

# WILLFUL IGNORANCE

By Troy M. Larson

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It was the kind of place where monsters lurked--a thick forest where fifty steps in the wrong direction would leave an inattentive explorer hopelessly lost. This particular spot, in what was considered by many to be the most intact boreal forest on the planet, was dominated by black spruce and tamarack, and in places where dead conifers had blown down, the prone, rotting trunks were covered in a damp carpet of brilliant green moss. Black and brown bears roamed the landscape, and the grizzly patrolled the forest at the top of the food chain.

The nearest paved highway was 17 miles away, down a series of unpaved, interconnected logging roads dating to the days before the government put a chain around the neck of the timber industry. In dry weather, the roads were navigable with a heavy duty truck, but when the rains came, the only travel was by air. In an era when a world of information was just a smartphone away for most, this was still landline territory, because the closest cell tower was almost 100 miles distant.

On this night, with summer coming to an end, the air was brisk, perfect weather for a bonfire, and the group of friends who had come from Rapid Valley, Pine City, and other small communities, took full advantage. The fire crackled and popped while they drank beer in mismatched lawn chairs arranged in a semicircle around the pit. It had become a tradition for this group of friends to return to this clearing at about the same time every year for some camping and drinking. The core group of eight was largely the same from year-to-year, but there were some new faces this year, too.

A young man in blue jeans and a coffee-colored canvas outdoorsman-style jacket got up and retrieved a cold beer from a steel cooler with "Hamm's" stenciled on the side.

"Riley," one of the gathered men said. "Toss me one."

Riley grabbed another beer from the antique cooler and tossed it to the man, who caught it in one hand and popped the top, releasing a burst of foam that ran down his upper arm and made the woman sitting next to him giggle.

"So, you're spending the night, Riley?" a man asked as Riley returned to his chair.

"Staying 'til Monday," he said, motioning to his green tent in the distance. "Just a little downtime, ya know?"

"Are you concerned about bears?" the man asked with a smile.

Riley smiled. "I'd be an idiot if I wasn't," he said, "but I have my bear spray."

"Oh yeah," a burly man in a trucker hat said. He was Blair Newbury, one of the only members of the group who lived in the area. "After a grizzly makes a burrito out of you in your little tent, he'll use that bear spray as seasoning."

"I'll think it'll be alright," Riley said.

"Personally, I wouldn't camp out here without my .338," Blair said. He grabbed at his waistband and tugged, in a futile attempt to hitch his pants up.

Riley's girlfriend, Amber, sat next to him. She was atypical compared to most of the girls he had grown up with. She was a busty girl with wavy blonde hair that was brunette underneath, and every man in the group had taken notice of her. Now, she had a look of concern on her face.

"Amber, are you staying, too?" one of the group asked.

“I was going to,” she said with a nervous smile, “but, bears, you know. I’m just gonna ride back with Jeff and Rhonda.”

“It’s not just bears you should be worried about,” Blair said, and the gathering erupted.

“Oh shit!” a man shouted. “Here we go!”

Laughter and murmuring traveled around the core group of friends. They had heard Blair’s stories before, and knew what to expect.

“What do you mean?” Amber asked, and looked from Riley to Blair, wide-eyed.

“There are Native American legends about a beast that lives in this...” he began.

“Are you talking about Bigfoot again, Blair?” a man interrupted in a loud, mocking voice. Laughter came from the assembled group.

“Sasquatch,” Blair said in a serious tone. “And it’s no joke. I know guys who have seen him. Ten feet tall with legs as thick as a 55-gallon drum, and stinks like a skunk.”

“Frank,” the man said to one of the gathered friends, “You did some anthropology stuff in college didn’t you? Can Sasquatch really exist?”

“Well, he’s right about the legends,” Frank said. “Native Americans have been reporting a large forest-dwelling creature for a thousand years or more.”

“Yeah, but it’s impossible right?” the man insisted.

“In the eyes of science, it’s pretty unlikely,” Frank said. “For Sasquatch to exist it would have to be able to reproduce, which means it would need a breeding population of five hundred or a thousand animals,” he continued, “but nobody has ever captured a live animal, or even produced a carcass.”

“Well, yeah,” Blair said with derision, “If you believe the stuff you hear in the mainstream media, but they’re humanoid. They might bury their dead.” He stared at Amber as he said it with a leer that made her feel uncomfortable.

“I’ve been fascinated by the Thunderbird legend, myself,” Frank said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Yes,” Blair said. “Tell it, Frank.”

“What’s a Thunderbird?” Amber asked.

“It’s a piece of shit Ford,” someone said, and someone else laughed.

“Imagine a giant bird of prey, the size of a small plane,” Frank said, “with wings so large, that when they flap, they make a sound like thunder.”

“Is that the bird on totem poles?” Amber asked. “Like the one outside the Chieftain restaurant in Rapid Valley?”

Someone snickered at the pretty blonde’s question.

“Yes, that’s a representation of a Thunderbird,” Frank said. “There are accounts of Thunderbirds in Algonquian lore, and Ojibwe legend says the thunderbird sometimes comes to punish humans for immoral acts.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence at the unbelievable tale, but Frank continued.

“Sounds crazy, I know,” he said, “but European settlers even reported them on occasion back in the day. There was even a Thunderbird attack reported in Illinois in 1977. Multiple witnesses saw a Thunderbird try to fly away with a 10-year-old boy.”

“Frank, come on,” said one of the men.

“Listen, I’m not trying to convince you,” Frank said, “but it’s not as farfetched as you think. The largest pterosaur had a wingspan of 52 feet, and there are condors with wingspans of 23 feet.”

“Blair, what’s that other thing you always talk about?” Jeff asked. “The Winnebago or something?”

“The Wendigo,” Blair said. He pronounced it slowly, like ‘When DEE go,’ and stepped forward. The bonfire lit him up like a theatrical performer about to deliver a monologue.

“That’s the one that really scares me,” he said. A twig popped in the forest, there was a murmur from the group, and Amber squeezed closer to Riley. In the low tone of an experienced campfire storyteller, Blair continued.

“The Wendigo has roamed this region for thousands of years,” he said. “It’s a ravenous creature with gray skin pulled tight over an emaciated skeleton, and eyes set deep in sunken sockets.”

“There’s some debate about its appearance,” Frank interrupted. “Some of the legends insist the Wendigo is a spiritual being.”

Blair continued like Frank hadn’t even spoken. “Before Europeans settled North America, the Indians suffered through harsh winters, and many starved. They would be so hungry that they were tempted to eat their dead, but stories about the Wendigo warned against resorting to cannibalism in times of famine. If you ate the dead, you would become the Wendigo.”

The gathering had grown quiet and the firelight flickered on the assembled faces as they listened intently. “There’s a smell of rotting flesh and a rush of wind right before the Wendigo attacks,” Blair said, “and when he does, he dines on your flesh with a hunger that can never be satisfied... he is damned to eternal starvation.”

“Rah!” Riley suddenly shouted as he rose from his chair. Amber flinched. “I’m a Wendigo!” he yelled as he playfully pretended to gnaw on Amber’s neck. She ducked her chin against her chest and slapped at his arm with her hand. Blair wrinkled his brow, irritated with Riley for making light of the situation.

The tension was broken and Frank rose to retrieve a beer from the cooler as people began to talk amongst themselves.

“So, Blair,” Frank said, “you gonna be ready when the Wendigo comes for you?”

“Oh, I’ll be ready,” he said, “as long as one of you socialist liberal fuckers doesn’t send the UN to take my guns,” he added and stared at Riley.

“In unmarked black helicopters, Blair?” one of the men joke.

Riley returned Blair’s gaze. “Say that with a smile on your face, Blair,” Riley said and got up from his chair. Amber laid her hand on his forearm, as if to calm him with her touch.

“You think I hadn’t noticed, Riley?” Blair asked with a flourish that made the name come out ‘RYE-leeeee,’ in a snide tone. “You were part of that Native oil protest last fall, weren’t you?”

“So what if I was?” Riley said and stepped forward.

Blair took a few steps forward until he was arms length from Riley.

