

## The Incredible Winter of Watauga County

by Nina Varela

### Willadean

Mostly I just remember the lights. Tiny glittering dots, like somebody took a sewing pin to the dark. Freckles of gold. They spun, the lights did, whirring and bobbing. They burned my eyes. They clattered around inside my head like hot marbles.

Papa said, “Goddamn, wouldja look at that.”

He said, “That's quite somethin'.”

He breathed in, the tip of his cigar glowing red. It was the kind of cigar we only got around Christmastime, the kind with a shiny wrapper around its fat middle. I watched as he breathed out, his chest crumpling, blue smoke crawling from his mouth. When I breathed out, white smoke came from mine. Winter—when the mountains rolled onto their backs and we stamped across their cold white bellies. Me and Jacob and Zoo all got obsessed with making snow angels that year, so much that Mama said it looked like our land crashed right into Heaven. Our whole farm peppered with holy shadows.

An icy little hand slipped into my coat pocket, shoving its way toward the fleece lining. My cousin Zoo was eight and couldn't keep track of her mittens, not that it stopped her from sneaking after Jacob and me into the snowy woods. She was no good at sneaking, too. Always sang out loud or tripped over something and gave herself right up. Then Jacob would tell me, “Pretend like you didn't hear that. Pretend we don't see nothin'. Let that kid think she's clever.”

That was how Jacob was.

So I would say, “All right,” but by the third or fourth time we heard Zoo humming her made-up songs, I'd yell out, “Go home, kid! You ain't old enough to come with us!” even though I knew it would just make her cry. That was how I was. And Zoo sure would cry, every time. That was how Zoo was.

The lights shivered in the wind.

“Goddamn,” Papa said again, because that was all he could really say, all any of us could say right then. All year long, our fifty acres were divided into neat rows of Fraser firs, an army of tall green soldiers kept perfectly in line. As soon as November ended, people swarmed in from all over looking to cut themselves a Christmas tree. Nobody we knew ever came—they all had their own trees on their own farms. These people weren't from the mountains. They had sharp eyes and quick tongues, like every conversation came with a racetrack and they'd be damned if they didn't hit that finish line first. Mountain people are like sweet molasses, words dripping slowly. We got all the time in the world.

Zoo and me stared across the hills at our land, all those empty stretches of churned snow where the big trees once stood. Only the skinny, scraggly ones were left, bowing proudly to the dirt.

I leaned down to whisper in Zoo's ear. “Almost time.”

She yawned hugely, the lights swimming like sunlit fish in her wide dark eyes. This was our family's tradition since before I was born, when it was just Papa and Mama and Jacob. Every year we gathered a bunch of leftover trees, hauled them up to the yard, and dressed them with shining Christmas lights, lanterns, strings of popcorn for the starving birds. Then at midnight, as soon as it was really Christmas, Papa would shoot his

gun right up into the sky.

I breathed all the way to the bottom of my lungs and looked down at my boots, firmly buried in the snow. I thought about tramping through the woods, hearing the satisfying crunch of frost, and how this year it was just me and Jacob and then tiny Zoo behind us, because Gracie was in bed and wouldn't get out of it no matter what anybody did. Something ached in the hollow of my chest. That big dark fear.

Jacob's mouth was at my ear. "One minute to midnight, Deanie."

Papa stepped forward, silhouetted against the tiny, glowing forest in our front yard. Gun in one hand, cigar in the other, his nose red with cold and his boots caked with frozen mud. He smelled like smoke and tree sap. He was glorious.

"C'mere, Willadean," he said in his sandpaper voice, and handed me his cigar, the cherry still lit. He looked up at the sky, aiming his gun in silhouette, a black Papa shape cut out from the stars. I squeezed Zoo's hand and put the cigar between my lips, breathing that musky cigar smell, like thick wet leaves and spices and something sweetly rotten underneath. All three of us kids watched Papa pull the trigger, heard the shot punch a hole in the night. I always closed my eyes then, because for a second I could imagine that when I opened them, I'd see a smoking bullet wound right in the center of the big white moon.

Papa hummed. He turned to Jacob. "You wanna have a go, Jakeboy?"

