

Snow Day

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They're out there now, where yard meets culd-e-sac over by the snow pile that's been pushed up against the curb by this morning's plow. They move deftly, almost prancing. Like gazelles. Or like the snow-equivalent of gazelles. Reindeer, Claudia thinks. Her sons are like reindeer.

They're building some type of fort. Impressively architectural. She thinks hopeful thoughts. Like one day Adrian will design buildings and Noah, following in his big brother's footsteps, will engineer them. She doesn't even know what that means, to engineer buildings. But it sure sounds good.

It's getting darker now. She has to squint to actually see *through* the window instead of her own reflection in the glass. The bare branches against the pale sky waggle around crazily in the wind. The boys work silently. Their breath plumes in the cold like smoke. Their mittenened hands pack down the walls like it's the most important thing they'll ever do. It seems terribly significant, this moment. Adrian on one side and Noah on the other. Not consulting each other, just motion and understanding.

She scrubs out the bottom of her coffee mug absentmindedly. The water gets too hot and she remembers she didn't even mean to wash the mug in the first place. She meant only to rinse it, then refill it. People were always talking about walking into a room and forgetting what

they're there for. Claudia tends to walk into a room and just plain do the wrong thing. Like wash a mug she meant to rinse.

Sometimes Claudia thinks there's something seriously wrong with her.

There was this awful pink snow-onesie her mother used to force her into as a girl. It was almost tearing at the seams and still she wore it for years. Her mother would squeeze these boots that were a couple sizes too small over the feet-attachments of the onesie. She'd come in with feet swollen and purple. Her circulation, cut clean off. Her mother would claim frostbite but Claudia, even then, knew it was just her mother's ill-preparation disguised as a special kind of love, rough and unrelenting.

Claudia swore she'd be different. Swore she'd be enough.

She turns back to the window and sees Adrian now grabbing the back of Noah's hood and smashing his face down into the snow repeatedly. Now what's all this about? Some type of horseplay? When'd her boys ever horseplay? Is this too brutal to be classified as mere horseplay?

She's about ready to walk onto the back deck and yell at them to stop that, stop that, and come inside anyway, it's getting awfully dark. But it's not like Noah's crying or anything. He just gets back up and keeps building like he has something to prove.

Her husband Simon would give one of his vague responses that are comforting nonetheless. Like, "Boys will be boys."

Sometimes Claudia wonders if Adrian is *troubled*. An awfully scary word for a mother. He's been a bit of a bully to Noah. At parent-teacher conferences earlier this year, Adrian's teacher told Claudia, "He's . . . *chatty*, to say the least."

This rebellious streak of his is new. Listen, it's *normal* for a kid to be rebellious, she'll have you know—she's read parenting books by the dozen. But it's not normal when he's *nine*. He's *nine*. Not sixteen.

The boys are talking now, laughing a bit. Gesturing toward the roof of the fort, perhaps suggesting finishing touches, their shrill voices dampened over the snow.

Their laughter makes her feel a little gushy inside in a not entirely pleasant way. Like the feeling's intensity is too much too fast. Like *These are my children*. Or more like *These are my children?*

She thinks about the fort collapsing onto them in an innocent “What *if* the fort collapses onto them?” sort of way. And then it's less than innocent. It's entirely unbidden. Because it's not like the thought terrifies her, or makes her breathe all hard the way she breathes when something scary happens. It's not like she tries to stop the thought when it comes. For just a sliver of a moment, actually, the thought brings her a sense of relief. A sort of comfort.

She thinks about it. Sees it all happen. The soft white silence packed on top of her frail children as they suffocate.

The horrifying, unthinkable part of this is the *comfort*. It's like the potential of the boys dying right out in their own front yard is as casual as small talk about a new restaurant in town.

It's not like she wishes death upon them. She knows that. She's not that kind of person. But the thought entering her mind like it owns the place, and her letting it crash for even a second, and its presence making her sigh with some ease, like a weight off her shoulders like, aaaahh, is enough to make her feel like the worst mother in the world.

One of the parenting books she liked was called *There Are Way Worse Moms than You*.

She turns on the outside lights to see them better. Noah carves out a hole in the side of the fort and Adrian is inside, looking through it. “A window, a window!” Noah shrieks.

These kids are so alive. So immensely alive.

She refills her mug. Not the one she just washed— she has this thing about refilling freshly washed glasses. She thought she’d be swallowing dish soap if she didn’t wait at least a day.

She picks up this mug Adrian made her for Mother’s Day. It says BEST MOM IN THE HOLE WIDE WORLD!!!! with precisely that many exclamation points and the missing W.

“Gee,” she says.

Simon gets home later than normal that night. “The roads are a mess,” he says.

He’s saying goodnight to the boys while kissing Claudia hello. It’s routine, but it feels a little awkward tonight like it’s the first time. Like, “Who’s this person in my house?”

In bed, he says, “Have a good day?”

“Fine.”

“Wasn’t fine, then, Claud. I know you.”

The house was making house noises and Claudia waited for silence before responding.

“Simon?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She hated when he said jokey things when she was trying to be sincere. Like ma’am. It made her feel like a baby.

She switches off the lamp on the bedside table like she'd rather him not look at her when she says what she's about to say. "This thing happened today. Or it didn't happen, I guess. Obviously. I just had a bad thought."

"What sort of thought?" he says.

"The boys built a fort today."

"Looked like the Taj Mahal of snow-forts," he says, punctuated by a yawn.

Claudia presses on, "And I thought for a moment what if it collapsed? Like, collapsed right on top of them."

"Well," he pauses. "Well but it didn't. A scary thought, though. I'm sorry you had a scary thought."

"But Simon. Listen. I felt *relieved* for a moment. I felt *good* about it. Thinking about our sons dying together like that's perfectly *normal*."

He turns to her in the dark. Something in his eyes. Fear, maybe.

"Um," he says. "Well. You wouldn't really feel that way. Right? Claud?"

She thinks about it and says finally, "No. I guess I wouldn't. I mean, really, I wouldn't."

The word "guess" hangs in the air like something evil.

"I love this life, Simon," she says quickly. "I promise I do. I saw a fox today out in the bushes. It made me *happy*. I'm *happy*, Simon. I promise I am. I promise."