“Global warming is a fucking joke!” Blair said. “Every one of those scientists gets government funding.” The gathered friends took notice of the rising tension of the situation but nobody made an effort to get between the men.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Riley said.

“It’s pinko fucks like you that are killing jobs with your eco-terrorism!” Blair yelled. He planted both his hands squarely in the center of Riley’s chest and shoved.

“Hey!” Amber shouted. A distant voice somewhere in the clearing yelled, “Fight!”

Riley stumbled back, recovered, and got right in Blair’s face. Frank leapt to his feet and stepped in between the men. Riley craned his neck and stared at Blair over Frank’s shoulder, prepared to say something, then didn’t.

“Yeah,” Blair challenged. “Whaddya gonna do, pretty boy?”

Riley relaxed, smiled, then spoke in a loud voice that everybody could hear.

“So, let me get this right, Blair,” Riley said. “Climate change is fake, but Bigfoot is real?” There was burst of female laughter from somewhere in the group. Blair lunged at Riley but Frank held him back. Since Blair had joined their annual gathering a couple years prior, he had always rubbed Riley the wrong way. Now, Riley sensed his opportunity.

“Look out, Blair!” he mocked. “The United Nations is coming for your guns!” There was more laughter.

Blair lunged again, pushed past Frank, took a swing at Riley, and their feet got tangled up.

“Whoa, guys!” a man yelled.

A woman’s voice called out, “C’mon, Blair!”

Blair lost his balance and tumbled between Frank and Riley, right onto the pile of burning logs in the fire pit. A cloud of red embers erupted into the air and danced like fireflies. A woman screamed. Blair attempted to get back to his feet, but reflexively planted his hand right in the white-hot coals at the bottom of the pit. He staggered to his feet, then pulled his burned hand to his chest. As he regained his footing, his pants slid off his hips and came to rest around his knees, exposing his plaid boxer shorts. He grabbed at his waistband with his unburned hand and tried to pull his pants up, but they caught on his left buttock and refused to return to his waistline. The voices in the crowd who had been giggling earlier now erupted in cackling laughter. Even Riley felt it was inappropriate and humiliating, despite their disagreement.

“You motherfucker,” Blair spat and stared daggers at Riley.

“Blair, your hand,” Frank said as he stepped forward and attempted to take a look at it.

“Fuck off,” Blair said. He shoved past Frank and retreated toward his rusty Ford Bronco parked at the edge of the clearing.

“Blair!” Riley called out.

“Leave me alone,” he yelled and climbed into his truck. The engine roared to life and the wheels spun on the gravel as Blair gunned the accelerator and raced away on the old logging road.

By midnight, most of the assembled revelers had headed for home, with only Jeff, Rhonda, and Amanda still to depart.

“Turn on the heater,” Rhonda said as she jumped in the car and slid across the bench seat to sit next to Jeff, who obliged.

Amber and Riley were locked in an embrace not far from the car, their bodies silhouetted and backlit by the dying fire. They kissed.

“I’ll call you when I get back to town,” Riley said.

“You better,” Amber said. She kissed him again.

“C’mon whore!” Rhonda yelled from the car.

Amber laughed and Riley chuckled. “She’s fucking *drunk*,” Amber said.

“Go on,” Riley said. “Talk to you Monday.”

“Love you, babe,” she said.

“How much?” Riley asked.

“Last number,” Amber said, and smirked.

Riley released her grudgingly, holding her hand as she walked away, until their fingertips parted. She bounded to the car and Riley watched her go, but he wasn’t the only one. About 300 meters uphill from the clearing, on the downslope of the timber-lined ridge, Blair also watched.

Why Blair was angry--now, yesterday, every day--was a matter of interpretation. Ask a neighbor, and they might tell you he was mad about property rights and political matters. He’d had more than one run-in with neighbors over things like the placement of a fence, or runoff from his land. Ask a government official or a member of law enforcement, entities with which Blair had interacted plenty, and they would say he was angry about a perceived interference with his freedoms and constitutional rights. Somehow, Blair considered it a constitutional right to drive without a valid license, and in keeping with his individualist ideals, didn’t recognize any legal authority beyond the local level. Ask a psychologist why Blair was angry and the blame would get put squarely on his upbringing.

Agnes Newbury had been a less-than-ideal parent. She descended from several generations of socially and sexually dysfunctional Irish immigrants, and she had a tendency to speak too freely in recounting her childhood. As a child, Blair heard countless stories from his mother that would have made a trucker blush. There were stories about his grandmother’s brief time as a prostitute, and hints of incest in the family, and even though Agnes seemed fully self-aware, she was somehow unable to avoid mimicking some of the behaviors, sexual and otherwise, which she had come by so honestly. Blair frequently paid the price.

Blair had joined his junior high basketball team, despite having no talent for the game, and found himself relegated to the “C” team, populated by a collection of losers and nerds. After

suffering a particularly bad defeat at the hands of a rival school, a game in which Blair had scored one of only two baskets by his team in a game that ended with a score of 38 to 4, he was subjected to an even deeper humiliation.

A number of neighbors, including the attractive blonde mom across the street and her equally pretty daughters, who were classmates of Blair's, had gathered at the Newbury's for a backyard barbecue. Conversation turned to Blair's extracurricular activities, and Agnes began to recount the humiliating outcome of his recent basketball game.

"No, they had some really good players on their team," Agnes had said.

"Oh, really?" pretty blonde mom Wanda acknowledged, while her daughters chattered and played a choreographed, patty-cake-type game.

"No, really," Agnes said. "I mean, this boy just breezed up and down the court... there was nothing they could do to stop 'em," she said.

"I made a basket," Blair said.

Agnes ignored her son's comment. "I mean, this boy had muscles and everything, Wanda," Agnes continued. "I admit, I was a little turned-on."

The gathering went quiet. It was an embarrassingly personal and dysfunctional comment, and one of those moments when someone says something inappropriate and nobody quite knows what to say. Wanda and several of the other mothers just kind of looked at each other, and Blair's face blushed as Wanda's daughters looked at him, mouths agape. Agnes would become known in the neighborhood for verbal faux pas, especially with regard to matters sexual, and Blair would suffer many more humiliations as a result.

It wasn't just his mother's nonexistent filter, either. Sometimes Agnes seemed to delight in emasculating young Blair. When he would have a friend over for a sleepover, she would make him fold laundry or wash the dishes, chores she never demanded of him any other time. The chores were always accompanied by belittling comments and profanity. By the time Blair was 15, Agnes had fooled around on her husband, Blair's stepfather, and the only father figure he had ever known. The man had moved-out when he found out, leaving the teenager as the only target for Agnes' debasement. With Blair approaching his most difficult teenage years, when other young men would seek to exert their dominance and superiority over him, he had developed a deep inferiority complex and a sensitivity to humiliation. It was on display as he crouched on the ridge and watched Riley through the scope of a long-barreled hunting rifle. He wasn't just mad, he was *seething* with anger.

The car with Jeff, Rhonda, and Amber drove away, and Riley went to work transferring firewood from the larger pile at the edge of the clearing to the burn pile near the pit. Blair tracked him with the crosshairs. Riley crossed the clearing with armloads of firewood, back and forth, and Blair kept the crosshairs on him, his view occasionally obstructed as his rifle panned past trees in the foreground. His burned left hand, wrapped in a gauze bandage, supported the rifle. He'd been drinking, first at the bonfire, and more heavily after the humiliation that had followed, and his hands were unsteady, his thinking not clear.

*That sonofabitch deserves it.*

If Blair was honest and self-aware, he would admit he envied Riley, who had a great family, a good job, and the love of a beautiful woman, but envy was an ugly emotion, and Blair would never be so honest with himself.

*They all laughed at me. And it's his fault.*

Really, Blair had made an ass out of himself, and it was his own fault.

*Liberal motherfucker.*

Blair's foot slipped on the steep grade of the slope and, in a reflex, he reached out to steady himself with his left hand, his burned hand. He caught himself on a tree limb, but a bolt of pain ran up his arm and he uttered an involuntary grunt in response. He put his eye back to the scope, searched the clearing for a moment in an attempt to reacquire Riley through the eyepiece, and when he did, he found Riley had stopped piling firewood and was staring right at the spot where Blair crouched.

