

FAIR FIGHT

katherine michienzi

Tommy pushed his red boots into the snow, packing down the narrow path in the middle of the road. On either side of him, piles of snow and ice chunks towered above him. He reached out, straining to reach the top of them on tip toes, but he fell short.

He wasn't too surprised. He and Joey already took turns jumping the highest to look at what they could see above the white. If they angled their heads just right, and were kind of far back from the snow, they could see windows and roofs. The tops of bare branches stuck out. Like antlers, Tommy always thought.

Joey marched ahead of him. His green mitten trailed along the blue shadows of the snow, letting the loosest layer sprinkle down. He turned back to Tommy, smiling with red cheeks. "Are you keeping up?"

"Yes!" Tommy sped up next to him.

They were getting close to David and Michael's house now, and Tommy knew all their friends would be out to play. The snow had stopped falling two days ago, but it took their fathers that long to clear a path from the door to the road, and for all the fathers and sons on the block to clear out a path on the road.

Right when Tommy was about to lose his mind stuck inside, his mom got a call from Joey's. Tommy was already putting on his heavy sweater and snow pants, and he could hear his mom in the other room talking about the storm and the news from the zoo. They'd already been out for hours, building snowmen, falling into snow, and climbing up the drifts.

Coming up to a break in the snow, they looked down a wider street. The drifts weren't too bad along the street, and they could see outlines of front lawns and paths for sidewalks. All the kids on the street were out, lined up against each other on either side of the street, volleying snowballs through the air. Kids shouted in excitement when they hit their target and yelled in frustration when they were hit. Tommy could recognize some of the people in his school: the Stanton boys, Jenny, Emma, and Robert.

"Look at this!" Joey bounced up and down. "There's David!" He pointed to the kid in a dark blue hat.

Tommy scanned the other side of the street. "And there's Michael! I call his team!"

They broke off from each other, running to opposite sides. Instantly, they were part of the team they joined, gathering snow and forming projectiles. Tommy got hit more than he hit others. Joey targeted him the most, at one point throwing the snowball right at his face. The snow fell inside his shirt, numbingly cold and sharp. Tommy abandoned his front, racing over and tackling Joey. The other boys joined in, pushing and elbowing each other in a giant pile of swishing nylon and knitted hats.



"Alright boys, that's enough," Mr. Stanton called from down the street where he was talking to some other neighbors. Some of the men were in their hunting gear.

They broke apart. Tommy was angry at the snowballs and the fight. Joey had been better than him and Tommy didn't get the chance to get back at him.

"I get one free hit to make it even," he declared.

Joey knew this was coming, and he was even about to offer it up himself. He liked that he was better at snowball fights, but he liked being Tommy's friend more. "To make it even," he agreed.

Tommy went to the pile of snow at the end of the nearest driveway. He searched through the chunks of snow, finding a heavy, football-sized one. There was some ice in there, he could tell, but not enough to actually hurt Joey. He liked being friends with him more, too.

The two boys lined up against each other. The other kids formed a circle of spectators around them. They knew fair was fair.

Tommy held the snow in both hands, raising it above his head, and throwing it on Joey. It hit him with a thud, and Joey oofed at the impact. The snow left a mark on his brown jacket where it hit him.

"Even?" Tommy asked in the silence ringing out.

"Even." Joey agreed.

"Hey, I'll get my sled from the garage!" David called from the side. The kids gasped in excitement, a new fun to be had. Tommy and Joey settled their matter, so there was no more anger or fighting.

They all played together for another hour, under the bright sun and clear skies. Tommy's teeth were cold from smiling in the chill, and his legs were numb from the wet snow soaking through his layers.

Mr. Stanton's voice suddenly cut through everyone's clattering and laughter. "Kids, you have to go home now," he called from his front door where he was talking with Mrs. Stanton.

A collective whine rose from the group.

"Hey, now, cut it out. Did your parents tell you about the zoo animals? Mr. Richards called from a couple streets down. He saw them by his house, so it's time you all get off the street. Let's go."

"What is he talking about?" Joey whispered to Tommy.

"The zoo animals, you don't know?" Tommy asked. Joey shook his head. "Some of them escaped the zoo! I think it was reindeer. That's what my mom was saying. They just walked over the fence cause the drifts got so high!"

"Do you think the polar bears got out?" Joey gasped.

Tommy paused, he wanted to be impressive. "Yeah, they did."

