

South Pole

by David Griffin

Jesse viewed winter days as boring and lifeless when no snow fell. Without a covering of white, the twelve year old boy saw his mill town in the Mohawk Valley as bleak and ugly. Black columns of smoke dripped upward from West Utica's factories to smudge the leaden sky and leak away in wet, ugly streaks. If the weather warmed for a day or two, the streets filled with grey slush, slopping up over the curbs and onto



the snow banks left by the plows in the last storm. During these brief winter intermissions, Jesse scanned the skies and watched his Boy Scout weather instruments, hoping for the snow to return and relieve the gloom. A storm was a happy event, canceling school and many chores at home. But more important, a good storm allowed Jesse to play The Game, and to play it alone.

From his reading at the school library, Jesse knew enough about the weather to recognize the herald of a heavy snow storm. Its arrival began with a bright blue sky shining through the kitchen window in the morning, illuminating his cornflakes as he sat with his brothers eating breakfast. Cold arctic air rushed down from Canada. It gave the sky a deep blue color and chilled the back porch thermometer into the teens as the boys packed up and left for school. By mid-morning, while Jesse read the Baltimore Catechism in unison with his seventh grade classmates, a vast sheet of moisture, sometimes fifty miles wide, rose off Lake Ontario and began to march east across the Tug Hill Plateau. While the boy sat in class and struggled with the question, "Why must my life be for the glory of God?" the warm moist air from the lake charged up against the Adirondack Mountains, fell back and toppled down the Marcy slope

into the valley. The warm air lie down on the cold air mass and together they spawned a storm of heavy snow. Jesse followed the storm in his mind as he trudged through the boredom of his school day.

Toward noon, he glanced up from his Social Studies text and gazed out the window to see large flakes falling to the ground. The church across the street began to disappear as the snow became heavy. That was Jesse's favorite thing about snow, how it could hide whatever it wanted.

At Our Lady of The Holy Innocents Elementary School, Jesse was adrift in an ocean of children. Seventh grade teacher Sister Clementia managed 56 children in a classroom built for 30. Jesse learned his lessons seated at a small desk in the middle of an overheated room. He ate lunch with two hundred other children in the cellar lunch room that doubled as an air raid shelter, squeezed in among a legion of uniformed girls and boys. Afterward, he marched to the bathroom and lined up with other boys at a bank of urinals, together pissing gallons of chocolate milk down the sewer, and sometimes down Jesse's pant leg from the boy next to him. Although he did not yet have the intellectual power to describe the weight produced by all of the crowding, his heart could feel it and his soul took notice.

At home, he endured three generations of family stuffed into a railroad flat. Gram and Gramps had the back bedroom, Mom and Dad the front. In between, Jesse and two brothers occupied a small bedroom stuffed with three beds, dressers, baseball equipment and all the artifacts of boyhood filled to the ceiling with the lives of three boys. He was seldom by himself. In the center ring of a circus going on around him, Jesse was unable to get away from the eyes of others. Nor did he escape their opinions. He was the youngest and the most often corrected. He awoke in the morning to the arguments of his brothers and longed to be away somewhere by himself.

All winter he had been reading accounts of explorers in the arctic wastes at each end of the earth. He spent weeks devouring every arctic adventure book he could find. The nun who ran the little library at school suggested he might like to broaden his literary interests. But Jesse ignored the look of concern on her face. He was quite happy to stay on the topic of his choosing and continue to read of solitary men who braved the snow and ice and cold, men who followed no one's direction but their own.

In his favorite daydream, Jesse was dropped by parachute at the South Pole. Equipment and a tiny house followed him out of the sky from the belly of a transport plane that would return for him the next year. On the southern ice, he would have a place for himself. He could read to his heart's content and maybe

learn to play the guitar and stay up all night to watch the moon rise against a black sky as he sat by his tiny window. Alone with no brothers or grandfather ordering him around, he would be invisible to the rest of the world. Gone to where no one could follow. Where nobody could see him. Where he could do as he pleased.

At the end of March in 1956, Jesse played The Game for the last time. He walked home from school in the final heavy snow of the winter. Sheets of snow slashed furiously across his path and the winds buffeted the boy as he fought his way over sidewalks that were quickly disappearing under a blanket of white. For a twelve year old, it was a perfect day. His mother might worry for his safety until he arrived home, but Jesse hadn't the slightest thought of any danger. After all, he was on the streets of a small city, and only a block from the local hospital.

When he reached the gate to Murnane Field, an outdated complex of ball diamonds and a cinder running track, Jesse detoured from his route home. He hung his book bag on the gate and stepped through the wrought iron entrance, now almost invisible in a covering of wet, sticky snow.

