Light on Snow

Anita Shreve

Beyond the window of my father's shop, midwinter light skims the snow. My father stands, straightening his back.

'How was school?' he asks.

'Good,' I say.

He puts his sander down and reaches for his jacket on a hook. I run my hand along the surface of the table. The wood is floury with dust, but satin underneath.

'You ready?' he asks.

'I'm ready,' I say.

My father and I leave his workshop in the barn and walk out into the cold. The air, dry and still, hurts my nose as I breathe. We lace up our snowshoes and bang them hard against the crust. A rust color is on the bark, and the sun is making purple shadows behind the trees. From time to time the light sends up a sheen of pocked glass.

We move at a good clip, dodging pine boughs, occasionally catching a shower on the back of the neck. My father says, 'I feel like a dog let out to exercise at the end of the day.'

The stillness of the forest is always a surprise, as if an audience had quieted for a performance. Beneath the hush I can hear the rustle of dead leaves, the snap of a twig, a brook running under a skin of ice. Beyond the woods there's the hollow road-whine of a truck on Route 89, the drone of a plane headed into Lebanon. We follow a path that is familiar, that will end at a stone wall near the summit. The wall, square on three sides, once bordered a farmer's property. The house and barn are gone, and only the foundations remain. When we reach the wall, my father will sometimes sit on it and have a cigarette.

I am twelve on this mid-December afternoon (though I am thirty now), and I don't know yet that puberty is just around the corner, or that the relentless narcissism of a teenage girl will make walking in the woods with my father just about the last thing I'll want to do on any given day after school. Taking a hike together is a habit my father and I have grown into. My father spends too many hours bent to his work, and I know he needs to get outside.

After the table is finished, my father will put it in the front room with the other furniture he has made. Fourteen pieces in two years isn't much of an output, but he's had to teach himself from books. What he can't learn from manuals, he asks a man

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called Sweetser down at the hardware store. My father's furniture is simple and rudimentary, and that is fine with him. It has a decent line and a passable finish, though none of that matters. What matters is that the work keeps him busy and is unlike anything he has ever done before.

A branch snaps and scratches my cheek. The sun sets. We have maybe twenty minutes left of decent light. The route back to the house is easy all the way down and can be done in less than ten. We still have time to reach the wall.

I hear the first cry then, and I think it is a cat. I stop under a canopy of pine and listen, and there it is again. A rhythmic cry, a wail.

'Dad,' I say.

I take a step toward the sound, but as abruptly as it began, it ends. Behind me snow falls with a muted thump onto the crust.

'A cat,' my father says.

We begin the steep climb up the hill. My feet feel heavy at the ends of my legs. When we reach the summit, my father will judge the light, and if there's time he'll sit on the stone wall and see if he can make out our house – a smidgen of yellow through the trees. 'There,' he will say to me, pointing down the hill, 'can you see it now?'

My father has lost the weight of a once sedentary man. His jeans are threadbare in the thighs and tinged with the rusty fur of sawdust. At best he shaves only every other day. His parka is beige, stained with spots of oil and grease and pine pitch. He cuts his hair himself, and his blue eyes are always a surprise.

I follow his tracks and pride myself that I no longer have any trouble keeping up with him. Over his shoulder he tosses me a Werther's candy, and I catch it on the fly. I pull off my mittens, tuck them under my arm, and begin to unwrap the cellophane. As I do I hear the distant thunk of a car door shutting.

We listen to the sound of an engine revving. It seems to come from the direction of a motel on the northeast side of the hill. The entrance to the motel is further out of town than the road that leads to our house, and we seldom have a reason to drive by it. Still, I know it is there, and I sometimes see it through the trees on our walks – a low, red-shingled building that does a decent business in the ski season.

I hear a third cry then – heartbreaking, beseeching, winding down to shuddering.

'Hey!' my father calls.

In his snowshoes he begins to run as best he can in the direction of the cry. Every dozen steps he stops, letting the sound guide him. I follow, and the sky darkens as we go. He takes a flashlight from his pocket and switches it on.

'Dad,' I say, panic rising in my chest.

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The beam of light jiggles on the snow as he runs. My father begins to sweep the flashlight in an arc, back and forth, side to side. The moon lifts off the horizon, a companion in our search.

'Anybody there?' he calls out.

We move laterally around the base of the slope. The flashlight flickers off and my father shakes it to reconnect the batteries. It slips out of his glove and falls into a soft pocket of snow beside a tree, making an eerie cone of light beneath the crust. He bends to pick it up, and as he raises himself, the light catches on a patch of blue plaid through the trees.

'Hello!' he calls.

The woods are silent, mocking him, as if this were a game.

