

## A Glimpse of Red

The drizzle left the January ground matted with an ugly mess of wet leaves. Soon, however, the temperature dropped below freezing, and the drizzle became a flurry of snow, and the flurry of snow an unrelenting barrage that fell into the wee hours of the morning, hiding the ugliness beneath with a white blanket.

Of course, the Channel 5 weatherman had predicted as much, so it was of no real surprise to the residents of Cassopolis, Michigan. Still, the visual contrast from green grass to white everything was somewhat jarring. Glistening icicles clung to porches and windowsills. Thick clumps of snow weighed branches down and buried vehicles. Roads and walkways, easily discernible only a day prior, now blended in with yards. Through it all, wind drifts rippled the landscape as if frozen waves on a vast lake.

A winter weather warning had been issued and schools were cancelled in advance. Many parents, thankful for a legitimate excuse, called into work to instead stay home with their children. On a corner lot, within a two-story, red-brick house, a weary mother and her 10-year old son, Charlie, sat eating warm oatmeal at the kitchen table as they gazed out the window.

“It’s pretty,” the mother said, absentmindedly. The blizzard had calmed into caressing flurries, like an apologetic lover soothing their significant other after an argument.

“Hey, Mom...” Charlie said, but when she looked, he’d already lost his train of thought. She followed his gaze, seeing as a massive plow truck scraped aside a continuous mound of snow along the curb. Charlie’s eyes widened as it made its way up the street, and for good reason. The truck itself was the size of two vans and its seemingly impenetrable plow cleared a path with ease. Cassopolis was too small of a village to own one of its own, so it must have been

a loaner from the County Rd. Commission. Or maybe from a neighboring city like Niles or Dowagiac?

After the plow truck passed the house, its red taillights were all that remained, glowing like the watching eyes of a predator, until they too disappeared into the grey haze.

Charlie said, “So, Mom, can I go outside?”

His mother, still gazing out the window, frowned. Her late husband, his father, would have already been out there helping the neighbors shovel their driveways. He’d been gone for almost a year, which equated to an eternity of tears, but the world doesn’t stop just because the heartbeat of a loved one does.

“Well?” Charlie said, uncharacteristically impatient. Could she blame him, though? Snow had a magical effect on children. His eagerness was simply winning out.

“I suppose,” she answered.

“Nooice!” He fist-pumped the air and pushed himself up from the table, causing his milk to nearly slosh over the rim of his cup.

“‘Noice’?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugged. “Yeah. It means *nice*.”

“Well, I’ll clean up your dishes, but it’d be ‘noice’ if you at least pushed in your chair.”

“Mom,” he said, rolling his eyes at her testing the word. “No. Just no.”

He pushed his chair in, downed the last of his milk, then rushed to leave the room.

“Dress warm,” she called after him, but when he didn’t acknowledge her, she changed the tone of her voice and raised it the way his father had taught her. “Charles?!” He stopped at the doorway and looked at her. “I mean it. Bundle up. It’s colder than it looks. I’m talking snowsuit, hat, scarf, gloves—”

“Boots and extra socks,” he added, with another roll of his eyes.

“Yup, and put plastic bags around—”

“My socks so they don’t get wet when snow gets in my boots. I know, Mom.”

She smiled. A whole year had passed since the last snowfall and he still remembered what his father had called ‘Bodily Winterizing 101’. She wished he’d stay inside and play board games with her, but there’d always be tomorrow. “I love you.”

“Yup, I know that, too,” he said. “Should I take a flare in case I get lost in the backyard?”

She chuckled. “Just zip it up, wise-guy. Snug as a bug.”

A smile began to gurgle on his face, but he contained it. Poor kid. Probably thought having a dead father meant he wasn’t allowed to be happy.

Ten minutes later, Charlie had so many layers of clothing on that he imagined himself an astronaut who’d just suited up for a mission. His movements were a bit constrained, and he felt close to overheating, but it was a necessary price to pay. And a temporary one. He thudded down the hall and into the chilly garage. It’d be even colder outside.

