

When the Wind Stopped



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AN VERY SHORT STORY BY

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...is a work of fiction. All events that take place are
imaginary,
and all characters and places described are entirely fictitious,
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THEY NEVER FAILED to appreciate the glories of autumn together—crisp days of golden aspens' quaking against the deep blue sky and the occasional light dustings of fresh snow on the high peaks; frosty nights with more constellations overhead than they could believe, with the occasional shooting star to surprise them, whisking by so fast that they almost missed it; the randy elk bulls' bugling those strange, soprano arias, chasing the ladies around.

In the middle of this glorious time, the first real winter storm always came as a heart-numbing shock, a wake-up call from a good dream into a real-world nightmare. They knew it was inevitable, but that could not cushion its crushing arrival.

No need for television or radio or internet weather forecasts to see it coming. Emergence from hibernation of the big highway department snowplows all shined up from summer maintenance, drivers perched way up there, vigilant for the first flakes—that told all. First would come the wispy cirrus clouds, the sun's disk

shining faintly through with a rainbow ring around it. Then the high peaks would disappear into the darker, menacing storm clouds, and tendrils of snow and mist would slide across the saddles between them into the foothills, providing the no-going-back warning that it was time to unpack the winter clothes and haul the firewood in earnest.

That firewood was his job. He had spent the summer laying it up, gathering logs and hauling them home in the ancient pickup, then firing up the chain saw to cut them down to two-foot lengths, making a big jumble of a pile out back. The days sitting beside the hydraulic splitter had seemed interminable, and stacking the results had been almost as much a chore as the gathering, sawing, splitting. But eventually he'd filled the old barn, now converted to a wood shed, and the winter's supply of firewood afforded a comforting feeling of security from the coming cold.

Even though he was ready for it, he always hoped that the foreboding weather would stay up there in the high country. But he also knew, deep down, that such hopes were in vain.

He knew this because the wind would return, first in the sky, its arrival signaled by the wave clouds settling in over the higher mountains, looking like flying saucers poised, waiting to pounce on the unwary. And then the wind would get bored with playing around up there and

come to ground, raking across the alpine meadows to the stunted tree-line thickets and sweeping down the draws into the valleys and, after breaking and tumbling through the forests of the foothills onto the plains, carrying with it rolling flurries of snow, dangerous wind-chills, and, inescapably, winter.

The first night was always the worst. He didn't need to see the trees bent and thrashing, the tumbleweeds flashing by eventually to spread their seeds far to the east, or the elk herd, one young bull missing, hunkered down in the ponderosa grove across the way, blonde hindquarters upwind into the cold. Hearing the wind howling and buffeting the cabin, feeling it as the pressure bursts vibrated his very insides, those were his personal bellwethers of the transition to winter.

The next day, he fought the wind to keep the wobbly pickup on a street that had already been blown clear of the snow and even the sand the plows had sprinkled. And Millie, his graying yellow Lab sitting on the seat next to him, struggled to keep her balance as the truck bounced around on the way to the supermarket.

His wintertime adaptations began to kick in. At the shopping center, he buttoned his red-plaid wool woodsman's coat all the way up and clamped his cap on tight as he leaned against the wind on the walk in from the parking lot. In the supermarket, he would

commiserate with friends and neighbors, their cheery greetings a veneer for their grim, gallows humor.

“Mornin’ to ya! Guess you didn’t blow away last night, either, eh? Lose any trees this time?”

“Y’know, I was wondering if my roof would be there when I woke up this morning.”

“Got your snow tires put on yet? I hear we’re in for a foot by tomorrow.”

Trudging into the teeth of it to the car from the pharmacy, he thought the blasting sand might take his face off, so he kept the bill of the dayglow-orange flannel cap pulled down to protect his eyes. He’d blown a month’s grocery money on her new prescription, a potion so new that Medicare wouldn’t cover it yet, and he prayed it would work. She had been coughing for weeks, trying home remedies without success, becoming ever weaker, and finally a visit to the doctor had procured a prescription, actual medication that held some promise.

Back at home, in the old cabin on the side of the little swale that seemed to funnel the worst of the wind right down their street, she was finally asleep. The big gusts woke him up at night, but he was able to roll over and doze again. She could do neither, roll over nor sleep when the wind was roaring, and sleep, well, that was something she desperately needed. Maybe, he thought,

she'll sleep through the day today and have the energy to tolerate this new medicine later.

