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### **"That Snow Joke"**

The clock radio woke Roger Prole at precisely six a.m. As he stirred, he caught the sounds of several radio stations drifting in and out, as if he were on a train passing through a variety of stations. On one, he heard an old Beatles tune; on another, a female voice that sounded like a smoke alarm; on a third, a hip-hop track that sounded to Roger like someone berating a whistling tea kettle as it rolled down a flight of stairs. And on one station, he heard something about six inches of snow having fallen overnight.

After this last audio snippet penetrated the murk that surrounded his consciousness, he leapt out of bed and tore open the curtains of his bedroom: yes, in the glare of the streetlight, he could see through the predawn darkness that there was indeed a thick layer on the ground—and, more specifically, on his driveway.

He had to be at work in Albany—a 30-minute drive when the weather is good—by 8:30 lest old Martin Knett, his boss, would yell at him at best and dock his pay at worst, depending on the foulness of Martin's mood, which was

usually a consistent level of unpleasant. If Roger had to dig out...well, he would be in something quite deep, and it wasn't snow.

He threw on a pair of old jeans and a sweatshirt, then bundled into his shoveling parka and related accoutrements, lurching out the front door like a cross between Nanook of the North and a Yeti. There were indeed six inches of snow on the driveway—light, fluffy snow, so that wouldn't be that big a problem. It was the four-foot-high windroll at the end of the driveway, courtesy of the city's ever-efficient street plowing, that would be the hell of it.

He looked up and down the street. He lived close to the heart of town, but on a side street that was two blocks from a main-ish drag. The neighborhood was somewhere between faintly urban and remotely suburban. Old single-family detached houses—many of which dated from the 19th century or the early 20th century at the latest—lined the street. He poked his head outside his hedgerow—the sidewalk was only a memory at this point, especially as this was the second such storm in as many weeks. Technically, he was supposed to shovel the sidewalk that ran in front of his property—but that was not going to happen any time soon.

Some of his neighbors were just starting to emerge from their homes and begin their own digging out processes. The

early morning silence was soon shattered by the powering up of a half dozen snowblowers.

He took a deep breath, grasped his trusty shovel, and silently cursed himself for having once stubbornly resisted buying a snowblower. ("I'm only 49," he kept saying, "surely I'm not too old and decrepit—yet—to shovel my own driveway by hand. Besides, it helps me assuage my guilt over having let my gym membership lapse." OK, so it had lapsed seven years earlier. That didn't detract from his point, he insisted.) (The truth was, it should probably be pointed out, that Roger had looked at snowblowers in Home depot but, as was the case with most things he tried to buy in Home Depot, he became overwhelmed by the sheer number of choices and finally ran screaming from the store, ran home, and vigorously embraced his snow shovel.)

It took just over an hour to clear the whole driveway—or at least enough to get his car out which, since it wasn't a very big driveway, was, well, the whole driveway. He had worked up quite a sweat which, as he stood catching his breath, started to freeze, and he went into take a hot shower before he ended up encased in a block of ice.

He dressed, performed the remainder of his morning ablutions, and was ready to head out by 7:45—it would be cutting it close, but if traffic wasn't too bad (though the

odds of that were pretty slim) he might have a chance of not incurring the wrath of Martin.

He put on his coat, grabbed his keys, and exited the front door. As he walked down the stoop-

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled.

At the end of the driveway was another four-foot-high wall of plow-deposited snow.

"It's not even snowing anymore!" he shouted to no one in particular.

He muttered a series of lurid profanities, started his car and, as it warmed up, began the process of shoveling the driveway. Again.

He made as quick work of it as he could, which still took 25 minutes. Now he was really late, and sweaty again. he didn't have time to shower again, so he tossed an extra Mennen Speed Stick in his glove compartment and hit the road.

Traffic was, as traffic inevitably is on I-87, utter hell, the result of slick roads, blowing snow, and drivers in every bit a frenzied, careless hurry as he was. Between exit 13 and exit 9 he passed a half dozen two-or-more-car accidents, a few SUVs overturned in the median, the drivers apparently not realizing that "four-wheel *drive*" doesn't also mean "four-wheel *stop*"), and other assorted car-nage.

He arrived at work 35 minutes late, and Martin was not even remotely sympathetic. He would have to be in an hour earlier the next day—and Roger had better hope the weather cooperated.

As for the rest of the day, it can be summed up in, essentially, a PowerPoint slide:

### **Roger's Day at Work**

- Shared snow stories with coworkers
  - How much did *you* get?
  - How long did it take *you* to dig out?
  - How bad was *your* commute?
  - Why the hell don't you get a snowblower?
- Cast aspersions on the abilities of local weathermen
  - They have been wrong all winter so far
  - Gee, I wish *I* had a job where I could be wrong constantly and not get fired
  - They say sunny and warmer for the weekend
    - If you can believe them

After a long day, Roger began the unpleasant task of driving home. As it turned out, the commute was only slightly more unpleasant than it usually was. But the real unpleasantness was waiting for Roger when he got home.

"Aw come on! This is not fair!" he shouted, as he topped outside his driveway, unable to park thanks to *another* five-foot windroll.

"Where the hell did this come from? Is this guy importing it from Canada?"

He glanced up and down the street; no one else seemed to have any snow deposited in *their* driveways. Roger scowled as he parked his car, trudged through the wall of snow, and grabbed his shovel. A half hour later, he was done. He pulled the car in the driveway and went inside.

