

The old man faced away as I entered, but he knew the Stetson remained on my head. It only further proved that he did, indeed, know everything. Perhaps, I'm predictable.

"Take off your hat."

I removed it with the shameful movements of a scolded child.

"And close the door, for God's sake. We invented inside to keep the outside out."

Franz Ek was a Swede. It showed in his voice and his shape. He stood over six feet tall. Pale leathery skin hung from sharp angular features like sheets thrown over the furniture in a old summer home. His accented speech flowed in a gentle melody, yet remained articulate. Every movement he made, even standing still, issued a firm yet quiet authority. I did as I was told, suddenly conscious of everything about myself, from the small tear in my coat sleeve to the snow sliding off my boots and onto his hardwood floor.

"I'm sorry if this is a bad time Mr. Ek, I—."

"There is nothing more sorry than false contrition," he snapped. "Have a seat. Or stand if you like. But, I am making tea and you will have some."

The small cabin in which Franz lived was just large enough to fit a high table flanked by two wooden stools in the center of the room. A bunk jutted from the wall to my right to within an arm's reach of the table. From above the bed, a stuffed ram's head stared down at me with glassy eyes. In a cradle beside it rested the old bolt action rifle which had taken its life. A counter stood against the long wall opposite me, at which Franz now stood with his gaze fixed firmly through the window above the sink. To my left, a pot belly stove burned beneath a

clothesline that ran from the front wall to the back, dipping deeply toward the wood-burning stove beneath the weight of a pair of brown woolen trousers.

The home represented a new fashion: houses small as campers; freedom in simplicity. He purchased it three winters previous and we towed the whole thing from a warehouse in Grand Junction, fully assembled, behind my old Ford Bronco.

Franz set a teapot on the hotplate of the stove. Beneath it, red and yellow flames licked through the air-slits in the iron door, trying to find a way out. He had yet to face me.

“When you are as old a man as me,” he said, “the room is never warm. I believe it is the cool breath of Death, sneaking up from behind, that blows over the nape and into the bones.”

“You know why I am here, Mr. Ek?”

“Because I shot Phillip Hansen.” he said as though it had been another of the day’s tiresome errand. “And you will call me Franz, now, Nicholas. I knew you as a boy. But you are not so innocent anymore. And now when you come at me with your *mister’s* I no longer hear the chirping of a child, but the barking of your badge.”

His words struck my chest with the kick of mule. It was hard to stand before him as a man— especially since what I wanted most was to be that wide-eyed boy again; the only wish living in my heart desperate to interrogate him about the universe, asking how it is made and how to make it work. My gut soured with hunger for a paradise lost. There proceeded a long silence that I wished would never break. I needed to find my footing. This was serious business, and I had a charge.

“Is he dead?” He asked, cracking the heavy quiet with his iron voice.

“No.”

“I see.”

“Does that disappoint you?”

It was a long, quiet moment before he answered.

“No.”

I stood on numb legs with a fat tongue and he continued to lean forward against his sink with a deep gaze that bore out into the bright white light that reflected in from the sky and the snow. From somewhere in that wilderness, crows were calling out into the dry winter air with a cry that must have held some wisdom Franz was trying hard to hear.

The kettle began to make a terrible, anxious sigh. I once had an old dog that lost its bark — his eyes would fill with a need to be heard, he lifted his snout and worked his throat, but the only sound mustered would be a strained, guttural wheeze. I eyed the kettle. Franz ignored it, lost in the woods.

He stirred suddenly and, with quick movements, removed the kettle from the heat. Long, boney fingers reached into the cabinets. He resembled an old tree blowing in the wind; his trunk tall and stiff, arms and fingers bending fluidly beneath wizened skin. From the cabinets came two mugs, a tea tin, and a box of sugar cubes.

At long last, Franz turned to face me.

“Take off that coat,” he said, setting two white porcelain cups in the center of the table, each was filled with water capped by the kind fog that encircles the mountains on cool mornings and cradled a single tea bag from which bled tentacles of red. “I am comfortable, so you are hot.”

I slid off my coat and stuck by it on a wood peg jutting from the wall. The bronze star-shaped badge hung loosely from the breast of the jacket, bowing to the floor. With the jacket off, I suddenly felt naked, and I shivered as sweat cooled along my back. Franz was already sitting at the stool across the table from me.

