

The Storm

The two brothers hand-sanded and varnished one of the widest slabs of Douglas Fir they had ever milled in these mountains until it was a perfectly finished kitchen table with live edges on both sides. They expertly attached legs to the underside of the tabletop from branches of the same tree.

Two matching benches were milled from narrower trunk widths higher up the same tree and then sanded and fashioned the same as the tabletop, which left live edges on the benches, too. The rugged artistry was pure functional simplicity, leaving exposed only the tree's naked beauty. The beautifully straight brown and amber grain ran the length of the eight-foot slab of the tabletop and the matching, footwide slab-seat benches.

The two brothers sat facing each other sitting across the table. Their coffee mugs steaming slightly in the as-yet-still cold kitchen. The cast-iron cooking stove's firebox had logs burning, and some heat was beginning to warm the chilly room.

The forecasts of the preceding days had grown more ominous as days had passed. The outlook was dire, and an Emergency Evacuation Order was issued for the entire area, beginning in only several hours due to the expected high rainfall totals and damaging winds. The brothers weren't discussing whether to evacuate. However, they were discussing where and how they were going to evacuate. The storm was traveling from the east to the west and was eerily following the same path as the only paved road out of the mountains where they lived.

Their conversation was calm, yet each man was determined that his way was right. The two brothers, separated by only one year in age, were born in these mountains sixty and sixty-one years ago. Their grandfather had built the home the brothers now called their own, and after the

two grandparents passed away, they took up residency. That was forty-two years ago, and neither had ever shown a desire to marry or to move. The brothers were very content with their lives.

The house was big when they moved in, and they had made the kitchen bigger by adding a breakfast area and a large walk-in pantry. They also added wrap-around decks to both the ground floor and the second floor, so from any room, anywhere, they could access one of the decks. The main living room, with its massive stone-arched fireplace, was located at the southern end of the house. Its ceiling was the underside of the beautifully framed, beamed, and paneled roof. Staircases inside either end of the house led to the upstairs bedrooms, and those ceilings were vaulted and finished with pine paneling. The outer walls were built using logs cut and milled right on the property, and the inside walls of the house were finished using paneling milled from different species of trees logged on their property.

Neither brother wanted to evacuate. But as the storm kept worsening, forecasters considered it unsurvivable in the areas so viciously incinerated by wildfire only two years previous. There didn't seem to be a choice because that was the area the brothers lived in.

Their conversation was centered on which way to evacuate. The younger brother wanted to evacuate towards the storm, while the elder brother wanted to evacuate away from the storm. Oddly, both men's reasoning seemed logical to the other.

The younger brother said, "I think I'll go towards the storm because I know how bad it is there, and I know it won't get worse. Also, once I'm through that front, I'll run into weather that will be a lessening storm and not a storm increasing in power. Yes, it will still be a storm, but once through the front things should get better."

The older brother waited until the younger brother finished and said, "I want to outrun the storm and not feel its wrath, and if all goes well, that should not be a problem."

The brothers sat still, and soon, both stood, shook hands, embraced, and set off to their already-packed pickup trucks. The younger brother drove east, and the older brother drove west, honking their horns as they departed. Both men knew the area better than most. They knew every logging road and which roads connected to other roads and which did not.

Since roadblocks were already in place, stopping all traffic going east, the younger brother took to the logging roads he knew so well. The logging roads mostly paralleled the main highway, though, at times, they were several miles away. After several hours of prolonged slow and bumpy traveling, the first heavy rain began to fall. The younger brother was well past the roadblocks, so as soon as he could, he rejoined the main highway, and his travel was less dangerous. At times, the rain was so heavy his windshield wipers couldn't keep up, and at other times, the wind grew so intense he feared his truck would be blown off the road. As the heaviest rains pummeled his truck, he was forced to stop. Once the heaviest rain abated, he would drive on. He repeated this stop-and-go as he drove through the front edge of the storm. On and on, he slowly traveled. On and on, the rain pelted his truck and everything around him. Sometimes, the sound of the rain slamming onto his truck was so intense he screamed out loud so that he didn't have to hear it for a few seconds.

Suddenly, and luckily for the younger brother, he saw something on the road and stopped before crashing into a fallen tree. Getting out of his truck, he became instantly soaked from the top of his head to inside his boots. The rain fell as hard as the water from the showerhead in his bathroom, but it was cold water that soaked him.

