

*Tales of a
Traveling Saleslady*

The Storm

by Linda Aksomitis



Tales of a Traveling Saleslady: The Cage

Written by Linda Aksomitis

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All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names. Any resemblance to individuals known or unknown to the author are purely coincidental. There isn't, and has never been, a PERFECT sewing machine company. Many of the events in the *Tales of a Traveling Saleslady* collection, however, were inspired by the true-life adventures of the author, who was a traveling saleslady for PFAFF sewing machines from 1984 to 1989. These years were the inspiration for the travel writing career that she continues to pursue at <http://guide2travel.ca>

The Storm is one of the stories originally published in the short story collection, *Tales of a Travelling Saleslady: Sew Far, Sew Good*. It was also aired on CBC Radio.

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Tales of a Traveling Saleslady: The Storm/Linda Aksomitis

ISBN: 978-0-9937177-5-8 (PDF format)

THE STORM

Joe Ratkovich blinked his eyes at the little red sports car suddenly visible by the gas pumps outside. Snow stuck on it in lumps, like unmelted sugar cubes at the bottom of a cup. Even though he'd kept the gas station open when he sent the staff home, he hadn't expected any customers until the storm blew itself out.

Standing, despite the shooting pain of arthritis in his hip, Joe listened to the storm howl through the cracks around the window. The mercury in the thermometer on the sill had nearly hit bottom. It was odd to be so cold with a weather disturbance in Saskatchewan.

Exhaust fumes rose from the car as it waited, mingling with the hurtling snowflakes. Joe waved at his customer, as he pulled on the green garbage coat that was a tight fit over his navy coveralls.

He sighed. Every time the youngster handed over the four pairs of clean coveralls every second Tuesday, Joe was reminded that Karen didn't have time for him anymore. Things just weren't the same since she quit washing his work clothes.

Even though it blared loudly, some of the television's words disappeared in the rattling noises of the tin eaves troughs shaking outside. He should've got somebody to fix them last fall. But he hadn't been able to afford it. He even cancelled his annual hunting trip, telling everyone he was just too busy, instead of broke.

Joe opened the door, lowered his head so the wind wouldn't take his breath away, and stepped into the storm. A semi crawled down the highway past his station. The small town, that should have been right across the pavement, was completely gone.

"Fill 'er up?" Joe shouted over the elements, as the woman rolled down her window.

"Just give me twenty dollars. That'll be enough to get me home. Is the coffee shop open?"

"Yeah, but I'm the only one here."

Joe hurried to get the nozzle into the woman's gas tank. Turning his back to the furiously hurtling snow, he watched the fuel pump. Finally, the magic numbers rolled up, like a slot machine, and he removed the hose. He gestured for her to move the car closer to the service station door.

Joe yanked the solid glass door open and stood aside so she could go in first. No sense her getting as chilled as he was. His fingers were already so numb in the thin knitted gloves he wore, he could hardly feel the icy doorknob in his hand.

Another weather warning flashed across the television screen as they entered. At least it didn't say the main highway was still closed down. Maybe Karen would come home after all. Maybe Sarah, that crazy sister of hers, hadn't talked Karen into leaving him yet.

The woman pushed the hood off of her blonde hair and shook her head, spreading snow across the tiled floor. Joe, feeling his fingers start to tingle, rubbed his hands together, then stamped his feet on the rubber mat at the door.

"Well, Miss, that'll be twenty bucks for the gas." It had been a bad year for fuel sales. Those cardlocks that had opened up at hundred mile intervals had taken away all of his trucking customers. And who could blame them, when the fuel was a dime less a liter?

"Company credit card okay?" she said, smiling. "It feels so incredibly good to be out of the car and not driving!"

Joe watched her pull at all five fingertips of the red leather gloves, each in turn. She reminded him of his middle daughter, Rhonda, who was away at University on student loans.

Karen had nagged him for years to start a college fund, but he didn't. The garage always needed more equipment to keep in business.

