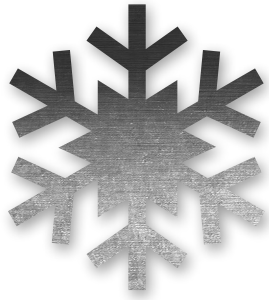




#1

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.

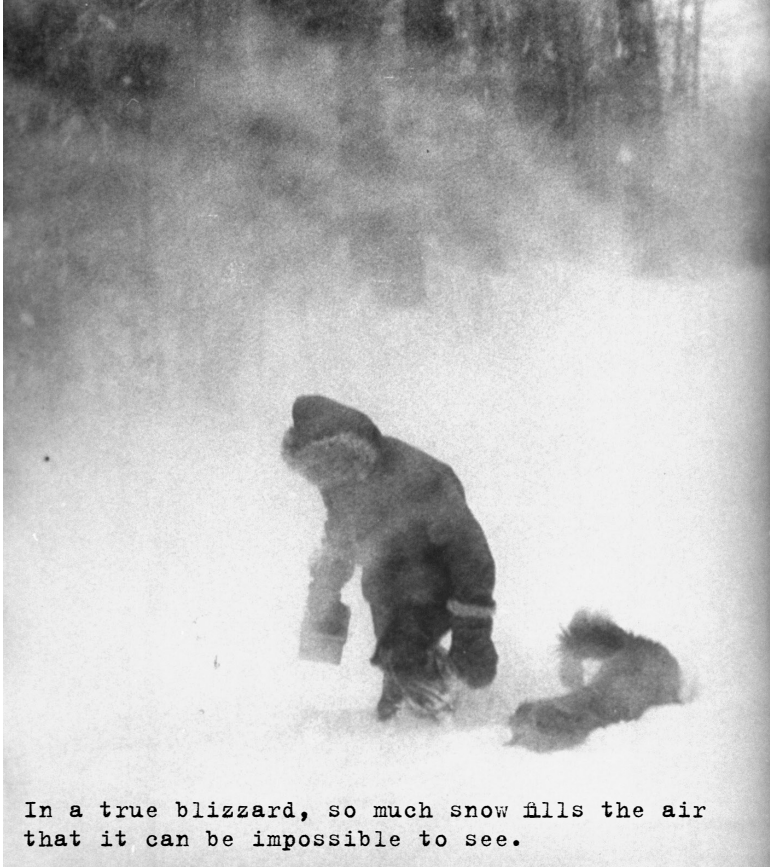
AN ARCTIC BLAST

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