In the best weather, his daily chore of restocking the firewood from the old barn up the hill tired him out some, despite his opinion of himself as a feisty old cuss who could beat winter at its own game. But in these windstorms it was a task for Hercules—leaning into the gale to load the wheelbarrow from the open door of the barn, maneuvering the load down the path while trying to keep his balance on the ice with the wind at his back, then pushing the empty wheelbarrow back up the slick slope into the gusts again. And doing it all over four more times, two more than usual: because of her illness, he was keeping the cabin extra warm. It was a daily chore that he must not neglect, as the temperature would plummet into single digits overnight, and without a fire they could both freeze.

The old cabin had survived eight decades of such winter weather, and he knew it would survive this one as well, and the barn, too. But the cabin needed new, insulated windows and more of that pink fiberglass stuff up in the attic to keep the chill out. And there were drafts as well, drafts from the doors and around the chimney, drafts that became miniature squalls when the wind outside roared. But repairs and upgrades were expensive, and her medicine had to be a higher priority just now.

Maybe he could find a way to winterize the place better come spring, he thought.

By the third day, the supermarket crowd's greetings began to lose their cheery veneer. Everyone seemed to have settled into the dreary reality of winter. The wind howled, the snow blew horizontally across the landscape with no opportunity to accumulate, and the temperatures continued to fall day by day. Feisty old cuss that he was, he kept at the daily chore of the firewood and in the meantime did everything he could think of to help nurse her back to health. In the afternoon, he made soup for them both, out of that missing bull's bones from the freezer, simmered for hours with fresh vegetables from the supermarket.

On day four, Millie, as depressed as the humans by all the wind, decided to stay home instead of riding to the store with him. She opted to doze by the fireplace, her head tucked under the footstool for protection from all the wind's racket, seemed like. Even his enticement of "Go for a ride? Go for a ride?" couldn't dislodge her.

But there was hope. He was encouraged to see that the new medication seemed to be helping. Her sleep improved, and she had more energy. On the fifth day, she sat up and fed herself, offering him the first smile he'd seen for nearly a week, a smile that warmed him from the inside out, and that evening she made it to the toilet without his help. Her day was spent taking short

naps, reading in between, and she slept through the night despite the unabated racket outside.

The sixth day of wind saw her up and about the cabin, even preparing a lunch for the two of them. After a nap, she went on a dusting and cleaning binge, sweeping up the many infiltrations of grit that the wind had forced through the cracks around the windows. The dust on the grandchildren's pictures on the mantel was something she took personally, and there was the usual male sloppiness in the bathroom that needed attention. All-in-all, she must have spent two hours doing things she had completely ignored while she had been bed-ridden. When she finished, she was surprised that he was still working on hauling firewood late into the afternoon. Usually, he was finished by lunchtime, but he seemed to be moving more slowly for some reason.

That evening, after their warming bowls of vegetables simmered in the rich elk broth for supper, they sat and reminisced over cups of tea about other wintertime intrusions of years past. This one was among the worst, certainly, but, just like the others, it would run out of energy and blow itself out. Winter would settle in, but without all this drama. Perhaps, they thought, the grand-kids could visit around Christmas. By then, there might well be enough snow to make snowshoe expeditions possible. And maybe a snowman. Those grand-kids were growing up so fast—they needed to see

them as often as possible, even though the trip from the coast was something of a struggle for everyone.

That night, just as it finally had become a familiar part of their world, the wind stopped. They went to sleep with it howling, and they woke up before sunrise the next morning to silence, the first in a week. It felt odd, empty somehow, to both of them. But they hugged and congratulated each other for having made it through yet another first winter storm.

It was just after dawn, when she was making another pass at the grit on the window frames and the pictures, that she heard Millie scratching at the back door and barking, strange sounds from a dog too well trained to do either. She looked out to see Millie running up the path to the old barn, and she saw him, too. He was lying on the path face down, orange cap askew, wearing the familiar red-plaid wool coat, right there with a tumble of split logs next to the overturned wheelbarrow.

And snowflakes, falling softly, glittered like diamond dust against the dark trees as the sun rose under the last of the clouds.

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