I sat. A large clothbound book lay open in front of me, a pair half-glasses straddling the pages. It was faced in the other direction, but I could make out that the words were French. He had tried to tutor me in the language at one point, but I struggled to make the sounds and it frustrated him, so I quit. This remained a disappointment with me he never quite got over. Franz reached across the table with one hand and snatched up the glasses. With the same hand, he pulled a scarlet ribbon into the crease of the page, closed the book, and set it off to the side leaving the spectacles perched on top to stare at me. Beneath them, along the spine of the book, I could read in worn gold-leaf: *Les Miserables - Hugo*.

A box of sugar cubes slid toward me.

I refused it.

“Bullshit,” he said. “Pretense is womanish. Everyone needs some sweet with the bitter. Be a man and take your lumps.” He shook out a pile of white cubes onto the dark wooden tabletop. I took one, hesitated, then, with a decisive motion, scooped up two more and dropped them into my cup. I felt him smile; the warmth of the sun revealed by a passing cloud.

“That’s a good boy.”

How often had I heard that? It was as comforting of a sound as my mother’s clucking. My diaphragm broke free and air filled my lungs with a full breath of air for the first time since I

arrived at the cabin. For a moment, I forgot that there had been any reason to come to the cabin but for a soothing suckle of tea and kindness.

“Okay,” he said, his smile fading. “Ask your questions.”

What are Northern Lights?

Does the North Pole taste like peppermint?

Tell me again about the time you killed a polar bear...

A strong gust of wind shuddered along the sides of the cabin and a cool draft reached through crack of the door to wrap its fingers around my neck. I rubbed it away and sat up straight, remembering.

“Why did you shoot Phillip Hansen this morning?”

Franz stirred sugar into his tea with militant vigor. He answered with his gaze still deep into the cup, watching the amber crystals melt into the maelstrom.

“He was on my land.”

“What was he doing on it?”

He tapped the tea with his forefinger and struck it into his mouth as though snuffing a match. He grimaced and reached for another lump of sugar.

“You’d have to ask him that.”

“I heard he was hiking over to Little Bear Ranch to see Marjorie about some odd jobs.”

“Maybe so. Maybe not so.” He sipped his tea, his eyes staring into mine across the brim.

“He didn’t go down to the ranch that I saw.”

“Because you shot him.”

“Ya, maybe so. Maybe not so.”

Impatience welled within my derrick. I sipped the tea, it burned my lip.

“What was he doing on your land that made you shoot him?”

“Being on it.”

“You have twenty acres! You couldn’t share a foot path?”

Franz spoke with calm, as though confiding in me a great wisdom. “He has the whole world to walk upon. These twenty little acres belong to me.”

“Did you shoot him because he is Finnish?”

His face filled with mirth. His lip curled back to reveal aged and yellowed teeth. “That was a happy accident. Although, I will not say that his *finne* nature didn’t lead to his folly, and that I did not hear my father laugh in the echo of the report.”

Franz held a wry smirk. Hot wood snapped and split within the stove. An angry wind hammered against the kitchen window.

“In Colorado you can’t just shoot a man for being on your property? You know that, don’t you?”

The corners of his mouth fell as if trap doors had swallowed them into his head. Blue eyes sharpened with fierce ice. “Says who what I can do on my own acres?”

The dead weight of defeat sank into my heart. He would take his stand and make me stand against him, and there would be no winning. We would continue in the manner of chess players who have already foreseen the end of the game.

“Says the law.”

“So says *you* what I can do on my acres, then.”

“Says the law.”

“And you are the law, now. Eh?”

“I suppose.”

“So says you then.”

“I suppose.”

A log shifted within the stove loosing some of its cinders out into the room. Two bright red glowing embers drifted up into the air, found a draft and danced, turning with each other as they lilted along the currents.

The old man narrowed his eyes and leaned toward. “Do you know how it is that in the Second World War Sweden could sit where Sweden sits and yet remain neutral?”

I leaned forward to meet him. “Because nobody wants to be a battlefield for somebody else’s war.” Normally, I would allow him his penchant for dramatic rhetoric. But I had hoped to throw him off balance. He was not moved.

“Because neither Stalin, nor Hitler, nor even that blustering bulldog of Britain could tell a Swede what to do on his own land!” On the last word, he struck the table with his fist. A splash of tea jumped from his cup, polluting the pile of sugar cubes with drops of brownish red. I held my composure, watching the tea stain spread through the sugar the way frost grows along a window.

