

Christmas Week

by
Sheelah Demetre

of the
Western Quebec Literacy
Council



illustrated by
Leslie Knoll
and
Teresa Popovich

Christmas Week

by
Sheelah Demetre

of the
Western Quebec Literacy
Council

illustrated by
Lesli Knoll
And
Teresa Popovich

ISBN: 1-895539-39-0

RECLAIM

The Reading Council for Literacy Advance in Montreal
3449 University St.
Montreal, Quebec
H3A 2A8

This book is a joint project of the following Laubach Literacy of Canada-Quebec Councils:

Chateauguay, Gaspesie, Laurentian, Quebec City, RECLAIM, South Shore, St. Francis, Western Quebec, and Yamaska

Reading Level 4

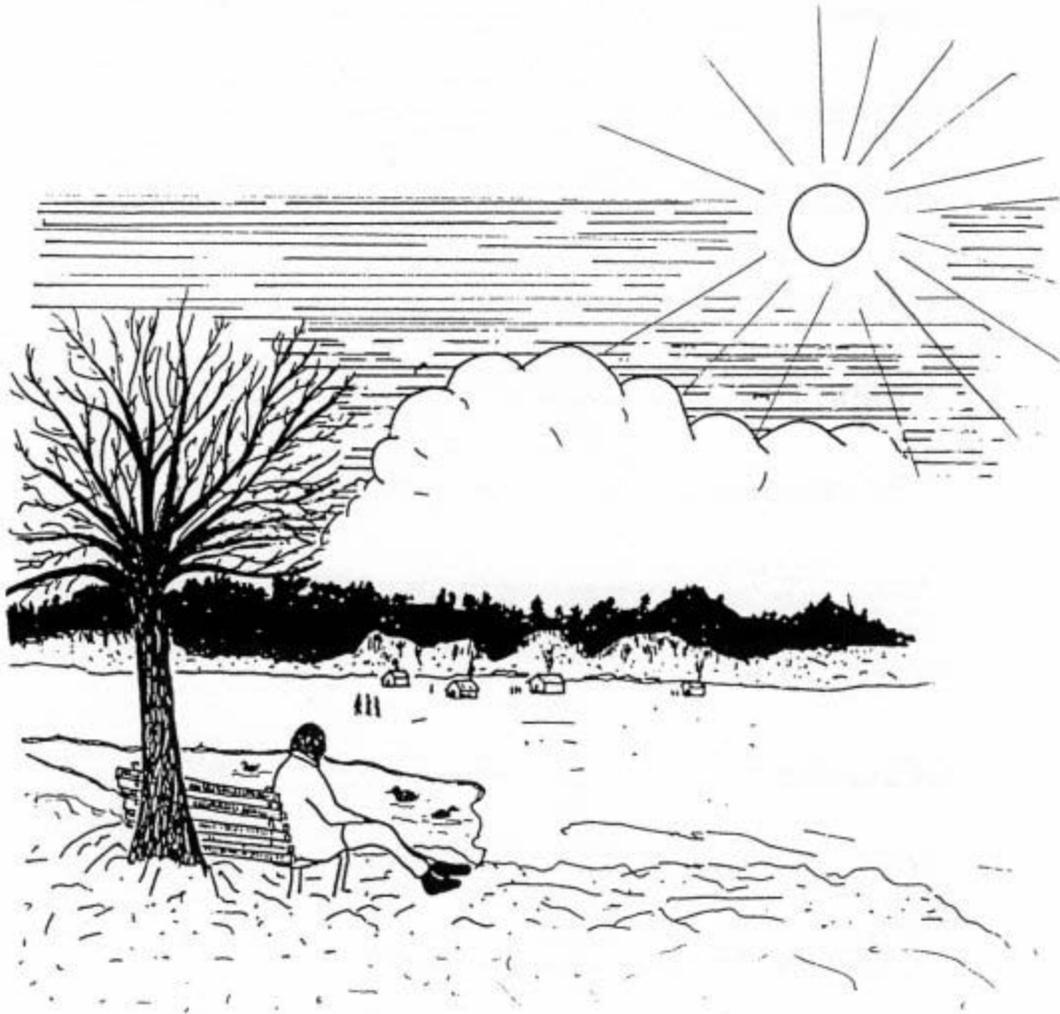
To order this book write to:

Western Quebec Literacy Council
170 rue Principale
Aylmer, PQ
J9H 6K1

Copyright 1993 Western Quebec Literacy Council

Contents

Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	6
Chapter 3	7
Chapter 4	8
Chapter 5	9
Chapter 6	10
Chapter 7	12
Chapter 8	14
Chapter 9	15
Chapter 10	16
Chapter 11	18
Chapter 12	20



Chapter 1

Emma watched the ducks glide towards the shore. Sensing the children, they turned and glided away.

