The Victor

Stephanie Pritchard*

*Iowa State University

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A WHITE wind ripped through the forest, screaming in rage at the stubborn pines that dared to block its path. With frenzied madness it flung itself against the gray trunks and lashed the green needles with its stinging tongue. Round and round it whirled, weaving a curtain of white isolation so that each pine must struggle alone with no communication, no encouragement, no sense of valiant comradeship with its brethren.

Old Jesse Kessler struggled into his heavy coat and pulled his cap tightly over his head. He listened to the wind howling angrily against the gray boards of the barn. The animals moved restlessly, sensing the danger in the wind's wild song. They'd be safe. He'd built this barn himself when he was a young man, full of strength and high with hopes. A pioneer of the wilderness was Jesse Kessler, yessiree! Forty years he'd cut and plowed and sweat, and he'd won—won the battle!

Jesse extinguished the light that had softly illuminated the dusky interior of the barn, and carefully hung the lantern on its nail near the door. He pulled the flaps of the cap over
his forehead and ears, stuffed his large hands into leather mittens padded with thick wool, and stepped outside.

Durned if it weren't cold! He pulled the sheepskin collar closer around his grizzled neck and secured the barn door. The wind whipped tears from his eyes, and he squinted to find the wire that would guide him safely to the house. Durned wind! You couldn't see a thing! He scraped his hand against the rough pine boards until he located the metal thread. It dangled loosely in his hand, and Old Jesse stood frozen. Then he cursed loudly, the wind whisking away his words before they'd hardly gotten out of his mouth. He'd made sure the wire was tightly fastened at both ends!

He shook the wire; it was heavy, so it must've come undone at the house. Well, this weren't the first time it had happened. This blizzard was no worse than the one ten years ago, and he'd made it then! He pulled the wire loose from its frozen burial and gripped it in both hands so that he wouldn't lose it.

The wind was merciless away from the sheltering wall of the barn. Jesse stumbled forward through the knee-high snow, bending his head against the relentless tug of the wind. Snow stung the exposed area of his face and outlined the leathery wrinkles in his cheeks. He closed his eyes and huddled lower over the wire.

His progress was slow. He had to lift each leg high and plunge it ahead through the thick layer of snow, then balance himself to thrust the other leg forward. The wind buffeted him about, blowing this way, then that, and only by stooping low over the ground was he able to keep standing. The wire slid very slowly through his muffled hands.

Why hadn't he brought his snowshoes with him! In no time at all he could've been at the house! It hadn't been snowing this hard when he went to the barn this morning, but he'd know'd a blizzard was coming on. He'd know'd it as sure as his name was Jesse! It'd take a long while to trail the cussed wire this way.

The cold was sinking deeper into his skin now, and he shivered as if he hadn't a stitch on. His overshoes were soaked through, and snow had sifted into them, wetting the three layers of socks he wore. His chest heaved with each
gasp of air, and he breathed raggedly through his mouth. The cold air stung the back of his throat and made it raw.

Suddenly his foot struck something solid. With a cry of relief, Jesse reached forward, pawing the air for the comforting contact of his rude cabin, and the warm presence of his Martha who would be waiting inside, wondering why he had taken so long. The wire slipped from his grasp, and his mittened hands met only the driven snow.

Jesse moaned and sank to the ground. The well! He had been going the wrong direction, away from the house instead of toward it! He leaned against the well stones and choked back the tears of frustration that flooded his gray eyes.

Suddenly he remembered the wire. He lunged forward and pawed the snow. He’d never get back without the wire! He ripped off his mittens and crawled on his hands and knees, flinging the snow wildly into the air while the wind howled derisively in his ears. Handful after handful of the freezing crystals he flung aside. He must find it; he must! His fingers turned stiff with iciness, but still he searched. Searched until, with a sob, he found the precious lifeline.