He knew precisely where his chainsaw was located, so he raised the tarp only enough to reach in and grab it. He started the saw and cut several lengths of the fallen tree, which he could then easily manhandle out of the way, allowing him access past the tree. Putting his saw away and reattaching the tarp, he climbed into his truck. His feet squelched from the water in his boots, and he was now soaked and covered in wet sawdust and wood chips.

On he went, and after several more anxiety-filled hours driving through the most severe storm he had ever experienced, he noticed that the intensity was waning, or so it seemed to him. The water now hitting his windshield wasn't seemingly being poured from giant buckets in the sky, but rather, the intensity seemed to him to be lessening the further east he drove.

His older brother was driving away from the storm, and as he went, he kept checking his rearview mirror. The road before him was beginning to fill with other fleeing evacuees. Some towed trailers with belongings stacked up high, and others towed trailers containing horses, so they had to drive slowly and carefully, especially around corners, to not cause their horses to stumble and fall or their trailers, filled high, to topple over. As the hours passed and his forward progress slowed, he noticed the once very distant storm was now only one-third of that distance behind him. The sky above him had turned a battleship gray, the wind had picked up significantly, and he wondered how his brother was doing. Reaching for his cell phone, he saw there was no signal, so he dropped it back into its holder.

The older brother was now behind a miles-long line of cars, trucks, buses, and cars and trucks towing things. The traveling was now irritatingly slow going, as many were not experienced in towing trailers; many were fearful and drove under tremendous stress, while others just did their best. Occasionally, a car or truck would come to a halt, and the reasons were many. A few ran out of fuel, another got a flat tire, while another had mechanical issues. These issues slowed the

entire line down even more, and as gawkers slowed to look, the procession of cars slowed even more.

The older brother could no longer see the top of the storm in his rearview mirror; so close had the storm advanced. Soon, the first drops of rain began dropping onto his truck. These were large droplets of water hitting his truck, too. Slowly, the intensity increased until he was caught amid a torrential downfall. Brake lights came on everywhere, visibility decreased due to the rain's intensity, and traffic halted. His windshield wipers could no longer keep up with the intense rainfall, and he could not see where he was going. He was stopped along with a mile and more of other vehicles.

His younger brother was now almost one hundred miles east of their home, and far ahead, he could see the ominous, near-total black-gray sky turning white in a few small areas. He hoped, of course, that the storm wouldn't stall as some forecasters had warned. His fingers were crossed on both hands as he drove, and he hoped that would help make a positive difference. He kept going slowly and carefully, and as he continued on his way, he could feel the intensity of this storm becoming less. As the wind lessened from a whole gale to a fresh gale and then down to a moderate gale, he was able to relax somewhat. He could feel he was driving into safer conditions, and after several more hours, he could finally increase his speed to forty-five miles per hour, and the wind dropped to a strong breeze. By now, he figured he was one hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy-five miles east of his home, and finally, he noticed a motel with a Vacancy sign.

Meanwhile, the older brother was hunkered down, and in the throes of the worst this storm had to offer. He was stopped in a virtual parking lot produced by gale-force winds and rain falling at two inches per hour. The storm had overtaken the slow procession of evacuees, and now there

was nothing for them to do but wait until the storm passed. If they kept driving, they would prolong their time in the storm because they would be traveling with the storm instead of letting it go by.

The younger brother checked into the motel and was thankful to get out of his wet clothes. He had been shivering since getting soaked despite the heater running in his truck. Getting into a hot shower was welcome, as was the heater in his room. After showering and drying off, he lay on the bed and instantly fell asleep, so tired was he from the anxiety and stress of the past hours.

Waking up, he dressed and walked over to the café attached to the motel. The wind was still gusting, and there was a light rain falling. He wanted to find out what was going on with this storm, and he wanted to eat.

Hours passed for the older brother, and the storm he had run from had caught up with him and continued to pummel the entire, miles-long string of vehicles that stretched in front of him and for miles behind him. The older brother could only wait this storm out now. He sighed and reached for the thermos of coffee he had packed and one of the tuna fish sandwiches he had made. As he chewed a bite of his sandwich and sipped his hot coffee, he wondered and hoped that his brother was faring better. He especially hoped his brother was not faring worse than he was. But these two had lived together nearly their entire lives, and each felt that the other could survive anything that was survivable. But here he sat, stuck in the middle of the storm he had run from.

The food in the café where the younger brother sat was good and hot. There was a television showing the storm's front was now almost two hundred and ninety miles west of where he was, and it was reporting that lines of evacuees, some lines of vehicles miles long, were reported

stalled by the storm's ferocity and speed. The news reported that the lines of evacuees were so long, and the storm moved so fast that it had caught up to everyone, and then the wind and rain forced them all to stop.

