

Kenny's Hill

By Brendan Rush
11-12-05

Sometimes when the wind blows a certain way it brings with it the smells of the past. Some little fragrance that sifts through the brain and draws up some image of something that was, and it is like we are there again.

The fire that I had lit was unnecessary, but I like fires and it was just cold enough to have one outside in my overused fire pit. I love autumn. In Baton Rouge we call autumn-like weather winter, and although it was autumn-like my thoughts were focused on winter.

A light gust of wind picked up some of the ash in the fire and suddenly I smelled winter. I'm not sure how or why, but I did. That cold dry smell that you smell when you press your face against the bark of a maple tree trying to rest before you have to duck out again avoiding the volley of snowballs coming from boys that are two to four years older than you and much better at making and throwing snowballs than you are.

When I was eleven years old it was tough to run in what we called ski pants. I never skied and never would. We sledged from sun up to sun down on the hill next to my house.

Kenny's Hill we called it because it was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Kenny. It was an additional lot that bordered their house and created a green spot in a neighborhood of houses separated by driveways. We lived on the other side of this giant green divot that was impossible to build on because of the scooped shape of it. What it lacked in cosmetic curb side appeal it made up for in sheer kid fun and at this very moment I was about twenty feet from the snow-boat that lay empty at the top of the hill.

My brother was moving and I knew once he got an angle on me he would project a well shaped snowball, the size of a baseball, at my head. I had not had time to create one myself and my lungs were burning from frantic escape that now situated me behind the maple tree in front of our house.

Being small and the least threat in the snow battle I went unseen behind the snow banks that castled the neighborhood in 1978. With surprising speed and dexterity I found myself right behind my brother and one of the other older kids in the neighborhood. Not only was I right behind them, but I was above them standing on the top of the snow bank like King Kong holding a giant chunk of snow. Like a wild ape I jumped down smashing the snow on both of them bringing everyone to the ground.

We slipped down and tangled up, me trying to escape and them trying to wipe the snow out of their eyes and from out of their collars. Snow down the neck was the ultimate in snowball attacks and as a little kid it was the thing of legend, but I was more interested in my escape than my legend and the snow covered ice layered sidewalk was making it impossible to get up and run.

Like a fat turtle I rolled and spun trying to get over to the harder snow where I could get my legs and start running. I had only seconds until they would be able to see again and I would be “dead meat.” A second later, as I was kneeling and breathing heavy, I noticed the pile of snowballs neatly stacked and ready for an attack - I immediately forgot about retreat and chose to sacrifice my escape for the good of little kids everywhere. I began stomping the snowballs, but before I knew it my brother was up and shoving me across the snow bank. He knew my plan was to destroy the ammunition and I had to be stopped. I got up quickly from where I landed and began my dash across the street and between the parked cars, but running in snow pants is like running in waste deep water – you get nowhere fast.

Like a lumbering seal on the rocks I moved changing my direction every few steps hoping to confuse my attackers. Snowballs whizzed by me but so far I was un-hit. I had destroyed a good many but not enough and I knew that they would be throwing anything they could get their hands on. I can remember one time in the past actually getting hit by a boot.

Now that I was behind the maple tree I tried catching my breath. Where was my team coming to my rescue? Where was a passing car that would provide me cover? Why couldn't now be the time for my parents to call me inside? I realized that I was on my own and there at the top of Kenny's Hill a snow boat called to me. I knew that a quick dash would make me a target for about ten steps and then I believed I could jump the yew bush and land on the snow boat. The slightest bit of momentum would start us down the hill and my escape would be complete!

A ride down Kenny's Hill was the greatest thing in my childhood life. Down the great scoop you went like a toboggan shoot. You then leveled out to a steady decline that leads you between the house and the giant oak that I had smashed into when I was four years old. You then continued through the hole in the hedges that would in later years be replaced by a fence in a time when parents looked to blame someone else for what their kids did. Once through the hole, you left Kenny's Hill and were now on the other end of the block careening down between a small granite cliff heading for the drive way of the crazy lady. I never knew who the crazy lady was but she lived in a giant house and would come out from time to time and shake something in your direction. We thought she was speaking Spanish but later in life found out that they were Greek.

Once you hit the driveway you could slide out to the side walk and coast down three or four houses until you came to a stop. I believe it was Timmy Monahan who had the record for distance. He made it all the way to Woodard road – barely creeping the last few feet before he reached out to touch the stop sign on the corner. That was the stuff of legend - as my escape would be if I made it.

A snowball exploded right above my head and would have hit me if my brother had not slipped a little trying to turn the corner around the end of the snow bank that marked the end of our driveway. It was now or never. I began my run and saw Mark O'Brien

coming with his hand raised and a huge snowball waiting to be released. I was locked in on the yew bush and the red snow boat that lay right behind it. I ducked low behind the snow bank and moved forward giving the appearance that I might be hiding. I could hear Mark slipping and struggling to crawl up on the other side to get a better shot at me. My ducking worked!