Wearily he leaned against the cold stones of the well. His hands were numb now; he must try to warm them, to bring them back to life. Retrieving his mittens, he pressed first one hand and then the other inside his coat, always making sure that he didn’t lose hold of the wire. His body didn’t feel as cold now. He was getting sleepy. How easy it would be to close his eyes, to sink into the warm oblivion of sleep. . . .

The wind snatched at the wire. Startled, Jesse gripped the metal thread; it had almost slipped through his hand. Mustn’t go to sleep. Must move; keep moving. He struggled to his feet. They were numb, and he had to balance himself against the low wall of the well. Stomping his feet, he drew the wire closer. His hands were so stiff they could hardly manipulate it.

A flash of heat surged through his body and Old Jesse started trembling. He had come to the end of the wire! It hadn’t broken off at the house . . . something must’ve snapped it further along . . . the oak tree he had planted maybe . . . a fallen branch broken by the wind. . . .
The barn. He must go back to the barn. Martha would know he had stayed there. She would find the broken wire and know. He stumbled forward and fell into the snow. It was above his knees now, almost to his thigh. Slowly he got to his feet. Shivering—a good sign. His body wasn't all numb; his blood was circulating. He struggled forward through the heavy snow, but the wire didn't slide through his hands. They were too stiff, like helpless, wooden knobs.

Again he fell into the snow. His strength was ebbing. Must tie the wire around his hand. Go to the tree, close to the cabin. Martha would hear him. Martha would put out a lantern. He rose to his knees and fumbled with the wire until he managed to twist it around his hand several times. He crawled through the snow, using his head and shoulders to break a path.

It was too slow. Must get to his feet, walk. He heaved himself upward and swayed in the whirling wind. Stumbling back until the wire was a taut line between him and the barn, Old Jesse plowed through the frozen wasteland. Every article of his clothing was stiff and unyielding. A white sheet covered his face, and he choked with every breath on the flakes thrown into his mouth by the white wind. Snow melted against his neck and trickled slowly down his chest and back.

Right foot, left foot, right foot. He must concentrate on making his legs move. Push; shove aside the snow. He could no longer lift his legs high enough. Right foot, left foot. Keep the wire tight. Right, left, right. . . .

He toppled over heavily, turning an awkward somersault, the wire slipping unnoticed from his hand. What had he tripped over? He cracked one eyelid open and looked at a black mound buried beneath a snowy blanket. It rose higher to his left, then disappeared into the foggy whiteness of the wind. The woodpile. He was close to home! Somewhere straight ahead was his cabin! Supporting himself against the wooden logs, he stood and brushed the icy sheet from his face. But only the snowy wilderness of the wind met his gaze.

"Martha! Martha!" he shouted horsely. The wind laughed and stole his words away, drowning them in its shriek before they could reach far into the clearing.

Old Jesse turned and picked up a large piece of kindling
wood. Supporting his lower back against the woodpile, he lifted the wood high over his head and heaved it straight ahead with all his might. No sound but the wind. He threw another piece, and then another, and another, until they finally plopped softly near his feet.

Exhausted, he sank into a sitting position. The pile of the snow drift insulated him from the icy breath of the wind. It was almost warm here, sunken as he was, away from the reach of that bitter wind. He must rest and let his strength come back. He wouldn’t go to sleep. He’d just close his eyes and wait. Wait until the wind died down.

Sunshine sparkled on the frozen crystals carpeting the forest floor. The pines proudly exhibited their badges of white adornment and expressed their joy in the communion of their brethren through the heady scent of their green needles. Breezes whisked playfully among their branches and wandered on to awaken the other forest denizens.

**Seascape**

*by Barbara Ann Christy*

The ocean came to Iowa today
wearing old mocassins and
tortoise shell
bringing me the lilacs and fishing floats
that were caught in the seaweed
of it all.
As the tractors were floating out of sight
I listened to the ocean
whispering
of winter seastorms and willow whistles
and remembered in time to
swim ashore.