

I Survived the Blizzard of '79

Memoir: Analysis

Survival: the metaphorical truth and how it takes shape through the narrative arc of the story/memoir

When the blizzard happened in '79: chronologically, it started as a vague memory to the author, the narrator and then the graphic, visual details are expanded on, bit by bit, in an organic way.

The memories that she stumbles upon:

“So I didn’t make up the blizzard, though it sounds made up, the grimmest of Grimms, windchill forty below, three feet of snow and snow still falling. You had to shovel your drive daily. Later, a neighbor would tell of coming home after two nights away and having to dig down a foot to reach his own keyhole.

My dad had a snow blower, which spewed sheets of snow out of the side of its mouth. Sheets became mountains, and mountains became walls on either side of our front path, reaching almost to the sky. I could still view sky by tipping my head back, but seeing it was no relief because the sky was snow-white, tearing itself into pieces and hurling them at us.”

The role of the narrator as the child: an unreliable narrator apparently, hence the use of the greater world and its visual details to depict the seriousness or grimness of the situation of the blizzard—the natural calamity and the response of her immediate world to the calamity.

More graphic details of the calamity:

“A motorist, dead of exposure in a stranded car. A man, dead of a heart attack while shoveling snow; ambulance couldn’t reach him. Coat drive, shelters for the homeless. *Check in on your elderly neighbors, folks. If you can get out, that is.* Amtrak trains abandoned. Hundreds of cars lining the highway, buried by snow, white lumps pierced by antennas. Family of five, killed when their roof collapsed.”

What we see here:

--depiction of the surroundings woven with an objective stance, with minute details, the narrator is situated within the greater context as an observer.

The part where the Dad drags the children to the church through the thick mass of snow—almost inhuman in its stunning rigidity, blind allegiance to religion.

“He helped us tug and wriggle into our snowsuits, and we slid our feet into plastic bread bags before yanking on our boots. He pushed open the door into the shrieking tunnel of white. We trudged between the walls of snow to the unplowed road. *Follow me*, Dad said. *Step where I’m stepping; this part will hold our weight*. Except sometimes we couldn’t match his stride, or the snow wouldn’t hold our weight and Julie’s boot or my boot would crunch through crust and we’d plummet to the groin, feeling nothing below but more snow...”

The feeling of ruthlessness of the dad seeps in the consciousness of the narrator as the adult self remembers this childhood account. What does the dad’s behavior denote here?

On the count of three, Dad said, and hoisted us out, and we battled on, snow melting into our boots, heads lowered against the wind.

.....*Righteo*, said my father, slowly turning back the way we had come. *Righteo*. Whatever he felt then—gazing out over the tundra, the alien tundra, all the mailboxes and road signs and newspaper vending machines and parking meters blighted and buried—wasn’t something he shared. What he shared was, *Home again, home again, jiggety jig*.

Remembrances of a hard, excruciating day as a child, plagued by the snow and cold and the bitterness of the situation. Stumbling on gruesome images of the calamity on the way.

“Elderly couple, found in their basement, dead of hypothermia. Fourteen-year-old boy, poisoned by carbon monoxide as he sat in a running car his dad was trying to dig out from a snow bank. Another shoveler’s heart attack. Volunteers with snowmobiles taking doctors to hospitals.”

The bliss of childhood versus the bitter awakening of facts—last section

“First, I heard my parents’ late-night argument, the barb about Dad dragging us to church in a blizzard, over two miles round trip. And in time, I recognized the catholicism of my father’s rigidity, the Victorian strictures of our house. And eventually, I realized that if he were going to foot-slog us through a blizzard, he should have damn sure dressed us in scarves.”

The remembrance of the father and his ways, his rigidity and his self-righteousness in religious obeisance. The legacy of a parent, when she is herself a parent and when the father is gone physically. The last sentence: an obituary of a father, an obituary of a memory itself, which is the foundation of the memoir.