



Winter Wonderland

Only in winter time would the children see it, a long smudge on the horizon dark against the white snow. Ellen and Alexander asked their parents, “What is it there?”

“Nothing I can see,” they’d always answer without even lifting their eyes from whatever task they’d be doing at the time.

Year after year the children asked the same question and year after year passed without their finding out just what it was.

That winter, when a particularly heavy snow made the image appear even clearer, Ellen and Alexander knew they had to investigate the shadow on the horizon shimmering through the misty air.

“Let’s get some others to come with us,” Alexander said.

Ellen scoffed. “Not yet. If it’s nothing, wouldn’t it be better that we find out for ourselves so as not to be made fun of?”

Alexander had to agree with his sister. “I guess you’re right.”

For another full day they continued to watch from afar as the shadow of a circular object slowly rose from the middle of the smudgy line. At sundown, a hill started to rise along one side to reach almost the circle’s height.

When morning came and a bright sunlight with it, the image flattened into what looked like mounds barely visible against the snow around it. Ellen and Alexander both went to school and asked their friends if they’d seen anything unusual on the horizon. They hadn’t, although a few said their parents used to tell stories about something unusual appearing every year in the snow. When they both returned home, the twins went about their chores, sometimes taking a peek through the windows to see if anything had changed. It never did. Not until twilight.

The children ate an early supper with their mother and father, who both retired early to read. Ellen held onto her black braids as she plopped her elbows on her bedroom window sill. “Do you ever think mother and father know what’s happening but won’t say—?” She stared at

the same spot she'd looked at 100 times that day, and for the first time, saw a sprinkling of lights that lit up the image, lights that traveled round and round as the circular object turned and that darted from side to side along the hill that had risen just to its right.

"Let's go!" They both grabbed their coats and ran outside, quietly closing the door behind them.

Both Ellen and Alexander traveled as fast as they could toward the lights, trudging through heavy snow and under a clear starry sky. As they got closer it became clearer what the image was they'd studied for several days in a row: an amusement park. The circle was an extremely tall Ferris wheel. Below it, lights of a carousel moved around and around. The hill was a roller coaster so high they couldn't see the top.

"Let's go there first!" they shouted and both pointed at the same time at the roller coaster. When they approached it, they realized that no one was anywhere in sight. No one to take the tickets. No one to help them inside. An empty cart swiftly appeared and abruptly stopped in front of them, and both Ellen and Alexander hesitated for only a moment before stepping inside. Just as they secured the belt across their waists, the cart took off.

In little time, the cart sent them up, up, up, and before they knew it, the moon hung in the sky just to their right. They held each other's hand tightly as the cart went screaming down, down, down—back down to earth. After a few dips and turns, the cart came to a stop and they pulled the belt off quickly and jumped out just before the cart took off again.

"That was exciting, wasn't it?" Alexander stood in front of his sister, his teeth chattering a little.

"It was. It was very exciting. Maybe we should go on something less exciting this time."

"Like what?"

"Like the Ferris wheel." Ellen took off running and Alexander soon followed. Again, no one was there to take tickets or help them into the dangling seats that stopped at the moment they climbed onto the platform. Ellen looked at Alexander and Alexander looked at Ellen just before they both slipped into the seats.

The ride took them up, up, up—up into the clouds. They traveled above the clouds so high that they heard the tinkling of stars over their heads. "How high will we go?" Alexander sat back in his seat and wouldn't look up or down.

They finally stopped. Ellen felt a little braver looking all around at the sky and the stars surrounding her, peering down occasionally at the tops of the wispy clouds far below their dangling feet. "We are really high."

Just as she said it, the Ferris wheel moved again. The cold burned against their cheeks as they felt the car descend and their seats traveled just slightly faster than they did. As soon as they reached the ground, they both got out and moved on quivering legs to go down the few stairs.

“Do you want to ride the carousel?”

Ellen could tell by looking at Alexander that he really didn't want to. “No. I'm feeling sleepy now. Maybe we should go back home and get in our beds.” Something caught her eye. “We could have something to eat before we go.”

A smile broke across Alexander's face. “I am hungry!”

They both ran to the same tiny hut and there waiting for them were two cups filled with ice cream.

Ellen picked hers up first and took a bite. Her eyes widened. “Snow ice cream!”

Alexander smiled as he took a second bite. “It is,” he said with his mouth full. When he looked at his sister, he noticed that she had stopped eating and her expression seemed very fearful. He turned and saw what she saw: a sea of snow women and men, all with their branch arms bent as if their hands rested on their wide snowy hips. Their candy lips were turned downward and their stick eyebrows in a ‘vee’ over their coal eyes.

One of the snow women asked the question: “Now just what are you doing here?”

“We, well, we...”

Ellen interrupted her brother. “We just came to see what this was and to have a little fun.”

One snow man asked, “Didn't your parents tell you...?”

“You know very well, Ralph,” the snow woman said. “That we warned their parents never to say anything to anyone.”

“That's right.” Ralph's frown eased for just a moment.

“We can, well, we can do that...”

Ellen finished her brother's sentence. “We can make that promise that we won't say anything, too.” She'd barely gotten the words out when she grabbed Alexander's hand and took off running, almost dragging him behind her.

The children did make it back to their house, outrunning with some difficulty the dozens of snow people gliding over the icy glaze of the snowy landscape they slipped and slid along. They quickly ran into the cottage and pulled the door closed behind them. Once inside, they didn't move but waited for just a few moments before going into their bedroom. The only sound

they heard was the tick-tock of the cuckoo clock and the only thing they saw were the green eyes of their cat Millicent glowing in the dark room.

The children were relieved to climb into their very warm beds, settling into their down pillows without saying a word. But sometime after they knew they were safe, they each let out a soft giggle, and turned over to dream the dream of moving among the stars.