

## Winter For A Year

It started in October. I remember during the first storms we were surprised to see it come so soon. Living on Martha's Vineyard, where the choppy sea that surrounds the island prevents any ice from forming in the foamy waves, snow was a rarity. But as I watched the feather-light particles of ice drift down from the heavens, there was this feeling of excitement, of expectation, the kind that everyone always gets at the first snowfall, that begins not when you see the flakes coming down outside your window, falling on the street and sticking in your hair, but when you can just *sense* that snow will come, whether it be by the piercing chill that precedes the frozen vapors' descent, or the clean smell of the air in the minutes before the initial fall. And in the end, you welcome it with open arms, seeing it as a chance to miss school or work, to wake up in the morning and see your familiar surroundings transformed into a crystallized wonderland, and to have everything that is so busy and complicated in your world just *stop*, and be silenced by the monochromatic blanket of snow.

In October, we students had just come back from summer vacation and wanted to return to it, so the phenomenon of snow in the early fall – however freakish it may have been— was well received. At least until the snowfall didn't stop, but continued for months, the winter enveloping the entire northern hemisphere in its cold embrace. At least until half of America, and all of its neighboring isles lost power, forcing my family to remain trapped inside of our house for weeks, slowly diminishing down our food supplies, and growing so cold that our bones felt like brittle sticks ready to snap, waiting for the spring that would never **come**.

**Commented [CM1]:** This first page is beautiful—lovely prose, very evocative and emotional. But it feels very different tonally from the first paragraph on page 2, which to me seems like a second beginning; page one sets the stage for winter, but page two gets us into the present timeline of the story itself. I hate to lose the loveliness of this first page, but you might consider either re-organizing so we get this filtered in elsewhere, or maybe separating the first page to make it feel like sort of a prologue?

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The longest winter in recorded human history began on October 13th, but we took no notice of it. No one gives a damn about the weather at a funeral. I was holding my sister Mia's hand when the first flakes hit the brown graveyard grass, sleet falling on our black umbrellas. From time to time, she would shift her gaze from the cigar box shaped urn to stare at me with a confused look on her face. Finally, she whispered to me, "But how did they fit Grandpa in that box?"

"Shhhh," I hissed back, as my mother looked back at us, concerned. She let go of our father's hand, and went over to touch my back, but I gently shook her off. She bit her lip and went back to my father's side, snowflakes dusting her hair as she went. But it was all silence after that, apart from my grandmother's muffled sobs. Tears rolled down my cheeks, stinging in the cold, as we walked back to our cars. I stopped and turned around, looking back at the urn, and my grandmother staring blankly at the remains of her husband.

*I'm sorry I wasn't there for you.* I turned back, and followed the others, black forms against a landscape slowly turning white.

It had happened in July, but I didn't know until August. Mia and I had been dropped off at our godparents' house in Nantucket so our parents could go to Seattle to visit my grandfather in the hospital. He had been operated on for lung cancer two weeks prior, and was expected to be out of the hospital in a few days. He had talked to us on the phone. He had laughed. He had discussed the latest developments in world news. Hurricane Ophelia hit the Atlantic shoreline two days later. The storms lasted only three days, but the power was out for a week after that. My parents couldn't reach the island until August 3rd. We

**Commented [CM2]:** Love these lines—what an opening!

**Commented [CM3]:** I think it would help the emotional resonance of the story if we got more about this, here in this first scene and elsewhere. On a small scale, I can't tell here if our narrator is apologizing to grandfather or grandmother, or both. Also, this scene and the end of the story imply that the family falls apart at least partly because of the grandfather's death, and the long winter is sort of a metaphor for their grief—I love that idea, it's very powerful, but I don't necessarily see that in the story other than when it's explicit. Is there a way to show the reader more about how Grandpa affected this family, and how his absence was felt?

**Commented [CM4]:** This might be a good place to include some of their relationship. Some memory of how he used to sound or what they used to talk about—something to imply a specific bond between them.