Emma enjoyed sitting on this bench. There was open water here. From here she could see far up and down the river.

Today there was no wind. The sun was shining and she felt warm. She watched the sun's reflections playing on the water and snow.

Further up, the river was frozen solid. She could see the fishermen's huts. They were placed over holes cut through the ice. Some huts were near the shore. Others were near the middle of the river. People fished here all year long. She liked to watch the winter fishing best. The sight made her wish she could paint.

She would paint the fishermen in bright beautiful colours. Bright red and blue tuques. Bright yellow, green and purple coats. She would paint the huts too, in bright colours. She would paint the smoke coming out from the top of the huts. She would paint them with the sun on them. She would catch the light and shadows playing around them. She would try to capture the diamonds on the snow. Walking here, she had studied the diamonds. The sun's rays caught them. There were green, blue and pink diamonds. But she couldn't paint. She was dreaming again.

She checked the children. Kathy was chasing Annie. They were throwing snow at one another. Kathy was strong and healthy again. What a change in a few short weeks.

Chapter 2

Whooping cough, the doctor said she had. Kathy would have to be watched carefully. So Emma gave her her medicine on time. She checked her carefully during the day. Taking care of her during the day was not too bad. It was the nights Emma found difficult.

Tom moved the lazy-boy into Kathy's room. It crowded the room. Emma used it at night with a blanket. She would doze off and on for a few minutes. Then suddenly she would come fully awake. For a moment or two fear would take over. The fear went into the pit of her stomach. She was afraid to look, afraid to listen. Then she would look and Kathy was all right. By Christmas week Kathy was running around the house. The doctor told Emma she had fully recovered. Kathy would tire more quickly than usual. He told her not to worry as that was normal. Kathy was fine now, but Emma was not. She was exhausted.

There was still so much to do for Christmas. Everything seemed to take longer than usual. Emma didn't watch her soaps that week. She didn't have the time. Mainly she was afraid she would fall asleep. She was surprised she hadn't really missed them. She felt more depressed every day. Part of the trouble was that she had not gotten any rest. The other part was the radio.

Chapter 3

Emma and Tom listened to an all music radio station. Some time back Tom began to listen to the CBC. It was mostly news but also talk shows. Usually Emma changed the station when Tom left for work. That week she hadn't bothered to change it. While cleaning, cooking and baking she listened to the news. And all the news was bad.

Plants were closing. So many jobs were lost. Small businesses were going bankrupt. More jobs were lost. So many friends were out of work. She worried about Tom's plant. Every night she expected him to tell her his plant was closing.

Emma really worried. How would they live, eat, and pay the rent? Would Tom have to go on U.I.C.? How long would unemployment insurance last? Then what would they do?

Chapter 4

After the news, the subject was breast cancer. For days they discussed breast cancer. They had “specials” on breast cancer. It seemed everyone had cancer. Not just old women, or middle-aged women, but young women, too. The women were Emma’s age. At the end of the week she was convinced she, too, had breast cancer. She promised herself she would see her doctor. She would go right after Christmas—if she lived that long!

At night TV was no better. Again there was a special on cancer. Then there was a special on AIDS. AIDS struck fear in everyone. Emma worried about AIDS too. She worried about all the people with AIDS. She became more depressed every day.

Chapter 5

As she worked she found herself listening for the news. It was always bad. Four hundred jobs were lost in one town. Two hundred jobs disappeared in another. It was just before Christmas. Her heart went out to those people. Everything was going wrong this year.

The Christmas tree was still in the back yard. There was snow on it. She couldn't drag it in alone.

Emma decided to get the tree ornaments ready. She went downstairs to the storage closet. She tried to pull the box down from the shelf. It was heavy and seemed to be stuck. She gave it one last hard yank. It slipped from her hands. Before she caught it, it struck her upper arm. The skates that were on top of the box hit her arm first. They really hurt her arm. When the pain went away, she hauled the box up the stairs. Slowly things were getting done.

Emma would leave the kitchen floor and counter tonight. She was so tired. She would do the floor early tomorrow before the others were up. Then she would do the counter and table. Then she would finish the shopping.

Chapter 6

Saturday morning Emma slept later than she expected. She just had time to finish washing the floor when the others were up. They were walking on the floor and it wasn't dry. The baby spilled her milk. It was dripping onto the floor. She tried to catch it but she was too late.

Emma's mind was racing. She had to remember to take the turkey out and finish the shopping. She needed onions. She wanted to wash and set her hair. She also wanted to finish the hat for Annie.

She was only partly aware of what Tom had said. Did she hear right? Tom had been speaking to her and said something about a thousand dollars more for university next year. She could not believe he would spend so much money. It meant another year of saving and being careful. For school! For him! Emma wanted to scream.

"Some jobs are going at the plant," Tom said as he filled his coffee cup. Emma was stunned. As he turned he said, "Thank God—not mine. School has paid off."

