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## Racing Blind

It warmed up after the first of the year and softened the snow. Then it dropped to 25 below zero and froze a hard crust on three feet of snow on the meadow. We ate breakfast and finished a few small projects in the house.

The sun shone, and we all wanted to be outside. I went out and looked at the thermometer. "It's up to a toasty ten below and rising," I reported. "Let's put on a bunch of clothes and see if the crust will support us for a walk across the meadow."

We walked down and crossed the frozen river. Even at five below zero, the sunshine warmed us, so we left part of our outer clothing hanging in willow bushes by the river and walked across the meadow clear to the edge of the timber. We sat on stumps in sunshine, rested and talked, and then we headed back toward home.

Amanda wandered away from the rest of us, seemingly walking aimlessly. After a few minutes, she stopped, turned around to look at the rest of us, and laughed. Laura asked, "What are you doing?"

"Walking with my eyes closed. It's fun. Try it."

So we all tried it. The smooth surface of the snow makes walking easy. Ditches are filled with snow. Anything we might trip over is smoothed toward level with snow. On the open meadow, we can walk a long way without bumping into any fences or willows or

falling over a river bank.

Far from us, a Raven croaks a harsh-sounding croak as it flies through winter sunshine. That and occasional laughter from any or all of us, occasional short sentences thrown out into the cold morning, is the sound of the snow-covered meadow. This is a wonderful feeling, this walking without seeing where we are going. We drift away from one another, but we keep fairly close by sound. Our general direction is scattered but still roughly homeward. Closer to the river, someone suggests taking turns, one walking with eyes closed and one guiding, and we get through the gates of two fences that way. We adults guide our children through the willows, down the river bank, across the river and up the opposite bank.

“Turn left. More. More yet. Straight ahead. You’re going to go down the steep bank to the river now. Stop. There’s a willow bush in front of you. Turn right. More. That’s it. Down the bank. You’re on the river, with a steep bank ahead of you. You’re going to have to step high to get started up the bank.”

When we’re across the river and on open ground again, I say, “Let’s have a footrace with our eyes closed.”

“A footrace?”

“Sure. Three race while one watches and calls out if anyone races into danger. Let’s head for that high ground and see where we wind up.”

Laura will be the watcher for the first race. We line up, and she says go, and we go. I’ve never felt anything quite like this before. Full speed ahead. I know I’m lifting my feet much higher than I need

to as I run, but it seems to be how I have to do it. I think I'm headed for high ground. My daughters' laughter drifts away to one side of me. I think they're sticking together by sound, but I let them go and head where I think I should go.

Laura calls to us, one by one, to stop. When she calls me, I stop and wonder what I'm facing. I don't want to open my eyes, but I open them, and I'm amazed that I'm standing on the river bank. For an instant, it's as if I've never before seen anything I see now; the river bank falls sharply away in front of me; ice caps the river; snow has drifted in windy patterns on the ice; leafless willow bushes stand along the river; the broad, snow-covered meadow lies silent across the river; a black raven lands on the brilliant white snow.

I turn and look behind me. Apparently, I started for high ground but bore left until I came half a circle back to the river. Juniper faces the river a hundred yards downstream. Amanda has gone closer to straight and faces a fence on higher ground. Everyone laughs. More. More of this, we say. But we're tired, and it's time to go home and get something to eat, and that's what we do, saying that tomorrow, we'll do it again.

But a chinook blows up the valley at daylight. The temperature jumps fifty degrees in fifteen minutes, and the crust on the surface of the snow softens. Walking anywhere on the snow means sinking into it hip deep.

We don't complain about the sudden change in weather. We go out in light clothing and walk down the plowed road in warm sunshine, and we look at the beautiful world around us.

“How soon will the ice on the river break up?”

‘February tenth.’

“March first.”

“Ummmm, well, maybe about March fifteen.”

“Who me? Y’all looking at me? Maybe, let’s see..., maybe fifteen days from now? Who’s writing it down?”

“Nobody. Just, each person remember the guesses.”

Far down the road, we turn and start back. We get home in time to see the snow on the barn roof give up its bond with the metal, slip down with a loud rumble, and pile beneath the eaves.

Cold times and warmer times alternate until early spring comes to Whitney Valley. The birds begin to come back. Green grass grows in the warmer seep areas. Ice on the river breaks up and flows downstream, and nobody remembers to check the date against our guesses.

The valley breaks free of winter in a terrific rush, and I’m glad it does. Spring is beautiful here in the valley and full of adventure, but already I’m planning for next winter, when we’ll have a firm crust on the snow.

I know where a person, walking with eyes closed, with a minimum of guidance, can walk about three miles without obstruction. Then we can open our eyes to one of those rare moments when we don’t know where we are, and the world is new again.