

# Charlie

BY LEE MARACLE

*"Runaway talk! Charlie hurriedly grabbed some clothes from the cupboard beneath the top of the night-table he shared with another boy.*

*'Ah'm comin' too,' he hissed... "*

Charlie was a quiet boy. This was not unusual. His silence was interpreted by the priests and Catholic lay teachers as stoic reserve—a quality inherited from his pagan ancestors. It was regarded in the same way the religious viewed the children's tearless response to punishment: a quaint combination of primitive courage and lack of emotion. All the children were like this and so Charlie could not be otherwise.

Had the intuitive sense of the priesthood been sharper, they might have noticed the bitter look lurking in the shadows of the children's bland faces. The priests were not deliberately insensitive. All of their schooling had taught them that even the most heathen savage was born in the image of their own sweet lord. Thus, they held to the firm conviction that the sons and daughters of the people they were convinced were God's lowliest children were eternally good. Blinded by their own teaching they could not possibly be called upon to detect ill in the warm broad faces of their little charges.

Charlie did not do much schoolwork. He daydreamed. Much standing in the corner, repeated thrashings and the like had convinced him that staring out the window at the trees beyond the schoolyard was not the way to escape the sterile monotony of school. While the window

of a bluejay trying to win the heart of his lady-blue jay, and... knew could be counted on for committing the crime of daydreaming was not worth the reward. So, like the other children, he would stare hard at his work, the same practised look of bewilderment used by his peers on his face, while his thoughts danced around the forest close to home—far away from the arithmetic sums he was sure had nothing to do with him.

He learned to listen for the questions put to him by the brother over the happy daydream. He was not expected to know the answer; repeating the question sufficed. Knowing the question meant that, like the others, he was slow to learn but very attentive. No punishment was meted out for thickheadedness.

"What is three multiplied by five, Charlie?" The brother's brisk, clipped English accent echoed hollowly in the silence.

Charlie's eyes fixed on the empty page. His thoughts followed the manoeuvres of a snowshoe hare scampering ahead of himself and his half-wild dog. The first snow had fallen. It was that time of year. The question reached out to him over the shrieks of joy and the excited yelping of his dog, but it did not completely pluck him from the scene of his snow-capped, wooded homeland.

"Three... times... five?" muttered Charlie, the sounds coming out as though his voice were filled with air. A tense look from the brother. A quizzically dull look on Charlie's face. All the children stared harder at their pages—blank from want of work. He was still staring at the teacher but his mind was already following the rabbit. Did the brother's shoulders heave a sigh of disappointment?

"Thomas," the boredom of the teacher's voice thinly disguised.

"Fifteen," clearly and with volume. Poor Thomas, he always listened.

The bell rang. The class dutifully waited for dismissal. The brother sighed. The sound of scholarly confidence carefully practised by all pedagogues left his voice at each bell. Exasperation permeated his dismissal command. It was the only emotion he allowed himself to express.

As he stood by the doorway watching the bowed heads slink by, his thoughts wandered about somewhat. *Such is my lot, to teach a flock of numbskulls... Ah, had I only finished and gotten a degree. Then, I could teach*

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*in a real school with eager students.* Each day his thoughts read thus and every time he laid out plans to return to university, but he never carried them out. At home every night a waiting bottle of Seagram's drowned out his self-pity and steadied him for the morrow.

Charlie was bothered at meal times. The food was plain and monotonously familiar: beef stew on Monday, chicken stew on Tuesday—the days with their matching meal plan never varied. Unvarying menus did not bother Charlie, though. Nor was it the plain taste of domestic meat as opposed to the sharp taste of wild meat that bothered him. He was bothered by something unidentifiable, tangible but invisible. He couldn't figure it out and that, too, bothered him.

