

Snow Day

Today was the second snow day in a row. Brady, a sixth grader, had worn his pajamas inside out the night before in hopes that the forecast would come true. It did. Brady woke up in an empty house and found a note downstairs. “Dad and I are at work. There is bologna and cheese in the fridge for lunch. I’ll be back around 3. Stay warm.” The note was scribbled in his mom’s handwriting and signed with a cartoonish heart. Brady knew what “stay warm” meant. It was the shorthand, loving way to say: I know it’s a snow day, and you want to play outside, but you know that without me and dad being home and your brother at Wrightsville Juvenile Detention, well, it’s just not safe. Not safe and not wise she would tell him each night when he asked, But mom! I am the only kid in class that doesn’t 'actually' get a snow day. Not safe and not wise honey, she would say. Love you Brady, but without any adults, it’s just smart to stay inside. She would always seal this instruction with a kiss on the forehead.

He grabbed a pop tart from the pantry and plopped down on the couch. Spy Lens was on T.V. He saw Jon Kipley fire his grappling hook and scale a Budapest hotel. He watched him bust into the crime boss’ lair and deliver heroic lines like, “Not today, Rooney Ramirez” or “Your time for terror has come to an end.” Brady always admired the way Jon Kipley delivered these lines, like saying I am in control here, you will listen to me now. Brady adored Jon Kipley and remembered when he would go on his own spy missions’ with Troy, his older brother.

Damn it, Troy. (He only thought curse words when he was alone). Troy was five years older than Brady and would always play Jon Kipley’s character when they went on missions. Brady would sometimes play his sidekick or sometimes the thwarted villain or sometimes the sidekick

who turned into the thwarted villain. But those days were over, the times of playing Spy Lens in the backyard were over. Troy had been busted with alcohol and pot in his locker the first week of his sophomore year, thus the juvenile detention center. Brady felt guilt tense in his shoulders. He remembered when he got into a fight with Troy and had told mom and dad about the cigarettes in Troy's room. Man did Troy hate him after that. Called him a no-good rat. Brady thought, I guess I was a little rat? Did that cause expulsion? Like did me telling our parents about the cigarettes cause him to rebel even more? Did I cause Troy's rebellion? And Troy's Rebellion caused Mom and Dad's to fight so much, so logically had I caused Mom and Dad's fighting?

Brady turned off the T.V., walked back to the kitchen and threw the half-eaten pop tart into the garbage. Troy just got mixed up with some wrong friends and made a mistake! We all make mistakes, some, just more so. Troy remembered when Preston announced in the lunch room that Troy had been expelled. Preston's older sister had been in Troy's grade and must have told Preston. For a few days, Troy's expulsion was the talk of the class. Brady remembered feeling the guilt when Preston mentioned Troy's name. Each time Troy's expulsion came up Brady would felt like he had to say something. Like there was some obligation or duty to defend Troy's honor Brady never did speak up though. Instead, he would move his mashed potatoes around on his tray. Brady thought, we all made some mistakes, gosh Preston, such an ass he thought, isn't his dad the one that had gotten caught with drugs? Who gave Preston the right to judge over people's lives? People make mistakes! Even I bend the rules a bit; like sometimes I write down spelling words on my arm before spelling tests to help me cheat. But that wasn't like selling drugs! I just needed an A on a test, plus I never got caught; If only Troy hadn't got caught.

The doorbell rang. Brady jumped off the counter a little frightened and went to open the door.

The chill gripped his shirt and produced goose bumps across his arms. The air smelled pure. It was this cold cleanliness that stung while refreshing his lungs.

“Hey, Brady!” Samantha said

She was wearing ear muffs and a big scarf so that only her eyes and red, crusty nose peered out into the air. Brady thought, Samantha! What is she doing here? I mean we were science fair partners in fifth grade. And I consider her a friend, well, hopefully, more than that one day. But doesn't she have someplace else to be? Wow, she is hot. Brady had a strange feeling about it. He was immediately excited when he saw her, like Wowza! Brady always had a kind of crush on Samantha. He liked the way she crewed her pencil in class. How she would ask him a question about what to do on the science fair project and instead of refuting his inferior idea she would listen intently. Maybe she wasn't hot per se, she was still kind of pudgy and had specks of prepubescence acne but she cared, and that was what Brady appreciated.

“Samantha?”

Brady parted the door and leaned half out.

“Wanna hang out?” Samantha said.

“With you?” Brady's brows furrowed

“Of course! It's a snow day! And all the other kids are playing video games. You should come hang out!” She insisted.

