



The Rink

The trouble with being an older brother is you've got to drag your younger brother everywhere you go. That and keep him covered in band-aids any time he scrapes himself, which is about every ten seconds. He's got this thing about his blood leaking out. "I'm leaking!" he says, "I'm leaking!" whenever he cuts himself. He loves band-aids.

So just when stuff starts getting exciting, and you're with your friends, there he is, twenty steps behind you yelling, "Hey! Wait for me!" That's the way it usually is.

It's a couple of years ago on Halloween and as per usual, I'm taking my five year old brother Cory trick-or-treating, but on the way home, we run into some of my friends.

Shane, who is a kind of leader of our gang, has a neat idea. He also has a pellet gun. He says he found it, but with Shane you never know. Anyway, he wants to go over to old man Givens' house and maybe pop out a few windows.

Old man Givens was the principal at our school till he retired last year. Givens the Geezer we called him because of

his bony, bald head. And his eyes would burn you like a cigarette. I never actually saw him give the strap because they don't allow that any more, but they said he used to use half a metre of a special thick black licorice because it didn't leave any marks. And then he'd sort of eat it on the school grounds, in front of everybody. He never used to yell. He didn't need to. All he did was whisper and everyone listened.

So anyway, I really want to go with Shane and the gang but Cory is with me, and everything I do when Cory is around, my mom finds out about. I mean Cory is basically a nice kid but he has a mouth as big as a bathtub. So I send him home and promise that if he says a word to Mom, I'll eat all his Halloween candy.

We go over to Givens the Geezer's house and park ourselves behind some bushes. Cam and Jerry have two bars of soap and work over Geezer's car. We try not to laugh too loud. Donny, another friend, has a dozen eggs. He gives a couple to me. We time it so that as Shane shoots his gun, Donny and I fire the eggs through the broken window.

On the count of three we do it, and it works like crazy! Shane's gun doesn't actually make a hole big enough for the eggs to go through. They slobber all over the window instead and it's really just as good. We run like mad! We can hear alarms going off.

It's not even an hour later when I get home. But I hardly walk through the door and I can tell that Bathtub Mouth has said something to Mom and Dad. I look at him and he says, "I told them you were going to take my candy if I said."

Cory gets the candy. I get in trouble, big time.

When it's all over, the police find that Shane's gun is hotter than a pancake and he actually goes to Wilbur Hall, a place for jaydees. The rest of us are on some kind of probation where we have to work for people, doing odd jobs.

Guess where I have to work? You got it — Geezer Givens'.

I have to work for three hours a week for ten weeks, just about till Christmas. The kind of stuff I have to do is help him clean the attic, the garage, shovel his walks and a bunch of other odd jobs no one would ever normally do, like washing the basement ceiling.

I guess I deserve every minute of it, but to tell you the truth, it's not as bad as I thought it would be. He taught science at school and is a real electronics nut. He has all these gadgets and doodads, remote this and automatic that, half of which don't work, but of course he's trying to fix.

So far the strangest thing I help him with is this intercom he has hooked up from his house to the garage. He wants to see if it's working. He says it's to hear the garage door opening. Why doesn't he just *look*? Anyway, it works.

I've been there three or four weeks and I've been in every room in his house, except one. This one has its door closed all the time. Then, one day, I find out something I wish I didn't know.

"Come here, Jason," he says.

"Yeah?"

He opens the door and says, "I've been putting this off for months. I guess I should clean it up." In the room is all

sorts of sewing stuff, pictures on the walls that look hand-painted, and knickknacks, the kind your grandmother has. It's quite a mess. "My wife's," he says.

"I didn't know you were married." You never think of your bald ex-principal as being married.

"She passed away in August," he says. "My boy wanted to clean it after the funeral, but I wouldn't let him."

"I didn't know you had kids." I can be pretty stupid some times.

He takes a photograph that's above the sewing machine. It's got a man and a woman and a little baby in it. The man is holding the baby.

"This is my boy, Michael. Lives in Toronto. That's my grandson, Bradley. He's six now. And that's Judy," he says, pointing at the picture. "They're coming for Christmas. I'll need the room."

He gives me a package of garbage bags and says, "Put as much of this in these as you can." I notice his hand is shaking. "Take them out to the garage."

He turns and walks away. Fast.

The next week it has definitely turned colder and the first mat of snow hides the frozen dirt. You know what I mean — where you kick a lump you think is snow but you just about break your foot.

Anyway, Mr. Givens and I are in the backyard where his garden used to be. There's still dangly frozen tomato plants sticking up and other stuff he wants cleared out. He paces off

a square in the snow and says, "Get this as level and clean as you can. This is where it's going."

