

Ground-Hog Day

The crowd was already gathered, waiting for the fire engine to arrive. The front row, the ones who had camped out overnight, were pressed close together and up against the chain-link barrier, trying to generate warmth but not risking their place for a cup of coffee or hot chocolate at the concession stand. They stood solemnly, as did everyone behind, staring expressionlessly at the fenced-in area where Pete would soon perform.

Late arrivals were scurrying for whatever vantage points were left. Most had first stopped at the concession stand and were carrying a Styro-foam cup, or a Danish, or both as they carefully secured their green THINK SPRING or white THINK SNOW buttons to their coats. Conversation was sporadic and generally among those wearing buttons of the same color.

"Think Pete's gonna see his shadow?" asked one green-button man to another.

"Don't see how," said the other, looking up at a whitening dun sky. "Sun's startin' to rise already, but there's nothin' but clouds." He adjusted his scarf under his grey overcoat. A few snowflakes began descending like feathers.

"Forecast says 'cloudy all day with snow'," said the first green-button man, holding out his left hand to let the snowflakes act as evidence. "Looks like they're gonna be right for a change."

"Well, all I know is I don't need any more winter," said the other. "Understand that Phil over there in Punxsutawney is already out and stayed out. Where the hell IS that fire engine anyhow?"

Nearby, two white-button men were munching on Danish and sipping coffee while they discussed the virtues of Pocono skiing and hoped Pete's

performance would mean an extension of their season. Other conversations sprouted; some green, some white, some mixed, because of the snow which was beginning to intensify. Aimlessly wafting feathers were being supplanted by compact, purposeful ice drops which hissed their arrival to the ground. Many in the crowd began turning up their collars and popping open umbrellas as a murmur of voices undulated throughout.

Suddenly someone yelled "Here it is!" and the murmur blossomed into raucous cheer. Off to the right, chugging its way up to the cordoned-off ground next to Pete's area, a bright red fire engine, all lights ablaze, pulled to within inches of the concession stand, stopped, let out a belch of exhaust, and backed into its parking space while all the children laughed and shouted their approval. The mayor, seated opposite the driver and wearing both a green and a white button on his grey hat, waved to the crowd, and, as <sup>he</sup> opened the door and exited from the vehicle, signaled to the driver, who made the siren pierce the snow-filled air with its distinctive wail.

Satisfied that his entrance was played well before his audience, the mayor raised both arms to quiet the excited crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen - and boys and girls, too - I hereby proclaim this Ground-Hog Day ceremony officially about to begin ...."

"Sure took you long enough to get here," rasped a voice from the crowd.

"Glad this place wasn't on fire!" bellowed another, and laughter rang out from everywhere.

The mayor managed a wry smile while he glanced nervously behind him. He knew the crowd had already waited too long, and any further delay

could prove to be fatal. Meanwhile, the firemen, all in black, hurriedly made final preparations, and once the generator was hooked up, the chief nodded to the mayor who again raised his arms, stilled the crowd, and with a flick of the switch on the fence enclosing Pete's yard, bathed the entire viewing area with light from twelve overhead lamps.

It was show time. While the crowd pressed closer and the snow was shrouding everything in cold whiteness, the caretaker, a small, quick-moving old man in a coonskin hat, entered Pete's yard, carrying a baseball bat in his left hand. Without hesitation he began striking the ground right where Pete's entrance hole was. The old man pounded as hard as he could for a few seconds and then paused to see if Pete would play the game and scamper out of his back door hole about fifteen feet away. It was February 2nd, but the only clock ticking in Pete's ears was the incessant thumping that made him cower in his tunnel, afraid to dash in either direction.

"How come he won't come out, Grandpa?" whined a little girl to the elderly man holding her hand.

"I guess Pete don't know how to play the game the way old Oscar did," answered the grandfather. "Best ground hog we ever had, that Oscar. Better than all the other ones since they started over again from 'A'. Lasted seven years, he did. But then he caught a cold and died. I hear that's how most of 'em go on us. Except Nero, the one before Oscar. He went crazy one year and tried to bite the caretaker. Had to use his bat in self-defense. Oh don't worry, honey, they'll get him out."

The caretaker continued his pounding for a couple of minutes. Then he walked back to the fence and waved to the firemen.

"No good, men," he called out. "Looks like we got a stubborn one. You know what to do."

Another cheer rose from the crowd as the chief and two of his men unraveled the fire hose from the side of the truck and connected it to the hydrant a few feet away. With the caretaker and the other three men aiming the nozzle at Pete's entrance hole, another fireman turned on the water. The hose slithered around for a few seconds and then stiffened to life. A gush of water and air suddenly blasted its way through Pete's tunnel and out the other end, catapulting the small brown ball of fur into the air and landing it onto the thickening carpet of snow.

The crowd howled in appreciation of the spectacle.

"The kick is good!" someone yelled with delight.

"Gee, he's a little fella," offered another. "No wonder he was so frightened."

But then everyone quitted down to see what Pete would do. The little ground hog first tried to shake off his discomfort, but he was soaked to the skin and chilled even deeper. The light from above was a brassy glow which provided neither spring warmth or wintery shadows. He began to snuffle and cough while he surveyed the area around his exit hole. It was too cold and wet to attempt a back-door entrance. He was shivering as he scampered over to the fence, away from the threat existing by the hole. Now the crowd got the view they had hoped for. While the white-buttoned losers walked away in disappointment, the green-buttoned victors cheered and applauded their hero. Pete stared quizzically for a few moments, but as the crowd dispersed to the shelter and warmth of their cars, he was overcome by a fit of coughing and sneezing which subsided only when his shivering became convulsions. He had come through for the green buttons.

There would be an early spring for those who believed. And there would be Quincy, a larger, more durable ground hog that would learn to play the game every February 2nd and give the crowd a good show for many years to come.