“This isn’t Sweden,” I said. “It’s Gunther County.”

I rose from the stool. He had made his confession, which was not what I wanted, but what I had come to collect. I retrieved my jacket and pushed my shaking arms back into it.

“And I’m not Hitler,” I said. “I’m just trying to keep the peace.”

“I suppose.” he mocked with the bitterness of a long, slow spit.

His eyes were glacier blue and burning with rage. His bottom jaw thrust outward in defiance. I dared to look into his face for a moment; a very brief moment. Shards of gold light reflected from my badge and raked over his face. He didn't blink.

I zipped the jacket. His gaze shifted to the wall above the bed. I remembered what hung there and felt a movement in my bowels.

Careful to keep the fear from my voice, I said, "I will need to take your rifle with me."

His eyes shot up to meet mine.

"You will be back with a warrant first."

I stood there for an eternal moment with our eyes joined; the bull and the matador. I had a confession—I didn't need a warrant. But I could feel my gut moving to heave and knew that neither he nor that rifle would move themselves from where they stood.

"I suppose," I said, and turned to leave.

With my face in the door and my back to the man, I said, "I need to go down the hill to examine the scene. You gonna shoot me if I do?"

"Don't be a bastard, Nicholas," he growled. "To me, you are my son."

###

There was blood in the snow; bright red spatter surrounding a tar colored hole. The snow was pushed around in the vague shape of a man where he had fallen and flailed— an angel with a pierced side. Footprints proceeded from out of the woods and up to the spatter. A blood-dappled trail led parallel to the foot prints and away from the scene. The gray shadow of a hovering hawk floated over the white snow, crossing back and forth over the path. I searched the sky for its black silhouette, squinting against the sharp white rays of the sun.

See, son, d'hawk, it knows how to w'it.

It looks and looks and w'its and w'its and when d'time is right

And oonly when d'time is right, den he mahk's his moove.

Over dar son— can you see' d'fox?

I can! It's by that rock!

Be qui't !

W'it... w'it....

BLAM!

Did I get it Mr. Ek? Did I get it?

No— be'cuss you did not w'it lik' I told you

And you did not hold d'gun lik' I told you

and you did not aim lik' dar was oonly von'a shot

A cold wind formed from the vast cyan sky and whipped over the slope. It rustled the branches of the aspens, shushing through the needles of the pines that framed the great open space around me, and thundered as it moved as if beating on a sail, but how it made this sound, I do not know, for it pounded against nothing; it was thin and empty and uncontained. The tips of my ears sang. My cheeks burned. Once, I got a call to the local whore motel for some thing or another, and there, parked in front of room 105, I saw my brother-in-law's truck. When I told Tenny, she flat handed me once for being the messenger, and then again, with her other hand, for

being a man. Then, she turned and left me standing alone in my duty as the blood rushed through into my face.

I wiped the snot from my nose. From one of my pockets I produced a pair of aviator shades. The frame was bent slightly. This caused the lenses to sit somewhat askew on my face. It felt odd, as if the whole world was off balance. But, the glare was dimmed and I could see the detail in the snow. A field of unblemished snow stretched between where I stood and the tiny cabin at the top of the slope.

I walked alongside the red speckled trail of footprints until it led me to a pine grove where the tracks disappeared into a bed of needles. Beneath the shadow of the trees, I removed the shades and searched the ground.

A small movement caught my eye. A black and white muddled hare cowered at the base of a pine. Its chest heaved with panicked breath. For a moment, we watched each other. Then, it bolted, leaping back and forth and away from me into the woods.

As I stepped to the next tree, I could see blood painted on some of its needles. A few more paces ahead, there was snow again, and footprints— one set in each direction with the same shaped shoe. These I followed for another half-click until I found myself led to the back of Phillip Hansen's house.

I approached the screened in porch. Its storm door was smeared with red handprints. I reached into my coat pocket and pulled from it a plastic zip-bag containing latex gloves. I stretched the gloves over my stiff hands. Carefully, so as not to disturb any prints, I turned the latch and opened the door. I looked around the porch. Some folding chairs stood erect beside a card table upon which sat a rusted coffee can with cigar butts heaped over the rim. The scene

looked undisturbed. I knocked on the door to the house, though I didn't expect an answer. The door wasn't fastened and it moved inward. I allowed myself in. I was in the kitchen. Tiny red drops ran along a linoleum floor in a line that took me to a wall-mounted telephone, its receiver dangled on the cord almost to the floor and was grisly with finger smears of blood.

