

Snowball

Helena, Montana, January 23, 2033.

It's funny how very small things can snowball into absolutely cataclysmic events. An old adage goes: 'A butterfly beating its wings in China can cause a storm in America'. Such was the case of Dale Wellington's rushed breakfast on an early winter morning, in those precious few minutes between getting up and getting to the bus stop for school.

Dale was in his first year at Helena High, in Montana. He was your general student, managing a seventy-four average. He had a normal teen life, normal teen issues. He would lead an ordinary, normal life, too. The fact that this morning he was unwillingly changing the fate of the planet was the furthest thing from his mind.

This particular incident involved a jar of Smucker's Strawberry Jam. Dale was trying to put on his winter jacket, load his bookbag up and whip up a half-assed breakfast before the bus left him behind. His breakfast (which he would eat on the bus, of course) was your basic PB&J, but he had encountered a problem. The jar was almost empty, he wanted the jam, and the bus would be there in about two minutes. Dale wasn't the best problem solver, and his solution was one concocted by a sleep deprived mind: he held the near-empty jar upside down over the bread he had laid out on the counter and gave a mighty jerk. The remaining jam exploded onto the bread and all over the counter. Muttering curses, Dale slapped the jam soaked slice to the peanut butter slice and did his best at cleaning up the counter in three seconds or less. His watch told him thirty seconds left.

Dale was out the door and sprinting, clutching his sandwich in one hand and the strap of his bookbag in the other.

Charlotte Deary shivered at the bus stop among a dozen or so frozen, tired students. Straight blond hairs peeked down over her eyes, but she made no effort to push them away. The morning was unusually frigid, and she found herself looking forward to the fifteen minute bus ride to school. She carefully glanced down the road, careful not to shift her neck in way that would allow any precious heat to escape, and was greeted by two happy sights.

One was the bus, which was already coming to a slow; its yellow warning lights flashing. The other was poor Dale Wellington, huffing up the sidewalk a few paces behind the bus, one

hand clutching what looked like a sippy sandwich and the other awkwardly holding his bookbag.

The bus came to a stop beside the huddling mass of teens with its classic *Psssh* sound, and the doors swung wide. Instead of racing to the glorious warmth, Charlotte waited for Dale to arrive, and giggled at his red cheeks and ridiculous sandwich-bookbag pose.

“Heya Dale,” she smiled, her breath escaping in wispy trails.

“Morn’,” he replied, only slightly winded. He took the time to sling his bookbag on his back before he moved toward the welcoming opening created by the bus doors.

“What’d you do to that sandwich, stab it or somethin’? She’s bleeding something awful,” she gestured at the wet pink bread, which was dripping jam onto the chilled sidewalk.

Dale paused to look at his disaster of a breakfast. “Jam was bein’ a bitch. Didn’t have time to reason with it,” he broke into a full grin. For a moment, his grin seemed to dissolve the bitter cold surrounding Charlotte, then it was gone.

The last kid had squeezed onto the bus, and the driver was giving the two of them a look that said *for Christ’s sakes kids, get on the damned bus!* They ambled up the steps and the door slammed shut behind them, cutting off the cold. Charlotte tried not to giggle as she trailed behind Dale: his sandwich was leaving little puddles of jam on the aisle in his wake. She and Dale sat in their usual seat: third from rear, in the row behind the driver, Charlotte in the window seat. The bus lurched forward as soon as Dale’s butt had touched the stiff plastic seat, and they were off.

The radio was tuned to KGLT-FM, and it was blaring some god awful western or country music, so Charlotte decided to skip her customary Dale-chat (he was preoccupied with his sandwich anyway) and go right to the discman. She fished the headphones out of her knapsack and put them around her neck. The actual CD player was found by feeling along the cord.

She pulled the device out and was just about to hit play when Dale nudged her. “Mmmph,” he said, then swallowed the chunk of PBJ that was in his mouth.

“Hey, I made that CD I was telling you about, the one with the trance tunes,” he explained, then began digging in his pockets. He produced a featureless CD case, and managed to open it with one hand (the other was still tending to the dripping, half-eaten PBJ). The CD was also featureless.

“Lemme put it on for ya,” he offered, and began the complicated operation of switching Charlotte’s original CD for his with only one hand. She thought this was both funny and cute, and she never took her eyes off his face, admiring the stupid determination in his blue eyes as he tried to swap the CDs. From time to time, he involuntarily moved his right hand (sandwich hand)

to help in the ordeal, only to subconsciously remember that he didn't want to soak everything in Smucker's Strawberry Jam.

Perhaps if she had paid attention to what he was doing with the CDs instead of being captured by his seemingly flawless face, things would have been different. She probably would have noticed the little splotch of jam that had landed on her CD player, right on the little digital window. She didn't notice until he handed it triumphantly back to her (CDs successfully swapped, taking only twenty seconds total). Charlotte grasped the discman, still looking at Dale and smiling sweetly. Her thumb came down directly on the jam puddle, and it squirted from her hand as easily as a wet bar of soap does.

"Shit!" she cried, and Dale tried to catch it with his knees, but his three hours of sleep had slowed him down enough to have him miss. The CD player ripped itself from the headphone cord and crashed onto the aisle, actually spinning like a coin for half a second before it dropped onto the dirt caked floor with a dull thud. Dale picked it up for her and gave it a looking over.

"You and your damn sandwich," she laughed, not the slightest bit mad at him, "that jam near killed my discman."

"Man, I'm sorry Char, I didn't know it was there," he said, a little shamefully.

"S'ok Dalesy," she threw him a wink, "so. She busted up pretty bad?"

He smiled, and turned the player over, "the battery case came off... you only have one in there, the other one must've rolled off."

She plucked the thing from him and looked for herself. Sure enough, there was only one double A battery in the case looking up at her. She and Dale looked around the shaky bus floor the best they could, but they only found the battery case cover.