*Can he see me?*

It was dark, and he was 200 meters out. There couldn't be any way Riley could see him crouched in the thick overgrowth. But looking through the scope, it sure looked like it.

*He's looking right at me.*

Blair's finger tensed, then squeezed the trigger, and a shot rang out. Riley's head spun quickly to the left and he crumpled to the ground in front of his tent.

It had rained overnight and the earth was soft, which made Blair's job easier. The shovel pierced the mushy forest floor with ease, and the digging didn't get really hard until he was about two feet down. A pile of rich, red dirt grew nearby, next to a body-sized bundle wrapped in a blue tarp. Blair had debated burying the body. Initially he had considered simply leaving the body where it was with the rationale that law enforcement would conclude he was killed by a stray hunter's bullet, a perfectly reasonable scenario that played out for some poor bastard at least once every hunting season. That might have worked fine if Blair hadn't been involved in an altercation with Riley the same night, with a dozen witnesses present. No, that explanation would not do at all. He needed to bury the body.

*That kid just disappeared. Anything could have happened. Maybe a bear got him. Maybe he slipped, fell in a stream, bumped his head and got washed downriver.*

When Blair was tired out and sure he had dug deep enough, he pulled himself together and continued digging for another half hour. The sun was out, the humidity was unbearable, and big beads of sweat rolled from his forehead. His shirt was soaked in perspiration, but he kept digging until there was no question Riley's body would be totally concealed.

*I've gone this far. No sense half-assing it.*

He was a mile into the forest from Riley's campsite, 100 feet off a game trail, in a small clearing with downed trees as a perimeter barrier. He had dragged the tarp down the game trail with

the body inside, aided by gravity and the rain-lubricated ground, and he took perverse pride in how hard he worked to cover up his crime.

Blair grabbed the tarp at one corner and dragged it toward the pit, but the tarp had been compromised by the rough trip down the game trail. In a spot where a fallen tree limb had punctured the tarp, it gave way and opened up like a broken zipper. Riley's body spilled out on the forest floor and Blair fell on his ass as the tarp came free in his hands.

He gathered himself up and got back to his feet. The corpse stared back at him through one glassy eye. A gaping, bloody entry wound existed where Riley's other eye had been, and a flap of skin hung from the side of his head, behind his left ear, where the bullet had exited.

"Time for bed, cocksucker," Blair said, put one foot against Riley's corpse, and shoved.

The body rolled over and tumbled into the three foot deep pit, face down. There was a rumble in the distance, and then a crack of thunder. Blair raised his head and looked at the sky through the forest canopy. It was blue sky everywhere he looked. He took off his cap, wiped the sweat from his forehead, then put it back on. He looked left, then right, then at the sky again.

*Finish the job and get out of here.*

He grabbed the tarp, threw it in the pit, then grabbed the shovel and buried Riley's corpse. It went considerably quicker than digging the pit had. There was a small pile of dirt left over, dirt that would have filled the area where Riley's corpse now took up space, so Blair spread it around with the shovel until it was a thin, 8-foot circle of dirt in the clearing, then grabbed tree limbs, vines, and loose foliage and scattered them about the clearing to disguise the burial site. He was just finishing the job when he heard the rumble again, followed by a crack of thunder.

Blair scrambled onto the trunk of a downed tree at the edge of the clearing and looked at the sky again. There were no thunderclouds in sight. He looked down on the clearing from his elevated vantage point. He could still pick out the grave site, but wondered if anybody else would be able to.

*It's like finishing a painting job with a slightly different shade of paint. Most people won't notice it, but the painter always will.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Blair saw movement. In the distance, something was moving above the horizon, blocking out light as it moved beyond the trees.

*And the thunder.*

What had Frank said?

*Ojibwe legend says the thunderbird sometimes comes to punish humans for immoral acts.*

Blair dismissed the thought. *It's just an eagle.*

He cast another look at Riley's final resting place, then casually folded up the smokejumper's shovel that he had purchased at an outdoorsmen's expo and strode away on the game trail. He walked quickly, heading back toward the campsite, where he had parked his Bronco out of sight, near the logging road. He was just approaching the clearing where Riley's tent still stood when the sun seemed to dim just for a moment. Blair looked skyward again but found himself staring into the sun and saw little but brilliant glare staring back at him. He was about to break into the clearing when a shadow appeared on the ground in front of him and traveled from where he stood, across

the clearing, toward the spot where his truck was parked. It was huge, and it reminded Blair of the times when he was a kid and he went to visit his step dad after his parents split up, and he would be playing in the front yard of his stepdad's tiny rented house, which was in the flight path of the airport, and a plane would come in for landing and the shadow of the jet would pass directly over the yard.

He looked up again and caught sight of a dark shape in the sky, ever so briefly, just before the shadow reached the other side of the clearing and he lost sight of it. He surveyed the scene carefully, to make sure nobody was around, that nobody had been snooping around Riley's now abandoned campsite. There was nobody around. He could cross the clearing to get to his Bronco, or he could spend an hour in the thick overgrowth, trying to blaze a trail to it.

*You're gonna have to make a break for it, buddy.*

He had no sooner thought it when he began to question himself.

*What are you afraid of? A legend? A creature that can't exist?*

Experts on sightings of supposed cryptids frequently discounted Thunderbird sightings as sightings of traditional birds in-flight, their size misjudged by people with nothing to compare for scale, and Blair again convinced himself he was mistaken.

In the distance, the tell-tale rumble, followed by a crack of thunder.

Blair's heart started to pound in his chest and his breathing became fast and frantic as he decided to run for it, doubts be damned. He burst into a run, his belly bumping up and down as he ran, his pants threatening to fall down, again. If you could feel terrified and ridiculous at the same time, Blair knew what that felt like.

He raced across the clearing, his Bronco coming closer with every step. He was out of shape and he breathed harder every second. If he had eyes in the back of his head, he would have seen the shadow of an impossibly large bird of prey closing on him, but he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, and he wasn't turning around to look. He ran for all he was worth and swore he could hear the rush of wind over impossibly large wings approach from behind. The Bronco was thirty feet away. Something was definitely back there. Twenty feet. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. Ten feet. Blair dove headfirst for the edge of the clearing and the cover of the trees where he had parked. He crashed to the ground in a heap, right next to his truck, rolled over, his face to the sky, and caught just a glimpse of...

*A thunderbird.*

...something. Something big. It swooped low, carried its momentum into a climb without flapping, like a hang-glider, and disappeared over the top of the forest canopy, blocking out the sunlight as it went.

His adrenaline gave way to bewilderment and his bewilderment to embarrassment. He felt like a fool. What had he been running from? A story meant to scare children around a campfire? He stood and retrieved a hunting rifle from the back of his Bronco and surveyed the sky as he loaded it. It made him feel better, and his fear subsided.

*Be cool, buddy. It's not every day you murder someone and dispose of their body. Your mind is playing tricks on you.*

Blair laid his rifle across the passenger seat and started his truck. Exhaust belched from the tailpipe as the engine roared to life, and Blair departed.

The Newbury place was a few miles north, about three thousand feet up the mountain, in a place known as Elkhorn Point, and it was much like the homesteads on the wilderness family TV shows that had become so popular--all function, no form. His single story house had siding only on the south face with the rest of the structure covered in silver insulation with the brand name "Insulotex" printed diagonally on the 4 x 8 sheets. The roof was made of recycled tin that had recently started to rust. There was a large diesel generator that supplied power to the homestead, a rusty tractor parked in front of an outbuilding, and a section of property that looked something like a salvage yard, with worn-out vehicles, truck parts, and rusty construction supplies piled in a manner that most would call haphazard, but which Blair considered organized. *Pumps, motors, and retired tools over here, auto parts over there, and building stuff in the back.*

Blair had just put his rifle back in the case with half a dozen other firearms and locked the door when he heard the voice behind him.

"You can't wait to use 'em, huh?" a voice said.

Blair wheeled around on his heel and in the second it took him to do so, tried to figure out why the voice sounded familiar. Riley stood in his hallway, looking like a high school student hired to stalk kids in a Halloween haunted house--one eye missing, with the part of his skull behind his left ear blown out.

