

Snow Kindness

Virginia had been awake on and off during the night, watching enormous flakes blow past her bedroom window. She'd left the curtains open deliberately. This was rare, these days, a snowstorm. The wind was wild and confused. Mostly the snow came from the south, but sometimes from the north, and from time to time from below as if trying to climb back to the sky. In the small hours of the morning Virginia dozed, floating in a dreamy, whited-out dimension, so that when she eventually woke properly and glimpsed clear sky through the pane, she was thoroughly disorientated.

She wondered if the storm had really happened, but from the window saw the landscape utterly transformed. The sun was rising from behind the white peninsula, casting sparkles across the city. In the kitchen Martin sat at the table in his dressing gown, putting the finishing touches to seven-year-old Laura's Michelin Man look. "Out you go," he said, patting her padded backside. She waddled off. "Shut the door!" yelled Virginia and Martin in unison.

Martin leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Snow Day! We haven't had one of these for years. School's off. I've phoned the office, said I'll work from home."

Virginia pulled up the kitchen blind. Ten-year-old Ben stood grinning in what yesterday had been the sandpit. He hurled his snowball. It exploded with a *thop* on the pane. "Where are your gloves?" shouted Virginia, but he only rolled his eyes and bent down to scoop more snow.

It was an astonishing snowfall. The snow was dry, puffy and generous – genuine Snow with a capital S, quite unlike the occasional miserable sleet of recent years. By ten-thirty the street was alive. Children and adults alike were chucking snowballs and towing makeshift toboggans. Yelps and bursts of laughter rang crystal-clear against a background silence. Snowed in and useless, the cars were white mounds. Like igloos, thought Virginia, abandoned igloos. With a shiver she suddenly remembered Johnny. Little Johnny-up-the-road, the kid from Tuvalu, the solemn wee boy she minded every day after school while his parents worked. Not that Johnny had ever been anywhere near an igloo. This would be his first experience of snow. He must be freezing. She glanced at the snowed-over sandpit – "Johnny's sandpit," as the whole family now called it.

By now it was eleven in the morning. It struck Virginia that Johnny's parents would probably have to go to work today, snow or no snow. So who was looking after Johnny? Virginia cringed to think that she hadn't spared a thought for any of them until this moment. She decided to walk up to their place immediately. She was pretty sure she knew which one it was.

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Virginia's breath came out in clouds and the cold nipped her lungs when she inhaled. It would freeze tonight. Tomorrow the footpaths and roads would be like glass. How long since there'd been a Snow Day? Five years? Six? Nothing like this though. This was a real old-fashioned dumping. Later in the week it'd be ugly, all dirty ice and cold-in-your-bones. Meanwhile it was beautiful, beautiful to be crunching up the street on such pristine whiteness, beautiful that it was a Snow Day, that school was cancelled, that the whole street seemed to be out walking, and with the walking greeting one another – calling hellos, chatting, catching up on months of news. Everyone was pink-cheeked, exhilarated.

Two boys were making a snowman in the middle of the road. Virginia recognised them from Ben's year at school. The snowman's fat torso was almost as tall as the boys themselves. They had manoeuvred a pumpkin-sized snowball into position for the head, but it wobbled, threatening to fall off.

"Here, I'll help," offered Virginia. She gathered more snow to form a neck, and showed them how to firm the connection. "Isn't it wonderful? Isn't the snow beautiful? Isn't it great having a Snow Day?" They worked together to secure the head, Virginia chirping like a finch, the boys saying nothing.

"Goodness," she said, stepping back, and suddenly noticing the structure's snowy breasts and its carrot penis. She recovered herself. "Is it a boygirl or a girlboy?"

One of the boys attached a snow nipple to the right breast; the other was wadding up more snow for buttocks. "It's a snowtran," muttered the shorter boy.

Virginia coughed. "Well," she said, "it's very good. I'd better go. I'm on my way to get Johnny from up the road. He's at your school. Do you know Johnny?"

"Johnny Coconut," muttered the tall boy. Virginia flushed. She walked on.