"Wa-hal, looks like it's *KayGeeAallTai-FM* furr us!" Charlotte announced in a southern country drawl. Dale grinned his ice-melting grin again. Charlotte was glad that she now had an excuse to further the Dale-chat for another five minutes, even though it was going to cost her a day's worth of music. She was well aware that she was falling for this goofy guy who couldn't make a decent PBJ sandwich, and who arrived at the bus stop with his bookbag in one arm and his breakfast in the other. Something about his eyes, something about the simple and carefree way he viewed the world.

Then, with three minutes left before the bus stopped with its classic *Psssh* in front of Helena High, the KGLT-FM breakfast crew decided to take a break from the music (to the relief of many half-asleep students), and discuss the newest movie releases.

Dale wasn't the brightest bulb around, but he wasn't stupid. He could sense the vibes Charlotte was giving him. It was pretty clear that she was into him, and that was just fine with him. Very pretty girl, by his standards at least. He had met her in the drudgery of grade ten math, back in September. The two had clicked right away, and were surprised to learn they lived within ten minutes walk of one another. He had been getting the 'vibes' from her for the past two weeks, but it wasn't enough to act on, according to Dale Wellington's Guide to Dating.

But this morning, he was getting 'mega-vibes', and the fact that his sloppy sandwich incident hadn't put her off in the least..., well, he 'sposed he better make a move. But he was sleepy, and he wasn't sure exactly how he wanted to go about it. The bus was only a few minutes from pulling into the school, and for some reason, he felt if he didn't do it *now*, nothing would ever happen. (Dale would never know, but his premonition was right: had he not opted make a move, Charlotte would have started to notice 'how cute' her science lab partner was (a rather hilarious kid named Roy McDearborne), that very day).

Fortunately, KGLT-FM gave him an opening. Usually he detested the crap that the station played (he envied Charlotte for her discman), but the DJs had cut the 'tunes' for second and were talking about that new action-thriller movie, *Corner Pocket*. Something about a gang using a pool club for a front and getting in crap with a mafia-honcho pool master, blah blah. Guns, girls, car chases: his kind of movie. Charlotte liked the fast paced kind too. *Perfect. Here we go.*

"We should go see that," he suggested casually.

Charlotte silently sucked in her breath. "Corner Pocket?" she asked, a little anxiously.

"Yeah. Just me and you, y'know? Maybe tonight, if--"

She cut him off, "Sure! Just me and you, yeah..." Charlotte blushed at her sudden outburst, and tried to regain her composure with a nervous smile. Dale was suddenly a little more awake.

A perfectly normal situation. Something similar happens everyday in every high school in North America. The incident itself was not the problem. The problem was the aftermath. Nothing out of the ordinary would've happened as a result from this happenstance, had it not been for a kid named Murph Rallow.

Dale and Charlotte went to the movie. They enjoyed it. The next day they announced they were officially a couple. News spread quickly (friends had predicted the Dale-Charlotte hookup

weeks in advance). Eventually the news reached Murph Rallow.

The news did not come to him from friends; he had no one he could really call a friend (unless you counted that fat kid who sat by him in english, who liked to tell stories about his online ‘Dungeon and Dragons’ adventures). No, Murph heard about Dale and Charlotte by casually eavesdropping on some people. It had been a simple comment, a nonchalant mention: *‘Hey’d ya heard about Charlotte Deary? She’s goin’ out with Dale Wells... or maybe it’s Wellington.’ ‘Really? I know Char but who’s Dale?’ ‘He’s in our math class, behind Jake...’ ‘Oh yeah? Hey, Jake told me yesterday that his sister got busted for possession!’ ‘Get out!’ ...* etcetera.

The mention of the new relationship was brief, but it suddenly made Murph’s heart catch in his throat and his body to produce a sudden rush of adrenaline. He had ‘loved’ or at least thought he loved Charlotte the moment he had seen her. Of course, she didn’t know him. All she knew is that he was the kid that Archie and Mitch liked to throw stuff at in art class, and how that was “such a sin”. Murph also knew exactly Dale Wellington was, and hated him. He had hated Dale solely because Charlotte paid so much attention to him. *So* much. Now he didn’t hate him, he *loathed* him.

Murph wasn’t stupid though; he was well aware that he would probably never even have a nodding relationship with the extravagant Charlotte Deary, but something about her actually made going to school seem worth it, for the hour he spent in her art class. Despite those inbred cretins, Archie White and Mitch Reynolds, throwing paintbrushes at him, he looked forward to art. That’s where was he was headed to when he heard the awful (and inevitable) news.

He walked to art class with his head down, one hand scratching his dirty blond hair. He was in such deep, emotional thought that he didn’t even notice some idiot call his name mockingly: *“MMMUURRRRRFFFFFFFFF! Hey, MMMUUUURRRRRFFF!”*

His legs were on autopilot, and before long he found himself at the art room’s door. He walked in and was relieved to see that Archie and Mitch hadn’t arrived. *A few minutes of peace*, he thought, and took his seat at the table closest to the teacher’s desk. He sat in a daze, turning the thought around in his head, *how could she be? No. No.*

Then there she was, just like that. Walking in, flanked by two of her girlfriends, chatting. Blonde hair shimmering, bright yellow t-shirt to match, tight blue jeans, dangerously alluring green eyes. At least that’s what he thought. *Shit-for-brains Dale probably doesn’t even notice. Just sees tits and ass and thinks “free ride!”*. *Asshole. Goddam jerk-off, goddam him. He doesn’t*

even de-

His furious thoughts were broken as the girl next to him poked him and said something. “What?” he almost shouted.

She looked at him through *enormous* wire frame glasses. She wasn’t obese, but definitely not your candidate for a Victoria’s Secret model. Her name was Mindy or Merry (Archie and Mitch called her ‘Butch’). “I *said*, don’t you hate girls like that Charlotte?”

“Uh?” was all he could manage.

“I mean, all people like her do is strut around, sticking out their chests and bending over at every opportunity for the guys. All they understand is makeup and thong underwear. I hate those slutty people. So ignorant, and...”

