



“Cold Comfort”

By

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It was the cold that decided him. From his apartment in the city, high above the lights of the park, he felt none of it, not the wind that blew snow past his windows; not the dropping temperatures that etched lines on his windows in a blue like his grandfather’s eyes. He knew they felt it though, his grandparents, in their cramped, run-down house in the mountains. It wasn’t even a house, he thought. It was that insult to architecture, that blight on suburbia they called the manufactured home. The walls had been covered with framed family pictures, and the image of his own slightly buck-toothed self at the age of ten had startled him from its place in the hallway nearest the bathroom when he had visited.

At the age of forty-five, he was in the prime of his life and wanted nothing. He lived alone, so his meals were simple but fine. The lack of a family meant he had a disposable income that was large enough to make him feel somewhat ashamed when ads came on the radio, asking for donations to feed the homeless. He assuaged his conscience by sending out ridiculously extravagant presents at Christmas to his family members still living in the small town where he grew up.

His mother had called him that morning. She always called on Fridays. It was a routine they'd begun back in the days when he had worked part time as a mail clerk in the publishing firm that now bore his name.

"Daddy's feet are bothering him again," she'd said.

He'd adjusted his own size tens under his desk, snug and comfortable in their Italian leather wingtips. The state of his grandfather's feet was no news. In fact, he was certain he could catalogue both of his grandparent's physical ailments with accuracy. His mother updated him faithfully each week.

"He was going to have them removed but we've talked him out of it."

The newspaper he'd been holding fell onto the floor.

"Removed? Why on earth would they remove a ninety-two year old man's feet when he's as likely to die in his sleep tonight as he is to wake up tomorrow?"

His mother hadn't been upset by his blunt appraisal of the situation, just sighed and said she hoped it would happen soon. They were just so tired, all of them.

He sat now with this dinner finished, swirling the cognac in the wide bowl of the glass, breathing in the fumes of it. He set it aside and watched the lights below flicker as the trees bent and hid the yellow-orange lamp glow. It hurt to think of them in pain.

They were farmers, his family, generations of farmers as far back as anyone could recall. There wasn't a lot of love, not the kind you could see from the outside anyway, and there was never enough money, but life had a steady forward movement to it. They were the kind of people that didn't stand out but always showed up and got the job done. He was proud of them, or had been growing up. He had been the first in four generations to attend college, moving forward in a career that quickly drew a line between him and the rest. He still visited, but they spoke differently around him. Gone was the slang and the softened ends of words, the back-woods flavor to their stories. They spoke to him like he was a respected stranger.

On impulse, he switched on the television and turned to the weather channel. It would be below freezing over the weekend, with nine inches of snow predicted in the mountains. They would be stoking the woodstove all night to stay warm in their tin-walled home. The scent of chimney smoke came to him all at once, and he almost envied them.

He would visit. He decided it without thought, but the plan formed instantly. He would leave in the morning. He could stop at the market on the way, the one he loved that only sold meat from farms where animals were treated humanely, not as inmates in

a state prison with a death sentence looming. He would make them a grand meal. No, not a grand one, he amended, a good one, the kind of simple food that he'd been raised on.

He checked his watch, relieved that it was early enough still to call and advise them of his plans. They would be there, of course. Aside from frequent trips into town during the week to see this doctor or that one for her complaints or his, they had nowhere to go. His grandmother answered the phone. She was surprised to hear he wanted to come, and asked if he'd heard they were expecting a storm. He assured her his vehicle could handle the snow, but said he could always stay the night if it got too bad to drive in. She agreed, and it was done. All that was left was to get there.

He woke up feeling such a sense of lightness and purpose it made the blue skies superfluous. The roads were bare and dry the whole way into the mountains. When the trees began to thicken alongside and the shadows stretched across the pavement, the tires of his SUV slid as he rounded the corners. He slowed his speed and gripped the wheel a little tighter. His grandmother had taught him how to drive when he was eight years old, not tall enough to reach the pedals. She'd sat him on her lap and given him the wheel and the dirt of the long country road had curled out behind them as she hit the gas.

His grandmother had been a wild one at some point, he was sure. By the time he'd arrived there had only been tiny glimmers of it left, but he'd seen it. His grandfather was another story. He didn't have to look far to see where he'd got the ice-blue eyes and

the drive that made him vice president when men he'd hired on with were still working the sales desks. He put his attention back on the road, looking ahead through the snow that had begun to fall. A white, hand-stenciled sign was the only marker of the drive for his grandparent's home through the pine trees and into the open space where the manufactured house had been plunked down with all the grace and charm of a horse shit during a parade.

They had always had a dog, all the time he knew them, and it felt odd to drive into the yard where no tail was wagging, or no barking warned of his arrival. He gathered up his packages and went up the wooden steps to the front door. It opened before he could knock and his grandmother smiled at him with his mother's smile, stepping back to let him move past her. The smell of the house hit him hard and he breathed through his mouth. It stank of urine, and the sweat of pain. He sat his bags down and forced a hearty tone into his voice.

"I hope you're hungry. I brought enough to feed an army." His grandfather hadn't risen from his chair by the fire, and his grandmother spoke loudly his direction.