"That's so cool!" Joey was peering down the street.

"Yeah, but hey, we need to go home, let's go." Tommy was nervous at Mr. Stanton's announcement. He went to the zoo years ago with his mom and baby sister. He couldn't remember how big reindeer were in real life.



The kids were dispersing quickly into their homes, and Tommy tugged at Joey's shoulder. "Come on, let's go."

Joey turned, and they began walking back to their street. This time, Tommy led the way. They didn't have to go too far: just five blocks away. Tommy could see their footprints heading the other way as they walked against them. The towering snow drifts were no longer awesome, but sat like a maze for the reindeer to hide in. He wondered how high they could jump, if they could just fly above all the snow, how big were they. He didn't know what they liked to eat.

Tommy could hear Joey suddenly stop when they reached a side street. "What are you doing?"

"Do you want to see a polar bear?" Joey asked.

"What? No!"

"Why not?" He retorted.

"Because I just don't, okay? Come on, I want to go home."

Joey angled his head. Tommy shifted under the look. Did this make him chicken? "It would be so fun, though! It's an adventure!"

Tommy opened his mouth then closed it. "I don't know," he trailed off.

"Well, I'm going to see a polar bear. You can come with me or not, I don't care." Joey turned down the street, heading toward Mr. Richards'.

Tommy watched for a moment. He couldn't let Joey go by himself. If a polar bear really did escape, and Joey was the only one who saw it, he'd be the coolest person in their grade. In the whole school. And Tommy would just be the scared one who didn't see it when he had the chance.

"Wait," he shouted, running down the street, "I'm coming."

Joey pumped his fist, "Yes!"

Even though they were a block away from the Stanton's, it was quiet and lonely on this street. No one was outside. The lightest layer of snow swirled gently across the drifts. Tommy and Joey shuffled along. They came up to another crossroads, this one more cleared out. Snow came up only a couple feet against the trees and street signs.

"That's Mr. Richards' house, isn't it?" Joey whispered, pointing to the third house down.

Tommy looked around at the open street. "Yeah. So, where's the polar bear?"

"Maybe they're the next street over? Let's climb up to see."

Joey went up to the nearest pile of towering snow. It was practically a hill. They scaled it carefully, pushing chunks of ice down as they went up. A few feet higher, they could see a bit further down the streets.

Tommy turned to the right. The street looked like it always did in the winter, washed white in the sunlight. He let out a breath, the air puffing in front of him.

A quick movement caught his eye. Hitting Joey on the shoulder, Tommy whispered to him, "Look!"



There they were. Two reindeer moving between trees about halfway down the block. Standing tall. Joey gasped, and they turned to the noise, their eyes searching the landscape. Tommy could see their exhales as the froze. For a long moment, no one moved. They just looked and looked. One of the reindeers blinked and turned back to ground, nosing around through the snow.

"Wow," Tommy breathed. "I don't think I've ever been this close to reindeer!"

"Me neither," Joey whispered back. "Hey, we should get closer!"

"Are you crazy? No!"

"Tommy, when will we get the chance again? Come on, please!" He was already turning to climb back down.

"Joey, no — "

A cracking boom cut him off. Tommy whirled back to the reindeer. One of them groaned out before taking off running. The other one was laying on the ground, four men were slowly approaching it. Two of them were holding shotguns.

"What just happened?" He asked frantic.

"They just shot it!" Joey answered.

"They can't do that!" Tommy shook Joey, "They can't do that! They belong to the zoo!"

"Tom, I know — "

The men were getting closer to the blood on the snow. One of them chuckled and patted another on the back. "Look at what you got."

"Too bad their antlers are gone, I would have liked to mount those up." The shuffled around the animal, talking more, someone saying they better call the zoo up. They hadn't noticed the boys.

"Joey, they can't just do that!" Tommy exclaimed.

He was quite for a long moment, mouth open in shock. Joey finally said, "Come on, we need to get home."

"What? No! We need to help it! They're just going to let that reindeer bleed out. It's not fair! We need to — "

"Go home." Joey gritted out. "Come on."

He grabbed Tommy's arm and went to the edge of the hill. Tommy tried to stop, but he was too shocked to really put up a fight. He stumbled down the snow, following Joey as he dragged him along.

Tommy fumbled along the path, noticing his numb legs and sore arms and snot running down his lips. He squinted up at the burning sun then back to the ground. He shoved his shaking hands into his coat pockets.✴