

Dust

Donna White

This didn't look good.

The wind threw the barn door open and blasted the snow in, pricking my face like cold barbed wire through a threadbare glove. Any warmth I carried with me from the school's potbellied stove was gone. I sucked in my breath, tossed the reins over Snap's neck then attached the toboggan to the harness.

"It's okay, beautiful," I said, rubbing Snap behind her ears. "It's a bad one, but we can do this, ... right?" I blew in her nostrils 'cause she liked that then I looked at the darkening clouds. If we left now, and kept it at a steady trot, maybe we could get home before the sun set. A man could get lost in a storm like this. So could two kids and a horse. Snap snorted. No, it didn't look good, at all.

I yelled for Liz, "Hurry up! Get your lunch pail! Let's go!" And then I saw her, hopping off the school steps, holding Paul by the wrist and pulling him over.

She said, "Can Paul come?"

I sighed. What was I supposed to say? No? If he came there wouldn't be enough room to sit and we'd have to stand on the toboggan. And if we stood, we'd be sure to take a tumble if Snap got anyway skittish. The way she was snorting now it would take all my strength just to keep her from bolting.

Liz put her hands on her hips, "Karl wouldn't make Paul walk. He knows how to drive standing."

"Well he ain't here now," I sneered down at her, "So what I say goes." I didn't need reminding Karl was gone: quit school, hopped a train, looking for work, leaving me the oldest at twelve with all his chores. Every time I had to make a second trip to bring water to the cows or muck out the barn alone, I thought about the morning I woke up to see his empty bed and the note that made the tears slip down Ma's cheeks when I showed her.

But I knew it wouldn't do to leave Paul to walking home in this storm. He was my age, but his legs were short. He'd have plenty of trouble making it through this snow. I finally said, "Okay. Get on Paul."

Paul just stared at the ground. "Naw, that's okay, Thomas. I'm good. Snap don't like to take more than two. She's spooky that way. I can walk." I couldn't see the look on his face but his voice wasn't agreeing with what he was saying. I know he was just being polite.

"Come on," I said. "Hop on. But if you fall I ain't stopping to pick you up." I stared down at Liz. "Or you either. I don't care what Ma says. You're nine years old. You're big enough to walk."

I flicked the reins and told Snap to hop up, then, 'cause I knew what Liz was doing behind my back, I said, "You best to stick that tongue back inside. It'll freeze that way and make you twice as ugly."

As we left the schoolyard, we passed some of our classmates walking home, scarfs wrapped tight around their faces, heads bent into the wind. They'd make it just fine. They lived close by. We had five miles as the crow flies.

A good thought slid into my mind. It'd been a long time since we had any snow. The ground had been frozen for near three months without any blanket to keep it warm. And all them white flakes meant water for our thirsty soil come spring thaw. Best thing we'd seen in a long time here in Melfort, Saskatchewan. We didn't complain about the rain and the snow like the city folks. I just wished it would slow until we got home.

Pa said when it came to city folk and country folk, us farmers had it better than the people stuck in the cities during this depression. But I wasn't too sure 'bout that. I know that men in the cities was losing their jobs, hoppin' the trains, searching for work, 'cause they was barely able to put food on their families' dinner plates. But out here this drought was making everything empty: the fields, the wallets, the pantries, and the souls. You could just look at a man and know his soul was gone. A man's job was to provide for his family. And if a man can't do that no matter how hard he try, well you may as well say he's worth as much as the dust that those little twisters blow across the fields.

Pa had that look. I saw it when he watched our small herd of cattle, ribs showing. Karl couldn't stand that look, that's why he left. "I'll find work and send the money home," he said.

I flicked the reins again and sent Snap into a trot. The wind was picking up now and it was all you could hear, like it had sucked up all the sounds and released it in a fierce howl: the swish-swish of Snap's heavy legs as she trod through the snow, her low rumbling snorts as she tucked her head into her chest, and even my own voice as I urged her on. The wind was plenty greedy and swallowed that up too.