Brady interjected, “I would love to, but can't.”

Was that lame? Why did I say that? Of course, I should stay inside and obey mom. But, wasn't it a bit unreasonable to have me stay in all day? I mean I could play outside for a bit and be back in long before the time she got back. What about mom's note? He remembered that time when all the kids had gotten these special shoes for Christmas, and he didn't. Then in January, he

came home upset after a rough day of school to find a pair of these special shoes in his favorite blue color pattern. He thought about his mom and how she was so generous that day and most days. But just this once? She wouldn't know? And it's Samantha! He couldn't just say no!

“Oh come on Brady!” Samantha said.

Brady started to shift his weight back into the warmth of the house. “I don't know,” he said.

“Come on! We will have fun!” She grabbed his hand and was urging him outside.

“Alright, alright, Give me a second.”

Brady hurried inside grabbed his coat from the rack and rushed out to join Samantha on the front lawn. The yard was frosted white with fresh powdery snow. Brady slogged through, each step drudging a path in the 2-inch layer. It was early December and the some of the houses in the neighborhood were already decorated for Christmas. Across from Brady's house was the Smith's house. In their yard was one of those Santa Clause blowup figures. It was half deflated and swayed to and fro in the subtle gusts. Next to the Smiths were the Myrtles whose yard had candy canes lining the driveway and unlit lights coiled around the big oak tree in their front yard. Brady's house was not decorated for Christmas. It used to be, every year dazzling with cheap L.E.D. reds and greens scattered across every shrub and tree. With those icicle lights dangling from the edges of the roof and of course mom's wooden nativity set with a single spotlight shining on baby Jesus. This December, no baby Jesus, no Icicle lights, no cheap L.E.D.s. There was a bit of garland wrapped around the mailbox that mom had added, and a candle in Brady's window facing the road. A candle he had bought with his own money.

“What now?” Brady said to Samantha.

“Maybe we could build a snowman?” Samantha crouched in the snow and started to gather a little pile.

Brady shrugged his shoulders and crouched down to gather his pile.

He felt silly, being a sixth and half grader making a snowman. He could have suggested finding some hill to sled down, Maybe the other kids are still sledding he thought, and with Samantha, he would surely be invited. Maybe he wouldn't be allowed to sled per say, but at least watching was cooler than building a snowman! He remembered the snow days with Troy when they would sled together, on their own hill, sure it wasn't as big as the one at the front of the neighborhood, but they got to sled as much as they wanted! And if they got tired of sledding, well there was countless adventures they could go on. Troy being Jon Kipley and Brady being whomever Troy wanted.

At least I am outside, he thought, and well with Samantha's grandmother in the hospital, and her dog had died just three weeks ago he could let her pick the activity. He remembered her crying at recess and the teacher telling the other kids to give her space. Maybe he could be there for her? Like, help take her mind off her dead dog and her dying grandmother? That's what science fair partners are for, he decided.

Brady and Samantha each started on their piles working diligently like adults. They didn't say anything, just bore the chill and revealed the grass with each clump of snow removed. Brady was starting to sweat; he was working much harder than he would have if alone. He wanted his snowman piece to be significant. They didn't even delegate which section they were working on and as Brady's clump gained in mass so did Samantha's.

"What do you think about Mrs. Lanky's assigning that book to read over Christmas break?" Brady said. He hated Mrs. Lanky and her yellow sweaters that always smelled. Mrs. Lanky was most feared middle school teacher. Once she had made this really shy girl in Brady's class recite a Shakespeare sonnet in front of the everyone because she was tardy. The girl started shaking

halfway through and ran to the bathroom crying. Brady hated that. He hated Mrs. Lankey for it and wanted Samantha to hate her too.

“Yeah, she is the worst! Assigning us a book to read over break! Like what teacher does that?” Samantha said.

“I know right!” Brady exclaimed.

“What are you doing for break Samantha?”

“Our family is going to visit our grandma. She’s not doing too well, and my mom says this might be our last Christmas with her.” Samantha looked down at the snow and continued packing a large mass.

“Sorry Samantha,” Brady said and meant it. “This will be the first Christmas without Troy.”

Brady remembered last year’s Christmas when Troy had gotten him a bb gun. He used that gun all the time. He would march out into the woods and pretend to be a Jon Kipley and shoot at trees and cans if he found them. He would sometimes go with Troy, and they would have competitions to see who was the truest shot.

“I wish I could get rid of my brother for a Christmas. He teases me and only hangs out with his high school friends. Plus, he always smells.” Samantha said.

