

Farewell Party

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Ambrose puffed his breath into the air and watched the faint cloud quickly disappear in the dry arctic climate. The thermometer nailed to the tree at the edge of the campground read minus 24 Celsius. Every day the mercury dipped closer to the minus 40 spot where Fahrenheit and Celsius come together, a possibility that Ambrose found mesmerizing.

He looked over at their collection of wood saws hanging from a nail in the fat pine tree near their fire. I'm going to do it today, he thought. The time has come.

He walked carefully, deliberately to the tree with the wood saws and selected the smallest, a bow-shaped saw with an eighteen-inch blade stretched between the ends of a metal bow tube. The teeth of the saw blade were deeply serrated, the indentations going nearly a half inch into the band. The teeth were worn from cutting wood, hundreds of small logs that had kept them from freezing over the past two months.

He tested the teeth. For all the work they had been asked to do, these saw teeth were remarkably sharp. This saw would do. This saw, and his hunting knife.

He checked the side pocket of his pocket pants for the waterproof match container. It was there.

As he left the clearing, carrying the saw, Maureen and Jen-Lee looked up. Maureen had been Rudy's girlfriend. Until they became too weakened by the hunger, she had prayed on her knees for an hour every day down by the gravel beach near the main camp. She had prayed for Rudy's soul and for everyone's survival.

No doubt the minicams had captured that.

Ambrose fanned his fingers in a little wave. Jen-Lee nodded back. Jen-Lee was their freelancer, their doer of odd jobs, the forty year old grandmother who had arm-wrestled Rudy and held out for more than two minutes. She had called Rudy Spearchucker. "You look just like that guy in M.A.S.H.," she told him.

"Yassam," Rudy said.

"Fucking Uncle Tom," she said.

Jen-Lee looked at Ambrose for a moment and then went back to working the boiled lichen with her teeth. It was all they'd to eat in six days.

Ambrose walked very slowly along the trail to the firewood camp, the little saw hanging loosely in his hand. As he walked, he watched carefully, his eyes darting from side to side to see if he could spot a rabbit or a vole or perhaps even a fox. But there was no edible life, only trees.

Ambrose had been hungry before. He had gone without food for three days on a camping trip in Manitoba. It had been painful, but at the end of the third day they arrived back at their truck and drove straight to an all-night diner at the intersection of route 124 and Mill road and the hunger was quickly dissipated by pancakes and maple syrup.

Here, they had been reduced to lichen and bark and a few nuts for nearly three weeks. The remains of the moose calf, even the marrow of the bones, was gone. Ambrose thought Ivan was still hoarding a Hershey bar--those were supposed to be shared--but Ivan denied it.

The hunger had settled into a rhythm. When Ambrose woke in the middle of the night, and again in the morning, well before dawn, there was a void in his stomach, a pulling. He knew the feeling would come, and he was afraid of it. It usually went away for a few hours during the daylight. Then the feeling would come back, an overwhelming drive to eat, to eat almost anything.

It didn't take long to reach the firewood camp on the north shore. The woodpile Rudy had constructed was just visible under the deep snow, marking the shallow grave where they had covered Rudy's body a month before. The drone had appeared high overhead during the burying ceremony, circling, taking it all in.

Ambrose knelt down and went to work. The snow came away easily. There was a layer of powder and then a crust. The crust was thin and Ambrose broke it with his boot heel, quickly uncovering the stiff frozen tarp, blue, showing through the dirt. They had dumped enough dirt on top of the tarp so that, they thought, the foxes would not find it interesting. With the body frozen, there would be no smell. On that, at least, they had been right. There was no sign of animal digging.

Ambrose pushed the dirt back with his gloved hands, standing from time to time to kick at a heavy frozen clod with his boots, then kneeling back down to brush away the remaining dirt and snow until the tarp was uncovered. He tugged at the corners of the tarp near where Rudy's head would be, kicking and digging until the corners came free. Then he pulled them back slowly, one corner, then the other. Rudy was frozen solid, the side of his once-dark face nearly white. One hand stuck awkwardly off to the side, the body lying on its front, the face turned back in the direction of the camp.

For a sudden moment Ambrose tasted fox. The fox meat was tough, and stringy. They'd been warm then, and almost full. The good days, more than three months before, when the earth was tilted differently. That was a month after the boat departed, leaving them with eight weeks' rations for a seven-month stay.

A few days later Ambrose killed the first fox.

Now he could smell the grass again, rubbing against his nose, sweet under the warm sun, as he pushed forward on his belly. There had been twigs that day along the path, scratching near his mouth as he moved forward. His hands gripped the rifle, holding it carefully in position.