My father waves the flashlight back and forth. I'm wondering if we shouldn't turn around and head back to the house. It's dangerous in the woods at night; it's too easy to get lost. My father makes another pass with the flashlight, and then another, and it seems he has to make twenty passes before he catches again the patch of blue plaid.

There's a sleeping bag in the snow, a corner of flannel turned over at its opening.

'Stay here,' my father says.

I watch my father run forward in his showshoes, the way one sometimes does in dreams – unable to make the legs move fast enough. He crouches for better leverage and keeps a steady bead on the bag. When he reaches the plaid flannel, he tears it open. I hear him make a sound unlike any I have ever heard before. He falls to his knees in the snow.

'Dad!' I shout, already running toward him.

My arms are flailing, and it feels as though someone is pushing against my chest. My hat falls off, but I keep on clumping through the snow. I am breathing hard when I reach him, and he doesn't tell me to go away. I look down at the sleeping bag.

A small face gazes up at me, the eyes wide despite their many folds. The spiky black hair is gelled with birth matter. The baby is wrapped in a bloody towel, and its lips are blue.

My father bends his cheek to the tiny mouth. I know enough not to make a sound.

With one swift movement he gathers up the icy sleeping bag, presses it close to him, and stands. But the material is cheap and slippery, and he can't get a decent grip.

I hold my arms out to catch the baby.

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He kneels again in the snow. He sets his bundle down, unzips his jacket, and tears open his flannel shirt, the buttons popping as he goes. He unwraps the infant from the bloody towel. Six inches of something I will later learn is cord hang from the baby's navel. My father puts the child close to his skin, holding the head upright in the palm of one hand. Without even knowing that I've looked, I understand the infant is a girl.

My father staggers to his feet. He wraps his flannel shirt and parka around the child, folding the jacket tight with his arms. He shifts his bundle to make a closed package.

'Nicky,' my father says.

I look up at him.

'Hold on to my jacket if you need to,' he says, 'but don't let yourself get more than a foot or two behind me.'

I grab the edge of his parka.

'Keep your head down and watch my feet.'

We move by the smell of smoke. Sometimes we have the scent, and sometimes we don't. I can see the silhouettes of trees, but not their branches.

'Hang in there,' my father says, but I don't know if it is to me or to the infant against his chest that he is speaking.

We half slide, half run down the long hill, my thighs burning with the strain. My father lost the flashlight when he left the sleeping bag in the snow, and there isn't time to go back for it. We move through the trees, and the boughs scratch my face. My hair and neck are soaked from melted snow that freezes again on my forehead. From time to time I feel a rising fear: We are lost, and we won't get the baby out in time. She will die in my father's arms. No, no, I tell myself, we won't let that happen. If we miss the house, we'll eventually hit the highway. We have to.

I see the light from a lamp in my father's workshop. 'Dad, look,' I say.

The last hundred yards seems the longest distance I have ever run in my life. I open the door and brace it for my father. We wear our snowshoes into the barn, the bamboo and gut slapping as we make our way to the woodstove. My father sits in a chair. He opens his jacket and looks down at the tiny face. The baby's eyes are closed, the lips still bluish. He puts the back of his hand to the mouth, and from the way he closes his eyes I can tell that she's breathing.

I unlace my snowshoes and then undo my father's.

'An ambulance won't make it up the hill,' my father says. Holding the child against his skin, he stands. 'Come with me.'

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We move out the barn door, along the passageway to the house, and into the back hallway. My father takes the stairs two at a time and turns into his bedroom. Clothes litter the floor, and a fan of magazines is on the bed. I hardly ever go into my father's bedroom. He snatches up a sweater but tosses it away because of the roughness of the yarn. He gathers up a flannel shirt and realizes that it hasn't yet been washed. In the corner is a blue plastic laundry basket that my father and I take to the Laundromat every week or so. Betweentimes he uses it as a kind of bureau drawer.

'Hand me that,' he says, pointing.

With one arm, he sweeps the magazines from the bed. I set the laundry basket on the mattress. He takes the baby out, wraps her in two clean flannel shirts, front to back, the small face above the folds. He makes a nest of sheets in the basket, and then he lays the infant gently in.

'Okay then,' he says to steady himself. 'Okay now.'

I climb into the truck. My father sets the basket on my lap.

'You all right?' he asks.

I nod, knowing that no other answer is at all possible.

My father gets into the truck and puts the key into the ignition. I know he's praying that the engine will start. It catches the first try only half the time in winter. The engine coughs, and he coaxes it to a whine. I'm afraid to look at the infant in the plastic basket, afraid I won't see the tiny puffs of breath in the frigid air, mimicking my own.

