### Dashing Through the Snow

Isaac Asimov

George and I were sitting at the window of La Bohéme, a French restaurant he patronized now and then at my expense, and I said, 的t will probably snow.

That was not a great contribution to the world's store of knowledge. It had been dark and lowering all day, the tempera­ture was in the teens, and the weatherman had predicted snow. Still, it hurt my feelings to have George ignore the remark en­tirely.

He said, “Now consider my friend Septimus Johnson.”

“Why?” I said. “What has he to do with the fact that it will probably snow?”

“A natural progression of ideas,” said George severely. “That is a process you must have heard others mention, even if you have never experienced it yourself.”

My friend Septimus [said George] was a ferocious young man, with a face permanently creased into a scowl and biceps perma­nently swollen into bulges. He was the seventh child in his fam­ily, hence his name. He had a younger brother named Octavius and a younger sister named Nina.

I don't know how far the progression went, but I believe it was the crowded condition of his youthful days that made him strangely enamored of silence and solitude in his later years.

Once he matured, and achieved a certain success with his novels (like you, old fellow, except that the critics say rather flattering things about *his* work on occasion), he found himself with enough money to pamper his perversion. In short, he bought an isolated house on a forgotten piece of territory in upstate New York and retired there for longer or shorter periods in order to write further novels. It was not terribly far from civilization, but as far as the eye could see, at least, it seemed untamed wilderness.

I think I was the only person he ever voluntarily invited to stay with him at his country place. I assume he found himself attracted by the calm dignity of my demeanor and the fascina­tion and variety of my conversation. At least he never explained the source of attraction in so many words, but it can scarcely have been anything else.

One had to be careful with him, of course. Anyone who has ever felt the friendly clap on the back that is Septimus Johnson's favorite mode of greeting knows what it is to have a cracked vertebra. Still, his casual exertion of force came in handy at our first meeting.

I had been beset by a dozen or two hoodlums, who were misled by my upper-class carriage and appearance into assuming I carried untold wealth in cash and jewels on my person. I de­fended myself furiously for, as it happened, I did not have a penny on me that day, and I knew that the hoodlums, once they found this out, would, in their way natural disappointment, use me with the utmost barbarity.

It was at this point that Septimus appeared, lost in thought over something he was writing. The horde of wretches were in his way and, since he was too wrapped in thought to consider walking in anything but a straight line, he tossed them absently to one side or the other in twos and threes. He happened to come upon me at the bottom of the pile just as light dawned and he saw a way out of his literary dilemma, whatever it was. Feeling me to be a good-luck charm, he invited me to dinner. Feeling dinner at another's expense to be an even better luck charm, I accepted.

By the time dinner was over, I had established the kind of ascendancy over him that led to my being invited to his country place. Such invitations were repeated frequently. As he said at one time, being with me was as close to being alone as possible, and considering how he loved solitude, that was quite obviously a great compliment.

At first I expected a hovel, but I was quite wrong. Septimus had clearly done well with his novels and he had spared no expense. (I know it is rather unkind to speak of successful novels in your presence, old man, but I am, as always, wedded to the facts.)

The house, in fact, although isolated to the point of keeping me in a permanent state of horripilation, was thoroughly electri­fied, with an oil-fired generator in the basement and solar panels on the roof. We ate well and he had a magnificent wine cellar. We lived in total luxury, something to which I have always been able to adapt myself with astonishing ease, considering my lack of practice.

To be sure, it was impossible to avoid looking out the windows altogether, and the total lack of scenery was remarkably depress­ing. There were, if you can credit it, hills and fields and a small lake, and incredible quantities of vegetation of a bilious green, but not a sign of human habitation, of highways, or of anything else worth looking at — not as much as a line of telephone poles.

Once, after a good meal and good wine, Septimus said expan­sively, “George, I find it pleasant to have you here. After listen­ing to you, I find it such a relief to turn to my word processor that my writing has improved substantially. Do feel free to come here at any time. Here,” he waved his hand about, “you can escape from all your cares and all the annoyances that may be hounding you. And when I am at work at my word processor, you have free access to my books, to the television set, to the refrigerator and — I believe you know the location of the wine cellar.”