I should have seen it coming.

There's two kinds of folks in the country. Those who have and those who don't. Well maybe there's more than two kinds 'cause there's also those who are happy you got and those who are plain jealous if you got anymore than they do. Mitchell Roberts was one of those. Jealous as a rooster fightin' over a brood of hens. And I can't say I blame him all that much, his pa being the way he is.

A snowball hit Snap on the neck and she reared and the toboggan rammed into her legs. She reared again and then she took off like the wolves were on her tail. I tightened my grip on the reins and pulled them to my chest and I pushed the calm into my voice. "Whoa, Snap," I said, but I was anything but calm.

Another snowball hit Snap's hind and she lost any sense she ever had. She bolted, and I knew Paul and Liz were thrown off 'cause the toboggan was flying now. Another snowball hit her

chest and she jumped back, smashing her foot through the wood. She kicked her back leg and the toboggan flew up and I hit the ground.

I dug my heels in, pulling one rein to the side, trying to spin her in a circle. She bucked and the reins ripped from my hands. She squealed and took off.

There comes a time when a person just plain loses it. And this was one of those times. I saw Mitchell laughing so hard he was holding his sides and Eddy Mason was slapping him on the back, like he was congratulating him. I didn't care if there were two of them and just me. I was mad enough to take them both on.

I rushed at Mitchell and with one punch I sent him flying into the snow but before I could swing at Eddy there was Liz screaming.

"Thomas Kenneth Adams!" she yelled. It sounded just like my ma, only shriller and, believe it or not, louder. "You stop that right now! Or I'll tell Pa you was fightin' again!"

But that didn't stop me. I didn't care if she told Pa. We had lost our toboggan and any chance of getting home before it was dark in this dang storm.

I threw myself at Eddy and brought him to the ground and punched him in the face. I must have punched him real hard 'cause there was blood coming from his nose by the time I took my third hit. Then I heard, "You get off Eddy right now Thomas Adams!" and I knew I was in trouble. It's bad enough when your little sister tells you to stop fighting but when your teacher catches you, well you know you're really gonna get it.

I got up but I couldn't look at Miss. Reiner. It wasn't because I was ashamed. No, I just didn't want her to see the anger in my eyes. You're supposed to look like you feel bad for what you did when a teacher reprimands you like that, but I wasn't. And sure enough, she said she was gonna tell Ma and Pa, as soon as the storm stopped and she could march on over to our place. She turned on her heel and left us, her red scarf flapping behind her.

I glared at Mitchell and Eddy, curling my hands into fists. They laughed and I leaned in like I was gonna take them on again.

"Come on," said Paul, "they're hicks. What do you expect?"

I knew Paul was right. He always had more sense than I did. So I stared them down, daring them to come at me, then I turned my back and we headed for home. By the time we came to Paul's house, the small glint of sun that was barely visible on the horizon was gone.

I grabbed Liz's wrist. "Come on," I said, "keep up and keep your yap shut." I picked up the pace. It was still another two miles to our farm, and I was fearin' we weren't making good time.

Maybe it was 'cause it was tough going and she needed all her energy to stay close, or maybe Liz decided she should listen to me. Either way, I didn't hear a peep from her. We trudged on, past Paul's fields, through the poplar grove, and then into our pastures.

When we got home, there was Snap waiting at the barn door with what was left of the toboggan.

I took her inside and brushed the snow off her back and gave her her hay. Then I looked in on the cows. Pa had taken all the woven rugs from the house and tied them around the cows backs with binder twine. They looked worse then before, all huddled together, trying to share their warmth.

No, Pa was wrong. We didn't have it better in the country. I decided right there and then that I needed to hop a train too, and get a job. Maybe I'd find Karl and we could both work and send the money home. If I didn't, we'd lose everything: house, farm, and even the boney cows. I drew in a deep breath and started in on my chores. If Karl could hop a train, why couldn't I?