

*From: Laura Ingalls Wilder. The Long Winter*

[...]

The plowed ground was tumbled slabs of earth still held together by the grass-roots. From underneath these sods, Pa dug small potatoes and Laura and Carrie put them into tin pails. Laura hated the dry, dusty feeling of earth on her fingers. It sent shivers up her backbone but that couldn't be helped. Someone must pick up the potatoes. She and Carrie trudged back and forth with their pails, till they had filled five sacks full of potatoes. That was all the potatoes there were. Pa laughed. "When I get those beans threshed and winnowed and sacked there'll be pretty near a bushel of beans. When I get those few hills of corn cut, husked, and stored down cellar in a teacup, we'll have quite a harvest."

Laura knew that it was a very small harvest. But the hay and corn would winter the horses and the cow through till spring, and with five bushels of potatoes and nearly a bushel of beans and Pa's hunting they could all live.

Girls, including the eldest sister, blind Mary, were busily knitting to finish warm things before cold weather. Sewing made Laura feel like flying to pieces. She wanted to scream. The back of her neck ached and the thread twisted and knotted.

[...]

Pa, who had gone hunting, did not come home until suppertime. He came empty-handed except for his gun. He did not speak or smile and his eyes were wide-open and still. "What is wrong, Charles?" Ma asked quickly.

"Something's queer. Not a goose nor a duck on the lake, every kind of bird is going south as fast and as high as it can fly. Every living thing that runs or swims is hidden away somewhere. I never saw country so empty and still."

Blizzards came in October and lasted for days and nights. The water pail was less than half-full. They must be sparing of water for nobody could get to the well in such storms. But the snow on the floor was clean. Laura scooped it into the washbasin and set it on the stove to melt, for washing. The air by the stove was not so cold now, so children shiveringly dressed themselves, close to the open oven.

Then an old Indian came to warn the white people that every seventh winter was a hard winter and that at the end of three times seven years came the hardest winter of all. He had come to tell the white men that this coming winter was a twenty-first winter, that there would be seven months of blizzards.

[...]

Pa decided to move in to town. His store building was, like the other stores, on Main Street.

"Well, here we are!" said Pa. "It won't take us long to get settled in."

He untied the cow, and her big calf from behind the wagon, and Laura led them to their stalls in the stable, while Pa unloaded the wagon. Then he drove it on to the stable and began to unhitch the horses. The lean-to's inside door opened under the stairs that went up from the back room. The narrow, back room would be the kitchen, of course, and it had a window, in its other end, looking out across the road that was Second Street.

[...] It was so unfair that she had to go to school! Mary wanted to be a schoolteacher, but she couldn't be because she was blind, Laura didn't want to teach, but she must do it to please Ma. Probably all her life she must go among strange people and teach strange children.

[...]

“How many people are there in town now?” Ma asked Pa. Pa counted up. “Fourteen business buildings and the depot; and then Sherwood's and Garland's and Owen's houses — that's eighteen families, not counting three or four shacks on the back streets. Then the Wilder boys are ... in the feed store, and there's a man named Foster moved in with his ox team and staying at Sherwood's. Count them all, there must be as many as seventy-five or eighty people living here in town. ... The railroad's the only place a man can get a dollar for a day's work and it's not hiring anybody. And the only hunting left around here is jackrabbits. Oregon's the place to be nowadays. The country out there'll be settled up, too, pretty soon.”

“Yes, but now is the time for the girls to be getting some schooling,” Ma said firmly.

[...]

Every night after supper she put her books and her slate on the red-checkered tablecloth in the lamplight, and she studied next day's lessons with Mary. She read the arithmetic problems aloud, and Mary did them in her head while she worked them on the slate. She read the history lesson and the geography to Mary until both of them could answer every question. If ever Pa could get money enough to send Mary to the college for the blind, Mary must be ready to go.

“And even if I never can go to college,” Mary said, “I am learning as much as I can.”

[...]

One day, when Laura and Carrie were in school, a blizzard suddenly began. Laura was trying to think how to get home. The schoolhouse was a long way from Main Street, and there was nothing to guide them. All the others had come from the east that summer. They had never seen a prairie blizzard. But Laura and Carrie knew what it was.

... There was only a little fuel at the schoolhouse. The school board was buying coal, but only one load had been delivered. Laura thought they might outlive the storm in the schoolhouse, but they could not do it without burning all the costly patent desks.

Whatever happened Laura had to somehow keep Carrie warm. Already the cold was coming in.

[...]

[At last] ... there was a loud thumping in the entry. Every pupil started and looked at the door.

It opened and a man stumbled in. He was bundled in overcoat, cap, and muffler, all solid white with snow driven into the woolen cloth. They could not see who he was until he pulled down the stiffened muffler.

“I came out to get you,” he told Teacher.

He was Mr. Foster, the man who owned the ox team and had come in from his claim to stay in town for the winter at Sherwood's, across the street from Teacher's house.

Miss Garland thanked him. She rapped her ruler on the desk and said, "Attention! School is dismissed. You may bring your wraps from the entry and put them on by the stove."

[...]

They could hardly walk in the beating, whirling wind. The schoolhouse had disappeared. They could see nothing but swirling whiteness and snow and then a glimpse of each other, disappearing like shadows. Laura felt that she was smothering. The icy particles of snow whirled scratching into her eyes and smothered her breathing.

