



Snowball wars are being waged. Jack's building the Abominable Snowman-ator while also practicing for the school play. One night, a catastrophe disturbs the neighborhood. Jack needs a Christmas miracle. Will he find room in his heart and his home? He just might discover this season is full of surprises.

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SHINER

I didn't see it coming. The snowball hit my right eye with an icy cold *SPLAT*. But I did see stars.

I'm not sure if that was before or after I fell backward and landed on the snow-covered yard in front of my friend Roger's house.

"Man down! Man down!" Roger's words crackled through the walkie-talkie tucked somewhere in the puffiness of my winter coat.

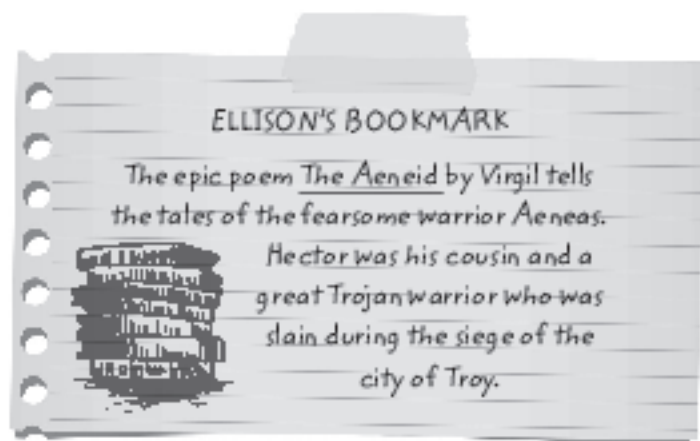
"Jack's been hit!" The voice of my little sister, Midge, pierced the black void I floated in.

"We need more ammo!" yelled Ruthie from nearby. "Scoop, pack, and throw as you run. Force them back!"

Close to my ear—and from somewhere among the

stars swirling around my head—my best friend, Ellison, chose this moment to dramatically quote literature. Lately, he was into Greek mythology. “Why could not I by that strong arm be slain, and lie by noble Hector on the plain?”

But the sound that ended our snow day home from school and echoed down the streets of Pine, Maple, Oak, and Cherry was the villainous guffaw of my arch nemesis and snowball attacker, Buzz Rublatz.



I blinked. Or tried to. The cold air coated the teary eye that wasn't swelling shut.

Ellison's face hovered over me. His brown eyes stared through his thick, black-rimmed glasses. “Are you alive?”

“Uhhh, buhhh, ehrrrrrr . . .” was all I could mumble. My eye socket throbbed.

"I'm going in!" Roger's voice crackled again. "Save yourselves!"

A blur of yellow snowsuit streaked past us. "For Jack!" Midge screeched.

"For Narnia!" Ellison shouted back.

Right before I blacked out, I imagined Roger toting his overstuffed, military-issue backpack, Ruthie wearing her eye patch, and my pip-squeak sister chasing Buzz and his fellow bullies all the way back to Second Street.



I blinked my left eye. The right one wouldn't open, so I reached up, felt something cold and slimy, and then . . . I panicked.

"Ahhhrrrggg!" I hollered. "My eyeball is hanging out!" I tried to sit up. That's when I realized I wasn't lying in the snow anymore. Underneath me was a warm, comfy couch. But I felt dizzy. I closed my left eye and lay back down.

A low and stern voice overhead calmed me. "*That*, young soldier, is not your eyeball. It is a prime piece of beef tenderloin."

I peeled open my left eye again.

A man, who I figured was Roger's dad, was looking down at me. His jaw was as square and as closely shaven as his head, and his eyes seemed as stern as his voice.

Roger's face came into view too. "That was going to be my dad's dinner," he said. "Dad said raw meat will bring the swelling down."

"Sacrifices must be made in battle," said Mr. Jennings.

I hadn't met Roger's family yet. But I knew his dad and older brother had been in the Army.

Ellison's and Ruthie's faces appeared next.

It's amazing how many things you can see with one eyeball. Now I know how Ruthie felt having to wear her eye patch. Because Ruthie has a weak right eye, she wears an eye patch over the left eye. That forces her right eye to get stronger and not look sideways on its own.

