

Ralph's Snow Plow Runs

Thursday evening had dropped 5 inches of pristine powder over the entire town. Ralph woke up on Friday and was happy. Snow meant good business that weekend, and good business meant Jessica.

He spent the day preparing. First off, he had to wax the plow. Ralph was quite sure no one realized just how important a good waxing was for his line of business. Once the smooth metal was shiny and slick with a nice new coat, he decided to put up a few posters around town hoping the recent snowfall could bring in some new customers. He printed out a dozen copies, drove into town, and began taping them to polls and message boards.

“What’s that?” It sounded more like *wuzzat*.

“Oh just my Snow Plow Run business.” Ralph replied.

“So you plow people’s driveways?”

“Not exactly... I mainly incentivize people to run.” The man looked confused so Ralph continued. “Do you ever go for a jog, but stop because you get tired?”

“That’s usually when I stop running, yeah.” The man supplied after a moment’s thought.

“Well what if you couldn’t stop?” Ralph was getting excited. He loved giving the pitch.

“I don’t understand.” The man frowned.

“What if,” Ralph paused for dramatic effect. “What if you couldn’t stop running because you were being followed by a giant snow monster that was shooting ice at you!”

“But...” The man considered. “It’s just you in your plow?”

“Yes it’s just me in my plow,” said Ralph hurriedly, “But use your imagination! Would you stop running if you were being chased by a giant snow monster?”

“I guess I wouldn’t.” The man still looked confused.

“Tomorrow at 8am!” Ralph offered, then quickly turned and walked to his car before the dim witted young man could ask any more questions.

That night his dreams were filled with flurries. He stood on a platform, naked, and danced around as the bloated snowflakes circled and dropped, pricking at his body with their icy fingertips. His plow, driverless, was careening in circles around the platform, rocketing the powder up into the air like a snowy geyser.

As he looked up into the swirling mist he saw a female figure descending towards him. Jessica. She was shrouded in the white, glittery snow. Angelic. As she dropped closer to Ralph, she extended her right hand in his direction. Ralph took the

extended hand and gasped as he was lifted up into the snowstorm with her, suddenly finding himself quite weightless.

She drew him close to her body, which was cold, ice cold. As she embraced him in a frigid hug, she brought her mouth to his ear and whispered to him. Ralph listened as closely as he could, but all it sounded like to him was the whistling of the wind and a door flapping in the breeze. She was so cold.

Ralph woke up shivering only to find that he was covered in snow. He looked to the left and realized that the door to his porch was open. A stream of powder was blowing in through the doorway. Ralph ran to go shut it and glanced at his bedside clock. 5:42am blinked back at him. Awakened by the snow, Ralph decided to go out and prepare the course.

After driving the route three time (two more than usual), Ralph decided that it was perfect. The right side of the entire loop was devoid of snow and ice. Instead, it was cleared and covered in a mixture of salt and gravel. The left side of the trail was heavy with snow.

Five minutes after Ralph returned home, his first customer arrived.

“Hi Ralphy!” He winced.

“Hi Nancy,” Ralph sighed.

“How’s the course?”

“Same as always Nancy.” He couldn’t decide which was worse, talking to Nancy or talking to his mother, who also called him Ralphy.

“Did I tell you about my surgery? It’s coming up this month.” She giggled and smiled slyly.

“Yes we talked about this last week, you know how I feel. Fake boobs will really hurt your mile time.”

“Oh Ralphy you’re so funny! Ha ha HA!” Her laugh was like a donkey’s.

“I’m not trying to be funny. I don’t even know where you could find any humor in what I was sa-” Ralph stopped and swiveled to his left.

“Jessica!” He cried out. “Hi!”

“Oh hi Ralph, hi Nancy.” Her voice was slippery like ice, sliding down Ralph’s mouth and into his lungs, cooling him to the core. He shivered longingly.

“How are you?” He managed to choke the words out of his frigid chest.

“Ready to run, like always!” She said brightly.

She was perfect in every way. Her black hair cascaded slickly over her shoulders; it glimmered in the morning sunlight. She wore a tight, red quarter zip that hugged her slight frame in the sexiest way. Ralph couldn’t even think about her leggings for fear of passing out.