Remembering myself, I reached down and unlaced my boots. In socked feet, I stepped farther into the kitchen, careful not to step on the blood marked path that Phillip left along the floor. It appeared that, by this point, he must have been dragging himself along the ground.

A glint of light jabbed at my eye and drew my gaze to the kitchen window. There, from a strand of fishing line, hung a brass Star of David, rocking gently in the window draft.

What's that thing do Mr. Ek?

Dat m'son is a sextant

Men use it to find dar place in d'world

What men?

Lost men

Men who are 'a searching for soomething

Men who find demselves 'a way out in d'nowher'

How does it work?

Just lik' everyding else— its e'sy if ya know how

Do you know whish one is d'Nordstar?

I don't

Its 'a dat 'a one in d'middle of d'whole ooniverse

You se' it, m'boy?

I do!

Good. Now lin' up d'sextant lik' a soo

Dats a good boy

Now you kno' how to find yar way out of anyding

When you have yar eye on d'Nordstar

Yar never 'a lost— never alon'

On the floor, beneath the kitchen sink, lay a crumbled jacket and sweater, soaked through with blood. A bar of soap, stained like some macabre peppermint, stuck to the well of the sink. One of the cupboard doors was marked with a handprint. I opened it. Inside, I found dishtowels, marred like everything else. I surveyed the kitchen.

There was a sudden mechanical vibrating which pulsed from my coat pocket. My heart jumped before I realized what it was. I removed my phone. It was Tenny, calling from the dispatch office. I answered.

“Tom Keller called from the pub, again,” she said in her melancholy tone.

“Is it Dad?”

“It is.”

“I can't right now.”

“Where are you?” It sounded like both an accusation and a longing.

“Phillip Hansen's. Send Bobby or Rick down here.”

“Are you okay?”

“We should process the scene.”

“What about Dad?”

“Let him lie in his filth,” I said, suddenly wishing I still smoked.

“That’s not fair to Tom Keller.”

“He takes his money.”

“He doesn’t have a choice.”

That’s the bullshit Tom shovels out while subtly insinuating that our father makes an ass of himself in the Tavern because I don’t control him. Tenny knows better, but often parrots the line, anyway—just like she blames mom for leaving him to grow old alone.

“I don’t have a choice, either,” I said.

“I’ll send Bobby or Rick over.”

“Here or the pub? I need ‘em here.”

“Calm down. One to one, one to the other.”

“I want him arrested.”

“Who? Dad? Or Mr. Ek?”

I paused. The thought had occurred, but wasn’t real until she said it.

“Dad.”

“I think you ran for sheriff just to spite him.”

“I ran *in* spite of him.”

“I’ll tell the deputy to lock him up for the day.”

“Leave him over night.”

“You still think it was Mr. Ek?”

“He confessed. How’s Philip Hansen?”

“Stable. They put him in a chopper. Denver or the Springs. I’ll find out. Mr. Ek confessed?”

“Hansen say any more about what happened?”

“Besides, quote, ’that bög fuck better hope I die’? No.”

“Can you get me the number for Little Bear?”

“Who?”

“Marjorie’s Ranch.”

“Right, hold on.... 678-6787. It’ll be okay, Nick.”

I wrote the number into my pad. “It’ll be okay when I understand why this happened,” I said and disconnected the call.

The air smelled of rust. A coolness ran along my toe. I looked down and saw blood was soaking into my socks and there was a new smear along the ground.

“Shit!”

I pulled off my socks and stuffed them into my pocket.

I shouldn't be here.

But, I need the answer.

I need to know...

Smears and random handprints marked the floor leading into the front foyer. I followed until they took me out the front door of the house and onto the step. Fat tire treads marred the snow in the drive from the foot of the porch up to the street. Ambulance tires, most likely, I figured.

I went back into the house and leaned against the threshold to the kitchen. Afternoon sunlight pierced through the windows. It lit the walls, the counters, and the path Phillip Hansen had lain in blood from the back door through to the front. My brow furrowed. I chewed my lip. There was more to this. The line of events appeared to be simple. Hansen walked onto Ek's land, was shot, walked back bleeding and alone, made a call, and held his wound until help arrived. But, there was no sense to it. I was missing something.

