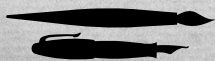


I SURVIVED

TRUE STORIES

FIVE EPIC DISASTERS

by Lauren Tarshis



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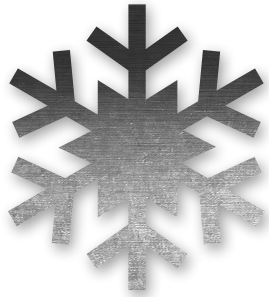
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#1

THE CHILDREN'S BLIZZARD, 1888



January 12, 1888, dawned bright and sunny in Groton, Dakota Territory, a tiny town on America's enormous wind-swept prairie. For the first time in weeks, eight-year-old Walter Allen didn't feel like he was going to freeze to death just by waking up. He kicked off his quilt and hopped out of bed with hardly a shiver. Within minutes he had thrown on his clothes, wolfed down his porridge, and kissed his mom good-bye. With a happy wave, he hurried off to school, a four-room schoolhouse about a half mile from his home.

All across Dakota Territory and Nebraska that morning, thousands of children like Walter headed

to school with quicker steps than usual. For weeks they'd been trapped in their homes by dangerously cold weather. In some areas, the temperature had plunged to 40 degrees below zero. It was cold enough to freeze a person's eyes shut and turn their fingers blue and their toes to ice. Schools all through the region had been closed. Parents kept their kids inside, huddled close to stoves.

At least Walter's family lived in a proper house, on Main Street. His dad, W. C., was a lawyer and a successful businessman. But most of the people living on this northern stretch of prairie were brand-new settlers. They had come from Europe, mainly Sweden, Norway, and Germany. The majority were very poor and struggling to survive in this punishing land. Without money to buy a house or building supplies, thousands lived in bleak sod houses, tiny dwellings built from bricks of hardened soil. Life in a cramped, smoky "soddy" was never easy. Being trapped inside for weeks was torture.

What a relief it was to be back at school! It was still cold outside, only about 20 degrees. But after the weeks of frozen weather, the air felt almost springlike. Many kids left home without their warm wool coats and sturdy boots. Walter wore just his trousers and woolen shirt. Girls wore their cotton dresses and leather shoes, their braids swinging merrily from their hatless heads. As children arrived at Walter's school, some stood outside on the steps. They admired the unusual color of the sky — golden, with just a thin veil of clouds. "Like a fairy tale," one of them said.

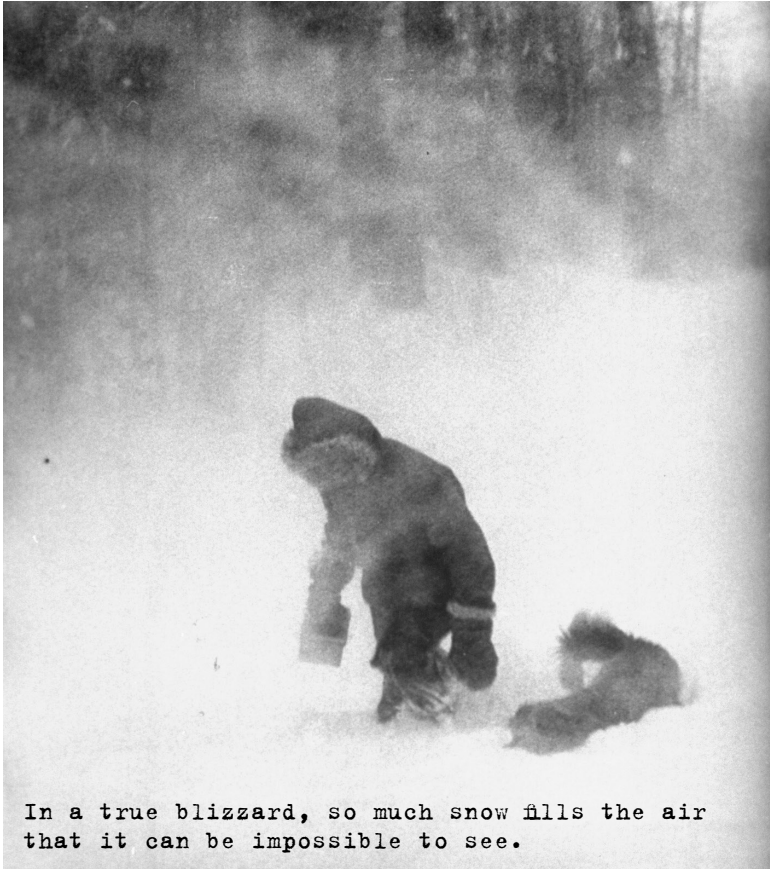
AN ARCTIC BLAST

But not everyone was smiling at the surprisingly warm weather and the glowing sky. Some people had learned the hard way that they should never trust the weather on America's northern prairie, especially in the winter. Wasn't there something spooky about the color of the sky? Wasn't it odd that the temperature had jumped more than forty

degrees overnight? A Dakota farmer named John Buchmillar thought so. He told his twelve-year-old daughter, Josephine, that she'd be staying put that day. "There's something in the air," he said to her with a worried glance at the sky.