"What?" I ask.

"The rink," he says. "For my grandson, for Christmas."

I never made a rink before, so I get kind of excited about it and I tell Mom and Dad. Cory, who is big into hockey, thinks this is the cat's meow. He's never seen anyone make a rink before and wants to come and watch. I figure it's not going to hurt anyone, so in a couple of days I take him along to Mr. Givens'.

Cory is sporting two band-aids that cover a rug burn on his chin. He got it diving after an imaginary puck in the living room. He doesn't *need* two band-aids, but that's what he's got.

Mr. Givens is kind of surprised to see me and Cory because I'm not *supposed* to be there for another four days. But I tell him my little brother wants to watch us make the rink and he gets all cheerful and even though he's in the middle of watching a hockey game on TV, he gets dressed, hauls the hose outside and we start putting water where the rink will be.

Mr. Givens has already put little boards around it and in a few minutes, after the water has soaked through the snow, it looks like a box of ugly cold slushy mud. I personally don't see how this is going to be a rink of any kind, but Cory likes the steam going up and chirps at Mr. Givens, asking a zillion questions, like little kids do. Bathtub Mouth.

"Can I skate on it?" asks Cory. He's picking at the top band-aid on his chin.

"Sure you can," says Mr. Givens, "but the first one to skate is going to be my grandson, Brad. You'll like him. He's just about your age."

"When's he coming?" asks Cory.

"He'll be here for Christmas," says Mr. Givens.

"That's a long time," says Cory.

"Not as long as you think," says Mr. Givens. "Well, that should do her for now. All we can do is seal it tonight."

"What's sealing?" asks Cory.

"To keep the water from leaking out. Like a band-aid stops bleeding," says Mr. Givens, smoothing out the one on Cory's chin.

The questions go on and on, while we put the hose away, while Mr. Givens gives us hot chocolate, in fact until we leave.

When we get out of the house and are on our way home, Cory is as quiet as he was noisy at Mr. Givens'. Too quiet.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Is sealing really like a band-aid to stop bleeding?"

That's what he asks me, honest. Kids.

Over the next few weeks Cory and I go over to Mr. Givens' a lot. Sometimes I pull him over in the sleigh when the snow is fresh, before people get their walks cleared. It's fun. But when the walks are cleared, we walk. It's only a couple of blocks.

The rink actually starts looking like a rink the closer we get to Christmas, and we're actually starting to be friends, especially Mr. Givens and Cory. But the closer Christmas

comes, the more edgy Mr. Givens gets. Even Cory notices it. And being Bathtub Mouth, he asks.

"What's the matter, Mr. Givens?"

Mr. Givens is incredibly patient with Cory's questions. He always answers. It would drive me nuts.

"Well, this is the first Christmas without Mrs. Givens, Cory. It just makes me a little sad, that's all."

"Oh," says Cory. He thinks about it for a second, then asks, "Why does that make you sad?"

I can't believe he asks that! That is not the kind of question you ask somebody and expect an answer. It's too personal. But, you guessed it, Mr. Givens answers.

"Well, my son and I tend to argue a bit, and Mrs. Givens was always there to . . ." He looks for words. "To keep us from hurting each other too badly. To stop the bleeding."

"Like a band-aid," says Cory.

"That's right," chuckles Mr. Givens, "Mrs. Givens was like a band-aid."

"She'd seal things."

"She sure would."

When we get outside, I give Bathtub Mouth heck for getting so personal.

"Don't call me Bathtub Mouth," he says.

"Well then don't ask such stupid questions."

"If I don't ask, how am I going to know?" says Cory.

I've got to admit, for a question, it's a pretty good answer. It shuts me up anyway. It also makes me forget the sleigh.

Neither of us remember the sleigh till a couple days later when it snows again. Christmas holidays have started and we trudge through the snow, past all the lit houses till we get to Mr. Givens'. Our plan is to scrape the rink and give it one more flood before Mr. Givens' grandson arrives.

But when we get there, the house is dark. It's like a black hole in the block, next to all the other houses. Our sleigh is nowhere in sight. Mr. Givens must have put it in the garage, or maybe behind the house.

We walk around to the back and there is no sled, but the rink is freshly scraped and flooded. The moonlight shines off it like a knife. It's almost spooky, as if something's dead. Cory wants to slide on it, but I say, "No. It's for his grandson first."

