

# In the Trenches

BY J. TROUT LOWEN

I gingerly nose my car down the alley narrowed by 9 inches of new snow and slip it into the pocket of my garage. My feet leave deep prints on my path to the door as soft, wet snow crumbles into my workday shoes. Although it's already been a full day, tonight I'll be pulling a second shift.

I inhale the warmth of a cup of tea, suit up, and head outside to shovel. It's a Minnesota ritual I look forward to each year with equal parts dread and enthusiasm. Shoveling is hard work often done in the dark, cold, and wind. But there's also something comforting about the *shuuut, shuuut, shuuut* rhythm of metal blade on sidewalk, something honorable in the sweat that steams up from inside my sweater after a long day behind a desk, and something warming in the

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camaraderie of working quietly together in the darkness with my neighbors, many of whom, like me, are single women homeowners.

Summers we chat over our lawn mowers, share gardening tips, news, and occasional cups of coffee. But between November and April our relationship, like the landscape, is muffled by snow. We call out across the dark street and raise our gloved hands in friendly acknowledgement, then attend to the task at hand.

Nothing in a Minnesota childhood filled with snowy memories quite prepared me for life in one of America's snowiest cities, Oswego, New York, on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. I'd never heard of "lake effect snow" living in Minnesota. Sure, blizzards blow in from North Dakota bringing big dumps followed by searing cold, but there's usually plenty of warning. Lake effect snow—storms created by winds that scoop up moisture across the surface of a Great Lake and dump it inland—is often completely unexpected and totally encompassing. Here, lake effect snow falls in feet, not inches—a ludicrous 7 feet one weekend—and the average annual snowfall of 160 inches is triple that of my Minnesota hometown.

My first winter in Oswego, I lived in an apartment and didn't even own a shovel, a mistake I learned the magnitude of one morning when the phone rang at

5:30. "Get down to Oneida Lake," growled the a.m. editor at the newspaper where I worked. "A boy scout troop was stranded on the ice by last night's storm."

I jumped into my clothes and ran out the back door...into 2 feet of fresh snow. Deadline was two hours off, the stranded boy scouts 45 miles away, and I had no shovel. Panicked, I spied one lonely soul shoveling out his car. "Twenty bucks for 10 minutes with that shovel!" was all I could think of to say.

The boy scouts were safe, I made deadline, and on the way home I bought a shovel.

A couple of years later, I moved into my boyfriend's house, perched on a hillside on a double corner lot facing a busy street. We had 170 feet of sidewalk, a doublewide drive, no garage, and no snow blower. We shoveled before work. We shoveled after work and on weekends. It became a grim game. Shovel out the hard pack dumped by the snow plow, then run inside, shower, change for work, and run out hoping to beat the next pass. More often than not, the door would click shut behind me just as the plow whooshed by with the next load.

When we moved to Minnesota six years ago, we volunteered to be caretakers for our Uptown apartment building. We looked out the door at the small sidewalk we would have to shovel and giggled.

After a year of endless open houses, we finally found a "fixer upper" we could afford, a 90-year-old South Minneapolis bungalow that begged for TLC and elbow grease. We tackled projects together. First one room, then the next. And when it snowed, we shared the task of shoveling. But the teamwork of homeownership wasn't enough glue to hold our relationship together. He returned to New York, and I became a single homeowner. "You can't handle this place yourself," he chided on his way out the door.

There are days when those words still haunt me. But when I look up and down my street at this capable community of women, my resolve returns. And as each winter passes, I grow more confident. I weather strip, put up the storms, and when it snows, yes, I shovel the walk, listening to the comforting *shuuut, shuuut, shuuut* sound of my own independence. **MH**

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