From the line-up, he carried his plate to the section of the eating hall reserved for sixth grade boys. He looked up to watch the teenage boys exchanging flirtatious glances with the young girls in a line opposite them. In the segregated classes of the school, boys and girls weren't permitted to mingle with, talk to, or touch one another. They sat in the same eating hall, but ate on separate sides. Charlie bored quickly of watching the frustrated efforts of youths struggling to reach each other through the invisible walls of rigid moral discipline erected by the priesthood.

His eyes began wandering about the eating room of his own home. The pot of stew was on the stove. It always had something warm and satisfying to the taste in it. He scarcely acknowledged its existence before he came to residential school. Now he saw it each day at meal time.

At home no one served you or stopped you from ladling out some of the pot's precious contents. Here at school, they lined you up to eat. Each boy at each age level got exactly the same portion. A second plate was out of the question. He felt ashamed to eat.

A stiff-backed white man appeared in the room and the low murmuring of voices stopped.

"EAT EVER-Y-THING ON YOUR PLATE!" he bellowed, clicking out the last *t* on the word plate. His entrance never varied. He said the same thing every day, careful to enunciate each word perfectly and loudly, in the manner he was sure best befitted the station of principal of a school. He marched up and down the aisles between tables in a precise pattern that was designed to impress on the boys that he was, indeed,

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the principal of the school. Finished with the last aisle, he marched stiff-  
legged out the door.

The boys were more than impressed. They were terrified. They  
likened the stiff-legged walk to the walk of an angry wolf. They had  
come to believe that whites were not quite human, so often did they  
walk in this wolf-like way. They knew the man who had just pranced  
about the eating hall to be the principal, not by the superiority of his  
intellect as compared to the other instructors, but by virtue of his having  
the stiffest walk and, hence, the fiercest temperament of the pack.

Night came and Charlie prepared for the best part of his incarceration.  
Between prayers and lights out, the children were left alone for  
fifteen minutes. Quickly into pyjamas and to the window.

The moon and the stars spread a thin blue light over the whitening  
ground below. Crystal flake after crystal flake draped the earth in a frock  
of glittering snow. As always, a tightness arose in his small boy-chest. He  
swallowed hard.

"LIGHTS OUT!"

Darkness swallowed the room and his little body leapt for the bunk  
with a willingness that always amazed him. He did not sleep right away.

"Hay, Chimmy, you got your clothes on?"

"Yeh."

"Ah-got the rope."

"Keh."

Runaway talk! Charlie hurriedly grabbed some clothes from the  
cupboard beneath the top of the night-table he shared with another boy.

"Ah'm comin' too," he hissed, struggling to snap up his jeans and  
shirt.

"Hurry, we're not waitin'."

He rushed breathless to the closet and grabbed a jacket. The older  
boys had already tied the rope to the metal latticing that closed the win-  
dow. Each boy squeezed through the square created by one missing strip  
of metal lattice, and, hanging on to the rope, swung out from the win-  
dow, then dropped to the ground below.

Safe in the bosom of the forest, after a tense but joyous run across  
the yard, the boys let go the cramped spirit that the priesthood so pains-  
takingly tried to destroy in them. They whooped, they hollered, bayed  
at the moon, and romped about chucking snow in loose, small balls at

each other.

Jimmy cautioned them that that was enough. The faster they moved the greater the head start. They had to get through the forest to the railroad tracks by night cover.

The trek was uneventful. The older boys had run away before and knew exactly where they were going and how to get there. Stars and a full moon reflected against white snow provided them with enough light to pick their way along. As time wore by, the excited walk became dull plodding. They reached the tracks of the railroad sometime near daylight. All were serious now. They cast furtive glances up and down the track. The shelter of darkness was gone. Discovery became real in the bright light of day. Surely the priest had sent the police in search of them by now.

The boys trod light-footed and quickly along the trackline, fear spurring them on. A thin wisp of smoke curling upward from the creaking pines on their right brought the boys to a halt.

"It's mah uncle's house," Jimmy purred with contentment. The empty forest carries sound a long way in winter, so the boys spoke in whispers. It never occurred to the other boys to ask Jimmy what his uncle's reaction to their visit would be. They assumed it would be the same as their own folks' response.