Murph let her continue. He knew that Charlotte was no slut, just, ...very attractive. She certainly didn’t bend over at every, if any, opportunity. He noted that Mindy or Merry’s breath smelled lightly of tuna, and made a point of moving his chair an inch or so away from hers. Charlotte was sitting now, and he watched her. (He had gotten good at watching people without actually staring).

The teacher, Mr. Rubie, said to settle down because class was starting. Murph saw that neither Archie or Mitch had arrived yet, and that was at least one good thing to counteract the terrible ache in what he supposed was his stomach. Mr. Rubie began to review notes on Egyptian art, and Murph expertly tuned him out.

Dale Wellington. Guess I should have seen it coming? He’s never not with her, this is like, the only class they don’t have together. Man. He doesn’t even know how to begin to respect someone like Charlotte. This train of thought continued on for about fifteen minutes, then Murph’s day took a huge downward dive. The door burst open, and in tumbled a laughing Mitch Reynolds, followed by a shoving, red-faced Archie White.

“Gimme my pen!” cried Archie, while making a lunge at Mitch’s hands.

“Nevah!”, bellowed Mitch dramatically, in a hideous attempt at Shakespearian mockery, “you will nevah relinquish this pen from my grip! Forever shall I--”

Mr. Rubie (who had also been relieved by the absence of these two) ran out of patience instantly. “*GENTLEMEN!*” he roared. Archie and Mitch stopped, in mid struggle. Murph allowed a small bit of happiness into his troubled mind. Mr. Rubie’s strict late-policy was sure to get the two buffoons sent to the office.

“You know the rules. I require a note explaining you being late, otherwise, take a walk

down to the office,” he said curtly.

Archie and Mitch looked perplexed, then Archie did something no one thought would happen: he produced a note.

“Been down the gym helping set up for the wrestlin’ tournament. It’s tomorrow you know,” Mitch explained, as Archie handed the note over.

“Yes I’m well aware of that Mitchell,” Mr. Rubie took the note and inspected it, “well. This is valid. Take a seat gentlemen, I want no more disturbances.”

“Yes Mr. Rubie,” they said together, and then quickly clambered into their seats, at the table right beside Murph’s. The somewhat crestfallen Mr. Rubie went continued his lecture on Egyptian art. His disappointment was nothing compared to what Murph was feeling. This was all he needed after the news about Charlotte.

They wasted no time. Mitch moved his seat close to where Murph was, and said, “‘sup Murffff? Hey Butch!”

“Mitch,” he replied.

“So dude. I heard you were at Queery Queenies all-men part last night.” ‘Queery Queenie’ was another unfortunate victim of society’s limited views. His real name was Jason Queens, and he bravely attended high school, despite being openly gay. Murph, who was straight as an arrow, had of course not attended any such party, and was pretty doubtful that such a party even existed.

“You would know, wouldn’t yah?” Murph tried his hand at a comeback. Mitch didn’t even notice. He continued as if he had just heard what he had expected: a meek denial.

“Yeah, you probably weren’t there. I doubt you afford the entry fee. Probably tried to spare change for it though, am I right?”

This opened Mitch up for a nice steaming comeback. Murph was about to ask how Mitch even knew about an entrance fee, but he figured the blockhead would just ignore it as he did before. Murph couldn’t just sit there, so he lamely mumbled, “shut up,” which Mitch would undoubtedly see as a lack of denial, and thus, a confession to spare changing for the entry fee to a fag party. But Mitch had either planned out the entire insult spree or was just too stupid to see that he had just trapped his victim.

“Shut up? Tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. You wash that raggedy ole sweatshirt, and I’ll shut up,” Mitch grinned, “how’s it sound, poor boy?”

That one stung. Possibly even more than the ‘Queery Queenie’ line of insult that Murph

had mentally prepared for. Mitch usually only made the sweatshirt crack when he was feeling especially upset and needed to use Murph as an emotional punching bag. Murph hated the joke *so* much because he *did* wash the shirt. Every damn day. It wasn't his fault that his step-father spent most of the income on booze. It wasn't his fault that it was his only warm piece of clothing (besides his five year old coat). The plain grey sweatshirt had a few stains, but that was to be expected after he owned it for three damn years, wasn't it? If he couldn't afford a new shirt then he couldn't afford expensive dry cleaning could he? Jesus, why couldn't Mitch just *shut the HELL up?!*

"C'mon Murffffff. Just one wash and I'll stop talking! Great deal! Going once..." People at Mitch's table were starting to snicker. He suspected most of the class was tuned into this.

"Mitch. Fuck *off*," he seethed, trying to sound as serious as possible.

"Oh, and what're you going to do? Get your raving drunken parents to run me over in your welfare car? You obviously can't hurt me, I mean, look at your arms! Your welfare checks can't afford anything that isn't malnourishing!"

"Mitch..." Mindy/Merry began.

"Your arms look very flabby today, Butch," Archie called sweetly, and Mindy/Merry clamped her jaw shut and crossed her arms, looking away.

"Well ain't that sweet," Mitch continued to pummel Murph, "your chunky *girlll*friend Butch is trying to stick up for you! You ain't gonna let Archie get away with that shit are you? C'mon, rub that sweatshirt in his eyes! It'll blind him!" People were starting to laugh now. Murph clenched his teeth and looked across the room at Charlotte. She wasn't paying attention to Mitch, thank God. Instead she was still chatting to her friends. He thought she mouthed the word 'Dale' at least three times in one sentence. Murph looked to Mr. Rubie for help, but he was engrossed in the amazing technique used in the making of King Tut's tomb. There was no escape.

He shifted his gaze back toward the smirking cocksucker named Mitch. Behind him, Archie was clutching his face, and softly moaning, "my eyes! The dirt is eating my eyes!"