“Frack,” he said, realizing he’d forgotten to waterproof his feet with plastic bread bags. Oh well. What his mom didn’t know wouldn’t kill her.

It was like he was inside of an airlock aboard a spaceship. He couldn’t just *go* outside. His body needed to adjust. First, the chamber would decompress before the outer hatch opened. Then, and only then, could he expose himself to the harsh environments of the unrelenting planet outside. He had his dad’s fondness for *Battlestar Galactica*, a space show on the Syfy channel, to thank for this knowledge.

He also had his dad to thank for his impatience. Charlie pressed the button for the garage door and ducked under before it was halfway open. The sun glared off the pure white snow and its brightness disoriented him at first. He stopped before he'd taken two steps out and shielded his eyes. He'd be fine. He trained for this. Using his gloved hand as a visor, he peered about the neighborhood the best he could. Things were quiet. Motionless. He seemed to be the only one outside, which was both disappointing and a relief.

Then he saw her.

Emily, red-headed, freckle-faced Emily. Emily who liked Spotify and bumblebees, funny YouTube Vines and all things Percy Jackson. She was in his grade and had lived across the street their whole lives, but she'd only been his crush since they'd sat on the bus that one time, on that one day, that he couldn't quite remember but would never quite forget. "Funny," he'd recently heard his mom tell her mom on the phone, "how quick 'cooties' become an afterthought."

Yuck, but maybe.

He considered shouting for Emily, but didn't. What would he say? And would she even care? He was a dork, and she was... Well, her.

While he stood, staring at her catching snowflakes on her tongue, a white ball exploded against his shoulder. He turned to see a short boy, heavily dressed, with brown skin and a wide nose, who he didn't recognize standing knee-deep in snow.

"Hi," the boy said. "I'm Nate. I'm new." He said it as if he was proud of it. Not a bit of shyness in his voice. Valiant and triumphant.

"I'm Charlie," Charlie said. "I'm not new."

"Where's everybody else?"

Charlie shrugged. "Probably inside playing Fortnite."

“My dad says video games make us weak. He says they hurt our imaginations, and they don’t prepare us for what’s to come.”

“Annd what’s to come?”

Now Nate shrugged. “Probably an alien invasion or something.”

Ha! Great. Charlie liked this kid already. The mere mention of space made him cool.

“You wanna colonize another planet and build a snow fort?”

“Of course, Soldier.”

And so, the two boys set off to scout for a location and to gather materials. It was Nate’s idea to build the fort into the preexisting mound of snow along the curb, but it was Charlie’s idea to bury the patio table inside it.

“What, why?” Nate asked.

“For support,” Charlie answered. “This way we can climb on top like a lookout and not worry about it collapsing under us.”

“Spoken like a true survivor,” Nate said with a nod of approval. “My dad would like you.”

Charlie wondered if their dads would have been friends or not? Maybe they could’ve had beers together and talked sports?

The two boys started digging a big enough hole to bury the table inside, but stopped. It was difficult work. Much more difficult than they’d expected. Nate said it would have been a drain on their resources, and since Charlie agreed, they left the table on the patio and went back to the tried and true methods of fort-building. Charlie began shaping the outsides of the fort with his gloved hands. He patted and smoothed away the excess snow and drew lines he imagined made it look like it was built out of ice blocks. Nate, in-between showing Charlie dance moves

like “flossing”, lined the top of their fort with sticks to keep potential alien threats at bay. Once finished, they stood back and marveled at their work.

“Nooice,” Nate said.

Charlie smirked. “Yeah. Noice.”

They played Rock-Paper-Scissors to decide who got to hollow out a tunnel inside.

Charlie won. He made the tunnel wide enough to fit through easily, but not so wide an adult could follow. Nate waited on the outside, helping scoop away the excess snow. Charlie didn’t know how much time passed, but after a while, he’d dug as deep as he could dig. He’d expected to find solid ground matted with blades of frozen grass, but instead, he found the concrete road. Strange. He looked back towards the opening, hundreds of feet away, and tried to figure out why this seemingly small finding made him feel so uneasy. It seemed silly, but it also seemed significant.

