

The Storm and the Farmer's Daughter

by Donald Firesmith

It's Halloween evening, and I know what's coming. My grandchildren are out collecting candy from my neighbors, and soon the little ones will be barging back through my door in their costumes and with their bags and plastic cauldrons full of goodies of all descriptions. They'll pour their sugary treasures out all over my floor and loudly tell me about which houses had the best decorations and who gave out the best treats. Then, when they start to settle down, my daughter-in-law will bring in cups of hot chocolate and steaming apple cider, and I know it won't be long. Everyone will gather around my recliner, and soon, one of my children will ask me to tell them 'The Story.' And I'll smile and think back to that trip so long ago. I'll close my eyes, and begin...

It was the day before Thanksgiving, and I'd been driving ever since well before dawn, stopping only when I had to for gas or to quickly use the facilities at some fast food restaurant I'd passed along the way. But most of the time, I just ate in my car and drove on. It was a long way from where I went to college to my parent's place in Chicago, and I had little time to spare if I was to be able to be home for my family's traditional feast. To tell the truth, although I really loved the freedom that came with being away at school, I was more homesick than I would have admitted to my friends and was eagerly looking forward to my mother's cooking after eating each meal in the college cafeteria.

And so the day slowly passed as my battered old car trudged up and down the mountains between me and my home. I'd crossed the Sierra Nevada's by midmorning and the Rockies by early evening. As it neared midnight and the first few flakes of snow began to fall, I was finally forced to realize that my plans for driving non-stop to Chicago had been wildly overoptimistic. Trying to make up time, I left my original highway and drove cross-country towards one that would take me more directly towards home. But, my plans quickly proved disastrous. Had I been listening to the local radio stations instead of my car's CD player, I would have learned that the first big snowstorm of the season had been barreling westward towards me. Only a few minutes before, the snow had just been drifting gently down. But it quickly grew thick and began to blow sideways, so that the brights of my car lights merely made it harder to see. Then, the balding tires my old car began loosening their grip on the icy road, making it almost impossible for me to steer. And it didn't help that I was getting incredibly tired and starting to nod off at the wheel.

And so the inevitable happened.

My eyes closed briefly, and by the time I reopened them, my car was already drifting off the road. Before I could do anything, I slid to a stop in some farmer's field with barbed wire wrapped around the front of my car. Angrily placing it in reverse, I tried to back up onto the road. But the tires just spun on the icy ground, and I was stuck.

Except for my headlights peering off through uncounted thousands of falling snowflakes, it was totally dark. It was then that I realized that I hadn't passed a farmhouse or car for at least an hour, not since I'd left the freeway for the isolation of that straight backcountry road. I began to worry. My gas gauge nearly on empty, and I would surely run out of gas before dawn if I kept the engine running. But if I didn't, I could well

freeze to death. Because I knew that I'd have everything I needed once I reached home, I hardly brought anything with me. Certainly, I didn't have any blankets or winter clothes to wrap up in.

So I didn't have much hope when I turned off the car lights to see if there were any signs of a nearby farmhouse or the lights of some small town reflecting off the low clouds streaming overhead. But all I saw was darkness and all I heard was the soft sounds of snow blowing against the windshield. I had no choice but to leave the engine running, the heater on, and to wait out the night. I wrapped my thin jacket tightly around me, leaned back, and eventually drifted like the snow into a deep black sleep.

Then, something woke me up. At first, I wasn't sure what it was. Then the silence and the cold made it clear. The engine had stopped running. I tried starting it again, but the engine just turned over without catching. I turned on the dash lights, and saw that the gas gauge on empty. I turned off the lights and sat in the darkness, disgusted at myself for not stopping sooner to refill the tank. Then, something, I don't know what, seemed to call to me, prompting me to look once more out into the darkness and the falling snow.

Far off, at the edge of sight, I seemed to see a pale cold light that flickered briefly, half hidden behind the falling snow. It disappeared. Desperately, I used the sleeve of my jacket to rub my side of the window free from the frost that was freezing onto it. And then, I saw it again, brighter this time as if the curtain of snow had briefly parted in the freezing air between us.

Desperate times require desperate measures. Though I had heard many times that it was safer to stay in your car when stuck in the snow, I also knew that no one knew where I was and that the road I was on was little traveled. I decided to abandon my car and place my fate in that flickering light in the night.

I opened his car door and the cold air nearly drove me back inside. Then, steeling my courage, I ignored the icy bite of the tiny flakes on my bare skin and headed out into the darkness.

After a hundred yards or so, I could see the source of the light. It was a large old farmhouse, set well back from the road between two huge oak trees, the only trees I'd seen for miles in that flat Kansas countryside. The light was a large candle burning in a downstairs window. Were it not for the lack of all other sources of light and my eyes being totally adjusted to the darkness, I never would have seen it. I walked as fast as I could, with the cold cutting through my coat and biting into my bones.