My father drives as fast as he dares. I grit my teeth in the ruts. The frozen lane is ridged up from the early snows and thaws of the fall. In the spring, before the town comes by to grade it, the road will be nearly impassable. Last spring, during a two-week melt, I had to stay at my friend Jo's house so that I could go to school. My father, who had taken great pains to be alone, finally walked into town one day, both to see his daughter and to break his cabin fever. Marion, who tends the register at Remy's, tried to bring him home in her Isuzu, but she couldn't make it past the first bend. My father had to walk the rest of the distance, and his calf muscles ached for days.

The baby snorts and startles me. She gives a wail, and even in the weak light from the dashboard, I can see the angry red of her skin. My father puts his hand out to touch her. 'Atta girl,' he whispers in the dark.

He keeps his hand lightly on the soft mound of flannel shirts. I wonder if the motion of soothing Clara is coming back to him now and hurting his chest. The road down the hill seems longer than I remembered it. I hope the baby will cry all the way to Mercy.

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My father guns the engine when he hits the pavement, and the truck fishtails from ice in the treads. He pushes the speedometer as high as he can without losing control. We pass the Mobil station and the bank and the one-room elementary school from which I graduated just the year before. I wonder if my father will stop at Remy's and hand the baby over to Marion, who could call for an ambulance. But my father bypasses the store, because stopping will only delay what he's already doing – delivering the infant to someone who will know what to do with her.

We drive past the small village green that is used as a skating rink in winter. In the middle is a flagpole with a spotlight on it.

Who left the baby in the sleeping bag?

My father turns at the sign for Mercy. The driveway to the hospital is lined with yellow lights, and I can see the baby, scrunching her face, ugly now. But I remember the eyes looking up at me in the woods – dark eyes, still and watchful. My father pulls up to Emergency and leans on the horn.

The door on my side swings open, and a security guard in uniform pushes his face into the truck.

'What's the horn for?' he asks.

I

I watch the baby disappear behind massive automatic doors. My father puts his head back and closes his eyes. When we hear the distant wail of a siren, he sits up. He wipes his nose on the sleeve of his jacket. How long has he been crying? He turns the key in the ignition, stripping the starter because the motor is already on. He drives as if he were new at the wheel, following signs to the parking lot. When we get out of the car, he looks down, only then realizing that his shirt is still unbuttoned beneath his jacket.

At the curb in front of the emergency entrance, my father hesitates.

'Dad?'

He puts his arm around my shoulder and we walk toward the entrance, our boots coasting on the salt pellets.

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The beige-and-mint entryway is empty, and there seems to be a lot of metal. I squint in the overbright lights that flicker like a strobe. I wonder where the baby is and where we should go. My father follows signs for Triage, each step forward on the tiles an effort. We don't belong in here. No one does.

We turn a corner and see a small room in which a half-dozen people sit on plastic chairs attached to the walls. A woman in jeans and a sweater is pacing, her yellow hair still bearing the imprint of her rollers. She seems impatient, annoyed with a sullen boy who might be her son. He sits in his plastic chair, his coat still on, his chin besieged with angry pimples. I think I see the reason for the visit in the way he cradles his right hand: a finger? a wrist? My father walks toward the Triage window and stands at its opening while a woman speaks into a telephone and ignores him.

I put my hands into the pockets of my jacket and look down the hallway. Somewhere there is a room and a cot and a doctor working on a baby. Is she still alive? The receptionist taps on the window to get my father's attention.

'I brought in a baby,' my father says. 'I found her in the woods.'

The woman is silent a moment. 'You found a baby?' she asks.

'Yes,' he says.

She writes something on a pad of paper. 'Does the child have injuries?' she asks.

'I don't know.'

'Are you the father?'

'No,' he says. 'I found her in the woods. I'm not a relative. I have no idea who she is.'

The receptionist studies him again, and I know what she is seeing: a tallish man in a stained beige parka; forty, maybe forty-five; a three-day growth of beard; dark brown hair with a sheen of gray; sharp vertical lines between the brows. My father probably hasn't had a shower, I realize, since breakfast the day before yesterday.

'Your name?'

'Robert Dillon.'

She writes quickly, in red ink. 'Address?'

'Bott Hill.'

'You have insurance?'

'I have insurance personally,' my father says.

'May I see your card?' she asks.

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My father feels in all his pockets, and then he stops. 'I don't have my wallet with me,' he says. 'I left it on a shelf in the back hallway.'

'No driver's license?'

'No,' my father says.

The receptionist's face goes still. She sets her pen down and folds her hands together in a slow, controlled manner, as if she were afraid of sudden movement. 'Take a seat,' she says. 'Someone will be right with you.'

