

# Snowy Days and Mondays

## A Wintery Short Story



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## **Snowy Days and Mondays**

I've talked to many people my age who have lost their love of the simplest things in life. Take for example the changing of the seasons. For them the changes from winter to spring to summer to fall have lost their magic. At one time this wondrous transformation held a special place in their heart signifying all that life has to offer, but over the years their view has blurred to the point where one season becomes another, seamlessly merging into one as these people drift through life just trying to make it the best way they can.

It gets to the point where they people actually dread each season: Winter just means more snow to shovel; spring keeps them cooped up in the house all day because of the rain; it's too hot to do anything in the summer; they fight an onslaught of leaves in the fall. They lose sight of what each change means and become sad curmudgeons when it comes to these miraculous changes. They have become grumpy old season haters.

But when you're a kid every season has its own bewitching magic: Spring is a rebirth, a chance to start fresh; summer is endless days of frolicking and mischief; fall is crisp, cool, and just plain majestic with its rainbows of color; and winter, well winter is extra special. Of course there are those magnificent holidays embedded within those dark, biting months but the season on its own is magical in and of itself.

If there is one season that I cling to in my old age simply for its majesty and breathtaking beauty it would be winter. For me there is nothing like the end of the year, that bone chilling, finger numbing time when the wind blows through you, when each breath is harsh and biting,

and the thrill of stepping out onto an icy, un-salted sidewalk sends shivers down the spine of even the most diehard stuntman. And I mean that in a winter loving way.

There are plenty of people in this world who have never experienced the virginal pureness of the first snowfall of the season and I feel sorry for them. Light, cottony flakes fall endlessly from the sky. The world is so silent and tranquil as the delicate flakes begin to accumulate on the frozen earth sound proofing the landscape, the silence only disrupted by the occasional clanging of snow chains on the tires of a solitary old Chevy as it rumbles down the street. As one tiny flake falls after another it's almost inconceivable that in less than an hour a good thick blanket of white will cover the ground.

Growing up in the northeast I had my share of glorious winters and yes, it is as beautiful as described but unfortunately short-lived. Despite all of the *White Christmas* imagery many conjure up of a good northeastern snow complete with cottony snow banks lining every path, a perpetual snow falling from the sky, and icicles dangling precariously from the rafters of houses reflecting the light from banks of streetlamps making them into their own dazzling, un-powered Christmas light show, there is one sad truth that not many will tell you. Just as quickly as these images come they are gone. In a blink of an eye the vestiges of this Norman Rockwellesque scene vanishes as the snow inevitably begins to melt turning it into a nasty grey icy slush. Slush might be great in a Slurpee from 7-11 but on the ground, that's another story.

Car exhaust begins to tint the whiteness until the town turns gray and dingy from the combination of the melted, sooty snow and the sand and salt the road department uses to keep the road clear. To this day the scene makes me feel as gritty as a sandwich eaten at the beach.

And it must be noted that while the snow is beautiful it can also be deadly for countless school kids as they anxiously sweat it out, pacing the floor in the pre-dawn hours as they wait to see if their school would be closed. There in the dark frigid morning a spark would ignite inside of them giving them a glimmer of hope that maybe, just maybe, a rare snow day would be called.

A snow day is a built-in school holiday so that in the event of a cataclysmic snowstorm schools would shut down. And let me tell you, in order for that to happen it had to be just that, an event so monumental, so disastrous that the school board was forced to shut them down. There could be 20-feet of snow on the ground, 50-foot tall snow drifts burying houses, and winds howling at gale force. Didn't matter. Schools would open. Scott of the Antarctic had nothing on

us kids as we mushed through our own frozen tundra for a date with Alexander Graham Bell and “new math”.

On this one particular morning the feeling was palpable. Each one of us knew that school would be closed that day even without setting a single foot outside. It was only a feeling, mind you, and there was always the slim possibility that your intuition was wrong but not this morning. My brain was gearing up for a fun-filled day of building snow forts, snowmen, and snowball fights.

I rushed downstairs to the kitchen where my Mom had a lukewarm bowl of Cream of Wheat waiting for me, a sure sign that the black, sooty oil furnace in our basement was fighting a valiant battle against the cold but was losing.

She had already tuned our behemoth of a transistor radio, the Zenith Royal 3000 Transoceanic Portable, to a local A.M. radio news station and was listening to the announcer read off the list of school closings. The signal crackled every time the furnace blower motor kicked on making it almost impossible to hear anything.

I woofed down the pasty cereal and glanced at the clock. It was 7:15. I had to be heading out of the door by 7:30 to begin my epic journey against Mother Nature in order to make it to school on time. My Mom verified, no announcement yet.

As the clock ticked ever closer to the time when I had to face the elements and trudge off to the red brick fortress of Brookside Elementary, I, along with thousands of other kids all across the region, began to doubt our intuition and that flame of hope for a snow day would start to flicker out. During those final moments before we stepped out into the frozen boreal we would come as close as we ever would to death from a heart attack without actually dying as we nervously, frantically, hysterically, waited next to the radio to hear if our school was closed.

