kitchen, she pulled a bottle of cooking oil out of the cabinet, and doused the log with it. The oil quickly caught fire, but the flames hissed and sputtered at the damp pockets of water still in the log. *It’ll dry out eventually though, won’t it?*

Martha pulled on another sweater and sat in the living room, staring at Owen’s door. She closed her eyes and thought of her little boy. She could feel his body in her arms, his shaggy hair through her fingers. His boyish smirk, like he was always up to something. *Why was he always climbing everything?*

She remembered walking into the cabin, the groceries in her arms weighing her down. The television droned in the background, and Gene with his feet on the coffee table droning on with it. He was such a heavy sleeper. He probably didn’t even know it had begun to snow. Didn’t even know what his son was up to.

Calling to him—“Owen?”—with no response, Martha nudged Gene awake.

“What’s he up to?”

Gene's eyelids sagged open and he shrugged. So cavalier. "Playing in his room last I saw him."

"You were *supposed* to be *watching* him."

"He's a kid, not a time bomb, Martha. Give him a break."

Not being able to open Owen's bedroom door all the way. Something blocking it. Through the crack in the door she could see his small arm on the carpet, unmoving.

"Gene..." She crammed her way into the room and froze in horror. "*Gene.*"

Her son's blue lips, parted slightly, his head lolled to the side. Eyes bulging. His chest crushed beneath by the wooden dresser that had fallen on top of him. Martha flung herself from the room as Gene was trying to get past her to get in.

From the living room she could hear his screaming. She could hear his sobs as he levered the dresser off their boy. Gene was calling to her from the other room, but she wouldn't come.

Suddenly she was antsy. She couldn't pretend they weren't there any longer. She needed to get them out. Martha yanked her jacket back on and rushed back out into the snow in search of Owen's heavy sled. As she dragged it through the front door the metal runners squealed against the wooden floorboards. A sled wasn't made for this kind of terrain.

In front of Owen's door, Martha paused. She took a deep breath. She pulled out the towel that she'd jammed under the door to hold in the smell of decay. She opened the door and went inside. She was surprised to find them looking so normal in the four days they'd lain there.

It was difficult to fit them both on the sled at the same time, and more so to keep them balanced as she towed them out the cabin and through the snow across the yard to the shed. Once she had them on the tarp, lying next to one another, she saw that it would be easy enough to shovel snow over the bodies. There was snow enough to get the job done.

But before she started pile the snow over them, she had one last thing to do. Slowly and deliberately, Marsha snugged Owen closer to Gene, and laid Gene's arms around the child. She tilted them so they faced in toward each other. She placed Owen's tiny hand in her husband's larger one and closed their fingers.

"My boys," she sighed, taking a final look. "My poor boys."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR // **VERONICA MATTABONI** is an author, poet, and freelance writer from Pennsylvania. She studied creative writing at West Chester University.



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