...Why?

What happened out there?

How did he provoke you...?

I needed to get to Little Bear. I needed to know what Marjorie knew. She would know. It seemed she always knew more about what these codgers were up to than anyone else.

A change of light in the sitting room to my right caught my attention. I lifted my leaden frame from the doorway and crossed into the room. Books overflowed from the mismatched shelves and cases which lined the walls. They rose in pillars from the floor. An antique desk hid beneath a mountain of magazines, file folders, and forgotten mail. A computer monitor poked through the rubble, its screensaver throwing photographs across the screen. I watched with voyeuristic curiosity while a catalog of photographs revealed the hidden life of Phillip Hansen.

Hansen was an austere man with a permanent scowl hidden behind a full and fiery beard

and set beneath a torrent of bright red hair. Some of the photos showed him looking like I've always known him. Some, as a man who must have been my age once, though with that same, unmistakable salted expression. There were a few that suggested he had once been married, and more that showed two beautiful, giney girls. One scene changed to another until, suddenly, my jaw dropped. Displayed before me was a picture of Hansen, smiling broadly, much younger, and shaven, wearing a zoot suit and loud polka dotted tie, and standing next to him was an equally dapper version of Franz Ek. They were both beaming, had an arm around each other's back, and with their free hand, mutually supported a shining brass plaque. I strained to read the plaque, but the picture changed. In a series of flashes, I was learning how little I had ever learned.

Snow crunched beneath heavy tires on the drive outside. Like a young boy caught at a keyhole, I felt the thrill of exposure turn to the shame of my trespass. I struck the keyboard. The screen cleared. I turned away and walked into the kitchen. Behind me, a heavy fist pounded on the front door.

“Sheriff's Department!”

“Come on.” I hollered.

I was standing in the kitchen, again. Rick maneuvered his hulking frame through from the foyer. He brought with him, for me, a light wave of relief. He was not the best, but he was discreet.

“Hey, Boss, I didn't see your truck.”

“Get your camera.”

“Yes, sir.” he said and backed out the door.

“And leave your boots on the porch!”

“Yeah, Boss.” I heard from the drive.

From its place at my feet, the phone receiver, which still dangled on a blood stained cord, emitted a sound like an angry locust. It had been doing so in the background all this time, but I hadn't noticed. I picked it up from the floor and moved it toward the wall-mount. I stopped short. Fingerprints marked the number pad. *That's not right...* My eyes narrowed. A bloody hand had left prints all over it, painting smears of red with desperate brushstrokes. *Not right...* I stared at the number pad until my vision grew tired. My focus relaxed. *What's not right?...* The numbers were all marked in some way--but not all in the same manner. Some had thick, tacky drops drying in small puddles along the inward ridge of the button. Others bore only flecks. But some had been impressed with distinct swirling ridgelines: specifically the six, the seven, and the eight. My vision came clear. What they were not, was the *nine* or the *one*.

Who did you call, Phillip, when you were dying?

The wall was covered in a collage of Post-it notes. The photo on the calendar showed a red-suited man hanging from his climbing tackle into what appeared to be a bottomless glacier cavern. The day squares beneath the picture were mostly blank. A couple of notes indicated appointments past and future--none for today. The Post-its had names and numbers, but those appeared irrelevant, as well.

A table stood beneath the notes. Hollowness suddenly filled my gut; that same feeling as when falling in a dream. My stomach clenched. My throat swelled. A Smith & Wesson revolver *How had I missed it!?* stared up at me from the table with thick, fresh globs of blood along the barrel and pressed into the valleys of the grip. I raised my arm against the wall to steady myself.

Once again, the narrative was shifting. A slight throb worked at my temples as tiny spots bloomed like oil slick in my vision.

What's this for, Mr Ek?

Have you not se'n a spinning top before?

A spinning top? No!

Ah son let me show you. See how good it spins at first

and den it slows?

I do.

Dis world son it wobbles lik' dat sloowing top.

Up in d'nord d'winter it gets 'a dark.

And in summer m'son d'days never end.

How do you know when its time to sleep?

Oh same as d'bear

D'bear knows when its tim' to take his winter

He knows when its tim' to wake in spring

So too you know

if you pay mind to d'bear in you

There's a bear inside of me?!