Coupled with the 'loss' of 'his' Charlotte, and the very cheap shots at his family and his lack of money, Murph found his emotions beginning to boil over. Terribly, he noticed that his eyes were stinging. *I am NOT going to cry. No, anything but that. ANYTHING.*

Archie White found a penny on the floor, and put it between his forefinger and thumb. With a snap, he sent it rocketing into Murph's exposed forehead. The penny screamed off the

bone right about his left eyebrow, and the world dissolved into a flash of red pain for half a second. Murph recovered just in time to hear Archie yammering on about how he could use the penny to buy some shoe scrapings from a bum. Mmm-mmm, a delicacy!

Maybe if Murph hadn't started the day off without seeing his passed out step-father laying half naked on the couch in the morning; maybe if he hadn't found the fridge absolutely empty when he went to get breakfast; maybe if he hadn't noticed the strange guy laying in bed with his whore of sister on his way out; and maybe if he had gone into class without knowing that Charlotte was now involved with Dale, maybe *then* he could have handled this situation. Maybe.

The tears were there. They were real. They were about to stream down his face, and he was as helpless to stop it as a pebble is to stop a river. Mitch noticed the water first.

"Ohh dude! Are those? HA! Murph's gonna c--" Mitch began to say, but Murph had other plans. To hell with it. He leapt out of his seat and sent a fist flying at Mitch's head. The other boy was surprised, but he had excellent reflexes. Mitch moved his head just in time, so that Murph's sadly weak punch only nicked his ear. Murph's forward momentum carried him past Mitch and into Mitch's table.

He fell over the table and knocked his own wind out, then slipped off of it onto the floor (to avoid the beating that Mitch was probably going to administer to him). But Mitch didn't lose his cool, and start whaling on him, no, Mitch lost his cool and nearly fell over with hysteria. About ten other people followed suit, while the others just laughed. Murph took the time to wipe the wetness off his face.

Mr. Rubie had finally noticed that something was going on, and began to demand to know what was wrong with Murph, did he or did he not understand how to behave in class, that he should get to the office *immediately*. Murph didn't hear any of this. Fresh tears had begun, and he needed to get out. The last thing he noticed before he raced out of the classroom was Charlotte's eyes. They were filled with pity.

He wasn't sure how he made it out of the school unnoticed. Mr. Rubie probably just assumed he had went to the office. Why wouldn't he? But Murph wasn't headed for the office. He was headed for anywhere that wasn't near the school.

His only encounter was in the parking lot; someone jeered at him, calling his name ("*Murfffff*") but that was all. The day had warmed up a bit since the chilled morning, but Murph

wished he had thought to grab his jacket before he stormed out of art. Mitch probably wiping snot on it or sticking gum to it right now.

Through teary vision, he wandered down the street until he came to a tiny convenience store (Holland's Stop 'n' Go), and sat down beside its dumpster. There, all the unfairness he had suffered through in the past five or six years came crashing down around him, and he bawled his eyes out. He cried for at least ten minutes, silently cursing himself and God and Dale and his real father (who had left home when Murph was only three).

When he could cry no more, he sat there, in the stinking alley, vaguely aware that something (rats?) was scurrying around in the dumpster. He drummed his fingers restlessly on the side of the giant green thing, staring off into space. He eyelids drooped and his breath eased. For awhile, he just sat there thinking about nothing. It was as if he had simply shut off; he had gone on standby.

What snapped him out of his trance were two things: first, his finger caught on a piece of rust that was sticking out of the dumpster like a tiny barbed wire. He made a sort of hissing noise, cursing silently and wondering how much more shit he was going to have to go through today. As he was wiping the blood on his shirt (a new stain), he noticed a dull, raspy sound. Then came a rather wet farting sound.

"What the hell...?" Murph sat up and realized he was more cramped than he had ever been. Then he saw the bum. He was sleeping against the fence directly across from Murph. His bare, filthy feet were less than a metre from Murph's ratty sneakers. That got him moving. The guy smelled mildly like Mindy/Merry's breath.

Standing without waking the bum was not difficult, as Murph had feared. His cramped legs practically gave out on him as he rose and he slammed up against the rusty dumpster. The scurrying ceased for a second, then resumed. Mr. Bum just kept snoring on. Then he farted again, and Murph forced his legs to carry him away from the alley behind the store. The sun was further west than he would have thought; *it must be past five* he thought grimly. That would mean he had been sitting there for a good three hours. No wonder he was cramped. Suddenly, the evening chill hit him like frozen tractor trailer. So Murph Rallow headed for the only warm place he knew and was (at least partially) accepted: his home.

He was a 'walker', meaning he lived close enough to the school to be denied a bus ride, and the store wasn't too far from the school. He made it home just as the sun dipped under the horizon. The grey house he lived in could rightly be called a shack; the shingles were almost

gone, the paint was stripping and the porch was almost rotten. It looked like a scene from a trailer trash movie. As if to emphasize the point, one of the boards creaked and snapped as Murph stepped onto the porch. He didn't care; he had stopped caring.

Inside wasn't much better. Old, ratty carpets, old, ratty window shades, bare bulbs, rusty refrigerator. *Home sweet home*, Murph sighed. He realized then that his bookbag was also forgotten at school. He barely registered the fact, and shuffled into the kitchen. The fridge creaked as he opened the door to the freezer. Inside was a yellowed ice cube tray and a half empty pack of hamburgers. He popped out an ice cube and applied it to his throbbing finger. It helped the pain considerably, but it did nothing for the pain he was feeling in his gut. There was no way he could go back to school. Dropping out seemed to be the sensible thing to do.

Feeling about as cheery as a rancid piece of roadkill, Murph trudged around the house, looking for his family members. No one was around. There was note from his sister, which read: '*Out wi Tom. B bak at 4. dee*'. He snorted. Wasn't it Harold last week? He doubted 'Tom' was even the guy he saw in her bed in the morning. And when Dee said '4', it was more like seven. Seven a.m.