"Your dad is on his way," Ellison said.

Over my good eye, Ruthie dangled a patch decorated with gold, star-shaped sequins. "And I ran home and got you one of my spare eye patches."

Midge climbed onto the couch and stretched out on top of me. "I thought Buzz killed you!" she wailed against my chest.

Doing this would have been okay when she was three, but she was going on nine years old and too many pounds.

"I'm going to die if you don't get off of me," I mumbled.

She scrambled up and stood on the end of the couch, raising her arm and pointing up into the air. "This means war!"

"I like your gumption, miss!" barked Mr. Jennings. "Now get down from that couch before Mrs. Jennings sees you."

A knock at the front door dispersed the crowd.

The door opened, and the cold air slipped in with my dad's voice. "Morning, George."

"Howie," said Mr. Jennings. "Your son took a hard hit. Would have taken out the best of us."

I was glad Mr. Jennings didn't think I was a wimp. And I was glad the steak was hiding at least one eyeball full of tears.

Dad was beside me in three seconds. "Hey, bud," he said, peeking under the steak. "Let's get you to the doctor. Your mom and I want to make sure you don't have a concussion."

"A concussion? What about Christmas play practice tonight?" I asked as Dad peeled off the slab of warm steak and handed it to Mr. Jennings.

He helped me sit up slowly. I smelled like a rare hamburger.

"Yeah, Jack is the Christmas Donkey, remember, Daddy?" Midge said. I'm pretty sure our dad had heard me hee-hawing around the house.

"My mom says we shouldn't even miss one practice, Mr. Finch," added Ellison. His mom, Mrs. Henry, was the director of the Christmas play.

Dad carefully helped me to my feet. His left arm held me tight. "I'm sure your mother will understand, Ellison."

"But it's the most important part, Daddy!" Midge protested, galloping to the door and stepping into her snow boots. "Donkey loses his way home, so he follows the Bright Star in the night sky. That's when he finds baby Jesus lying in the manger."

Midge happened to be starring as the Bright Star. And she wasn't happy about it. "A real star does *not* have five points," she'd complained when Mom was making her costume out of yellow foam board. "A star is a burning ball of gas."

Midge had a point. Five, actually. But I suspected she secretly wanted to be the Christmas Donkey instead.

MIDGE'S PHENOMENAL FACTS

Stars, like our sun, are made up mostly of a gas called hydrogen. Because of pressure in the core of the star, some of the hydrogen turns to helium. All the energy that produces causes the star to shine. Stars, like kids, come in different shapes, sizes, and colors. This may sound strange, but blue stars are hotter; red stars are cooler.¹



ARCTURUS, BRIGHT STAR

At the door, Roger helped me put on my puffy coat, and Ruthie handed me the sparkly eye patch. She likes to decorate her eye patches. Today she was wearing a red and green one in the shape of a Christmas ornament.

Ruthie wrinkled up her nose. "I'll make you a more manly eye patch soon. Like with a skull and crossbones."

I smiled and took the sparkly one anyway. Ruthie was a good friend, even if she did like glitter. I tucked it way down in my pocket.

Dad thanked Mr. Jennings for carrying me into the house and taking care of me.

Mr. Jennings seemed to stand at attention. "I'm not a religious man, but my grandmother used to say you never know when you're showing hospitality to angels unawares."²

"Oh, Jack isn't an angel," Midge said, zipping her coat. "Michael Reynolds is playing the angel."

Michael, also known as Mini-Fridge, is a lineman on the Lions pee wee football team. All the kids called him Mini-Fridge, after Chicago Bears football legend William "The Refrigerator" Perry. Plus, he's the biggest kid at Deer Creek Christian School and can pack away as much ice cream, lunchmeat, and leftovers as a major appliance. His high-top haircut adds about four inches to his height.

"I'm playing Joseph," said Ellison. "And not because my mom is the director."

Dad shook Mr. Jennings' hand. "George, you and Gloria and the boys are welcome to come to Deer Creek's Christmas play."

"Can we, Dad?" Roger asked.

"Please, will you, Mr. Jennings?" echoed Ruthie. "My family doesn't go to that church, but we're invited. You can sit with us!"

