

**Ghosts of Clotheslines Past**

**F322b**

You never know the last time you've done something until you look back. Like the last time you went roller skating. Or baked cookies with your grandmother. Or pinned sheets to a clothesline.

The last time I did that I was living in a mountain cabin west of Denver. It was early December. The girls were hunting ghosts between the sheets I clipped to the rope Frank had strung across the yard. Betsy was 9; Francie, 7.

“Boo!” They hooted, wrapping damp sheets around their heads.

“Boo!” I hooted back, pausing to remember that the best part of having kids is playing with them.

Not that my mother played with me. The eldest of six, I was a helper, not a child.

As I had done 30 years ago, I blew warmth into my hands and closed my eyes. That simple breath transported me to a second-story back porch in a blue-collar neighborhood. With fingers frostbitten by the winter, I pinned clothes to a rope attached by a pulley to a tree that every family used to anchor their clotheslines. Clip. Clip. Push. Hours later, the rhythm reversed. Yank. Unclip. Yank. Unclip. Just as my mother had taught me.

With laundry fluttering like signal flags on a tall ship, we kids scrutinized the lines to identify the owners of stiff jeans and brittle underwear.

“I see London, I see France,” someone would taunt, “I see Kathy’s (or someone’s) underpants.”

Yet the sheets and towels were fluffy, like the ones in my own backyard.

Inhaling a gust of the piney west wind, I opened my eyes to see a sidewinder skitter across the scrappy backyard. Instead of fearing its sideways motion, I remembered that Frank, my husband, had adopted the small rattler as his totem. He said it represented adapting and survive in difficult situations.

Life was good.

Until the next day, when it wasn't.

“Honey, wake up.” My husband nudged me before dawn. “Pipes froze overnight.”

A cold front had moved across the Continental Divide. Temperatures plunged as snow mounted. Frank, ever practical, had turned off the outside spigots and left water dripping in the kitchen and bathroom. Although moving water should have kept the pipes from freezing, our fragile plumbing was no match for the brutal cold.

“See if you can thaw them, Babe. I've already opened the faucets. Start in the kitchen. I gotta go plow. I'll get water down at the garage. But bring some snow in.”

I knew the drill. You'd think that you can just melt snow for water, but it isn't that easy. Mountain snow is dry. Moisture evaporates if you don't melt it slowly. Very slowly. Fill buckets with snow, cover them, and place them near—but not too near—the woodstove. Then, set the hair dryer to low and hold it close—but not too close—to the pipes. Otherwise, they could burst.

As I struggled out of my warm bed, Frank kissed my forehead. “I stoked the fire.”

He was sweet like that. As snow layered itself inch by inch over everything, I watched him start the truck, hitch the plow to it, and carve a path toward the state road.

Plowing was one of his many jobs. So was welding, carpentry, and hauling wood. *Hot and Handy* he called his business. Its logo was a sidewinder. But his trademark was a gutsy

laugh. A fiercely independent mountain man, he provided for his family, adapting and surviving in difficult situations.

“Don’t flush the toilets,” I told the girls as I scrambled some eggs. They knew the drill, too. “And go easy on water. Until Daddy gets back.”

Daddy wasn’t their daddy. That man was a mountain cowboy. I had pinned my future to a dreamer who rode off into the sunset when the going got tough, leaving me with two girls. Then Frank rambled into town in his pickup truck. Kind and practical, he swept us off our feet and into his log cabin in the woods, about a mile in from the state highway. We moved in and never looked back.

We were happy, though life was hard.

The girls and I made a game of opening all the cabinet doors and running a hairdryer over the kitchen pipes, but no water dripped from the faucets. After a few hours, though, we had about a cup of water from melted snow, so I bundled up, went outside to fill the buckets again, and added wood to the fire.

But I hadn’t adjusted the flue correctly, so the cabin filled with smoke. Even though it was drafty, we all started coughing. We drank the little water we had. Then sucked on peppermint candy.

When Frank returned hours later with water, he took over the tedious process of heating the pipes, until water oozed then gushed—not out of the faucet but through a pipe.

“Shit!” Water flooded the kitchen. “Shit, shit, shit.” Grab me some duct tape, Hon, will you?”

With water leaking everywhere and Frank cursing God, himself, and the pipes, panic seeped into my toes, then stampeded to my brain. I wasn't prepared for living without water. In deepening puddles. With children. In the winter. In isolated backwoods.

Between sopping up water with clean towels, I formulated a plan to get us out of the mountains.

"How are the roads, Frank? Can we make it to Denver?" He said they were clear. "I'll call my cousin. We can stay with her. Just until you fix the pipes."

We did, but he couldn't. Although Frank considered himself a universal fix-it man, these corroded pipes were beyond his abilities. The more he tried to fix them, the more they cracked and crumbled. The whole place needed to be replumbed.

After staying with Mary for a few weeks, I found an apartment—with a clothes dryer. I pretended to smell the wind when I did laundry. Frank pretended to like the city in between days at the cabin. First to work on the plumbing. Then to caulk the cracks around the windows. Then to chink the gaps between the logs. And then to live there. Until he didn't. He died one night. Carbon monoxide.

The girls and I moved back East, to be closer to my folks. And here I was, a dozen years later, on a train to New Haven. Betsy was graduating from college. Francie was in her second year. Both on scholarships. I had a good job. We had done well. Frank would be proud.

Passing through an anonymous, rundown city in the Northeast industrial corridor, I noticed clothes hanging from dingy backyard clotheslines and—clip-clip—I was yanked back. To my childhood. To fingers frostbitten by the winter. To the cabin. To the freshness of wind-blown sheets. To Frank.

You never know the last time you did something until you look back. You say, in wonder, *that was the last time* ... I went roller skating. Or baked cookies with grandma. Or pinned sheets to a clothesline.

Overcome by the urge to run like a ghost through wind-blown sheets, tears oozed then gushed, like broken pipes flooding a drafty cabin.