A short trek through the woods brought them to the cabin's door. Uncle and aunt were already there to greet them. They were now used to the frequent runaway boys that always stopped for a day or two, then not knowing how to get home, trudged nine and some miles back to school. The holiday, uncle mused to aunt, would do them no harm. Besides which, they enjoyed the company of happy children.

A good meal... a day's play... nightfall... heavenly sleep in this cabin full of the same sweet smells of his own cabin brought sentimental dreams to Charlie.

Charlie's dreams followed the familiar lines of his home. In the centre stood his mama quietly stirring the stew. Above her head, hanging from the rafters, were strips of dried meat. Hundreds of them, dangling in mute testimony to his father's skill as hunter and provider. A little ways from the stove hung mama's cooking tools. Shelving and boxes made of wood housed such food stuffs as flour, sugar, oatmeal, salt and the like. All here was hewn from the forest's bounty by Charlie's ageing

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grandfather.

Crawling and toddling about were his younger brother and sister, unaware of Charlie's world or his dream of them. Completing the picture was his dad. He stood in the corner, one leg perched on a log stump used as a kindling split. He had a smoke in his hand.

No one but his wife knew how his thoughts ran. How he wondered with a gnawing tightness why it was he had to send his little ones, one after the other, far away to school.

Daily, he heard of young ones who had been to school and not returned. More often, he would come across the boys who recently finished school, hanging about the centre of the village, unwilling and poorly equipped to take care of themselves. Without hunting or trapping skills, the boys wasted away, living from hand-to-mouth, a burden on their ageing parents. One by one they drifted away, driven by the shame of their uselessness.

It was not that they could not learn to hunt or trap. But it takes years of boyhood to grow accustomed to the ways of the forest, to overcome the lonely and neurotic fear it can sometimes create in a man. A boy who suddenly becomes a man does not want to learn what he is already supposed to know well. No man wants to admit his personal fear of his home.

The pull of years of priestly schooling towards the modern cities of a Canada that hardly touched their wilderness village grew stronger. For a while, family and city pulled with equal strength, gripping the youth in a listless state of paralysis. For some, the city won out and they drifted away. Charlie's father worried about the fate of his young ones.

His private agony was his own lack of resistance. He sent his son to school. It was the law. A law that he neither understood nor agreed to, but he sent them. His willingness to reduce his son to a useless waster stunned him. He confided none of his self-disgust to his wife. It made him surly, but he said nothing.

In his dream, Charlie did not know his father's thoughts. He saw his father standing, leg-on-log, as he usually stood while he awaited breakfast, and he awoke contented.

Jimmy's uncle had given up wondering about the things that plagued Charlie's father. His children had grown up and left, never to return. He did not even know if there were grandchildren.

He lived his life without reflection now. Jimmy was the eldest son of his youngest brother. It was enough for his life's labours that this boy called him grandfather out of respect for the man's age.

"I'm going to check the short lines," he said, biting into his bannock and not looking at the boys.

"Can we help?" The older boys looked at their plates, studiously masking their anxiety.

"Sure." Staring at them carefully, he added, "but the small one must stay." The old man was unwilling to risk taking the coatless boy with him.

Charlie followed them to the edge of the woods. He knew that no amount of pleading would change the old man's mind and crying would only bring him shame. He watched them leave and determined to go home where his own grandfather would take him to check his short lines.

The old aunt tried to get him to stay. She promised him a fine time. It was a wasted effort. He wanted the comfort and dignity of his own cabin, not a fine time.

Charlie knew the way home. It had not taken him long to travel the distance from the tracks near his home to the school. He had marked the trail in the way that so many of his ancestors might have: a rocky crag here, a distorted, lone pine there. He gave no thought to the fact that the eight-hour trip had been made by rail and not on foot.

The creaking pines, straining under the heavy snowfall of the night before, brought Charlie the peace of mind that school had denied him. A snow-bird feeding through the snow curled Charlie's mouth into a delighted smile. A rabbit scampered across the tracks and disappeared into the forest. He had half a mind to chase it.

