

*In his novel "Passing Innocence," Francis Dwyer wrote the following extract that describes his memories of winter at the home. His intent was to portray the joyful experience of winter in the Wood's Christian Home.*

*("Passing Innocence," Trafford Publishing, 2002, ISBN 1-55369-699-9)*

"One of the boys woke early, filled with anticipation. He slid to the fire escape, and cracked it open pushing a weight of snow back, and tiptoed out onto the landing, his bare feet curl at the shock of touching frozen snow. Ted hung over the railing, brushing clouds of feathery flakes away. He looked down on the dozens of snow angels covering the back yard, with none of them touching and no footsteps between, their fan-like wings leaving beautiful tracings on the white purity. He thought that angels might have fallen from the nighttime sky. As he gazed, entranced, the first light struck the tops of the firs, some of them starting to shake snow off in silent sloughs. Ted watched steam like wreath of smoking vapour quitting the lifting branches, as if angel wingtips had spun ghostly trails above the sleeping forest.

In the exciting weeks that brought on winter, the temperature dropped and the nights turned crackling cold. All through the dark hours, radiator pipes thumped and banged, while the boys slept in tight balls, dreaming of snow play. On some of the coldest mornings Ted sat on the landing pressing his fingertips against windowpanes. The warmth melting tiny spy holes through the intricate frost. What he liked best was to splay his tongue onto the shocking coldness and taking a dangerous lick; by that means providing a large enough window to peek through and watch the dance of falling flakes. When he tired of this, he used the heel of a hand and fingertips to make tracks like baby footsteps marching up the frost.

Ted and the other boys spent their spare times sliding on the hills. They tobogganed down an old creek bed. It had banked corners and a jump where an ancient wagon trail crossed. When they flew off the jump, the toboggan trailed a stream of snow, like pale smoke. The whooping exhilarating shouts echoing around them, as a trail of crystal vapours drifted in their wake. The front one wore a cracked old aviators helmet and a pair of welder's goggles which Fishface had found somewhere, the other boy with earmuffs and a bright red scarf wrapped round his chin. Their parkas took the brunt of the spraying snow. The fur on the hood icing up so the riders looked like they had stood in the discharge of a snowplow. And at the end, they sprawled thrown against each other, seeming stupefied, a collapsed heap on the flat, becoming aware that it was over, until they gathered themselves and trudged upward again, all of them grinning wildly.

In the boot room up near the dorm entrance, Buzz showed Ted how to make a scooter. They kept old worn out boots crammed in a box there. Boys sometimes searched through the discards to find turned-up ones that might fit them near enough. By knocking the heels off, they created ski boots to use for rocketing down the trails in a crazy leg-rattling sort of way. Buzz showed him something better. He took a plank and jammed it up behind the steam pipes, where they came off the boiler, wedging a hefty boot in to bend the front of the board up. The bend has become permanent from heat and moisture when Ted returned a week later. They nailed a piece of two-by-six to the bottom so it was upright and sunk the nails deep into the ski groove. Lastly, Buzz spiked the flat end of an apple box on top of the two-by-six upright. "There you go Scooter, now you've got the best sled in the world and it's named after you." Ted waxed the bottom up slick with Johnson's paste wax from the stuff they used in the dorms. The thing went like a whiz-bang. Ted shot down the rutted trail, his mittens gripping the underside of the apple box ends and his feet up and out for balance, hollering the whole way.

After about a month, Ted got real skates. Even without skates, he had enjoyed hanging around the skate shack. It was dingy inside, with so little light that if it wasn't awful cold they left the door open. In January when it turned frigid, the big barrel stove glowed, red-hot, providing all the ruby soft light they needed. If anyone wanted to see better they just kicked the stove door open.

Strewn around the floor, amongst the general litter, were pieces of dirty waxed skate lace and a few old skate tighteners. The boys used the little coil springs which secured the side of bed springs, ones lifted always from someone else's bed, to tighten their skate laces. Underneath the scarred benches, a few crumpled wool socks grew hard and moldy amongst the dark wood chips and other sooty debris.

Ted liked the acrid smell of wood smoke, which lingered on his clothing after leaving the shack. He could always smell it, strongest on his mittens, as he mounted the first of the seventy or so wooden steps leading back up to the home. Those steps were incredibly steep and long. The big thing that year was that three boys rode a toboggan all the way down them. Amazingly, no one broke a leg. Crazy Charlie did break his arm going off the road jump, sticking it out as the toboggan veered into the trees. He was hurt and uncharacteristically vulnerable, but no one dared take revenge. As Dutch put it, "Grabass would come back and get you even if he was in the grave."

When it turned seriously cold, arctic cold; boys could sometimes skate on the canal. Rain followed by repeated snow melting would put some water back in, making the canal during mid-winter a kind of stagnant brook with high mud banks. The sky turned azure, deep blue right up to the shrunken sun, no clouds at all and imprudent noses hurt

from taking deep breaths. The air sparkled with zillions of frosty diamonds suspended everywhere. Smoke rose straight up, and snow squeaked under foot. The canal seemed like an irresistible invitation written upon glistening ice, the pale blue sublime enough to mock a bitter wintry sky. The effect so mesmerizing, so alluring as to banish any thoughts of breaking through, even if the boys knew that the ice at those times could be desperately thin. It was as if the magic of speed defeated any terror of a frigid drowning death. The canal skating, this best skating with deadly water just below, was a kind of dare. A boy knew that if he skated fast enough and just smoothly enough, he could streak across any creaking film of ice and outpace the lethal cracks.

On one occasion, Ted resting on the steps on his way up from the shack turned and saw skaters streaking along the canal. Four boys flew past, trailing each other with effortless strides. Their arms swung way out, scarves billowing behind them. The skates made soft scraping sounds, as their breath trailed like ghostly, dancing ribbons. The late afternoon light flashed on silver blades, as they glided away flying on a shining path. Their blades sprayed ice, like silvery dry leaves shot dancing and skipping by bursts of wind, all of it so beautiful and swiftly gone. He heard their shouts echoing through the frosted forest. They skated away, and he wanted more than anything to skate like one of those boys."