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Northern Lights

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NORTHERN LIGHTS

by

Kenneth A. MacIver

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STREAMLINER

“The path of duty is not always straight.”

The wind whined and wrapped around me. It came down from the gray mountain, leaving the somber peak silent and alone. Bearing a strength, which originated far away, the swift, cold gusts discovered the three of us pulling our toboggan on the slope below and clung to us. I wondered if it was loneliness that made it cry so often. When I ignored its grasp, it snapped away and amused itself by driving dark fingers of smoke over the barren surface of the frozen lake. Winding into tumultuous coils and wailing in solitary, the northern gale swung back and spun snow at us. We defied him until, driven away by our sharp shouts, the wind rose and waited, poised over the hollow houses clustered around the junction of the railroad track and two thin streets.

The boy in front wearing the black parka was bigger, and it was his toboggan, so I rode in the back. I was left to push off and to join them on the breathless ride down the bumpy hill. I had to throw myself pell-mell on the bouncing sled. There was little space left for me and if I didn't squeeze against Frances and hold fast to her shoulders I would be thrown out into the frozen, silver snow. I fell on her and firmly, yet as gently as I could, clutched her tense body. Her black hair lifted into my face and I savored the coldness of her neck against my cheek. When we skidded and plunged into the shallow ditch at the foot of the hill, she turned and looked at me and laughed, revealing the shadow of last summer's freckles on her cheeks and forehead. Her smile was new for me and accented by her violet eyes, but our moment was interrupted. A mile away the mill's whistle shrieked the end of the first shift while over our heads a furious jay knocked snow off a pine branch. The snow filtered down to land on my face. It was cold and I brushed it away and listened to the startled blue and white bird

screaming his contempt for the mill and the world. “Shut up, bird,” said Big Harold and he dragged his Christmas toboggan out of the ditch and shook the snow from his high, brown rubber boots. “See ya,” he said to Frances. He hesitated and then looked at me, “You too,” he muttered and mispronounced my name again. Frances spoke to me before she tried to get up. “You’ll be there tomorrow—to see the streamliner?” I told her I would. “Come after me. We’ll go together,” she whispered. I helped her from the ditch and held her hand. She smiled once again, but turned away and hurried to catch up with Harold, who walked slowly as he sought snow piles worthy of his expensive boots. I waited until they crossed the tracks before starting on my way home. Leaping over the ditch, I ran with high strides, kicking the snow in front of me and whistling to the jay and the snow-burdened trees. The breeze returned. I felt in touch my face.

The immense oval of the moon, fixed in the winter sky, loomed closer as the sun dropped and sent long shadows that touched and darkened the workers’ houses. The first houses on the street were unlit and silent. If the small houses vanished, or if they were a little bigger and were painted, the scene would be like the color picture from our reader, the one in the story of the Magic Kingdom of the Mountain King. As it was, their squat box shapes would never make the pages of a book. From the shack under two bare oaks a squeak and cough broke my daydream. Mrs. Cooper kicked open her back door and dragged a large oil bottle to the rusty barrel propped in the corner of the sagging porch. I could smell the sweet, heavy odor of kerosene and the liquid popped and choked as the bottle filled. The front window framed Mr. Cooper’s large head. I saw him through streaked panes, sitting there with his cap on, rocking and staring at the face of the clock hanging on the wall. In other bare clapboard houses, I saw shadows move across dark orange windows. The odor of overcooked meat escaped from chimneys of all sorts—brick, cement, and iron—to be driven ahead of me by the wind at my back. I had an odd feeling, that I was a visitor, that I was alone in some strange place and that I was observing, but not part of this street, this day. “Get your head out of the clouds, boy,” my uncle would tell me, but I couldn’t help it. If I shut my eyes and opened them, a new place, a new world would appear, a world of remarkable

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things and names like the ones I heard about on my uncle's radio. I shivered and threw a snowball into the face of the rising moon.