"Naw, better just go home." His voice seemed to come from deep within him, spreading itself out in a wide half-circle and meeting the broad expanse of hill and wood only to be swallowed by nature's huge majesty somewhere beyond his eyes. The thinness of his voice against the forest made him feel small.

The day wore by tediously slow. Charlie began to worry. He had not seen his first landmark.

"Am I going the right way?" What a terrible trick of fate to trek mile after mile only to arrive back at school. The terror of it made him

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Around the bend, he recognized a bare stone cliff. Assured, he ran  
a little. He coughed and slowed down again. He tired a little. He felt  
sleepy. He touched his bare hands. Numb.

"Frostbite," he whispered.

In his rush to leave the dormitory he had grabbed his fall jacket.  
The cold now pierced his chest. Breathing was difficult. His legs cried  
out for rest. Charlie fought the growing desire to sleep.

The biscuits aunt had given him were gone. Hunger beset him. He  
trudged on, squinting at the sprays of sunlight that cast a reddish hue on  
the snow-clad pines in final farewell to daylight.

Darkness folded itself over the land with a cruel swiftness. It fell  
upon the landscape, swallowing Charlie and the thread of track connect-  
ing civilization to nature's vastness, closing with maddening speed the  
last wisps of light from Charlie's eyes.

Stars, one by one, woke from their dreamy sleep and filled the  
heavens. Charlie stumbled. He rose reluctantly. His legs wobbled for-  
ward a few more steps, then gave in to his defeated consciousness that  
surrendered to the sparkling whiteness that surrounded him. He rolled  
over and lay face up scanning the star-lit sky.

Logic forsook him. His heart beat slower. A smile nestled on his  
full purple lips. He opened his eyes. His body betrayed him. He felt  
warm again. Smiling he welcomed the Orion queen—not a star constel-  
lation but the great Wendigo—dressed in midnight blue, her dress alive  
with the glitter of a thousand stars. Arms outstretched, he greeted the  
lady that came to lift his spirit and close his eyes forever to sleep the  
gentle sleep of white death.





## The Rink

The trouble with being an older brother is you've got to drag your younger brother everywhere you go. That and keep him covered in band-aids any time he scrapes himself, which is about every ten seconds. He's got this thing about his blood leaking out. "I'm leaking!" he says, "I'm leaking!" whenever he cuts himself. He loves band-aids.

So just when stuff starts getting exciting, and you're with your friends, there he is, twenty steps behind you yelling, "Hey! Wait for me!" That's the way it usually is.

It's a couple of years ago on Halloween and as per usual, I'm taking my five year old brother Cory trick-or-treating, but on the way home, we run into some of my friends.

Shane, who is a kind of leader of our gang, has a neat idea. He also has a pellet gun. He says he found it, but with Shane you never know. Anyway, he wants to go over to old man Givens' house and maybe pop out a few windows.

Old man Givens was the principal at our school till he retired last year. Givens the Geezer we called him because of

his bony, bald head. And his eyes would burn you like a cigarette. I never actually saw him give the strap because they don't allow that any more, but they said he used to use half a metre of a special thick black licorice because it didn't leave any marks. And then he'd sort of eat it on the school grounds, in front of everybody. He never used to yell. He didn't need to. All he did was whisper and everyone listened.

So anyway, I really want to go with Shane and the gang but Cory is with me, and everything I do when Cory is around, my mom finds out about. I mean Cory is basically a nice kid but he has a mouth as big as a bathtub. So I send him home and promise that if he says a word to Mom, I'll eat all his Halloween candy.

We go over to Givens the Geezer's house and park ourselves behind some bushes. Cam and Jerry have two bars of soap and work over Geezer's car. We try not to laugh too loud. Donny, another friend, has a dozen eggs. He gives a couple to me. We time it so that as Shane shoots his gun, Donny and I fire the eggs through the broken window.