Finally, I was standing in front of the huge old house. I trudged up the steps onto its covered porch, stomped my feet to remove some of the snow that had caked onto my socks, opened the screen, and knocked on the door.

Nothing happened.

I pounded again, as hard as my freezing hands would let me, but again the only answer was the loud booming of my knocking reverberating through the darkened house.

Then I saw a flickering light approach through the stained glass window in the door and it opened.

A beautiful, young girl, nearly my own age, stood in the darkened doorway. She held an oil lamp in one hand and used the other to wrap her thin robe more closely around her slender body. But instead of looking at me, she gazing instead out over my shoulder, staring into the night as if she had been anxiously waiting for someone else. Then with

her hopes dashed, she hung her head with disappointment, and gestured for me to follow her inside.

I was shivering so from the cold that I barely managed to say "Thank you" as I joined her in the darkened entryway of the empty house. Then I noticed that I could see my breath in the pale light of her lamp. The house seemed little warmer than outside, though I was happy to be out of the wind and snow.

The girl then turned and stared into my face as if truly noticing me for the first time. With a look of concern, she had me follow her into the parlor. There, she sat me down in a big leather chair, wrapped a large knitted comforter around my shivering shoulders, and bent down to add some wood to the remaining coals that glowed amid the ashes in the fireplace. Then, without a word, she walked silently out of the room before I could introduce myself or tell her what had happened. As the wood caught fire and the flames began to light the dark recesses of the room, I could hear her moving about in the kitchen and the sound of a pan being placed upon the stove.

The fire began to give off the most wonderful warmth as it crackled and hissed as I leaned forward to rub my icy fingers in front of the flames.

A few minutes later, she returned, carrying a large mug full of hot apple cider that she carefully placed into my still frigid fingers. I took a sip of the steaming cider, smiled, and then drank all of it.

I thanked her again, gratefully smiling up at her. Then I told her that I had been on my way home from school, and that I must have dozed off while driving. I explained that I'd run my car into the field, just down the road, and that now it was stuck in the snow. I asked to use her phone so I could call my parents and let them know I was all right but that I wouldn't be home tonight as I'd planned.

She nodded and led into the hallway, where she pointed to an old antic phone that was mounted on the wall. I lifted up the receiver and was about to dial when I realized that there was no dial tone.

I told her that the phone was out and asked her if she had a cell phone I could use. But she just looked at me with a funny expression on her face and shook her head.

Realizing that I hadn't introduced myself, I told her my name and asked her for her's.

She told me that her name was Crystal, and that her parents were away visiting Crystal's sick grandmother in Topeka and weren't due back until the next afternoon for the family Thanksgiving dinner.

After an awkward pause, Crystal led me back to the parlor and we sat down in front of the fireplace. Almost instantly, I was nodding off and I must of fallen asleep because the next thing I remember, I felt her hand on my shoulder gently waking me. She led me upstairs to a spare bedroom, and I was asleep in seconds.

The next day, I was wakened by the sound of her calling my name. Brilliant sunlight was streaming in through the window, and on getting up, I could see that the surrounding fields were covered in a beautiful bright blanket of fresh snow and that the road was blocked by drifts, some of which were a couple of feet high. It was clear that I was going nowhere until the snow melted. As I stepped out into the hallway, the wonderful smell of frying eggs and ham drifted up from the kitchen. I walked in just as she was getting ready to dish up our breakfasts.

Over breakfast, Crystal told me about growing up on the farm, graduating from the local high school, and how totally quiet the house had been since her parents had left the

previous week. She asked me about what my college was like and about the classes I was taking. And I also told her of my childhood and my family, and even my ambitions and dreams once I had my degree.

It was a perfect meal. I'd never felt so comfortable with anyone in my life. Crystal listened intently to everything I said as if hungry for the mere sound of my voice, as if she hadn't talked to anyone for ages. And I found her rapt attention amazingly attractive and her intent gaze seductive. And she was beautiful, very beautiful with long straight black hair and the pale skin of someone who never spent time outside under the sun.

After such a great breakfast, I helped Crystal clear the table and wash the dishes. Somehow, doing them by hand wasn't really work when I had her by my side. The rest of the morning, we passed playing games: dominos, checkers, cards, and even chess. I hardly cared when I discovered that the electricity was out and there was no television.

Later, after a similarly wonderful lunch, Crystal started getting food out and asked me to help her fix the Thanksgiving dinner. She started a big turkey in the gas oven, and soon I was busy peeling potatoes, opening jars of home-canned vegetables, and learning how to bake bread and pies from scratch.