A muted tinkle from the dark road behind heralded the labored approach of big Jerry, and I stopped and waited to watch the giant horse plow his way down the sidewalk. The horse caught up with me and as he passed I reached up and clapped him on the neck. The dappled bulk of his body blotted out my view, and the loud snorting and blowing that accompanied his efforts to drag the heavy plow overpowered his bells; and in spite of myself I bent backward away from the massive head. The driver, Kelly, looked down at me and nodded so I jumped up and joined him on the blue, wooden platform of the plow. Behind us, partially lost in the spray of snow from the plow, Bill Johnson shuffled head down, protecting his face with a torn red scarf and noiselessly ignoring the clumps of snow and dirt thrown at him by the heavy rig. All winter Bill followed the horse, staggering under the weight of a large tub of sand strapped to his chest. Dark yellow flurries splashed from the tub as he scattered his offering on the sidewalk with expert flicks of a worn, wooden paddle. The sand would be there in the spring for him to sweep. In front of me, like peaks in a royal crown, the horse's ears pointed high and the towering animal quickened his movements knowing his day would soon be finished. I tumbled into a snowbank in front of my house and watched big Jerry lumbering into a heavy trot. The town barn was near, and if he turned his head slightly the horse could see his destination forming on the tip of his blinder. Kelly looked back and waved. He would be in the Blue Goose Saloon early tonight, but not before my father.

The two rooms of my home had the peculiar and frightening emptiness and the tangible anxiety of a house that waited for its drunk. I ate my supper in silence, oatmeal again. My mother moved about nervously and did not comment when I took another spoonful of sugar. I finished the meal and she sent me to bed. It was cold in my place under the roof and I burrowed under the blankets and waited. We all waited, my mother the house and myself. He came late and I heard him fall against the chair. His sour smell reached my attic retreat, and I put my head under the covers and pretended that I was the captain of a great ship that sailed on a bright, sunlit sea.

It snowed again in the night, and my mother woke me in the darkness. I ate oatmeal and toast while shivering at the table watching the water run from the faucet. It ran all night to keep the pipes from freezing. We used the last of the butter, and I knew it was a special day when she put a cup of coffee in front of me and sat down to talk. I knew what she would say.

She clutched her hands and looked away at the faded wallpaper as she spoke, "Try it. If it's too much for you, come home." Fifteen cents an hour or two whole dollars if I lasted the day; it was a lot of money, a man's wages. I had admired the older boys who skipped school to work. Some of them got regular jobs and had their own money. My father could not go and I should try it—just for the day, she said. She had darned my mittens while I slept and I took them from her and dropped them into the hood of my jacket. She bent over and helped me with the snaps of my overshoes; then she took my father's lunchbox off the table and handed it to me. I wondered if she would say anything else. She didn't. She turned away and walked to the sink, treating me like a man.

I stepped through the door and slipped down three icy steps. I could see the dipper, hanging over the lake and the stars, bright around the mountain. I selected the largest and brightest star and followed it, holding my father's coal shovel out in front of me like a lance. I became Galahad and my quest was an endless search for the Grail. When the town work crew came into view, I swung the shovel over my shoulder and tried to shrink—to remove myself from their curious gaze. Their eyes looked at me from under the visors of their red and black caps. "Hey, it's Jake's boy. Where's your old man, kid? Sleeping it off, is he?" I cringed and looked for the support of my old uncle, who drove one of the dump trucks. I did not see him.

The large, round shape of Frances's father, foreman of the gang, blocked my way. He shoved his woolen cap back on his head and peered at me with flat eyes. He had enormous boots, large hands, and a wide leather belt over his jacket. His large teeth were yellow and when he laughed puffs of condensations from his open mouth marked his outbursts. Some of the men called him "Lefty" and laughed at his jokes. Some called him "Boss" and stayed out of his way. He looked

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down at me and scoffed, growled and began to speak in a voice that was unusually high-pitched for such a big man. "Well, this will keep you the hell away from my daughter." Suddenly he sucked in air and launched a large ball of spit toward me and it splattered on my foot. "Your old man isn't much. Don't imagine you're any better. Let's get going." The last was spoken to the waiting men. "You too, kid," he growled and the crew and I moved in a clumsy column to the tall mounds of snow in the square where the two roads met. This was good fortune because the streamliner would pass close by and I wanted badly to see it. My uncle had told me that the train would wake up the town. "Cut the miles in half—it'll be the biggest thing since the war." He had heard about it on his radio and he told me twice to be sure and see it. Suddenly I remembered my date with Frances and skipped a breath. I wondered how long she would wait for me.

