

And We Shall Have Snow

by

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Loretta had never seen snow like this in all her life. Where were the storms of her youth that released cheerful flurries that typically let up within hours to allow folks to go about their business? This snow was relentless in its efforts to cut her off from the world, leaving only glimpses of hidden structures on the edges of the expanse. The harsh wind forced her to stay in the little sod house. It whistled at her all day, which drove her mad and wild with longing for an end to the swirling drifts and bitter cold.

The outdoors was her true love—spring, summer, and even fall—but winter meant she was no longer whole in the dismal palette of the season. Weeks had passed under the stifling onslaught, and Loretta’s existence became one of merely waiting and trying to keep the sinister snow from completely smothering her.

She was not alone in her small abode. This was their homestead, her husband and toddling daughter accompanied her through this most awful of winters, so at least she did not have to face the threatening, swirling whiteness alone.

“The North Wind doth blow,” she recited, “and we shall have snow.” She spoke in a sing-song voice to her daughter, Katie, who clasped her mother’s legs as Loretta attempted to set the table for supper.

“Almost milking time.” The girl looked up with a wide grin, welcoming the trip to the barn.

Loretta bundled Katie in her coat and hat, long stockings and shoes. Grabbing both the girl and the milk buckets, Loretta tried to keep the buckets from banging against her shins as she staggered through yet another winter storm.

The smell of hay welcomed them in the barn, and Loretta deposited Katie into her makeshift baby pen of hay bales. It kept her out of the way while her mother methodically filled the buckets.

As she began milking, Loretta shook the snow from her mind and drifted to thoughts of a big new house with a parlor and a front porch. John insisted on building the barn first, but a wooden house with no bugs falling from the ceiling or mice crawling through the walls would be a dream come true.

It wasn't long before she realized she hadn't heard a peep out of Katie. Loretta did a quick search around the hay bales where she'd left her, but there seemed to be no sign of her daughter. She must have climbed over the bales!

"Katie?" she called. "Kaaaaa-tieeee!"

Just then John, who had been fighting the strong wind, burst into the barn all red in the face and peppered with freshly fallen snow. During the short time she'd been milking, the snow had turned into an all-out blizzard.

"I got a rope strung betwixt here and the house," he said wiping the snow off his hat with a bare hand. "Grab it, and it will take you up to the house. Leave the milk. I'll get Katie."

A feeling of terror suddenly arose deep within her. "I don't know where she is."

He looked at her with panic in his eyes. "Katie?" he shouted. "Katie? Where are you?" They frantically searched the entire barn, but the child did not seem to be anywhere.

“We’ve got to find her.” John’s voice was calm, yet stern. “The door to the barn was open a little when I came in. She must be out in the snow.” He took a couple of deep breaths and swiped at the snow still clinging to his coat. “I’ll find her. You go to the house and stay there. Will you do that?” He pointed his finger in her face and waited for an answer.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Grab that rope and make your way to the house, and when you get there, you stay inside. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now go. And whatever you do, don’t let go of that rope.”

The blowing snow beat at her face and tore through her hair the minute John opened wide the sliding wooden door. She began to shake. A complete whiteout stood between the barn and the house. The rope disappeared into the blizzard. Tears welled up in her eyes as she forced herself to take hold of that rope for a shaky journey to the house, leaving her daughter behind.

As bad as the winter had been, this storm outmatched any other. There was no seeing through the whiteness of it. She would have been lost without that line stretched across the yard, acting as her only link to safety.

The wind whipped around her trembling body, making her uncovered ears ache deep within. Clinging to the rope, she trudged through the fresh snow moving deeper and deeper into the abyss.

She couldn’t help crying when she thought her little girl might be out in this uproar of arctic temper. Ice formed on her eyelashes and her vision blurred. The never-ending wind smashed against her face and froze her eyes. She squeezed them shut, but couldn’t stop the tears.

Losing all sense of direction, she forced her feet to continue marching toward the little sod house. She sobbed more uncontrollably the closer she got.

Then Loretta stopped crying and stood perfectly still. It couldn't be! She looked back at the rope that led to the barn and saw that it disappeared into the unknown whiteness of the storm. The forward view looked much the same, but she thought she heard something. Katie?

She listened. The sound was definitely crying!

"Katie!" she screamed. "Katie!"

Her mind told her if she let go of the rope, she'd be lost in the whiteout for sure, but it *was* Katie she heard out there, somewhere in that storm. She was sure of it!

As she stood there hanging onto the rope, not knowing what to do, she looked down at the line connecting her to the house and the barn. What if John was lost too? She hadn't heard him calling their daughter's name for a while now. She would not lose them both. If she let go, she would be lost, but another noise from Katie made the decision for her.