We worked and talked all afternoon. Time just seemed to fly, and soon we were making salads and setting the table. The turkey and home-baked bread smelled wonderful, the mashed potatoes and bowls of green beans and corn were ready, and all we needed was for her parents to arrive. Every so often, Crystal and I would go to the windows and look out at the road, but we never saw anything, not even the tracks of any cars that might have passed while we had been busy fixing dinner. It began to look like the snow drifts, even though they weren't very big, were still blocking the road.

And so we waited and waited as it grew dark and evening came. And still we waited as the candles on the table slowly burned down in their holders. The mashed potatoes had long been cold, the bread was getting hard, and the turkey was drying out, and still we waited. Crystal became more and more nervous and upset as her parents still did not come. Eventually, when it became clear that they wouldn't make it until the next day, I suggested that we sat down and celebrate Thanksgiving together. I'm sure it would have been better had we started eating when the meal was warm from the stove, but I don't think it really mattered. It was still a wonderful, old-fashioned dinner, and we ate it together. I was happy to just talk with her, and once she had resigned herself to waiting another day, it wasn't long before she was smiling again.

After we'd stuffed ourselves, we got up, leaving the table and dirty dishes for the morning. We returned to the parlor, I built another fire, and she played the piano for me. They were quaint old songs that I remember my grandmother listening to on her old wind-up Victrola. Somehow, they just seemed to fit the old farmhouse and the traditional meal we'd just finished. Then, she went back into the kitchen, brought out a couple of slices of apple pie, and we sat down on the couch and watched the flames from the fire flicker and fly up the chimney. It was truly magical, and I wanted nothing more than for the evening to never end.

But eventually it did. As it neared midnight, Crystal said she was sleepy and we stood up and headed for the stairs. She saw me to my room, gave me a warm kiss goodnight, and then headed down the hall to her room. I sat down on the bed and realized that I was in love with her. I went to sleep wondering how we could spend more time together and

deciding that I would rather spend Christmas break in this old Kansas farmhouse than with my family in Chicago.

I don't know why, but the next day, I slept in 'til midmorning. On finally waking up, I rose and looked at my reflection in the big mirror on the dresser. I was smiling ear to ear as my memories of the day before came back to me. I even began to whistle as I glanced out the window of my room to a clear blue sky and brilliant sunshine shining down on the farmer's fields. The weather had warmed up, and the snow was rapidly melting so that there were bare spots on the road. It looked like I'd be able to get my car out of the field if I could just borrow some gas.

I went downstairs, but Crystal wasn't in the kitchen fixing breakfast as she had been the day before. I called out her name, thinking that she was just in some other part of the house, but all I heard was silence. I quickly checked the other rooms of the house but didn't find her. Beginning to worry that something bad might have happened, I even went up into the attic and checked down into the basement. But still no Crystal.

Then thinking that I'd find her outside, I went out and looked in the barn and shed, but all I found was a can of gasoline. I carried it out to my car and poured it into the empty gas tank. Then, getting in, I turned the key and the engine started right up. Although the wheels spun a little in the wet ground, on the third try, I managed to back my car out onto the road and drive back to the house. I opened the door and called her. Again, there was no answer.

I was about to look for her again, but then I remembered that I hadn't called my parents the previous night. I checked the phone, but it was still out. Thinking that she just must have gone for a walk in the fields, I wrote Crystal a note saying that I'd be back as soon as I had driven into town to call my folks.

About ten miles down the road, I came to a small Kansas farm town dominated by a couple of grain elevators. The road became Main Street with a few stores, a church, and a single gas station. I parked in front of the town's lone diner and went in.

In spite of the huge Thanksgiving dinner I had the previous day, I suddenly realized that I was ravenous, as if I hadn't eaten for days. I wolfed down a large stack of pancakes and then headed to the payphone in the back next to a counter at which an old man in his sixties sat in faded overalls, nursing his cup of coffee.

I called home, and my mom answered immediately. She said she'd been worried when she heard on TV about the storm that had passed through. She had been especially worried when I hadn't called in from some motel along the way. I reassured her, telling her where I was, that I was fine, and that I would be start drive home again later that afternoon. She asked me why I wasn't heading home right then, given that I had already lost a day because of the storm, and so I told her about getting stuck, finding Crystal's farm, and staying two nights there with her. From what she said and how she said it, I could tell she was both grateful that I'd found a place to stay but also concerned about me staying in some strange woman's home. So I tried to reassure her by describing Crystal, what we had done on Thanksgiving, and the farm she lived on. I explained that's why I wouldn't be heading right back; I wanted to thank her and say goodbye properly. I didn't tell her that I also wanted to set of a way for me and Crystal to keep in touch and hopefully spend part of Christmas break with her. Then I told my mom goodbye and turned to go.