I never knew that snow could be so heavy. The experienced workers carved perfect squares of snow with their oiled steel shovels and lifted them gracefully to the trucks. Twisting the blades of the shovels with a little flick of their wrists made their white loads pause in the air before settling softly into place. They cleaned their blades by ringing their shovels on the cobblestones. The clean, white snow became heavier still when the dim sun reached it. I knelt to get in a better position to lift the clinging mass with my shovel. It was hard work, much harder than I imagined, and I knew every penny would be well earned. The owner of the Blue Goose crossed to our party and coffee cups were passed. It cost a nickel so I passed. We rested a bit and some of the men spoke to me while they drank their coffee and stamped their feet.

"Take your time, kid; there's plenty of work here. Don't let Lefty bother you; keep your mouth shut. One man told me to pay no attention to the foolish talk I would hear. Stay out of it, he said. Two men told me to give Timmy a hand if he needed it; his lungs are bad. I glanced at the worker named Timmy who seemed more fatigued than I did.

"Get your asses in gear," ordered Lefty and we began again. From the corner of my eye I saw movement and I tried not to see what weaved down the street by the tracks. I lowered my head; I turned away and first my ears, then my cheeks and then the rest of me turned scarlet.

My father wobbled through a snowdrift and went into the Blue Goose. Lefty snorted, started towards me, changed his mind and turned away. "Hang on, boy," one man said and we all shoveled.

By ten-thirty my hands were numb, my back burned and my arms trembled. I struggled to lift the shovel off the ground, and I shook and stumbled as I strained to lift. More and more time was spent carving the white squares—I got much better at it—and less and less throwing them into the trucks. My uncle's truck pulled up; he wheeled it into position beside the drift and climbed awkwardly down from the cab. I looked for the smile that constantly creased his ruddy face. It was missing. He walked slowly to my side and spoke with no feeling. "Put up your ear flaps—save them for a cold day." It was ten degrees but I did what he said and wondered if I had done something to make him angry, some unknown thing that had erased the beaming grin and the pushy high spirits that usually marked him. He started to walk away, stopped and came back. "You'll ride home with me tonight in the truck. Do you hear?" I nodded and looked at him. "Look," he said, "don't lift the shovel any higher than you have to." He started to say something else, thought better of it and went back to his truck. Lefty stopped shouting when he walked by. Uncle pulled himself up into the truck, lifting his bad leg with his hands. He had left part of it in Flanders. "I made a good trade," was the way he would put it if people asked him about it. He never told what he got in return.

I shoveled. Over and over the trucks were filled and rolled away with their loads, to dump them into the lake, and to chug back for another helping of the cargo, which defied nature and seemed to grow when hit by the sun. Sometimes the playful wind blew the snow back into the street and off the blade of my shovel. I found myself wishing that it would blow all the white away. At last the noon whistle sounded at the mill and we leaned on our shovels.

I scrambled to the top of the largest drift and ate my sandwich above everybody. Across the street someone opened a window in the Blue Goose and the jukebox could be heard faintly. I knew the words of the song and made believe that I was with Frances.

Down among the sheltering palms,

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Oh honey wait for me. Oh honey wait for me.
Don't be forgetting we got a date,
Down where the sun . .

"Move it, boy. We ain't got all day!" A couple of men laughed with Lefty but most did not acknowledge his shout. Their eyes seemed weighted with lead and did not rise above their boots. I slid down from my perch with a bump and walked slowly to the snowbank we had left. It had grown larger, and my shovel now seemed too heavy and too large for my sore arms. I shut my eyes and wished myself away but when I opened them I was still there and so was the snow. I looked around and realized that none of the other workers were there. They too had escaped, fled to a place of their private fantasies. It gave me the strangest feeling. I was surrounded by men, yet no one was there. They shoveled slowly in a trance while the trucks moved very slowly and the snowbank gradually diminished.