"You..." Blair said. "You can't..."

"Can't wait to use those guns again, huh Blair?" Riley asked.

"I use 'em when I have to," Blair said.

"Like last night?" Riley asked.

Blair didn't respond, at least not out loud.

*You're crackin' up buddy. He's not really here and you know it.*

"You ever ask yourself what it is you're hoping for, Blair?" Riley questioned.

"What do you mean by that?" Blair asked.

"With all this food, all these weapons," Riley said. "You *hope* you have to use 'em some day... that your doomsday scenario actually comes to pass. Because it would validate your personal beliefs and make you feel superior for seeing it coming when most people didn't. You're rooting for the apocalypse."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, snowflake," Blair said.

"You'll look pretty stupid on your deathbed if none of this comes to pass," Riley said.

“I’m *prepared*, libtard,” Blair spat. He looked around; at his gun case, into the pantry, where he had stacked months of provisions, dry food and canned goods.

“Be careful what you wish for, Blair,” Riley said, and when Blair turned around, he was gone.

A deafening thunderclap jolted Blair awake. He had only intended to take a short nap when he’d stretched out on the sofa, but after a full-night awake, sleep had overtaken him quickly and he’d slept for hours. He jumped to his feet and ran, still half-asleep, to the window, where he parted the blinds with two fingers and peered out, scanning the sky. The sun had set, but when a thin bolt of lightning flashed above the forest canopy in the distance, he could see storm clouds had moved in.

*Just a thunderstorm.*

He put a dented metal tea kettle on the stove and turned on the gas as the *whap whap* sound of oversized raindrops drummed the tin roof, first intermittently, then became a steady din. Lightning struck again, closer this time, and flashed through a recycled skylight which cast a rectangular white window on the stuffed heads Blair had mounted on the wall. The glassy black eyes of an elk Blair shot the previous autumn came alive for a moment, then returned to their previously lifeless state.

The tea kettle whistled and Blair removed it from the burner. He retrieved an envelope from the cupboard with “True Patriot Chili Mac” emblazoned on the label, tore it open, and dumped it in a bowl. It had become a staple of Blair’s diet, but it was incredibly high in salt content, which manifested itself in dark circles which were always present under his eyes. He grabbed a spoon from the drawer, poured steaming water from the tea kettle into the bowl and stirred as thunder rumbled and rain hammered the roof in an unrelenting fusillade.

Blair set the bowl on his dingy kitchen table, grabbed a Pabst Blue Ribbon from the fridge, and took a seat. He scooped a spoonful of the still-steaming chili mac into his mouth and his lips immediately formed an ‘O’ shape as the hot food touched his tongue. He huffed as he attempted to chew his too-hot meal in an open-mouth fashion, but couldn’t do it.

He made a “*Blah*” sound as he stuck out his tongue and spit the bite of chili mac back into his bowl.

“Sonofabitch,” he said. He was starving, but it would have to cool for a minute or two. He cracked his beer and took a drink, and the cold beer soothed his burned mouth.

A minute later, he scooped up another spoonful of his dinner, and he was just about to try again when something caught his attention. He froze, with the spoon halfway to his mouth, and cocked his head. The rain continued to pound the roof, but somehow it sounded... *different*.

He got up and walked tentatively toward the window, listening.

*What is that?*

Without warning, the lights in the cabin went out. He grabbed the cord for the window blinds and pulled with one quick motion. The blinds rose with a clatter and, outside the window, a brilliant spotlight shone down on his yard. He looked skyward toward the source of the light just as

a flash of lightning illuminated the night and revealed the backlit silhouette of a helicopter which hovered above his property. A rope dangled from the chopper and mercenaries in black tactical gear were gathered at the spot where the rope touched the ground. They crouched, weapons at the ready, and proceeded toward the cabin.

“Motherfuckers!” Blair shouted.

He spun on his heel and took off on a dead run for the hallway to the back of the cabin, where his assault rifle waited with the rest of his weapons. He raced down the hall, past the kitchen, and had almost made it to his gun rack when the back door exploded inward and a black-clad intruder with nightvision goggles and a rifle entered and blocked his path. Blair’s feet skidded on the wood floor as he stopped, momentarily unsure. He turned and ran back toward the living room but hadn’t even made it there when he heard the front door kicked-in and the sound of voices shouting commands in a language he didn’t recognize.

*What language is that?*

He turned again and ducked into the kitchen where he scanned the room for a weapon, anything he could use to defend himself. There was nothing. He sometimes left a rifle propped in the corner, but he had used it to shoot at a bear that showed up on his property days before and hadn’t returned it to the kitchen.

“Goddammit,” he cursed himself.

Blair edged his way toward the kitchen door and popped his head into the hallway. The intruders in his house closed in--he was trapped.

“Get on the floor!” one of the intruders shouted with an accent. Blair pulled back just as a shot rang out and splintered the door frame where his head had been an instant before. He looked around the room, frantic.

Blair took three running steps toward the oversized window he had salvaged from an abandoned homestead on the other side of Elkhorn Point. He leapt toward the window, but his foot slipped on the unfinished plywood floor and he lost some of his momentum. His knee banged against the kitchen counter and he went through the window sideways, where his bulk struck the center pillar and tore the entire window frame from between the studs where he had done a half-assed installation only months earlier.

He crashed through the window and carried an explosion of glass and splintered wood along. Bullets followed him out and he landed on his back at the top of the slope behind his home. He made a *whoof* sound as his breath left his body and he struggled to roll over and pull himself over the crest of the ridge. Headfirst, he scrambled downhill in the rain; his hands clutched and pulled at the vegetation, and he slid on his belly down the muddy, heavily-wooded slope. His vision started to close-in, and, like anyone who’s had their wind knocked out, he wondered if he would ever breathe again.

“Down the hill!” a voice shouted from above.

As if on cue, Blair’s diaphragm finally reacted and his lungs sucked in a huge breath. He scrambled to his feet but went down hard when he tried to put weight on his bruised knee. He got

back to his feet and leaned against a tree while he caught his breath, then proceeded downhill, slipping and sliding and bracing himself against tree trunks as he went.

He reached the bottom of the slope and staggered into a creek, drenched and muddied. Blair had hunted this land countless times and knew exactly where he was going.

*I have the advantage.*

He struggled to follow the creek downhill and wobbled back and forth as he stepped on submerged rocks. He could still hear the voices of his pursuers, but they were definitely falling back.

*They don't know where I went.*

About three quarters of a mile downstream, Blair came to the game trail he had been seeking. He knew it would take him to a hiding place where *they* would never find him.

*Who are they? They couldn't be cops.*

There was no way anybody could know what he had done.

*Wonder later. Keep moving.*

Blair stepped on a rock and attempted to hop to the bank of the stream but his foot slipped on the slick stone and he fell face first into the stream. His left arm landed on the exposed point of a largely submerged rock and his body weight came down on top of it. The sharp edge gashed his skin and his forearm snapped. He howled as the pain shot up his arm, through his shoulder, and into his brain.

Again he got back to his feet and stumbled up the creek bank to the game trail. A mile further on, he came to his shelter, a ramshackle hunting cabin that had been used by a number of outdoorsmen over the years.

An old cast iron wood stove stood in one corner, ready to accept a bundle of firewood, but Blair had considerable trouble loading it with only one unbroken arm. When he finally managed to get a fire going, he struggled to remove his wet clothes without irritating his wound. He grunted as he removed his wet shirt, dropped it on the stove to dry, and when he raised his bloodied arm, he had to look away. He had broken both bones, the radius and the ulna, and his forearm was bent about fifteen degrees. It would have to be splinted.

*It's gonna hurt.*

Blair looked around the room for something to use for the splint, and decided to use a piece of wood trim from the doorway. He broke off a three foot section, then propped it against the wall and stepped on it, right in the middle, to make two pieces about 18 inches long. The unspoken rule among outdoorsmen in a shelter like this was similar to the etiquette for a penny dish at a gas station -- *take it if you need it, and resupply it if you can*. Previous occupants had left behind a number of things, and Blair found most of what he was looking for--a dry cloth and a roll of duct tape--on a shelf near the bunk. He'd hoped to find a bottle of alcohol to clean the gash in his arm, but no such luck.

