

PARKER'S MAELSTROM

A Short Story by Steve Stranghoener

Good Friday ... yeah, right. Even when I used to attend church regularly, I don't think I could have fathomed anything good about that Friday. So what if my life was a miserable drab? There is something to be said for monotony. At least it's safe and predictable. Looking back, I would have given anything just to be stuck back in the tedious rut of my hum drum existence. Sure it would have been nice to gain a strike or spare here and there but, come what may; gutter balls nevertheless keep you in life's alley.

St. Louis is not a bad place to live if you're not a thrill seeker. Excitement is over-rated anyway. I was comfortable in the sleepy suburb of Bridgeton; a good, solid middle class neighborhood where people care. It's a great place to raise kids, this northwest patch in the quilt that is the St. Louis Metropolitan area; one of many small towns woven into our proud community at the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Ah, I sure do miss them, the kids ... and my truant wife. Now, let me see. What was her rationale for insisting upon a trial separation? Oh yeah, I used an acronym to help me remember the explanation that, to this day, I still can't quite grasp. I recalled the three Ds: dispassionate, distant and detached. What does that mean? All I know is that she up and detached from me and took my boys with her. Sayonara Curt Parker ... don't call us, we'll call you!

It was about that time that my glasses became jaded and I started seeing Bridgeton in a different, harsher light. That feeling of belonging and sense of community vanished. Suspicions wormed into my brain and I was convinced the neighbors now saw me as an interloper; a bad apple in their otherwise pristine barrel. One in particular really got under my skin. I took to calling him BHIB, short for Biggest House in Bridgeton. It wasn't actually the biggest but still seemed out of place on our street, *down-to-earth lane*. BHIB's manse was too opulent for my taste; better suited for chic Chesterfield, tony Town & Country or perhaps even a distant cousin to the posh palaces of Ladue. Never mind that I hadn't met the man and didn't really know anything about him. Just the fact that he lived in that house said everything I needed to know about BHIB. I just knew he was propped in his throne of an easy chair, peering down his long, snooty proboscis to lord his good fortune over the rest of us measly peasants. I could sense it oozing through the cold mortar of the imposing stone and brick façade.

The weather provided a constant, unpleasant parallel to my life. Winter dragged on forever with what seemed like weekly avalanches of snowfall and spring made a liar of Punxsutawney Phil. It was not only colder than normal but it rained incessantly like some kind of rampant outbreak of Chinese water torture. Malaise turned to self-pity when I lost my family and bitterness pushed out any optimism and good will that had occupied my puny heart. Perhaps I was just projecting my own frustration and disappointment onto others but didn't realize that my self-imposed exile was only dragging me deeper into the abyss. Just when I thought I couldn't sink any lower, things took a turn for the worse. Meteorological terrorists were attacking across our country but these things didn't happen in Bridgeton. They were just ethereal images that came across the television screen with no more meaning than the constant spate of contrived reality shows littering the airways. At least that's what I thought.

Good Friday was good in the sense that it was Friday, the end of the work week for me and a chance to drown my sorrows in some of St. Louis' finest ... a few frosty cold bottles of Budweiser. It was just what the doctor ordered to put another week of dreariness behind me and numb the mixture of envy and contempt I felt for all the lemmings heading off to church services. As I sat there stewing in my hops and barley, I was at first oblivious to the sirens that shattered the stillness of an otherwise peaceful evening. When the warnings shrieked a second time, the sky grew dark and the winds were whipped into a frenzy and it dispersed my lethargy like so much pollen dust and I went outside to satisfy my curiosity. I still had difficulty grasping the cold, harsh reality of the situation until I gazed upon the horizon which approached with startling swiftness like an invading horde of ghostly marauders atop

massive stallions trampling everything in their path. The line of demarcation was hauntingly stark where the foreboding black columns clashed with an eerily green, luminescent sky. Then someone turned up the celestial stereo playing a roaring symphony of the Norfolk & Western rushing by one ear at light speed while the Southern Pacific rumbled past the other. The last mortifying image I saw before I tumbled frantically into the basement was the sky swirling and extending its deadly tentacles down to earth like a malevolent spirit bent on reaping its harvest of blood and devastation.

It lasted forever in a few moments. I gathered myself, still trembling involuntarily but instilled with enough composure to get up and move by the silence that was only punctuated by the pattering of rain and approaching sirens of emergency vehicles. The power outage shrouded everything in a complete darkness that further motivated me to search for a flashlight and escape the basement to take stock of the situation. My heart sank nauseatingly into the pit of my stomach as I caught glimpses of the damage in the flashlight's beam as it jumped nervously in my hand. My home was intact but had lost windows, part of a wall and a section of the roof where tree limbs hung down as if to grab me in their evil clutches. I recoiled at the sight and sound of raindrops invading my home in a way that shattered every measure of safety and security I had ever possessed. I should have felt fortunate when I ventured outside to see what had happened to some of my neighbors. The wicked winds had not been so kind to them. Several homes nearby were completely demolished, leveled to the ground in a mass of debris with clothing and cherished possessions flung far and wide as if by vandals in a way that erased any trace of human dignity. Before a hint of compassion could well up in my empty soul, I saw something down the lane that stopped me in my tracks. I ventured through the rubble taking care to avoid the downed power lines snaking off the telephone poles that were snapped like so many dry twigs. Then my worst fears were realized. Somehow, in the midst of all this utter devastation, there stood BHIB's vile structure, completely untouched with nary a shingle missing.

