

# **The Snow Day**

**Mark Binder**



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The Snow Day  
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Edited by Beth Hellman • Graphic design by Lou Pop

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PO Box 2462  
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# The Snow Day

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*This story was written as a bonus story for fans of  
“The Zombie Cat.”*

One year when I was a kid, we woke up to eleven and a half feet of snow. It was a Monday morning, five am, and the phone was ringing. I lay in bed listening, wondering if I should get up and answer it.

We didn't have cell phones back then or answering machines either. Actually, now that I think about it, they didn't even have those automated phone messages telling you that school was canceled.

The phone stopped ringing. I looked out my window, but couldn't really see anything. The snow had started late yesterday afternoon, and got heavy just about bedtime. It was still snowing.

No way was I going back to sleep without finding out.

I put on my moccasins, padded downstairs and

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turned on the television to check out the news. Nothing but static on all three stations<sup>1</sup>.

Looking out the living room window, I saw nothing but white.

School had to be canceled, right? Or at least an hour delay.

I listened for sounds upstairs from my parent's room. Nothing.

I sighed, went into the kitchen, opened the back door, and saw a solid wall of white.

It took me a moment to realize what it was—snow. The entire door frame was full of snow.

I've lived in Groston my whole life. New England has snow—or at least we used to have snow back then—but it comes in clumps of three inches or a foot or three feet at most. When you open your back door on a snow day, you expect to see a layer of peaceful white bliss covering all the defects of the back yard.

This snow filled the entire doorway top to bottom, left to right.

And the snow was right in front of me because Dad hadn't gotten around to replacing the storm door when it blew off the year before in a windstorm.

There was even a small indentation in the wall where the back doorknob had poked into the snow.

I grinned. No school today. Definitely.

I reached out and scooped a cold handful, stared at it, and licked it.

Fresh snow and freedom from school taste the same: icy and cool, temporary and delicious.

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<sup>1</sup> No cable, fiber optics or Internet back then. And it was a black and white TV!

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And then the snow started to drift into the house. It wasn't densely packed. I tried to push the door shut but couldn't get it all the way closed.

I dropped the snow in my hand and shoved, but too much snow had gotten in, and the doorjamb was blocked. I leaned against the door. Snow brushed over the tops of my moccasins and began to melt against my bare ankles.

"Mom? Dad!" I yelled. "We've got a problem."

It took five minutes of yelling and screaming to get them downstairs. They stared at me for a while, like I was crazy.

"It's cold in here," my Mom said.

"Why don't you just shut the door?" my Dad asked.

"I can't!" I yelled. "There's snow pouring in!"

They looked at me. They looked at the door. They looked at the calf-deep drift of snow on the kitchen floor.

My parents really aren't very good without their morning coffee.

"Ohmygodomygodomygod!" Mom shrieked.

"Where's the shovel? Where is the snow shovel?" Dad yelled.

"Why is everybody shouting?" screamed my older sister, Ellen from upstairs.

"QUIET!" I bellowed.

Remarkably they all shut up.

"The snow shovel is in the garage," I said, "which isn't going to do us any good, so there's no point in arguing about it. I think that the beach shovels are in there too."

"They are," my Mom said.

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“Don’t look at me like that,” Dad said. “This house doesn’t have a basement.”

Another puff of snow pushed through the gap and floated down on the floor.

“Get something to dig with,” I said, leaning back against the door to keep more snow from coming in. “My toes are freezing.”

To their credit, they leaped into action.

Mom got a spatula. Dad got a serving spoon. They began scooping snow into cooking pots. Ellen came downstairs and began a bucket brigade, dumping snow first in the kitchen sink, and then running it upstairs to the bathtub. Dad duct taped his spoon to a broom handle and cleared enough room behind the door.

Finally, it shut.

I slid to the floor, which was a mistake because it was soaking wet with melted snow.

“Dang.” I sighed. “I am freezing, and now I’m soaked.”

“You’re turning blue,” Ellen said.