“Hey,” Jessica was waving a hand near Ralph’s face, “I said, ready to run, like always. Are you awake yet?”

“Awake!!” Ralph yelled, ‘I mean, yes, I’m awake. Sorry, I zoned out for a second.”

“I feel like that happens to you a lot.”

“Can’t freeze the daydreams of a dreamer, you know?” Ralph walked away to greet the newest arrival of runners before Jessica could think about how little sense he was making.

“Hi Tim, Hi Jim.” He chirped.

“Hello Ralph,” they replied in unison. The twins did just about everything in unison if they could help it.

“Anyone know where Michael is?” Ralph asked loudly.

“Just saw him down the road,” “He was parking his car,” “He should be here in a minute or so,” the twins responded.

Sure enough, as soon as he looked up, Ralph saw another figure trudging around the corner.

“Michael!” He called out, waving a hand above his head in greeting.

“Hi Ralph!” Michael jogged over to join the group. Everyone was here now. Ralph surveyed the people before him. Tim and Jim were stretching, Jessica was hopping up and down to stay warm, and Nancy was wrapping her hair into a tight bun while staring at him.

“Ok, is everyone just about ready?”

“Yes!” The group called back.

“Alright, so this week we are pushing the pace. Gonna start of at 8 minute miles, but by the time we finish we will be under 7. Got it?” Several nods, a thumbs up, and a wink from Nancy. “I am gonna get in my plow, you know what to do.”

Ralph turned and walked back up his driveway. As he neared his beloved truck he traced a finger along its sleek, waxy plow, then stepped up and into the driver seat. The engine thrummed to life warmly, and Ralph let out a contented sigh.

Looking ahead, he saw that the runners were ready. They all stood at the beginning of the trail, nervously glancing back at him every few seconds, waiting for the signal. Ralph raised, then lowered the plow to a few inches off the ground. He too, was ready.

But he waited, letting the moment draw out. Ralph knew what this moment felt like for the runners. They knew he was ready, and he knew they were. But still he waited. He could see Jessica bouncing up onto her toes. But he let time stretch like taffy, pulling tauter and thinner and wispiers until...

Ralph honked, and the pack was off. He quickly accelerated to catch up. Several seconds later he reached the head of the trail and the plow engaged with the piled snow. White powder was funneled up and to the left by the custom grooves Ralph had installed. It shot off the side of the plow with force, creating a moving plume of swirly snow speeding at just about an 8 minute mile pace towards the runners in front of it.

Soon the synthetic snowstorm was just inches behind the Nancy, who was at the back of the tightly packed group of runners. Ralph glanced at his phone. 8:10 pace. Too slow. He nudged the accelerator just a bit further, and soon the snow was shooting into Nancy’s left shoulder.

“Come on Nancy, pick it up! Pick it up!” He called out the window. She opened up her strides until she found herself in front of the blazing ice storm again. Ralph scanned the rest of the group. The twins were in perfect stride with each other. In front of them Michael and Jessica led the pack.

“Good job gang, keep it going!” Ralph rolled his window up and started the sound system. As always, the first song queued up was Simon & Garfunkel’s *A Hazy Shade of Winter*. He hummed with the music, smiled, and looked down at his runners. This was pure bliss.

By the time the runners had passed the fourth marker, Ralph had pushed the pace to 7 minute miles. Only one more to go. The runners were in the zone; arms pumping, chest burning, blood pounding on their eardrum, smoky breath in tempo with their cadence.

The runners might have been in the zone, but Ralph was not. Ralph was staring at Jessica. And man was she radiant. Ralph was surprised she wasn’t melting all of the snow as she ran by.

He decided it then and there. Or maybe he had decided it when he woke up from his dream, he wasn’t really sure. But he knew that today was the day. After the run he would do it. He would tell her how he felt. It was time to vocalize the thoughts that had filled his head ever since Jessica attended her first Snow Plow Run.

But he needed her alone, that was the problem. Nancy was always the last to leave after the run, and that wouldn’t work at all. He needed Jessica and Jessica only.

