

Bread and Water

When Hobie LeBlanc arrived at Arceneaux's Grocery Store the clogged check-out lines reached all the way back into the shopping aisles. He crowded his way into the store but couldn't find any unused shopping carts. As Hobie stood there weighing his options a young mother pulling a crying toddler by the wrist hobbled toward him. When the pair shuffled past, one of the kid's shoes caught on Hobie's bootlace. The kid tripped, tumbled into a ball, and fell sprawled out on the floor at Hobie's feet.

"Gawd almighty, I'm sorry 'bout that," he told the boy's mother.

She hardly noticed, lifting the screaming child up by the arm and then tugging him along toward the produce aisle with even greater urgency. Hobie looked down, noticed his work-boot was untied, its haggard brown lace trailing alongside the cuff of his camo pants leg. Shit. He wasn't about to waste time bending and tying, not with his back the way it was.

Every part of your body failed at a different rate when you got old. Eyes no good for reading, then your back's no good for hard work, then every single joint feels like it has a headache. Even Hobie's ears weren't sharp as they used to be. The grocery store echoed with a muffled buzz like a crowd milling around at a Mardi Gras parade. Hobie

waded into the fray, shouldering past some folks huddled around the fruits and vegetables and then he high-tailed it back to the water aisle.

The whole place was gutted. The only water containers left were three-gallon plastic cubes with ungainly dispensing spigots and molded plastic handles on top. Hobie strode over and grabbed two. They weighed more than he would have liked given he'd just started shopping, but so be it. He was late to the game. This never would've happened if Irene were still alive. She would've had Hobie to the grocery as soon as the weather lady said the hurricane was headed their way. A year and a half since she'd passed, and still one more reason to wish she was still with him. Add that to an infinity of reasons. Hobie never ran out of them—reasons dancing around him like angels on the head of a pin, raindrops in a thunderstorm.

The water taken care of, he made his way over to where they kept the bread. Same story. No loaves of sliced bread to be found, but there must have been a fresh delivery of Reising's French bread just arrived. Dozens of long red and white baguette bags laid stacked on a corner rack, three or four eager souls helping themselves to a couple of loaves each. Hobie put down one of his waters on an empty shelf and then wrestled his way over, eventually managing to nab two loaves. They still smelled like fresh sweet dough, like some tiny part of the city that had remained sane.

Why the hell did people buy bread before a storm anyway? Didn't make sense really. But then Hobie had to laugh. For sure, Irene would have told him to get bread. A memory of an Easter Sunday poured over him, of his wife serving up a loaf of hot French bread and him carrying in a big tureen of her special recipe seafood gumbo from the

kitchen. Perhaps bread was more of an idea than it was food, the rich familiar taste of it like comfort in your mouth, like four sturdy walls and roof over your head.

Hobie stopped trying to make sense of bread, tucked the loaves under his left arm and retreated to where he'd left his other water container. It was gone. Goddammit! He gazed up and down the aisle, but saw no one with a clumsy water cube like the one he was carrying. Who would do a thing like that in an emergency? He snorted away his disgust and set to finishing up.

Everywhere people, frantic people with glazed-over blank eyes and pursed lips, rushing aisle-to-aisle, trying to find whatever it was they considered essential. Not just bread and water. Baby food. Diapers. Peanut butter. Hamburger meat. Oranges. Did Hobie have those same eyes, the ones that ignored everyone while they spied for the next item on the list? He weaved around a blurred array of people as they brushed past him. Burly guys in baseball caps, women with babies in their arms, kids excited by the wonder of seeing chaotic adults, all this frenzied activity covered up with a thin plywood veneer of normalcy, and the promise of thunder in the wind.

One thing left on Hobie's list: batteries. He headed toward the back of the grocery store, wondering how he was going to carry everything he needed back to the check out, and how long he was going to have to wait in line. He marched down the rear aisle, peering up each of the rows until he spotted a battery display and then bee-lined his way to the near-empty flashlight and battery shelves. There were still a few packs of *Ds* left. Hobie grabbed three four-packs, as many as he could hold with his free hand, and then scooted down toward the front end of the store to find the shortest check-out lane. Two steps before the end of the aisle he tripped.

