

# A Candle In The Window

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Matt Calver's old man knew the facts. It would only take one night where the temperature dropped to an even 29° to ruin the orange crop. For three years in a row it was the same story, the same waiting game and the same smudge pots that would burn throughout the night, trying to hold off the freeze. It was also a time for the same ultimatums. "God, if I could just know that I was gonna have one good crop this year . . ."

"It's a damn no-win situation you got here!" Roy said as he cradled his hands around his coffee cup. "Seems like you put out and put out some more, and it gets to the point where you think that it's finally gonna be your year to make a few bucks, and then this! Damn freeze! You know, it gets to where a fellow shouldn't care no more!"

All the other men sitting in the diner nodded, but said nothing.

Pat came around with a fresh pot of coffee. "How 'bout if I warmed up your coffee, Roy?"

"I'd rather you'd warm my heart, Pat," said Roy, reaching over to grab Pat's waist.

"You can top my cup off, Pat," said Jay, keeping his eyes fixed on the table.

"How 'bout you, George? Need a refill?"

George didn't answer. His concentration was focused on two burnt wooden match sticks he had discovered on the table. For the past fifteen minutes he'd been rolling them between his thumb and first finger. The friction had already worn the edges round.

Roy spoke up. "Hey, George! If you're fixing on starting a fire with those sticks, you're gonna have to rub them a whole lot harder!"

George looked up and broke into a soft smile. He tossed the matches aside and drank down the last of his coffee. "No more for me, Pat. I promised Mona I'd fix the flue on the fireplace. It keeps snapping shut when the wind picks up."

"You tell her 'hi' for me, George."

"Will do."

"And you tell that boy of yours that if he doesn't show his face around here before he goes away to school . . ."

"I'll give him your regards . . ." George said softly, with a wink of his eye. He lifted his jacket collar and headed for the door.

"Hey, George," said Jay, "you think you're gonna be out tonight?"

"Don't know. Depends how far it drops."

"You call me if you need any help, you hear?"

"You bet."



George stepped out of the diner and into the crisp morning air. He snuck a look at the diner's outdoor thermometer. A thick crust of frost clouded the glass. With his knuckle, he etched off the ice. 37°. He checked his watch. 7:05 AM. Give or take a degree or two, he figured the temperature had only risen a few degrees since dawn — not a good sign for tonight.

Letting a long husky cough fill the air, he crossed to his pick-up truck. A sharp wind snapped around the diner as he pulled the bill of his navy blue baseball cap closer to his forehead. George's squat, round figure didn't budge with the sudden uproar. He moved like a man who always had a place to go and knew how to get there. Lately, his stomach had begun to pour over his belt which threw his weight forward when walking. His hands and fingers were small and plump with a great mound of calloused skin on each palm which made it impossible for him to close his hands without a gap appearing at some point.

George was born to the land. He knew the soil better than he knew himself, and he was able to tell a prime field without touching the dirt. He was most proud of the fact that he was able to make his way with his instinct for the seasons — when to plant, when to hold back, and when to pick the oranges so that the juice would be at its peak. They were simple snips of knowledge to an onlooker, but to George, they were the means that had sustained his family for over a hundred years.

As George turned onto the dirt road that led to his grove, he had to quickly shift his truck to position the tires into the ruts that were worn deep into the ground. In the Spring, the weeds and wildflowers would cover the flat width between the tire ruts so that the bottom of the truck would skim the heads of the flowers, catching a few of the taller ones.

Mona was outside the front porch, struggling with a heavy roped rug. Each time she tried to lift it in the air, the weight of the rug would pull her down, leaving a soft dust cloud behind her.

George parked the truck and headed toward Mona. He grabbed one side of the rug and changed places with Mona. "Here, come on! You yank on that side while I shake it over here."

Mona held on tight and turned her head while George lifted the rug up and down several times.

"All right, that about does it for this one," George said as he spit a wad of dust toward the porch.

"I'm glad you came home when you did. I'd be buried in it by now!"

"Why didn't you get Matt to help you?"

"He's busy collecting his books for his trip. He can't find that one on the Civil War."

"Did he check up in the barn loft?"

"I think that's where he is now. Oh, listen, George, I figured out how we can keep that flue open in the fireplace . . ."

George wasn't listening. His eyes wandered toward the barn loft.

"George?" Mona said, softly.

"The flue . . . yeah, right . . ."

"Are you all right, George?"

"Of course. I just thought of a place where Matt's book might be. You better get in the house. It's freezing out here."

George proceeded toward the barn and started in when a bale of hay fell from the loft, landing a few feet in front of him. He looked up to find his son perched upon the barn's cross beam, frantically digging through a mound of discarded hay.

"You almost did me in, Matt!"