I sit next to a man with a doughy face who coughs quietly into the collar of a quilted parka the color of weeds. The light is harsh and unflattering, making the elderly look nearly dead and even the children blotchy with imperfections. After a time – twenty minutes? half an hour? – a young doctor in a white coat steps into the room, a mask loose around his neck, a stethoscope anchored in a breast pocket. Behind him is a uniformed policeman.

'Mr Dillon?' the doctor asks.

My father stands and meets the men in the center of the room. I get up and follow. The doctor is pale and blond and looks too young to be a doctor. 'Are you the man who found the infant?' he asks.

'Yes,' my father says.

'I'm Dr Gibson, and this is Chief Boyd.'

Chief Boyd, one of only two police officers in the town of Shepherd, is, I know, Timmy Boyd's father. They are both overweight and have the same rectangular black eyebrows. Chief Boyd pulls a notebook and a short pencil from a uniform pocket.

'Is she all right?' my father asks the doctor.

'She'll lose a finger, possibly some toes,' the doctor answers, rubbing his forehead. 'And her lungs may be compromised. It's too soon to tell.'

'Where'd you find her?' the chief asks my father.

'In the woods behind my house.'

'On the ground?'

'In a sleeping bag. She was wrapped inside a towel inside the bag.'

'Where are the towel and bag now?' Chief Boyd asks, licking the tip of his pencil, a gesture I've seen my grandmother make when composing her shopping lists. He speaks like most of the New Hampshire natives do – with broad a's, no r's, and a slight rhythm to the sentences.

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'In the woods. I left them there.'

'You live on Bott Hill, right?'

'Yes.'

'I've seen you around,' Chief Boyd says. 'In Sweetser's.'

'I think it was near the motel up there,' my father says. 'I can't remember the name.'

The chief turns away from my father and speaks into a radio he has clipped to his shoulder. I study the paraphernalia attached to his uniform.

'How long was she there?' the doctor asks my father.

'I don't know,' my father says.

I have then an image of the baby still in the snow in the dark. I make a sound. My father puts his hand on my shoulder.

'Tell me how you found her,' Chief Boyd says to my father.

'My daughter and I were taking a walk, and we heard these cries. We didn't know what it was at first. We thought it might be a cat. And then it sounded human.'

'Did you see anything? Anyone near the baby?'

'We heard a car door shutting. Then an engine starting up,' my father says.

There's a squawk on Chief Boyd's radio. He speaks into his shoulder. He seems agitated, and he turns away from us. I hear him say twenty-eight years' experience and he's here.

I hear him swear under his breath.

He turns back to us and puts away his notebook and pencil. He takes a long time doing this. 'Is there somewhere I can put Mr Dillon?' the chief asks the doctor. 'I've got a detective from the state police major crimes unit coming up from Concord.'

The doctor pinches the bridge of his nose. His eyes are pink-rimmed with fatigue. 'He can sit in the staff lounge,' the doctor says.

'I can run the girl home,' Chief Boyd says as if I'm not even there. 'I'm headed that way anyway.'

I lean into my father. 'I want to stay with you,' I whisper.

My father examines my face. 'She'll stay with me,' he says.

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We follow the doctor to a lunchroom not far from the waiting room. Inside are tall metal lockers, a pair of cross-country skis propped in a corner, a pile of jackets on a Formica table against the wall. I sit at another table and study the vending machines. I realize that I'm hungry. I remember that my father doesn't have his wallet.

I think about the baby losing her finger and possibly some toes. I wonder if she'll have a handicap. Will she have trouble learning to walk without her toes? Will she be able to play basketball without a finger?

'I can call Jo's mother,' my father says. 'She'll come get you.'

I shake my head.

'I could pick you up after this is all over,' he adds.

'I'm fine,' I say, not mentioning my hunger, a fact that is sure to get me sent to Jo's. 'Will the baby be all right?' I ask.

'We'll have to see,' my father says.

'Dad?'

'What?'

'It was weird, wasn't it?'

'Yes, it was.'

I shift in my seat and sit on my hands. 'Scary, too,' I say.

'A bit.'

My father takes his cigarettes out of his jacket pocket but then thinks better of it.

'Who do you think left her there?' I ask.

He rubs the stubble on his chin. 'I have no idea,' he says.

'Do you think they'll give her to us?'

My father seems surprised by the question. 'The baby isn't ours to have,' he says carefully.

'But we found her,' I say.

My father bends forward and folds his hands together between his knees. 'We found her, but she doesn't belong to us. They'll try to find the mother.'

'The mother doesn't want her,' I protest.

