

Cottonwood Fall (Pages 392-393)

The Snowsuit

Having spent the morning listening to their classmate Butch Matlock present a long and boring lecture on the "History of Thanksgiving," Jase and Danny are greatly relieved to be saved by the recess bell. They throw on their coats and race outside into the cold air where they are caught up in an incident involving two younger kids from the neighborhood, Sherm Tolna and Chub Tucker.

During the weeks leading up to that morning's deep freeze, the Hamilton broad jump (now called *long jump*) pit had filled with about a foot of rainwater. Overnight, a thick layer of ice had formed. Danny and I took it upon ourselves to break this layer into as many ice cubes as we possibly could, before the bell sounded ending recess.

Our stomping and splashing caught the attention of the herd of Hamilton underclassmen led by Sherm and Chub. One by one they joined us in the pit. It got so crowded that Danny and I decided to take a break and simply watch. From the sidelines, the stompers resembled a crazed crew of stunted Sicilian winemakers at grape-harvest time.

Before long, there wasn't a piece of ice worth stomping, so Danny and I organized a small test of courage for our underclassmen associates. We positioned the two dozen snow-suited neophytes about twenty feet away from the broad-jump launch point, a rectangular rubber pad nailed into the ground at the edge of the pit. When the recess bell sounded, we yelled, "Follow us!" We dashed madly toward the launch pad. When we hit it, we leaped as high and as far as we could. After landing in the center of the pit, we kept on running, through the ice water and up onto the steps of the school.

Before going inside, we looked back just in time to witness the pile up. Instead of maintaining an interval between jumpers, Sherm, Chub, and company had run furiously, en masse toward the small launch pad. The first two jumpers' legs somehow became tangled. Each did a magnificent belly flop right in the middle of the frothy pool of ice cubes and frigid water. Like lemmings, the rest of the snow-suited jumpers leaped into the air and came down right on top of Sherm and Chub, creating an enormous pile of arm-flapping, splashing miniature Eskimos.

By the time the trail of soaking wet snowsuits reached the steps where we stood, each Eskimo was bawling. Frost had formed a white powder, coating their faces and clothing. Abandoning our roles as Riverton's two courageous heroes, Danny and I panicked and absented ourselves from this potential scandal and rushed back to class.

Very innocently, we hung our wraps and took our seats. Just then, the principal's special bell sounded, calling all teachers to her office. By the time the sodden-suited underclassmen made it back to their classrooms, their suits were so frozen their zippers wouldn't open. So a command decision was made to send the shivering, ice-coated boys home in the company of responsible upperclassmen. Each kid was asked to name a trusted guide to accompany him home. Danny and I assembled in the hallway near the front door with the other trustees.

We were given careful instructions on our duties. We should slowly escort our wards to their homes, taking care to ensure that our sniffing ice-balls didn't tumble over and spend the rest of the winter as permanent fixtures embedded somewhere in Riverton's snow-covered landscape. Upon arrival at their houses, we should take them inside and stand them next to the stove. If their mothers were home, our obligation ended.

If no mother was present, we should wait until their snowsuits thawed. Then we should remove their suits and immerse our wards in a hot bath, if we could arrange it. If not, we should cover them with blankets, seat them in front of the stove, and stay with them until their mothers returned.

As we left school, through the window of our classroom, we saw Butch, chalk in hand, plodding on with *The History of Thanksgiving, Part II*. Looking down on frosty Chub and icy Sherm, we decided that we had the better of two undesirable choices for how to spend a frigid Monday afternoon in Riverton.

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