The Beginning of the End/995

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I never thought that someday this would happen, that someday the world would turn so quickly from the place I call home to a place where anyone and anything wants to kill you.

When I woke up in the familiar tent, I was surprised by the extreme chill of the morning air on my face. My dad was still asleep next to me. Today is a special day, my birthday. So yesterday we backpacked down Main Street, across the Arkansas river, up Midland Hill, and into Hop Gulch, the place where we spend a couple of days every year to bond.

But little did I know I would never backpack up Main Street, across the river, or into our campsite just for fun ever again. I zipped open the door to our tent. Freezing snow poured in; it coated my sleeping bag. I stepped out of the tent and towards my quiver and bow leaning under a tree. They were both soaked.

I was struck with surprise by the freezing cascade. Usually, the sun would be out and the birds would be singing and I would be searching for water for breakfast. But now I searched for nothing because I saw nothing under the thick blanket of snow almost up to my knees. I scanned the area. I saw all the things one might expect for a blizzard in the middle of the summer. I saw snow-coated trees. I faintly saw our food bag hanging from a tree in the distance, wearing a snow cap.

My brain went into autopilot; the first thing I needed to do was to evaluate our camp. Water, frozen solid, food hanging from the tree, safe, my hunting tools, bow in a tree wet but usable, tomahawk on my belt, quiver wet, arrows frozen.

My dad emerged from the tent and seemed surprised. The first real words of the morning were uttered as I struck a match to light the fire I had just built. “What is happening?” Asked my dad, sounding defeated and confused.

I replied, “I have no idea,” warming my gloveless hands by the fire. My dad left towards the food bag, his feet crunching the snow. Once he had retrieved it from the tree, he returned. “We’re running low. All we have left is some noodles and our tea,” he stated.

I added another thought. “Then we’d better get going soon if we want to be in town before sunset.”

We cooked what food we had left, bundled up with what we could find in our summer gear, and left our camp. I had my bow in my hand, an arrow knocked at all times. Something about this didn't feel right.

What I saw will stay with me forever. My town, the town I knew so well, was frosted over. Multiple cars were crashed on the side of the road; a telephone pole was knocked over. There was a man inside the car crumpled on the pole. He looked jarred, staring straight ahead not moving. I approached. Slowly. Once I got close enough I realized that he wasn't “frozen” he was actually frozen, solid. A thin layer of ice covered his entire body, a look of fear was locked on his face.

At that moment I realized that this was real, that this was no game. That man was someone's son, husband, or brother. This was not the time to be messing around. Once my dad approached and saw what I was looking at, we increased our speed from walking to jogging. Even given our increased speed, he fell back again and took a couple of seconds to peer into every window just to make sure there were no people.

We made it to the intersection of 285 and Main Street but he looked torn about whether to go left toward our cabin and check on my sister and mother, or go right and get our much-needed supplies. “Let's go,” I said, beginning toward the grocery store. I knew they could handle themselves for half an hour. My mom had grown up in weather like this in less than a cabin. Well, not the frozen alive part but I know she could handle the snow. And my sister never left her side, so I know she's safe too.

Once we had walked down the highway to the grocery store, we saw that the window was broken. But we assumed nothing because of the extreme cold and the heavy snow. But then we saw the footprints in the thick layer of powder that had blown in from the broken glass and two sets of boot prints, both very large. Two grown men had come in through the glass and might still be there.

We entered through the broken glass, leaving prints of our own in the snow. I drew my bow, ready for anyone who wanted to hurt us. Then we heard them just as we entered the hardware section. Chatting came from the aisle next to us. “Do you think anyone else is alive?” asked the first man.

Then another voice replied, “I don't know but we need those bandages. We also need to get back soon before the frost comes in again.”

They rounded the corner and came into view; their eyes widened at the sight of us. One wielded a knife, and the other held a sharpened broom handle. I increased the tension on my bow to a full draw and my dad pulled out his tomahawk, a twin to mine. The four of us were locked in an endless tension you could drown in. Then my arm began to shake.

I had to decide if I would release my arrow into this man's chest or let my bow down and leave myself vulnerable. After a second more of thought, I released my draw and let the bow fall. No more lives need to be taken today.