

Storm Door

HIS WIFE TOLD HIM IT HAD GONE TOO FAR, but Thomas Parker remained focused, scribbling notes in the pocket-sized memo pad and crossing off the next item on the list. He marched out of the garage and into the flat white hue of the backyard, flecks of snow descending erratically in the wind like tiny parachutes. The weatherman had announced the oncoming storm in usual foreboding tone; the same voice used during the summer when one-hundred degree temperatures scorched the valley. Same urgency—different season.

Winterizing the house was the last stage, as most goals had been completed during the summer. Evolving into a labor of love, an engineering background was pushed to its full potential, contributing to the highly organized regimen as provisions were calculated to maintain a family for one year. Sustenance groups included grains, legumes, fats, oils, milk, sugars, and water. These were divided into subcategories and amounts: wheat, seven hundred and forty-eight pounds; flour, seventy pounds; cornmeal, one-hundred and fifty-three pounds.

In the garage, canned goods had been stacked in alphabetical order, sacks of grain positioned according to size and weight; actions met by the perplexed expressions of his children and a grimace from his wife. She worried that the neighbors would think he was one of those ‘survivalist wackos,’ and questioned the sensibility of the endeavor. He defended his position by rationalizing the actions as good old-fashioned common sense—like having an insurance policy, he wanted to be prepared for any stormy times ahead including war, weather, disaster, or financial setbacks. Thomas even quoted the bible.

With his daughter sitting in his lap, he read a section from Genesis, reciting it slowly and deliberately as the children listened. Joseph had interpreted a dream of the Pharaoh as a prediction of an impending famine; but because Joseph prepared for this crisis, there was enough food saved to feed all of Egypt—he had planned ahead. Of course, as children often do, they began asking questions that were outside the story’s message. Why would God allow a famine to happen in the first place, and if it did happen, wouldn’t the people just die and go to heaven anyway? Thomas took a deep breath and patted each of his children on the head; they were everything to him, the heart and soul of the house, but someday would lose their innocence. He knew the unexpected often occurs; wars break out, economies falter, and fathers lose their jobs. Reality must be met by preparedness—Thomas kept stockpiling.

Ingenuity created ways of storing provisions so they would remain unseen, an effort to preserve an anxiety-free life. Camouflaging the supplies within the confines of the house, they remained out of sight of family and visitors. Simple end-tables in the recreation room were actually twenty-five gallon drums of water covered by table cloths; a lamp on one, a plant on another. Cubbyholes behind the entertainment center were filled with containers of dried milk along with cans of evaporated. Sacks of sugar were stored behind editions of old Harlequin novels on the bookshelves. After nailing up nets under the crawlspace to hold dried beans and other varieties of legumes, he had pulled the memo pad out of his pocket to make a note. ‘Toilet paper’ was added to the list.

He had also found a renewed interest in hunting. All the firearms had been moved to his mother's house when the children were born, but now that they were older, he didn't see any reason not to bring the guns back home. Aside from hunting, it would also be a good security measure, especially living in a mountain environment. Again the face of his wife reflected disapproval; the tight vertical lines in her lips making it appear as though they were sutured firmly together.

Before she took the children and left for her sister's house, those same lips opened without restraint, allowing a relentless barrage of rhetoric against his work. He had been outside installing metal bars on the windows, and as she spoke out to him, he met her protests with an unwavering pursuit to secure the house, doing his best to minimize her objections. He emphasized how important it was that they work together; making sure the house was safe and secure, and that the children understood the importance of his efforts—if she wasn't totally supportive, it would only weaken the family structure.

Now that they were gone, the anger over this conflict—and many other evaluations of him and his work—fueled his commitment. Phrases including, '...needs aggressive attitude ...lacks enthusiasm and proper planning ...might not be a good fit for this position,' burnt within Thomas' psyche, the disaster of his job the center of the scorching heat.

Thomas proceeded to the shed. Pieces of firewood scattered about the floor had remained untouched since last winter, and the musty smell of damp oak and pine permeated the room. Picking up the pieces of wood, he tossed them out the door where they bounced against a rusted wheelbarrow. After emptying the shed, it would be easy to sweep clean, then re-stack the wood, making room for the additional two cords to be delivered the following week.

Clearing a small pile from the corner of the shed, he noticed fluffy pink fibers poking between the wood, like cotton candy stuck between his children's fingers. Pushing a couple of logs off the pile, he uncovered a mass of the fibers woven in a circular pattern, the work of an industrious pack of mice. Thomas knelt down, studying the compactness of the nest—the efficient and frugal use of fiberglass insulation. Pine nuts, piled next to bits of dried dog food, looked like miniature loaves of bread, ready for delivery. He reached down and tore a piece of the material from the den. Letting it drop, he pulled out the memo pad from his shirt pocket, adding a reminder to check the insulation under the house and secure any loose screens on the vents, preventing any further damage.

With the wood removed, he swept the shed clean while little puffs of pink floated through the air, replacing the scattered snowflakes. The snow had stopped, the winter weather dissipating as an opening in the clouds allowed the sun to blanket the back patio, causing steam to ascend from warming pavement. Thomas wondered when his family would return; the weatherman had been wrong this time, but more winter storms were coming. Thomas knew they were out there.

Authors Note:

“Storm Door” portrays the life of a man, so dedicated in his attempt to protect his family, that his behavior actually ends up driving them away. Like many of my other short stories, the theme of obsession, and inability to clearly see the ‘big picture,’ is the driving force behind a situation filled with irony. The major cause of this man’s actions, is brought to light near the end of the story, where it is found out that he has lost his job.

I wrote this story shortly after 9-11, when there was a great concern of additional terrorist attacks being waged, resulting in the practice of ‘stockpiling’ supplies. Many people, myself included, thought that it might not be such a bad idea to be prepared for any possible emergency—I saw how easily it could be to fall into a paranoiac trap, and the only recourse I had was to exorcise my fears by writing this story! Another underlying theme deals with the reluctance to blindly support a questionable effort, even if it means not being ‘loyal to the cause.’

I received a favorable comment from one of the fiction editors of ‘The New Yorker,’ where a handwritten note included, “...really very beautifully presented and a pleasure to read...” It was later accepted for the 2K4 awards, and publication in “The Peralta Press.”