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asked them how Grandpa was doing, and we were told that he had died eight days ago.

While we were planning the jokes that we'd tell him, or what to get him for Christmas, he had had a seizure, been put into a coma, taken off life support, and finally turned to ash in the hospital morgue. The feeling of betrayal that pervaded our small beach house in the weeks that followed brought about the estrangement of our family. We did our best to avoid the house and each other, finding excuses to leave, places to be. I went to the piers to tend to our small pocket-cruiser, which had fallen into disrepair after Mia was born. Mia went down to Chappaquidick with our neighbour's sons to look for the same purple quahog shells that the original inhabitants of the Vineyard had treasured centuries before. Our mother spent more time working at hospital on the mainland, and Dad went to the tavern from five until nine. We continued that way, only admitting the presence of one another on the way to our little sanctuaries from reality, until the storms confined us to our house in October.

After the funeral, the snow only got worse. The first flurries had been strange, but expected, with the solar caps melting and all, leaving the water to mobilize after thousands of years, and evaporating to make every cloud swollen and low in the sky with the excess water. But it was around Thanksgiving, when severe winter storm warnings stopped all ferries from crossing the North Atlantic strait between us and the mainland, preventing our visit to my grandmother's house, when my parents started to worry.

*"Getting in the way of family...don't know if there's school tomorrow...Seven people died from black ice this morning alone, this is getting too dangerous"* were whispers that I could hear when my mother called my father from work in the afternoons. She started logging more hours in the hospital, and after November, she would stay at the hotel next

**Commented [CM5]:** INTERESTING word choice—implies that the family feels that Grandpa owed them his presence, that they needed him in some way. Why?

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to the hospital, only coming home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then not at all.

During one phone call in early December, she told me that there was no point in taking the hour-long ferry ride through the storms only to go through it all again eight hours later. I couldn't blame her. Our house was an empty shell without my mother, and Mia and I were left to fend for ourselves while our father was at the pub, coming home only to kiss us on the cheeks, and then head upstairs. When Mia would cry at night, I would comfort her, not wanting to wake Dad up. He could barely get through the day without collapsing as it was.

On the few days that our mother was be home, Mia and I avoided her, and took walks through the snow, looking for trees that could be cleared before they crashed on power lines. One day, when the sun had melted all but a foot of snow, Mia and I went walking through the Great Rock Bight path. There she spotted a limping rabbit.

"Oh, the poor bunny!" she ran over to its side, and, despite its struggles, picked it up.

"Mia, drop that thing now!" I yelled at her.

"But it's dying! Look at its leg, Nora!" she held it up for me to see.

"Mia, you're scaring it. Its heart can stop from fear."

"It's going to die if we leave it here, we can't just let it die." She pouted.

I looked in the terrified eyes of the still-squirming rabbit, and something broke within me. It needed to be saved. Nothing deserved to die.

"Fine, Mia." I muttered, kicking a drift out of the way. We headed back down to our house, where our mother sat at the table, head in her hands. There were two glasses of bourbon in front of her, one empty, and one full.

**Commented [CM6]:** This is a pretty heavy thing, for her to become responsible for her own care and her little sister's because of her mother's all-but-abandonment and her father's depression. I might want to see this weigh on her more. Earlier we read about their food supplies dwindling—that's the kind of thing that could maybe be commented on here.

**Commented [CM7]:** LOVE this, a nice thematic line. (Not here specifically, but this does remind me that their own mortality could be emphasized perhaps—the winter doesn't always feel as dangerous as it could.)

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"Where's Dad?" I asked as Mia shuffled in behind me. She lifted her head from her hands.

"He's gone down to the tavern. He'll be back in a few hours."

"Mia found an injured rabbit by Great Rock Bight, so she figured you could fix it, considering all the time you spend in the hospital." I stared at her, and she gulped.