In the middle of the afternoon small children and women left their houses and came to the square and watched us. I saw my teacher arrive, her hood covered most of her face, but I knew that she observed me. She waved and I responded. When I looked up again the red jacket of Frances signaled her presence. She did not react to my wave. She stood with Big Harold, and they walked off together to stand beside the tracks. Kelly came around the corner of the Blue Goose with Big Jerry and drove his wooden plow close to the rails. Men began to lean on their shovels and peer expectantly down the tracks. It seemed as if the whole town was there, waiting and staring intently into the distance where the two rails came together. In the mill windows opened and workers leaned out to watch, to see the streamliner come to town. One purple-nosed veteran of the town crew slipped away and sidled into the Blue Goose where several other workers, who seized the chance for a drink, joined him. I scrambled back to the top of the largest mound of snow, where my view of the streamliner would be clear. It would be here soon. Below me I heard one of the drivers grumbling to Lefty.

"This damn stuff is sticking. I gotta get some help. Sure as hell I'm not gonna shovel it myself."

"Come down here, kid. Bring your shovel," Lefty yelled.

I looked at him hoping he would change his mind. My throat began to swell and for a second I thought tears would flow. The boss took his large hand out of his pocket, blew his nose and then waved his red handkerchief. I came down.

"Throw your shovel in the back of the truck and go with him." His heavy thumb pointed toward the dump truck.

"I wanted to see the streamliner," I said and looked up at his sweating face.

"The hell with the streamliner."

I had no choice and slowly I walked to the truck and pulled myself on the running board; I turned and jammed my shovel into the loaded snow in the back. The driver did not speak to me and drove away. At the lake, where he would dump his cargo, he backed his double wheels against the six-by-six timber beside the entrance to a small footbridge, the spot where the trucks made their deposit in the water.

"Get out, kid." The driver pointed to the pipe fence between the street and the moving water below. "Get that top pipe out of there. It comes out." He was too bored to shout, and I could barely hear him.

"When I lift her up, get out of the way. Don't get caught under that load. If it sticks, you climb up there and push it with your shovel."

How was I supposed to stay out of the way and, at the same time, climb on to the packed snow? I glanced at the current below. It swirled black and cold before slipping underneath blue ice. Across the channel I could see the Town Square. Shrunken people lined the tracks and gazed into the distance. Their heads all rose together and I heard a sound, muted and then louder, like hundreds of hungry babies screeching in the night. It wasn't the way a train should sound, and I stopped and waited to hear the streamliner's cry again.

"Look out, kid."

The truck opened over me. I jumped back, but some of the heavy snow fell on me and knocked me to the ground. Sprawled on the frozen street, I watched the rest of the load plunge into the lake, pounding into the dark water and sending snow chunks that floated in the swirling current splashing under the footbridge. Oh, God, I saw my father's shovel drop on an ice floe with the last of the snow. My stomach churned. My father would kill me if I came home without his shovel.

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The handle beckoned to me from the moving ice and then slowly began to dip and move as the current pulled the ice toward the deep water that coursed under the bridge. Running without thinking, I threw myself over the pipe fence and swung down on the underpinnings of the bridge, the heavy wet timbers that supported the planks above. I squeezed out onto the slippery bottom timber and gripped with my legs. I reached out close to the water and felt its coldness on my face. If I slipped I'd miss the shovel and fall into the lake. The red handle came toward me bobbing and swaying like a frantic dancer. It veered away suddenly, and it looked for a moment as if it would go by. With a final strain and extension of my body I reached it, clutched the handle and pulled the shovel from the water. I lifted it awkwardly and heaved it over my head, back and up, to get the heavy tool on the bridge. My aim was short, and the black steel clanged off the top pipe of the fence. The end of the handle was still in my fingers, and I tried to grasp it for another heave. My hand and arm were not working the way they should. I knew that the black blade was going to hit me, and strangely, there was time to ponder my dilemma, yet there was nothing I could do about it. It dropped out of the sky and closed my view like the blinders on Big Jerry. It shut out the dim light, and I had a feeling of sympathy for the horse. My face would hurt.

Bright light was everywhere. I saw it all around. The sight so bright surrounded me. Floating white, dancing brilliant ridges of light streamed before and around me streaked in white and yellow and green—all bright shades of dancing, vibrating color. The bright colors fused together, leaving the brightest blue that was before me and behind and down and up and moving; and I moved with it. I swirled and pivoted and the blue became green. The green exploded with velocity and sped beneath, and the white edge cleared and roared toward me.