As it happened, I did. I had even drawn a little map of guid­ance for myself, with a large X at the site of the wine cellar and several alternative routes carefully plotted out.

“The only thing is,” said Septimus, “this refuge from worldly woe is closed from 1 December to 31 March. I cannot offer you my hospitality then. I must remain in my town house.”

I was rather dashed at this. Snow time was woe time for me. After all, my dear fellow, it is in winter that my creditors are most pressing. These grasping people who, as everyone knows, are wealthy enough to be able to ignore the few paltry pennies I may owe them, seem to gain a kind of special delight at the thought that I might be thrown out into the snow. It inspires them to new feats of wolfish greed so that it was then above all I would have welcomed refuge.

I said, “Why not use it in winter, Septimus? With a roaring fire in this magnificent fireplace ably abetting your equally mag­nificent central heating system, you could laugh at the cold of Antarctica.”

“So I could,” said Septimus, “but it seems that each winter howling devils of blizzards converge here and dump snow on this demi-paradise of mine. This house, lost in the solitude I adore, is then cut off from the outside world.”

“The world is well lost,” I pointed out.

“You are perfectly right,” said Septimus. “And yet my sup­plies come from the outside world — food, drink, fuel, laundry. It is humiliating but true that I cannot actually survive without the outside world — at least I couldn't live the kind of sybaritic life that any decent human being would want to live.”

I said, “You know, Septimus, it may be that I can think of a way out of this.”

“Think away,” he said, “but you won't succeed. Still, this home is yours eight months of the year, or at least whenever I am here during those eight months.”

It was true, but how could a reasonable man settle for eight months when twelve months existed? That evening I called up Azazel.

I don't think you know about Azazel. He is a demon, a magi­cal imp about two centimeters high who possesses extraordinary power which he is glad to exhibit, because back in his own world, wherever that may be, he is not very highly thought of. Consequently —

Oh, you *have* heard of him? Well really, old fellow, how can I tell you this story in reasoned manner if you feel called upon to insert your own views continually? You don't seem to realize that the art of the true conversationalist consists of being com­pletely attentive, and refraining from interruption on such spe­cious excuses as that of having heard it all before. At any rate —

Azazel was, as always, furious at being called up. Apparently he was engaged in what he called a solemn religious observance. I held my own temper with difficulty. He is always involved in something he imagines to be important and never seems to stop to consider that when I call him up, I am invariably involved in something that *is* important.

I waited calmly till his twittering sputters died out and then I explained the situation.

He listened with a scowl on his tiny face and said at last, “What is snow?”

I sighed and explained.

“You mean solidified water falls from the sky here? Chunks of solidified water? And life survives?”

I didn't bother to mention hail, but said, “It falls as soft, downy flakes, Mighty One.” (It always soothed him, you see, to call him foolish names.) “It is inconvenient, however, when it falls to excess.”

Azazel said, “If you are going to ask me to rearrange the weather pattern in this world, then I refuse with considerable fervor. That would come under the heading of planet-tampering, which is against the ethics of my highly ethical people. I would not dream of being unethical, especially since if I were caught at it, I would be fed to the dread Lamell Bird, a most filthy crea­ture with dreadful table manners. I would hate to tell you what he'd mix me with.”

“I wouldn't dream of having you planet-tamper, Sublime One. I would like to ask something much simpler. — You see, snow, when it falls, is so soft and downy, that it will not support the weight of a human being.”

“It is your fault for being so massive,” said Azazel scornfully.

“No doubt,” I said, “but this mass makes the going difficult. I would like to make my friend less heavy when he is on snow.”

It was hard for me to hold Azazel's attention. He kept saying, in a revolted manner, “Solidified water — all over — burying the land.” He shook his head as though unable to grasp the concept.

“Can you make my friend less heavy?” I asked, pounding away at what was, after all, a very simple point.

“Of course,” said Azazel indignantly. “All it requires is the application of the anti-gravity principle, activated by the water molecule under appropriate conditions. It isn't easy, but it can be done.”

“Wait,” I said uneasily, thinking of the dangers of inflexibility. “It would be wise to place the anti-gravitational intensity under my friend's control. He might find it convenient to flounder on occasion.”