His chest hit the floor first, then his chin. The French bread under his arm crunched and the packages of batteries flew off to God knows where. He managed to keep hold of the water container. Hobie lifted his head and righted himself, his left elbow propped up underneath him, his brain spinning cartwheels. He swung his legs around and sat there, rolling his head back and forth, trying to shake off the pain of the bruising fall, too embarrassed to go looking for the batteries. Goddamned shoe lace.

An older black woman with dark wide eyes and an empathetic smile came over to him. She was carrying one of his battery packs. “You all right, dawlin’?” she asked him, clutching his shoulder.

“Yeah. Fine.”

She squeezed and gently moved him side to side.

“You sure you don’t need some help?” she asked.

“Naw, I’m all right, really,” said Hobie, struggling to his feet.

The lady kept right on talking to him, her eyes focused on Hobie’s groceries. “Well, I see you got enough French Bread there to last you through the storm. I always say, French Bread and some butter’s like your home and your family all wrapped up in love.” The woman’s smile was a comfort. For a moment Hobie forgot his pain. “Don’t you worry now,” she told him. “You gonna be all right, trust me.”

The woman handed him the package of batteries, patted Hobie’s shoulder and then took her place back in line. No one else seemed to care about, or even notice his tumble. Mayhem. So much activity teeming through the place it didn’t surprise anyone, an old man tripping and falling, spilling out like water onto the floor.

Hobie looked around. Whoever had found his other two packages of *D* batteries must have kept them for themselves. Animals. The whole civilized world turned to animals in a crisis. Noah would've had no trouble filling his ark up in here.

Hobie got up and shuffled over to the nearest check-out lane without bothering to check if it was the shortest. There were more than ten people in line in front of him. Human nature never changed. Things get worse as time grows short. But this time—this time he had to admit he'd brought catastrophe down upon himself. He'd waited too long. How many times had he done this? A dozen? He knew better than to wait until the last minute. Damn his pig-headed stupidity.

This was how it always was before a storm.

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The final 4-by-8 sheet of plywood went up without a problem. Hell, the frames outside the picture window still had the nail holes from the last time he'd had to batten down the hatches. A wind-driven drizzle pelted Hobie's slicker as the dim remnants of the afternoon faded to gray, handing the night over to whatever chaos was on the horizon. The air smelled tangy, that metallic ozone scent, water so fresh you want to hold open your mouth and catch the drops on your tongue.

Hobie retreated inside his storage shed and stowed his hammer and the remaining nails back in his toolbox. He slid his hand underneath the top tool tray, removed his long stainless-steel flashlight and flicked it on, just to make sure it still worked. A steady beam of blue light flooded the shed. He had whatever juice remained, plus the four batteries

he'd bought at the grocery store to hold him over. He shut off the flashlight and went inside, locking up the tool shed behind him.

Nothing to do now but wait. The channel six weather lady was going on about storm tracks and storm surges and strike possibilities. Hobie sat down at the kitchen table and cut a slice off one of his loaves of French bread, slathering on a pat or two of soft margarine before crunching into it with his teeth. Sweet Jesus, was there anything that tasted better than French bread and butter? Emergency rations, Cajun style.

The phone rang. Hobie swallowed before marching over and picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Dad? Are you OK?" It was his son, Richie.

"Hell, yeah. I just finished tackin' up the last of the plywood. I'm holdin' on. How you doin', Son?"

"Dad." There was a long pause before Richie continued. "Dad, we're leavin'. We're goin' up to Baton Rouge, and stay at my friend, Frank's."

"All right then."

"No, Dad. You don't understand. This is supposed to get real bad. I'm calling you because I think you ought'a come on with us."

"Aw, now son, I seen a bunch 'a these things, and I ain't never cleared out for a blessed one of 'em. That Betsy was the worst, and I ain't left my house and home for that."