There was indeed something in the air, and it was headed directly toward America's vast midsection. High up in the sky, three separate weather systems — masses of air of different temperatures — were about to crash together. The warm air that had delighted the schoolchildren that morning would soon smash into a sheet of freezing Arctic air speeding down from Canada. Most dangerous of all was a low-pressure system — a spinning mess of unstable air churning its way across the continent from the northeast. The meeting of these three weather systems would soon create a monstrous blizzard, a frozen white hurricane of terrifying violence.

But Walter Allen and his classmates had no idea what was brewing above them in the endless



In a true blizzard, so much snow fills the air that it can be impossible to see.

prairie sky. Not even the experts knew what was coming. First Lieutenant Thomas Woodruff, trained in the brand-new science of weather forecasting, was working at his office in Saint Paul, Minnesota. It was Woodruff's job to gather

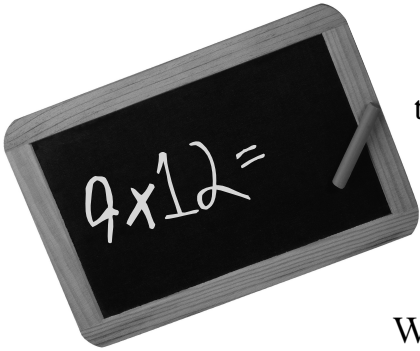
information about the weather, including the temperature and wind speeds, in surrounding areas. Using this information, Woodruff would try to predict what weather was heading down to the area around Groton.

At 3:00 P.M. the day before, Woodruff had sent out his prediction for the following day. His forecast would be printed in small-town newspapers.

“For Minnesota and Dakota: Slightly warmer fair weather, light to fresh variable winds.”

AN EXPLOSION

All morning Walter Allen sat at his desk working on his arithmetic problems. His teacher walked through the room offering help, her skirt swishing and her boots clicking against the wooden floor. The children worked on their small rectangular chalkboards, which were called writing slates. After finishing each set of problems, Walter took a tiny glass perfume bottle from his desk, removed



the jewel-like lid, and poured a drop of water onto the hard surface of his slate. The bottle was Walter's prized possession.

All of the other children kept small bottles of water and rags at their desks to wipe their slates clean. But Walter's bottle was special, a treasure that seemed to be plucked from a pirate's chest.

He was just finishing his problems when a roaring sound overtook the school. The walls began to shake, the door rattled, and some of the younger children began to cry. Walter rushed to the window and was stunned by what he saw.

"It was like day had turned to night," one farmer later wrote in his journal. From out of nowhere, sheets of snow and ice pounded the school.

Fortunately the men of the small, tight-knit town of Groton mobilized quickly when the

storm hit. As the teachers gathered the children in front of the school, they were relieved to discover that five enormous horse-drawn sleds were already there, ready to take everyone home. The teachers kept careful track of every child who climbed onto a sled, checking off names in their attendance books. When every child was accounted for, the sleds began to move.

SWALLOWED BY DARKNESS

Walter's sled was creeping slowly away from the school when he remembered his perfume bottle. He knew the delicate glass would never survive in such cold temperatures: The water inside would freeze, and the bottle would shatter.

Nobody saw Walter Allen as he jumped down from the sled and hurried back into the school. It took him just a few seconds to grab his bottle, stuff it into his pocket, and rush back outside.

But the sleds had vanished — swallowed by

the sudden darkness. Walter tried to run into the street, but the wind spun him and knocked him over. He stood up, took two steps, and the wind swatted him down again. Up and down, up and down.

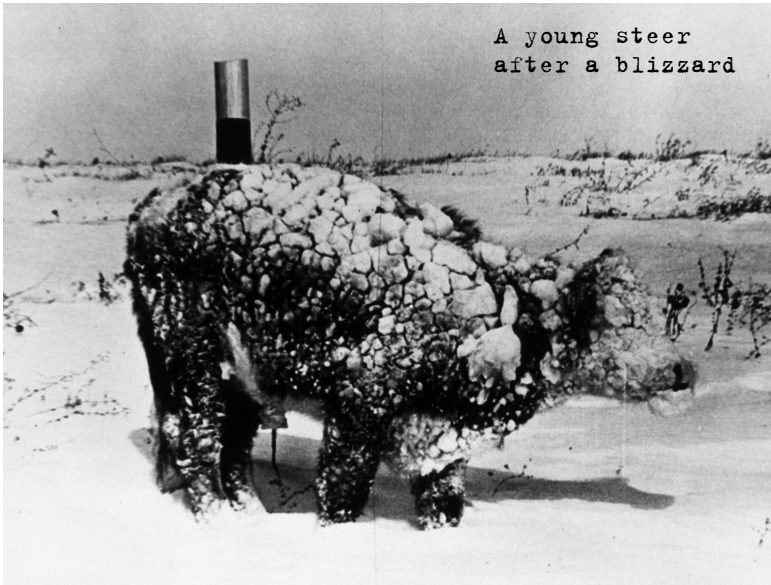
Meanwhile, snow and ice swarmed around Walter's body like attacking bees. Snow blew up his nose, into his eyes, and down the collar of his shirt. His face became encrusted in ice, and his eyes were soon sealed shut by his frozen tears.