"John, did you hear him? Say hello, for goodness sake!" She looked apologetic when no sound came from the half-open mouth of the old man in the recliner.

"I don't know if your mother warned you, but he's not been himself lately." She rubbed the bulging knuckles of an arthritic hand, skin still tanned from fieldwork on a farm that had been gone before he went to college, and shook her head.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "She said he's been forgetting where he is sometimes. But he does remember who you are?"

She bunched up her mouth and shrugged.

"Sometimes its hard to tell."

He didn't know what to say to that, and so instead busied himself, emptying out the bags into the nearly empty refrigerator. He thought of his own kitchen at home with every possible indulgence, a good portion of which went straight into the trash at the end of the week as his housekeeper made way for fresh things. It comforted him to know he wouldn't have to worry about them now, and whether they had enough. When he straightened up, he saw that his grandfather had risen from his chair and was standing in the kitchen's doorway, hands behind his back and mouth pursed around a toothpick, rocking back and forth slightly on his heels. He watched carefully for a minute to be sure the rocking was intentional, and then smiled uncertainly, looking for signs that his grandfather knew who he was. He wouldn't blame him if he didn't; it had been too long since his last visit. His grandmother came back into the kitchen and pointed to the

cupboard that held her pots and pans, when he asked, though protesting that she ought to be the one cooking, as he was the guest.

“No, no,” he insisted. “I want to see if I can remember how you always used to make your soup for us. When it’s all done, you can tell me what I’ve missed.” He smiled at her, letting her see the boy he’d once been, though privately feeling grateful for the dental work he had paid for that ensured he no longer looked like the picture in the hallway. Or not entirely like the picture. His hair still stood up off his forehead in the same ridiculous poof that refused to be flattened. Some things could not be fixed.

His grandparents took their seats at the table, the same marbled yellow Formica he’d remembered from every summer spent at their home. The old people looked entirely content, watching him move around the shabby, cramped space, peeling carrots and potatoes, chopping onions, and adding herbs and spices to the broth bubbling in the big soup pot on the stove. Sometimes they talked, he and his grandmother, telling each other stories recalled from the years past, but mostly they each kept to their own silence. It was a comfortable space, where memories mixed with present, and the scent of cooking vegetables took the place of the more unpleasant scents that had hit him on entering this house. He knew he was doing the right thing.

The meal was a success. His grandmother assured him he hadn’t forgotten a thing; the soup was just as she’d always made it. She was not one for empty praise and only told the truth. He put her words away into a place deep inside where they would

remain safe. They didn't speak at all of the aches and pains, or the surgeries and illnesses. They pushed their empty plates forward to the center of the table and spoke about warmth and being content. He watched with satisfaction as they began to soften into their chairs, shoulders drooping and the lines of strain, the marks of pain that stayed even if they weren't spoken of, began to be erased.

He got up several times to add more wood to the stove, enjoying the feel of tending a living fire, something he didn't often get to do, as his apartment had central heating and everything for his comfort was automatic. They offered perfunctory protest, saying he was the guest and ought to relax and let them attend to it, but he told them he liked to do it, and he spoke the truth too. He cleaned the kitchen quickly, making it as meticulous as he knew his grandmother always liked things, as she had taught him to, and when he was finished, he turned back to the old people at the table.

His grandmother had bent forward and folded her arms on the tabletop and the shape of her head fit itself into the spaces of his heart that were cold. Her hair was in the same gentle perfectly formed curls she'd worn since she was eighteen years old and learned how to make pin curls with bobby pins in beauty school. Her shoulders rose and fell evenly, but slowly. His grandfather hadn't moved much from his earlier position, simply let his chin fall forward, the toothpick wobbling in his mouth with each breath exhaled. The man felt something heavy lift off his chest. They were feeling no pain.

The fire crackled as the flames found a pocket of pitch in the logs he'd put in, and made a soft whoosh as the heat expanded with its new fuel. He went to the front windows, standing as his grandfather had in the kitchen doorway, hands clasped behind him, rocking gently, watching the snow falling steadily. They would easily get the nine inches that had been predicted. The night was the soft sort of dark that wraps around fresh snow, a glowing blue-black that would make the roads glisten with unseen ice and prevent all but the most vital travel from occurring. There were no lights dotting the surrounding hillsides. There were no neighbors for miles. It was utterly silent.

He waited there in the still, tending the fire, until it was time to leave. His grandparents never changed positions, and the stillness moved from the wide-open sky of night and into this place where there had been pain and struggle, where dignity had been slowly giving way to a graceless slide into death. But now that was done. He rested a hand on each of them, in gratitude and in farewell, and took his coat from its peg on the wall next to his grandfather's old felt hat with the feather in the brim. On impulse, he put the hat on his head and adjusted the fire one more time. He could hear the roar of it even before he closed the door with a quiet click of finality.

Pills rattled in the bottle in his jacket pocket as he went down the steps, and he tucked his hand inside the warmth, clutching the prescription bottle with his name on it tightly. His car pulled smoothly down the drive as the first of the flames began to snake around the open door of the stove and lick at the frayed rug on the hearth. Snow fell on the silence and he drove back home where he never felt the cold.