Mr. Jennings cleared his throat and stood taller. "Understood. I'll rendezvous with my family and report back."

"He means he'll talk to my mom and let you know," Roger whispered to me.



Even though the doctor gave me a thumbs-up—no concussion—Mom wouldn't let me go to play practice that night. The road had already been cleared enough for anyone who was able to come to the church.

My dog, Arrow, lay curled up on the floor next to the couch. Sometimes he'd sit up to push his wet nose under my hand to check for signs of life.

Midge brought me an ice bag before she left for play practice.

My eye was still swollen shut, and my eyeball felt like a dried-up nut banging around inside its shell.

Midge let out a low whistle. "That shiner sure is a doozy. The Christmas Donkey is really going to have a hard time finding the manger now."

I carefully laid the ice bag over my black eye. "I guess Bright Star will just have to do a better job of lighting the way."

"I'm going to ask Mrs. Henry tonight if I can be Arcturus instead of Bright Star."

I was used to my sister spouting science facts, so I didn't even need to ask her who—or what—Arcturus was.

"It's the fourth brightest star in the northern hemisphere," she babbled on. She spread her arms and legs wide

to make a star shape, apparently forgetting all about the five-point controversy. "And it's my favorite star because it's also—"

"You look more like a five-pointed star than a burning ball of gas," I said.

"Humph!" she snorted. Then, she stepped closer and gazed deep into my one eye. "Maybe *I* should be the Christmas Donkey. You know, because of your face."

"What am I supposed to be then?"

She tapped her chin. "Hmm, how about the Christmas raccoon?"

"Mooommm!" I hollered. "Midge is tormenting the patient!"

"Midge, let your brother rest. It's time to leave for practice!" Mom called back from the kitchen.

Midge *hee-hawed* and galloped off.

The evening wasn't a total bust. Grandma Jo and Grandpa Ernie walked over from next door where they were still settling into their new home.

Having my grandparents thirteen seconds away was the best Christmas present I could have asked for. But I still missed Mr. Bruno. Bruno Kowalski had sold his house to them and moved to California to live with his daughter. He had said he was "getting up there," which means getting old. From what I could tell from his bald head, hunched shoulders, hands like tree roots, and all the things he knew

about World War II, he was pretty near the top of “up there.” He said it was time to leave the Chicago winters for the sun and palm trees of paradise.

Still, Mr. Bruno was the first friend I’d made after Dad, Mom, Midge, and I moved to King’s Grove in the spring. He’d hired me to mow his lawn. And he’d always fed us kids a steady supply of tuna and pickle sandwiches and Green River pop. Best of all, he let us use the 1960s underground room in his backyard as the official Tree Street Kids fort—aka, Da Bomb Shelter.

Now Mr. Bruno was gone, and the shelter hatch was frozen shut. Plus, this would be the first Christmas the whole family wouldn’t be at the farm where we’d lived with my grandparents all my life.

“Jack,” said Grandpa Ernie, shaking a big piece of paper when he walked into the family room. “Wait till you see my plans for the outdoor Christmas lights!”

Grandma Jo followed right behind him, carrying a plate piled high with cookies. “First, the boy needs sustenance.”

Two seconds later, a plate of warm cookies, smelling like melted butter and grandmotherly love, sat on my chest. A detailed drawing of their house with hundreds of multicolored dotted lines was laid across my stomach.

Grandma peeked under the ice bag. “I sure hope Mr. Rublatz left the fight with a matching one of those.”

"Josephine," Grandpa scolded, gently, "we don't know what Buzz's life is like that makes him take it out on other kids."



"Some people are born as mean as they are born blond," she said and stuck a cookie in my mouth.

"And thankfully, the Lord has compassion on all He has made," said Grandpa, "and so should we."³

I was pretty sure Buzz Rublatz was made of 100 percent trouble. And Christmas play or no Christmas play, I was going to figure out a way to win the Great Snowball Battle of 1995. That's what I'd call it, anyway. Maybe it would even go down in history, and when I turned as old as Mr. Bruno, I'd be telling my grandkids and great grandkids how I defeated my arch nemesis once and for all . . .

. . . and about the secret weapon I built to do it.

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