

WHAT THE SNOW BLEW IN

Shrieks of laughter used to bring our mother flying up the steep stairs, the refrain of Buddy Holly floating up behind her. Breathing on the double-glazed windows or melting a viewing hole with the heat of our hands, we children often waved and pulled faces at our friends next door. We scored on days when we caught a glimpse of the new boarder, a young teacher, in the light of her attic bedroom. That year in January and February, we fretted stuck indoors during the school holidays or on days when classes were cancelled.

Swinging at the air, our Mummy admonished me, my younger sister Jenny and little brother Ian for ogling the young woman's pink nakedness. What will the neighbours think? she sighed, as if we haven't enough to do fitting in as outsiders, as immigrants to Canada. Our mother had recently started wearing tent-like smocks and her formerly brisk gait was now replaced by a waddle. Some nights after my younger siblings were asleep, I caught snatches of my parents' laughter and low voices deep in conversation. *Was it true? Was there going to be a little baby in the house?* I dared not ask.

Now it was our father who rushed up the stairs when he heard us. Reddening with embarrassment he chased us away from the window then went and sat sentinel on the hall stairway between the two bedrooms. Our Daddy soon settled us, insisting we get into bed, heads down, get under the blankets, go to sleep or we wouldn't go to the ice-rink tomorrow. He said that Mummy was feeling tired, we needed to let her get some rest.

For endless days and nights after Christmas, snow licked up against the windowsills and blew upwards onto the front porch while we children passed the long winter days in the magical underground space our father had created for us. Canadian homes all have a cavernous basement that is made good use of. It was a place where we played at all the games and role-plays common to children before iPads, computer games and the addiction to television. He wallpapered and painted the space with a certain whimsy and fitted it out with carpet against the cold of the flat concrete floor.

From this subterranean nest, when confined indoors, the phosphorescent glow of ice or frozen snow reflected the sun's weak beams down into our little space. It was a place of imagination, tussles, accords and conflicts; a place in which to observe and act out the rituals, rites and habits of everyday life, of friends and of adults we encountered on our way through childhood.

Every morning our Daddy had to push at the outer door, releasing himself from the airlock that was the vestibule, onto the viewing platform that was our front porch. In the dimness of the frost-glittering air, the grinding and churning of the snowplows reverberated, their crystalised sound waves creating flat slaps against the sides of the houses.

Each morning without fail, a barrier of snow lined the edges of the streets. Each morning fathers descended their front porches wielding shovels to scrape away the snow, disgorging the cars that had loitered outdoors overnight and digging their way out of the driveways into the daylight of the working world.

Whenever the milk delivery arrived, our Daddy battled his way onto the front porch and handed up the half-frozen milk bottles to our mother who was slower and rounder than usual. She spent her mornings in her dressing gown and slippers, something that ran counter to her every instinct. Dreamily, she watched the milkman crunch away over the packed snow and ice. Sometimes if they went out too late they found cracks creeping their way down the length of the glass bottle.

We children muddled through our daily routines, oblivious to her changed state. Instead of the morning skirmish, she watched our Daddy stamp his feet, setting the buckles clacking. He didn't bother to close them. Most people didn't. Children didn't and our plodding trek to school was a dance, the ties and flaps on their toques, hats and scarves bounced in unison with the clack-clack of our dangling buckles.

If instead of a deceptive satin sheen of ice, there was a blanket of powder-snow over the landscape, we children threw ourselves down on our backs. Jumping back up, we

left behind the imprints of angels in the snow and our receding backs glistened ice-white from head to toe as we meandered off towards the school.

The neighbour-man called out, 'It sure is coold, eh?' which still puzzled our Daddy, who hadn't grown used to Canadian cadences and mannerisms. He was never sure whether he was supposed to give an answer because almost every utterance seemed to finish with an, 'eh?' And he wasn't quite sure about the vowels either. So, always good-humoured, he adopted the trusty, 'Sure is!' 'Sure do!' 'Sure can!'

Then like all the other fathers, he puffed out his cheeks and breathed humid air into his hands before pulling on the heavy fleece-lined chamois gloves for the no-option drudgery of clearing the driveway.

One particular morning this routine was broken. I told my siblings a baby was coming, that Daddy had woken me late that night, he said he'd let the neighbours know.

On that midnight run, the temperature was minus twenty-five when the car ran dry and sputtered to a halt en route to the hospital. That was when he discovered he'd left his wallet at home. But luck had not deserted him. His army-issue Jerry can was at hand and a solitary twenty-four hour gas station sat silently illuminated behind him some distance down the deserted road.

Canadians have been known to undertake a robbery with great civility. And their service ethos is renowned. The first was, fortunately, not required. The second proved correct. Few words passed between the prospective father and the attendant who allowed him to race off into the arctic darkness with a full Jerry can.

'I'll pay you on the way back,' he'd called out.

When little Ian got up, the house was quiet. Our Daddy wasn't there. The little boy ran into our parents' bedroom, he called out that our Mummy wasn't lying on the bed. She should have been there, like every other morning, drinking her beloved cup of tea that Daddy brought to her. That was when I told them they were all to stay home that morning,

to be good, they were to help her and if they did, they could have their favourite breakfast cereal then watch TV and have popcorn.

Later that day, our family Chevy crunched up the ice-clumped driveway. The neighbour-man called out, 'How ya doin'? I thought ya'd need the driveway cleared, eh?' Our father offered the neighbour a cigar and invited him into the house for a cup of tea. Perhaps his Canadian friend would have preferred a coffee. Or maybe a beer, but our father was still British to the core. Even if we children no longer were.

Furthermore, this new child, the one that had arrived in the middle of the night, was a real Canadian. He had arrived in true Canadian style.