"Alright then. Nora, do you mind getting my sewing kit from over there? Mia, did you touch the wound?"

"No." She quickly lied. I glanced back at her, surprised. She bit her lip and held the rabbit out to our mother, who quickly sewed the wound shut, then turned to us.

"Don't tell your father about this, he's got enough on his mind. It'll be our little secret."

So when he came home late that night, when only my mother and I were up, we said nothing as he asked us how our days went, just stared out at grey landscape of ice and sea that surrounded us from all sides.

Christmas came and went with little celebration. The White Christmas that I had always planned to see as a child was no special miracle, but a soot-stained, cold affair that consisted of our family's power flickering on and off until finally giving up and shutting down on Christmas Eve, and a two-mile walk in the middle of a blizzard to the church we only went to twice a year. Normally, the Christmas service was festive and gorgeous, but the lack of heating and the crying from the pageant children dampened our spirits. In the end, to stay warm we had to light the candles that we had normally used for our fire-lit rendition of *Silent Night*. As us church-goers sang the carol, the sound of our congregated voices could not drown out the howling winds outside, or the crackle of

**Commented [CM8]:** I'm not quite feeling the gravity of this, though I think it comes back in a powerful way later. Could we see her touching the wound above in-scene, and maybe the narrator warning her not to, or somehow clueing us in about the possible danger there? Or their mother could elaborate here on why she's asking?

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another power line being snapped in half under the barrage of the winter storm. At

Commented [CM9]: Very nice, symbolic.

midnight, already shaking from cold that our feeble candles could not chase away, we stumbled blindly back home, to the house where our traditional candles at the window were black in the night, to the living room filled with the absence of a cheerful Christmas tree that was adorned with sparkling ornaments that we had gathered over the years spent in our old beach house. The search for a tree had proved too dangerous after the giant pines that surrounded the property collapsed on the roads, preventing my family from bringing one of the pine trees' smaller cousins home with us.

As I headed upstairs, promising to sing Mia some carols, I glanced at the sparse pile of gifts on the ground, all that my mother could manage to buy on the mainland. When I opened Mia's door, I found her shivering in her cot.

"They're fighting again." I heard the muffled shouts downstairs in our parents' room, and nodded.

"It'll be alright." I settled into her bed, wrapping my arms around her.

The next morning, I heard the door slam. The presents were forgotten.

My sister started feeling ill around January 18<sup>th</sup>, but we took no notice of it. Before, we had been concerned with the ice storm warnings and ensuing power outages, and joined in the mad rush of islanders to the nearest food store, which in this case was Allie's of Chilmark, in order to stock up in supplies before we were hit again. By mid-January, temperatures that had been hovering just above 0° for days began to drop, triggering a mass exodus to the mainland for the members of the Vineyard's population

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who wished to leave before the frozen sea cut the island off from the rest of the world.

My family stayed on the island because we had nowhere else to go.

So when the electricity went out, and we were left standing in the darkness, we were more concerned with building a fire than Mia's hoarse coughing, and so, as the days went by without light, her condition worsened. Soon, she was barely able to speak without wheezing, and would sit down and not be able to get up for hours. It was then that we knew she needed medical help. So we trekked across the foot-deep snow, hoping that some help lied in the generator-lit hospital halls.

"Tularemia," said the doctor, squinting to read her notes in the dimly lit examination room. She glimpsed at Mia but then went back to her diagnosis.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid your daughter has Tularemia." I looked up at her while my father sank, deflated into his chair.

"What's that?"

"It's that disease that had an outbreak here about ten years ago." My father replied, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Quite right, yes," added Dr. Brenner, "We *did* have some cases of tularemia in 2004, partially due to the tick population rising. That's how we know that this *is* tularemia. Normally it's diagnosed as a nasty cold, but we have been on the lookout since the last outbreak. Ticks are the main cause of Tularemia, but since there have been no ticks in the past four months, it was probably ingested it through the air, or by touching an infected animal." At this, Mia's face blanched

**Commented [CM10]:** Including their mother? Did she decide to stay home instead of where she works in the hospital out of guilt, necessity? A change of heart?