Brady said, “Yeah brothers aren’t always the best.”

Samantha didn’t respond she just nodded her head and ball up a clump of snow.

Brady looked back down at the now basketball size cluster of snow.

“Snowball fight!!” Samantha yelled.

Samantha had thrown a snowball at Brady throwing him onto his back. Icy residue sprayed across his check. He looked at the sky, stunned. Its soft gray splashed with cirrus brush strokes

was almost serene, and emanating quietness. He saw two crows gliding within the canvas. He felt the icy softness across his back and the snow that had gotten into his boots when he fell back.

Samantha cackled “I-I got you so good!” She doubled over pointing at Brady

Brady balled up a bit of snow in his right hand sat up and hurled it her direction. The snowball barely grazed her ankles.

“Is that the best you got?” Samantha was already balling up another piece of ammunition as Brady was getting to his feet.

She fired another snowball at Brady which he dodged barely.

“Oh, it’s on now!” He said while reaching for another snowball.

Samantha turned and ran across the yard, “You can’t get me!”

Brady, snowball in hand, gave chase awkwardly slugging through the grass cover snow.

Samantha was crossing the garland mailbox and stepping out into the street when Brady threw.

Brady saw a Samantha lose her balance and then heard her cry out as her head smacked into the pavement.

Samantha in attempted to dodge the snowball had stepped onto a black patch of ice on the edge of the street. A soft stream of blood was flowing into the gutter and discoloring the already discolored salty grey sludge.

“Shit!” Brady said allowed. Did I do that? What if mom finds out? What if Samantha’s parents find out? What if they know it was me? Do kids that hurt other kids with snowball go to Jail? To Wrightsville Juvenile detention center? Did I say ‘shit’ out loud?

Brady stood, frozen.

Samantha writhed on the pavement letting out faint whimpers while she clutched the back of her head. Her body seemed to shrink as she curled in on herself. She rolled to face Brady.

“Help, please it hurts.” She said with a cracked whine.

Shoot! Need to get help! I messed up real bad! I need to fix this! Need to get help! Is Samantha going to be okay? Will she ever forgive him? Brady thought spastically and fearfully.

“What are you doing! Help! It hurts like really bad!” Samantha called out again this time fainter than before yet more desperate.

Brady surveyed the neighborhood. The street was empty, the houses where unlit and nothing but snow and an occasional decoration covered the yards. He thought, what would Troy do? In this crisis! What could I do! Run inside? Use the house phone? Nope, can't do that! The house phone hasn't been working since September when Mom said it was an unnecessary bill. Maybe grab a towel? You know try to stop the bleeding and then walk Samantha back to her house? Then what, say, “Hello Samantha's parents, I umm almost killed your daughter, here ya got have a nice day.” NO! Couldn't do that, it wasn't his fault. Just an accident. It was just a mistake; I mean how could he have known that there would be black ice there and that the snowball would hit her the same instance she stepped on the aforementioned black ice? But if he hadn't thrown the snowball would they still be playing together? Building a friendship now that in high school would turn into love and then to marriage and then to their kids that would have their wholesome snowball fights? Had he just messed all that up? By not being careful? By not following mom's note?

Wait, the street wasn't empty. At the top of the hill in the front of the neighborhood was mail truck. It was dropping off a package on the right side of the street about six houses down. Probably some early Christmas gift. Brady saw the driver get out of the vehicle and march toward the door with the brown parcel tucked under his arm.

“Hang in there, Samantha, I’m getting help!” Brady bolted from the lawn across the street to the sidewalk than to the other yard than to the next and the next. Lifting his knees in uncooperative strides. He rushed into the wind, feeling the biting cold on his nose, eyes, and ears. He squinted to see the man leaving the package on the doorstep and walking head down back to his truck. He was three house away, then two, then one. The mailman looked up.

Is this what heroes feel like? Like they can run faster than cars? Like their courage will keep them warm even in the cold? Like they have some superpower only tapped by a few brave souls? Did heroes have to fix the mess they got themselves into? No probably not, he thought. However, there was still this feeling of gallantry in his bones as he called out to the mailman.

“Sir! Sir! Can you help me! I mean this girl, in the gutter! Her head hurts!” Brady tried to calm his heart rate by thinking of Jon Kipley in Spy Lens. He wouldn’t be nervous, would he? No, he would take charge of the situation own up to it and save the girl. That is what Troy would do, well used to do, perhaps is going to do once more after his behavior is corrected? Maybe I can be like the Jon Kipley/Troy that does the right thing? The one that does the right thing; which is first to calm yourself.