He gathered the cloth and tape, his splint, and a small section of tree limb from the wood pile. Blair dropped his supplies on the small, semi-rotten wood table in front of the window, took a seat, then peeled back a piece of tape. He stuck the sticky end to the edge of the table, then stuck his fingers through the hole in the center of the tape roll and pulled until he had stretched out

a two foot strip. With his teeth, he tore the strip free from the roll, then repeated the process five more times until six long strips of the fibrous tape hung from the edge of the table. With the first two, he strapped the dry cloth over the gash in his arm. The bandage was the easy part.

Blair set one piece of the wood trim on the table, then gingerly laid his broken forearm on top of it. His wrist touched the trim, and his elbow did, too, but in the middle, there was a half inch gap. With his good hand, he grabbed the second piece of his splint and laid it across the top of his forearm, and found the reverse to be true. His forearm touched the splint in the middle, directly above the break, but his wrist and elbow did not.

*This is really gonna hurt.*

Blair got up from the table and rummaged through the cabinet above the sink. Behind a can of baked beans and a half-empty can of coffee, he found a fifth of Yukon Jack with a few ounces remaining in the bottom. He removed the cap, tipped it back, drank the sweet, burning liquid down, tossed the empty bottle in the corner of the cabin, then sat back down at the table. He waited for a moment to allow the honey-infused whiskey to work its way into his bloodstream. He grabbed the small piece of tree limb he'd scavenged from the wood pile, put it between his teeth, and bit down, then placed his arm atop the bottom piece of his splint and laid the top piece across his forearm again.

Careful not to apply any pressure, Blair placed the palm of his right hand atop the splint, directly above the break. He had not yet warmed up from his rain-soaked escape, but beads of sweat stood out on his forehead anyway. His pulse pounded and his breathing accelerated. He reached up and snatched the baseball cap off his head with one quick motion and threw it down on the table with a flourish. Blair bit down harder on the stick and began to huff and puff around it, like a swimmer about to hurl himself into an ice cold lake, then placed his palm atop the splint again and pressed, hard.

There was a grinding sensation as the broken bones in his forearm rubbed against each other, accompanied by an electric bolt of pain. His ears rang, and there was a subtle pop as his wounded limb returned to its natural alignment. Blair howled in pain and the stick fell from his mouth. He struggled to maintain consciousness as his vision blurred and his brain tried to swim away into the black. When his senses returned, he examined his arm. The spaces between his broken arm and the pieces of wood splint had disappeared. Blair grabbed a strip of tape from the edge of the table and wrapped it around his splinted arm, just below the elbow. He repeated the process with the remaining three strips of tape, and let out an occasional whimper when he moved his arm in a manner that disturbed the break, but eventually, his left arm was splinted and immobilized.

"How's the arm, Blair?" a voice asked from behind him.

He didn't have to turn around to know it was Riley. Blair got up from the table and went to the bunk where he stretched out with his damaged arm across his chest. Riley stood near the door, his eye still blown out, a dried river of blood on the cheek beneath his gaping eye socket. Blair said nothing. He laid on the bunk, closed his eyes, and waited for the Yukon Jack to work its magic.

"Nothing to say, Blair?" Riley asked. "Doubting yourself yet?"

Still, Blair said nothing.

“Who do you think those guys were, Blair?” Riley questioned. “See any badges? Any vests with an agency’s name written on the back?” The questions hung empty in the cabin’s musty air.

The sound of an explosion in the distance echoed through the wilderness.

“Ohhh,” Riley said in a mocking tone. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“You’re dead,” Blair said without opening his eyes.

“How long before you are?” Riley asked as Blair drifted off to sleep.

The storm had moved out and Blair awoke to the sound of chirping birds. Sunlight beamed through the cabin’s sole window and cast a bright, canary yellow rhombus on the floor. In his sleep-deprived state, Blair momentarily forgot his situation and reflexively placed his left hand against the bunk and attempted to push himself into a sitting position. His broken arm screamed in protest and Blair cried out and cradled his arm against his chest. He was awake. As he rose to a sitting position his brain swirled. He felt dizzy and cold.

*Infection. You have a fever.*

It took Blair considerably longer than it normally would to get going, but he managed to get his dried shirt over his splinted arm without too much trouble. He opened the cabin door, just a crack, and pressed his eye to the opening, half-expecting to see black clad figures pointing weapons in his direction. The forest was still and the previous night’s snow had melted away. He opened the door a little more, peered the other direction, and squinted into the glare of the sun. There didn’t appear to be anybody around.

He stepped onto the porch of the weather-beaten cabin and listened carefully. He heard no voices, no crunching of foliage under government-issue boots. Blair turned to his left and peered intently into the forest but saw nothing. He turned his head back to the right and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw a man standing on the porch, not five feet away.

“Jesus Christ!” Blair exclaimed and staggered back a step.

The man was old, with the deep-lined, leathery skin of someone who had spent much of his life outdoors. His hair was tied in a long, black braid that ran down his back.

“Yogi,” the man said.

“What?” Blair asked as he regained his composure.

“Not Jesus Christ,” the man said and pointed one finger at his own chest. “My friends call me Yogi.”

“Like Yogi fucking Bear?” Blair asked.

“No,” the man answered. “Like Yogi Berra.” He smiled.

Blair took his uninjured right hand, which he had pressed over his heart, fingers spread, when the old man had startled him, and held it toward Yogi, palm out.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said. “You just caught me by surprise.”

“No need to apologize,” Yogi said.

“Is this your place?” Blair asked, a little worried that Yogi might consider him an unwanted guest in the cabin.

Yogi tipped his head back so that the rising sun fell fully on his face and closed his eyes.

“Yes, this is my place,” he said. “This is *all* my place.” He opened his eyes, took out a pack of cigarettes, removed one, began to put them away in his breast pocket, then thought better of it and offered Blair one, which he gladly accepted. Yogi lit their cigarettes with an antique, flip-top lighter.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Yogi asked and gestured toward Blair’s splinted arm.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Blair answered and exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. “I’ll be alright, though.”

He didn’t look alright. His clothes were covered in dried mud from the previous night’s escape, and the bags under his eyes said he was operating on about six hours of sleep over the previous two days.

“Say, let me ask you something, Chief,” Blair said. “Do you, I mean, you and your people, believe in the Thunderbird?”

Yogi contemplated the question for a moment before he answered. “The Thunderbird lives,” he said, “because someone always believes in him, and this,” he continued, waving one arm at the surrounding forest, “is a very special place.”

“I don’t follow,” Blair said.

“It is a place of wishes and yearning,” Yogi said. “When my people first came here, millennia ago, the land was still ruled by the cold, and this land was covered in water as far as the eye could see. My ancestor, a wise old mother, waited for her sons to come home from a hunt, but they did not return.”

Blair puffed his cigarette and listened with an expression that belied his true feelings.

*Superstitious native hooey.*

“That night when she went to sleep, she had a vision,” Yogi continued. “A Great Eagle came to her and told her that her sons had been drowned beneath the waters of the icy lake. She called-out to the Great Spirit but would not allow herself to cry, lest her tears be added to the great lake which had taken her sons.”

Yogi flicked his cigarette from the porch.

“For many days and nights she prayed,” he said. “She prayed that the Great Spirit would dry up the lake, so that no mother would ever again have to sacrifice her sons to its waters. She believed that the Great Spirit would hear her pleas, and one night, there was a great shaking. In the morning, the people discovered the lake was gone, and only dry land remained,” Yogi said.

“In this place, if you believe in something enough, it can become true,” he finished.

“Is that right?” Blair asked dismissively. “Great story, but if you’ll excuse me, I gotta get headed for home. Thanks for lettin’ me use your place last night.”

His knee was still sketchy and Blair was out of shape. It was afternoon before he completed the long, uphill hike back to his homestead on the ridge. As he approached, he paused periodically to look and listen for anyone who shouldn't be there, but he saw no signs that he was walking into an ambush.