Joe shrugged away his thoughts. Nobody paid his way, either. "Sure. We take most cards. Gotta these days. Nobody uses paper money."

She handed him a piece of plastic. He couldn't help but notice her fingernails were the colour of frothy pink lemonade, and a scent of spring roses clung to the air around her.

Joe slid the card through the machine, remembering the days when Karen had worn perfumes. The one she bought from the Avon lady was his favourite.

Looking up at the woman, he said, "That gol darn wind chills right to the bone, doesn't it?"

"Does it ever! I sure hope I can convince you to get me a cup of coffee to warm me up. Maybe it'll calm me down too." She smiled again, her eyes flickering like sparks jumping from a good plug.

Joe turned the card over and over in his hand, waiting for the approval. "No problem. As a matter 'a fact, I just put a pot on before you drove up, so's I could have a cup."

"Oh, good. I'd hate to be a nuisance."

Without thinking, Joe blurted out, "need all the customers I can get." He felt himself turn red--no need to let the world know how close he was to bankruptcy. "Ashley Adams. That your name?" He read from the credit card, trying to keep her from commenting on his remark. Nobody in the community even suspected how bad things were. He'd have heard the rumors if they had.

"That's me all right," she said as the machine spit out the approval. Joe handed her a pen to sign the paper receipt.

With a flourish Ashley scrawled her name across the thin slip of paper. "It's so easy to sign credit card debits when you know you're not going to get the bill, isn't it?"

"Never been in that position myself, but I guess it would be."

Indeed Joe Ratkovich had never received a penny he hadn't worked darn hard to earn in his whole fifty-three years. The only free money he'd ever seen was the baby bonus for the three kids, and Karen spent that.

Ashley carefully slipped the credit card into a folder in her wallet, then slid it back into her clutch purse. "Better put these away before I forget them," she said, stuffing the leather gloves into her parka pocket.

"Sure looks like a warm coat," said Joe. It was so long it nearly touched her ankles and was fur trimmed on the hood and cuffs. Shauna, his youngest, had been showing him pictures of something similar that she wanted for walking to school. But they were expensive.

Ashley twirled about so slowly that the polar bears on the bottom of the coat seemed to be lumbering through a cream-coloured snowstorm of their own.

"I made it myself. Just another one of those things you have to do to sell sewing machines. Do you have a lady at home who'd be interested in these computerized designs?"

Joe closed the drawer on the till. "Never know what Karen'd be interested in these days. She seems to change her mind every two minutes."

Ashley laughed. "I thought that was a woman's prerogative. You know, to change her mind."

Joe led the way to the coffee shop. The fluorescent lighting seemed brighter than usual today. Maybe it was because the outside world showing through the wall of windows had dissolved in a swirl of snow. The restaurant was like a cave.

“Well . . .” drawled Joe. “My Karen used to be as solid as rock. Nothing could ever persuade her once her mind was made up. Why her family tried for weeks to convince her not to marry me, so we just up and eloped.”

“Oh, that sounds so romantic!” Ashley slipped the coat off and threw it carelessly over one of the tables before she sat at one of the counter stools. “Where did you go?”

Joe grinned as he walked around the white arborite counter top. “You’re not gonna believe this, but I had this friend was a Justice of the Peace, so we were joined in Climax, Saskatchewan.”

“Sounds fine to me. And where did you take her for the honeymoon?”

Ashley sounded as curious as a two-year-old. Just like his grandson, Matthew. Lisa’s little boy was the best thing that had happened in his life in a decade. Even if she hadn’t married Matthew’s father.

Joe took two cups and saucers from the shelf beside the coffee maker. The aromatic smell of fresh coffee wafted up as he began to pour.

“Why, we slipped across the line,” Joe said, continuing the story. Suddenly he could see the young woman he’d married again: happy doing whatever he wanted; following his dreams. How he missed those days!