The fox was eating raspberries. The easy movements of its tail, the movements that showed it was eating, stopped. Ambrose stopped. He waited for the fox to stop worrying and begin eating again.

A line of sweat had formed at Ambrose's temple. He focused on it, brushing it off. To stop it from dripping he'd have to move his fingers from the grip of the rifle upward, very slowly, in front of his ear. Too tricky. He let it run.

Then he thought: Maybe I should have gone to college. With college I could make enough money for Josh's school without this. I wouldn't be risking my neck, with winter looming, for two hundred thousand dollars. I wouldn't be performing in front of the minicams like an insect on a pin.

Still, the two hundred thousand would do it. In two separate tax years it will take care of Josh's special ed for quite a while, plus Rachel's alimony and there'll be some left over. I may even be able to get the Jag, the XKE.

He breathed in the sweet smell of decay and dry wild flowers and fungus. His eyes, at the periphery, took in the flat colors of lichen and dry balsam needles.

He had wondered what would Rudy do with his money. Or Jen-Lee? Maureen wants it for independence, so she can say Fuck You to the men in her life. I don't need you, I'll just take what I want, Thank You Very Much, and be on my way.

Jen-Lee? Well, she'd touch the money, caress it, use it as a companion. And she'd feel better, secure.

The animal was munching the berries again. Ambrose pulled himself forward a few more inches through the lichen and the leaves and the balsam needles. Now he could see the fox's head. The .22 was nearly in position. He moved the barrel just a few inches to the right, lining it up on the animal's head, getting the rear sight aligned, the tiny post on the end of the barrel exactly in the center of the little V close to his squinting right eye. His index finger snaked around the trigger guard, pushing off the safety, then slipping back to touch the metal of the trigger which was cool even on this warm day. The smooth metal of the trigger was calming to his touch.

The fox stopped eating for a moment, raised his head and sniffed. Ambrose was ready. The crack of the rifle sounded not so much like a shot as the splintering sound of wood, as though someone had hit a piece of wood with another piece, not in anger but deliberately and with some care.

The fox jumped, straight up, then dropped in a snarling blur, all four legs churning, and dove into the underbrush. Ambrose jumped up, the .22 in his left hand, and ran toward the animal. A trail of blood led away from the raspberry bush to the spot where the fox had disappeared into the wood-line. Ambrose stepped in. The fox was there, thrashing on its back. He stood well clear and watched. Death spasms. No need to waste another precious bullet. The fox's bladder voided, the smell powerful and foul. The thrashing stopped. The fox twitched for a few seconds and then was still.

Looking at Rudy's corpse, he thought Now, in winter, we are the prey. The world is trying to kill us. And of course the audience is watching. They'd like to see us die, I expect. Now all that matters is getting through this, surviving until March.

"We know who you are," he said aloud, looking at Rudy. Third string line-backer for the Oakland Raiders, fast as the wind. Sawyer of wood. Teller of dirty jokes. Farther. Fake Uncle Torn, proud black man, sometimes a friend.

Ambrose worked around the tarp, pulling at the corners near Rudy's feet, easing it up. Now Rudy was liberated from the earth and snow, lying peacefully on his stomach, solid as a rock. Ambrose thought, I'll start with the flesh behind the thigh, between the buttock and the knee.

He took out his hunting knife and began cutting the back of Rudy's parka pants. No one had taken the pants after Rudy's death because they all had plenty to wear. There was no shortage of warm clothing, just a shortage of food.

Sometimes they talked about the hunger. Some of them sat, some lay back around the fire, and they spoke of hunger pangs, of weakness, and of hamburgers and potatoes and chocolate cake.

But that made things worse, so they tried to talk of other things.

Only two more months, 57 days. But two months now seemed like more than any human could endure.

Ambrose cut very slowly and methodically. First a cross cut into the fabric behind the knee, then slicing the fabric up the back of the thigh past the buttock to the belt line. Then he separated the cut portions of the parka pants, exposing the frozen thigh, but there was still too much material in the way to use the saw. Ambrose walked around between Rudy's feet, picked them up, one hand gripping each of Rudy's boots, and pulled at his legs, separating them. The right leg was still awkwardly bent from the fall, where Rudy had hit the rocks at the bottom of the ravine. The cameras had recorded that too, Ambrose was sure. And the drone had come over as Rudy lay dying, crying out, for the next two days. Maureen and Jen-Lee had spelled out their SOS with rocks and sticks on the beach, and the drone had recorded that too, probably a live transmission, millions watching.

But they were true to their word. No help, no visits, no drops, no nothing for seven months. Nothing, under any circumstances, until March 1.

Ambrose eased the body down. Then he knelt, and finished cutting the parka pants completely around the edge, and pushed the pants down under Rudy's thigh until all of the material was out of the way. Now he could use his saw.