The announcer would start reading the list of closings around 5 a.m. but because of the sheer number of schools in the Tri-State Area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut it would take almost three hours to wade through it.

I slowly rose from the table and started making my way toward the back door where a coat rack stood with my winter survival gear hanging at the ready. As I walked I was bombarded by a string of commercials blaring from the radio for *Schaeffer Beer* (the one beer to have when you're having more than one), *General Tires* who guaranteed you'd go in snow or they'd pay the tow, and *Castro Convertible* sleeper sofas that were so easy to open even a child could do it

which was followed by that jingle that stuck in your head for the rest of the day: “Who’s tops in the convertible line, Castro Convertible.”

I pulled my scarf off of the coat rack and murmured, “Damn! Come on already!” under my breath, but my Mom had hearing like the giant Arecibo Observatory Radio Telescope and could pick up the sound of a pin drop ten miles away.

“What did you say?” she said half angry, half unsure if she actually heard what she thought she had heard.

“I didn’t say anything,” I replied sheepishly. “Must have been the furnace.”

She just glared my way for a few seconds then continued going about her business.

Finally, the commercials were over and the announcer went back to reading the announcements. He rustled his papers near the microphone making them sound like a crackling fire over the airwaves. Clearing his voice that was now going a bit dry and hoarse from reading the 10,000 pages of school closings up to this point he continued with his sermon and as always the Catholic schools topped the reading.

“Continuing our list of school closings: St. Mary’s, St. Paul’s...”

To this day no one knows exactly how many Catholic schools there are in the New York City area, but there were many.

“St. Lucas, St. Bernard...”

Apparently Catholics had inside information that we in the public sector were not privy to.

The announcer droned on and on. “St. Patrick, St. Pius, St. Manuel...”

The clock ticked on as the announcer’s monotone voice continued.

“...St. Cloud, St. George...”

It was now 7:25. I inched closer and closer to the door slowly pulling one thick, heavy rubber snow boot on at a time.

“St. Pius the Ninety Eighth, St. Pius the Ninety Ninth, St. Saint...”

It was now 7:29. The adrenalin was coursing through my veins as I waited for what looked like to be another crushing let down. No! I must hold out hope that school would be closed today! My palms were sweaty; my heart was racing. Come on, man! Say the magic words!

I slipped on my heavy wool coat, tightened the scarf around my neck, and pulled my Soviet Ushanka hat down low over my ears. My hand trembled as it latched onto the doorknob when the announcer paused for what seemed like an eternity. The clock struck 7:30. I opened the door and a howling wind whipped through the kitchen bringing with it a dusting of snow. My old man's copy of the *Daily News* fluttered about the room. Then, the voice crackled over the air.

“Brookside Elementary...”

You could literally hear the thud of hundreds of kids in the neighborhood hitting the floor as they passed out from the sheer exhaustion and fatigue brought on by waiting for those two words.

Now once your calendar has been cleared for the day it was time to go out and frolic in the newly fallen snow, which never made sense to us at the time. You can't go to school because of the snow but you can certainly spend the day playing in it but one should not question these mysteries of life.

Little did the gang realize as we made our preparations to race out of our homes and into the winter wonderland that awaited us that this was not your typical snow day. No, sir. This was much more than that. Overnight the area had experienced the worst ice storm it had seen in thirty years. The entire town was blanketed, not with snow but with at least a half inch of ice. Power lines creaked and moaned under the weight of its protective icy sheathing threatening to cut power to the masses. Small trees were bending over so much that their upper most branches were touching the ground creating artificial ice caves.

Through the frosted windows of our house you could hear car tires spinning relentlessly trying to get a grip on the icy surface until there was that brief moment of silence where you knew what was coming next – the loud thud of the car sliding into a tree or the neighbor's car that was parked on the street.

The town was completely at a standstill. Nothing could move - buses, trains, even the post office was frozen to a halt. Everything was locked in the hard freeze, everything, that is, except the intrepid kids of Brookside Elementary who were presented with a rare opportunity to make history. It was our chance to break the town's speed record for sledding. Well, at least we thought it would be a record.

Kids slid their way around town on the ice, spreading the word: “Grab your sleds and head to Houvenkopf Mountain. Today is the day!”

They came in droves with every imaginable type of snow runner and of course, the gang had heard the call. Creep had his plastic snow saucer with him. Badger lugged an old cardboard box that once housed a refrigerator. Me? I had my Flexible Flyer. If anyone could break the record it would be me and Old Flex.

The sled was actually an American Flyer model built by the Flexible Flyer Company in Canada. It was made of the finest Northern hardwoods and had multiple ribs that created the deck you laid upon as you sped down the slopes. It had reinforced knee areas for comfort, and the coup de grace, a special powder-coated set of runners that, as the ad in *Boy's Life* magazine said, "Sliced through even the smallest amount of snow".

The line of thrill seekers began making their way up the hill. The ice was treacherous and made it a long and arduous trek. We would take one step up and slide back three, then two steps forward and slide back four.

Denise walked along side of me as the parade slowly made its way to the top of the hill. The look of concern on her face was unmistakable.