“First time Karen was ever in the States. She was so excited, you’d of thought we’d gone to Hawaii or somewhere exotic. Not Montana.”

“Karen sounds nice.” Ashley reached for one of the cups when Joe finished pouring.

“Sugar?”

She wrapped both of her hands around the cup as if trying to draw out the warmth. “No, I take it black. No additives.”

Joe turned and looked in the display case over the coffee machine. The last pie, saskatoon berry, had only two pieces left. Karen and the girls picked the berries every summer, so she could serve customers something special. “Why don’t you help me finish off this pie? It’s been up there a couple of days now and I don’t expect many people in. It’ll be on the house.”

“Sure.” Ashley’s face was beginning to look relaxed. “I rushed through lunch. I was so anxious to get on the highway.”

Joe’s callused hands deftly lifted the two slices of pie onto plates. “How long have you been driving in this storm?” He pushed one plate toward Ashley, then pulled up a stool on the opposite side of the counter, in front of the other one.

“Well, I’ve been more than two hours getting fifty miles.”

“Why didn’t you wait ‘till the storm slacked up a bit?”

Ashley’s face tensed. “I’m not big on waiting. And I guess I didn’t really know what I was getting into when I left.”

Joe shrugged. “Gee, I’d ‘a thought anybody living here would be practiced at this weather.”

“You’re right. I thought I was an experienced driver until I hit this!”

“Why Karen’s fought her way through so many blizzards picking up parts for me, or kids from things, that she laughs when they put out weather warnings.”

Ashley’s voice quivered. “Well, after today, I may start listening to them.”

“Really?” Joe tipped the cup to his lips, taking a sip to wash down the pie.

“This pie is delicious.” Ashley twirled the fork between her fingers, then chased the pastry flakes across her plate. “Bet this is a popular place to eat. That Karen of yours is some cook.”

“She sure is, isn’t she?”

It bothered him, even though he knew it shouldn’t, that it was the restaurant side of the business that had kept them afloat these past ten years. And that had happened when Karen took over running it. Now she was all gung ho to get a liquor license for the place and start serving fancier supper meals.

Another set of truck headlights, creeping down the highway, caught Joe’s eye. “How come the road was worse than usual?”

Ashley’s gaze grew distant again. “First off, it was so mild this morning that the water was running on the highways, with the frost coming out of the pavement and the salt melting everything in the sunshine. You’d have thought it was spring.”

Joe nodded. “That was about eight or nine o’clock, wasn’t it.”

“I was doing a sales pitch that took me right through until noon, so I don’t know when it started to snow or the wind got up.”

“That would’ve been around ten here.”

“Anyway,” Ashley’s fingers tightened on the fork she was holding, “when I realized that it was getting blustery outside, I rushed through the business luncheon and headed out as early as I could. I have something special to do tomorrow so I didn’t want to be stranded.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. I was hoping that Karen would come home this morning too, before the weather turned. But that sister of hers must’ve talked her into staying.”

“Well, when I got out of the city, the highway was covered with about four or five inches of thick, slushy snow. And it just got deeper and deeper.”

Ashley stopped for a minute, as if she was catching her breath. “Snow was drifting across the road and falling out of the sky. Like my Grandma used to say, ‘God was shaking his feather-ticks out and one broke!’ Then I realized the temperature was falling. There were giant ruts freezing onto the road that made steering almost impossible. I started getting really nervous. I was so scared I thought I should turn around.”

“Why didn’t you?” Not that Joe Ratkovich ever backed away from something he’d started either. He’d never changed his mind in his life.

Ashley’s voice sounded panicky as she recalled the next events of the drive. “Every time I tried to slow the car down, I felt like it was going out of control. And I couldn’t pull over to the side of the road because of the ruts. I was afraid if I lost too much speed in the driving lane, someone would hit me from behind.”

“So you just kept going?”