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'We don't know that for sure,' my father says.

I shake my head with all the certainty of a twelve-year-old. 'Of course we know for sure,' I say. 'What mother would leave her baby to die in the snow? I'm hungry.'

My father pulls a Werther's out of his parka and slides it across the table.

'What will happen to the baby?' I ask, unwrapping the cellophane.

'I'm not exactly sure. We can ask the doctor.'

I stick the candy into my mouth and tuck it into my cheek. 'But Dad, let's say they let us have the baby. Would you take her?'

My father unwraps his own candy. He balls the cellophane and slips it into his pocket. 'No, Nicky,' he says, 'I would not.'

The minutes pass. A half hour passes. I ask my father for another candy. Overhead, on a TV screen, a newsreader announces budget cuts. Three teenagers from White River Junction have been arraigned following an attempted robbery. A storm system is moving in. I study the weather map and then glance at the clock: six-ten.

I get up and walk around the room. There isn't very far to go. At the end of the row of lockers is a mirror the size of a book. My mouth protrudes because of my braces. I try not to smile, but sometimes I can't help myself. I have smooth skin, not a pimple in sight. I have my mother's brown eyes and wavy hair, which at the moment is kinked up on top of my head. I try to straighten it out with my fingers.

A man in a navy overcoat and a red scarf enters the room without knocking, and I guess that he is another doctor. He unwinds his scarf and lays it over a chair. I can see that my father wants to unzip his jacket, but he can't. He has no buttons on his shirt.

The man takes off his coat and sets it down on top of the scarf. He rubs the palms of his hands together as if anticipating a good time. He has on a black cabled sweater and a blazer, and his face is gravelly with acne scars. To the right of his chin is an extra flap of skin, as if he'd been in a car accident or a knife fight.

'Robert Dillon?' the man asks.

I am surprised that this other doctor knows my father's name, and then I realize he isn't a doctor at all. I sit up straighter in my seat. My father nods.

'George Warren,' the man says. 'Call me Warren. Want a coffee?'

My father shakes his head. 'This is my daughter, Nicky,' my father says. Warren holds out his hand and I shake it.

'She was with you when you found the baby?' Warren asks.

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My father nods.

'I'm a detective with the state police,' Warren says. He takes some change from his pocket and inserts it into the coffee machine. 'You told Chief Boyd you found the baby on Bott Hill,' he says with his back to my father.

'I did,' my father says.

A heavy paper cup tumbles into place. I watch the coffee run from the spigot. Warren picks up the cup and blows over the top.

'The sleeping bag and the towel should still be there,' my father adds. 'I found her in a sleeping bag.'

Warren stirs the coffee with a wooden stick. His hair is gray but his face is young. 'Why'd you leave it there?' he asks. 'The sleeping bag.'

'It was too slippery,' my father says. 'I was afraid I'd drop the baby.'

'How did you carry her?'

'I put her inside my jacket.'

Warren's eyes slide to my father's jacket. The detective draws a chair back from the table with the toe of his Timberland boot. He sits down. 'Can I see some ID?' he asks.

'I left my wallet at the house,' my father says. 'I was hurrying, trying to get the baby to the hospital.'

'You didn't call the police? An ambulance?'

'We live at the end of a long hilly drive. The town doesn't maintain it very well. I was afraid an ambulance would get stuck.'

Warren eyes my father over the rim of his cup. 'Tell me about the sleeping bag,' he says.

'It was shiny blue on the outside, plaid on the inside,' my father says. 'Cheap, like you'd buy at Ames. There was a towel, too. White and bloody.'

'You've lived on Bott Hill a long time?' Warren takes another tentative sip of coffee. His eyes are both alert and distant, as if all the important stuff were going on somewhere else.

'Two years.'

'Where are you from?'

'I grew up in Indiana, but I came here from New York.'

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'The city?' Warren says, pulling on an earlobe.

'I worked in the city, but we lived just north of it.'

'If it hadn't been for you, Mr Dillon,' Warren says, 'we'd have found a couple of bones in the spring.'

My father looks at me. I hold my breath. I don't want to think about the bones.

'You hot?' Warren asks my father. 'Take off your jacket.'

My father shrugs, but anyone can see he's sweating in the overheated room.

'What were you doing when you found the infant?' the detective asks.

'We were taking a walk.'

'When?'

My father thinks a minute. What time was it? He no longer wears a watch because he catches it too often in his tools. I glance up at the clock over the door. Six twenty-five. It feels like midnight.

'It was after sunset,' my father says. 'The sun had just set over the top of the hill. I'd say we found her maybe ten, fifteen minutes after that.'

'You were in the woods,' Warren says.

'Yes.'

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