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“The rabbit...” she muttered, before turning to look at me with wide eyes. “The bunny that we found in the snow, the one that I wanted to keep.”

“Unfortunately, since Tularemia is such an extremely rare disease, with only five out of ten-thousand people having it, this hospital does not supply treatments for it.” The doctor’s sympathetic voice broke me out of my daze. My father look surprised.

“But you said that you had cases before-”

“Ten years ago, Mr. Price, but that was back when we had a fully operating ferry, and the death of a man surely hastened the process, but we do not have these resources now. We only have twenty-five beds in this hospital, and we can’t afford to keep treatment for a disease that only receives two hundred cases per year. I’m sorry, but your best bet is to wait until the storm is over.”

“God knows how long that’ll take.” muttered my father, his hands shaking from agitation and cold.

“I’ll do my best to help. Here, I’ll tell the ferry captain to guarantee your seats on the next boat over, just give him this note.” She scribbled on her parchment, ripped it off, and handed it to us.

“He’s a good friend of mine. In the meantime, I can give you drugs for her pneumonia.” Dr. Brenner reached inside her cabinet and produced a small bottle of Mucinex.

“It’s not much, but it’ll help.” My father thanked her for the help, and as she rushed down the hall to check up on the other patients, we left, stepping out of the warm, soft, hospital lights into the cold, white, smothering world of ice.

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I knocked on my father's bedroom door. Mom hadn't been home for a month, and I didn't know if it was because of the drinking or because of the snow. But it hadn't helped Dad in any way. He was sitting in his armchair, clutching an empty bottle of whiskey.

"Did you check the liquor store?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you buy any?"

"I'm sixteen, Dad." He grumbled, and then muttered,

"I don't think anyone gives a damn at this point."

"Shouldn't you be caring less about alcohol and more about Mia? She's not getting any better."

"We make do with what we can."

"Does Mom even know?" At this he froze.

"Why in the world should that woman know? She's gone, and there's nothing we can do about it. Sometimes people aren't there for you when you need them the most. That's life, Nora. Accept that and move on."

I walked out the door, and then went up to give Mia her medicine.

It was sometime late in February, after having heard Mia coughing and crying for the month, that I decided to take matters into my own hands. I woke Mia up early in the morning, wrapped her in her warmest clothing and multiple blankets. I left a note on the counter for my father, telling him not to worry, though I doubted that he would be awake to read it for another twelve hours. He had drunk much more than usual last night, as evidenced by the number of liquor bottles on the ground. Mia waited for me to lock up the house, we walked out on the road far enough to be able to wave at the cars that still

**Commented [CM11]:** Mom's coming and going is a bit unclear—I assumed she was with them at Christmas, but not sure when she left again, or what triggered that.

**Commented [CM12]:** Another really heavy moment that I don't quite understand the context of. Was their marriage/family in trouble before Grandpa's death? How connected is this? Does Nora feel this abandonment like her father does? Does she feel that he also has abandoned them when they need him, despite his physical presence?

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had gas. We hitched a ride down to the Oak Bluffs marina. We stopped right next to our family boat, *Boats and Ships and Sealing Wax*. I ushered Mia into the berth under the cockpit, then started the engine. It took a while to get started, but finally gave in. We pattered along the icy sea, stopping only to break any ice on the water with a wooden oar. Around halfway, Mia stopped shivering. I knew from my life training course that the inability to shiver was sign of hypothermia, so I took off my outermost jacket and wrapped it around her. I bent down and shook her shoulder.

"Mia?" She opened her eyes, and smiled at me.

"I'm just going to nap, is that okay?" She closed her eyes.

"No no. Mia- Mia!" I grabbed her face and tapped her cheeks. Her eyelashes fluttered open.