... Her skirts whipped around her, now wrapped so tightly that she could not step, then whirled and lifted to her knees. Suddenly tightening, they made her stumble. She held tightly to Carrie, and Carrie, struggling and staggering, was pulled away by the wind and then flung back against her.

She was alone in the confusion of whirling winds and snow except for Carrie's hand that she must never let go. The winds struck her this way and that. She could not see nor breathe, she stumbled and was falling, then suddenly she seemed to be lifted and Carrie bumped against her. She tried to think. The others must be somewhere ahead. She must walk faster and keep up with them or she and Carrie would be lost. If they were lost on the prairie they would freeze to death.

But perhaps they were all lost. Main Street was only two blocks long. If they were going only a little way to north or south they would miss the block of stores and beyond was empty prairie for miles. Laura thought they must have gone far enough to reach Main Street, but she could see nothing. They had all stopped. Huddled in their wraps, they stood like bundles close together in the swirling mist. Teacher and Mr. Foster were trying to talk, but the winds confused their shouts so that no one could hear what they said.

... Then, out of the whirling whiteness, something hit her. She rocked on her feet and stumbled against something solid. It was high, it was hard, it was the corner of two walls. Her hands felt it. She had walked against some building.

With all her might she yelled, "Here! Come here! Here's a house!"

All around the house the winds were howling so that at first no one heard her. She pulled the icy stiff muffler from her mouth and screamed into the blinding storm. At last she saw a shadow in it, two tan shadows thinner than the shadowy wall she clung to—Mr. Foster and Teacher. Then other shadows pressed close around her.

They crowded together and they were all there—Mary Power and Minnie, each with a little Beardsley girl, and Arthur Johnson and Ben Woodworth with the small Wilmarth boys. They followed along the side of that building till they came to the front of it, and it was Mead's Hotel, at the very north end of Main Street. Beyond it was nothing but the railroad track covered with snow, the lonely depot and the wide, open prairie. If Laura had been only a few steps nearer the others, they would all have been lost on the endless prairie north of town.

[...]

... After more blizzards, and forty degrees below zero, trains were stopped by snow, and no school. "There is no more kerosene in town," Pa said. "And no meat. The stores are sold out of pretty nearly everything. I got two pounds of tea, Caroline, before they ran out of that. So we'll have our bit of tea till the trains come through."

The room grew colder. There was no heat from the front room to help the cookstove. The cold had crept into the front room and was sneaking in under the door. Beneath the lean-to door it was crawling in too. Ma brought the braided rugs from the front room and laid them, folded, tightly

against the bottoms of the doors. There was lamplight at supper, but Ma told Laura to leave the dishes unwashed. They must all go to bed quickly, to save the kerosene and the coal. Another day was the same. The blizzard winds did not stop roaring and shrieking, the swishing snow did not stop swishing, the noise and the dark and the cold would never end.

[...]

Before Christmas Ma said: "We can find a little something in the stores for..." and she glanced at little Grace. "But you older girls know, Pa hasn't been able to get any work for wages this year. We can't spare money for presents, but we can have a happy Christmas just the same. [...] I'll try to contrive something extra for dinner, and then we'll all read, and when it's too dark to read, Pa will play the fiddle."

Laura was making a little picture frame of cross-stitch in wools on thin, silver-colored cardboard. Up the sides and across the top she had made a pattern of small blue flowers and green leaves. She decided to give it to Carrie for Christmas. How fortunate it was, too, that she had finished knitting the lace for her petticoat. She would give that to Mary.

[...] At bedtime that night no one spoke of hanging up stockings. Grace was too young to know about hanging stockings on Christmas Eve and no one else expected a present. But they had never been so eager for Christmas day, because they hoped the train would come at last.

[...]

Early in the morning, Ma was putting on each plate a small package wrapped in red-and-white paper. "Merry Christmas, Ma!" Laura said. "Oh, what are they?" "Christmas presents," Ma whispered. Then Laura put her packages at Ma's plate, and Mary's, and Carrie's.

Pa stepped in, smiling, and handed Ma two cans of oysters. "Charles!" Ma said.

"Make us an oyster soup for Christmas dinner, Caroline!" Pa told her. "I got some milk from the cow, not much, and it's the last."

"I'll thin it out with water," said Ma. "We'll have oyster soup for Christmas dinner!" "Merry Christmas, Merry Christmas!" they said and laughed together.

"Hurrah for Santa Claus!" Pa sang out. "The old fellow made it in, if the train didn't!"

They began to unwrap their presents... When Grace tore the paper from her gift, she gave a gurgle of joy. Two little wooden men stood on a platform between two flat red posts. Their hands held on to two strings twisted tightly together above their heads. Ma gently pressed the bottoms of the posts inward. One of the men somersaulted up, the other swung into his place. Then the first came down while the second went up and they nodded their heads and jerked their arms, dancing and somersaulting. Grace could not have enough of watching the funny little men.

[...]

Frost was freezing up the windowpanes and the room was cold near the walls. When the dishes were washed and put away, Ma set the lamp on the red-checked tablecloth and lighted it. There was only a little kerosene in the bowl where the wick coiled, but it gave a warm and cheery light.

Laura opened the bundle of Youths Companions. "You girls choose a story," Ma said. "And I will read it out loud, so we can all enjoy it together."

So, close together between the stove and the bright table, they listened to Ma's reading the story in her soft, clear voice. The story took them all far away from the stormy cold and dark. When she had finished that one, Ma read a second and a third. That was enough for one day; they must save some for another time. [...]