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Winter of the White Dog

Mary wouldn't let him be. She pulled into the driveway, churning autumn leaves and pine needles under her tires.

Morning sun shines down through pine trees and fir trees. Purl had been splitting kindling. He leaned the axe against the pile of kindling, brushed off the splitting block, and sat down on it. He smiled at Mary as she got out of the car. He soaked up the warm sunshine.

But she didn't respond to his smile. She started in again. "Dad, you shouldn't split wood."

"Well, I cut the trees down, and I cut them into blocks and loaded and hauled and unloaded and stacked the wood, and I never stopped to ask you if I should or shouldn't, so I didn't think I needed to ask if you thought I should or shouldn't split it."

"I wish you'd sell this place and move to town."

"I know what you wish. You've told me often enough that I remember, even if I am old and my mind slips like your automatic transmission does when you let the fluid get too low."

"Dad..."

"Mary, come in and sit down. You look tired."

"How can you even get up the walk? You've got wood everywhere."

"It's always like this in autumn, remember? The leaves turn color and fall. All the geese fly out of the valley heading south, and I have wood all over the yard.

"That side of the walk is all green pine. I have to stack it where it will dry. Can't burn it for quite a while yet. These piles are dry red fir, ready to use for the heater, except for splitting the biggest ones. I'll stack it and cover it. Up there, dry pine for the cook stove. It looks messy to you, but I'm sorting and organizing it, and to me, it's all part of an orderly plan."

"You could hire a young man to get your wood for you, or you could buy wood and have it delivered already seasoned and split."

"And then what would I do with the time I usually put into getting my winter's wood? Watch more television? Read more? What would I do for

exercise, join a jogging club? I enjoy getting wood.”

In an unimpeded conversation, Purl might have said, “My eyes aren’t what they used to be. Too much reading or too much television, I get a headache. I could sit indoors and wish your mother hadn’t passed on, drive myself down into sorrow even after eight years. Sometimes I am dreadfully lonely.”

But with Mary, lately, he censored what he said. She would seize the opportunity. “See a doctor about your eyes. Move to town. You’re too far away. You’re too old to be all by yourself, this far away from everybody.”

Purl said, “Come on in and sit down, Mary. Sit down. I’ll make some tea. You must have had a rough week.”

“Fifty-five hours. Eight deaths. Eight in one week. That’s an all-time record for the hospital, and every one on my shift.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why should I tell you about it? You have a morbid mind, to be so interested in death.”

He chuckled and put the cup of tea down in front of her. He touched her hand, which startled her, and he sat down across the table from her. “I’m not very interested. You seem more agitated than usual, and I thought it might be some relief to you to talk about it, to get it off your chest by talking about it.”

“It won’t get off my chest. I’m not agitated because all those people died on my shift. People die, that’s all. I’m agitated.... you know what I’m agitated about. I’m agitated about you staying up here all by yourself, with winter coming on.”

“How’s Bill doing?”

“Okay. He’s away for three weeks this time. Clear to Florida. A week and a half to go.”

“You worry about him, don’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I probably would. But I wouldn’t take it out on my parents. I’d just figure they’d done the best they could for as long as they could, and I’d leave it at that.”

“That is not what’s happening. I worry about you. Well, are we going to town or not?”

“I need to go to town. But I could forego the trip if you plan to keep

lecturing me all the way there and back.”

“No. I’ve said what I have to say. Let’s go.”

Halfway to town, Purl said, “Mary, if this trip to town twice a month crowds your schedule, I could ride in with someone coming down the ridge and save you the time.”

“No, Dad. I like to do it. It’s a chance to spend some time together. You’re right, you know, I let other things that bother me get mixed up in our conversations, and I work out some of my frustrations by lecturing you. I don’t mean to do that. One thing I like about the trips to town is, you help me see what is bothering me and get it sorted out until I realize worrying and getting upset doesn’t get me anywhere. I’m always a lot calmer when we get back than I am when we start out.”

What stayed in Purl’s mind from that trip was not the conversations they had, nor where they went, nor what they bought, but rather something he almost didn’t see and didn’t understand at first.

After they got what he needed at the hardware store, Mary turned wide to pass a pickup double-parked just around the corner. Purl saw the man standing in the street, putting on his gloves. Something about what he saw disturbed Purl, but he didn’t know what it was until they were halfway to the grocery store.

The pickup was from the animal shelter, and the man had been putting on his gloves to pick up a dog’s body and put it in the back of the pickup. Purl had seen the nearly shapeless body in the gutter, but he hadn’t realized what it was until he reviewed what he had seen and deducted what sense he could from it. He wondered what they did with animal carcasses. Did they take them to the dump? Did they bury them? Did they try to find the owner?