“Fit it to your crude autonomic system? Really! You know no limits to your effrontery.”

“I only ask,” I said, “because it's you. I would know better than to ask this of any other of your species.”

This diplomatic untruth had its expected effect. Azazel ex­panded his chest by two full millimeters and, in a lordly, counter-tenor squeak, said, “It shall be done.”

I supposed Septimus gained the ability at that moment, but I couldn't be sure. It was August at the time and there was no snow cover with which to experiment — nor was I in the mood for a quick trip to Antarctica, Patagonia, or even Greenland in a search for experimental material.

Nor was there are point in explaining the situation to Sep­timus with­out snow for demon­stration. He would not have be­lieved me. He might even have come to the ridiculous conclusion that I — *I* — had been drinking.

But the Fates were kind. I was at Septimus's country home in late November, in what he called his farewell stay for the season, and there was a copious fall of snow — unusually heavy for the month.

Septimus chafed loudly and proclaimed war on the universe for hot having spared him this vile insult.

But it was heaven to me — and to him, did he but know. I said, “Fear not, Septimus. Now is the time for you to find out that snow has no terrors for you.” And I explained the situation in ample detail.

I suppose it was to be expected that his first reaction would be one of ribald disbelief, but he made certain totally unnecessary animadversions on the state on my mental health.

However, I had had months to work out my strategy. I said, “You may have wondered, Septimus, how I earn my living. You will not be surprised at my reticence when I tell you that I am the key figure in a government research program on anti-gravity. I can say no more except that you are an invaluable experiment and will greatly advance the program. This has important na­tional security implications.”

He stared at me in wide-eyed amazement as I softly hummed a few bars of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

“Are you serious?” he asked.

“Would I palter with the truth?” I asked in my turn. Then, risking the natural rejoinder, I said, “Would the CIA?”

He swallowed it, overcome by the aura of simple veracity that pervades all my statements.

He said, “What am I supposed to do?”

I said, “There's only six inches of snow on the ground. Imag­ine yourself to be weighing nothing and step out on it.”

“I just have to *imagine* it?”

“That's the way it works.”

“I'll get my feet wet”

I said sarcastically, “Put on your hip boots, then.”

He hesitated and then actually got out his hip boots and strug­gled into them. This open show of lack of faith in my statements hurt me deeply. In addition, he put on a furry overcoat and an even furrier hat.

“If you're ready — ” I said coldly.

“I'm not,” he said.

I opened the door and he stepped out. There was no snow on the covered veranda, but as soon as he placed his feet on the steps, they seemed to slide out from under him. He grabbed the balustrade with a desperate grip.

He had somehow reached the bottom of the short flight of steps, and he tried to push himself upright. It didn't work, at least not in the way he intended. He went sliding along for a few feet, arms flailing, and then his feet went up in the air. He came down on his back and continued to slide until he passed a young tree and wrapped an arm around the trunk. He slid around it three or four times and came to a halt.

“What kind of slippery snow do we have here?” he shouted in a voice that trembled with indignation.

I must admit that despite my faith in Azazel, I found myself staring in surprise. He had left no footprints and his sliding body had made no furrow in the snow.

I said, “You don't weigh anything on the snow.”

“Lunatic,” he said.

I said, “Look at the snow. You've left no marks.”

He stared, then make a few cursory remarks of the type that in past years used to be referred to as unprintable.

“And,” I went on, “Friction depends in part on the pressure between a sliding body and what it slides upon. The lower the pressure, the less the friction. You weigh nothing, so your pres­sure on the snow is zero, the friction is zero, and you therefore slide on snow as though it were the smoothest ice.”

“What am I suppose to do then? I can't have my feet slide out on me like that!”

“It doesn't hurt, does it? If you don't weigh anything, and you land on your back, it doesn't hurt.”

“Even so. Not being hurt is insufficient excuse for spending my life on my back in the snow.”

“Come, Septimus, think yourself heavy again and then get up.”

He scowled in his usual fashion and said, “Just think myself heavy, eh?” But he did, and got clumsily to his feet.

He stood inches deep in it now and when he tried, cautiously, to walk, he had no more trouble than one usually does in snow.

“How do you do it, George?” he said, with much more re­spect in his voice than I usually managed to elicit. “I wouldn't have thought you were such a scientist.”