Emma believed her world was falling apart. She felt like she was choking. Her throat had dried up. Then she heard the scream from Annie. As Emma turned she saw the orange juice. The whole large carton was spilling over the table and floor. She yelled and yelled at them. She said she was running away and never coming back. She ran out the door and drove away.



Chapter 7

As Emma drove, she felt as though her head was going to burst. She was very angry. She was angry with the children, the radio station, and Johnny's teacher. She was especially angry with Tom. It seemed he was never at home now.

He worked five days a week. He went to school two nights. When he wasn't at work or school, he was in the little room. He studied every night. Emma felt that Tom thought only of himself.

This last year one of his courses was at a university. He was doing an English course. "He speaks English," thought Emma. "Why go to school for that?" Emma worried that maybe it was just to get away from home.

Emma sometimes couldn't understand what Tom was talking about. He used big words. She had never heard some of them before and she didn't know what they meant. Tom had been taking courses for five years. He had changed.

It began when Annie was born. Something happened to him then. She had seen it in his face while he was holding Annie. He used different words after that. He never said "us" any more. It was always "the family" and "the future." Emma wondered who's future. His? Emma worried about the cost of university. University was expensive now. She knew this because she had heard it on the radio.

Something else was bothering Emma. The nights Tom was home, he and Johnny couldn't wait to go into that room after supper. Then after an hour together, they would go outside. Emma couldn't believe what she saw. They would walk around looking up at the stars. She would watch them talking together. Were they talking about the stars? What a waste of time. She was so angry now she was driving too fast. The road conditions were bad. Luckily she soon found herself behind a snowplow.



Chapter 8

Emma's anger was almost spent. She was beginning to think clearly now. She didn't try to pass the snowplow. It slowed her down, but she decided not to push her luck. The roads were bad.

Emma decided to buy the book for Johnny. She was against spending all that money for a book. Johnny couldn't read. They knew that from the teacher. She had sent a note in the fall saying Johnny was far behind the other children. He was very good at other subjects, but very bad with reading. The teacher said he needed some help at home. How could she help when she couldn't read very much herself? She had felt so hurt.

Tom was the one who had read the note to her. It didn't bother him. All he said was, "We will have to do something about this."

Emma tried to find the book in the children's section. She knew the book was about stars. She checked again. She couldn't find any book on stars. She watched other people looking at the books. They seemed so sure of themselves. She remembered she had the name of the book written down. She looked in her purse and pulled out another note from the teacher. She had been so upset she had shoved it in her purse. Emma had forgotten about it. Poor Johnny! He was not doing well in school. She didn't try to read the note here. She pushed it back in her purse. She would give it to Tom to read after Christmas. She was very sad now.

Emma handed the paper to a girl at the counter. The girl smiled and went to a different section. Emma realized she had looked in the wrong section. It wasn't a children's book. The girl informed her the book was sold out. She checked in the store's other branch. They would hold it for her.

Chapter 9

The store was at the other end of the town. The sales lady told her the store was fifteen miles away. Emma couldn't disappoint Johnny. She had to make that trip. The book was the last Christmas present on her list.

First she would have a cup of coffee. The mall was crowded. The tables were small and very close together. She had to share one with two old ladies.

Emma drank her coffee slowly. She was calm now. She noticed her arm ached. She didn't pay too much attention to it. Her mind was on other things.

She had forgotten to take the turkey out of the freezer. She would be getting home late. The storm would hold up traffic. Would Tom feed the kids, she wondered. Emma thought of all the things she still had to do.

The kitchen counter was a mess and she would have to do the floor again. She must do it tonight. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve and it would be too late.

The ladies were talking together. She wasn't listening to them. Yet she could not help overhearing what they said. Someone had died. He had had a heart attack. He had complained about a pain in his arm. That was a sure sign of a heart attack, one of the women said.

Emma finished her coffee and left. She would finish her shopping first, then pick up the book and start for home.

Finally Emma finished her shopping. She decided to stop for a bite to eat. She had not eaten all day. It would be a good hour or so before she would get home. The storm would slow everything down.

Chapter 10

Emma spent over an hour in the restaurant. The food was good but the service was terrible. She realized she would have saved time by going home to eat. Yet it was very peaceful and she began to relax. She was beginning to enjoy this time for herself.

Yes, she thought, Tom had changed. She remembered almost to the date when he changed. It was just after Annie was born. He had become very serious. Soon after Tom told her what he wanted for the children. She remembered it now.

“Emma, honey, I’ve been thinking about you and me and the kids. I want the kids to have a good and happy life. I want to give them a good education. Then they can make choices. They can be anything they want to be. The only way to do that is to get a better education myself. I’ll get a chance to move up at work. It’ll be hard, Emma, honey—hard on both of us. But we will do it.”