He started at the hamstring. "Sorry Rudy," he said out loud. "No more football." He jerked back, a reflex, as though someone had pushed against the front of his body.

Sometimes, with the others, Ambrose drank hot water to have some feeling in his belly but it didn't really help. From the gnawing the hunger progressed to weakness. At the really bad moments, when he sat or lay in the darkness, he chewed pine needles but the taste did not cover the feeling of his strength leaving his extremities moving toward the center of his body, a sense that his vital parts were pulling his energy inward like a turtle pulling in its head and legs.

At those moments, he felt his muscles weaken and he knew his body would not do what he asked, chop much wood or walk very far. At those moments he was afraid of death.

Ambrose breathed a few times, watching the little clouds in front of his mouth. Then he looked down, and drew the saw against the hamstring and the other ligaments behind Rudy's knee and cut through the ligaments and the frozen flesh until he met bone. Then he moved up to the buttock and made a parallel cut just below the buttock line. Then, with his hunting knife, he began cutting incisions into the frozen flesh on lines perpendicular to his saw cuts until he could work the knife well into the flesh, along the femur. The pulling and jerking on the knife melted bits of flesh and gradually let the knife pass through until, finally, there came loose a large piece of Rudy's frozen flesh, perhaps four pounds.

Ambrose had never decided whether he liked Rudy. They'd had a fight over Rudy's "humble Negro act," as JenLee called it.

"Why do you do that act?" Ambrose had asked.

"It's a good way of dealing with the world," Rudy said, "So back off." He had looked at Ambrose with a level gaze.

"Look at Maureen. Maureen likes me. Maureen and I went down to the beach when the weather was warm and fooled around some..."

"For a big audience," Jen-Lee cut in.

"I knocked three mini-cams out of there," Rudy said. "I don't think there are any more."

"There are more," Jen-Lee said.

"Anyway," Rudy said, "Maureen likes me because I'm not threatening. I'm not so smart-ass. Do you think she'd have sex with a black man who's aggressive?"

"She did," Ambrose said.

"Bullshit," Rudy said. "She made love to the Uncle Tom. That's the one she liked."

"Let's ask her," Ambrose said.

"No," Rudy said. "It's none of your business."

"It's a lie," Ambrose said. "Pretending you're harmless is a lie."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Only about that, but yes."

Rudy finally told Ambrose to keep the fuck out of his way. They had avoided each other after that.

Ambrose turned his face away, then back. The hunk of flesh was grayish, and purple. He looked straight up, then back to the tree line, toward the main camp. He gagged.

A question crossed his mind like a cloud. Will this be enough? If I do this thing will it save us?

He set aside the piece of flesh, pulled the torn parka pants back over the wound in Rudy's body, and re-covered the body with the tarp, weighting down the edges with rocks and snow. Then he began preparing the fire.

Rudy's grill was in front of the little shelter they had used before his death. Ambrose leveled the grill, piled some twigs and lichen underneath and lit them. The wood was dry and caught easily.

The flames grew, licking up around the wire of the grill.

When the fire seemed right, he put his pan on the grill, and waited while it warmed. Then he took the piece of frozen meat and cut carefully, using the saw and his knife, until he got a chunk off one end and dropped that in the pan. He watched as the pan warmed the frozen flesh and a tiny spiral of smoke began to rise. Then he smelled the smell of cooking meat, a sweet smell, compelling, powerful. He added another piece and cut some more and added that.

Jen-Lee came first. She appeared at the end of the trail they had walked so many times between the main camp and this north-shore firewood clearing.

Jen-Lee watched Ambrose as he cooked and turned the meat. She came slowly toward the fire, drawn to the aroma. "I wondered how long it would take," she said. She squatted down on her haunches.

"Do you want some?" he said.

"Yes, I do." She paused and glanced at him. "Please." Ambrose put the pan with the three pieces of meat off on the side in the snow away from the fire. He cut one of the pieces in half, impaled the smaller one on a camp knife and handed it to Jen-Lee. She held the knife by its handle with the piece of meat on the tip, put it in her mouth and began chewing. They looked at each other quickly in the silence. She swallowed. "It's food. By God it's food," she said. Ambrose took a piece and chewed and swallowed. Then he cut another piece from the frozen chunk and put it in the pan, and put the pan back on the grill.

The others began appearing slowly, silently. Ambrose went on frying the meat and cutting it into pieces. They gathered around him in a circle. Ambrose held out the pan, now full of cooked meat. "Take it, eat," he said.

"Yes," said Ivan.

"Rudy's body."

"Given for thee," Maureen said, and crossed herself.

The drone was overhead again, circling.