

Snowbound

By Rhonda Ashurst

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Snow has been falling for a month straight. We haven't seen the sun since December, and it is well into February. The wood we stacked in the garage is nearly gone. The windows on the lower floor have been covered for over two weeks. Now it's at the bottom of the window sills on the second story—our last chance of escape.

The last snow cat left yesterday. They came for us. Ray Phillips begged Justin and I to go with them, south beyond the deepening wall of snow descending on our mountain world. We thought about it long and hard, not much else to do as the days and nights run together and hours stretch into weeks. We both feel the same way—this is our home, our life, our world. If it is disappearing under the snow, we are inclined to go with it and not join the fray down south.

I can hear Justin calling for me from upstairs. "Yeah, I'm comin'," I say as I plod up the log steps to the loft of our cabin.

He is sitting by the window, the deepening lines in his face softened by the dull light and his brown hair going everwhichway. I'm still shocked by his beard. He was always a clean-shaven man.

I drop into my chair beside him and look out on the falling snow, feeling the soft leather wrap around me. These chairs used to be downstairs, facing the large windows in the living room. We would sit there for hours, talking and looking out on our little valley with its wide ribbon of river and majestic ring of mountains. When the view disappeared behind the curtain of white, we moved our chairs upstairs, next to the small window in the loft.

Being above the wood stove, the loft is the warmest place in the house. So we took the mattress off our downstairs bed and brought it up here. Now we spend most of our time on the upper floor, when we aren't stoking the fire, melting snow for water, or cooking.

"Ma," Justin says, "I been thinkin'."

"Pa," I say, "Whatcha been thinkin'?" I don't know when we started calling each other "Ma" and "Pa". It must have been back in the beginning, probably over twenty years ago. I'm also not sure how we settled on these nicknames, since we don't have kids.

"At the rate it's snowing, we've got maybe a day or two left before this window gets covered. I'm thinkin' I don't wanna be here after that."

That's my Justin—direct and to the point. "So, what's the plan?" I ask.

His green eyes meet mine. There's a sad, determined look in them. "I think I wanna be out there." He nods towards the window.

My breath catches some place deep in my chest and I feel my heartbeat speed up. Justin looks back at me, but I can't hold his gaze, so I stare down at my lap. Pretty soon one of his big hands covers mine. It feels like warm sandpaper.

"Ma, I can't die in this house."

When he says it, I know he's right. We can't die inside, hanging on until the bitter end comes, waiting and wondering what will take us: freezing to death, thirst, hunger. We are outdoor people, so it seems only fitting that this should end outside.

"So, what're we gonna do?" I fight to keep the quaver out of my voice and the tears from spilling out the corners of my eyes. But I lose.

Next thing I know I'm gathered up in his strong arms, sitting on his lap like a little girl. I let the tears spill onto his flannel shirt and he strokes my hair. We stay like this for a long time.

Finally he says, "I want to go to our tree."

“Our tree,” I echo, looking up at him.

It hangs there for a moment, suspended in the air, like God holding His breath.

In the front yard stands a huge blue spruce. I can see it out the window, branches bent with the weight of the snow, but still standing tall and defiant. It must be hundreds of years old.

The idea settles into place deep down inside me. Of course, our tree. Justin must have been sitting here, mulling this over for days. That’s his way—think about it for a long time, make up his mind, then announce his decision in two sentences or less. In our many years together, I’ve rarely found reason to argue with him. I reach up and hold his cheek in my hand and he leans his head into it and closes his eyes.

Suddenly, I am angry. My life wasn’t supposed to end like this! I’m only forty-four. I can’t sit in Justin’s lap any longer, so I get up and mutter something about stoking the fire and making some coffee.

I wanted to see the pyramids in Egypt, those Inca ruins in Peru, the Eiffel Tower. I’ve never been to a beach in Florida. I heard they were beautiful, like walking on sugar, before they disappeared beneath the waves. So many of the places I wanted to see are underneath salt water now. When Greenland’s ice sheet melted in 2018, the seas took most of the coastlines, along with my dreams of getting a tan on the white sands of Miami Beach.

That was the beginning of the end.

“Hey, Hon?”

“Yeah?”

“Bring me the papers with that coffee, will ya?”

The darned papers again. Why does he want to keep reading them? Does he think they’re going to say something different? We haven’t had any news for over a month, not since the power grid for the northern U.S. went down.

I pick up what I can carry of the stack of old newspapers and take them up to Justin with his coffee—two teaspoons powdered creamer, one teaspoon of sugar. He prefers real cream, but that's been gone a long time now.