"Katie!" she yelled as she abandoned the rope and began to move to where she thought the sound came from. She heard it again, only now it seemed farther away. She looked back for the rope, her safety, but it had vanished in the white, suffocating storm. Her throat hurt from yelling. All she could hear was the dreadful sound of the moaning wind. Her toes were too cold to feel them. Her face and ears were burning, her fingers numb. Then she blindly ran into the side of the chicken coop. At least she knew where she was.

"Katie!" she shouted one last time in desperation.

Then she heard her.

The girl was close. When Loretta took a step towards the sound, her little girl appeared right in front of her. Loretta began to cry again, only this time it was because she was so happy to

have found Katie. She opened her coat and closed it around the child as she carried her in the direction of what she thought would be the house.

Now that she had found Katie, Loretta realized even more acutely the freezing cold. As she plodded through the blowing snowstorm, she became more and more fearful. It seemed like she should have been to the house by now, but she couldn't see anything. As the whiteness swirled around her, she considered going back. Katie was quiet and still in her arms, but warming up.

Afraid that she'd already passed the house, Loretta tried to keep her vision clear by blinking in rapid succession. The white, swirling storm made her feel more trapped than ever. She stopped for a moment, but could not get her bearings. She had to keep going—had to try. The icy wind was like daggers cutting through her clothes and pulling her hair.

When Loretta nearly tripped over the rope tied between the house and the barn, she cried out for joy. It would only be minutes until they were safe. She repositioned Katie so she could carry her with one arm and hold the rope with the other ungloved hand.

Running for the safety of the house was impossible. The snow was getting deeper, and she couldn't move very fast. She was so ready to get inside that she hadn't even considered that she'd gotten turned around was going the wrong way. When she mistakenly found herself in front of the barn door instead of the house, she let go of the rope and tried to pull open the heavy wooden gate. At least it would be warm in the barn, but her hand was too frozen to make her fingers work, and she couldn't open it while holding Katie.

Defeated, she turned around with closed eyes and began her retreat through the blizzard. When she finally burst through the door of the sod house, all was quiet.

John was still outside, absorbed in the intense white.

She took Katie to the warmth of the fireplace, leaving a trail of snow. Loretta noticed her daughter's little fingers were bright red, not unlike her own. They sat on the floor close to the fire, and Loretta gently massaged her daughter's tiny fingers, talking to her tenderly. Katie screamed from the pain of thawing, but it didn't last long. Her mother took off the girl's shoes and stockings and worked her long fingers over Katie's small feet, rubbing gently, ignoring her own stinging fingers.

Loretta could feel nothing in her toes, so she pulled off the wet high-laced shoes and stockings to warm her own feet by the fire while they waited for John. Katie soon calmed down and the two of them sat in silence while the pain subsided. The woman's mind filled with a terrible dread of what might have happened to John.

She wrapped Katie in a thick quilt and slipped woolen stockings on her own cold feet. When she cracked open the door to peek out, a white mass of blowing snow assaulted her. She shut out the blizzard and came back to the rocker by the fire, rubbing her shoulders from the chill.

The door flew open and a shooting sensation lurched through her body. She ran across the room to greet John, but it was only the wind that had blown the door open. Trembling, she stood in the doorway for a minute, letting the bitter cold blast her body.

She had gotten lost in the blinding snow of the blizzard. If John had wandered very far from the barn looking for Katie, he'd never find his way back. She felt guilty at having the warm fire and leaving John outside, fighting the wind and cold. "If only..." she thought, closing the door. "If only I'd been watching Katie better, he wouldn't be out there now."

“I’ve got to go find him,” she said to Katie with a shaky voice. Her daughter’s innocent eyes peeked at her mother from under the quilt. Loretta found her coat and pulled it on. She looked at her daughter.

“I have to go,” she said through her tears. “What should I do?”

The howling wind taunted her. John was out there. He was freezing. She buttoned her coat, determined to not let anything happen to her hard-working husband.

“I’ll be fine,” she said to Katie. “Go to sleep.”

The wind blew the door open again, and she took it as an invitation to step into the blizzard. Only this time, it wasn’t the wind.

“John!” she yelled, running to him. “You get in here and get yourself warmed up. I’ll get you some coffee.” She helped him across the room and into the rocker. Ice had formed in his eyebrows and mustache and his cheeks were red in areas and white in others. His eyes were iced over and she realized that he must not be able to see.

“I found Katie,” she said to him through her tears. “She’s safe.”

He nodded his head in acknowledgement. She could tell he hurt from the cold just like she had when she’d come in, only it was worse for him because he’d been out so much longer. He held his rough hands out towards the fire, and as the evening progressed, she watched them slowly swell and blister. His face got a little blistery too, but he was all right—they all were.

“The North Wind doth blow,” she whispered. “And we shall have snow.”