In summer, he sometimes walked here from home and paid ten cents admission to a men's' softball game. He would buy a bag of peanuts for a nickel and climb up to the very top of the decrepit old bleachers. He sat alone and watched the sun go down, eyeing the game occasionally, though he had no interest in sports. He would gaze over the long expanse of green grass and lift his eyes above the dreary neighborhood to the far off clouds on the horizon, golden clouds against the pale blue sky, a sight that could hold one's heart forever. It was so beautiful over there, he thought, and he wondered why a person couldn't live in a sunset like one could live at the South Pole.

But today, at the end of winter, a deep snow lay on the ground, and more was falling from the sky. As he entered the field, Jesse was immediately enveloped in a swirl of icy wet crystals beating against his face and piling up on the front of his coat. Blinded by the snow, he stood there, absorbing the beauty of nothing but white. Today would be excellent.

The first part of The Game was to walk as straight as possible and not miss the field house up ahead. He could see nothing, but he knew there were 74 steps to the building. At step 65 he put his hand straight out in front, ready to touch the front wall of the field house. Now his feet began to slide carefully forward through the snow, to avoid tripping on the front steps in the unlikely event he arrived at the exact

center of the building. Touching the brick wall at 78 steps from the gate, Jesse felt his way around the building. When he reached the rear corner, he walked 40 steps across the back to stand in the exact middle of the building. He put his back against the wall and faced outward. He was now oriented to the entire field, but in the driving snow he could see none of it. It had never snowed as heavily and he was elated to see absolutely nothing but snow everywhere.

Off to his right, Jesse could barely hear a few cars making their way through the snow on Burrstone Road. Across that street lay the small Faxton Hospital. To his left was a dead end street of mostly two-family homes, and across the other street behind the field house he was leaning against was a Firehouse, staffed full time by bored men who sat out on benches in the summer and spoke of nothing but their families or new cars from Detroit. In front of him, straight ahead in the middle of Murnane Field was Jesse's substitute South Pole.

He stepped away from the back wall of the Field House and walked forward 205 steps, the distance to the exact center of the field, as he had measured it on a sunny day last fall. As he reached his destination, Jesse was elated to feel the snow coming down even harder. For a moment he simply stood there, absorbing the wonderful feeling of being completely alone. Hidden by the blizzard, he was cut off from the world. No one from his family watched him, no fellow students crowded him, no nuns with stern looks stood by to correct him. Jesse was not just alone, he was invisible.

As the wind and snow drove into his body, Jesse reached up under his coat, loosened his belt and dropped his pants and under shorts to his ankles, leaving himself naked from the waist down. After loosening his coat and shirt buttons at the neck and wrists, he reached back over his head and with both hands grabbed the collars of his coat, shirt and undershirt. In one fluid motion, he bent forward and pulled them all over his head and threw the clothes behind him. He spread his arms and stood in the middle of Murnane Field, completely naked except for the pants around his ankles. He took a deep breath and screamed, a shout of exultation and complete release. As he cried out a second time, a sharp intake of breath hiccupped from his mouth and a violent shiver overtook him. He was terribly cold, but Jesse was now the king of this frozen world. To celebrate, he pissed in the snow, spraying what he laughingly called "jet fuel" into the west wind, much of the urine coming back to spatter up his front as the wind tried to blow him down. Jesse stood his ground. He had not come this far to be beaten by the wind. He waved his hips left and right and up and down, hoping to make large yellow circles he could not see. When he finished, Jesse reached around behind for his clothes. They were gone.

Jesse yanked up his pants, turned and took a step back toward the field house. He could see nothing. He plopped down on his knees, feeling ahead in the snow. He reached left and right and then he bounded forward a few feet, bending over and feeling in the snow for his coat and shirt. He moved left again, and then right, and in the process lost his sense of direction. He touched something, and pulled his scarf back to him. He was now shivering uncontrollably. Remembering from his books that the head lost a great deal of heat, he wrapped the scarf around his ears and tied it under his chin. In a few minutes, he knew he wasn't going to find his shirt or coat. He believed he could make a beeline in any direction and quickly be on one of the streets, where he could bang on a door and get warm. But he hesitated, thinking how embarrassing it would be to show up half naked on someone's front porch and have to explain what happened to his clothes. Well, he supposed he'd have to do the same at home.

Jesse had played The Game before, but never completely disrobed, only dropped his pants and relieved himself in the snow, never taken off his shirt and coat. He saw the afternoon was darkening and, now thoroughly frightened, he ran toward a sound he heard, the whine of slipping tires on a nearby street. He hoped in that direction he would find Burrstone Road, the street closest to his home.

The next time he heard whining tires they were behind him. The sound could have been coming from another street, but it seemed more likely he was moving in a circle. He was running now, with his freezing hands jammed up into his armpits. He heard a car horn from one direction, and then a siren from another. He twisted and turned and ran toward each sound.

Jesse was becoming exhausted. The cold and exertion and feverish state of his mind were taking their toll of his energy. He wanted so much to sit down and rest, but all of his reading had warned against doing so. He was staggering now. He fell, then got up. He ran a few steps and fell again. Forcing himself up on his feet, Jesse looked up into the sky and screamed in anguish. Then he sat down hard in the snow.