On the count of three we do it, and it works like crazy! Shane's gun doesn't actually make a hole big enough for the eggs to go through. They slobber all over the window instead and it's really just as good. We run like mad! We can hear alarms going off.

It's not even an hour later when I get home. But I hardly walk through the door and I can tell that Bathub Mouth has said something to Mom and Dad. I look at him and he says, "I told them you were going to take my candy if I said."

Cory gets the candy. I get in trouble, big time.

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When it's all over, the police find that Shane's gun is hotter than a pancake and he actually goes to Wilbur Hall, a place for jaydees. The rest of us are on some kind of probation where we have to work for people, doing odd jobs.

Guess where I have to work? You got it — Geezer Givens'. I have to work for three hours a week for ten weeks, just about till Christmas. The kind of stuff I have to do is help him clean the attic, the garage, shovel his walks and a bunch of other odd jobs no one would ever normally do, like washing the basement ceiling.

I guess I deserve every minute of it, but to tell you the truth, it's not as bad as I thought it would be. He taught science at school and is a real electronics nut. He has all these gadgets and doodads, remote this and automatic that, half of which don't work, but of course he's trying to fix.

So far the strangest thing I help him with is this intercom he has hooked up from his house to the garage. He wants to see if it's working. He says it's to hear the garage door opening. Why doesn't he just *look*? Anyway, it works.

I've been there three or four weeks and I've been in every room in his house, except one. This one has its door closed all the time. Then, one day, I find out something I wish I didn't know.

"Come here, Jason," he says.

"Yeah?"

He opens the door and says, "I've been putting this off for months. I guess I should clean it up." In the room is all

sorts of sewing stuff, pictures on the walls that look hand-painted, and knickknacks, the kind your grandmother has. It's quite a mess. "My wife's," he says.

"I didn't know you were married." You never think of your bald ex-principal as being married.

"She passed away in August," he says. "My boy wanted to clean it after the funeral, but I wouldn't let him."

"I didn't know you had kids." I can be pretty stupid some times.

He takes a photograph that's above the sewing machine. It's got a man and a woman and a little baby in it. The man is holding the baby.

"This is my boy, Michael. Lives in Toronto. That's my grandson, Bradley. He's six now. And that's Judy," he says, pointing at the picture. "They're coming for Christmas. I'll need the room."

He gives me a package of garbage bags and says, "Put as much of this in these as you can." I notice his hand is shaking. "Take them out to the garage."

He turns and walks away. Fast.

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The next week it has definitely turned colder and the first mat of snow hides the frozen dirt. You know what I mean — where you kick a lump you think is snow but you just about break your foot.

Anyway, Mr. Givens and I are in the backyard where his garden used to be. There's still dangly frozen tomato plants sticking up and other stuff he wants cleared out. He paces off

a square in the snow and says, "Get this as level and clean as you can. This is where it's going."

"What?" I ask.

"The rink," he says. "For my grandson, for Christmas."

I never made a rink before, so I get kind of excited about it and I tell Mom and Dad. Cory, who is big into hockey, thinks this is the cat's meow. He's never seen anyone make a rink before and wants to come and watch. I figure it's not going to hurt anyone, so in a couple of days I take him along to Mr. Givens'.

Cory is sporting two band-aids that cover a rug burn on his chin. He got it diving after an imaginary puck in the living room. He doesn't need two band-aids, but that's what he's got.

Mr. Givens is kind of surprised to see me and Cory because I'm not supposed to be there for another four days. But I tell him my little brother wants to watch us make the rink and he gets all cheerful and even though he's in the middle of watching a hockey game on TV, he gets dressed, hauls the hose outside and we start putting water where the rink will be.

Mr. Givens has already put little boards around it and in a few minutes, after the water has soaked through the snow, it looks like a box of ugly cold slushy mud. I personally don't see how this is going to be a rink of any kind, but Cory likes the steam going up and chirps at Mr. Givens, asking a zillion questions, like little kids do. Bathtub Mouth.

