

Another Blizzard

Maricela and Bill were in the stockroom of the hardware store talking when Craig arrived.

“...gets me when we have these runs,” Bill was telling Maricela. “We’re almost out of snow shovels and people are buyin’ flashlights and batteries like there’s no tomorrow. Every year there’s storms like this and people are always surprised.” He shook his head.

Maricela nodded agreement and glanced at Craig. The flesh on her cheekbones pooched out slightly and her eyelids arched—he knew she was smiling at him inside her mask. She was tall with dark skin and jaw length straight black hair. Only a few months ago she had turned sixty. Craig’s first thought was, as always, *‘Wow, she looks good’*.

Her eyes sparkled for a moment and then she was back to business: “You two are closing tonight, and two of the others are staying. It’s going to be busy with all these last minute shoppers. Any questions before I go?”

“Tomorrow morning,” Bill said, “I don’t know if I can get here to open, or if any of the others will. I’ve got my snowmobile at home ready, but if this thing hits like they’re sayin, after midnight, it’ll still be goin in the mornin.”

“Call me,” she replied. “I don’t want anybody out in it before it’s over. If you, of all people, can’t get here, won’t be any customers anyway.” Bill nodded.

“We’ve still got two generators,” Craig said. “Should be able to sell those before closing. Always somebody who panics and wants a backup.” It had been true as long as Craig had owned the store. Last minute crisis buying.

“Yeah,” agreed Maricela, “We’re here to serve, but not at a discount.” Craig smiled. She’s all business, he thought. In the five years since he had retired and she took over as manager he had not regretted the change for even a minute. When she got home at night and needed to vent about the employees or the customers or just the workload he was there for her. Craig had run the store for years, decades, and knew the grind—day in and day out. He kept his hand in, working occasionally when she needed extra help in busy seasons or, like this afternoon, when they expected a pre-storm rush.

Bill went back out into the store and Maricela smiled again at Craig. “I’m outa here. I’ll pick my stuff up at home be at Mama’s by six. She leaned close and kissed him through their masks. “Love you.”

“Love you too. I’ll call when I get home,” he replied, thinking ‘*Damn masks*’, and patting the back of her denim jeans as she turned to go.

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Craig left the store at seven-thirty. Lunch had been late so he was only beginning to be hungry. He took his time, driving carefully through the light flurries that were precursors of the storm. Maricela going to stay with her mother was a good thing: Zuri lived alone and this would be a barn-burner of a storm. Power would be out for who knew how long. She was in in her middle eighties and vigorous but winter storms sometimes frightened her. Maricela knew how to run the generator could keep a couple of rooms

warm with electric heaters, all of which had come from the store over the years. There was a camp stove, too, so they could make hot meals if the power was out.

Becky couldn't do any of that, Craig mused. She didn't care about the store or anything in it as long as it paid the bills. She couldn't have run a payroll or kept her mother warm and safe in a storm. Yeah, she was a stay-at-home mom until Teddy (Really, still 'Teddy'? The guy is almost forty now, with a wife and children. Show some respect: 'Ted'.) was in middle school. She went to work for the County and dumped me for one of her co-workers the year Ted graduated high school. Christ. That was out of left field. Didn't see it coming at all. Running the store was a lot of work and I was up to my eyeballs. We had some good times. Becky could be a real firecracker. I guess we just got lazy. Sucks that Covid got her, almost at the beginning, a year and a half now. The kids were stricken. I'm glad they like Mari, so we could all grieve together. Mari's great. She takes charge, gets things done, and she loves me. I am one lucky old guy.

Craig arrived home with a smile on his face and parked in the garage. Outside, new snow was beginning to cover the three feet that had accumulated so far this season. He took his dinner out of the fridge and put it in the microwave. That was one of the good things about retirement, or semi-retirement: Maricela worked and he cooked so he usually got what he liked. Fifteen years and he was getting better at her Puerto Rican recipes, but tonight was wintertime comfort food: leftover pot roast with potatoes, carrots, and gravy.

He phoned Maricela: "Mari," he asked, "you two okay? Settled in?"

"We're great, honey. Mama made pastelón to keep us warm. Just the thing for a stormy night." Craig knew Zuri was a fantastic cook.

“Oh, I’m jealous,” he replied. “Save me a left over, if there is any.’

“Come and shovel Mama’s driveway and maybe she’ll give you some.” Maricela was laughing.

Craig laughed, too. Not at his age was he shoveling someone else’s snow, not even his mother-in-law’s. “Busy last couple of hours at the store, but it went well. Sold one of the generators.”

“Good,” she replied. “Thanks for helping out.” She paused. “I gotta go. Mama’s program is starting. Take care of yourself and stay warm. I’ll call you in the morning.”

They said their goodbyes and Craig took his dinner to the living room, turned on the television, and settled down to watch a basketball game.

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When he awoke next morning the faint light of day was bleeding in around his bedroom curtains. Wind was beating on the walls and roof and storm windows. In the living room he pulled back the drapes from the big picture window to look at the blizzard. Neither the trees along his street nor even the picket fence at the sidewalk were visible. He put more fuel into the wood stove.

It was like being inside a snow globe. Even though it was expected, the storm struck him as unusually fierce. There had been one like this over twenty years ago. It had come at mid-day when Becky was still at work. She called from the public works yard where she was a dispatcher and said he shouldn’t worry. She would stay and help out with the storm response. He was home because he had closed the store almost as soon as it opened, what with of the storm warning. Then the phones went down so all he could do was wait. And wait.

Craig made a simple cold breakfast and turned his chair to watch the storm as he ate off a TV tray. The wind wailed but the snow was silent. Snow flew and spiraled and made little tornados outside the window. He wondered if any of it actually landed on the ground as it seemed to be going up as much as coming down. It swirled across his field of view. The effect was hypnotic.

Was someone out there? In one of the swirls, there and not there. A gray movement in the white turbulence. Leaning against the wind, slogging through the whiteout toward the house? Becky? Was she home, finally?

Craig sat up straight and shook off the drowsiness. Nothing. He must be losing his grip. No fool like an old fool he thought as he got up and took the dishes to the kitchen.

His cell phone rang—Maricela.