“What’s wrong?” Nate asked.

“Nothing.”

“Okay.”

Charlie shook free of his thoughts and put his hand on the wall. “Hey,” he said, after an idea occurred. “Toss me a stick.” Nate did so. Charlie used it to poke a hole in the wall to see how close they were to digging all the way through. Turned out, they were pretty close. A beam of light shown in, focusing a nickel-sized spot on the wall like a laser melting its way through.

“You should make a window,” Nate suggested.

Charlie made the hole a bit wider and then peeked through.

“What can you see?”

Across the street, he saw a snowman with a pink scarf, nearly finished but for a hat and a carrot nose. And he saw Emily...

“Ok, ok,” Nate said, pulling at Charlie’s boot. “Let me have a turn.”

“Hold your horses, I’m—”

“Stop it!” Emily shouted.

Charlie perked up at the sound. Nate squeezed in beside him and poked another peephole in the wall to see through. Two teenaged kids had come into view. Both wore what appeared to be hand-me-down clothes that had gone through multiple generations. They stood by Emily’s snowman, circling it like sharks while she tried to ward them off. The taller kid scooped up a bunch of snow and padded it on the snowman’s backside. “Now that’s a big ass.”

The teenagers laughed, then the chubby one said, “Say cheese,” and pretended to hold out a camera.

Instead, the tall kid said, “Gizz,” and pretended to ejaculate on her snowman’s backside.

Emily’s face scrunched up in disgust. “You’re not funny.”

“Well, I think so.”

He was a good two feet taller than her. Even still, she glared up at him, unconcerned. Her face, already red from her freckles, had either reddened more from the cold, or from her anger.

Charlie started backing out of the fort.

“Where ya goin’?” Nate asked.

“We can’t just let them do that to her.”

“Oh, I know,” Nate said, matter-of-factly. “But you can’t jus’ rush over unprepared either.” He smiled, then held up a snowball for Charlie to see.

Seconds later, they were on top the fort making a pile of snowballs as quick as they could.

“I’m not kidding,” Emily said. “I’ll tell.”

“Alright, that’s enough,” Charlie said. “This is it. Now or never.” He looked at his house, seeing if his mom was watching out the window, then vaulted over the top of the fort and slid down. With a fresh coat of snow, the street was completely unmolested. No footprints. No tire tracks. “Toss me one,” he said. “I’ll draw them this way.” Nate did so, and Charlie caught it with ease before darting across.

“Just get away,” Emily shouted.

“Or what?” the chubby kid asked.

In answer, Charlie chucked his snowball. It exploded against the side of the kid’s head in a spray of white powder. Charlie, surprised by his own aim, darted forward and grabbed Emily’s hand. “This way,” he said, tugging her across the street.

“Hey,” the taller teenager shouted. “Get back here, you lil’ shits!”

A snowball careened passed, followed by another and another. Each sunk into the snow around them like comets crashing into the ocean.

“Hurry,” Charlie said, not letting go of her hand. They climbed the fort wall, smacked aside two of the protruding sticks, and dove over just as multiple balls of snow struck. Breathing hard, they pressed their backs against the wall, shielding themselves on either side of Nate.

“I’m Nate,” the boy said, looking at Emily, his grin revealing a missing front tooth.

“I’m Emily.”

They could hear the teenagers approaching, but Nate was ready. He rose up and took position. He slung snowballs with lightning speed, like a military man mounted behind a turret.



The older kids didn't have cover to hide behind. They were sitting ducks. Charlie started slinging snow balls next, followed by Emily. Together, the three of them slung away, a few, to their extreme delight, exploding against the angry teens.

"You lil' shits are gonna get it," the taller kid said, but Charlie doubted it. Neither of the boys wore gloves. At first, they'd used the sleeves of their jackets to toss snowballs, but at some point, they'd started using their bare hands. They appeared to be paying the price for it now. Both squeezed their hands into painful fists at their sides and shivered.