His mom was at work, a clerk in a convenience store even seedier than Holland's Stop 'n' Go. She'd be home around twelve thirty tonight, then she'd sleep until nine or ten, when his step dad would thoughtlessly wake her up by turning on the old black and white TV, volume full blast. His step dad was no doubt en route to a tavern right now, he would have gotten off work a few minutes ago. Murph sat down on the ancient couch that sat in front of the TV, and proceeded to fall into another stupor. The ice melted and soaked part of his jeans.

At quarter to eight, a clanking, coughing 2025 Ford Mare rolled up to the little grey house. The grey truck was seven years old, but still running. It was rusted in spots and the oil needed changing, but otherwise, it was generally okay for driving. It actually could out distance many newer models with the same fuel capacity, but that was only because Murph's step father had some ties with organized crime. He had been filling the old truck with what was called 'Engine Dope' or on the streets. The new fuel was very efficient, relatively cheap compared to normal gas, and of course, very illegal. The stuff had a tendency to eat away at the fuel tanks after time, and if it was exposed to flame, it would go up like Nos. The vapour it gave off was moderately hazardous to the respiration system as well. Engine Dope had become as much as a problem as cocaine for authorities across the globe in a few short years.

Murph's step dad clambered out of the Ford, red in the face. He had parked the truck right in front of the entryway. The headlights were bare inches from the rotting wood posts that held up the roof of the veranda. The tall, unshaven bear of man walked onto the porch and promptly fell headfirst into the screen door, thanks to the hole created by Murph and the rotted boards.

"FUCKIN' Christ! Boy! Murph! Get your lazy ass out here now and fix this fucking bugger! Get OUT here!" The man exploded into the living room, forgetting about the orders he had just given Murph immediately, and headed for the kitchen, for his private liquor stash. Vodka, Jack Daniels, and the new stuff: Brekk's Liquid Inferno: 'one hundred and fuckin'-twenty proof'. Earlier in the day, he had learned that his habit of arriving at work late and smelling of Coors wasn't going over well with the manager. The pigheaded jackass had 'let him go'. Now there was no money for the taverns, so he had to go to his last resort, the secret 'under the sink stash'.

Murph didn't hear the Ford rolling up to within inches of the house, but he certainly was jolted out of his hypnotic state when his step dad had collided with the screen door. He thought he was going to be beaten to a pulp by the sound of the man's voice, but was relieved when he saw him head directly for the kitchen. Murph was well aware of the 'secret stash'. The shit had hit the fan somewhere, and his step father was going to drink it away. *Maybe he'll die of alcohol poisoning* Murph prayed silently.

He looked down at his jeans and saw the wet spot, and thought for a horrifying second that he had, in fact, pissed himself. But then he recalled the ice cube. That brought back the dumpster, the bum, the alley. That brought back the incident in art class. It brought back that look in Charlotte's eyes.

Charlotte.

Barely aware of the sound of clinking liquor bottles emanating from the kitchen, Murph leaned back and groaned. All the emotional pain he had gone through concerning Charlotte hit him like the cold had hit him earlier. Murph slipped into yet another trance, but this one wasn't just a stupor, it was filled with thoughts, a dreamy fantasy about Charlotte.

He would see her in the hall, and she'd smile, say hi. Then, in art, she'd ask him to be her partner for the mural paintings. (Mitch and Archie had recently died in an explosion). The murals would go well, they would paint made a wonderful scene: a white mansion overlooking a lake during a sunset, the watercolours exploding with vibrance. She would be impressed with him, impressed with herself. Then she'd ask what he was doing after school. He'd say nothing, ask her

if she wanted to do something. Of course, she'd blush and look away, and murmur, "sure, yeah". And Murph, smooth Murph, would smile and ask for her number. She'd write it in ink on his palm, make him promise not to forget to call her. He would laugh and promise to keep his hand in saran wrap until he got home. Boy, that one would crack her up. Dale (he was in the art class, a transfer) would look over his shoulder and his brow would crease, he was jealous. After school, Murph would call Charlotte, she'd pick up barely after the phone started to ring, she'd be excited. They'd meet at the corner of Faulkner and Farrow, she'd joke about how Farrow sounded like his last name, Rallow. He'd disagree, and a hilarious argument would ensue, with her hanging off his arm laughing as he did an Italian chef's pronunciation of 'Rallow' and 'Farrow'. They'd go down Faulkner street until they reached the arcade. She would say how she wasn't really into all those pinball machine noises and whatnot, but then she'd see the longing in his eyes and tell him that he'd probably make it fun, though. They'd go in and Murph would win her one of those big ole pink teddy bears, and she'd hug him and exclaim that she never thought an arcade of all places could be so much *fun*. So, after a twilight walk through Amber Park (it was also summertime now, August), they'd call it a night. Murph would walk her home (wow, they only lived ten minutes apart!) And she'd peck him on the cheek, and tell her to *call her tomorrow (Saturday), or ELSE*. Then a wink, followed by a wave. Murph would walk home, then watch the ball game in colour with his dad. His dad would ask him if he was up for a fishing trip on the weekend, and Murph would say that he couldn't, there was this girl... and his dad would clap him on the back and laugh, and then ask him if he knew about the birds and the bees. Murph would groan ("Daaaaad,") and his loving father would laugh again, and tell him he'd better be off to bed. "Wait, your mom made chocolate chip cookies," he'd say, and tell Murph that he'd better eat one if she was to be pleased. His mom was in the kitchen and gave him a hug as he wolfed down a delicious cookie. He'd go to bed, and sleep like a baby. The next morning, he'd call Charlotte at ten o'clock. Turns out she was up since eight waiting for him to call. Well, they had the whole day to themselves, and they would spend a good chunk of it in Amber Park. Later that afternoon, as they were sitting on the bench, Charlotte would admit to him that she had the *biggest* crush on him since she met him in art. It seemed so right for them to be together, she'd explain. He would concur. Then, smooth ole Murph would lean over, and kiss her oh-so-gingerly on the corner of her mouth, and she'd look at him, startled, with those amazing green eyes. They weren't filled with pity, but a sort of deep affection. Then, she'd wrap her arms around his neck, and force him back onto the bench, (her hair smelled like strawberries) and—

A cold breeze tore through the park, Murph realized he had peed himself in his excitement. No no, that was the ice. Ice?