Satellite television was working, the generator at the motel and café was providing power, and after dinner, the younger brother decided he wanted to sleep. Within minutes of his head hitting the pillow, he was sound asleep.

The elder brother was also asleep, but his sleep was shallow. It was almost as if he was sleeping with one eye open, trying to sleep while also trying to keep an eye on the storm. Hour after hour, the monsoon-like rains fell, flooding the road they were stalled on. The flood waters rose perhaps half a foot over the next several hours, and while those now stranded by the storm were never in danger of getting flooded or drowning, the stress and anxiety overwhelmed many. Many didn't realize that, since they were still in the mountains, the natural terrain would stop any significant flooding.

The night progressed, and soon it was only several hours from dawn. The older brother yawned as he awoke, and he soon noticed the rain had diminished from a monsoon down to heavy rain. Once again, he reached for his thermos. Shaking it, he smiled because there was still coffee. He reached for another tuna fish sandwich and was grateful things were still good for him. He was also optimistic that within hours, traffic would again be moving.

Then, right at dawn, he heard vehicle engines begin to start, and in the far distance ahead, he barely saw through the darkness of the stormy, early morning sky, brake lights go off, and vehicles begin to move. So packed was the road that there was no way to turn around since both

lanes, the only two lanes, were full of traffic evacuating west. There wasn't an empty lane to go east on.

Sometimes, large trees needed to be pulled or pushed off the road, and occasionally, enormous trees had to be chainsawed into smaller pieces. But the giant trees couldn't be moved, so both lanes needed to merge into one as they navigated by, thus causing even more stopping and going.

After five hours of excruciatingly slow, stop-and-go traffic, he noticed a motel displaying a Vacancy sign, and without hesitation, he pulled into that motel. After getting a room and checking in, he ran a hot shower and stood under the welcome water. After that, he walked to the café attached to the motel and ordered lunch. While watching the television and the reporting on the storm, he learned that the main storm had indeed moved past where he was now staying, and it was also clear two hundred miles east of where he was. The news reported significant damage in many places, and electricity was out for thousands of people. Trees were down, and homes were damaged, but so far, there were no deaths reported. Phone lines were down, too.

The younger brother woke early and, after breakfast, decided to drive back home. The main road home was strewn with toppled trees and downed power lines, but he had the road nearly to himself because it was early, and most everyone had evacuated west. As soon as he could, once again, gain access to the logging roads he knew so well, he did. Most of the trees on these dirt roads had been removed decades earlier to afford the logging trucks a wide berth as the forest was harvested and loaded onto trucks for transport to the mills.

There was one huge uprooted tree he had to chainsaw pieces from so he could roll those rounds out of the way and drive through the gap he had created. Several smaller trees he had to

manhandle off the road. The going was slow, and removing trees, or pieces of trees, was hard work, but the only times he needed to stop were to remove debris.

Arriving home was like receiving a blessing from God for him. He smiled the biggest smile he had smiled in years. Their home was undamaged, and though leaves and branches were strewn everywhere, it would be easily raked up. He started the generator and flipped the switches so it powered his home. He went into the house, lit the stove in the kitchen, and let it get hot before closing down the air vents. His hot shower warmed the chill from his body, and he slept without eating that night, so tired was he from the past few days. But it was fitful sleep because he worried about his brother. He checked his phone, but there was still no service, so he laid back down and waited to fall asleep.

The morning finally dawned, and he rose, lit the stove, and made coffee. After toasting some slices of bread and eating those, he went outside and cleared the yard and around the house and outbuildings. He started a burn pile away from the house and set it alight as the winds had died down to nothing. He added to the burn pile until all the debris was cleared, and finally, there was only a low, hot mound of white ashes with only wisps of smoke.

He busied himself until the burn pile could be left safely unattended, and later, after eating a hearty dinner, he again turned on the news. The news showed videos of the damage throughout the county where he lived and the damage still being inflicted on counties much further west as the storm progressed.

At about eight that night, he heard his brother's truck climbing up the unpaved driveway and coming to a halt. The engine shut off, and he could hear his brother's familiar grunts and groans as he exited the truck.

The younger brother rose and opened the door for his brother; the two shook hands and briefly hugged. They were smiling and were happy to see each other. They once again sat on the beautiful hand-finished benches, and at the beautiful kitchen table they made all those decades ago, and they were very happy with this outcome.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © September 14th, 2023