“The CIA forces me to mask my keen scientific know-how,” I explained. “Now imagine yourself lighter little by little, and walk as you do it. You'll leave shallower and shallower tracks and the snow will grow more and more slippery. Stop when you feel it becoming dangerously slippery.”

He did as he was told, for we scientists have a strong intellec­tual grip over lesser mortals. “Now,” I said, “try sliding around. When you want to stop, just make yourself heavier — and do it gradually or you'll go over on your nose.”

He caught the knack immediately, being the athletic type. He told me once he could do anything in the way of sport but swim. His father, when he was a boy of three, had tossed him into the water in a kindly attempt to get him to swim without the tedious necessity of instruction, and the young Septimus had required ten minutes of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as a result. He said it had left him with a lifetime fear of water and an aversion to snow as well. “Snow is just solid water,” he said, exactly as Azazel would have.

The aversion to snow failed to make itself evident under the new conditions, however. He began sliding about with an ear-splitting “Whee!” and would, from time to time, make himself heavier as he turned, casting up a thick spray of snow and com­ing to a halt.

He said, “Wait!” dashed into the house and emerged — if you will believe it — with ice skates affixed to boots.

“I learned how to skate on my lake,” he explained as he began to put them on, “but I never enjoyed it. I was always afraid the ice would break. Now I can skate on land without danger.”

“But remember,” I said anxiously, “it only works above the H2O molecule. If you come to a bare patch of earth, or exposed pave­ment, your lightness will vanish instantly. You'll hurt your­self.”

“Don't worry,” he said, getting to his feet and taking off. I watched him speed along for at least half a mile over the frozen wastes of his acreage and to my ears there came the distant bellow of: “Dashing through the snow/ in a one-horse open sleigh —”

Septimus, you must understand, guesses at the pitch of each note, and always guesses wrong. I put my hands over my ears.

There followed what I truly believe was the happiest winter of my life. All winter long I was snug and warm in the house, eating and drinking like a king, reading improving books in which I tried to outguess the author and identify the murderer, and speculating with grim delight on the frustrations of my cred­itors back in the city.

Through the window, I could watch Septimus in his endless skating over the snow. He said it made him feel like a bird and gave him a three-dimensional delight he had never known. Well, to each his own.

I did warn him he must not let himself be seen. “It would endanger me,” I said, “for the CIA would not approve this private experimentation — but I don't care about my personal dan­ger for, to a person like myself, science comes above all. How­ever, if you were ever seen skimming over snow as you do, you would become an object of curiosity and dozens of newspaper­men would swarm over you. The CIA would hear of it and you would have to undergo experimentation with hundreds of scien­tists and military men poking at you. You would never be alone for a minute. You would become a national celebrity and you would be at all times within reach of thousands of people con­cerned over you.”

Septimus shuddered strongly at the prospect as I knew an iso­lation-lover would have to. Then he said, “But how will I get supplies when I am snowed in? That was the whole purpose of this experi­ment.”

I said, “I'm sure the trucks will almost always be able to make their way up the roads and you can store up enough to tide you over those times when they can't. If you *do* need something on an emergency basis when you are truly snowed in, you can skim as close to town as you dare, making sure no one sees you — there'll be very few people in the open at such times anyway, possibly no one — then restore your weight, tramp the last few hundred feet, and look worn out. Pick up what you need, tramp away a few hundred feet, and take off again. See?”

Actually, it was never necessary to do that even once during that winter; I knew all along that he had exaggerated the snow danger. And no one ever saw him during his skimming, either.

Septimus couldn't get enough. You should have seen his face when snow held off for more than a week or the temperature rose above freezing. You can't imagine how he feared for the safety of the snow cover.

What a marvelous winter! What a tragedy that it was the only one!

What happened? I'll tell you what happened. You remember what Romeo said just before he slipped the knife into Juliet? You probably don't, so I'll tell you. He said, “Let a woman in your life and your serenity is through.”

The following fall, Septimus met a woman — Mercedes Gumm. He had met women before; he was no anchorite, but they had never meant much to him. A short period of socializa­tion, romance, ardor, and then he forgot them, and they him. No harm in it. After all, I myself have been ferociously pursued by many young women and I never found harm in it at all, even though they frequently cornered me and forced me to — but I drift away from the story.