Hobie wore his victories over hurricanes like badges of courage, as if each storm's onslaught was a Redcoat attack he'd successfully repulsed. Nature wasn't going

to take back what he'd fought so hard to secure. Katrina? Who came up with the names for these things anyway?

"You never know, Dad. They say if the storm comes ashore east of the city the levees are sure to give way. That surge comes up from the Rigolets and you'll be up to your ass in ten feet of water."

"That ain't never happened before."

"But, if it does..."

"If it does then I'll be a monkey's uncle, but for sure, I ain't leavin' my home 'cause of some wind and rain."

There was another long silence. "It's obvious I can't talk sense to you."

"Now, what kind of thing is that to say..."

"Dad, this ain't like them other storms. You been watchin' the news at least? They're sayin' category five. That's as bad as it ever gets. It could be real serious."

"You know how many times I heard that song and dance, Son? You remember Camile? Category five. That was gonna come right up the river. Destroy the city. Remember what happened? Nothin'."

"That was only because it turned at the last minute."

"Well, all's I know is they said it's gonna hit out by Slidell. That's forty miles away for Christ's sake. I ain't leavin'. But, you go 'head on and run up to Baton Rouge if that makes you feel better. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Again, Richie fell silent on the other end of the line. Finally he spoke up. "I'll call you, Dad. You take care of yourself now."

"You too, Son."

Hobie hung up the receiver and stood there in his kitchen, staring out of the window over the sink at the ancient oak tree in his front yard. Gnarled black roots coiled up around its base jutted from the loamy wet ground like tiny flood walls holding the standing water from the yard at bay. The tree branches whipped about like the arms of a drowning swimmer. That oak tree was Irene's favorite, the thing she liked most about their property. Hobie built her a bench swing that hung out under its most sturdy limb, the swing's seat now swaying to and fro in the steadily strengthening wind. The gales howling against the eaves of their home sounded for a second like Irene, cackling with joy as Hobie and his son pushed her higher and higher, the contraption's rusty chains straining to keep her tied to the earth.

Thirty minutes after he'd hung up the phone he was still staring out of the window at that swing. He'd almost managed to tear himself away when a set of blue headlights lit the front yard and a red Chevy SUV pulled up into the driveway—his son's vehicle. Aw, shit. What now?

Hobie unlocked the back door, put on his slicker and walked out under the carport. The rain was driving harder now, whipping past the corner of the house in gusty waves. The sky flickered with a flash of lightning as he walked out toward the SUV. A clap of thunder thudded only a few seconds following the flash. Hobie took a moment to cover up his head with his slicker's hood. The driver's side window powered down as Hobie leaned in toward his son's face. Inside the cab, Richie's wife, Jo Ann, sat with a tight-lipped grimace on her face and two fretful black wells for eyes. Hobie's six-month old grandson, Leif, laid sleeping in the car seat just behind her.

"Dad. You've gotta come with us," Richie said, raising his voice above the storm.

“Boy, you are one stubborn sum ‘bitch.”

“Yeah,” said Richie, smiling wide. “I wonder where I get that from?”

“I tol’ ya, I’ll be all right. I’m like that old oak tree. I got roots here, Son.”

Richie laughed out loud. “I bet if that oak tree could move it’d pull itself up by the roots right now and clear the hell outta here.”

Hobie rubbed at his cheek, felt at the dull ache emanating from the bruise on his chin.

Richie kept on talking, a little louder than he had before. “C’mon and get in the truck with us. We’re goin’ out Highway 90 and see if we can’t get up to Baton Rouge that way while there’s still time.”

Every wind gust brought with it a wave of rain, the gale-driven drops peppering Hobie’s face with the sting of BBs fired from an air gun. His slicker popped and crackled each time a bead of water made an impact. Inside his hood the sound was mesmerizing, like being trapped on the inside of a popcorn machine. Hobie just stood there, thinking of all the reasons he should stay, trying to figure whether each one was an anchor or a life raft.

He leaned in closer to Richie. “Your mama’s buried right down the street, down at the church graveyard. I figure if anything was to happen I ought not be too far away from her.”