“Oh my baby,” Mom said, “go upstairs and take a shower.”

“The bathtub is full of snow,” Ellen said.

“It will melt,” Dad said. “Take a quick shower, warm up, and then after you’re done, rinse the tub and fill it up with clean water.”

“Why?” Ellen asked.

“Because if the power goes out, we won’t have any water to drink or flush the toilets with,” Dad said.

“We can melt the snow,” Ellen said.

Dad shook his head. “Electric stove.”

“I told you I wanted gas,” Mom hissed.

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Dad looked at her. “We agreed that was going to be our next anniversary present.”

Ellen looked at my Dad. “You give her appliances for your anniversary?”

“We go out to dinner too,” Mom said, defending Dad.

“Ellen, go upstairs and get dressed,” Dad said. “Put on some warm clothes.”

I got up and walked away.

After my shower, we had a family meeting in the kitchen. The snow had drifted almost up to the second floor of the house. Outside you couldn't see anything but rooftops, power lines and tree tops. In the kitchen, the counters were covered with pots and pans full of water. The phones were dead. The TV stations were off the air. Dad had found an old hand-cranked radio that picked up an emergency broadcast warning to “Keep off the roads and stay inside. Emergency services will be available soon.” The message repeated over and over.

“It sounds like an old cold-war recording,” Dad said.

“That's not very helpful,” Mom said.

Dad shrugged. “Let's make the best of it.”

“Who wants brownies?” Ellen said.

My hand shot up.

Dad's hand went up. He looked at Mom.

“You want me to cook?” she said.

“I can make brownies,” Ellen said.

“You mean you can make chocolate bricks,” I said. The last time Ellen tried making brownies they'd been hard as diamonds.

“I'll supervise,” Mom said.

“You get to clean up,” Ellen said.

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I've got to say, warm brownies, cold milk, and a good book on a snowy day is just about perfect.

We were all settled into the living room when the power went out.

"No!" Ellen yelled.

"I was just getting to a good part," I said.

"What now?" Mom said.

The living room was dark. Snow blocked the downstairs windows, which sounds cozy, but is actually quite frightening. Without power and without light, our house was as black as a cave.

"Candles," Dad said. "Save the flashlight batteries."

"We should have gotten the candles ready before the power failed," Ellen said, helpful as always. "I can't see my hands!"

Mom sighed. "Nobody move. I don't want to trip over you."

She felt her way to the kitchen. We heard cabinets open and bang shut. A drawer opened. The sound of a match. Then a flicker of light from the kitchen.

It's amazing how much light a single candle can cast against the darkness, and comfort too. Instead of blackness, we could see the outlines of the furniture.

Another candle lit in the kitchen.

"Come and help," Mom said.

Dad rose and headed off. "We'd better take inventory. How many Sabbath candles do we have?"

"A big box," Mom said.

"Don't leave me alone with him," Ellen said. She followed Dad.

Just then there was a knocking at the front door.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?" Mom said.



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“Somebody knocked at the door,” I answered.

“You’re imagining things,” Ellen said.

“It’s just the snow settling,” Dad said.

There was another knock.

“No,” I said. “Someone is at the door.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Dad said. He came back into the living room holding a candle with its base melted onto a teacup’s saucer.

There was another knock.

Now Ellen and my Mom were back.

“Don’t open that door,” Mom said.

“There’s somebody there,” I said.

“Why would they be here?” Dad asked.

“You’re a doctor,” Ellen said.

“I guess that makes sense,” Dad said. “I’ll go upstairs and get my bag.”

“No,” Mom said. “You are not leaving me alone until we find out who’s there.”

“Can I open the door now?” I asked, holding the knob.

“Look through the peephole,” Ellen suggested. She’s not always annoying.

I looked through the peephole. Weird.

“I see light,” I said. “I see snow. I can’t see anyone there.”

“Maybe it’s a squirrel,” Ellen said. “Or a beaver.”

“Or a bear,” I said, grinning, as I saw a shape on the other side.

“Don’t!” Mom and Dad said together.

