

A Winter's Tale

By John RC Potter

Winter nights are long and cold in the heart of the snowbelt, that area of southwestern Ontario that has Lake Huron to the west and Lake Erie to the south. Some of the worst winters on record were just before the start of World War Two. The Great Depression was receding; people became hopeful for better days ahead but were mindful of the rumblings of a possible war.

Nonetheless, families were hoping for an enjoyable Christmas as 1938 wound down. This was the case for the Williams family, who etched out a reasonable existence on their farm. It was the only property on a dirt lane roughly north-by-northwest of the village of Shakespeare and not far from the town of Stratford. Walt and Gert Williams made the last-minute decision that their six children – three boys and three girls, ranging in age from four to ten - would each receive a store-bought gift this Christmas, to be given alongside the homemade presents their mother lovingly created from bits and bobs late at night. The couple set off that late afternoon in the old pickup truck for the five-mile drive to Stratford, after having an early supper to ensure their children were fed beforehand. They expected to be home by early evening.

What they had not bargained on was a sudden snowstorm that descended on the area as the afternoon darkened into a snowbound evening. Stranded in Stratford because the roads were snow-packed, the couple regretted their decision to do last-minute Christmas shopping. They were able to take refuge at the home of an elderly couple who bought their produce from their garden in the summer, as well as eggs and homemade preserves. Mr. Williams used their telephone to call home; he wanted to tell the children to hunker down for the night. But the line was dead. It seemed the snowstorm and the ice produced from it had affected the telephone line.

However, that was not the only problem. The children were concerned early in the evening when the electricity went out and plunged the house into darkness. They lit a few candles and sat around the kitchen table, the older ones playing cards, hoping their parents would soon return home but knowing the roads would probably be impassable. Then the furnace died. The two oldest boys took a lighted candle and went to the cellar to try to get the furnace going again. It was to no avail, and they went back upstairs to the chilly kitchen. The oldest girl decided to call their nearest neighbours on the nearby concession road, to inform them of their

missing parents and to ask for advice. She discovered the telephone was dead.

The children discussed the situation and decided it was best to go upstairs to bed and try to keep warm by snuggling up to each other. The three boys slept in a double bed in one bedroom at the top of the stairs on the left side, and the three girls in another bedroom just to the right of the landing. For a time the children chatted in their beds, their teeth chattering from the cold. It was warmer when they pulled the blankets over their heads. The snowstorm continued unabated as night descended. The children could barely see the outlines of the windows because the night-time sky was dark and formidable. Christmas was forgotten.

Creak. Creak. Creak.

The children in their respective beds heard a sound coming from the bottom of the stairway.

Squish. Squish. Squish.

The sound was approaching; someone was coming up the well-worn wooden stairs.

Groan. Groan. Groan.

The children peered over the covers at the inky blackness at the top of the stairs.

Moan. Moan. Moan.

The old stairs seemed to be trying to alert the children to an imminent danger.

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

The children were frozen with fear. The top of the stairs was an inky pool of dark shadows.

Sigh. Sigh. Sigh.

The children knew there was someone – or something – at the top of the stairs, just outside their bedrooms. Was it a person? A ghost? Then they could hear breathing and knew it was a person. The wooden floor outside the bedrooms made a noise as the person came to the door of the boys' bedroom. A moment later the person moved slowly to the door of the girls' bedroom. The children knew it was a man by the pungent odour of sweat.

“Who’s there?” the oldest boy called out.

The girls could hear the man take a step into their bedroom. They could feel his presence and knew he was staring at them. They pulled the blankets over their heads in fear.

“What do you want?” the oldest boy shouted from the other room, sitting up in bed.

The girls heard the man turn and walk away; he went to the door of the other bedroom. The boys were petrified with fear. The two younger boys hid under the covers. Frightened to the core, the oldest boy remained sitting up; he peered into the darkness, trying to see if he knew the man.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

The children could hear the footsteps slowly descending the wooden stairs until there was silence. The oldest boy lit the candle on the bedside table and with his brothers went to the landing. The light from the candle cast long shadows; peering down the curve of the stairwell, the boys could not see anyone. They went to their sisters' bedroom; the girls were wide-eyed and sitting up in bed. Feeling a sense of relief, they excitedly talked about the man. But what if he were still in the house?

They decided to go downstairs. Their feet became damp from the water on the steps from the melted snow. From the bottom of the stairs, the children could see the front door was open. It had stopped snowing. They could barely make out the dark shapes of the apple trees in the orchard in front of the house, the stark branches reaching into the nighttime sky. The garden on either side of the front walkway – full of vegetables and fruit in the summer – was now just a dusky and desolate wasteland.

At that moment, the moon came out, glowing in the nighttime sky and burning away the frosty clouds and dark panorama. In the distance, the children could see the man walking through the deep snow, almost effortlessly. Then he disappeared out of sight.