The old man was staring at me with the weirdest expression. It was as if he couldn't tell whether he'd seen a ghost or if I was somehow completely crazy. I was about to walk past him when he grabbed my arm with unexpected strength and demanded to know where I'd spent the night. I told him that it was none of his business, but if he had to know, I'd stayed at a big old farmhouse between two giant oak trees about ten miles down the road. Then, becoming deathly white, he demanded to know who lived there. I had barely said Crystal's name when he jumped up, and ran out of the restaurant so fast that he practically knocked down the diner's only waitress.

I stared at him through the diner's front window as he roared out of his parking place and then turned to the waitress who now stood behind the counter. I asked her what was with the old man. She told me not to mind him. She said that he'd never been quite right for the last thirty years, not since he and his wife had come back from a trip the day after Thanksgiving only to find out that his house had burned down the previous night. He'd lost his daughter in the fire and lost his wife just a few years later. Since then, he'd been kind of lost and harmless crazy old coot.

It was a sad story, but I didn't really give it much thought. I was eager to get back to Crystal and spend a few more hours with her before I had to continue on towards home. After stopping briefly to fill up the gas tank, I drove back through the small town and headed west towards the farmhouse and the girl who'd suddenly become such an important part of my life. Although I'd only been gone for about an hour, I already missed her and was angry with myself for not looking harder for her before I left. I was also upset that I hadn't had a chance to say goodbye and hoped that she'd seen my note and understood why I'd driven into town without finding her first. I didn't want her to think that I'd left without even a goodbye. Maybe it was just that I'd been unnerved by the crazy old man. I drove the memory of him from my mind and thought only of her beauty and tenderness and our first kiss the night before.

It wasn't long before I saw the farm's two tall trees on the horizon. But even from that distance, something seemed strange. When I drew closer, I understood. I'd just been mistaken because no old farmhouse stood between them. I thought it strange that I hadn't remembered passing them on my way into town, but I was probably just in a hurry to get there, call home, tank up, and return.

Getting closer, I saw that an old car parked along the side of the road. I was slowing down to pass it when I noticed the broken chimney and ancient ruins of a fire on the foundation where an old farmhouse once stood. Glancing over at the car, I saw the old man from the diner sitting slumped behind the wheel. No wonder, I thought, given the similar trees and the burned down farmhouse. No wonder the old man had been confused when he'd overheard me describing the place to my parents over the phone. The resemblance was striking. Yet, surely most old farmhouses had big trees in their yards. I'd just have to drive farther down the road until I found the right one where Crystal was surely waiting for me.

And then I saw the hole in the barbwire fence and the fresh ruts that my tires had left in the snowy ground. My blood froze as my car skid to a stop.

With a deepening sense of dread, I got out of my car and looked down at the footprints my shoes had left in the snow that morning. I staggered back to where the old man sat in his car. He opened his door, stepped out, and stood sadly waiting for me.

As I joined the old man to stare at the ruin of his home, he asked me if this was the place where I'd spent Thanksgiving. I answered that it couldn't be. I'd just left the house an hour ago and everything was fine. There had to be some mistake. He asked me what the girl's name was, and I told him. He nodded knowingly and then sadly told me about how he and his wife had gone to visit her sick mother in Topeka. He told me how their daughter, Crystal, had decided to stay behind to cook the traditional Thanksgiving feast. He told me how they had not made it home in time to share the meal with her because they'd been stuck in a huge snowstorm and couldn't get through. And finally, he told me about returned the following day to the still smoking ruins of his farmhouse. There had been a terrible fire and the volunteer fire chief had said that Crystal had died in the blaze.

But my mind rebelled; I couldn't believe that it was the same place. There had to be another farmhouse just down the road. Wasn't there another family with a girl named Crystal that lived nearby? Surely, we weren't talking about the same Crystal.

But he told me that there wasn't another farmhouse for miles and that this was the only place with two tall trees in the yard. He said that Crystal had promised that she'd have Thanksgiving dinner ready for them when they got home. Her spirit must have been waiting all these years, trapped between this world and the next, for some way to fulfill her promise. And then I came. Maybe it was something about the snowstorm, and maybe it was the danger I was in. But whatever it was, I had finally let her keep her promise and for that he was grateful. Maybe now she could finally rest in peace.

I didn't want to listen to him, and I certainly didn't want to believe him. I ran back to my car and drove off. I must have spent the entire day driving up and down the roads outside of that small Kansas town, but I never did find the farm. I was finally forced to accept that the old man was right. I'm not sure whether Crystal was a ghost in a ghostly farm or whether the storm had somehow transported me back in time to that fateful Thanksgiving just before she had died. Either way, it didn't matter. I never saw her again. But wherever she is, I hope she remembers me. I know I'll never forget her.