

FROZEN PIZZA

by Anthony Swilly

In the town of Larkspur (population 2,143 if you counted the Lundgren twins separately, which most folks did except on Sundays when they dressed alike and confused the ushers) there was a small grocery store called Halvorson's Market, a place where time moved at the speed of conversation and the freezers hummed like a choir that had given up on perfection but not on faith.

You could stand in Aisle Three for ten minutes deciding between two brands of canned peaches and no one would rush you. In fact, someone would likely join you, offer an opinion, and before long you'd be discussing your aunt's gallbladder surgery or the peculiar way the weather had turned that year, as if it had somewhere better to be.

The frozen foods section was at the back, past the bread that never quite tasted like bread used to, and the milk cooler that rattled ominously but never failed. It was there, in the soft blue light of the freezer case, that Carl Peterson found himself one Thursday evening in late January, staring at a row of frozen pizzas.

Carl was a quiet man, the sort who fixed things without being asked and never mentioned it afterward. He had worked at the hardware store for thirty-seven years and could identify a screw by touch alone, which he sometimes demonstrated at parties, though the town had long since stopped throwing parties that required such demonstrations.

His wife, Elaine, had passed the previous spring after a long illness that had left the house too quiet and Carl unsure what to do with the hours

that used to belong to caring for her. He had taken to coming to Halvorson's more often than necessary, buying one or two items at a time, as if groceries were a reason to keep moving forward.

That Thursday, he stood before the freezer, considering his options.

There was the Deluxe Supreme, with its ambitious promise of everything: pepperoni, sausage, green peppers, onions... like a gathering where no one quite got along. There was the Plain Cheese, modest and dependable, the kind Elaine used to prefer before her appetite faded. And then there was a newer brand, something with a wood-fired crust that looked too sophisticated for Larkspur, as though it had taken a wrong turn somewhere near Minneapolis and never found its way back.

"Evening, Carl."

He turned to see Marlene Dobbs, who taught second grade and had a way of speaking that made even ordinary greetings sound like gentle instructions.

"Evening," Carl said.

"Cold enough for you?" she asked, though the question was rhetorical, as it always was in January.

Carl nodded. "Suppose so."

Marlene peered into the freezer. "You thinking about pizza?"

"Seems that way."

"Well," she said, as if delivering a lesson plan, "I've found the crust is the key. You can forgive a lot if the crust is right."

Carl considered this. "Elaine used to say the same thing."

Marlene softened. “She had good sense.”

They stood there a moment, the hum of the freezer filling in the spaces where words might have gone.

“I don’t cook much anymore,” Carl admitted.

“You don’t have to cook,” Marlene said. “That’s the beauty of frozen pizza. It asks very little of you. Just a willingness to wait.”

Carl gave a small smile. “I can do that.”

Marlene selected a pizza, Plain Cheese, and placed it in her basket. “Start simple,” she advised. “You can always complicate things later.”

After she left, Carl reached into the freezer and took out the same kind. It felt solid in his hands, reassuring in its certainty. Here was something that required no guesswork, no delicate timing beyond what the box instructed. Preheat the oven. Remove from packaging. Bake for twelve to fifteen minutes.

He paid at the register, where young Tyler, home from college and sporting a beard that seemed aspirational, rang him up.

“Pizza night?” Tyler asked.

“Something like that.”

“Good choice,” Tyler said, though he had not seen what Carl was buying. “Can’t go wrong with pizza.”

Carl stepped out into the cold, the sky already dark though it was barely six. The snow underfoot squeaked with each step, a sound that belonged only to winter and only to places like Larkspur, where winter had opinions and was not shy about expressing them.

At home, Carl set the pizza on the counter and read the instructions twice, as if they might change upon second viewing. The oven, which had seen better decades, took its time preheating, clicking and sighing like an old man rising from a chair.

Carl leaned against the counter and looked around the kitchen. Elaine's presence lingered in small ways: the jar of wooden spoons she favored, the calendar still turned to April, the faint scent of something floral that no longer had a source.

He remembered the way she used to hum while cooking, not a particular tune, just a soft thread of sound that made the room feel occupied even in silence. He had not noticed it much at the time, the way you don't notice a clock ticking until it stops.

The oven beeped, a modern addition that seemed out of place in the old appliance. Carl placed the pizza on the rack and closed the door.

Twelve to fifteen minutes.

He stood there at first, watching through the small window as the cheese began to soften, then melt, then bubble in places like small, contained storms. It was oddly mesmerizing, this transformation from something frozen and rigid to something warm and alive.

After a few minutes, Carl moved to the table and sat down. The chair across from him remained empty, as it had for months now, but tonight it felt less accusatory, more like a pause than an absence.

He thought about the years with Elaine... not in grand, sweeping terms, but in small, precise moments: the way she insisted on folding towels a certain way, the way she laughed at jokes she'd heard before, the way

she always saved the last slice of anything for him, even when he told her not to.

The timer went off, a sharp, insistent sound that pulled him back.

Carl stood, opened the oven, and carefully removed the pizza. The crust was golden at the edges, the cheese evenly melted, just as promised. He let it sit for a minute, remembering something about letting it rest, though he couldn't recall where he'd heard it.

He cut the pizza into four slices, though he knew he would only eat two. Old habits persisted, even when their original purpose had vanished.

Carl carried a plate to the table and sat down. He took a bite.

It was... fine. Not remarkable, not terrible. The crust had a certain crispness, the cheese a predictable stretch. It did not taste like anything Elaine had ever made, nor did it try to. It was, in its way, honest.

Carl ate slowly, listening to the quiet of the house. Outside, a car passed, its tires hissing on the snow. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked, then thought better of it.

Halfway through the second slice, Carl found himself speaking aloud.

"Crust's not bad," he said.

The words hung in the air, unclaimed.

He nodded, as if someone had agreed. "Could use a little more sauce."

There was a pause, and then, in the quiet way of memory, he could almost hear Elaine's response: *You always say that.*

Carl smiled, a small, genuine thing that felt unfamiliar on his face.

“Well,” he said to the empty chair, “some things don’t change.”

He finished the slice and set his fork down. The remaining pizza sat on the counter, cooling, waiting. It would be there tomorrow, and the day after, a quiet assurance that not everything had to be decided all at once.

Carl stood, rinsed his plate, and turned off the kitchen light. As he headed toward the living room, he glanced back once more at the table, at the space that was both empty and not.

In Larkspur, winter would go on for a while yet, as it always did, and Halvorson’s freezer would continue its low, faithful hum. People would stand in Aisle Three and debate peaches, and Marlene Dobbs would teach her students about the importance of beginnings.

And Carl Peterson, who had spent most of his life fixing things for others, would learn, one frozen pizza at a time, that some things are not meant to be fixed, only tended to, with patience and a willingness to wait for the warmth to come back, however slowly it might arrive.