Reality snapped back so abruptly that Murph uttered a small yelp. He was on the couch, his lap still soggy. It was full dark out, the only light seeping in from the kitchen. The January air had forced open the flimsy screen door and filled the house with its icy fingers. Deep depression bloomed in Murph; his fantasy had seemed so real, so damn *possible*. The thing that got him the most was the light from the kitchen. It was weak, an old 40-watt bulb, and it seemed to highlight all the crap, all the things that were opposite from his fantasy in a gloomy, unforgiving glow. The ratty old carpet. The lack of wallpaper. That beery smell.

Murph stood up, and was met by new cramps. God, his jeans were soaked. And he was really cold; the screen door was wide open. Never in his entire life did Murph feel as low as he did now. A poor, smelly kid who lived with drunks and hoes, who lived in a house that couldn't afford decent insulation, or decent heat, could barely afford electricity (40-watt bulbs). A poor, smelly kid who had no friends, who had been harshly denied the one bright spot in life by a snotty rich boy named Dale Wellington. Murph's decision was the best he could come up with. People with higher values and a better upbringing would have probably made the same choice, if they were in this situation, feeling this feeling of utter pointlessness. Murph trudged to the kitchen. To the 'secret stash'.

His step dad was passed out drunk in the chair by the table, all five bottles of liquor opened and half full, three on the table, two on the floor. Alcohol would get rid of this. Alcohol would make him warm too. Murph carefully inspected the bottles, trying not to make any noise. He soon realized that his step dad was as likely to wake up as the bum from the alley. After half a minute, Murph found what he was looking for. Brekk's Liquid Inferno. He found a glass in the cupboard (it was one of five, and it was dirty) and filled it. He returned to the couch, and sniffed his drink. It smelled terribly strong and oddly like Pine Sol. Murph figured that was his mind playing tricks on him. *Take this, brain*, he sneered, and without hesitation, swallowed half a mouthful.

At 10:43 p.m., Murph Rallow was flirting with full drunkenness after three quarters of a glass of Brekk's Liquid Inferno. He had spilled the rest of it some ten minutes ago. The alcohol had helped a bit (he certainly was warmer), but he still found himself feeling very sorry for

himself. He still was thinking of Charlotte, and his goal was to be so drunk that he wouldn't even be able to think the word Charlotte clearly, let alone feel bad that she was dating some other guy.

He had wandered out to the front porch, and was debating on whether or not to go get more Inferno. Part of his rational mind told him that getting drunk was *not* the answer, but what the fuck did

it know? Hell, he was drunk already! *Exactly, and you're still all woozy and mushy over that slut, aren't yah? Yeah, so how is booze gonna help you? You remind me of your step dad. Drunk bastard. That's all you are.*

Murph saw that this was true. He was taking the path of his step dad. That was bad; that was wrong. *Then what should I do?* he begged of his mind. It didn't answer immediately. Then he looked up. In the faint moonlight, he noticed that it had started to snow lightly. He also noticed the Ford.

A vicious battle took place in his mind at that moment. The rational bit of his mind versus the depressed, alcohol-tainted mind. The rational side had a single flag, held up by a tiny Murph. It read: ***Drinking and Driving KILLS!*** It was a powerful message, and Murph understood it well. But the other side offered a strange, twisted form of logic. The devil on his shoulder agreed that drinking and driving wasn't cool, no, that got people killed alright; but he wasn't that drunk, just a bit tipsy. The devil assured him that if he turned away from the car, he'd go back to the liquor. Somehow Murph knew this was true. He firmly believed that if he was to head back inside, he wouldn't wander into his room. He'd go right back to the poison. Become his step dad. And he'd end up just like him, hooking up with some poor bitch who already had two kids, and drinking away the cash that was suppose to be supporting those kids... and the boy (his poor step son) would be made fun of at school. He'd be tormented of by the sons of Mitch and Archie, and his step son would be denied the beauty of Charlotte's daughter. Denied because his filthy upbringing had rendered him into an anti-social shell. There was no way in hell he would let *that* happen to his (step) son.

The decision had been made. The rational mind screamed and waved its sign, but to no avail. The truck's keys had been left in the ignition (who'd want to steal the pile of junk, anyway?), as Murph discovered. He climbed into the driver's seat and was welcomed by huge rush of relief. Now his (step) son wouldn't have to go through all those horrors. Now it'd be okay; he had beaten the booze.

Okay, smart ass, answer me this: Where do you intend on going? Good question. Then Murph knew the answer. North. Why not? Nothing like a good drive north to chase away your problems. Or run from them.

The truck coughed and sputtered when he turned the key, then the engine caught, and rumbled on smoothly, sputtering only a few times; better than would be expected from a seven year old rust heap. The headlights illuminated the front of his shack-like house with fierce intensity, and for moment Murph thought this would wake his step father (the engine noise waking him up never occurred to Murph), then he thought, *I've got the truck, what's he gonna do?* A new feeling, a feeling of supreme power coursed through his veins along with the liquor, and Murph actually laughed. That his drunken step father could call the police never crossed his mind, and he reversed out onto the street (without looking first), feeling better at that moment than he had in months.

Murph didn't have to worry about his step dad though, the man's heart had stopped five minutes after Murph had taken his first swig of the Inferno.

The driving went smoothly. Murph found he wasn't bad at negotiating the roads, even with the light snowfall. Cars and trucks and semis passed him, and he hadn't even flinched as he thought he would. The devil was sticking its tongue out at the sign toting Murph, who was sitting there with his arms crossed. *Apparently alcohol isn't as impairing as the ads made it out to be,* he thought cheerily. How wrong Murph was.

The roads became less and less populated as eleven thirty rolled around, and by that time, Murph had driven the Ford up the highway (at a cautious forty miles per hour) almost halfway to Canada. An eighteen wheeler fell into the space behind him as he coaxed the speedometer up to forty five.

