Michaella Thornton

Why a Mother Teaches Her Daughter to Shovel Snow

1.

Where I grew up near Kansas City, Missouri, I shoveled snow and mowed lawns and changed my truck's brake pads with my father. I did these things not to prove that girls were capable, but because that's what you do in the lower Midwest when your former-jock father, a power-and-light dispatcher who listened to too much Rush Limbaugh, wished he'd had a son first instead of a smart-mouthed daughter.

I know where my three-year-old daughter gets her stubborn optimism, her need to be out in this single-digit St. Louis cold with her mother, who is, this particular winter, almost always shoveling snow. I respect my child's resolve and kindness and sense of joyous solidarity because snow can be fun and is not just a Sisyphean exercise in moving shovelfuls of frozen water from one surface to the next. In fact, my daughter often reminds me to put down the shovel, to lie in the snow with her, to create these ephemeral, translucent wings together.

But beyond keeping her warm, I want my daughter to have a childhood, something I didn't really have as the eldest daughter of four. Instead, I was one who took care of my siblings every other weekend when our father lashed out at us in anger.

Anger at a light left on in the upstairs bedroom or a tub of margarine placed on the wrong refrigerator shelf. Anger when I read books indoors instead of playing softball outside or offered up facts when he raged on in his opinions. Anger because my mother left him first, and then our stepmother second. Anger that no one seemed

to appreciate how hard he worked, even though we all knew what overtime and time-and-a-half were and what everything cost before we knew how to drive, how to walk away, how to leave him like our mothers.

My girlhood, my identity even, was forged in trying to be "good," to not displease, to read a room and its inhabitants' intentions and emotions before anyone ever opened their mouths, to walk on eggshells already crushed by my father's anger.

When it snowed, I shoveled and salted steps without being asked. I cleared surfaces for a man who blamed everyone else for the destruction left in his path.

2.

On this freezing February evening, I wait for my young daughter to fall asleep before I clear the driveway to ready our daily journey to preschool and then work.

Truth be told, I am exhausted and fall asleep with her snuggled in my arms. When I wake, it's almost eleven p.m. The temperature outside clocks zero degrees Fahrenheit I put on a thermal zip-up over my sweater and leggings and pull on long wool socks, a hooded winter coat, warm gloves my ex left behind, my Marge Gunderson hat, and my beloved pair of insulated and waterproof Kamik Men's Fargo boots.

3.

When a marriage ends, some women buy cordless drills, weighted blankets, vibrators, wine, gym memberships, self-help books, dating app subscriptions, jewelry, or a grand vacation. For me, the fall after my ex leaves, the first thing I buy are big-ass snow boots.

Feeling stuck is one of my greatest fears, greater than being neglected, greater than being abused, far greater than being abandoned and left to fend for myself. I've survived this much and more, and, at the end of the day, the wish I want most is to know I can take good care of myself and my daughter.

So, I wish for boots which can withstand temperatures down to minus forty degrees. Boots that make me feel comfortable on slick

surfaces, like I was built for shoveling snow uphill in unforgiving weather. Like I was a woman made of salt and steel and not some lonesome girl forged in solitude and ice.

When I wear these boots, I know I'll be OK. My daughter will be OK. We'll both be OK; more than OK, actually. She will see her tough-ass mother outside the dining room window shoveling snow. Her inheritance, I pray, is she will know how to dig herself out of a challenging situation. She will never doubt that she is loved, she is brave—she is free.

4.

At night there is a faint glow of gold emanating from my neighbors' porch lights. Two-bedroom, one-bath brick bungalows from the late 1920s and newly built half-a-million-dollar homes sit side by side in this suburban St. Louis neighborhood, separated only by middle-class chain-link fences or high-dollar privacy barriers.

The world is quiet. No one else makes the muffled scraping sound of metal on pavement late at night like I do.

I leave the back door open with the glass patio door shut on the off chance my three-year-old daughter wakes to use the restroom or tries to find me, which she often does when I leave her bed to wash dishes, fold laundry, read, binge watch a series, or try in vain to sleep in my own bed until she crawls in beside me, arms outstretched.

She has grown used to the boundary of my body, nestling her warmth into mine, and I will not lie: Falling asleep next to her is my greatest comfort, even with her feet jabbing me in the stomach or her face mere inches from mine come morning when she announces, "It's wake-up time!"

But this time when I sneak away from her, I do so to clear the snow off of the back porch and to make a salted trail to my compact car, which is idling in the driveway with half a foot of snow on top. I want to make sure the engine will start come morning, that the ice and snow don't become so heavy in their accumulation that clearing our way in the morning will be harder than it has to be. So, I retrieve a broom to sweep off the car's hood, to do what I can now.

And as I approach the glass door, I see my daughter's reflection—golden hair loose and wavy, rainbow-striped pajamas, bare feet, eyes

scrunched up in tears. I open the door and hug her and tell her I'll be right back, to stay put, and then run to turn off the car's engine.

"Oh, honey," I say upon return, scooping her up in the cold mudroom, "please go back to bed."

"I had a bad dream," she says, crying, as I carry her back to her bedroom. "I need you. Where were you?"

"I was shoveling snow," I whisper, pulling the covers up and over her small body, kissing her forehead, her baby cheeks. "I am right here. I would never leave you."

"But I wanted to shovel with you," she says, tears warming my face.

I hold her until she falls back to sleep, and I breathe in her scent—sweet orange and vanilla shampoo, dryer sheets, applesauce, innocence.

Tomorrow we will shovel snow together, not out of obligation or fear or a desire to create order out of a mess my child did not create. No, I will give her a different birthright: a pale blue shovel and sturdy hot-pink snow boots and an innate belief in her strength and worth. That perhaps, just maybe, I will help her uncover a path I did not get to take myself. That if I am lucky and work hard enough, I will be a mother who unburies her grief so her child might walk surely, swiftly, unencumbered.