
SNOW PATROL

by

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Here's what I think happened. Sister Mary Frances faced the windows of her second story classroom, retreating from the twenty third-graders deprived of their lunch-hour recess because of the storm. After eating, those who hadn't gone home for lunch were herded back to their classroom and allowed to color or read or explore the few creative toys kept for exactly this contingency. But the irritating babel spawned by restrained youth confined to a small classroom tested the Sister's nerves. An only child of older parents, she could never get used to the piercing voices, constant tittering, and occasional screeches of her charges. "They're like caged animals at the Doorly Zoo."

Sister Mary Frances watched the thick flakes swirl from the sky on the back of an emphatic Great Plains wind, and wondered if the Principal might consider sending the children home, sparing her from an afternoon of restless Munchkins. Most lived within a few blocks and could make it safely before the drifts deepened. Of course, she sighed, there was that issue of working mothers, who must be notified before a child could be released. She shook her head. "Always some complication."

Sister's gaze wandered out to the chain link fence, barely a shadow defining the southern edge of the schoolyard. Sliding back over the abandoned playground, the fresh, unblemished snow impressed her as virginal and pure, like the soul of a newly baptized infant. "If only they remained that way."

Closer in, at about the middle of the playground, Sister discerned the gray outline of the raised grotto to Saint Adelbert. Its four-foot concrete retaining walls were completely drifted over, and the six foot statue atop the mound looked ghostly amidst the white curtain falling around it. "What the ... oh no!"

Sister leaned close to the glass to gain a better view, steaming it with her humid breath. Turning to Sister Mary Anne, her young novice, she announced, "There are boys on the grotto, jumping into the snow."

"Ours?"

"I'm not sure. I'll bring them in." Sister Mary Frances almost dashed to the door, anxious to be free from the clamor of the room. "Watch the children."

Here's what I know happened. Kenny and Larry, among the many children living close to the elementary school, walked the two blocks to their homes every day for lunch. On this day, as on every other stormy winter's day, they buttoned up tight in their dark parkas, wore stocking

caps under the attached hoods, and buckled on their rubber snow boots, carefully tucking their pant legs inside. The woolen scarves covering their faces, and the large, paddle-like mittens, completed the impression of a pair of miniature Eskimos.

As typical eight-year-old boys, the weather seemed more a game than a hindrance; at least on their short trek back to school. In fact, they enjoyed themselves as they kicked through the drifts and plopped down on the covered lawns to make snow angels.

The pair stopped at the outer fence. "Nobody's here." Larry pulled his scarf down to see better.

"They're inside," Kenny directed a mitten across the vast white plane toward the yellow lights radiating through the windows of the drab three story brick school. They could make out the heads of their classmates busily playing games. The warmth appealed to the two like flame bound moths.

"Come on, this way." Larry pushed on toward the opening in the fence. Kenny followed.

Once inside they plunged through knee deep snow, perhaps imagining they were plows clearing the streets.

"Neat!" Kenny shouted. "The grotto's covered."

"Let's go." Larry veered off toward the back of the mound.

"Wait!" Kenny plunged after him. "The stairs are drifted over."

"We can climb up here." Larry pointed to the earthen slope up the back side, blown clean by the steady wind.

So up they went, slipping and sliding and giggling all the way. Once on top they passed the statue and stepped tentatively to the front. The four foot wall was completely drifted over.

"Can't see the stairs," Kenny pointed to the tubular metal railing poking up from its white encasement.

"Who needs stairs," Larry laughed, jumping off and sinking almost to his shoulders.

"Come on," he shouted, bulling his way to shallow snow, then turning to watch Kenny jump.

Wanting a fresh drift, Kenny ran to the far side of the stairs and leapt over the edge like a paratrooper abandoning a plane. Landing butt first, he sank into powder. Larry waded in to help him to his feet. Laughing and brushing snow from their coats and pants, the two quickly pushed their way to the back of the grotto for a second jump. Up they climbed, and over they went, laughing all the way. As they freed themselves an apparition approached.

Sister Mary Frances blew through the main entrance onto the level expanse of heavenly white, her crisp black habit standing in sharp contrast. As Kenny watched her approach it appeared she glided above the drifts, as if she were walking on water.

"What do you boys think you're doing?"

"Jumping in the snow," Kenny explained innocently.

"You know you are not to play on the grotto."

"But ... there's snow." Larry waved toward the drifts.

"Why would snow matter?" Sister Mary Frances grabbed Larry by the sleeve. "Come

with me. You boys will explain yourselves to the Principal.”

“Why?” Kenny whined, following in the Sister’s wake. “We’re only playing.”

“Recess was moved inside,” Sister Mary Frances assured them.

“We didn’t know that,” Larry shot back.

“Don’t play dumb with me, young man. You know better.” The Sister of Mercy pulled open the heavy front door, then pointed to the wide steps inside. “Sit there. Take off your boots and wet clothes. Don’t move until I come to get you.”

The boys, not noted as trouble makers, were almost in tears as they pulled off their mittens, unbuttoned their coats, and unsnapped their rubbers. They sat on the bottom step watching snow melt off their boots into small dirty puddles on the worn linoleum.

The clack of heavy heels sent their stomachs into their throats. Sister Mary Frances led them down a dingy hall to the Principal’s office. Obviously contrite, the boys stood sad faced, looking at the floor. The Principal gave them a stern lecture about the hazards of jumping from the grotto, the inappropriate nature of covering themselves in snow on a school day, and generally behaving like a couple of wild animals.

Neither Kenny nor Larry argued. They instinctively knew to hold their tongues, even though they steamed inside at this overreaction to unfair rules. After agreeing to never do it again, Sister Mary Frances marched the duo back to their classroom, just in time for the afternoon’s first lesson.

Sister Mary Anne quieted the residual commotion by announcing a spelling quiz.

“Their exaggerated groans and forced sighs are almost as bad as their squeals,” Sister Mary Frances thought as she peered through the frosty glass. The wind had subsided, allowing the large flakes to float through her awareness. She began counting them like so many white rosary beads, but quickly realized the folly in that endeavor. The gray outline of the statue of Saint Adelbert caught her eye. She checked it over to make sure there were no more jumpers. Satisfied that the grotto was secure, she reflected upon her earlier rescue, welcoming a moment of pride. “Two more restless souls returned to the straight path.”

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