Jacob didn't say anything, but we all saw his grin. He and Gracie were the oldest of us at sixteen, and he was a boy, so he'd shot a gun before. Squirrels and rabbits. The sky would be his biggest game yet.

I stood there, snow falling on my hair, as Jacob raised the barrel toward midnight.

My head was quiet for a moment. Everything was quiet for him. That was how the world was.

January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1981: My brother Jacob shot the stars.

Jacob

I woke up slowly. In winter I always did. In winter I was in hibernation, toes twitching beneath a pile of blankets, curled up like an animal. I'd always liked feeling compact. That was the difference in the Whitaker twins: Give me a wide open space and I'd dig myself a hole like a gopher. Give Gracie a wide open space and she'd try to fill the whole thing until there wasn't any space left. That's why Gracie'd gone crazy, not that anybody knew it but me. Her mind wasn't big enough to fill a whole world full of open spaces, but she didn't learn that until she'd already lost it trying.

I told her: *Can't nobody understand everything. There's always gonna be shadows you can't light up.*

Well, she didn't believe me. And that's how she got to be so damn sad.

I lay in bed for a few moments, listening to the sounds of winter: The house creaking, icicles dripping onto the roof in staccato *tap-taps*, tree branches weighed down with snow scraping against my bedroom window. Deanie, right on the other side of the wall, shifting in her sleep. She slept restlessly ever since Zoo came to live with us. I still didn't know quite why Zoo couldn't live at her house with her daddy, but Papa wouldn't tell me when I asked him. He just quoted Proverbs 21:23—“Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble”—and said I was not to ask Zoo or he'd tan my hide, which was a lie. Mama said nothing. She never did these days. She just sat at

the kitchen table in that one patch of watery winter sunlight, smoking a cigarette and staring at her hands. Zoo's mama was my mama's sister.

Somebody knocked on my bedroom door. "Jakeboy," came my Papa's muffled voice. "Come on, now. Up now, kid." He'd still be calling me *kid* when I was thirty. "Need more firewood. Mama's gettin' froze stiff."

"Make Deanie chop it," I said, and he rumbled a laugh. Willadean was twelve, but she was just barely bigger than little Zoo. The axe was half her size.

I stumbled out of bed and pulled on jeans, the hardwood floor cold beneath my bare feet. I could hear Papa waking Deanie and Zoo, then lumbering back to the kitchen like the big bear he was. I shoved my feet into my boots and stilled, looking over at Gracie's bed.

She lay beneath the window. The sunlight fell in a pale square on her quilt, the rest of her shadowed in morning gloom. Her hair was the same brown as mine, but she hadn't washed it in so long that it was dark with oil, spilling in clumps across the pillow. I couldn't tell if she was awake or not. With Gracie, you couldn't tell if she was awake or not even if she was looking you right in the eye.

"Mornin', Gracie girl," I said because I always did, and then left our room, shutting the door quietly behind me.

### Gracie

It is winter again, and you are going mad.

It begins as it always does: the cold, stumbling in through the back door, pale, skeletal, clutching a ragged coat in both hands. The cold, stretched gracelessly across the

couch, bony limbs akimbo, sneering at the woodstove. The teakettle atop the woodstove, the stack of splintering firewood in the leather sling. At night, the cold curls around you, pressing you into its chest. Each rib a frozen metal rod pressing against your skin. It does not let you go. There are no sufficient words for this—the second heart that hatches as the last leaves fall, settling behind your sternum, slumped between your lungs. Pumping ice through your veins, for months. And months.

Winter is a very strange hurt.

Here's something stranger: At first, you welcome it.

Hello! Yes, come in. You must be—ha ha!—cold. I didn't lock the back door. I thought you might show up. You always do on days like this, when the sky is draped heavily across the treetops, like that old Chaz Addams comic with the Indian balancing his body on a bed of nails. The sleeping sky, gray with starvation, devoid of pregnant clouds or sweltering sun. This time of year, the sun is white. Yes, we do get snow here. These mountains, my home. When we do, it's in one long stretch, weeks of perpetual snowfall until the sky turns over and collapses back to sleep, utterly spent.