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She was right to go and fetch Johnny. His father beamed with relief when she reached their door. "I should be gone," he said, "but I didn't know what to do with Johnny. And my wife had an early shift. This is really a great help – are you sure it's not a problem?"

"It's good as gold, honestly," replied Virginia. "Martin's working from home today, but I thought you'd probably have to go to work, and I'm happy to take Johnny, he can play with Ben and Laura, just play – this is nothing to do with the after-school arrangement, I mean there'll be no charge – they can make a snowman and – ."

She was burbling, but how could she say what she felt, which was something about adversity and snow making people magnanimous, and this tradition, in the south, of Snow Kindness ... No, she couldn't say what she felt, standing there on the freezing doorstep of Johnny's freezing house. The truth was, these people were refugees whose homeland was being steadily swallowed by the Pacific Ocean, and she felt sorry for them. Protective even. She supposed it was Johnny. She'd had him after school for six months now, six months during which he'd done nothing but play in the sandpit. She corrected herself: work in the sandpit. Five afternoons a week for half a year the child had laboured, silent and absorbed, constructing intricate towns. At five minutes to five, always – she could set her watch by it – he put the finishing touches to the last house on the last street. By five past five everything was gone, ritually and systematically drowned with a couple of buckets of water. At ten past five Johnny's father came through the gate to take him home, and Johnny was always cleaned up, a sand-free zone, ready and quietly waiting, school bag on his back.

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Johnny and she retraced her footprints through the snow. He was cold. She would dig out some of Ben's cast-off clothes for him, a jersey, a pair of gloves, a hat. His eyes were enormous, taking it all in. The snowman was finished. The boys had a new project. They rolled a huge snowball along the street. "We're gonna take it to the top of the park and drop it down on the cars," said the shorter boy. "Giddy Johnny. Whaddya reckon? Awesome, eh."

Johnny stared at the snowman. Virginia wasn't certain if she should point out its non-traditional nature. She didn't want him drawing pictures of his first Snow Day in New Zealand complete with transvestite snow...person. What on earth would his grandmother back in Tuvalu think? This was the grandmother who'd refused to leave. *I was born here and I'll die here*, she'd said. Johnny's father had repeated this to Virginia, and Virginia's heart had tightened, or shrunk, like a poked anemone. She saw the grandmother stiffly defying the encroaching sea, a woman as insubstantial as a piece of driftwood, yet fierce, made solid by her sheer determination not to be washed away. Tacked to the thin wall inside her house, imagined Virginia, would be all the photographs from New Zealand, and little Johnny's letters and drawings. Curling at the edges, each one, and a little more with every tide.

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Virginia made Johnny a hot chocolate, and rummaged in Ben's wardrobe for warm clothes. "That's better," she declared, once she had him rugged up like a woolly lamb. "Here," she added, "a good luck snowman". She tucked into the pocket of his jacket a plastic snowman she'd found in the toy box. It was something off a Christmas tree, a trinket she'd always found ridiculous hanging off a pine branch in warm December. "Away you go now."

Johnny trudged outside obediently. He went to where the sandpit was hidden under snow, and stood there. Virginia knocked on the window. "Hey, Ben!" she shouted at her son. "Show Johnny how to make a snowman. He's never seen snow before."

Ben made a face. He didn't usually bother with Johnny. Johnny was so much younger, only six to Ben's ten. And quiet, the kid was virtually mute. Every day after school, he'd politely eat his fruit and biscuits then head straight out to the sandpit. Every day making those silly villages full of twig people and plastic pigs, pushing those rusty matchbox toys around on pretend roads.

But Johnny was already piling a mound of snow over the sandpit. He was more animated than Virginia had ever seen him, bossing Laura around, sending her scurrying round the garden to find bits and pieces of greenery. He had Ben gather armfuls of snow, and together they mounded a solid phalanx, higher than Johnny himself. Laura brought snapped-off rhododendron and camellia, and Johnny set about foresting the mini-mountain. Virginia smiled. It wasn't exactly a snowman, but it was very pretty anyhow. The snowman, she thought with relief, had obviously not made much of an impact.

