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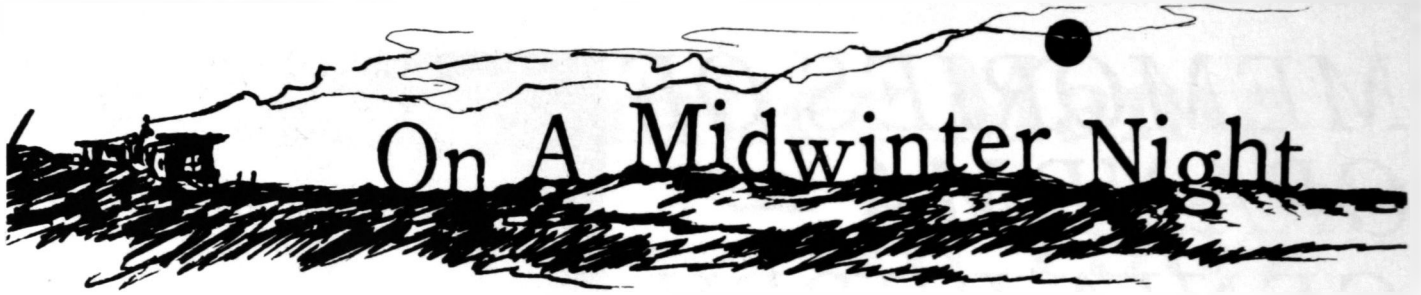
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# On A Midwinter Night

By Margie Snowden North

The day has been a long one — from dawn to dusk dragging cotton sacks and shivering in a Western Oklahoma wind. Home is a two-room shanty: 1 x 12's covered with tarpaper on the outside and a brown, heavy-duty wallpaper boasting dull pink flowers on the inside. When we arrive there, we are greeted by more cold. It's a different kind of cold than that projected by outside elements. It glares off the kerosene cook stove, the oil cloth covered table, the bare, blackened linoleums.

Our breath makes little fog clouds. Papa shakes the grate and scoops ashes that sift upward in the frigid room. "You children get some kindlin' and shinnery roots." (Papa calls us *childern*.)

The fire roars and the sound warms us. We peel off part of our outdoor garb, hang it on nails or on the backs of chairs to be worn the next day. In the kitchen Mama is peeling potatoes for soup and giving directions — "Ava Jean, skim the milk, Donna Mae start the churnin', Alvinita (my middle name, which I was known by at home since Mama's name was also Margie) and Rose Marie, set the table." Little Ransom putters with a toy, not yet having been initiated into the world of everyday realities. Papa lights a kerosene lamp.

We eat hot cornbread and steaming soup (Grandma Snowden's special — potatoes, onions, tomatoes, cow-cream, and cow-butter). From the oven emanates the aroma of roasting peanuts. Warmth and food have always made homes, and we are secure.

Amidst the clatter of spoons against bowls, we girls chatter nonsensically or giggle. Papa and Mama discuss the rankness of the cotton, the disagreeableness of the weather, and Truman's handling of the Korean situation. Afterward, Papa goes outside to tend to chores in the dark and Mama begins cooking the beans for next day's meal. We girls do dishes in two dishpans set on the table and filled with hot water from the tea kettle.

Someone announces, "AMOS AND ANDY's on."

From the front room, the scratched brown plastic radio erupts in static and dialogue. We pull up slat-backed, rope-bottomed chairs and strain to hear above the static.

Peanuts are consumed almost absently, hot tea warms us inside, and the monstrous black wood-stove sings the closest half of our bodies while the other half is covered with a rash of chill bumps. Laughter is restrained, even the snap of breaking peanuts muffled carefully, but much of the banter issuing from the brown box is indistinguishable. Static prevails before the program is over.

But — wait. A backless prose and poetry book (discarded by the school) is in Ava Jean's hands. We sit expectantly in the semi-dark of the lamp-lit room. We have relished the words in this magic book before. She begins in a measured, mysterious voice:

"The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,

The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,  
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,  
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door."

We see the ghostly galleon and the gusty trees, forget to eat peanuts. The tea grows cold in our cups. Outside, the wind is a torrent of darkness — a night that would please any highwayman. The mood swings sharply:

"The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day;

The score stood four to two, with but one more inning to play;

And so, when Cooney died at first, and Burrows did the same,

A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game."

We hear the air shattered by the force of mighty Casey's bat. We hear the cry of maddened thousands and the echo that answered, "Fraud!" The crushing stike-out is sighed over once more while the shinnery wood in the fire crackles cozily. It's the perfect setting for Sam McGhee's creation:

"There are strange things done in the midnight sun

By the men who toil for gold;

The Arctic trails have their secret tales

That would make your blood run cold. . ."

We are seeing Sam's smile that you could see a mile, hear him say, "Please close that door. It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm. Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm."

The cracking and crunching of peanuts have resumed in the interim. We sip fresh tea while little Ransom sleeps unheeding on a nearby bed. Mama, ever-busy, calls from the kitchen, "You kids better get in bed. Mornin' comes early."

We stir reluctantly. Stretch and yawn. The day has been a long one, but good.

*MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH, who resides near Erick, has been writing most of her life. Her freelance work has been published by denominational houses and local newspapers, and for about a year she did a weekly column for the OKLAHOMAN called "Something to Think About."*