At this point I knew that a head shot was coming. Once my brother got his legs and Mark got up on the snow bank, two well timed - well aimed snowballs had my name on it. They were coming. I knew it. I knew that one of their shots would hurt, but the yew bush was coming up and I leaped as best I could in heavy boots and a winter getup that made me resemble the Michelin man.

When you are a kid, time can stop and slow down just like in the movies, or maybe looking back it seems that way. It is amazing how you can notice so much and notice so little at that time in your life. In mid air, I swear that I could see the snowball going by my shoulder just to the left of my head. I even saw it land and explode some ten feet in front of me. I felt the icy hot sting of a second snow ball that planted itself on my right butt-cheek. That was the snow ball of snow balls – hard enough to hit as it did and penetrate the thick puffy armor of my ski pants – that would leave a mark. In mid air I noticed all this. I felt the pull of the yew bush on my boot as I came down on the far side. I felt and heard the air leave my lungs as I smashed down upon the snow boat just barely landing inside the plastic cavity enough to push it forward without falling out. As my eyes exploded with tears and my head rattled against the hardness of the quarter inch thick plastic boat on packed down ice below, I knew I was the stuff of legends.

The boat moved forward and I could hear my brother and Mark rushing up trying to get another shot at me, but the boat had just tipped the edge of the hill's scoop and in less than a second I would be shooting down Kenny's Hill toward the hole in the hedge. There was not a kid alive that could run that fast, especially in snow gear. I was gone and laughing and waving – the pain in my limbs, lungs and butt all but forgotten. I may have even took off my knit hat and waved it in a circle like a cowboy as I rode to safety – stuff of legends being lived out amidst a chorus of threats like "You're dead when you get back!"

It was quite possible that I was dead when I got back, but for now I was enjoying a wonderful ride swooping and swerving down past the granite cliff and out the driveway. Kenny's Hill and the crazy lady's yard were like a magic world in winter. Every day when there was snow we rushed out after school to sled until the street lights came on. With numb hands and feet we continued to go down the hill and race back up as quickly as we could to do it again and again. Dragging our bodies like ice zombies we trudged back up through the hedges and around the right side of the hill so as not to destroy the well worn ice path that had been created. Some days before when the new snow fell all the kids had come together to prepare the hill for sledding.

There was a good amount of work that went into creating this perfect sledding experience. After a new snow had fallen, you had to get back out there and carve out

your sledding path. New snow was slower snow and it bogged up in front of the plastic sleds and was impossible for the sleds with runners. After the new snow fell, every little kid with a flying saucer or snow boat was commissioned to sit with all their weight and begin the process of packing down the snow. Sometimes a big kid would place two little kids in a snow boat and push them along the old sledding path and then pull them back up the path. It was a strict law on the hill that all kids needed to keep their feet inside the sled so as not to scrape the path and ruin it. Dragging feet was not tolerated and could result in a pelting with snowballs.

Once we got the original path up and running and packed down tight the OK was given to allow sleds with runners. We still used the flying saucers and snow boats but with runners you could turn back and forth which came in handy if the kid in front of you fell off his sled. The runners allowed you to swerve around him.

Getting hit by a runner sled was no picnic and could ruin a day of sledding. Blood on the snow was like a beacon in the night and mothers would see that in a flash. Sometimes we would have to doctor a cut behind the old oak by putting snow or ice on the bloody area of the body while other kids kicked as much snow as we could (without damaging the sledding path) over the red patches where the accident occurred.

When you got injured on the hill you knew you were going to get in trouble when you got home, you just hated to have to go home so early. If you could cover up the evidence and stop the bleeding you might be able to sled for another hour during a weekday and possibly three or four hours on a Saturday. If you were lucky, the swelling went down, you had all your teeth and no one was the wiser when you got home.

A traditional game on the hill was trying to see how many kids you could fit on one snow boat. Usually, the biggest kid got on the bottom and you would pile two more kids on top followed by three smaller kids sitting like cowboys on top of them and one standing on the back. That would be a record.

This game eventually escalated to something more risky. Two boats would be loaded up. The kid standing on the back or the one sitting like a cowboy on the front could be used as bombs. As a bomb, your job was to leap or roll off of the boat while it was going down the hill. Your target was the other boat and your job was to knock as many of them off their boat before they got a chance to knock you off yours. Occasionally bombs would meet in mid air in between the boats. This could result in the best of times and the worst of times. Some kids did not make good bombs. Some kids did not realize what was being asked of them as bombs, and so the collision with the other bombs or boat riders did not result in a euphoric "I took you out so bad" but instead with moaning and running home.

Moaning, crying and running home was the worst. If you could stop the kid you would. Sometimes it took tackling and other times it required a softer side. This meant that one of the girls would have to provide hugs and coddling. This would confuse the average ten or eleven year old boy during those initial confusing years of girls being a jumbled

mixture of feelings that ranged from a desire to kick or the secret desire to kiss. If this did not work, we were all fucked. No one ever said we were fucked, but we definitely knew we were. It would still be a few years before that word made it into our everyday vernacular.