The dull grey of the day is fading to black. Justin lights the kerosene lantern on the small, wooden table between our chairs. I set down his coffee and the papers, noticing the headline on top: March 18, 2019, *Millions of Coastal Refugees Riot—Streets Filled with Bodies*. The pictures beneath show bodies stacked like cord wood along streets and buildings burning in the background. The captions read: Mexico City, Phoenix, Frankfurt, New Delhi.

I remember the day I read that paper, the sick feeling that pierced through the very core of me. The winter of 2019 left us buried under ten feet of snow and it was still coming on March 18th. I had been fantasizing about moving south when that paper arrived and shattered all my illusions.

Justin sips his coffee. “Mmm, this is good.” He smiles and reaches over to touch my hand, then returns to the papers.

I sit down in my chair next to him and drink my own black coffee, savoring the warmth as it slides down my throat. How many more cups of coffee do I have left? Better enjoy this one. I pick up the mindless romance novel I'm reading and disappear into another world where the sun shines on a shirtless man working in a green field.

A couple of hours later I feel the evening chill settling into the house. Justin gets up and goes downstairs to load more logs in the wood stove. Then I hear him opening and closing cupboard doors in the kitchen. It reminds me of the newspapers—this nightly cupboard checking ritual of his—like he thinks something new might appear when we haven't made a grocery run in a month. If I'd have known then that it would snow fifteen feet in thirty days,

closing down all the roads surrounding our isolated town, I would've bought more food at Ned's Market while it was still open.

"Whadda ya wanna eat—chili beans or Spaghetti-O's with Vienna sausages?" he calls up to me.

"I don't care. You pick," I say. We ate everything we liked last week.

Pretty soon I can smell the chili simmering on the woodstove below. A few minutes later he appears carrying two steaming bowls.

"This's the last of the chili. Tomorrow we're stuck with Spaghetti-O's and Vienna sausages."

I groan dramatically and put the back of my hand against my forehead, "Oh, Rhett! Whatever shall we do? Maybe it's time to go see our tree." The last sentence comes out minus the southern drawl and an octave or two lower than I intended.

This draws one of Justin's x-ray stares. "You mean that?"

I'm sure he can see into my very soul. Do I mean it?

"Well," I say, hedging with a bit of sarcasm, "I can't see having Spaghetti-O's and Vienna sausages for my last supper."

This starts him chuckling, which quickly turns to laughter. Pretty soon we are both caught up in it, slapping the arms of our chairs and wiping tears out of our eyes. A part of me seems to stand aside and watch this outburst with hands on her hips, shaking her head; another part of me desperately needs to laugh, to keep from screaming.

When we finally settle down, he turns those Superman eyes on me again and asks, "Now really, Tess. Do you wanna go tomorrow?"

I can't hold his gaze, so I look out the window into the blackness. I wonder briefly if that is what death is like. Does it go all black?

“Tess?”

“I don’t know for sure,” I finally manage to say. “Can I think about it tonight?”

“You can think about it as long as you need to.”

We eat silently, staring out the window into the dark. I find myself wishing the TV still worked. I could use a distraction. I remember watching a Weather Channel special on what they called “The Great Ocean Conveyor.” The scientists explained how the Earth’s weather was driven by the Conveyor, which had shut down after Greenland’s ice melted into the ocean. They were predicting another ice age and warned us northerners that we might want to go south, like Canadian Geese.

Justin brings me back to the present with a nudge, “Whadda ya thinkin’ in that pretty head?”

I set my half-empty bowl down on the table and look at him. “I was thinkin’ about that weather show on the ice age. You know, what it’d be like if it didn’t stop snowing for years. I wonder who will find us when it melts and how long that will be.”

“I guess we won’t be around to find out, will we?”

He gets up from his chair and takes my hand, pulling me to my feet and into his arms. “C’mon, let’s dance.”

He hums one of our favorite country waltzes in my ear and whirls me around the loft, like we were on the wooden dance floor at Lilly’s.

The next morning Justin gets up before me and stokes the fire, places the coffee pot on the woodstove, and then crawls back into our warm bed. He spoons me against his solid frame and I feel safe, protected. His lips nuzzle my ear and he whispers, “I love you, Tess.”

When the coffee is ready, we drag ourselves out of our cozy nest and head for the kitchen. The fire crackles in the stove and it seems like just another ordinary day in our new

world of endless winter. Sitting in our chairs, I notice the snow has half covered the window overnight. In the upper half, I see another dreary day and more flakes falling.