An hour later, after a quick dinner was cooked and consumed, he realized it was garbage night, so he went out to take his trash to the curb. As he walked out the front door, he gaped speechlessly at the driveway.

Yes: yet *another* four-foot windroll.

"You have *got* to be kidding me!" he finally was able to say.

He sighed deeply, and thought about whether he actually had the physical strength to shovel the driveway for the fourth time that day. Well, he reasoned; he had to be at work an hour earlier the next day, so it was either now or at five a.m. the next morning. There was no more snow on the street by any stretch of the imagination, so this was likely it. He grabbed his shovel and set to work.

As he was halfway through removing the latest windroll, he heard a rumbling coming up the street behind him. "Christ!" he shrieked. "Not again! This is beyond ridiculous!" He paused, and stared straight ahead, gritting his teeth, waiting to pivot around and give the plow driver a piece of his mind. Finally, he turned around, and the large, yellow plow was bearing down on him. What he didn't expect was to see it pushing along a 25-foot-high tsunami of snow. Before he could react, the wave was upon him. He was just able to catch a glimpse of the driver, a malevolent smile upon his face. Roger thought the driver looked vaguely familiar, but suddenly, for an instant, just before the snow hit him, he could have sworn he saw the driver's face turn into a grinning skull.

The force of the snow swept him backward off his feet, and he tumbled head over heels several times as he was completely enveloped in violent cold darkness. He very quickly had no idea which way was up, and the air seemed to be running out rapidly. He had always heard that at times like this that your life flashes before your eyes. And yet, the one event that *did* flash before his eyes was an argument he had with his neighbor five years earlier. It was a typical snowy-post-blizzard morning. He was running late for work and was dusting off his car when his neighbor

trudged through the snow where, purportedly the sidewalk was, and accosted Roger in his driveway. The neighbor has an older man, probably in his 70s.

"You're supposed to shovel the sidewalk along your property," said the neighbor.

"I am?" Roger asked. He had only lived there a short time. "Says who?"

"The city."

"Well, if they give me a ticket or whatever I'll do it. I don't have time right now."

The neighbor frowned. "It's also a courtesy to others in the neighborhood."

"Oh." Roger shrugged. "If I have time tonight, I'll take care of it."

The neighbor muttered something under his breath, and stalked off. That was the last Roger ever saw of him and, since the city never said—or charged—anything, Roger pretty much ignored the sidewalk for all the years he had lived there.

Why he was remembering this minor incident as he lay suffocating in a huge mound of snow was perplexing to him. But then, in the snow before his eyes, he saw a vision, as if a portable TV set had been buried along with him. The screen flickered to life; it was the street outside his

house, on another cold, snowy and icy morning. He could tell from the small image that it was the day after an ice storm had hit; he remembered it: the power had gone out for several hours. The power had returned just in time for him to watch a hotly contested football game he had been looking forward to all week. On the screen, he saw the aftermath of the storm, everything encased in a thin sheet of ice, as if the world had been laminated. A light snow was falling. He saw the neighbor walking along the sidewalk in front of his house, the snow wasn't very deep, but it was thin enough to conceal a sheet of ice. Roger watched as the man slipped. His feet shot out from under him, and he flopped over backward, the back of his head smashing into the sidewalk with a sickening crack. The man lay there; the scene on the pseudo-TV sped up and an ambulance arrived and, in fast motion, paramedics loaded the man onto a stretcher and pulled away. The last scene that appeared was that of a cemetery.

What was he watching? "Did the old guy die?" Roger asked himself. "Is that why I never saw him again? I thought he just moved away."

The pseudo-TV vanished and Roger suddenly felt intense heat. The snow around him melted rapidly, and Roger tumbled onto his back onto the driveway, which was now completely

clear of snow. He lifted his head slightly, and saw the snow plow parked in the street. The driver sauntered over to where Roger lay. Roger suddenly knew why the driver had seemed so familiar: it was the old neighbor. A *frisson* of terror shot down his spine.

"I...I thought you were dead," he stammered.

The plow driver glowered down at Roger.

"I am. Thanks to you. Or, I should say, thanks to your negligence."

"So...are you...are you a ghost?"

"Something like that. Enough of your damn questions. By all rights, I should finish you off. I'm allowed, you know. But, well, that wouldn't be neighborly." At that point, his sour mien burst into a smile that was even more horrific than the frown. Indeed, he looked almost identical to a grinning skull.

"All I'll say is this. Stop being a selfish prick and try to have some consideration for your neighbors. 'Cause I'll be watching."

And with that, he climbed back in his plow and immediately vanished. Roger lay on his back, unmoving. He thought for a moment, then immediately got to his feet, grabbed his shovel, and cleared off the sidewalk in front of his house—and down the rest of the block, as well. He

emptied two containers of ice melter, ensuring that no one else was likely to slip. And for the rest of the winter, and every winter until Roger retired and relocated to Fort Lauderdale, no sidewalk in town was as snow- and ice-free as that in front of Roger's house, even if it meant he would be late for work.

The snow plow driver, meanwhile, addressed a crowd of his fellow spectres in the local afterlife bar. "Funny how you have to put the fear of death into some people to get them to act like sensible human beings."

"Pretty heavy-handed, Earl."

He shrugged. "Whatever it takes, I guess."