Matt turned on his heels. "I didn't hear you."

"You find your book?"

"How'd you know I was looking?"

"Your mom."

"Oh." He continued digging.

"You look over by the chicken coop?"

"It wouldn't be there."

"How come?"

"Because I only read about history in the loft."

"Oh . . . What do you read about by the coop?"

"Economics."

"What about the shed?"

"Chemistry."

"How about Agriculture?"

Matt didn't answer. He'd had just about all he could take of agriculture. Every time he turned a corner or opened a door, there it was — AGRICULTURE, staring him in the face. There wasn't a word that he had read in all of his books that could describe how much he loathed it. All those acres of fine-tilled soil had robbed him of any individuality he could hope to find. He was always "George Calver's boy," and he had stopped counting how many times the locals had asked him, "So, Matt, when are we gonna see you sitting tall in your Daddy's tractor?"

There would be no tractors, no groves. He was going to a place where he would become something grand, something, perhaps,

that no one before him had ever dared to become. And he would finally be proud of himself, and in that moment, he would become whole.

Over the long, tense years, Matt had come to the conclusion that he and his father shared nothing in common. The sight, for example, of a plump, ripe orange did not move Matt the way it did George, who could spend hours discussing the merits of one crop. Deep down, there was no thread, he thought, no binding that brought them together as father and son.

George was well aware of the awkward gaps that separated him and his son. At times, it had made George angry because his pride for his land ached for respect. The only time George had ever laid a hand on Matt was five years back when Matt pronounced that all farmers had to be "ignorant cretins." George had no idea what a "cretin" was, but if it could be colored "ignorant," it was slander.

All this hostility had burned a hole inside of George that grew larger with each blow. But, lately, unknown to anyone, including Mona, George's thoughts were in turmoil. He had begun to wonder if perhaps he was that "ignorant cretin" who didn't have the sense to come in out of the rain. How could one man watch a thriving orange grove turn black and dry from too many nights of sub-freezing temperatures and not get out while he could still get a fair price for his land? All around him, his neighbors were packing up, grabbing their kids and leaving town. For those who refused to face the hard reality of "losing it all," there was a piece of rope and a barn beam. For some in George's district, suicide had become a viable, if not welcome, alternative. But George could never have taken that final step — there was always something that held him back, something inside that pulled him to his groves where he was able to dish up another serving of optimism. The optimism was getting harder to find, though, and each time he would have to dig down deeper to pull it free.

"It's not here!" Matt announced. "I don't know where in the hell it could be!" He turned his lean body ninety degrees and jumped off the beam. He landed firm, feet planted like a gymnast after a dismount. He strode across the barn, picking the thin prickles of hay out of his shirt.

"It looks like it's gonna be a cold one tonight!" George said, as he flicked his fingers against the barn's thermometer.

"It never fails —" Matt said with an air of indifference.

"The guys down at Pat's Kitchen were taking bets this morning on whether the pots were gonna have to be lit tonight."

"What's the consensus?"

"Fifteen 'yes,' six 'no.'"

"Another fun night —" With that, Matt turned and left the barn.

George didn't follow. He dug his heels into the dirt and felt that hole inside of him cut deeper.



By late afternoon, the wind picked up, bringing with it an icy chill that whipped through the groves and encircled the tiny farmhouse. Pockets of green fruit thudded to the ground, imprinting tiny craters in the dirt. The barn thermometer held at 40°. An unsettled stillness filled the gaps when the wind was not blowing. Tight, unbending tension lay over the groves as the afternoon moved into night.

Matt had holed himself up in the attic, deep into the world of a favorite book. The cover had been torn off years before and some of the pages were missing, but none of that could stop Matt from sinking deeper into its spell. In his books, he found reverence. They were like a beacon in the dark — a place he could go to that would hold him securely and tell him that everything would turn out all right.

By nightfall, George had gone from the house to the groves a dozen times. Before returning to the house each time, he would check the barn thermometer for the latest drop in temperature. The winds had subsided a bit, but in their place, a frigid layer of air was settling upon the groves. A light frost started to form on the leaves and the oranges began to take on a dry, opaque tint.

"You planning on calling Jay about coming over tonight?" Mona asked George as he returned to the house.

"Can't say. He offered. But, he's got his own to think of —"

"That's never stopped him before —"

"The freeze could break anytime."

"But, if it doesn't, you can't work the pots *and* the wind machines —"

"I can't even say if I'm gonna put the damn things on!!!" George stopped. He turned away from Mona and got control of himself. Carefully, he spoke. "I need . . . to know."

Silence.

Mona started toward George but he moved to the door and left the kitchen. He slammed the door so that the square panes of glass echoed as it shut.