I was livid and consumed with anger toward God and sheer hatred for the faceless man I had never met. These feelings lingered even as they were somewhat muted by the realization of the sheer havoc that had been visited upon our street as revealed by the sun's first light. Then something happened that kept my irrational, dangerous feelings at bay. Bridgeton and the entire surrounding St. Louis community showed their true colors. Volunteers of every stripe appeared out of nowhere like munchkins blossoming out to greet Dorothy after the tornado dropped her house on that unfortunate witch. Without any official direction or detailed instructions, people began rolling up their sleeves and diving in ... cutting, cleaning, hauling, covering, cooking and consoling. We had suffered such a deep wound that it would take weeks and months to regain our health but it helped so much that the healing process started so quickly. Even my dark, stony heart was warmed by this outpouring of love and generosity. It helped me feel, just a little bit, like part of a community, no, a family again.

It's odd though because I didn't even know most of the people who were working to restore my home and way of life. Some people came and went as time permitted and I saw them perhaps a time or two. Others seemed to be there over and over, lending a secure feeling of familiarity to the surroundings. Of course, some were gawkers who just wanted a closer look at the devastation and others were do-gooders who were there more out of a sense of obligation than compassion. You could tell because they did more talking than working. Then there was Old Jim. He was at least fifteen years older than me, perhaps in his early sixties but you wouldn't have guessed it based on his fitness and work ethic. Old Jim was a quiet cuss. It's not that he wasn't friendly but he was really focused on the work. He was there constantly, every day so much so that I wanted to strike up a conversation with him but he would have none of it, preferring to keep his nose to the grind stone. And he didn't fiddle with the easy tasks.

Jim would always tackle the dirtiest, most difficult jobs with dogged determination. All the time he was as pleasant and peaceful as could be.

As the week went on, Old Jim was always there working like a machine. I was at least able to pry out of him that he was a neighbor who lived nearby but you know how that goes. Sometimes you can live right across the street from someone and never really become acquainted, especially with someone like Jim who prefers to keep to himself. There was so much help that I started feeling like a general contractor or supervisor. It got to where most of my time was spent getting to know folks, thanking them and making sure everyone had plenty to eat and drink. Time and again, my fraternizing drew me back to Old Jim. There was something so compelling about him and the quiet example he set. He would occasionally chat briefly but most often would only drop one of his pearls of wisdom on me from the Bible he kept in his head, "for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee." Once he caught me down in the dumps and quietly recited as he ambled by, "The God of my rock; in him will I trust: he is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my savior; thou savest me from violence." Normally, I would have resented such proselytizing which I considered vain and hypocritical but not when it came from Old Jim. He never came across as a preachy, holier-than-thou Bible thumper. Jim had a humble faith and he always gave the glory to God saying that even his faith was a gift for which he could claim no credit. I actually started looking forward to his daily f-bombs. Oh, sorry ... that's another one of my acronyms ... for faith-bombs.

One thing was still stuck in my craw. There was a maelstrom in my belly that was every bit as destructive as the tornado that ripped through our neighborhood. Every time I looked down the street and saw BHIB's gleaming structure looming on the horizon untouched, it filled my heart with venom. And, unfortunately, I couldn't help but spew it, even amongst the wonderful, charitable people who were giving so generously of their time, talent and treasure to get me back on my feet. I'm sure Old Jim overheard me denigrating our neighbor many times but he never admonished me. I guess he was just too patient, wise, forgiving and understanding for that. He had more important things to do, like breaking his back to help an undeserving creep like me. I wish I would have taken his good example to heart but I kept letting my petty, sinful side get the better of me.

As things winded down and we were close to finishing much of the restoration, there was Old Jim still grinding away faithfully along with a sprinkling of remaining volunteers. I should have been overcome with joy and thankfulness at the amazing progress that had been achieved by the sweat of so many brows happily donated by friends, neighbors and caring strangers. But that maelstrom was still churning and I couldn't resist launching a few more incendiary darts at BHIB with my friend Bob while Old Jim was within close ear shot. On and on I went, satisfying my envious, vengeful nature without realizing how shameful I was behaving. Bob turned pale as a beluga whale that had eaten some bad krill and tried to change the subject but I droned on with the bitterness cascading from my filthy mouth. Finally, the discomfort was too much for Bob to bear and he grabbed my shoulder and literally pulled me away from everybody. I could tell by the look on his face that Bob was appalled and offered sheepishly, "Bob, I'm sorry, is BHIB a friend of yours?" Bob whispered so softly that I had to lean in close to hear him, "I guess you don't know it Curt but that house belongs to Jim." I was stunned and turned every shade of red. Every cruel word I had spoken in Jim's presence came back to me and I wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

It was hard but I finally worked up the courage to apologize to Jim. And do you know what? Jim was more concerned about me than with any of the invectives I had hurled from every direction at him. He took great pains to ease my embarrassment and extend the hand of friendship and fellowship to me.

I'm a changed man thanks to Old Jim and God with whom he helped me get reacquainted. My jaded glasses have been replaced with spiritual lenses that can see manifold blessings even in the midst of tragedy. I've been able to recognize God's grace in the maelstrom; the goodness and mercy that helped us avoid death and serious injuries in spite of the devastation. It took some time but I regained my wife and family. Now on Sundays, you can find us in church, sharing a pew with Old Jim. The three Ds have been supplanted by the three Fs ... faith, family and friends. I still use one acronym though but now it refers to my house ... BHIB ... Blessed House in Bridgeton.