It was too late. I pulled the door open.

It was my best friend, Kovar. He had a smile on his face. “Wanna come out and play?”

Kovar had a shovel in one hand and a catcher’s mitt

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on the other. He stood upright in a perfectly made tunnel of snow.

A moment later, Kovar's dad came around a corner. "Were they surprised?"

"Told you." Kovar nodded. "You should've seen the looks on their faces." He slapped his Dad five.

Mom and Dad and Ellen were still dumbfounded.

I stepped aside as they came in. We shut the door behind.

Kovar explained that he and his Dad had figured out a way to make tunnels quickly by excavating in a bit, but then pushing the snow out against the walls with baseball mitts as they went. Fortunately, even though it was deep, the snow was incredibly light. Every twenty feet or so, they'd dig an airshaft to the surface so that if the tunnels collapsed they wouldn't suffocate.

"I call it the snow mole technique!" Kovar said, excited.

"It's really not very dense snow," Kovar's dad said. He was a chemical engineer. "Initially, we were going to just do trenches, but I realized that drifting snow would just get back in, so tunnels seemed a better bet. Once the two of us stopped arguing and started working together we found out that we could make about three or four feet of tunnel a minute."

Kovar shrugged. He and his dad get along pretty well, but adults can still be pains.

"Why did you come here?" Mom asked.

"Doctor," Kovar said. "Nobody's hurt, but just in case."

Dad nodded. "I'll get my black bag."

"And you used to coach Little League," Kovar said. "Didn't you?"

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Dad nodded. He had been my Little League baseball coach for exactly three innings. It had been a disaster.

“What we really need are snow shovels and more baseball mitts,” Kovar’s dad said. “Let’s get them and get digging. The more people we teach this method to, the sooner everything will get back to normal.

“All that stuff is in the garage,” Mom said.

“Which is buried in snow,” Ellen added.

“We don’t have a basement!” Dad said. “I am not going to excavate a basement for our anniversary!”

“That sounds like fun,” Kovar smiled.

I grinned back.

Shoveling snow tunnels is hard work, even with a supercharged digging technique. It’s also confusing because without precise mapping,<sup>2</sup> if two people start from different points they don’t always meet up in the middle. Then there are cave-ins and blow-outs and twisters, which is when you start digging at the top of a hill that you didn’t know existed.

Pretty soon we left the digging-out to the grown-ups and a bunch of us gathered in Kovar’s basement lair. Kovar’s Dad had the generator going, so their house was the only one with power.

I sniffed the air as I went.

Kovar smacked me on the back of the head. “I cleaned everything up months ago,” he said.<sup>3</sup>

Charlie, Adam, Sean, Helen and Francesca were already waiting. It was pretty awesome that Kovar’s Dad had rigged up a rope-pull elevator ramp just to get Helen’s wheelchair up and down the stairs.

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<sup>2</sup> No GPS in those days.

<sup>3</sup> See The Zombie Cat.

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“Hey guys,” I said. “Where’s Jesus?”

“Stuck out of town,” Charlie said.

“So, what’s up?” Adam asked.

“Snowball fight,” I said. “What else?”

Everybody in the room, Adam and Sean, Francesca and Helen, Fat Charlie<sup>4</sup> and Kovar started nodding and grinning and talking all at the same time.

“A snowball fight!” “Awesome!” “This snow is perfect for that.” “It’ll be epic.”

“There’s only one problem,” Helen said.

We looked at Helen in her wheelchair.

“Your chair’s not a problem. We’ll work as a team,” Francesca said. “You’ve got a great arm, and my aim stinks. I’ll make them, and you throw them.”

“Thanks, but not that,” Helen said. “Where are we going to do this? There’s a ton of snow but no room to throw it.”

That shut us all up pretty quick.

“We could dig tunnels,” Kovar said. “Dig out a whole playing field. An underground...”

“Under snow,” Adam corrected.

“...top secret snowball battlefield with fortifications and obstacles...”

