



Wendy Noble

The Snow Goose

Eric heaves his right foot out of the snowdrift and plunges it down into the one in front of him. Then he does the same with his left. With every step he takes it seems as though he's climbing over small icy hills. The branches of the fir trees sag under the weight of their winter coat. They look as tired as he feels. The sky is the same leaden grey it's been for the past three months. Winter refuses to leave.

Each morning Eric holds his breath and listens for the bell down on the dock. It will peal when the ship arrives and then they'll know they've been saved. But the supply ship is late, held back from land by the sea-ice, and each morning is as silent as the last. At least, it is until the baby awakes and the pitiful mewling begins again.

Tilde's milk has dried up and the baby is fretful, the hunger gnawing in his little stomach. Turnip broth is no substitute for a mother's milk. Tilde doesn't sleep much, chewing on her anxiety, her fear growing daily. Death has been prowling around their village for weeks, and his icy fingers tap, tap, tap on their windows.

Every morning Eric says to Tilde, 'God won't abandon us. The ship will come and the bell will ring. You'll see. Then we'll have such a feast: roasted goose, onions and sweet green beans.'

At first she played the game, too. 'We'll have cranberry sauce and honeyed carrots,' she'd say. 'We'll have chocolate pudding with lavender cream.'

Now she doesn't even bother to shake her head in denial. She just looks at him, the circles around her eyes as dark as the night. And the baby whimpers.

Eric's been gone for two days and he dreads going home empty handed. They're down to the last few potatoes and turnips. He hasn't seen a deer in a long time. He might have had more chance with the hunt if his dog, Bella, was with him. Poor Bella. When he'd tied her to the tree she'd looked at him with eyes full of trust. Then, when he raised the rifle she'd cocked her head to the side and trust had turned to bewilderment. He had to shake away the tears to aim straight. But, she'd kept them fed for several days.

He stands still and listens. He hears his breath whistling, his heart thumping, and the soft plop, plop of snow sliding off the laden branches. He's enveloped by the cold silence as the forest holds its breath. It would be so easy to sink into the white powder and let sleep take him. He could lie down. He could surrender. But, just as his knees begin to fold, he pulls himself back up; Tilde is waiting for him. He heaves his right foot out of the snowdrift, plunges it down into another and then does the same with his left.

A weary hour later, Eric finally sees his cottage up ahead, light spilling out of the windows and smoke curling up from the kitchen chimney. If only he had something to give his family: a mourning dove, or even a crow. Anything would be better than emptiness. If the ship doesn't come soon, all they'll have left will be the bark from the trees. He leans his

shoulder into the door and slowly pushes it open. He braces himself for Tilde's disappointment.

She doesn't see him at first. She's sitting at the table, smiling as she peels a potato. He watches the skin curl up off the knife and over into the bowl. He announces his arrival with a cough, and with a glad cry she rushes to embrace him.

Eric apologises for his failure but Tilde stops him mid-sentence, putting her finger to his lips. 'Hush,' she says. 'It's all right. Tonight we feast.'

'Has the ship come in?' he asks.

She shakes her head and grins, hugging herself with delight. Her face has the same glow it has on Christmas morning when, jiggling with anticipation, she waits for him to unwrap his gifts.

'Has a neighbour taken pity?' he asks.

'No, no,' she says, 'it's better than that.'

Her face is alight with excitement. Apart from the glow from the oven door, and the sweet aroma of roasting meat, he can't see, he can't imagine what her secret could be.

She giggles. Her words spill out of her like red wine from a broken glass. 'Can you guess what has happened? No, you won't guess in a million years. I'll have to tell you. We've had a miracle, Eric. A miracle! God sent us a snow goose. He sent us a goose, my love, plucked and ready for the roasting.'

His heart leaps and flutters in his chest. 'There aren't any snow geese, Tilde. They flew south for the winter.'

She flaps her hands. 'Yes, yes, God sent us a goose. I found it this morning lying dead on the floor. It's a miracle I tell you. Doesn't it smell good?'

Eric listens, while the world holds its breath. He hears his heart thumping. He hears the soft pop, pop, pop of fat sizzling in the oven. But, the loudest sound of all is the one he can't hear. He finally sees what his heart had been whispering to him ever since he came home. Her eyes are wild like the winter seas. He grabs her arms. 'Tilde, what have you done?'

Just as sanity slips back into her eyes and they widen with terrible understanding, and her mouth stretches ready to scream they hear, cutting through the crisp winter air, the dreadful clanging of the bell.

Wendy Noble, M.A. (Creative Writing), is a new writer who has had some success with reviews and short stories. A breast cancer survivor, for over sixteen years she's been a public speaker at church and community events in South Australia, Queensland and the USA. 