His breath rushed in and out in heavy gasps as he exited a game trail he had walked a hundred times, and he should have known exactly where he was, but he found himself momentarily confused. He should have been home, but there would no landmarks that he recognized--the life he had built for himself atop Elkhorn Point was gone. His home was an ashy ruin, burned flat. The spot where his 110-gallon propane tank had been looked like ground zero of a bombing--there was a crater, 3 feet deep and 25 feet wide. As he walked about his property, he took a mental inventory of everything he had lost. All his food, his legal papers and property records, his guns... all gone.

He had relentlessly mocked the liberals who refused to accept his reality, that someday his preparations would be justified. He had planned for this day. He had stockpiled weapons and supplies, and had envisioned the day when he would have to make his final stand, either forced to go out in a blaze of glory or vindicated in a firefight when fellow patriots joined him on the firing line and beat back the forces of oppression, and yet, here he was, unarmed, unable to hunt, his life incinerated by forces unknown. Things had not gone as he had planned.

The nose of his Bronco was visible in the metal quonset he used as a garage and a workshop. Whoever they were, they had left his Bronco undamaged. Blair ran his hands over his pockets. He didn't have his keys. He stepped closer to the charred mark on the ground where the front door of his cabin had once been and attempted to orient himself. Steam and wisps of smoke rose from the burning wreckage of his cabin, but the rain had mostly cooled the debris and he was able to walk into the smoking ruin while charred debris crunched beneath his boots. He reached the spot where the entrance to his kitchen would have been, where he used to hang his keys, and swiped one foot back and forth in the ash. The metal hook that once held his keyring appeared from beneath the ash. Blair crouched, reached out his hand, brushed aside some muddy ash, and his keys appeared in the rubble near the partially-melted remains of his Winchester keychain.

"Yes!" he said as he snatched his still-warm keys from the ruins and limped to his Bronco. His left arm was killing him, mostly useless, and beginning to swell, so he had to turn his right hand upside down to manipulate the door handle. He climbed in, then leaned over and reached his right arm across his body to pull the door closed. Blair put the key in the ignition and tried to rotate it forward but the ignition lock did not release. He tried again, still no luck.

"Come on," he said.

He turned the key backward and it rotated into the "accessory" position without trouble. He turned it forward again and the starter cranked the engine to life.

"Yeah baby!" Blair exclaimed. He dropped the transmission into "drive," stepped on the gas, and spun the tires as he accelerated out of the shop.

Blair's mind raced as he left the driveway and merged onto the rough mountain road that led away from his place. He had never planned to bug out. Technically, he had preemptively bugged-out when he had moved to Elkhorn Point. He hadn't planned to leave.

*Schafer. I can go to Schafer's place.*

Charlie Schafer was a hunting buddy, a single guy, who shared many of Blair's views. He lived 15 miles down the mountain, near the junction with Route 6. Blair could go there, tell him about the events of the previous night, and Charlie would have some idea what to do.

Descending from Elkhorn Point meant a trek down a serpentine road, still rutted from the logging trucks that had once swarmed the mountain like ants on a discarded sandwich. The grade varied, about 10 degrees in spots where the road spiraled around the mountain, to a comparatively precarious 35 degrees in places where it crossed a ridgeline and snaked through a ravine on the other side. Blair kept his good hand on the wheel and drove slower than he normally would but the Bronco still fishtailed around corners as gravity battled to pull the truck ever faster down the mountain.

Blair slowed to negotiate the hairpin turn at the bottom of the ravine, then accelerated up the other side. He slowed again to navigate around another sharp corner at the top of the ridge, where the black spruce and tamarac pressed close to the road. He rounded the corner and saw a fallen tree which blocked the road from shoulder to shoulder. His foot reflexively jammed the brakes and his knee screamed with pain as the Bronco skidded to a stop just feet short of a collision with the thick spruce.

Blair had cleared trees from the road hundreds of times in the years he had lived on the mountain, but as he exited the Bronco, he thought something seemed different in this case. Most of the time, it was a rotten tree trunk which had fallen over the road after standing dead and limbless for a decade or more. This tree was not one of those. He stepped closer to the spot where the trunk was snapped and examined it. It was broken off, not cut, about four feet from the ground, and the splintered wood inside the trunk was the healthy, honey-gold color of a living tree.

Blair pushed up the bill of his baseball cap and scratched at his forehead. He looked around for evidence of a blowdown, but the trees in the area, even the dead ones, still stood.

*How could this be the only one?*

In the back of his Bronco, Blair's chainsaw waited. He always kept it handy for situations just like this. He retrieved it and wondered how he might operate it with only one good arm.

When he was a kid, he had spent a couple long summers at his uncle's house, where his mom had sent him *to learn how to be a man*. He had been forced to spend day after day cutting wood, sometimes 9 or 10 hours per day. Not yet strong enough to start the chainsaw on his own, he had endured a profanity-laden tutorial from his uncle on how to start the saw with the help of gravity.

"You hold the saw up near your chest," his uncle had said, "Then throw it down toward the ground while you pull the cord with your other hand." His uncle had stood over him and called him *pussy* and *sissy* after every failed attempt, until finally, the saw sprang to life.

Even after he had grown strong enough to start the saw without trouble, it was a technique he had continued to practice. He knew he would have to change it up this time, because just clenching his left hand sent bolts of pain and heat racing up his broken left arm.

Blair set the chainsaw on top of the tree trunk and, with his right hand, pressed on the decompression valve which would make the cord easier to pull. He braced the palm of his left hand against the handle, then grabbed the ripcord's t-shaped handgrip between the fingers of his right hand. He steeled himself for the pain that would surely come, then pulled the ripcord with one quick rip. The handle pressed into his palm and the broken ends of the bones in his arm smashed together at the break. His arm wailed and his palm recoiled from the handle. The chainsaw turned over with a weak *muck muck muck muck* sound, but didn't start.

"Pussy," his uncle's voice echoed in his head.

The chainsaw slid off the log and banged against his throbbing knee.

"Motherfucker!" Blair shouted as he stepped back from the saw.

Angry, he picked up the saw and set it back on the trunk of the fallen tree. Again he placed his palm against the handle and pulled the ripcord. The saw chuckled at him again--*muck muck muck muck*--and his arm throbbed, but the chainsaw didn't start.

From somewhere in the forest, a tree limb snapped. Blair tried to ignore the pain in his arm and looked around. The wind blew gently through the trees and, although he was sure he had heard something, he saw nothing move in the woods.

*Don't get distracted. You need to get to Charlie's.*

Again he tried to start the chainsaw, but it continued to mock him. Just as the *muck muck muck muck* of the saw died out, Blair thought he heard something else... something weird.

*It sounded like a growl.*

Blair had heard bears make a similar noise, when they were just awakened. It was a low rumble, an abyssal, guttural sound from deep inside. He looked around again and wondered whether a bear might be about to come crashing out of the brush. Something popped in the forest and Blair's head turned toward the sound.

As he scanned the forest, he was reminded of a vacation he had taken the previous summer to visit his brother. They'd stayed awake 'til the wee hours of the morning, drinking and reminiscing about past hunting trips and the conversation led them to a discussion of animal camouflage. Before long, they were online, flipping through photos in one of those quiz-type apps. The photos were taken by a nature photographer, and they showed animals camouflaged in their natural environments. The challenge was to spot the animals in the photos. Some were easier than others. A willow ptarmigan in winter plumage, or a wolf wandering a birch forest, for example, blended perfectly with their environment, but Blair had encountered them in real life so many times, he found them simple to spot. Others were not so easy. It took a surprisingly long time to spot a Great Gray Owl camouflaged against a tree trunk, for example, or a leopard in the grass in an African wildlife refuge. The real entertainment, though, was the primal stimulation of spotting the animal after staring at the photo for a time... one minute he didn't see it, and the next, there it was, right

there in plain sight, staring right back at him. There was a spooky, ingrained thrill to it that dated back to the earliest days of the human species, when people had not yet reached the top of the food chain.

He stood at the edge of the forest and tried to spot the animal that was making noise in the woods. His pulse quickened as he worked to overcome the challenges of scale and depth perception while he scanned the treeline. Another noise from the creature would surely allow him to zero-in on its location, but whatever it was, it didn't make a noise. Wild grasses stood three feet tall in the foreground, thin branches and twigs jutted into the field-of-view, and tree trunks of every shade cluttered the scene. And then... he saw it.