“No way,” Charlie said. “First off, your Dad has all the equipment. Second, it would take too long. Third, that’s a lot of hard work.”

We all sighed.

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<sup>4</sup> A lot of people seem to get upset when I call one of my best friends Fat Charlie. Deal with it. Back then, Charlie Johnson was fat—short and fat to be specific. Folks who didn’t know him might have judged him for it—or us for calling him that—but Charlie he didn’t take offense. He was an awesome guy who liked to joke, “Hey, I know how to throw my weight around.”

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Then, simultaneously, every single one of us said it all at once.

“The high school gym!”

While our parents were eating lunch, we borrowed the snow mole equipment and dug a side tunnel from the Main Street snow highway to the emergency doors in the middle of the long side of the Ashby Bryson High School gym.

Fat Charlie and I were keeping a lookout while Sean picked the lock. As soon as the door was open, Kovar raced in and disabled the alarms. I found it both a combination of cool and a little disturbing that my friends and I could break into the high school so easily.

“Relax, Mark,” Charlie told me. “The power’s still out, so Kovar had plenty of time, and if it does go off later, we can get home before anybody knows we’re here.”

Inside, the gym was beautiful. It was old school—literally—with row after row of tall arched windows that went up three stories, high enough to let in lots of light despite the blackout. It was a huge room, with enough bleachers to fit most of the town. They were all pushed in, so there was a ton of space.

The centerpiece of the gym was the basketball court with its amazingly beautiful antique parquet wood floor. The zig-zag pattern had been installed by the same company that built the court for the Boston Celtics, and it was lovingly cared for by Mr. Green, the ancient school custodian, who was almost as old as the gym.

Mr. Green was famous for screaming his head off at any kid who wore a black-soled shoe to gym class. Out off respect for (and fear of) Mr. Green, we’d all

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brought sneakers, and left our snow boots by the door. Fortunately, Helen's wheelchair's snow tires were scuffless.

It was perfect: plenty of light, plenty of space. Except for one small problem.

"What are we going to do about snow?" Adam asked. He always was the sensible one. Plus he hadn't been paying attention when we'd made our plans. Adam was all into Tai Chi these days, and he'd been doing some weird slow motion thing while we'd discussed the details.

Attached to the back of Helen's chair was a large package. Francesca and Charlie unhooked and opened it.

Inside were a half dozen blue plastic tarps.

"All right guys," Francesca said. "We pile snow in the tarps, bring the tarps into the gym, build some forts, and then at my signal we start."

"What about the snow melting?" Adam asked.

Francesca rolled her eyes. "The heat's off."

"Oh, right," Adam said.

"We have to wait for your signal?" Sean said. "Who made you the boss?"

"Really?" Francesca rolled her eyes and tilted her head. "You're going to argue with me."

"No," Sean said. He grinned.

Then, Sean, Helen, and Charlie chucked snowballs at Francesca, popping her with three direct hits to the torso.

"Hey!" she yelped. Then she ran back to the door to grab more snow.

The level of fun and chaos was incredible.

We immediately split into teams. Me, Adam and

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Kovar took over the south part of the gym. Francesca, Charlie, Helen, and Sean were on the north side. They had more people, but Fat Charlie and Helen were both huge targets and easier to hit.

You have no idea how challenging it is to load a tarp full of snow while simultaneously protecting yourself from attack and ambushing the other team. We tried every combination from two men loading while one defended to all three counter-attacking in an attempt to push back the enemy.

Then, Kovar noticed that, since everybody was throwing snowballs while squeezing in and out of the doors in the middle of the gym, there was a big pile of snow building up. He nonchalantly laid down a tarp inside the gym and began systematically firing snow at anyone who stood on it.

“Hey!” I yelled as Kovar pegged me on my left shoulder.

“Sorry.” He smirked. Kovar’s eyes glanced down at the blue tarp, and I figured it out.

A few minutes later, the pile on the tarp was big enough that we dragged it to the south end and started building a fortification. We took heavy fire while Adam tried to protect our flanks, but it worked!