“So, what do you wanna do today?” Justin asks. There is a cheery uneasiness in his tone.

Good question. What do I want to do on my last day? I’d considered that question in the past and always had answers like: visiting my parents, going to one of the places I’d always wanted to see, doing one last camping trip, bungee jumping. Now none of these were an option.

“I don’t know.” I pull in a deep breath of air and hold my forehead, fighting back the tears. “I wish this weren’t happening. I want the sun to come out, the snow to melt and spring to come again. I want to hike up into the mountains with you and camp out under the stars.”

Justin sets his coffee down, gets up from his chair and kneels down in front of me. He pulls my hand away from my forehead and touches my cheek tenderly with his other hand. “I wish it weren’t happening too, but it is.”

We are silent for what feels like a long time, staring into each other’s eyes. I’m trembling and I feel like I’m floating on the ceiling—empty and light. At the same time my body feels heavy and I realize I’m not really in my body. I watch this inner paradox with an oddly detached interest.

Justin gets up from his chair and takes my hand, pulling me firmly onto my feet. His gaze is calm and determined. He leads me down the stairs, across the living room and out to the garage. We trudge up the stairs into the attic. On the south wall there is a window which we have been using to get in and out of the house for the last two weeks, since the doors were sealed shut by snow. Our winter gear is sitting in a pile under the window.

I am suddenly filled with a feeling of peace like I haven’t felt in a very long time. I am drifting on the snow clouds. My feet follow Justin. He sits me down on the stool next to our

snow boots and snowshoes and proceeds to dress me as if I were a small child. He removes my slippers, puts my boots on and straps on the snowshoes. Next, he helps me to my feet and into my down jacket. The final touch—my big black ski gloves.

I stand there in my snow-cloud daze. Justin puts on his jacket and gloves, swapping his slippers for boots. Then he opens the window and snow falls in. The opening is full. He begins to dig, letting the snow pile up on the attic floor. Pretty soon he crawls out the window, packing down a path with one of his snowshoes. When he is finished, he backs through the window, stands and faces me. His eyes are a green lake and I am swimming in them.

He dusts himself off, sits down on the stool and straps on his snowshoes. He takes my hand again, guiding me towards the window. I follow him. He helps me through the window, turning my snowshoes until they clear the frame. I crawl along the short path he has made to the surface and stand up. I realize I haven't been outside in over a week. The amount of snow is overwhelming, paralyzing.

I feel Justin stand up next to me. He pats me on the back, then begins to pack down a path towards the spruce. I follow behind him. Now I see only the tree. It is about fifty yards away, but it seems much farther. Time hangs like mist between us and our goal.

After what seems like a half-day of slogging through our white nemesis, we are there. I know that at least twenty feet of the tree lies below where we stand. I look along the trunk and see a deep hole where the snow has been blocked by the massive limbs. Justin begins pacing around the tree, searching for the right spot. I hear him tamping down snow on the opposite side. Curiosity moves me towards him. He has found a perfect place below a large branch with about four feet of clearance. He has made a snow nest for two.

He reaches up to me and helps me climb down into our new bed. When I am level with him he draws me to him, carefully wedging his snowshoes between mine. He wraps his arms

around me. Something awakens in me and I find myself fiercely clinging to him. There are tears on his jacket—my tears.

Maybe another half-day later he pulls away, turns up my chin and wipes away the frozen tears, then kisses me deeply. I have the feeling for a moment that I have disappeared inside him to a dry, warm, safe place.

He bends down and removes my snowshoes, then his own. He places them at the head of our snow nest and lies down, lifting the hood of his jacket over his head, then resting it on his snowshoes, like a pillow. I join him.

I am staring up through the boughs of the spruce, through pine needles and snow and into the gray sky and ever-falling flakes. His heavily gloved hand finds mine. He tries to grasp it, but I can hardly feel it through my own glove.

I feel his hand leave mine and I hear the scraping sound of him tugging off the glove. I know I must do the same. Then I feel the familiar sandpaper hand fumbling for mine. He finds it and grasps it tightly. I turn to him and smile. He smiles back. The shroud of hanging time drapes over us. I am so cold that I shiver violently. Then, I am too hot. I've got to get out of this jacket.

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We are tangled in each other, clothes strewn everywhere and we are laughing. The white sand of the beach is as beautiful as I imagined. Like sugar, warm sugar. I can feel it against my skin as his body presses mine. Behind us the waves of a turquoise sea pound the shore.