"Mia, you have to listen to me. You can't fall asleep. OK? You fall asleep, and you won't wake up. You remember Grandpa? He fell asleep, and look where he is now. Look where *we* are now. I--I can't let you die. You are not going to die. You are going to stay awake until I get you to the hospital, and you are going to get better. So for God sake, Mia keep your eyes open." She gulped, and then nodded. I turned back to the wheel, trying to make out Wood's Hole in the distance.

In the end, it took the boat over an hour to make it to the mainland. By then, the snow had picked up, and was starting to blur my vision. I turned off the engine, and tied the boat up, helping Mia step onto the icy dock. Thunder was rolling in the distance as I glanced around at the abandoned wharf. I hadn't been expecting a town illuminated with lights that would put a carnival to shame, or kind-faced strangers offering warm blankets to Mia

Commented [CM13]: LOVE THIS

Commented [CM14]: I'm surprised that it's so easy for the sisters to get in the boat and cross to the mainland--this makes me feel that I've been misunderstanding how serious the storm is and how isolated they are. If it's so relatively easy for them to leave, why didn't the dad or doctor propose it when Mia first was sick? Because they didn't, I assume it must be a large task, especially for a young girl and her very ill sister. Maybe the tension could be upped here, beyond just that they sometimes need to break ice with an oar? It seems that the storm should be truly awful and dangerous, but I don't always feel that from the characters.

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and me, promising a quick ride to the hospital, but it had never crossed my mind that there wasn't help on the mainland. I hadn't been there since October, when there were still stragglers left over from the summer going back to their off-season lives. The lighthouse was dark, having no ships to steer home. I picked Mia up, blankets and all, her tiny figure shivering in my arms. She had lost weight in the month that she had been sick. I knew that if walked far enough, we were bound to find someone that could help us. I shuffled along, cloaked only in my snow pants and a parka along the deserted stretch of highway. There were no cars in sight, and the houses were all vacant. This part of Cape Cod was just like Martha's Vineyard, lively in the more clement months, but when the cold winds rolled in from the sea, the inhabitants of all these shore-towns fled, leaving their homes and villages to be no more than perfectly preserved ghost towns. The cold was biting my face, the snow causing my eyes to water. There was no end to the wasteland of Cape Cod, and my sister seemed to be getting heavier in my arms. I started wondering how long I would last until I collapsed. I remembered watching the national news bulletins back in November, pieces that listed the names of the countless individuals that were killed by collapsing roofs, or had been buried alive in their cars, headlights still blinking underneath three feet of snow. If I fell, I would never get up again. Mia and I would just be two more names broadcast to the public, news anchors gravely announcing that the storm had taken more innocent lives. It would be so easy to just give up, let the cold take me. But I couldn't do that to what remained of my family. I had vowed to protect them, to do what ever I could to keep myself from losing them. So I walked on. I walked until I could not feel my legs, motivated only by Mia's coughs into my jacket. After what felt like a lifetime, I spotted a blink of light. Forty feet away, barely noticeable in its mantle

**Commented [CM15]:** Did this happen to anyone they know, in their neighborhood, or people from school? Might raise the stakes to get the severity of this sooner.

**Commented [CM16]:** IMPORTANT! Would love to see this earlier and more clearly, her urgency to protect her family—could she maybe try to temper her dad's drinking by replacing some of his alcohol with water, or try to take steps to reconcile her parents?

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of snow, was a diner. I saw lights and heard music playing, people laughing. I struggled to reach it, but almost fell with Mia's weight.

"Mia?" I whispered to her. She opened her doe-like eyes and yawned.

"Yeah?"

"Could you run to that diner over there? I can walk alongside you." I said.

"Only if you don't let go of my hand. Promise?" Mia stuck out one pinkie from under her blankets and mittens.