“Hobie, please,” Jo Ann said, craning her head over to the driver’s side window.

The thought of Irene’s funeral service, the smell of those white roses, her picture set atop the casket—closed because of how bad the cancer had ravaged her body—it was

more than a memory. The hurt of it twisted around Hobie's heart. He couldn't leave her now. Not after all they'd been through together.

"I bought her that gravestone," Hobie said. "It's got her portrait on it, laser etched, her sittin' on the swing, swingin' out under this oak tree," he said, pointing. "Our oak tree. This is my home, Jo Ann, and I don't think I can leave it behind. Thank you, kindly for lookin' out for me though."

Jo Ann sunk back over into the passenger seat and started crying. Richie leaned away from Hobie, and then, craning forward, he squinted hard into the rain-hazed darkness, staring out at the beams of his headlights, almost like he was trying to see his way forward.

Hobie felt bad for Richie. For the first time since Hobie's wife died the loneliness felt wrong, not like a pain that was his alone, but more like a barrier between him and his son. Fighting to stay when Richie was leaving felt like a wedge between them. Wasn't right him having words with his son right before a storm, but Hobie still couldn't see parting with his whole world. He'd spent so many years building up the memories tied to this place it seemed they'd somehow sunk down deep inside everything around him.

Finally, Richie turned and stared up into Hobie's eyes. "You know, gravestones ain't for the dead."

"No?" Hobie's chin throbbed in the cold rain. "How you mean, Son?"

"You don't buy a gravestone for someone who dies." Richie reached out with his hand and latched onto the collar of his father's shirt, pulling him in closer to his face. Hobie could smell something sweet on his son's breath, like cold pop in the summertime. The urgency of his son's grasp surprised him. Richie spoke in a deep voice, deeper than

Hobie ever remembered him speaking before. “Gravestones are for the living, Dad. They’re markers, for your family. So’s they can find their way back to a place.” Richie’s eyes searched through what he’d just said. Then he added, “But home ain’t a place.”

Hobie stood there, amidst the crackle of the raindrops, the tops of his work boots soaking wet, his feet cold. He looked inside the SUV at Jo Ann. She wiped her eyes and turned to stare at the baby, still asleep in the back seat.

Richie kept on hacking away at him. “This ain’t just about *your* roots, Dad.” Richie let go of him and turned in his seat. “You see that little boy back there? To him roots ain’t a place, at least not yet. *You’re* his roots. You drown clingin’ on to your rooftop in the night and he ain’t never gonna have a chance to know where he came from—ain’t never gonna know his own grandpa.”

Roots. Shared blood. Life held on to Hobie in a way he never knew it could, its invisible tendrils like the veins running throughout his body. All a man ever has that’s worth a damn is his family. Maybe Richie’s little boy needed to know that. Maybe Hobie needed to think more that way right now. He scoured his memory. Hobie had never weathered a storm alone. Hell, he hadn’t lived alone in near fifty years, and he was no damned good at it anyway. The picture of him lying on his ass helpless in the middle of Arceneaux’s Grocery Store kept flashing in his head.

“C’mon, Dad,” Richie shouted at him. “We’ll come back, no matter what. I promise.” Jo Ann wiped away tears from the bridge of her nose, and then stared back gravely into Hobie’s eyes. His whole marriage, 47 years, he never saw Irene cry scared, not the way Jo Ann was crying now.

“All right,” said Hobie. “Give me a minute.” Hobie leaned back from the window, taking a few clumsy steps away at first, and then he trotted as fast as he could toward the house. Inside he took a look around, thought about his things, what to save—clothes and guns, family picture albums, official papers, tools and flashlights. He could hear Irene telling him only to bring what’s important. Hobie tried hard to get his bearings, to take good stock, but after a minute roaming around the house he walked back into the kitchen, looked down at the table and smiled. He arrived back out at Richie’s SUV carrying a kitchen knife, two fresh loaves of French bread and a tub of margarine. Hobie opened the back door and climbed inside next to his grandson.

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