Ya son ya— Dar is a bear lives in all of us

Sometim's he is asleep— Sometim's he is awake

Sometim's he is 'a hoongry as a bear can be

and sometim's he is angry

Dat is d'bear more'a fearsome dan any you meet

Did you really kill a polar bear?

No son— Eh shot him

and he came to take his winter in m' heart

You can never kill d'bear son

It's he who kills you

The front storm door slammed against its aluminum frame. A gust of frost-nipped air rolled into the kitchen. I drew in a deep lungfull of it, filling my chest with winter and awareness. Rick stood in the foyer, the camera picayune in his large leather-gloved hands. He wore the manner of a child in a room of adults— awkward, lost. This was strange territory for all of us.

“Bag this gun.” The sick feeling turned in my stomach. I cleared my throat and stepped into the front hall with the deputy. “Photograph this whole house. Especially that phone. Then the blood trail that leads out the back here and over to the Ek property where the shooting occurred. Get a full 360 of the landscape from that point. I want to see all the vantages. Collect blood samples, watch there are some on the trees out there. And then,” I swallowed hard, “I’ll need you to swab Ek’s hands for residue.”

Rick stood in the hallway, nodding his head slightly and looking around. I put my hand on his shoulder and squeezed with a firm grip until I felt the flesh move beneath his jacket. He looked back at me with glassy eyes.

“Tenny said you got a confession.”

“Get the photos, get the samples. Don’t fuck this one up,” I said, “or you will be in the soup line with me. This thing gets wonky and Seth Garrett will cry foul for favoritism in the next election.”

“Yes, sir,” He said, blinking back the fear that was pooling in his eyes.

The walls were pressing in, suffocating me. I released Rick’s shoulder with a gentle squeeze and stepped up to the glass storm door that faced out into the drive. I stood there for a moment, staring out into the white wild void. Behind me, Rick started snapping pictures, the flash reflecting from all around and hitting the back of my brain like an electric baseball bat. I stepped out into the cold.

The dark shape of the hawk still hovered in the open sky. I pulled out my notepad and looked at the numbers Tenny had read to me.

6 7 8 - 6 7 8 7

My mind flashed back to the print-stained buttons on the phone. A snow plow ran along the highway, its blade scraping roughly against the pavement and throwing a Champaign spray of snow into the air along with a low rumble like slow-moving thunder. I closed the pad. Marjorie would not be home. She would be on her way east— to Denver, or the Springs.

The door suddenly opened behind me. I started. “Sorry, boss, but you maybe might wanna look at this.”

I followed Rick into the sitting room.

“Couple things,” he said and wrung his hands. “I don’t know. Maybe nothing, but you said if I think anything--”

I cut him off with a gesture. He nodded, and took a breath. “Well,” he continued, “it just seems odd to me, doesn’t it? Everyone knows Hansen is this nasty old hermit. Right? But, then... there’s that.”

He pointed to a tin TV tray that was opened in front of a ratty tartan couch pressed against the back wall of the room. On the tray were two wine glasses and a saucer. The glasses were empty except for a bit of red tar where the stem met the bowl, and the plate was equally barren but for a long muddy smear of what appeared to be chocolate.

“You think he had a guest?” I asked.

“Oh, not just any guest. See?” He reached out with his fat leather-gloved fingers and delicately twisted the stem of one of the glasses until, facing me, on the lip of the glass, was a rose colored smudge.

“It looks dry,” he continued. “Like not here from today, but, maybe last night or so.”

I turned out of the room.

“Who’d’a thought, huh?” Rick said behind me. “Hey you don’t wonder if that’s Marjorie’s lipstick, do yuh? She’s the one come and took him into the hospital, yuh know.”

I went to the kitchen and looked around. The ugly scene no longer carried intrigue, it had become a swamp to me; foul and rotten, stinking of decay. Nothing more would be discovered there. Rick came into the room, speaking, and playing with his lower lip at the same time.

“Hey, you don’t wonder... you don’t wonder maybe Ek... you know he spends a good bit of time over at the Ranch, too, now and again. You don’t suppose all this happened over... over a

wo...” The expression in his eyes and on his person had returned to that place of awkward and pleading uncertainty. He looked like a child who had pissed himself in church.

“You’re doing good, Rick,” I said. “Put this in your notes. You’re a good cop. Now keep at it. We’ll get this sorted.”

I shifted my jaw back and forth. It felt odd to comfort a man my own age. I wasn’t sure why I had felt the need to. The world was shifting on its axis, and everything was dark. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

I needed answers.