We called our Fort “Yerbase” because we figured it would be confusing to the other team if we kept yelling out, “Get back to Yerbase!” Really it just confused everybody, which was not a problem, because Helen’s team named their fort “Arrbase.”

About that time more kids began to show up.

It seems that either our brilliant idea was not unique, or we just had a lot of smart and bored kids in town.

Within an hour there were three new forts: Therbase,

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Weeblebase, and The Whitehouse. The middle door on the other side of the gym was also opened, so while barrages flew back and forth across the court, fresh snow was now resupplied from two sources.

If you want a sense of what was happening, use your imagination to take snippets of every single action movie you've ever seen that didn't include helicopters or submarines.

Kids were running and throwing and taking hits and dodging and diving and falling and getting back up for more.

Two girls climbed up into the rafters and conducted an effective aerial bombing campaign until forces from Yerbase and Hizbase cut off their chain of supply, and Adam convinced them to come down before they fell and got hurt.

Snow walls were built, assaulted, overrun, and then cannibalized for ammunition.

Kovar was cursing himself for not bringing along a funnelator,<sup>5</sup> but since nobody else had artillery we weren't really at a disadvantage. Instead, he kept trying to create arched roofs for Fort Yerbase as protective shields. Helen figured out what he was doing, so every time he got going, she targeted that area.

At one point, Kovar managed to get three-quarters of an igloo built, until Fat Charlie screamed, "Kamakazie!" and came snowplowing through.

"Oh come on!" Kovar complained as Charlie dropped a handful of snow on his head as he raced by.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See "The Stink Bomb War" in *The Zombie Cat*.

<sup>6</sup> We only had one rule, and everybody knew it. No snowballs to the head. And no ice balls, but since there wasn't any ice that wasn't a problem. But, if you could get close enough, you were



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“Coup!” Charlie yelled and took off.

Kovar tasted the snow, closed his mouth and went into rapid fire mode, nailing Fat Charlie three times in the back.

Fat Charlie tripped, went down hard, and started to roll. By then there was a seven-inch layer of snow all across the gym’s floor. Charlie’s coat was damp from snow and sweat exertion, and it started taking on weight.

It was like watching someone invisible building the bottom part of a snowman. Charlie inertia was turning him into a giant snow boulder. Within a matter of seconds, his head was gone. His arms and legs were gone.

Kids were diving out of the way. One third-grader was too slow and got absorbed into the mass.

“We’ve gotta save them!” Adam shouted.

There wasn’t time.

The sideways mountainless avalanche thundered across the gym in under a minute. It wiped out Fort Arrbase, barely fit under the basketball hoop, and hit the North Wall where it cracked open like wintertime version of Humpty Dumpty.

Fat Charlie and the third grader emerged wobbly, dizzy and unhurt.

“We’re okay!” Charlie said, although the third grader looked a little green.

They were perfect targets, and everybody in the room was just about to throw a snowball at them when a

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allowed to drop up to two handfuls on the enemy’s head in a maneuver Francesca had dubbed, “Scalping.”

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loud voice yelled, “WHAT’S GOING ON AROUND HERE?”

The whole gym got quiet. Everyone stopped in mid-throw.

It was my Dad and a bunch of the grown-ups.

We hadn’t noticed how much time had passed. We hadn’t noticed that the power was back and that the lights had gone on in the gym.

The adults had finally noticed that all the kids in town were missing and had organized a search party.

I looked at my Dad.

Then I looked at the snowball in my hand.

My Dad has this thing about playing catch. He said that when he was a kid, his father never had time to throw a baseball around. So every spring Dad would make me and my sister Ellen go outside with him and play catch. We’d do this for two or three days in a row until he’d throw out his arm and have to quit for the rest of the summer. But then next year, as soon as the weather changed, he’d make us do it again.

Dad... Snowball? Hmm.

I licked my lips. Would it be worth it?

“Hey, Dad!” I shouted. “Catch!”

Dad turned and saw me.

He saw the snowball in my hand.