"Can I skate on it?" asks Cory. He's picking at the top band-aid on his chin.

"Sure you can," says Mr. Givens, "but the first one to skate is going to be my grandson, Brad. You'll like him. He's just about your age."

"When's he coming?" asks Cory.

"He'll be here for Christmas," says Mr. Givens.

"That's a long time," says Cory.

"Not as long as you think," says Mr. Givens. "Well, that should do her for now. All we can do is seal it tonight."

"What's sealing?" asks Cory.

"To keep the water from leaking out. Like a band-aid stops bleeding," says Mr. Givens, smoothing out the one on Cory's chin.

The questions go on and on, while we put the hose away, while Mr. Givens gives us hot chocolate, in fact until we leave.

When we get out of the house and are on our way home, Cory is as quiet as he was noisy at Mr. Givens'. Too quiet.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Is sealing really like a band-aid to stop bleeding?"

That's what he asks me, honest. Kids.

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Over the next few weeks Cory and I go over to Mr. Givens' a lot. Sometimes I pull him over in the sleigh when the snow is fresh, before people get their walks cleared. It's fun. But when the walks are cleared, we walk. It's only a couple of blocks.

The rink actually starts looking like a rink the closer we get to Christmas, and we're actually starting to be friends, especially Mr. Givens and Cory. But the closer Christmas

comes, the more edgy Mr. Givens gets. Even Cory notices it. And being Bathtub Mouth, he asks.

"What's the matter, Mr. Givens?"

Mr. Givens is incredibly patient with Cory's questions. He always answers. It would drive me nuts.

"Well, this is the first Christmas without Mrs. Givens, Cory. It just makes me a little sad, that's all."

"Oh," says Cory. He thinks about it for a second, then asks, "Why does that make you sad?"

I can't believe he asks that! That is not the kind of question you ask somebody and expect an answer. It's too personal. But, you guessed it, Mr. Givens answers.

"Well, my son and I tend to argue a bit, and Mrs. Givens was always there to . . ." He looks for words. "To keep us from hurting each other too badly. To stop the bleeding."

"Like a band-aid," says Cory.

"That's right," chuckles Mr. Givens, "Mrs. Givens was like a band-aid."

"She'd seal things."

"She sure would."

When we get outside, I give Bathtub Mouth heck for getting so personal.

"Don't call me Bathtub Mouth," he says.

"Well then don't ask such stupid questions."

"If I don't ask, how am I going to know?" says Cory.

I've got to admit, for a question, it's a pretty good answer. It shuts me up anyway. It also makes me forget the sleigh.

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Neither of us remember the sleigh till a couple days later when it snows again. Christmas holidays have started and we trudge through the snow, past all the lit houses till we get to Mr. Givens'. Our plan is to scrape the rink and give it one more flood before Mr. Givens' grandson arrives.

But when we get there, the house is dark. It's like a black hole in the block, next to all the other houses. Our sleigh is nowhere in sight. Mr. Givens must have put it in the garage, or maybe behind the house.

We walk around to the back and there is no sled, but the rink is freshly scraped and flooded. The moonlight shines off it like a knife. It's almost spooky, as if something's dead. Cory wants to slide on it, but I say, "No. It's for his grandson first."

We get half a block away when a car pulls into Mr. Givens' driveway. It's them, Mr. Givens, his son and family. They get out of the car. In the clear air we can hear them like they're next to us and Mr. Givens says, "Watch this!" He waves his arms and all of a sudden, his house lights up like a Christmas tree. Spelled out in letters of light is "Welcome Judy, Michael and Brad!! Merry Christmas."

"Oh that's sweet," says a woman I guess is Judy.

"Very nice, Dad," says Michael.

"Can we go in?" says grandson Bradley. "I'm cold."

Cory wants to go back and get the sleigh. But I tell him we should wait till tomorrow.