The truck driver was called Bucky by his friends. (A night involving too much beer and a mechanical bull had earned him the nickname). He was shipping DVD players up to Edmonton from Fargo, and had decided to cut across the northern states before going up into Canada, to avoid the minor storm that was dwelling over Saskatchewan and due to make a south westerly turn into Montana. He was a truck driving veteran, and as usual, his tactics had paid off: he was at least two hours ahead of schedule.

Now, he waited at one of the intersections that connected Great Falls, Montana to what

was known as Route 15. The highway led north into Alberta, and south towards Helena. It was surrounded by pines on both sides for most of the way.

He waited for the single vehicle, a slow moving truck, to pass him before he lumbered onto the blacktop. The truck did, and he saw it was an older model. He dismissed the fact and pulled onto the highway, and shifted gears. The truck's red taillights would keep him company until they turned off at wherever. *Maybe they're headed for Edmonton, too*, Bucky thought, but in his experience, he knew this was rarely the case. It was late, and it was more likely that the driver of the truck was headed for somewhere close by, maybe Power or Dutton, possibly even as far as Conrad.

The speedometer read forty-seven miles per hour as Bucky kept pace with the twin red taillights in front of him.

In an hour's time, the snow had picked up a bit, but not enough to keep people from driving, it seemed. Bucky counted five cars and two trucks passed since he turned onto Route 15. And still, the twin taillights remained. They had just passed Shelby ten minutes ago (the speedometer had dropped to forty again; the truck had slowed, so Bucky did too), and Bucky sensed that this fellow was indeed headed for Canada. The border was roughly thirty miles from Shelby, so he'd be in Alberta in under an hour.

Murph had settled into his fourth trance. The alcoholic euphoria had subsided enough to snuff out the joy caused by his newfound feeling of power completely. Part of his brain kept his eyes on the road, while the other, more dominant part cycled through the atrocities of his day, his life. He found that it all boiled down to that girl, Charlotte Deary. If there was one thing that could've made up for the poverty and traumatic youth, she had been it. Outside the windshield, the highway stretched on for about the length of a football field before taking a sharp turn to the right. All he could see was her face (it was in fact, his own, reflected in the glass). When the small red car came around the bend, Murph Rallow barely noticed.

The car didn't have its high beams on, but the lights were plenty bright. When they got close enough, Murph finally saw them. No cars had driven by in the last half hour, and the new headlights surprised him in the worst kind of way. His brain was still seeing the world through the haze of alcohol, and the afterimage of Charlotte merged with the oncoming car. The gears in his head were slipping, and he somehow fused the two into the same thing; the car was

Charlotte... *and he was going to hit that car head on!*

Now, if Murph had of just stayed rock solid, and not moved a muscle, he would have been perfectly fine. But something about the fact that he was driving at night, during a mild snowfall, and after three fourths of a glass of Brekk's Liquid Inferno made him *positive* that he was going to hit the car. It seemed dumb to assume that he'd be just fine. So his tired and emotionally drained mind tried to come up with a plan to dodge the car (and hence, saving the life of Charlotte) in a split second. His eyes took into account the sharp right hand turn just ahead. The sick, twisted logic returned.

It seemed obvious, that in this case, right was the wrong way, simply because right was the way he'd turn if he was going to be happily on his way. But he couldn't be going happily on his way (right) because if he went happily on his way, he'd smash into Charlotte and destroy the one thing that had even been good in his life.

The small red car (a brand new 2033 Acura Horizon) approached Murph at an alarmingly quick rate. He saw the lights up close and screamed: he had reacted too late. Too late for Charlotte. Or maybe it wasn't too late. In desperation, he wrenched the wheel to left (right was wrong, obviously). Unfortunately, the most efficient part of the old Ford besides the Engine Dope were it's tires. They had been changed only a month ago. The truck swerved left just as the car passed Murph, free of skidding, just like the cars in the TV ads as they wove effortlessly through the pylon course. The left bumper of the truck slammed into the rear of the Acura, right into the little fuel nozzle cap. Usually, automobile accidents aren't very spectacular, even at high speeds. This one however, would have made a Hollywood producer proud.

The two vehicles joined and spun like a pair of kids grabbing one another's arms and then spinning on their heels. The force of the collision was so great that the Acura was facing north and the Ford was looking southward in under half a second. Then the kids lets go. Murph's truck spun ninety degrees and began to slide; it was perpendicular to the double yellow line and facing east, leaving behind a sick trail of burning rubber and thin grey smoke. The weight of the Ford was bringing it up on two wheels when it slid into the turn. It kept going until the guardrail made its appearance. The hubcaps connected to the steel at thirty miles per hour. That was more than enough to send the ruined truck tumbling over the guardrail. It landed on its roof and bounced, tumbled again, came right side up, and skidded down into a ditch where it came to a total stop, thanks to a large pine tree.

The car was spared any guardrail tumbblings; when the vehicles had 'let go' of one

another, the car had been flung onto the wrong side of the road and forced into the guardrail, head on. It had bounced off like a giant red misshapen pinball, spinning helplessly as if the asphalt was made of ice. The driver was trying to turn into the skid when the passenger side of the car disappeared into the grill of Bucky's eighteen wheeler.

Bucky saw the crash unfold in front of him like a nightmare. One moment, everything was peaceful; the twin red taillights remained solid, and the approaching car's headlights had been just another pair of white orbs; to say it was a common sight would be quite the understatement.

Then all hell had broken loose.

Bucky didn't even have enough time to realize exactly what had happened, all he knew was that there was suddenly a smash and squeal of tires, and that the headlight beams in front of him rotated wildly like a lighthouse gone crazy, illuminating the snowflakes in maddeningly quick arcs. Then the truck had kept going, but it had been sideways, he could see it sliding towards the curve in the road, drawn to the bend as if by a giant unseen magnet. Then the car had been spinning, spinning *toward* him, and all Bucky could do was stamp down on the brake pedal. The big eighteen wheeler had screamed as the tires locked and friction built, and it had almost come to a stop (ten miles per hour). When the little red car impaled itself on the grill. Bucky barely even felt the truck stagger as the car connected. The sheer power of the 70,000 pound monster was made very noticeable in that moment.