"Don't you think this is a bit dangerous, Jake?" she asked.

"Nonsense! Flex and I are certified ridge runners! We're thrill-seekers!"

"Idiots," she shot back.

Houvenkopf Mountain was small in size as mountains go. This wasn't your K2 or Everest. It was a small foothill to a larger range of mountains called the Ramapo's but still, it was a mountain and to us, majestic. The mountain itself was not too big or too small. It was just right for sledding and record breaking. Legend has it that at one time in the distant past the town submitted a bid to the Olympic Organizing Committee to bring the Winter Olympics here, but alas one little mountain did not impress the committee.

Our sledding course was a wide clear stretch of land called a power line where, coincidentally enough, an electric power line stretched down the hillside feeding the village with electricity. The power line went up the side of the mountain from the very bottom to the very top.

We climbed and slid and climbed and slid until we finally made the summit and the upper most end of the power line. The view was magnificent from this perch some 700 feet up. In the distance on this gray and overcast day you could see my house. In fact, you could see the entire town with dark black smoke billowing out of chimneys from their oil furnaces. And straight down the hill you could see the bottom of the power line far below, our finish line.

Creep was the first to go on his saucer. He deftly placed the plastic disc on the hillside and grabbed its sides with both hands. Placing one foot securely behind him, the other firmly on the disc, he pushed himself off with the anchor foot. The saucer immediately flew out from under him, careening down the slope sans passenger while Creep up-ended and landed with a thud on his back.

Next up was Badger. The growing crowd began to murmur like armchair quarterbacks sizing up his chances and hypothesizing the best strategy he should use.

“Straight down the chute. Best way,” one voice said.

“Keep the weight back,” another chimed in.

Badger seemed oblivious to the commentary that was going on behind him as he latched onto the sides of his cardboard box with both hands and flung himself onto the ancient bobsled propelling himself down the hill.

A polite golf-crowd-like applause came from the spectators as he departed the starting gate. Down the hill he went, his speed increasing exponentially. Trees whizzed past his face but unfortunately the friction from the high speed was causing the ice to melt beneath the box. It saturated the flimsy rig and upon hitting one mogul it ripped in half sailing Badger through the air, off the course, and into a frosty snow bank. He had only made it about 200 feet down the hill.

Paramedics, that would be Denise with a thermos full of hot Dr. Pepper, rushed to the scene but Badger was fine. He jumped to his feet giving a hefty two-thumbs-up to the ever-growing crowd signaling that he was ok.

It was now my turn. The gang turned away afraid to watch what they thought would be the end of good old Jake. But I had a different feeling – I was going to make history. My ride will be the talk of the town for generations to come.

I don't remember the sound of the crowd. I was focused on the run. Creep later recalled that they began a rhythmic chanting of “Jake – Jake – Jake” that crescendoed into a deafening roar.

I tucked the towrope of the Flexible Flyer neatly onto the pilot's deck so it wouldn't tangle under the runners. Slowly I leaned over and grabbed each side of the deck. Like a world-class bobsledder I rocked the sled forward and backward in the starting area, concentrating on my goal – the bottom of this 700-foot run.

I pushed it forward – once. I pushed it forward – twice. Then on the third thrust forward I ran with all my might and hopped onto Flex’s deck. I quickly grabbed onto the control horn with both hands and down I went.

The exact speed that I reached is still debated to this day but to me it felt like I was on the verge of blacking out. The sound of the trees whizzing by my head was one constant rush of air. My heart was racing. My eyes were watering from the sting of the icy cold winter air pelting them relentlessly. I managed to squint through the tears just enough to see that I was already nearing the end marker – a huge oak tree directly in the middle of the run at the bottom of the hill.

With the dexterity of an astronaut with 30 g’s pounding their body during liftoff I managed to turn the sled just enough to barely miss the tree and come to the end of the run. There was only one problem – the run wasn’t over. This wasn’t just a snow run we were doing. This was an ice-storm run! My speed continued to increase as I continued up and over a second smaller hill.

There was no way to stop Old Flex. I was going much too fast to just jump off, that would be crazy, insane, suicide. Quickly thinking I lowered my feet that were dangling from the back of the sled so that I could use my toes as a brake but the speed and friction ripped my boots off.

Flex and I continued to careen down the hill to a certain date with our maker. I hit a large bump that almost knocked the wind out of me. I squinted again trying to determine where I was and realized that I was now traveling down Main Street and was heading toward my house.

Parked cars along the side of the road looked like a streak of color past my face. Then I noticed that a sand truck had just entered the road before me and was throwing a plume of sand onto the road to melt the ice. This was my last best hope.

I closed my eyes as Flex hit a patch of sand. The sled came to an abrupt halt. I, on the other hand, sailed through the air and crash-landed into a row of garbage cans.

It was an amazing ride and one that would go down in the folklore of this sleepy little village. Generations would talk about the day that Jake defied all odds and survived to claim the sledding speed title of Houvenkopf Mountain. I had plenty of time to relish in the victory and think back on the event. While the ride lasted an unbelievably short ten minutes, the resulting hospital stay was an incredibly long seven days.