Johnny smoothed the top carefully, and from his pocket pulled the little plastic snowman. He positioned it reverently on the very apex. Like an angel, thought Virginia. Maybe it was a wintry trick of light, but the snowman no longer looked like a piece of mass-produced throw-away junk. She glowed with Good Samaritan happiness. Johnny had finally made some friends: he'd be all right now. His life in this new country would work. He would adapt, to the people, to the climate. He'd look back on this day – on her – with affection. She imagined him telling his own children about the wonderful snowfall the year of his arrival in New Zealand, and how he and the neighbourhood kids ran wild all day, coming inside only briefly, to eat the hot pikelets his friends' mother had whipped up. How the pikelets dripped with butter, how the steam in the kitchen smelled so sweet.

Virginia banged on the window. "Ben!" she shouted. "Now show Johnny how to make a real snowman!" She watched them choose a spot in the corner of the lawn and start kicking snow into place. Still smiling, she rolled up her sleeves and found the mixing bowl.

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At half past five, Johnny's father arrived. "I'm sorry to be late. It was slippery."

"Wait until tomorrow," said Virginia. "It'll be like a slide. Here, I found some warm clothes that used to belong to Ben. Johnny can have them. School will be shut again tomorrow by the looks of it. I'll take Johnny again if you like. They've had heaps of fun."

"Dad! Dad!" Johnny was yelling from the yard. "Come and see!"

Virginia turned on the outside light, illuminating the children and their afternoon's work. "It's a snow gangster," announced Johnny importantly.

"And a snow victim," piped Laura. The snow gangster had a cap and a machine gun. His snow victim lay spread-eagled on the snow, with blood pouring out of a wound in his chest.

"Tomato sauce," said Ben. He saw Virginia's face, and switched to his she's-not-gonna-get-this voice. "It's a snow carnage thing."

"I'm so sorry," said Virginia. "I had no idea. Ben!"

"It doesn't matter," said Johnny's father. "It was very good of you to take him today. You didn't have to." His voice, with its deep Pacific boom, was suddenly quite uninflected, emotionless. Cold. He spoke to Johnny in Tuvaluan. Johnny looked up at Virginia.

"Thank you for having me," he said. "I have to go now."

"I'll pick him up tomorrow then? From your place. I'll walk over, like today..." Virginia faltered.

Johnny's father spoke again in Tuvaluan. "Thank you for having me," repeated Johnny. "Dad says he doesn't have to work tomorrow."

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Hard-edged stars filled the sky. Martin and Virginia lingered in the kitchen once the kids were in bed. Virginia hadn't bothered to set out lunch boxes for the morning. "I'm really pleased that Johnny's started playing with Ben and Laura. But...a snow gangster, of all things. I told them to make a snowman."

Martin laughed. "You're lucky it wasn't a snow mass murderer."

Virginia thought of the blown-apart snow victim oozing blood. "I think we offended them. They're pretty religious." She wondered how she knew this. She'd never been across the threshold at Johnny's place. It was just..."Islanders usually are. Aren't they?"

The snow gangster sneered from the garden. *Rat-a-tat-tat* he seemed to say, *sotto voce*, pointing the machine gun at her through the kitchen window.

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All night, a sensation clung to her: a claggy awareness that wouldn't lift – a thick dream that she knew must be a dream, but couldn't budge. Seemingly it rained, all night long, though the sky, surely, was cloudless, the stars unchallengeable, the temperature sub-zero. But when she got up in the morning and looked out the bedroom window, nothing was left of the snow. It was as if it had never fallen at all. Ragged clouds scudded past. Puddles pooled the ground.

She left Martin asleep and went into the kitchen to turn on the radio. She felt she ought to check the cancellations just in case. Yet the snow had definitely vanished. She stared out: bare trees, sodden grass, a straggly garden.

There! Something white! The grubby remains of the snow gangster were just visible beneath his cap. The machine gun lay off to the side as if flung there in the mobster's final collapse. The snow victim was nothing at all, merely a smudge of red on muddy grass. And the sandpit, Johnny's sandpit...it was awash. No sand to be seen and the plastic snowman floating face down on a full tide of filthy water.

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