Now he sat there, stunned for a moment, before he radioed in, requesting an ambulance immediately. Bucky then got out of the passenger's side door (the car had at least been powerful enough to warp the driver's door shut). He raced to the car, which was still stuck to the front of his rig. The windshield was cracked a thousand times, spiderweb patterns laced and interlocked all over the front of what had been shiny and transparent. The cracks blocked the contents of the front seats. Bucky was glad for this, because all he could hear from the car was a slight hiss. No one was groaning or screaming, or yelling for help. The hissing sound was possibly steam escaping from somewhere. Possibly the gas lines leaking. The latter possibility got him into thinking, *maybe I should stand back a bit...*, but then a new, faint sound joined the hissing. He strained to hear what it was. It sounded like metal being strained, very slowly. *Metal straining equals sparks, Bucky ole pal*, he reminded himself. But something about it was wrong. Again he strained to hear. Then he placed it. The blood ran out of his face and he forgot all about leaking

gas and sparks. He raced to towards the eerily disfigured car, his heart in his throat.

He had heard a baby crying.

Murph looked groggily over the airbag and out the windshield at the new scene. The headlights were still working, and all the dashboard lights were on. He saw snowflakes falling, big fat snowflakes. They extended out in the double cylinders of the high beams. He also saw what looked like the upward curve of a ditch on his right, and there were trees. Lots of trees, they marched out forward along with the snowflakes.

He found that he was mildly amused that the windshield was virtually untouched. A single hairline crack spread from the driver's side all the way across, but that was all.

"Tough old bird," he rasped, and then saw that he had spattered drops of blood onto the white puff of the airbag. He was also aware of a dull, throbbing pain in the side of his head. If he had of looked to the left, he would've saw the shattered remains of the side window, where his head had bashed it in. The little devil that had convinced him to take the truck out was mysteriously silent, and all he had was the rational part of his mind, waving its sign, screaming at him. *You killed them- in the car, you killed them! It wasn't Charlotte you stupid drunkard, it was a couple, remember? Right before you had the brilliant idea to ram the side of the car? A man driving, a woman beside him. They're dead because of you, you goddam irresponsible piece of shit!!*

Shut up, it was just a touch. I probably got the worst of it, 'cause I hit the turn. They probably just spun out.

Probably.

Murph groaned, and silently cursed the whole world. He didn't really remember how this had all started, it had to do with Charlotte, and ice. Why ice? Who knew. Murph was suddenly struck with a pang of fear; *What's my step dad going to say?* Surely that truck driver behind him had called the police. Murph tried to lift his left hand to his face but found he couldn't. He groaned again. At that moment, several lose wires in the engine stopped swaying, and they touched, causing a spark. There was no fuel leaking from the Acura, but the old Ford was spouting it like Ol' Faithful. The spark wasted no time in finding the fuel vapour, and gleefully expanded into a searing fireball that raced into the gas tank via the new cracks.

The Engine Dope sure was efficient, in terms of how many miles you got for the gallon, but to use it, you had to have extreme confidence in your driving ability, and just hope to God

that you didn't wind up in an accident. Murph's late step father had overlooked all the risks; the only thing that interested him was the money he would save. Ironically, the recent cash he had saved had gone toward replenishing and improving the 'secret stash'. The Liquid Inferno was one of the 'improvements', and it had ultimately sealed both Murph's and Murph's step dad's fate.. The explosion liquified all the metal and plastic around the fuel tank and sent it flying out in a deadly sphere of tiny droplets; lethal pinpricks. The windshield that had miraculously survived the initial crash vanished in a wave of crystalline dust; the dashboard disappeared behind a flurry of oversized sparks and the evergreen boughs cracked backwards as if a hurricane had just materialized in the area. The body of the truck bounced and shuddered. Murph Rallow no longer had to worry about the troubles of his world.

Police and medical personnel arrived some ten minutes after Bucky radioed in. The fire department arrived shortly after, and doused the pillar of flame that had once been a '25 Ford Mare. The Acura had been spared a fiery grave, but it had still become a tomb. The passenger had been killed instantly when the car had married the front of the semi, a middle aged woman identified as Raelene Clindare. The driver was assumed to be her husband, a Mr. Donald Clindare, also middle aged. He had suffered a massive head injury, on the right side, and had died from skull fractures and blood loss before the ambulance people could even get him out of the car. (The medical examiner at the scene gruesomely explained the reason for the injury: his own wife's head had broken his skull when she was ejected from her own seat).

Despite these grisly circumstances, there was some relief. The baby that Bucky had heard crying was strapped into a toddler seat behind the driver. Bucky had tried to open the door to get to him, but it was so badly warped by the crash that all he could do was jiggle the handle. The window was unbroken, and he obviously wasn't going to bash it in with an infant's face less than five inches away. So he had waited there for nine seemingly endless minutes, listening to the kid wail, until the authorities had arrived and used the Jaws of Life to tear off the door and get the baby out. Somehow, whether it had been the angle of the crash, the pillow around the kid's head, the way the force had been distributed through the Acura, or just a plain old miracle, the little guy had been virtually uninjured. There was a tiny scratch on his cheek and a few chips of glass had landed in his tiny lap, but that was all.

The detective on the scene finished questioning Bucky and headed for one of the ambulances. She there learned that there was another fatality; the Ford's driver had died in the

fire, and he looked young. The medical guy said it was probably alcohol or drugs. The detective agreed. She was about to go and call HQ, when she turned back to the med and asked what the little boy's name was.

The infant, barely seven months old, was named Kirby Clindare.

That's when the snowball (started by Smucker's Strawberry Jam) began to gather speed.