The runners were not as tightly clumped as before. Jessica led by a few strides and Nancy was trailing behind. The fatigue was obvious in her form. Clumsy and oafish. A maniacal grin washed over Ralph’s face as he checked the current pace.

He nudged the accelerator, daring his truck to speed up. Within seconds the snow was at Nancy’s back and Ralph saw her glance backwards.

He nudged the accelerator again. The snow was now spitting into Nancy’s side. She sped up, but so did the truck.

“Hey!” She gasped, but not loudly enough. Ralph heard it, but the other runners didn’t break stride. The shout was lost in the whoosh of snow. Committing to his plan, Ralph depressed the accelerator further, and Nancy was enveloped in the whiteness.

A moment later he heard a muffled screech and saw what might have been a hand flail out of the powdery storm. Ralph sped up even more until the snow was scraping the feet of the twins.

“Too fast!” “Slow down!” They yelled before tumbling to the ground in unison as the snow covered them up. Two birds with one stone. Ralph almost laughed out loud. One more to go.

Michael was the closest to Jessica, and as he fell he reach out towards her, almost catching her foot as it shot past his hand. Ralph was relieved that he fell silently before disappearing into the storm.

Finally it was just her. Ralph checked his phone. 6:15 pace. Jessica was flying. Her form was so graceful she looked like she was gliding over the path, effortlessly accelerating to evade the pursuing snow.

Only about 100 meters left now. They were under 6 minute pace now. With the end in sight, and the snow only inches away from Jessica's back, Ralph had the most perverse desire to speed up and cover her, too, in the cleansing snow.

But to his partial relief he felt his foot relinquish its hold the accelerator, slowing down to the cooldown pace just as Jessica crossed the last mile marker. She was jogging now but still looking straight ahead. They were very close to his house.

Only as they reached his driveway did Jessica stop running, putting her hands, fingers intertwined, behind her head. Ralph parked.

"Hey, where is everyone else?" Jessica looked puzzled and beautiful. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark eyes were alive with heat.

"That's not important right now." Ralph's heart quickened just as hers slowed.

"What do you mea-"

"Jessica, I love you." He couldn't think of any other way to say it.

"Ralph, oh no!" She gasped. In that moment he felt his heart freeze over. A frigid wave of nausea and terror swept over him and he began to shiver.

"Jessica..." He was almost pleading.

"Oh Ralph," she looked down at her feet, "I was going to tell you this next week. But I'd better do it now." She looked up, but his eyes were glazed over.

"I'm not coming to your Snow Plow Runs anymore." She said it quickly and Ralph felt like it had been an icicle driven through his chest.

"What?" He said softly.

"I am switching over to Remy's Pebble Runs."

"I don't understand."

"Well," she closed her eyes slowly, "he rides behind you on a snowmobile and tosses pebbles at you to keep you on pace. But it's one-on-one, there isn't a group. It's more personal, surely you understand."

But Ralph didn't.

"I'm going to leave now," Jessica murmured.

"But.. but," He said weakly, "I could throw pebbles at you."

"I'm sorry Ralph, it's over." She turned and walked to her car.

Ralph was sitting on his icy lawn with his head in his hands when three snowmen and one snowwoman arrived.

"What. The. Hell." Nancy was furious. Looking up, Ralph saw her nose had been bleeding.

"I'm sorry guys, I don't know what I was thinki-"

"Save it." Nancy stormed off.

"That was not cool," "yeah not cool." And the twins were gone too.

Michael just walked away without a word. As Nancy reached her car she turned and yelled out,

“We’re not coming back again either! Goodbye Ralph.”

Ralph was still sitting there an hour later. It had started snowing again. At first it came down wispily, a few flakes at a time, melting as they neared the heat of his body. Then more steadily, dusting his hair and jacket in white powder. And now, it comes with fury, pouring thickly out of the sky onto the land below. The snow drifts are building on Ralph’s shoulders. He is tired.

But now is not the time to stay frozen. Not the time to be buried in it. He stands and shakes the snow off his body. It’s time to keep moving forward. And so he plows on, pushing ahead through the cold, clearing out his path in this world, and staying just barely ahead of the ever-present, even-advancing snowstorm of life.