Two dark brown eyes stared directly at him. They blinked. It was close--maybe twenty feet away--but something was wrong. Blair was six feet tall, and even a bear standing on its hind legs would have been about eye-level, but he was looking up at this creature. Blair cast his gaze downward to gauge the elevation and half-expected to see the ground slope up and away, but the ground was relatively flat.

Fear rose up in him with an intensity he'd never felt. His gaze returned to the creature in the woods, then quickly to his chainsaw. He grabbed it and his adrenaline overpowered the pain in his broken arm. He yanked the ripcord and his arm screamed with hot fury.

*Muck muck muck muck.*

Blair's head snapped around in time to see the face of the creature in the woods contort in an angry grimace. It was humanoid, and largely covered in hair. Its mouth opened and it let loose a terrifying, deep roar punctuated by a repetitive vibrato. The sound echoed through the surrounding forest and a heavy thump accompanied by the sound of breaking underbrush signaled the creature's first step toward Blair.

"Jesus Christ," Blair exclaimed as he again reached for the ripcord. He yanked on it again but the chainsaw again failed to start. A second heavy footfall sounded from the forest and the saw fell to the ground as Blair turned to run for the door of his Bronco. He had just rounded the front of the vehicle when he heard the creature bellow again. Blair staggered and fell next to the truck. He looked up. Through the truck's dirty glass, he saw the creature's face emerging from the forest, and then, a loud snap, like the sound of a thick tree trunk breaking.

A shadow passed above his head and he flinched. He reared back and covered his head with his arms as the trunk of a spruce tree, broken off at ground-level when the beast had burst forth from the forest, smashed onto the roof of his Bronco and crushed it flat, right across the driver's seat. Broken safety glass and splintered wood showered Blair as he crouched next to the wheel of the truck.

Blair lifted his head, afraid of what he might see, and rightfully so. The beast stood on the shoulder of the road, bent over the hood of the truck, and looked down at him. He felt a rush of hot breath on his face. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

*"Climate change is fake, but Bigfoot is real?"* Riley had asked him.

The beast stood up, stretched its arms out in a ten-foot wingspan of matted hair, tilted its head toward the sky, and howled again.

Blair vaulted to his feet and took off on a dead run for the woods on the opposite side of the road. The beast moved to come around the Bronco, its eyes locked on Blair as he fled into the woods. Blair ducked into the thicket and ran, panicked and limping. He could hear the beast in pursuit and it grunted and growled as it smashed its way through the woods, its wide, muscular body knocking down trees that Blair had easily passed between moments earlier.

His confused flight led him in no particular direction. He simply ran. He crashed through a stream and up the bank on the other side. The beast was still back there, and it would occasionally bellow in a manner that reminded Blair of the sounds made by movie dinosaurs. From the sound of it, he thought the beast was falling back a bit due to its difficulty in moving through the dense forest. Blair paused to catch his breath and had leaned against a tree when still-dead Riley stepped out from behind the trunk.

“I wouldn’t rest too long, Blair,” Riley said. “It’s still coming.”

Blair looked back without speaking. Trees fell in the distance and the underbrush cracked and popped. It was still coming. He took off again and Riley watched him go.

Five minutes further on, he broke into a clearing, the forest at his back and a moss-covered granite outcropping beneath his feet. Ten steps away, the granite seemed to fall away into nothing. Blair continued forward until he stood at the edge and looked down into a massive quarry. It had been a working granite quarry back in the day, but had long ago been abandoned. The pumps had been shut off when the work crews left, and over the years, the quarry, essentially a giant granite bathtub with sheer rock walls 80 feet tall, had filled with water. Now, the quarry ledge was 40 feet above the dark water and huge blocks of discarded granite could be seen in submerged, ghostly piles beneath the water.

Blair examined the surrounding landscape. He had exited the forest onto a point. Vertical rock walls descended to the water all around. The only route away from his location was back through the forest, but he could hear the beast coming closer. When he turned to look the other direction, searching for an escape, he recoiled. Riley stood on the granite outcrop.

“What do you think, Blair?” Riley asked.

*I think I’m trapped.* He refused to speak to someone who wasn’t really there.

The treetops wavered as the beast approached the edge of the forest, about to break onto the outcrop, and Blair’s panic rose.

“I don’t think it’s too late, Blair,” Riley said.

Blair broke down and spoke. “What the fuck are you talking about?” he yelled. “Too late for what?”

“You know the answer to that,” Riley said.

The beast emerged from the forest with a crash, and Blair saw it in full for the first time. It was terrifying. It had to be ten feet tall, covered in reddish-brown hair over a heavily-muscled frame.

*Ten feet tall with legs as thick as a 55-gallon drum.* That was how Blair had described it at the bonfire, but seeing it in person, it was even more frightening.

Blair's head swiveled right, then left as the beast took a step toward him, then another. He had seconds to escape. With nowhere else to go, he turned toward the quarry and leapt as the beast reached the edge and swiped at him. It missed by inches and Blair plummeted 40 feet to the water, where he impacted in a prone position.

His momentum carried him deep into the murky water, and his injured arm stung as the iron-laden quarry-water seeped into his wound. Blair's mind raced in the following seconds. Would the beast follow? Would its fantastic bulk come thundering into the water any second now and force him ever deeper into the abandoned quarry? No thunderous splash came, but when he started to believe the danger had passed, he was possessed by another frightening notion.

*What other dangers might lurk in this very special place?*

His mind conjured an image of himself, viewed from below. His body floated near the surface, silhouetted by the sunlight above--a perfect visual temptation for a creature lurking below, desperate for a meal.

His arms and legs fluttered instinctively and forced him toward the surface. It took three kicks before his head broke the plane of the now-rippling quarry and he immediately cast his gaze to the ledge above. The beast paced incessantly at the edge and bellowed when Blair surfaced. It fixed its eyes on him and Blair thought there was something intelligent behind its stare, a creepy intelligence like the monkeys at the zoo.

Blair paddled his arms against the water until he was nearly on his back--*where I can keep my eyes on that thing*--and swam away from the ledge. The beast quickened its pace, and Blair thought it showed emotion.

*It seems angry.* The thought terrified him. Anger was a largely human emotion, rooted in intelligence.

The beast...

*Sasquatch.*

...traversed the point and then back. It examined the ground on both sides as it howled and yipped.

*It's looking for a place to climb down. Can it swim?*

Blair paddled quicker until he was far from the ledge, in the middle of the quarry, surrounded by black water, and the further away he got, the more the beast seemed desperate to get to him, but eventually, it huffed through nostrils the size of salad plates and stomped into the forest with heavy footfalls.

Blair turned on his side and side stroked to the other side of the quarry. When he found an area where he could easily climb out with his injured arm and knee, he did so quietly, unsure where the beast may have gone. For all he knew, it was crashing through the forest right then, trying to find its way to him.

Night fell and Blair was hopelessly lost. He was more acquainted with the area than most, but his flight from the beast had taken him through unfamiliar terrain, in no particular direction. *Just away*. If there had been a stream, he could have followed it down and it would eventually have met a road, but there was no stream, and the dense forest looked the same in every direction. Once the sun set, he no longer had any sense of direction--he simply walked. His head swam with fever and his arm swelled and pulled tight against the duct tape he'd used to bandage it. He knew his arm was infected, and without treatment, he would lose it. The temperature had dropped dramatically and Blair shivered. He told himself it was unseasonably cold for that time of year, and it was, but he suspected his fever made it feel even colder than it really was.

Riley appeared to him, but Blair wrote it off as fever-induced hallucinations.

"It's pretty cold, Blair," still-dead Riley said.

Blair continued to trudge.

"Seems like it's unseasonably cold for this time of year, don't you think?" Riley asked.

Blair did not answer.

"I guess global warming is a fucking joke," Riley said, and disappeared.