He started to shake his head with a stern look of warning growing in his eyes...

I fired it off.

Was it worth it?

Oh, yes.

The snowball line-driven across the gym straight at my Dad’s head, which I knew was against the rules, but

I had hoped that over that distance gravity would have taken its toll.

Dad saw the white bullet coming in fast and to his credit, he got his mitt hand up in time to catch.

The snowball disintegrated and powder caught him in both ears.

Dad stared at me.

I stared at him.

The whole gym was so quiet that you could actually hear the powder falling off my Dad's earlobes onto his shoulders.

Everybody stared at us.

Dad's frown got deeper and darker. He pressed his hands together in rage, and then without a moment's hesitation, he winged the snow that he'd caught right back at me.

It hit my left shoulder where it exploded with a puff.

"Too slow!" Dad said.

I looked at my Dad. He looked at me. We both grinned.

And then every single kid pegged every single grownup and the fight was back on!

I wish I could say that the Great Gymnasium Snowball Battle lasted for three days, but it didn't.

It was late, and we were tired, hungry, cold and wet.

My Dad and I were among the last to leave.

I was nervous. It's usually not a good idea to hit your parents with snowballs when they're not expecting them.

Dad said, "You know there's going to be trouble."

I nodded, wondering what kind of punishment I was going to get.

"When Mr. Green sees this," Dad said, "he's going

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to lose it. He used to scream at us every time we'd wear black-soled shoes to gym. Now, look at it. "

We stared across the empty gym together.

The parquet basketball floor had been beautiful. There had been decades of wax and polish that had protected it. Now the wood was bare and damp.

Dad and I found some wide mops and cleaned it up as best we could.

By the time we got home, we were both shivering. Mom gave us chicken soup and hot chocolate. Ellen complained that we'd had a snowball fight and nobody had bothered to tell her.

"Dad," I asked before he turned out the lights in my room, "am I in trouble?"

"Not from me," Dad said softly. He ruffled my hair. "Not this time. We'll see what happens with Mr. Green and the high school."

Fat Charlie's Uncle James was a Groston police officer, who went with Mr. Green to survey the damage.

"Old Man Green had a stern face on when he opened those doors," Charlie's Uncle James told us later. "He walked inside like he was treading on sacred ground. He didn't say a word. We left him alone and watched. He walked up and down that gym, utterly silent, surveying every square piece of parquet. He bent down and touched it in spots. After a while, he came back and stood there by the doors. The Mayor and police chief and everybody on the town council were watching him. We were all kids who'd grown up with his yelling at us, just like you guys. Nobody ever wore black shoes to gym more than once.

"Then Mr. Green sighed. He looked at the High School Principal and said, 'You know, I've been

wanting you to polyurethane that floor for years, but you always claimed that removing the wax would have taken half a year and cost too much. Guess you've got to find money to fix it now."

By springtime, just in time for basketball season, the repairs were finished and the whole town came to the ribbon cutting as the newly named Samuel R. Green Gym was reopened.

Mr. Green was finally retiring, and the Mayor was in the middle of giving a speech lauding "Mr. Green's many years of dedicated service..."

Just then, something white flew up across the gym in a perfect arc.

Everyone saw it coming. Girls pointed. Mothers covered their young children's faces.

Mr. Green's eyes narrowed as he followed the parabola. He took one small step to his left.

The snowball—which had been carefully preserved at 32 degrees Fahrenheit so that it would remain soft—plopped right onto the top of the Mayor's bald head, where it splattered into ice crystals and slid under his tie and down the back of Mayor's shirt.

"Who threw that?" the Mayor snapped.

Everyone cheered, and nobody told.

## The End

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<http://markbinder.com/store/>

## About the Author

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Mark Binder likes baking bread and pizza. He loves reading and writing, swimming under water, dining well, breathing deeply, battling the forces of darkness, creating cool projects, having great adventures and telling lies about them. He lives in Providence with his wife, children and friends, and has a sneaking feeling that you're reading this over his shoulder.

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