Emma had never thought like that. She had been so happy with just the two of them. There was nothing more she had wanted. Then Johnny arrived.

Johnny was the icing on the cake. Her world was complete. She never wanted it to change. She never thought it would.

Tom had explained it to her.

“Emma, honey, you, no—we, believed that getting married was the end of it all, and everything we wanted. Well, Emma, honey, it wasn’t. Not to me anyway. It was the beginning, don’t you see? Life is growing, getting bigger and better.”

Emma was only now beginning to see it as Tom did. She wondered why she had never seen it before. She realized she never thought how it was for Tom. He was working all day and going to school at night. The nights he went to the university he arrived home after eleven.

How hard it must be for Tom. He never complained. All she did was dream. Maybe she would take his advice. Maybe she could take a course in the daytime. She could get a baby sitter for a few hours once a week. Betty had offered to teach her to draw and paint. Who knows, she might even be good at it. As Tom would say, “Just dreaming is no good—you’ve got to take action, Emma, honey.”



Chapter 11

Driving home was worse than Emma expected. The storm had turned into a blizzard. Everyone was driving carefully. All the cars went slowly and no one was too close to the car ahead. Emma became aware of the pain in her arm. She had bumped it getting into the car. What had that woman said about a pain in the left arm? It was a sure sign of a heart attack.

A heart attack! God, was she having a heart attack? Could she die here? What about Tom and the children? Imagine dying at Christmas! Every Christmas would be a sad time for them. Emma was getting very upset again.

She said a silent prayer. “Oh, dear God—let me live through the holidays.” Emma was frantic. Poor Tom, how would he manage with the children, the house and school? How would the children remember her?

She remembered the way she left the house that morning. Emma now could see Tom and the children’s faces. “Oh God,” Emma pleaded, “please help me. I love them so much.”

She reached the cutoff. Here she had to be very careful. A car could slip and run right down the bank. She never could understand why they had raised the road. Perhaps it was for the run-off in the spring. You wouldn’t be able to pass with the water.

Emma arrived home. There was only one light on. Usually most of the lights were on. She wondered what could be going on.

No one was at home. Emma wondered where they were. Maybe Tom had taken them shopping at the village store. They would like that.

She made herself a cup of tea. It had been a long hard drive home. She would relax for a few minutes before getting started with the housework.

She sipped her tea and suddenly she was aware of how clean and tidy the kitchen was. The floor was cleaned and polished too. She went to the fridge—there was the turkey beginning to thaw.

“Thank God for that,” Emma said to herself.

She went into the living room. Maybe Tom and Johnny had brought in the tree. Maybe they had even set it in the stand. She turned on the lights.

The tree was in, set up and decorated. The lights went on from the wall switch near the door.

Emma went back to the kitchen for a second cup of tea. She sat down and touched her arm. It was still sore. Then she remembered the box and skates falling on it yesterday. That was why her arm was sore.

“Some heart attack,” she said to herself. She wanted to laugh at herself. What a mess she had made of her day. Then she heard the family entering the front door.

Chapter 12

Tom's mother was with them. Tom said, "Come on, Emma, honey, you and I are going to the Chicken Bar-B-Q."

Tom had asked his mother to look after the children for an hour or two. She was so good with them, and insisted on feeding and bathing them. She, too, was worried about Emma.

At the Bar-B-Q Tom told Emma how worried he had been about her. He knew how tough things were. When he talked about that morning, they both began to laugh.

Emma told Tom how bad she had felt. She explained how alone she was, especially at night. She told Tom how hard the last month had been.



Tom, too, had felt very alone. He had tried to talk to her, but she hadn't seemed interested.

After Emma explained she didn't understand the big words he was using, she knew things would be all right. Tom didn't say he would not use big words any more. But they agreed he would help her at night to improve her English.

Tom said they would live big that night. They would have a second large Coke with their dessert.

They were very happy again. Then Emma needed a Kleenex. She put her hand in her purse and found the letter. She had forgotten about it completely. She handed it to Tom. Tom was smiling.

Emma wondered what he could be smiling about. Tom read it aloud to her. Johnny had done so well. Now he was with the top readers in his class. Emma didn't believe it. How could he be?

Tom explained. "Well, every night I'm home, I work with him after supper. Didn't you know what we were doing there? After we worked on reading, we would look at the stars. Did you know Johnny is teaching me? He can point out and name many stars. He knows all the planets too. You would be surprised how much he knows."

"By the way, did you get the book?" asked Tom.

"Yes, I even had to go fifteen extra miles to get it. I thought you were crazy!"

"Once Johnny got interested, he wanted to learn to read. He's doing so well, Emma, honey."

As they walked to the car, Tom put his arm around her. Emma saw how Tom had grown. Johnny was also learning and growing. She knew she, too, would keep growing along with them now.