A kid leaving the hill crying signaled the end of the day of sledding and the preparation of your defense. Someone was to blame. You just needed to make sure it was someone else if you were planning on sledding tomorrow.

I was still sledding and I could no longer hear the insults and threats from my brother and Mark. I thought about trying to beat Timmy Monahan's record but stopped three houses before the stop sign. I rolled over in the boat and looked up at the winter sky that was a mix of long thin purplely-gray clouds, white puffy clouds and the remaining orange film of light that was February. Who knew when we would return to school? I felt like a baby in my mother's arms looking up at the sky and feeling the light winds blow past me. It was perfect.

I lay there for a while and decided to get up before I fell asleep. I picked up my boat and carried it on my side like an Irish warrior. I knew that I may have been followed and that an ambush could come out of anywhere. I was several houses away from home and there were numerous trees, bushes, cars and driveways from which an attack could come.

I decided to stick to the sidewalk because it was mostly cleared and easier to maneuver. I shuffled as fast as I could for a while and then would return to walking. My brother was either waiting somewhere or he had decided to let me go and search out some other little kid to punish for my successful attack. Since no one came to my aid when I was stuck behind the maple tree I figured they were all in hiding and if smart had headed for their home cellars.

As I reached the Nelson's house I had to make a decision as to my approach to my back yard. He might be waiting just outside the cellar door expecting my approach. I could go up one more house and come through the yard behind our yard or I could cut through Nelson's yard and peak over the wall into my back yard. If I took the Nelson yard route it would allow me a chance to run and jump on the boat and slide down the side walk to escape.

I went down Nelson's driveway and cut to the back fence. I slid along the back fence with my boat held up like a shield. I could peak from around it and guard the entire right flank from attack. The only part that was exposed was my back which is exactly where they came from.

My heart exploded through my chest as the first snow ball came at me. I was so dead! I started running and realized the downside of the Nelson yard – the wall. Trying to climb in snow pants was impossible but I had to try. There was a smaller flower bed that you could step up on and then attempt the field stone wall. The snowballs were coming fast

and furious and if I was not mistaken they were also coming from some little kids. Traitors!

I was so mad and so scared at the same time that I made it to the flower bed before I realized it. This gave me a boost of energy. I began my climb.

The wall was about five feet in height and had numerous places to put your hands and feet but my snow boots would be the challenge. I grabbed the bushes that hung over and pulled myself up. My feet spun trying to find a foot hole and still the snowballs came at me. Under an onslaught of snow and ice I scrambled up the wall only to realize that no one had grabbed me. The most opportune moment to grab me and drag me down into the snow was lost to my enemies and now I was twenty feet from the cellar door. This was amazing! Though I could barely breathe and I had to leave my snow boat behind I was elated to see the door ahead of me and know the wall was behind me.

I began to run and crawl up the slope of the back yard. I finally stood and began my wobble to the door. My wool mittens came off preparing my hand to turn the knob ahead of me. Then I noticed my brother coming from the left. Down the wooden steps that lead from the side of the house to the back yard he came with lopping strides and snow ball-filled arms. With his left arm he rolled them over into a cradle and began heaving them with a whip-like motion. I covered my head as they flew by and one caught me on the forearm and stung all the way up my shoulder.

I was steps away from the door when a few hit the back wall of the house and one bounced off the plexi-glass window. My god the window! The window shook and warped but did not break - but the sound seemed to last forever. Once again, time seemed to stop as we both paused waiting for some response from above. Did my dad hear that? Did we wake up my step-mother?

The air turned to jello and my breathing struggled to change from heaving gasps to slow controlled silence. I had to move. I had to hide.

In the moments that lingered, I moved closer to the door. Ever so slowly I crept as the other kids came up over the wall. Then one let loose a snow ball that hit the wall of the house behind me at the very instance my dad was looking out the back porch window.

It was such a stupid thing to do – throwing that snowball that close to a house – and yet it was perfectly timed for me. I scooted inside the cellar door and made monkey faces at my brother. He leaned up against the window trying to hide from my dad's line of sight and mouthing the words, "let me in."

I could have done nothing and left him to sweat it out, but he would be less apt to get me if I saved him from my dad. I slipped the bolt and squeezed the door open. He slid in the door and we both breathed a sigh of relief as one of the little kids received the brunt of my father's wrath.

“What the hell is wrong with you,” my dad yelled as he opened up the window. He must have been pissed to open the window in winter time. “If you are going to throw snowballs, go throw them at your own damn house!”

I sat smiling at my brother and calmly removed all my snow gear hanging it up to dry. He shook his head and motioned me to be quiet. My dad may put two and two together and realize that the kid must have been throwing at someone and that someone might be one of his kids.

We sat in silence still breathing heavy but ready to slip out the cellar door if we heard my dad coming down the inside stairs. He did not come that day, and as I sat still smiling from ear to ear, even my brother had to admit, for today, I was the champion – the stuff of legends.

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