Something was wet and cold. My face was in the water. I pulled up and wiggled back onto the timber and looked down into the black water. My fingers still clutched the handle of the shovel. I pulled it out of the water and carefully slid it onto the planks of the bridge. I lifted my eyes, and I saw the back of the silver streamliner small in the distance and quickly growing still smaller. I turned and looked at the

square and at the miniature people. Big Jerry was stamping his hooves and shaking his head. He looked like a wild dog shrunk against the skyline with his ears flattened against his head and his mane in disarray. I looked for the red jacket and could not see it.

“Let’s go, kid. We got work to do.”

The driver gave me a funny look as I climbed into the truck. My uncle’s truck was coming in to dump its load. He was alone in his cab and I waved to him. It was cold and I rolled up the window to keep out the wind. Only two more hours and I would finish the day. I made two more trips to the lake; the snow did not stick so there was little for me to do but stay out of the way. The afternoon lost the little, weak illumination that it had mustered; for the sun, exhausted with its attempts to break through the cloud cover, stopped trying. But the wind had not relented and I kept the window closed.

“Well kid, I have to take the truck to the garage and fill it with gas. You go back with the men; they gotta turn in any equipment that belongs to the town and you listen to Lefty to hear about tomorrow’s work.

I liked what he said about tomorrow’s work. It made me feel like one of the regulars, a real member of the crew. I found out there wasn’t much hanging around as most of the gang had disappeared from the frosty square. I saw that the windows of the Blue Goose had become fogged over and I could hear coughing and muttering from within where most of the men had found refuge. For the first time I let my muscles relax; the shovel slipped to the hard-packed snow of the street where I let it stay. The faint glow or a truck’s headlights winked in the distance; my back straightened and I pounded my hands together in anticipation. My uncle would be proud of me tonight. Perhaps he would be in one of his talkative moods and I would ask him to show me his jar of medals and the rows of ribbons and after my day’s accomplishments; yes, after what I had done today, he would tell me about his adventures in the war.

I climbed—swaggered really—into his truck and tossed the shovel, my lance, with a grand gesture into the back. Through the dark I felt the intentness of his gaze, and when his eyes caught the light from the dash they sparkled. He sighed and mellowed a little.

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“Are you tired?”

For an instant I thought I’d deny it, but there was no way I could deceive him and no need for false heroics. I nodded and watched the white-garbed trees slide by the windows. He made no comment upon my successful day, and I prodded him.

“I did all right, didn’t I, Uncle?” He was silent and I looked at him. “I did my duty—like you say, Uncle, a man must do his duty. Was I a man, Uncle?”

We had stopped beside the lake; the dump truck was back at the footbridge where it had dropped its load throughout the day. Suddenly he lurched out of the cab, hopping on his good leg, and swinging the other. He carried something, and at first I couldn’t see what it was, but then I saw it was my shovel, my father’s shovel. He had pulled it out of the truck. He reached the fence by the lake and I saw what he carried. He raised the shovel over his head and threw it with two hands as far as he could. The shovel skipped on the surface, twisted, the handle lifted and steadied and then started to sink. I couldn’t see it go under as small puffs of vapor covered it and blocked my view. My uncle muttered and made his way slowly back to his truck; his head was up and his jaw stuck out in front of him, making him look like an old bulldog, a wardog who wheezed with the residue of mustard gas. After he struggled into the truck, he sat for a minute or two and I could hear his breath whistling in his chest. He spoke very quietly, almost like a whisper: “The path of duty is not always straight. It’s crooked, boy—it turns and doubles back and it’s not always what you think it is. Do you understand?” I didn’t but there was nothing I could say to him. I nodded. He spoke louder, more to himself than to me. “There’s death in duty if you don’t think.” He pounded his damaged leg and then looked at me.

“Come over tonight,” he said quietly. “And we can listen to the news on the radio together—that is, if you’re not too tired and your mother doesn’t need you at home.”

He rolled down the window and spat into the wind. He grunted and started the engine and we drove slowly down the snow-covered street. It was drifted and the wind drove loose snowflakes into the beams of our headlights. I watched them as they sped in a blur across our way,

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building the drifts and wiping out the path opened yesterday by the plow.

Stories by a prizewinning professor. Many in national media. Colorful characters, poignant settings. Boy-train, man-horse, children-Christmas, politician-ski mountain, Viking-priest, woman and one-eyed captain, black back-white coach; young and old love, unforgettable tales to remember.

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