

## Winter Storm.

By Jade Mitchell

The park was bare and silent. Snow floated in puffs and gusts and little swirls that spiralled around the few stragglers that were hurrying through the park. It blanketed the field, covering what only a few hours earlier had been green and bright in an all consuming white.

It was silent. All sounds muffled and soft, overshadowed by the powdery hush of winter. It was a morning of instinctive stillness. A rugged-up-with-a-book-and-a-hot-drink morning.

The field was not only silent, but empty. Where there would normally be birds lounging in the warmth of each other and their nests there were none. Rabbits sought shelter in the deep layers of their burrows. Animals that would otherwise spend their days sleeping and communing in the park had moved on, tasting the change in the air and stealing themselves off in the night in search of warmer beds.

Three tracks wound across the field, a small path through the layer of otherwise untouched snow.

The sky hung white and cold above the three travellers. Bright coats automatically drawing the eye from amongst the white.

They pushed through the snow, breaths hot and heavy, hindering them by fogging up their view, and helping them by sending warm gusts of air back into their faces.

Their noses were bright, flushed. The crisp air cooled their nose, cheeks, lips and lungs in piercing inhalations.

They shivered through four layers of clothing, their bright green and pink coats spotted with white, pushing and shoving through the snow as fast as they could, but only ever getting a few steps at a time.

Josh paused, forcing Anne to a stop through their joined hands.

‘What?’ Anne said, breath short and gusty, ‘What’s wrong?’

Josh, eyes bright in the cold, scarf coated in snow, could only breathe. It came in bursts. In. Out. In. Out.

‘Can we stop?’

Anne shook her head. Her favourite cotton shirt, comfy and well worn, rubbed against her arms under her jacket irritably. She itched to take it off, but dared not remove any of the layers weighing her down.

Rusty, a few paces ahead of them now, barked. His winter coat, thick and dark and heavy, was not enough to keep the occasional shiver from him. His bright eyes watched them, urging them forward but also watching for them. He was more serious than Anne had ever seen him. Traversing the snow ahead of them, silently creating a path where he would normally zig-zag across the snow, snapping at the drifts he made and playing with the rabbits that bounded abruptly out of hiding places.

It was Rusty’s calm impatience that spurred Anne hurriedly forward. It was the cold she could feel seeping through to her skin, giving her goose-pimples that were from foreboding rather than chill. It was the clear sky, that was clouded with flurries when they had first set out.

It was too still.

‘We have to keep going,’ Anne said.

Josh, younger and weaker and frailer, looked ahead of them.

‘The world’s disappeared.’

The words were soft, snatched away by the wind and snow so that Anne almost didn’t hear them. She shivered and pulled on his hand.

The sky started to blur again. The crisp clearness that had made their trip across the second half of the field marginally easier dissolving into churning snow drifts.

Just a few feet away from them, and Anne could just see the line of trees. Through those trees was a car park and a cafe that Anne hoped to take shelter in.

Rusty barked once, short and commanding. Hurry up, he said.

Anne pulled on Josh. The wind was growing fierce. Hungry. It spun the world around them in confusing flashes of white and black, disorienting Anne so that she had to stop several times and make sure they were headed in the right direction, though she was sure they were walking straight.

The quiet churned into loudness. The wind howling in voice that was at once quiet and loud, muffled and clear, beautiful and terrifying.

It ripped at Anne's hair. Pulling it from her hood, tearing at the braid and yanking at the strands, so that they attacked her own face, stinging and whipping and clouding her vision.

'Hold onto me!' Anne shouted, clutching Josh's hand, squeezing it tight so she was sure she had hold of him and not just some clutch of empty fabric.

Rusty disappeared into the wind and snow, but Anne could still hear him, still smell him over the sharp clear smell of water and pine trees.

He was her guide. He barked, trailing back and fourth between the siblings and their destination.

Amongst the trees it was dangerous. The trees grabbed at them, slapping them. Anne was thankful for their layers that shielded them from the sharp thwack of branches, that instead felt more like a soft snowball.

They were not soft snowballs though. Anne pulled Josh close, throwing an arm over his head to protect him, ducking her face low and tasting snow and blood mingled in her mouth. She had a cut on her lip.

They stumbled, unbalanced in the uneven and deceitful snow, into the car park.

Anne pulled on Josh, forcing him into a run.