"Promise." I replied, shaking her tiny six-year-old pinkie. I set her down on the ground, and we doggedly marched to the diner. We pushed inside, and stumbled into the party. The exhaustion and pain that my stubborn resolve had kept at bay finally kicked in, and I realized how much I had been holding back. I slumped onto the ground, defeated. I could hear Mia's hoarse voice in the background as a woman rushed to help me. I closed my eyes, feeling the heat of the diner burn my skin, the voices now dimming to a murmur, and let the darkness swallow me.

I woke up with the sun shining in my eyes. I tried to sit up and see where I was, but I was met with a brutal headache. A machine to my right beeped, and I saw a heart-rate monitor next to me. An IV was connected to my arm, and my left side and leg felt strange. I looked down and saw bandages on my fingers. *What happened?* I looked to my side and saw my mother sleeping in the chair next to my bed. I sat straight up, setting off a series of beeps from the monitor, waking her up.

"Nurse? She's awake!" She cried, pressing the call button.

"Mom? Where am I?" I looked around at the room, taking in my surroundings.

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"You're in Boston Hospital. You were treated for severe frostbite and bronchitis at Cape Cod Hospital, and then put in a coma because of brain damage. You were moved after your condition was stabilized, when they had transfer Mia to the Center for Disease Control. I got the call two weeks ago from there. Turns out the personal information I wrote on your jackets really helped out."

She smiled warmly, as if we were just having a normal mother-daughter conversation.

"Where *were* you?" I whispered. Her smile fell for a second, but she recovered it.

"What's important is that I'm here now—"

"I'm not asking about now. I'm asking why you left us when we *needed* you, Mom."

She shook her head, and then pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Do you understand what it was like, Nora? How hard it was to be in that house—"

"It was hard for me too. And you're the adult here!"

"Your father, Nora—"

"He got worse after you left, Mom. He needed you, and you got scared. He wouldn't even say your name!"

"Are you seriously attacking me right now, Nora? Do you know how *stupid* and reckless it was to cross the ocean and trek through a snowstorm on your own? Did you even stop to think for one moment how you were putting not just your life *and* your sister's at risk?"

"Do you really think I was going to let her die? I wasn't going to wake up one morning and find her dead! That would kill Dad after what happened with..." My voice trailed off.

"Are you really bringing this up, now? That has nothing to do with Mia—"

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"It has everything to do with Mia! When you got the call, I'm betting you didn't even know she was sick! That's how I felt when Grandpa died and you didn't bother to tell me for three weeks! You got to say goodbye, and I never will."

Her eyes widened. "Is that what this is about, Nora?" I turned my head. "Nora?" "I thought that if I could save Mia, then I would be making it up to Grandpa for not saving him." I muttered.

She started crying. "Do you realize that if any of you three had told me this, I would have reacted differently?"

"But you didn't, Mom. You didn't."

"I am so sorry, sweetie, I had no idea. I'll talk with your father about this when he arrives."

"Wait, the roads are open again?"

She smiled. "You were in a coma for two weeks, sweetie. It's March, almost spring."

"I forgot what spring was." I smirked.

"Me too, Nora, me too." she murmured, brushing my hair back from my face, and this time, I didn't jerk away.

Outside, I could detect the faint trill of one tiny bird, waiting for the snow to melt so the grass could grow once more, to see the sun bearing down on those cold crystals, melting them away, and eventually chasing the winter into the budding, dawning springtime.

**Commented [CM17]:** This conversation seems to be the heart of the story, but it happens really quickly and comes a bit late. I think there's very powerful stuff here, in the dialogue and in the ideas, but it would impact the reader more if we'd been able to see and feel some of this in the rest of the story, so that it was like a tense build to this overflow, instead of this coming as a bit of a surprise. Consider if this is the main thing you want the story to be about, and then as you go back through, try to find places to strengthen these feelings and themes.

**Commented [CM18]:** An easy fix, but an important one: you might consider a different billing for the storm (and title for the story) since the winter last from October to March, not a full year 😊

**Commented [CM19]:** Beautiful last paragraph!