We get half a block away when a car pulls into Mr. Givens' driveway. It's them, Mr. Givens, his son and family. They get out of the car. In the clear air we can hear them like they're next to us and Mr. Givens says, "Watch this!" He waves his arms and all of a sudden, his house lights up like a Christmas tree. Spelled out in letters of light is "Welcome Judy, Michael and Brad!! Merry Christmas."

"Oh that's sweet," says a woman I guess is Judy.

"Very nice, Dad," says Michael.

"Can we go in?" says grandson Bradley. "I'm cold."

Cory wants to go back and get the sleigh. But I tell him we should wait till tomorrow.

It's Christmas Eve. Cory and I trek over to Mr. Givens'. We go to the door. I'm just about to push the doorbell, when

I stop. I can hear yelling in the house. I look at Cory. He can hear it too.

Sometimes with your brother, you know exactly what each other is thinking, and right now we're both thinking about what Mr. Givens said, about his wife not being there. And how she stopped the fighting.

I turn to go but Cory pushes the doorbell. The yelling stops. Mr. Givens answers the door.

"What do you want?" he says. His face is red.

"Our sleigh," I manage to say.

"In the garage," he says, and closes the door.

A second later we hear the garage door rumble open. We go in and there, leaning up against the far wall, is the sleigh. Right next to it is the intercom I helped test weeks ago. I know it works. Cory looks at me with question marks in his eyes. I turn it on. We listen.

"I don't care if you flooded from here to Calgary . . . " Michael.

"I don't want to go skating. I hate it outside." Brad.

"If Brad doesn't want to go skating, he doesn't have to go skating!" Michael.

"Fine, get the hell out then!" Mr. Givens.

We hear a door slam and through the window we see Mr. Givens heading towards the garage. Cory and I dive behind the car.

"Where's he going?" Judy says over the intercom.

"I don't know." Michael.

"Can't you two get along?" Judy.

Mr. Givens is in the garage by now, with no coat. He doesn't see us.

"Shut up!" he yells at the intercom. It goes silent.

He goes to the wood stacked against the wall. He picks up an axe. Cory and I freeze, if you can freeze even more when you're already frozen.

He leaves the garage, but instead of heading back to the house, he goes to the back yard. Cory runs after him. "Mr. Givens!" he's saying, "Mr. Givens!" I follow Cory.

Mr. Givens is at the rink. He's chopping at it with the ax. He is like a madman. Chips of ice are flying everywhere, splinters of board.

"Mr. Givens, don't!" Cory is yelling. "Mr. Givens!"

Mr. Givens stops. He is sweating and breathing hard.

"Why are you doing that to the ice?" asks Cory.

By now Mr. Givens' son Michael is there, so is Judy his wife.

"Dad stop, come on in," Michael says. He tries to take the axe.

"Leave me alone," says Mr. Givens.

"Are you looking for the seal, Mr. Givens? Remember the first night when we sealed it?" asks Cory.

Mr. Givens' hand relaxes, the axe falls. His eyes turn to Cory. Then he crumbles to the ice with his hands over his face. He starts crying like a baby. "Yes, yes," he says, "I'm looking for the seal."

"What's he talking about? Dad, what are you talking about? Are you okay?" asks Michael. He puts his hand on his father's back.

"He misses your Mom," Cory says. "You shouldn't fight on Christmas."

Silence follows. Like after a tree snap when it's thirty below.

"I'm sorry Dad. I miss her too," says Michael the son. He crouches down beside Mr. Givens and looks for the right words.

"It's a beautiful rink, Dad. I just can't make Brad skate on it. He's not me. When you made all those rinks for me, those were the best days of our lives."

Mr. Givens lifts his head. He straightens up, still on his knees, on the ice.

"Then I got too big for it," continues Michael, "And we didn't play anymore. We needed Mom — we *used* Mom to keep us from fighting. We got to learn to do it alone, Dad."

Mr. Givens looks up at the stars, then at his son.

"I love you Dad," says Michael. And they hug. Right there on the rink.

We all stand there, like icicles broken from the eaves. We look at each other, and then away, not knowing what to say.

Except for Cory. He asks, "Can I skate on the rink now, Mr. Givens?"

Mr. Givens smiles through his tears. "It's all yours," he says.

"Well, yours too," says Cory.

"Maybe Brad will come out when he sees you skating," says Michael.

"We'll fix the holes though," says Cory.

"Yes we will," says Mr. Givens.

He's a neat kid, Cory. I decide then and there I won't call him Bathtub Mouth anymore.

Soon after, we wish them a Merry Christmas and head home. We forget the sleigh again, but it doesn't matter. We'll be back.