Their feet danced awkwardly through the thick snow, shoes soggy. Cold. Numb.

Anne flexed her fingers of her free hand, anxious to keep the blood flowing.

When they reached the door Anne struggled to grasp hold of the handle. It kept slipping away from her, her fingers stiff and clumsy in the layers of cold and gloves.

Then, when she finally had hold of it, it wouldn't turn.

She cried out, her throat raw though she had not spoken since the field.

She turned, huddled before the door with Josh pressed on one side and Rusty on the other.

Her eyes rested on a truck in the far corner of the car park. It was a delivery truck, the kind her Uncle used.

She turned to Josh, grabbing hold of him and pressing him into the door. She took his hand and clasped it onto Rusty's scruff, pushing the large dog so the two of them were pressed together.

'You stay here with Rusty,' Anne shouted above the calling wind.

He stared at her, eyes wide, face red, and nodded. He felt cold, though Anne did not know if it was just her own cold she felt.

She turned, and pulling her coat tighter around her, threw herself back into the wind.

It was violent. Pulling her this way and that. Rushing against her face, snatching away the air she tried to breath.

She barely felt her footsteps. She sunk through the snow with each step, yanked herself back out again, and fell through another drift. It was exhausting, and breathing became even harder.

The truck was a relief. Solid. There. Open.

Turning back toward the cafe, Anne waved her arms. She took a breath and attempted a shout, but either she had no energy for it, her throat was too raw, or the wind roared over it for she heard nothing.

The truck was grey and white, and in the fierce wind, Anne feared loosing her way back to it. Still she hunched herself over and surged back to her brother.

She felt frozen all over.

Josh was huddled against the doorway, a small shivering lump of white. Anne fell to her knees, surprised to feel the pain of concrete jarring through her legs.

Rusty shook himself free of the lump and thrust his cold, dry nose in her face. It sent a sharp chill through her.

Unclenching Josh's hold on Rusty's fur, Anne replaced his hand with her own and, hauling Josh to his feet, the three started back across the car park.

Anne's trek twice through the car park left a faint track, but the wind and snow left almost no evidence of the path she had taken.

Rusty pulled Anne, and she pulled Josh. The snow was up to Anne's knees. She felt as if she never moved, pushing against a force that pushed back, that shrouded her on all sides. The thick hold of the snow below and the flogging of the wind above sent Anne's head on a spin. Her eyes stung from the force of the wind, and water streamed from them. She kept her head low in an attempt to stop the tears from cooling to the point of ice.

When she finally reached the truck, she found they were at the wrong side. She wanted to put a hand on the truck, to follow it round to the back door, but with one hand holding Josh, and the other Rusty, Anne was afraid if she let go of either she would lose them forever.

She hitched herself toward the truck until her shoulder bumped the side. She felt no pain, padded as she was by her coat. Using her shoulder as a guide, her eyes squinted, they made slow progress around the truck.

Opening the door was a chore and she only managed a crack. First, Anne pulled on Rusty who, although by now coated in a good layer of snow, managed to jump up into the back of the truck on his own. With her hand free, she yanked on Josh, almost losing her own balance in the process.

He was unyielding and unhelpful, struck dumb and frozen by the cold. She shoved at him, manoeuvring his hands until they grasped the edges of the truck floor. It took three attempts to get him to climb up and then she had to push him more so that there was room for herself.

When she was finally able to pull herself up, she hauled the door shut behind her with relief and the world suddenly fell away.

The hush was back and instead of the all consuming white, all was dark.

Rusty's nose touched her hand, and then she felt him press against her. Anne was alarmed by the force of his shivering until she realised that it was her shivering.

She could not even feel it.

Quickly, she stripped off her outer coat and yanked at her shoes. She flung them away, pulling next at the socks and rubbing her feet.

'J-J-Josh, tttt-ak-ke o-ff your sh-shoes,' she chattered at him.

A low moan came in response.

Anne felt around for him, and repeated the process of pulling off his shoes and socks and outer coat. She shoved the wet things as far from them as she could and then pulled Josh to a corner of crates. She searched the crates but found nothing useful.

Anne jumped as a sudden weight fell over her legs. As the shock wore off, she registered the feeling of scratchy fur, and leaned forward to give Rusty a pat. Then she checked Josh's legs to be sure his cold feet were beneath Rusty.

There they waited, in the wrath of winter, for the world to come back to them.