Septimus came to me in a very cast-down mood. “I love her, George,” he said. “I am driven to distraction by her. She is the very lodestone of my existence.”

“Very pretty,” I said. “You have my permission to carry on with her for a while.”

“Thanks, George,” said Septimus gloomily. “Now what I need is *her* approval. I don't know why it should be, but she doesn't seem to take to me much.”

“Odd,” I said. “You are usually quite successful with women. You are after all, rich, muscular, and not uglier than most.”

“I think it's the muscular part,” said Septimus. “She thinks I'm an oaf.”

I had to admire Miss Gumm's perception. Septimus, to put it as kindly as possible, *was* an oaf. I thought it best, however, as I imagined his biceps writhing under his jacket sleeves, not to mention my estimate of the situation.

He said, “She says she doesn't admire the physical in men. She wants someone thoughtful, intellectual, deeply rational, philo­soph­ical and a whole bucketful of adjectives like those. She says I'm not any of these things.”

“Have you told her you're a novelist?”

“Of course I've told her that. And she's read a couple of novels of mine, too. But you know, George, they tend to be about football players and she says she found that revolting.”

“I take it she's not the athletic type.”

“Certainly not. She swims,” and he made a face, probably remembering being mouth-to-mouth resuscitated at the tender age of three, “but that doesn't help.”

“In that case,” I said consolingly, “forget her, Septimus. Women are easy to come by. As one leaves, another arrives. There are many fish in the sea and birds in the air. They are all alike in the dark. One woman or another, it makes no differ­ence.”

I would have continued indefinitely, but he seemed to grow oddly restless as he listened, and one doesn't care to make an oaf restless.

Septimus said, “George, you offend me deeply with those sen­timents. Mercedes is the only girl in the world for me. I couldn't live without her. She is inseparably bonded to the core of my being. She is the very breath of my lungs, the beat of my heart, the vision of my eyes. She —”

He *did* continue indefinitely, and it didn't seem to bother him in the least that he was offending *me* deeply with those senti­ments.

He said, “So I see no way out but of insisting on marriage.”

The words were the knell of doom. I knew exactly what the result would be. As soon as they were married, that would mean the end of my paradise. I don't know why it is, but if there is one thing that new wives insist upon, it is that bachelor friends must go. I would never be invited to Septimus's country place again.

“You can't do that,” I said in alarm.

“Oh, I admit it seems hard, but I think I can do it. I have worked out a plan. Mercedes may think I'm an oaf, but I'm not entirely unintellectual. I will invite her to my country place at the beginning of winter. There, in the quiet and peace of my Eden, she will feel her being expand and she will come to realize the true beauty of my soul.”

That, I thought, was expecting far too much even of Eden, but what I said was, “You're not planning to show her how you can skim over the snow, are you?”

“No, no,” he said. “Not until we're married.”

“Even then —”

“Nonsense, George,” said Septimus censoriously. “A wife is a husband's second self. A wife can be trusted with the dearest secrets of one's soul. A wife —”

Again, he went on indefinitely, and all I could do was say weakly, “The CIA won't like it.”

His brief comment on the CIA was one with which the Soviets would heartily have agreed. Cuba and Nicaragua as well.

“Somehow I'll persuade her to come with me at the beginning of December,” he said. “I trust you will understand, George, if we two plan to be alone. I know you wouldn't dream of interfer­ing with the romantic possibilities that would arise between Mercedes and myself in the peaceful solitude of nature. We would surely be drawn together by the magnetism of silence and slow time.”

I recognized the quotation, of course. It was what Macbeth said just before he slipped the knife into Duncan, but I merely stared at Septimus in a cold and dignified way. A month later, then, Miss Gumm *did* go to Septimus's country place and I did not.

What happened at the country place, I did not witness. I know it only through the spoken testimony of Septimus so I cannot vouch for all the details.