He took a breath.

Lead him to her; he’s an adult he can help her. She won’t die?! She will be just fine. And maybe, since I saved her mom will forgive the whole disregarding the note thing. Lead him to Samantha, got it. I can and I will.

“What? Where is the girl?” The mailman looked like a scarecrow, draped in blue and white, his weathered face peering at Brady.

“Come on!” Brady grabbed the sleeve of the mailman’s jacket and yanked him in the right direction. They scrambled together over the snow, mail truck still humming behind them.

Samantha was still lying there when they arrived she had stopped crying and was instead shivering against the pavement. More blood had accumulated on that gray-sludge snow in the gutter.

“Jesus,” said the mailman.

“I got help Samantha, it will okay,” Brady said.

He reached down and put his coat on her and rubbed her back. As if to say, sorry for all this mess, I like you and want to be friends still. But it was more human than that, it was if to say, I bet that fall hurt, and I would hate to be where you're at, but don't worry it will be okay.

“Yes, we have an emergency. On Peterson lane. A girl fell, hit her head good.” The mailman was talking to 911 while Brady continued comforting Samantha.

“Brady, thanks,” Samantha said into the pavement her body still shivering under her coat and his.

Five minutes later an ambulance arrived. It's red and blue lights were blinking against the gray sky. The paramedics carried Samantha into the vehicle and Brady watched it drive away.

The mailman turned to Brady and said, “Good thinking kid, you did a good job.”

Brady smiled and put his hands in his pockets. “Thanks, sir,” Brady said.

With the ambulance sirens in the background, Brady capered back into his house and made himself a bologna and cheese sandwich. He turned on the T.V. to watch *Spylens* and thought about how proud Troy would be of him. Troy would say “Great job Brady. You handled yourself there, proud to have such a brother as heroic as you.” Brady smiled.

At three, Brady's mom came through the front door.

“Brady, you were not outside, were you? I saw two piles of snow in the front yard?” Brady's mom said.

Brady had forgotten about violating of his mom's note.

Brady's head was hung low, and he peered behind the couch avoiding his mom's eyes.

"Brady, you know what I have told you about not going outside when I am not home. Not safe and not wise." She said.

Her lips pursed, and she had her hand cocked against her hip and another carrying a manila folder from work.

"Samantha came over! She begged me to go outside! I didn't have a choice, and well then Samantha got hurt. She hit her head, and well I ran and got help. She's fine now, and the ambulance came. But mom! If it weren't for me, she wouldn't have been helped!" Brady said. He was animated and practically standing on the couch. His arms were flailing with each statement of defense.

"My God, Brady! An ambulance came? Came here? Is she okay?" Brady's mom said.

"Yes mam, they came, she's okay. She hit her head, but she's going to be okay the ambulance people promised me." Brady said.

"Brady, this is exactly why I tell you to stay in. It's just not safe son. What if that was you, Brady? Or what if it was worse and you couldn't get help for her? I am glad she's okay but Brady, you can't disobey me like that again."

Brady's mom moved closer to the couch, and Brady shrunk down again.

Brady said, "Yeah," and looked down at his wet pant cuffs.

"Brady I can't just let you off the hook like this, I don't want you ending up like your brother. No T.V for the next week. Go up to your room until dad gets here, I am going to call Samantha's parents and make sure everything is all right."

"Yes mam," Brady replied.

Brady burned with anger as he stormed up the stairs. Turn out like Troy? What's so bad about Troy? He just made a mistake! And regardless of his mistake, Troy was the best possible brother ever, he thought.

Brady made it to his room, sat on his bed and watched out the window as more flurries came down onto the decapitated Santa.

One week later it was Saturday, December 21st, Brady was watching Spylens on the couch and both his parents were at work. He was about to start his third episode when the doorbell rang. Brady less scared than before made his way to the peephole and saw the mailman on the front porch. Brady opened the door. It was the same scarecrow looking mailman from the snow day. He greeted Brady with a smile and said he had a package for a Brady Thompson. Brady was a little surprised but took the box and thanked the mailman. Brady went back inside and sat down. Scribbled on the top left corner in curly handwriting was the Rollins Family. Brady tore open the box and inside found his coat. Included was a Christmas card. It had an evergreen tree on its cover and inside was a twenty-dollar bill and a note from Samantha's family. It read:

Brady,

Thank you for getting help for Samantha when she fell. Your actions were courageous, and we could only help but return the favor. Merry Christmas.

At the bottom of the card were signatures from Samantha's mom, Samantha, who had written: thanks again, Brady!