



Before the Storm

PAUL HILDING

THE DOGS AND I DON'T GO AS far as we used to. Instead of the half-mile jog to the mailboxes at the top of the road or sometimes to the river another half mile beyond, it is all Cabo can do to limp alongside me for a few hundred yards. Loma stays close in the alfalfa field, chasing geese and checking scents left by deer and other late-night visitors. But he's started to slow down as well, his hips stiff with arthritis.

Our unhurried pace allows me to study the weeds along the roadside. As fall becomes winter, I watch the goldenrod fade to cream and then gray. The same cold weather alchemy transforms the grasses and mulleins to muted shades of hazel, rust, and beige. Scattered rows of curly docks have turned entirely brown, as if cast in bronze from stems to leaf tips.

It is easy to succumb to melancholy during this season. Surrounded by so much death, it is natural to think of the short time we have left with our aging dogs. And with each other. But there is also beauty in this stark landscape that draws me out each day into the December chill. And something more—a meaning, perhaps, to be worked out.

Now, as dusk approaches, I pause at a desiccated stand of wild sunflowers. Their straw-colored skeletons remind me of candelabras, dried blossom heads tipped upward toward the slate gray sky. Storm clouds float low in the western sky like silent battleships, crests tinged blood-orange by the last light of the winter sun.

Cabo takes advantage of the break to sit heavily at my feet, seeming to admire the scene as much as I do. After a long moment, he slides to the ground, sighing in a way that seems almost human. The horizon darkens and the battleships sail closer through the evening gloom.

Eventually, Loma sniffs the approaching storm and looks over from the stubble-strewn field. The lifeless stalks shiver in the rising wind. I whistle softly and pull my jacket tight against the cold. For today, it seems, this is the right place to turn around.

The dogs wag their tails as we start the short walk back to the warmth of the cabin. And I feel grateful as well. For these moments before the storm. For all of these moments, every day. Before all of the storms. ✖

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