And I needed warrants.

If I couldn’t have the one, then I would start with the other and see where it led. As I scrolled for the judge’s number, I stepped back through the filthy kitchen, out the back door, and into the pines, ignoring or not ever noticing the burn of snow on the skin of my feet.

###

The wheels of my Bronco turned off the paved state road and onto a snow-packed dirt driveway. The earth popped and crackled beneath my truck tires and struck the bed and panels with a sharp and constant clatter— like a snare drum. Up ahead, the shape of the judge awaited me from the expansive porch that stood beneath a two story log home. A pang of anxiety shimmied through my chest. Even at this distance, in the cool dim of twilight, his image personified a reckoning.

“How’s he doing?” the judge asked as I stepped down from the cab.

“Which one?”

This took him off guard for a second, then he smiled. “Both.”

“Belligerent.”

He laughed. “That’s about right, I’d guess. Coffee?”

In the kitchen we talked of small things. When the topic strayed a little too large *How’s your dad?* we changed the subject. *How’re your grandkids?* The judge had a smooth voice that sounded the way cinnamon tastes: warm, comforting, but with a distinct masculine character. The manner of his speech was truly western. I think of Wilfred Brimley and Sam Elliot. He was slight in stature, but his presence filled the room. In court, he was as terrifying as the vision of the coming Christ. Here in his kitchen, he warmed the room to a womb with the narcotic radiance of a wood fire.

“How’s the coffee?”

“It’s good.”

He was a man of his hands. He hunted with a bow, and tanned his own hides. The stool under me had been a mule deer and an aspen. The coffee was bought green and then roasted. He brewed his beer and stilled his own whiskey (*hush, wink*).

“Shall we discuss this warrant you want?”

“Yes, Judge, I...”

“Not here,” he said. “Laura would not allow it.”

His wife was dead, but he had the habit of speaking about her as though she might walk in the door at any moment. We adjourned to a small room that was barely large enough to contain two bountiful chairs clothed in elk and hewn of antler. He produced a pipe and began packing it. I walked him through my day: a call, a confession, a dangling phone, some lipstick, and a bloody revolver. The judge was intent on his tobacco. He did not react to anything that I

said. It was as though I were a ghost watching a man who believed he was alone. At last, I finished and sat in silence while he sealed away his tobacco pouch and set the pipe into the corner of his mouth. He struck a match and tugged the flame down into the bowl.

Thuph, thuph, thuph. Smoke issued from his mouth like a great dragon.

“So, that’s what you found. What do you know?”

“All I know is what I don’t know.”

“Then you are a wise man,” he said, a satisfied smile creasing his face.

“What about Hansen’s gun, though?”

“What about it? It’d say more if he set out into this land without one, no?”

“I hoped Marjorie would be of help, but I think, now, that she is somehow involved.”

“What do you want, Nicholas? Some objective observer?” He pulled the pipe from his mouth and leaned in toward me. “That, Son, is a jack-a-lope.”

My head dropped. A throbbing ache pounded at my temples. I let my eyes close, hoping that when they opened this would all be over.

“What do you need warrants for?”

“His rifle.” I said, rubbing at the sides of my head. “and arrest.”

“And what will that serve?”

My eyes opened. It seemed a peculiar question. “Justice...”

He scoffed. “You are a peace officer. What do you want with justice? That’s a messy thing. Let me be the judge of that. You just keep the peace.” He put the pipe back in his mouth and ginned up another cloud of thick sweet smoke. “How old is Ek?”

“Eighty-three”

“And Hansen?”

“Closer to seventy, I think.”

“And do you believe that either of these two are apt to pull a stunt like this again?”

“I don’t know.”

“In your gut, son.” He sat up straight and beat his stomach. “In your gut!”

“I don’t know....” I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. When they opened, they met his which stared back with an electric gaze. “No, I do not.”

“Then you have peace. What do you want with warrants?”

I sighed in frustrated despair. “I need to know why?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why.”

“No. Why know why?”

The pendulum of a grandfather clock ticked behind me.

“I need to understand.”

He slowly shook his head. “Those two have more history knowing each other than you do on this Earth. No matter what you know, you would never understand.”

The world rocked as though Atlas had strolled out onto the sea. My mouth tasted of paste. That terrible nausea returned— and violently. I scanned the room for a place to puke. This whole day had been a trip down the rabbit hole and everything was upside down. The judge sat in front me, puffing, and watching me drown.

