



Warmth

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The janitor sat in the darkened boiler room hidden in the deepest recesses of the schoolhouse basement. The only illumination was the red-hot glow from the opened furnace door. Looking asleep, his hands were clenched between his knees and his head hung down, chin touching chest. A low moaning could be heard, and he let out his breath with a sigh. Like an old worn doormat, he felt old and useless.

Sitting up he ran his hands over shirt-sleeves frayed at the cuffs. His ferret-like eyes darted around taking in the bleak surroundings. In the corner lay two wrinkled blankets ridden with moth holes. Often he lay in the corner covering his thin cold body with the musty smell of the damp basement. He looked at the wrinkled newspapers, which covered the floor, keeping some of the cold from leaking from the dirty concrete into his feet. As he moved his left foot closer to the warmth of the furnace, he noticed an advertisement for corn on the cob, two cents an ear or a baker's dozen for twenty-five cents. If only he had a couple of pennies, he would buy two ears. He would roast them by the furnace and have a feast. However, the newspaper was from two summers ago and tonight was cold and the snow poured from the starless sky. Lucky if you could afford such a treat in the winter.

Seeing the fire was dying down and feeling the cold seeping back into his bones, he rose slowly from the ladder back chair. The coal shovel was in its usual place, and he shoveled a small pile of coal chunks into the furnace. The fire was carefully banked so the embers could be brought to life in the early morning before the children arrived. He closed the furnace door. On second thought, he decided to leave it open just a crack to warm up the basement before he fell asleep.

After he settled underneath the tattered blankets in his corner, he began to think about how nice it would be to have hot roasted corn. He would roast the ears in their husks, and they would be steaming and moist when he peeled back the blackened husks. Suddenly he was dreaming. Children were bringing him baskets of corn—hot steaming corn. They brought more and more piling it around him. It was so warm

and he was so comfortable. He thought happily that he would soon reach out and grab a succulent ear.

Just before dawn the first fire truck arrived at the school. Smoke poured from the windows blown from their panes. The heat was intense. Four hours passed before the flames were quenched that had taken hold of the dry timbers, ancient desks, and thousands of sheets of children's schoolwork. The snow continued to fall sharply contrasted by the blackened remains of the school. It was five days before the charred bones were found in the basement. It was easy to see that the fire had started from the opened furnace door. There was nothing left in the basement except for the janitor's charred remains and hundreds of blackened corncobs.