He managed to stand one final time, desperate now. But he was no match for this monstrous storm. Once more the wind slammed Walter down. This time he could not stand up, so he curled himself into a ball, too exhausted to move. He realized that nobody knew that he wasn't on the sleds, huddled among classmates, heading for home. It was as though he had tumbled off Earth and into space — a frozen, swirling darkness.

THE LONG WINTER

Brutal winters were always a part of life on America's northern plains. Native American tribes first settled the area 1,500 years ago, hunting buffalo across the flat, grassy plains. But most tribes migrated south for the winters, returning after the worst of the snows had passed.

Few of the white settlers who came to the plains were prepared for the hardships and loneliness of life on the prairie. Many were driven away — or



A young steer
after a blizzard

killed — by the deadly winters. “There was nothing in the world but cold and dark and work . . . and winds blowing,” remembers Laura Ingalls Wilder in her book *The Long Winter*. The book, part of the famous Little House series, describes the Ingalls family’s terrifying experiences in the Dakota Territory during the snowy winter of 1880–81. At one point, trains carrying food and coal were stranded due to snowdrifts. The family and others in the town nearly starved.

But the storm of 1888 was different from even the most brutal prairie blizzards. It hit so suddenly — a gigantic wave of wind, ice, and snow that crashed over the prairie without warning. As Walter Allen lay freezing on the ground in Groton, thousands of other children across the Great Plains were also caught in the storm.

Some teachers had kept their children at school, gathering them together in front of wood-burning stoves, calming the young ones with stories and songs. Minnie Freeman, a seventeen-year-old

teacher in Mira Valley, Nebraska, hoped to keep her sixteen students safe in their tiny schoolhouse. But within an hour, the winds had ripped a hole in the roof, and Minnie knew they would all freeze unless they found shelter. She tied the children together with a rope and led them through the storm, sometimes crawling along the ground to escape the winds. Somehow they made it to the boardinghouse where Minnie lived — cold but alive.

RESCUE MISSION

There were other lucky children that day, saved by quick-thinking teachers or, more often, small miracles. There were the Graber boys, who were lost on the prairie until they glimpsed a familiar tree, enabling them to find their bearings and get to their home. There was eleven-year-old Stephan Ulrich, who was lost, freezing, and nearly blind when he crashed into the side of a barn. Feeling his way to the entrance, he went inside and spent

the night curled up next to a hog, whose warmth protected him from the cold.

When Walter Allen's father, W. C., discovered that his youngest son hadn't come home, he and four other men headed back to the school, risking their lives. At the last moment, they allowed Walter's eighteen-year-old brother, Will, to join



them. Will had always watched over his little brother; he refused to stay behind.

The search party made it to the school, but Walter was nowhere to be found. W. C. became so distraught that his neighbors had to carry him back to the sled. Somehow in the sadness and confusion, they left without Will. And now both Allen boys were lost in the storm.

Although Will saw the sleds pull away, he remained focused on his search. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled along the frozen ground, feeling his way across every inch. He could not see or hear, and the wind made it difficult to breathe. But he kept searching until he bumped into a small heap covered with snow.

It was Walter. He was unconscious, but alive.

MORE PRECIOUS

During the hours that Will and Walter were fighting for their lives, hundreds of other children were caught in the grip of this killer storm.

Hundreds never made it. Even decades later, Will Allen could not explain how he managed to carry his unconscious brother through the blowing snow, or how he managed to find his way home. It was as though the storm's fury had entered Will's veins, giving him the strength to walk against the wind, to rise up when he fell, to hold his little brother tight in his arms.

They arrived home to the jubilation of their parents. Over the next few hours, Walter drifted in and out of consciousness as his family hovered over him. They warmed him slowly. They quieted his shivers. At first his body was so numb that he didn't feel the tiny cuts on his leg from the shards of glass sticking out of his pocket. It wasn't until later that night that Walter realized his beloved perfume bottle had broken during the storm after all.

Of course by then it didn't matter. Walter understood that something infinitely more precious had survived the blizzard, something that could never be replaced: Walter himself.