“I need the warrants,” I said in measured speech, “to do my job.”

“And what *is* your job?”

“Are you telling me not to investigate this?”

“It’s not *my* job to tell you how to do *your* job.”

“If I don’t arrest him, I’ll lose the fall election.”

“Perhaps. If that’s what folks want.”

“They want me to do my job!”

“Young man, are you going to let other people tell you what to do your whole life?”

His eyes shone on me with a terrific glare. It cooled me. Anger receded. My stomach began to unwind. I still felt lost—and ashamed for being lost. The judge sat upright in his chair like an eagle on its roost. His silent authority humbled me more than any raised voice or angry tone ever could. In the pool of his glare I felt no right to indignation.

He continued, “I say your job is peace officer. Maybe the town wants a jailer. But, the only thing in this whole mess that matters for *you*...” He let the last word hang in the air with his smoke. “...is what you believe your job is and that you do just exactly that. Let me get your warrants.”

He left the room. On a small side table by his chair, the pipe slowly extinguished itself. Its last breath of smoke rose until captured by the recessed light that shone down from above. The lace-adorned vapor danced a few turns, opened its arms for a curtsy, then grabbed its train and disappeared into the luminance.

The judge returned with the warrants, produced a pen from some hidden pocket, and then shot his eyes up to meet mine, before looking back down to the papers and signing them. I rose.

He handed them to me with a grave expression. “When ancient grudge breaks to new mutiny all are punished. I’m sorry for your burden, son. It’s a crap deal. Now go do the right thing.”

###

As the sun began to set into the state road that ran off toward the western valley, painting the white canvased mountains with a rich lavender glow, I pulled my truck into the drive that led to that familiar tiny cabin. The soft orange glow of electric light was cast against the window, and gray smoke issued from an aluminum stack that protruded from the roof. I shut off the engine.

In the glove compartment, I found my side arm and hand-cuffs. I secured them to my belt. I peaked into the shoulder bag that sat on the seat beside. The manilla folder in which I had placed the warrants peaked back at me. I grabbed the bag by its strap as I swung down out of the truck and into the still of the evening.

I knew that even though he probably recognized the sound of my Bronco before I had even turned off the highway, he would wait for me to knock. It was his way. He always knew what I needed done, but would wait and make me do it. I am grateful to him for that. I knocked.

There was a loud CRACK to my left—

Instinctively, my hand fell to my waste and seized the the butt of my weapon. My foot dropped back. My head snapped up. Several yards away, in a clearing past the wood pile, stood a lone black bear. It looked back at me with the same startled look that I, no doubt, had drawn across my face. And, then, a second or two hence, it seemed, we both understood that there was no threat. The bear looked away from me and carried itself on with long, easy strides toward the wildness. As I faced back to the door, it opened.

“Hello, Nicholas.”

“May I come in?”

Franz moved away and I stepped inside. He maneuvered himself gracefully to the far side of the center table. I took off my hat, and then my jacket, and set them each on a wall peg. I turned to face him. He was facing me, a slight quiver in his trunk.

“Have you come for my gun then? Or have you come for me?”

I pulled out a stool and sat.

“I have come for your hot chocolate,” I said.

He studied me for a moment. “Very well.”

And, he turned away from me to fill the tea pot. His limbs swayed about the kitchen, rustling through the cabinets, pulling down mugs and clattering, little tins. I lifted my shoulder bag onto the table, unbuckled the latch, and folded back the leather flap. There again I was greeted with the peachy yellow of a manilla folder. I lifted it with my fingers. Under it I found a piece of chipboard that had been folded in half. I extracted this, and let the file remain. Then, reaching deep inside the bag my hand wrapped around a purple-velvet sack that rattled slightly as I pulled it out into the light. I let the shoulder bag drop back down to my feet.

The chipboard was lined in black paper, but when I unfolded it onto the tabletop it displayed a field of red and black checkered squares. I loosed the draw string on the sack, grabbed the bottom, and shook until two full armies of hand-tooled wooden chess figures were scattered across the table. Some of these pieces had been carved from red mahogany.

And, the od'ers of whit' oak.

URSA MINOR

A short tale

by

Richard Lyon Bergh

55 Sugar Hill Drive

Weaverville, NC 28787

RichardLBergh@gmail.com

(302) 354 - 6943