“Sort of.” Ashley’s words tumbled out with the same velocity as the raging blizzard. “Actually, I looked over my clenched fingers at the ditch. Right at, I mean. And I almost turned my steering wheel and hit the gas pedal. I figured if I was in the ditch, a tow truck would have to come for me. It would be over.”

Joe’s face wrinkled with sympathy as he imagined her fear. Last night he’d felt much the same way when he faced the fact that Karen probably wasn’t coming home. She hadn’t phoned for two days now. He’d stared at the rifle in the gun cabinet and down at his clenched fists too.

Ashley’s face brightened. “But then I looked down the highway at all the other people who were still out there. I figured if they could do it, so could I! Then I hoped one of them didn’t lose control and take me with them.”

“Isn’t that the truth,” said Joe, thinking of the near miss he’d had a few years back out hunting with old, half-blind Walley. “Taking care of yourself is never quite enough. There’s always the other guy to worry about.”

Joe stood up to pour some more steaming liquid into their cups. Last night fingering the wooden stock of the gun, he'd had but one regret in life. He'd missed the only shot he'd ever had at a buck with at least a six pronged set of antlers. What a trophy that would have been mounted on his wall.

Steam from the fresh cup of coffee swirled up into Ashley's face. "So what's your Karen doing in the city? Christmas shopping?"

"I guess." Joe shrugged, pretending it didn't matter.

"She won't come home in this storm, will she?"

Suddenly Joe had to talk to someone. All morning he'd ignored the staff's questions, half thankful for the storm so he could send them away. "I don't know if she's planning to come home at all. That sister of hers, Sarah, may finally cut me down enough that Karen'll leave me."

Ashley grinned. "No, that's not how it works."

"How what works?" said Joe in confusion. He'd never understood how women talked, even with a wife and three daughters always chattering around him. He just tried not to listen.

"If her sister gets too mean, Karen will have to defend you. I think there's an unwritten law that says you never agree with everything your sister says. Especially if she's attacking your whole life. Now you'd have to worry more if it was Sarah taking your side."

"Why?"

"Then Karen couldn't. She'll come home. After all you're business partners too, aren't you?"

The words came slowly to Joe's lips. "Yeah, I guess we are."

That's what Karen kept saying. Don't worry about which end of the business was showing a profit. She enjoyed running the restaurant. It made her independent.

Joe stared out the window, lost in his own thoughts, mesmerized by the storm that was suddenly blowing itself out. The cement inland grain terminal across the highway wavered briefly, then materialized before his eyes. Snow still swirled around its huge figure, but not thick enough to cloak it any longer.

"You know," said Ashley, "it's looking really eerie out there. Everything is popping in and out of focus!"

"It is, isn't it?"

Ashley's eyes widened for a second. "After today, I'd say life is kind of like driving in a storm. Half the time you can see where you're going and half the time, you can't. Then, just when you most desperately want to give up, you realize the only choice you have is to go on."

Joe nodded his head. "You got a point all right." He watched the Terminal fade again behind a shroud of snow.

The telephone rang. Joe reached for it.

About the Author

The award winning, Internationally published author of thirty books in numerous genres, Linda's books span the range from textbooks (*Guide to Becoming a Library Technician*) to high interest/low vocabulary nonfiction (*Science Solves it All: Sports Champions*). She has a nonfiction picture book, *L is for Land of Living Skies: A Saskatchewan Alphabet*, and three historical fiction novels for young readers.

Linda has a Master of Vocational/Technical Education degree, and is an instructional designer with Saskatchewan Polytechnic in Regina, Saskatchewan. She also teaches writing and publishing courses through the community college network in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, and Europe.

- [Introduction to Internet Writing Markets](#)
- [Publish and Sell Your E-Books](#)
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Currently, Linda lives in the town of Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, although she spends a lot of time through the year visiting many locations as a travel writer, giving author talks and lectures, and researching upcoming writing.

Follow Linda in her current travels at her travel blog: <http://guide2travel.ca>

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