Blair walked, and soon, snow began to fall. The bill of his cap wore a thin coating of snow and his shoulders were wet. It was hard to tell how much time had passed. He was hastened along by every noise from the forest, but it felt like he had been walking for days and he was running out of time. The end was near. He had begun to stagger, and the last bit of energy to walk was about to slip away when he spied a light in the distance. He paused, squinted, strained to focus on the light as wet hot breath escaped his lips and condensed in the cold air. His feet began to move again, more steadily, rejuvenated by the hope of salvation, but the more he walked, the more he wondered whether he was getting any closer. He was maybe 100 yards from the edge of the forest when he could finally make out the source of the light... it was a house. A light shone from a window on the main floor.

Blair staggered out of the forest and crossed the yard to the house. It was poorly maintained, with rain gutters hanging from the eaves and peeling paint. He headed for the first door he saw and left size 12 footprints in the snow as he went.

"Help," he called in a weak voice. "I need help."

He crashed against the wood door at the top of the steps and mustered a knock.

"Help," he cried again. "Please help me."

There was no sign of life inside. Blair put his hand on the doorknob and turned. The door opened. He stepped inside, into a grimy kitchen right out of the 1950s, with olive green appliances and dirty white subway tile. The sink was full of dishes, and a bowl, full of dark liquid, sat on the counter next to a butcher knife. To Blair, it looked like the family that once ate dinner in the kitchen had not done so in quite some time.

"Hello?" he called. "I need help." There was no answer. "Can I use your phone? Hello?"

Blair closed the door and the latch clicked loudly in the quiet house. The ceiling was illuminated by a wedge of light from the adjoining living room and Blair followed it.

The living room was paneled in wood and dimly lit by a brass lamp with a stained beige lampshade. A fire crackled in the fireplace, and Blair could see the outline of a figure seated on the sofa near the hearth, facing away.

“Hello?” Blair said, but there was no response.

His feet carried him into the room. “I didn’t mean to barge in like this,” Blair said as he rounded the end of the sofa.

“I need help,” he finished, but the person on the sofa did not respond. It was a boy, no more than 12 or 13 years old in Blair’s estimation, and he sat nearly motionless on the sofa and stared into the fireplace.

“Is it warm enough in here?” the boy asked.

Blair thought it was an odd question, and strangely out of context considering he hadn’t been able to get a response to his calls as he’d entered the house. The boy cradled himself, his arms crossed. His left hand gripped his right arm and vice versa, as if he was freezing. Blair looked at the fireplace, then back at the boy.

“Do you have a phone?” Blair asked. “I hurt my arm and I need to get medical attention.” He was worried about frightening the boy considering his appearance. There was blood on his clothes, he had an arm bandaged with duct tape, and he was limping. He probably looked like a homicidal maniac.

*You are a homicidal maniac.*

The boy did not respond. Blair’s legs could support him no longer and he sat down, *whooshed down*, into the chair opposite the sofa. The moment he did, his head began to swim again and his stomach rumbled. He was starving, and running on empty.

“Do you have anything to eat?” Blair asked. “I’d be happy to pay you a little something. I could come back tomorrow...” he said, but the boy interrupted.

“You’re not supposed to eat,” the boy said in an emotionless, flat tone.

Blair got up from the chair. “I’m sorry. I know your mom and dad wouldn’t mind if I just had a little something to eat. I haven’t had anything in days and...”

“There’s not enough to eat,” the boy said, and for the first time, turned to face Blair. The boy looked up at him with dark eyes and an almost hypnotic stare.

*It’s like he’s looking right through me.*

Blair felt uneasy. “Ok, I gotcha, buddy. You don’t mind if I use your bathroom, do you?” The boy did not respond and went back to watching the fireplace.

The hallway was dark, but Blair found the bathroom and flipped on the light switch to reveal a filthy, unkempt scene. There was an overpowering stench coming from... somewhere. Stagnant, dark liquid had pooled in the bathtub. The toilet looked like it hadn’t been flushed in months, and the vanity mirror was smashed.

The medicine chest opened with a creak and Blair found what he was hoping for... a bottle labeled "Amoxicillin." Gingerly, he opened the bottle with one good hand and one faulty one, popped one capsule in his mouth, then replaced the cap and pocketed the bottle as he swallowed the capsule dry.

"It's not too late, Blair," still-dead Riley said from behind him.

Blair flinched but quickly recovered. "Too late for what, snowflake?"

"To accept reality," Riley answered.

Blair reached for the doorknob and exited into the hallway. He looked left and saw the flickering light from the fireplace projected on the ceiling, but instead of going back to the living room, he went right, past a utility room and the home's rear entrance, and opened the door to a bedroom. An incredible smell rolled into the hallway and Blair recoiled and was forced to shield his nose and mouth with his broken forearm as he let out a small cough. The utility light in the yard shone through the window and offered just enough light for *something* to catch Blair's eye. He moved forward to get a better look. The wallpaper, which he initially mistook for an avant-garde surrealist print pattern, was splashed with a dried, dark brown liquid. Flies buzzed about in swarms.

*Blood?*

Blair's thoughts preceded the facts but somehow, he knew. Some kind of lumpy matter...

*Tissue. Brain matter.*

...had splattered on the wall and dried into a textured mess. In the narrow space between the bed and the wall, there was a pile of... something. It took effort to understand what he was seeing in the dimly lit room. A pile of red, pulpy material had oozed into an irregular pool on the fleur-de-lis patterned carpet and what looked like bones protruded from the mess. The reality of what he was looking at became clear when he noticed a repeating pattern of parallel white lines in the mess. It was part of a human rib cage, overrun with maggots.

*It looks like it's been picked clean.*

"I tried to tell you, Blair," Riley said from the doorway of the bedroom.

Blair retreated slowly from the horror he had discovered as if in a trance, first one step, then a second, and bumped into a small table near the foot of the bed. A glass knick knack of some type tumbled off the table and shattered on the floor at his feet, and when Blair looked down, he realized he was leaving tracks in the semi-coagulated, not-entirely-dry blood on the floor. The bedspread was pulled back just enough to reveal one glassy eye staring back at him from beneath the bed.

"Willful ignorance is a dangerous thing, Blair," Riley said.

Blair tugged on the bedspread and the thing under the bed came fully into view, but he already knew what it was... a human head, mauled...

*Eaten.*

...and missing its other eye. It looked like a female but he couldn't tell for sure.

"No," Blair said, and took a couple more steps back. "No!" he shouted, and turned to run for the door. He raced through the doorway where still-dead Riley's apparition had been moments

before and saw the boy standing at the end of the hallway, his hands at his sides, his hypnotic dark eyes fixed on Blair.

“NO!” Blair shouted again and bolted through the utility room to the backdoor where he struggled with the doorknob, then burst back into the cold yard. He stumbled down the steps, almost fell, and dashed across the yard toward the forest. Riley was there.

“You can’t run from it, Blair,” he said.

Blair tripped on a fallen tree limb as he entered the forest and fell, and the woods came alive with the dry rustle of not-yet-fallen leaves as a gust of wind blew through. A noise came from behind him.

*A snarl.*

He rolled over on his back. Standing at the treeline was... a creature. It was seven feet tall, with a head like a wolf, a deep, sunken abdomen with gray, hairy skin stretched tight over its ribs, and long, animal-like legs, muscled in the thighs with knees that bent backwards. It looked at Blair with dark, hypnotic eyes that he immediately recognized.

“No!” he shouted.

*The Wendigo.*

Blair’s elbows and heels scuffed the freezing, snow-covered ground as he tried to scramble away. The creature lunged forward with the agility of a wild animal and pounced on Blair.

“I don’t believe in you!” Blair cried out.

“Oh, I’m afraid it’s too late for that now,” still-dead Riley said.

The creature opened its mouth to expose a gaping maw lined with razor-sharp teeth and terrifying fangs, which it plunged into Blair’s neck. A jet of hot, crimson blood burst forth and atomized into the brisk night air, and the creature came away with a pound of flesh from Blair’s neck, leaving a gaping, fatal wound behind. The Wendigo tipped its head back and swallowed the flesh in one motion, then plunged its teeth into the man again and tore loose another massive bite of food, accompanied by the wet sounds of carnage as Blair screamed.

Riley appeared and stood over Blair as his vision tunneled-in. Just before he lost consciousness for the final time, Riley spoke to him.

“This all could have been prevented, Blair,” he said. “If only you’d been a man of truth.”