



Winter Blues

By Catherine Austen

Oscar and his mother were happy outside together all summer long, even during the pandemic. They planted a garden. They read stories in the sunshine. They played basketball and badminton. They went for walks and took photographs.

But in winter, Oscar's mother stayed inside all day. When she looked outside, she shuddered. She had only been in Canada for two years. In her old home, it was summer all year round. Every day brought blue skies, green grass, red blossoms, golden leaves.

But here, in Quebec, there was nothing but white. The sky was white with clouds. The yards were white with snow. The streets were white with ice.

Oscar's mother turned away from the window and announced, "I'm not stepping outside until springtime. I'm not even looking. There is nothing to see."

Oscar pressed his hands to the cold windowpane. He was mesmerized by the icy stillness. "I like winter," he whispered.

"Weeks and months of nothing but white," his mother complained. And she went to her bedroom, to look at photographs of summer.

A bright red cardinal streaked past the window.

“Mom, I see a bird!” Oscar shouted.

His mother peeked into the living room. “I see nothing but white,” she said. And she walked away.

Oscar flattened his nose against the frosty glass. A princely blue jay zipped past the porch. “Mom, I see another bird!” Oscar shouted.

His mother paused in the doorway. “There’s nothing to see,” she said. “I wish there was.” And she went to her bedroom to dream of summer.

Oscar decided to make his mother’s wish come true. He ran to the recycling bin and grabbed a plastic pop bottle. He cut out holes and poured in seeds and made a bird feeder. He hung it on the porch and thought, *The birds will see this and fly straight over.*

The air outside was crisp and clean, and the light was pale and fragile. Oscar thought it was beautiful.

He went back in and shouted, “Come look outside, mother!”

They stood at the window for several minutes, but nothing happened. “Winter is cold and lifeless,” Oscar’s mother said. And she left to read a book about summer.

Oscar ran to the kitchen. He rolled a scoop of peanut butter in dish of oats and he dropped the messy ball into an onion sack. He hung it on the porch and thought, *The birds will spot this treat from miles away.*

He heard a dog bark across the street, and children laughing two doors down. The sounds were soft and gentle, cushioned by snow. Oscar thought it was magical.

He went back in and called, “Come look outside, mother!”

They waited at the window for a long time, but nothing happened. His mother patted Oscar’s head and said, “Everything is dead here in winter.” And she left to watch a movie set in summertime.

Oscar searched the basement for scraps of wood and cardboard. He measured and cut and hammered and taped.

“What are you doing down there?” his mother called.

“I’m making you a present!” he shouted.

She laughed. “Can you build summer in a box?”

Oscar could not build summer, but he built ten bird feeders! He filled them with nuts and seeds, suet and oats, dried fruit and cracked corn. He hung them all on the porch and thought, *The birds will certainly come for this feast.*

The bird feeders swayed in the breeze. A grey squirrel chattered from a maple tree nearby, its tail wrapped tight against its back. The sun peeked through the clouds, low in the sky, and the bark of the tree shone silver.

The world looked cozy, Oscar thought, nestled in a blanket of snow.

He went in and shouted, “Come look outside, mother!”

“I’m getting tired of this game,” she said as they waited.

Nothing happened. No birds came.

Oscar’s mother lay down on the couch and said, “Wake me when it’s spring.”

Oscar stared outside. His bird feeders hung just beyond the glass, filled to the brim with food. But not even the squirrel came close.

Oscar began to cry. “I don’t like winter,” he announced. “There’s nothing to do. We never go out. And I can’t make your wish come true.”

His mother held out her arms. “You are my wish come true.”

Oscar stepped away from the window. He ran to his mother’s arms. “I wish there was something to see!” he cried. “I wish everything wasn’t dead! I wish we weren’t stuck inside for months!”

Oscar’s mother held him tightly. She looked over his shoulder, past the empty windowsill, outside, and she said, “I think my present has arrived.”

Oscar turned around. He wiped his eyes. He gasped. He giggled.

Twenty-two birds perched on the porch!

Red birds, blue birds, brown birds, black birds. Plain birds, striped birds, speckled birds, capped birds. Noisy, lively, beautiful birds. Plus one grey squirrel trying to blend in.

“This is a very good present,” Oscar’s mother said.

They snuggled together on the couch and watched the birds, their eyes shining, their hearts warm.

“I love winter,” Oscar said.

His mother laughed. “I love you.”

That afternoon, they dressed in bright colours and walked outside, through the snow, to the store, together. To buy bird seed.