The whole world gets exhausted here. We're no big city with its glittering insect lights and tiny toy cars. We have a bedtime, and it's December. Come in. It must be very lonely out there—it's lonely in here, too.

The thing about lonely: It changes with the seasons.

Come spring, the sun is a stray cat in heat, newly awake and maddened, tossing itself across the sky, working itself into a frenzy, and lonely is a desperate lurch. Shaking. Manic. Everything heightened. Summer is the flatline. Time of death, you call it. You finally understand that air has weight. You lie there as if drugged, anchored by the

atmosphere itself, and lonely lies beside you, amorphous and panting.

Every year since before you can remember, autumn is when you begin to lose your mind.

Your thoughts fall.

To the ground.

You remain, naked and trembling, reaching out with twig-like fingers and saying indignantly—plaintively—Wait, not this. Not yet. Now hold on just a minute, I'm not ready *yet*.

And then winter hurtles through your chest, a train shrieking over the track of your ribcage, and from hereon out, all is a blur. Quite suddenly, it is a very good idea to let the cold in, swing the door wide open and let the cold in, hello, yes, I know you. The cold taps you on the forehead, raps its knuckles against your temples, kisses your mouth. Eyelashes, laced with frost. The cold hangs up its coat and hat.

These are the things you know by heart: the coat. The hat, on its hat rack, just inside the back door. The hard knobs of a spine, like marbles beneath your tripping fingers, a tiny row of hills. And valleys. The curve of a jaw, resting in the hollow of your clavicle at night. At night when the two of you are wrapped in dark and each other. You will shiver. You know this. It cannot be helped or contained. And always there is the cold, seeping into you under the dark, its legs tangled in your own, its thoughts rubbing against yours.

You: the immovable object. It: the irresistible force.

You will void each other out. But that's all right. It happens.

## Zoo

If I knew one thing for sure, it was that nobody made pancakes like Uncle Will made pancakes. He was letting me and Cousin Willadean help this morning, us on our tippy-toes stirring the batter while he heated up the griddle, dropping pats of butter onto it with a sizzle. He said the trick to heavenly pancakes is brown sugar and vanilla and don't you be shy with the butter now, hey now. Uncle Will talks like a song. Hey now, c'mon.

“See if you c'n flip that one over, Susie Mae,” he said to me, holding out the spatula in his big callused hand. “Flip it nice so it don't splat.”

I flipped the pancake nice and that big hand covered my entire shoulder, all warm and rough like cracked leather. My mama always said Willadean's daddy was a good man, and it ain't his fault that he got a sad wife. My mama said Aunt Jo had always been sad, ever since they were my age, and Aunt Jo probably gave her sad to poor Gracie.

Aunt Jo was sadder than ever since That Day. Even I could see that.

“Lookit, I made a smile!” said Willadean. She'd dribbled the pancake batter onto the griddle in the shape of a happy face with a crescent-moon mouth.

“Why's he happy?” I asked. “He's gonna get eaten.”

“Maybe he likes getting eaten,” Willadean said.

“Why?”

“Now how would I know that, Zoo?” she snapped, and Uncle Will said, “Willadean,” like a warning. She glanced at me, her eyes narrowed. Willadean looked like an owl, with wide gray eyes and feathery brown hair and kind of a big nose. I looked like a yellow-haired dog.

I tilted my head back to look at Uncle Will, who was grilling thick red and white

slabs of bacon. "Should we bring some to Gracie?"

He and Willadean's faces made the same shapes, then. They both looked sad and old, even though Willadean was only a bit older than me and I was the baby. Uncle Will opened his mouth but nothing came out of it.

"Gracie don't like pancakes," said Willadean, pouring more batter onto the griddle. She made the pancake mouth turn downward this time. I didn't know quite what to say to that, so I just stirred harder, until my elbow ached and my knuckles were white against the wooden spoon.

Mama said part of it was winter: the long, incredible winter of Watauga County, the mountains buried in it neck-deep. All that white snow on the ground, she said, got some people thinking about Heaven. And once you get thinking, she said, sometimes you just can't stop.