Winter hit. Below-zero nights and days that rose only to about twenty degrees descended on the mountain. Purl only went outdoors for short times and worked briefly at necessary chores.

He saw the little white dog on the snow by the shop when he went out late afternoon for another armload of wood. The dog saw him and crawled under the shop. Purl tried to coax him out, “Come out, little dog. You can come in the house where it’s warm, and I’ll give you something to eat. It’s too cold outdoors for a little dog like you are.” But the dog wouldn’t come out.

He knew it didn't belong to anyone on the ridge. Maybe someone had brought it up the road and abandoned it.

He took out some meat and some soup he'd had simmering on the stove. He hoped the smell of food would bring the little white dog out, but he didn't come out.

After dark, Purl took a flashlight and looked under the shop. He coaxed and called and talked softly, but all he said and all he offered didn't bring the dog out. Then Purl was exhausted, and he had to give up and go to bed.

He had a dream. Winter wind howled and tore at him. A woman cried aloud at the despair of her living. He woke, and the howling went on. He got up and put wood in the stove, then looked at the thermometer. Five degrees outside.

He dressed. He walked out to the garage, started his pickup, drove it around, and shone the headlights on the back wall of the shop. He went into the shop and got his flat bar and hammer. "I wish I'd felt up to doing this earlier, little dog, while it was still light. I thought you would come out. I think you must be sick or injured, and I didn't realize that before. My mind is too slow. Maybe Mary is right, and I'm too old."

In the light from the headlights, he removed the skirting from the back of the shop. The dog howled without interruption. Nails screeched coming out of the wood. He laid the boards on the snow. He had cut the trees and milled the boards to build the shop, more than forty years before, and the boards were still sound. Even in heavy gloves, his fingers got cold fast, handling the cold steel tools.

"Lots of noise up here, little dog. I'm going to get you out of there and take you in where it's warm."

He lay down, pulled himself with hands and elbows under the floor, and gently pulled the dog back out with him.

The little, dirty, white dog didn't vary its high-pitched, despairing howling as he carried it across the yard, into the house, and lay it in a cardboard box he had padded with rags. He went out, drove the pickup back into the garage, shut it off, and plugged in the block heater. Then he went into the house, spread newspapers and an old, clean rug on the table and put the dog on the table and examined him.

"Easy now, dog. Just relax. You don't seem to have any broken bones. Here. If you won't drink, I'll pour a little warm water down your throat."

He gave it warm water and then bouillon. About two o'clock in the morning, the dog quit howling, whimpered a while, and then was quiet. He panted but made no effort to move nor to look around.

Purl sat in his rocking chair by the stove and took the dog onto his lap. The dog relaxed more. Purl fell asleep and didn't wake until daylight. The little dog licking his hand woke him. Purl stroked him gently. The dog began to pant very rapidly and then died. Purl sat for a while before he lifted the dog and put him down on the rug by the stove.

"Little dog, I had a Siamese cat named Cindy. She lived with me for sixteen years. She was blind the last three of those years, and she just got more and more feeble until she passed on last spring. I'm going to bury you out there beside her."

He shoveled snow aside and buried the dog's body and covered the grave with boards so nothing could dig it up. He shoveled the snow back over the boards and smoothed it out a little. In the spring, he would replace the boards with rocks.

He thought a lot about the little dog in the next few days.

When Cindy died, he had been terribly lonely, but he had decided not to get another cat. There was no sense to a man as old as he was getting a kitten. He wouldn't be there to take care of it through its entire life, as he had been with Cindy, so it wasn't fair to start.

Wednesday, when Mary and Bill showed up to take him to town, he was ready and got into the car as soon as they pulled into the driveway. "Well, Dad, you're looking in good shape this morning, and busting out like you've got something special going."

"Well, I do have. After we get all the other shopping done, I want to go by the Animal Shelter. I called them, and they have some long-haired Siamese-cross kittens they need to find homes for. People don't want them as much as they want the purebreds, and if they don't find homes for them, they have to put them to sleep."

"Dad, I remember you saying you weren't going to get another kitten."

"And I'm not, Mary. I'm going to get two or three. Maybe four if they can't find homes for any of them. And they have another, older cat there that was abandoned and injured. They say she's part Siamese, and I'm probably going to bring her home too."

Mary said, "Dad, my goodness, how many cats can you keep?"

Bill grinned and steered the car down through the curves.

Purl said, "I don't know. Several, I think. Possibly many." He felt strong. The world was less weight to him than it had been. He patted Mary's shoulder and hugged her over against him. She looked up at him, startled, then leaned against him in response and smiled at him, a smile that never faded all the way down the mountain to town.