Jesse wondered if it was true that when freezing to death a person passed from shivering and frostbite into a state of sleepiness and comfort. He brushed the thought from his mind. He didn't want to die. He was only twelve years old. But he couldn't go on. He was too exhausted. Jesse started to cry, finally, the frustration howling inside his head.

He couldn't believe this was happening. He simply could not be lost in the middle of a field in a city of one hundred thousand people. He must try again, walking only in a straight line. But it was darker now, and the wind even stronger. The snow had built up on his skin during the short time since he sat down on the ground.

With a great effort, his legs wobbling and unsteady, Jesse stood one last time. He was shivering badly and was sure if he took a step he would fall. He pushed forward off one foot and came down on the other, now numb with the cold. He stayed upright.

He now knew he was going to die here. A great sadness enveloped him and he thought of Christmas morning almost three months ago. Jammed into the small flat with his parents and brothers and grandparents, they had all been so happy. He looked down at himself and in what little light was left of the day saw his body covered with snow. "Oh, no," he said. "Oh, no."

Jesse's mind reeled with the agonizing thought that it was almost spring. Tomorrow morning the sun could be shining and the temperatures in the sixties, as often happened in late winter. And just a few hours before he would die a freezing death within sight of the hospital and the bored firemen who would have been happy to rescue him. His family and the police would search all over the city tomorrow, never thinking to look in the summer sports field. Maybe a fireman across the street from the field's entrance would notice a book bag hanging on the gate. The sun might be shining bright and the snow have melted. On a nearby sidewalk, nurses and doctors and kids and dogs would be walking and playing, oblivious to the presence of his corpse only a hundred feet away. Jesse would be lying here dead, half naked and probably still frozen, like a visitor from an icy planet or a veteran from the South Pole.

He became angry. He took one more step and fell flat. He couldn't breathe with his face in the snow. With what little strength he had left Jesse pushed himself up to a sitting position. That's when he saw the colors.

The cold had made him delirious, and logic said he could not have seen it. But a flash of light occurred to his right. He turned his head and glimpsed a break in the curtain of snow, and through it a momentary flash of clouds on the horizon, pink and green and turning gold against a pale blue sky. He pulled himself to his feet and staggered in the direction where it had been, strength returning to his legs. In a few moments Jesse bounced into the tall fence that surrounded the field. Stumbling along it, he came to an

opening. He saw headlights, all in a row, cars slowly moving along the snow covered Burrstone Road, carrying men and women home from a day of work.

Jesse bolted into the road, his eyes blearily fixed on the lights of the hospital. A driver slammed on his brakes and was rear-ended by the car behind, both cars sliding off to the side of the street and into a snow bank. The boy kept going, half naked with the scarf wrapped around his head and patches of snow and ice clinging to his bare skin. A new surge of energy coursed through his body, but he knew it would soon end and he must get inside to warm up. By the time he reached the back stairs of the building, he was beginning to falter. On his way up the steps, he slipped twice and fell, praying each time he got up that the entrance would not be locked. It was. He pulled and pulled on the handle and feebly banged on the door. It was a long way around the building to the front door and even farther to the Emergency Room, too far for him now. He slid downward, his frozen hands coming away from the door handle.

The woman would later tell Jesse she had trouble opening the door against his legs and was part way through when she found him huddled up against the pipe railing, almost upright, his arm over the lower rung. On her way home and bundled against the cold, the cafeteria manager saw a frozen half naked youngster at the edge of the cone of light provided by the light over the back door. She bent down to touch Jesse, then grabbed his arm and began to drag him inside. His legs moved to help. Suddenly he was up on his feet and running away from her.

Jesse pushed through swinging doors into the main hallway of the hospital. The warm air seared his frozen skin, every nerve ending writhed in pain. He sprinted down the hallway with no destination in mind. Passing the window of the Gift Shop, Jesse spotted them again, turned back and flew through the open doorway. He collapsed into a display of cut flowers, his arms thrusting out to grab the warm colors of yellow and green and pink, as he greedily hugged them to his chest.

The doctors said that only a twelve year old could have survived such an ordeal. Jesse left the hospital a week later, and was back to school within days of his discharge. His mother took him in the family car each day for the next week and picked him up after classes. The nuns banned him from the school library for the rest of the year. Instead, they sent books to the classroom for him, with titles such as “The Life of Saint Ignatius Loyola” and “Hobbies For Teens.”

Although memories of that fearful afternoon would always remain, Jesse grew up to be as normal as most young men. Despite the experience, his love of snow was not lost completely, although heavy storms made him uncomfortable. Certainly, he was never again tempted to stand naked in a blizzard. And as far as anyone knows, to this day his mother believes a mighty wind blew his clothing off as Jesse crossed Murnane Field in the last major snow storm of the winter of 1956.

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