

Over the Back Fence
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Approx 630 words

Hello, customer service?
By Alva Wood

“Don’t touch that shovel!” Florence Armitage lectures her husband Ollie. “I don’t want you dying of a heart attack like poor Isobel Steele did!”

“But the snowplow hasn’t come around,” replies Ollie. “If I don’t shovel the road, we won’t get out of here.”

“We don’t need to get out,” Florence says.

“That’s not the point,” Ollie retorts. “What if something happened to one of us and we had to get to the hospital?”

“Like what?” Florence demands.

“Well, like...” Ollie thinks hard for a minute, “like maybe I had that heart attack you’re always warning me about.”

“If you don’t shovel the road, you won’t have the heart attack, and you won’t need to get out to the emergency department,” says Florence, with stunning logic. “If you shovel it, you’ll need it.”

She starts back in, and then changes her mind. “Why don’t you use some of that excess energy by calling the village offices to complain that no one has plowed our road yet?”

As Ollie trudges towards his front door, she has a last word for him: “Take off your boots when you come in!”

Ollie struggles out of his boots, his tuque, his mitts, his parka. He’s out of breath by the time he calls the village offices.

“Oh, hi, Ollie,” says Yvonne Wentz, answering the phone.

“How did you know it was me?” Ollie asks.

“I could hear you wheezing,” says Yvonne. “You must have been out shovelling your driveway.”

“Not my driveway,” says Ollie. “My street. Nobody’s been around to plow it yet.”

“Oh, okay, so you want to talk to Ronnie,” says Yvonne.

“Ronnie who?” asks Ollie.

“You hadn’t heard?” Yvonne replies. “Ronnie Burkholder, Sam’s son. He’s in charge of snowplowing now.”

“My God!” says Ollie. He turns away from the phone to talk to Florence. “They’ve got that dim-wit son of Sam Burkholder plowing our streets,” he tells her.

“That’s appropriate,” says Florence. “He’s working for a half-wit engineer. They’ll make a good pair.”

Ollie turns back to the phone.

“Okay,” he says, “if I have to, I’ll talk to Ronnie.”

“He’s in a meeting,” says Yvonne. “I can give you his voice mail.”

This has been the best job Ronnie has ever held in his life. All week, when it’s cold and clear, he sits in a nice warm office filling out forms and attending meetings on corporate efficiency, codes of ethics, and customer service.

The snow usually waits until weekends, which means he gets overtime for Saturday and double-time for Sunday. And if he doesn’t get all the roads plowed by Sunday night, he leaves them until the next weekend. They’ll melt soon enough.

“I don’t want his voice mail,” says Ollie. “I want to see him in person.”

“I can make an appointment for you,” says Yvonne helpfully. “His calendar is fully booked for the next two weeks.”

This kid learns a lot faster than I had expected, Ollie thinks, but he doesn’t say it.

“When would you like to come in?” Yvonne asks.

“I don’t want to come in at all,” replies Ollie. “I want him to come and see me.”

“I don’t think he makes house calls,” says Yvonne, a little puzzled.

“He needs to,” says Ollie firmly. “There’s at least a dozen of us out here would like to have him visit us.”

“Really?” says Yvonne.

“Yes,” says Ollie. “It’s like a neighbourhood association,” he adds, thinking that always adds some political weight. “And tell him to bring his snowplow with him when he comes.”

He can hear Yvonne’s computer keys clicking as she checks Ronnie’s schedule.

“Okay,” she says. “I think I’ve found an opening. How would June 7th work for you?”