Several hours passed and not one smudge pot had been lit. Mona sat asleep in the family rocking chair nearest to the fireplace, one hand hopelessly trying to prop up her chin. Only the crackle of a few dead embers in the fireplace could be heard throughout the house.

Upstairs, Matt went over each registration pamphlet as he had been doing every night for the past six weeks. It didn't matter that he knew them verbatim — it was more a calming tool than another lesson. A biting wind suddenly picked up, smashing the branch of a tree against Matt's bedroom window. Startled, he let out a slight yelp and hurried to secure the window. Rolling an old towel lengthways, he stuffed it along the bottom crack of the window.

Matt tried to examine the tree that did the damage, but it was too dark outside to even see an outline. His eyes wandered toward the direction of the groves. Black. He put his hand flat against the window pane and a freezing chill burned through the glass. He looked toward the groves again. Coal black. How many times had he stood at that window and watched the tiny flickers of light fill the groves? For as long as he could recall, the simmering pots were a symbol of Winter's wrath and a testament to his father's will for holding off the freeze.

But, tonight, there was only darkness.

Matt started to pull back when his eye caught a tiny point of light coming from the barn. It was so faint that he had to strain to make sure it wasn't a reflection cast by the moon. He donned his overcoat and decided to investigate.

Snapping the porch light on, he creaked the screen door open a few inches and leaned out into the yard. The light from the barn was a little brighter now. He considered the cold, and, pulling his coat around his chest, crossed to the barn.

He leaned into the large barn door. The dim light was shining from a small lantern that was placed at an angle on the work bench. His father's back was to him, bent over the work bench. Matt stood silently for a moment, waiting for his father to turn. Somehow, the silhouetted scene sent a shiver through him. He waited for his father to make the first move.

Nothing.

"I saw the light," Matt said, more as a question than a statement.

"I found your book," his father said with an eerie strain to his voice. His back remained to his son.

Matt became uncomfortable. "Yeah?"

His father looked up and pulled the book from in front of him. He closed it, marking his space with a discarded strand of a lantern wick.

"You can read it if you want. I mean, it's no big deal. I just have to have it when I —"

"You like this barn?" George said, getting up and crossing away from Matt, back still turned.

"The barn? Sure . . . It's —"

"Quiet. It's very quiet," his father said softly, letting his eyes scan the shadowed walls. "It's very peaceful." He paused and his smoky breath filled the air. "I can see why you read your history in here. Of all the walls on this land, these hold the most history. Sometimes if you close your eyes and listen, you can hear all the words that were spoken on this very spot. All the plans that were made, the deals that were struck, the hopes . . . the love. And they didn't judge one move . . . they just listened . . . and somehow, they believed." George turned to his son, his eyes hoping for understanding.

Matt saw the fear in George's eyes. He tried to think of something — anything, to say, that would wipe out the fright, but his mind drew a blank.

George crossed a few steps toward Matt. He moved his round palm against the wood bench. "You know, in all my life, for as long as I can remember, I only wanted one thing — a candle in the window. Some small light in the distance that would tell me I was gonna be okay. Some security. Something that would tell me that I wasn't stupid and that I could still be proud of what I've built. I need to know, Matt . . . Everyday, I need to know if it's still there . . ." He dropped his head.

It all came too fast for Matt — the light, the book, the words. He stood very still and waited for his father's next move. Always, *always*, George made the exit and delivered the verdict. Now, there was only a tired, sad man, bent over a dim lantern.

Matt spun around and started toward the house. He threw open the kitchen screen door and grabbed onto its aluminum frame. One foot lay firm on the concrete step and one was planted in the soil. His knuckles streaked white from the pressure on the door. With one angry swoop, he swung the door closed. Taking long, determined strides, he crossed to the power box that was hidden behind the shrubbery. He snapped up each light switch using quick, even strokes. The yard became flooded with light. When the panel switches were all up, Matt ran to the shed and lifted the metal arm which released the large beams that poured into the groves. He ran to the center of the yard and stood, eyes directed toward the barn.

"It's still here!" Matt bellowed, reaching down into the pit of his lungs. "You hear me? Your damned groves are still here! And you will die before they do!" He took a breath. "Are you gonna die tonight?" He stood, letting out quick fogs of air.

Matt ran toward the groves. In a thrusting assembly line fashion, he ignited each smudge pot. The huge wind machines came next, each one joining the former in a loud hum that grew with intensity. The grove exploded with light and sound.

George stepped into the light and watched as Matt, poised upon a fence post, aligned a wobbling wind machine.

Matt jumped off the post and stood solid, whole and proud.

George moved to a pot and carefully adjusted the grid. Tiny candle points poked through the metal. He turned to his son and for one brief moment, they were one.