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It's Christmas Eve. Cory and I trek over to Mr. Givens'. We go to the door. I'm just about to push the doorbell, when

I stop. I can hear yelling in the house. I look at Cory. He can hear it too.

Sometimes with your brother, you know exactly what each other is thinking, and right now we're both thinking about what Mr. Givens said, about his wife not being there. And how she stopped the fighting.

I turn to go but Cory pushes the doorbell. The yelling stops. Mr. Givens answers the door.

"What do you want?" he says. His face is red.

"Our sleigh," I manage to say.

"In the garage," he says, and closes the door.

A second later we hear the garage door rumble open. We go in and there, leaning up against the far wall, is the sleigh. Right next to it is the intercom I helped test weeks ago. I know it works. Cory looks at me with question marks in his eyes. I turn it on. We listen.

"I don't care if you flooded from here to Calgary . . ."

Michael.

"I don't want to go skating. I hate it outside." Brad.

"If Brad doesn't want to go skating, he doesn't have to go skating!" Michael.

"Fine, get the hell out then!" Mr. Givens.

We hear a door slam and through the window we see Mr. Givens heading towards the garage. Cory and I dive behind the car.

"Where's he going?" Judy says over the intercom.

"I don't know." Michael.

"Can't you two get along?" Judy.

Mr. Givens is in the garage by now, with no coat. He doesn't see us.

"Shut up!" he yells at the intercom. It goes silent.

He goes to the wood stacked against the wall. He picks up an axe. Cory and I freeze, if you can freeze even more when you're already frozen.

He leaves the garage, but instead of heading back to the house, he goes to the back yard. Cory runs after him. "Mr. Givens!" he's saying, "Mr. Givens!" I follow Cory.

Mr. Givens is at the rink. He's chopping at it with the ax. He is like a madman. Chips of ice are flying everywhere, splinters of board.

"Mr. Givens, don't!" Cory is yelling. "Mr. Givens!"

Mr. Givens stops. He is sweating and breathing hard.

"Why are you doing that to the ice?" asks Cory.

By now Mr. Givens' son Michael is there, so is Judy his wife.

"Dad stop, come on in," Michael says. He tries to take the axe.

"Leave me alone," says Mr. Givens.

"Are you looking for the seal, Mr. Givens? Remember the first night when we sealed it?" asks Cory.

Mr. Givens' hand relaxes, the axe falls. His eyes turn to Cory. Then he crumbles to the ice with his hands over his face. He starts crying like a baby. "Yes, yes," he says, "I'm looking for the seal."

"What's he talking about? Dad, what are you talking about? Are you okay?" asks Michael. He puts his hand on his father's back.

"He misses your Mom," Cory says. "You shouldn't fight on Christmas."

Silence follows. Like after a tree snap when it's thirty below.

"I'm sorry Dad. I miss her too," says Michael the son. He crouches down beside Mr. Givens and looks for the right words.

It's a beautiful rink, Dad. I just can't make Brad skate on it. He's not me. When you made all those rinks for me, those were the best days of our lives."

Mr. Givens lifts his head. He straightens up, still on his knees, on the ice.

"Then I got too big for it," continues Michael, "And we didn't play anymore. We needed Mom — we used Mom to keep us from fighting. We got to learn to do it alone, Dad."

Mr. Givens looks up at the stars, then at his son.

"I love you Dad," says Michael. And they hug. Right there on the rink.

We all stand there, like icicles broken from the eaves. We look at each other, and then away, not knowing what to say.

Except for Cory. He asks, "Can I skate on the rink now, Mr. Givens?"

Mr. Givens smiles through his tears. "It's all yours," he says.

"Well, yours too," says Cory.

"Maybe Brad will come out when he sees you skating," says Michael.

"We'll fix the holes though," says Cory.

"Yes we will," says Mr. Givens.

He's a neat kid, Cory. I decide then and there I won't call him Bathtub Mouth anymore.

Soon after we wish them a Merry Christmas and head home. We forget the sleigh again, but it doesn't matter. We'll be back.