Miss Gumm *was* a swimmer, but Septimus, feeling an uncon­quer­able aversion to that particular hobby, asked no questions about it. Nor did Miss Gumm apparently feel it necessary to force detail on an unquestioning oaf. For that reason, Septimus never found out that Miss Gumm was one of those madwomen who enjoyed donning a bathing suit in the depth of winter, breaking the ice in the lake and dropping into the freezing water for a healthful, invigorating swim.

It followed that one bright and frosty morning, while Sep­timus was snoring in oafish slumber, Miss Gumm arose, put on her bathing suit, terry-cloth cloak, and sneakers, and went along the snow-covered path to the lake. The rim was lightly iced up but the interior was still free of cover and, removing the cloak and sneakers, she plunged into the frigid water with what must have been every evidence of enjoyment.

It was not long after that that Septimus awoke and, with a lover's fine instinct, instantly realized that his beloved Mercedes was not in the house. He went through it calling her name. Finding her clothes and other belongings in her room, he real­ized she had not secretly left for the city, as had been his first fearful thought. She must then be outside.

Hastily, he put boots on his bare feet and slipped his heaviest overcoat over his pajamas. He dashed outside, calling her name.

Miss Gumm heard him, of course, and waved her arms madly in his direction, shouting “Right here, Sep. Right here.\*'

What followed next I'll tell you in Septimus's own words. He said, “To me it sounded like \*Here, help, help!' I reached the natural conclusion that my love had ventured out onto the ice in a moment of madness and had fallen in. How could it ever occur to me that she would willingly throw herself into freezing water?

“Such was my great love for her, George, that I instantly determined to dare the water which ordinarily I cravenly feared —especially ice-cold water — and to rush to her rescue. Well, perhaps not *instantly,* but honestly, it was after not more than two minutes of thought, or three at the outside.

“Then I shouted, 'I'm coming, my own, my loved one. Keep your head above water.1 and I started out. I wasn't going to *walk* there through the snow. I felt there wasn't enough time. I de­creased my weight as I ran, and then took off on a magnificent slide, right across the shallow snow-cover, right across the ice that rimmed the lake, and right into the water with a horrendous splash.

“As you know I can't swim and am, indeed, deadly afraid of water. My boots and overcoat dragged me down, too, and I would certainly have drowned if Mercedes had not rescued me.

“You would think that the romance of rescuing me would have drawn us closer together, welded us into one, but —”

Septimus shook his head, and there were tears in his eyes, “It didn't work that way. She was furious. ‘You oaf,’ she shrieked. ‘Imagine plunging into the water in your overcoat and boots and not even being able to swim. What on earth did you think you were doing? Do you know what a struggle it was to get you out of the lake? And you were in such a panic you clipped me on the jaw. You nearly knocked me out and had us *both* drown. And it still hurts.’

“She packed and left in a complete huff, and I had to remain behind with something that quickly developed into a very nasty cold, one I still haven't quite gotten over yet. I haven't seen her since then — she won't answer my letters; she won't return my phone calls. My life is over, George.”

I said, “Just out of curiosity, Septimus, why *did* you throw yourself into the water? Why didn't you stand on the lakeshore, or as far out on the ice as you dared, and reach a long stick out to her or throw her a rope if you could get one?”

Septimus looked aggrieved. “I didn't intend to throw myself into the water. I intended to slide along the top.”

“Slide along the top? Didn't I tell you your weightlessness would only work on ice?”

Septimus's look became one of ferocity. “I *thought* that was it. You said it only worked on H2O. That includes water, doesn't it?”

He was right. H2O sounded more scientific and I had to main­tain my air of scientific genius. I said, “But I meant *solid* H2O.”

“But you didn't *say* solid H2O,” he said, as he slowly rose with what I felt to be the clear intention of dismembering me.

I didn't remain to check on the accuracy of my feeling. I have never seen him since. Nor have I ever again been to his country paradise. I believe he lives on a South Sea island now, largely, I think, because he never wants to see ice or snow again.

It's as I say, “Let a woman in your life —” though, come to think of it, it may have been Hamlet who said that just before he slipped his knife into Ophelia.

George let a large, vinous sigh bubble forth from the depths of what he considers his soul and said, “But they're closing the place and we had better leave. Have you paid the bill?”

Unfortunately, I had.

“And can you lend me a fiver, old man, to get me home?”

Even more unfortunately, I could.