Charlie, Nate and Emily grinned at each other, sensing their victory mere moments away. They'd not only stood up to bullies, they'd survived, unscathed. No casualties.

"Come on, let's get outta here," the taller kid said to the chubby one.

"Ha," Nate said. "Running scared."

"Oh, no," Charlie said, standing straight up, completely exposed. "No, no, no."

The teenagers were charging across the street, straight towards Emily's snowman. Charlie made to go after them, but Nate pulled him back. "It's too late," and it was. The taller kid close-armed the head off the snowman and the fat kid rammed his shoulder into its mid-section as if he were a linebacker tackling the quarterback. The snowman, big-butt and all, crumbled apart and spread across the ground. The two older kids laughed and fist-bumped. The taller one, briefly walking backwards, flipped both middle fingers up. "Next time," he said, slashing his throat with a finger, "you're dead."

"Man," Nate said. "That guy sure hate's losin'."

"It's us that lost," Charlie answered, looking at Emily. "Sorry about your snowman."

She brushed strands of iced hair from her face. "It's okay. I can build another."

"Still."

A moment of silence passed as neither of them seemed to know what to say. It was Nate who spoke first. “Well, guess it’s time for me to go.” He pointed across the street where a woman stood on her porch flagging them down. “That’s my mom.”

“Ok, well, see you in school tomorrow,” Charlie said, hoping they’d share a class.

“Unless it keeps snowing,” Emily added. She stuck her tongue out to catch a flake on it. “It was nice meeting you, though.”

“Ditto,” Nate said. “Or is it tritto?” He shrugged. “To be continued, I guess.”

Charlie and Emily watched him go. He ran across the road without so much as looking for oncoming traffic, and then got chastised by his mom for doing so.

“Thank you,” Emily said.

Charlie smiled, then looked down. She was often teased for having more freckles than face, but he liked her freckles. Thought they made her more original and not just another copycat kid.

“Really, thank you.”

Charlie shrugged, as if to say, Don’t mention it.

She leaned over then and planted her cold lips on his colder cheek. He froze, letting her do it. When she pulled away, his cheeks blushed.

“Maybe you can sit with me on the bus tomorrow?” she said. “Or, whenever we have school again.”

“Um. Okay.” He wanted to play it cool, but half his mouth curved into a giddy smile. “I mean. Yeah, sure.”

They locked eyes for a split second before she vaulted over the side of the fort and slid down to the road like she’d done it a thousand times. He watched her through the increasing grey

haze. She grabbed her pink scarf from the crumpled mound of snow that was once her snowman, shouted, “Thanks again,” over her shoulder and then disappeared into her house.

Still blushing, he climbed down and took shelter inside the fort. He made his way all the way to the back where he’d knocked out the window. He looked at her house once, wanting to see if she was peeking out her window. She wasn’t. But that was okay. He didn’t need to worry anymore about whether she liked him or not. After all, she’d kissed him. She’d. Kissed. Him. He laid on his back and carved E-M-I-L-Y into the ceiling, then rested there looking at her name. She’d kissed him.

It was calm. He heard the wind whistling outside his fort, but not much else. Not until the ground beneath him began to vibrate, slight at first, but enough to get his attention. Unsure what was happening, he sat up and looked about the best he could but neither vantage point offered much to see. The vibration became a rumble. Snow sprinkled from the ceiling of his fort. A scraping sound, like a monstrous shovel crunching snow, came from— Oh, no. He tried to scramble towards the exit, but the fort closed in around him. He hadn’t time to scream. Darkness gobbled him up. He felt himself ripped away, tossed about.

...Torn apart.

Charlie's body was scooped aside and buried somewhere in the mounds of snow lining the curb. No one saw. The plow truck pressed on, leaving a long streak of red to dye the road behind it. For a moment, the warm blood settled into the snow like syrup on a snow cone. But then the winds blew harder. Drifts of snow lifted into the air, then fell. Within minutes, winter covered it all up, hiding the ugliness beneath with a white blanket.