

Don't Go Back the Way You Came

4100 words

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Tripping and hopping, clutching his pants against his belly, Zemke ran up the Baxter Street stairs, too scared to stop and dress.

Half rain, half snow, and cold enough so he could see his breath.

He pinched his socks and shirt beneath his arm. He carried his shoes in his hand. He'd stuffed his underpants in one of them. He clamped his undershirt between his teeth. He'd grabbed it from the floor next to Helen's bed.

Fuck her, he thought. *She should have known the asshole would come home.*

One shoe dropped. He stooped, he spun, he bounded toward the Hilltop School's playground at the top of the stairs.

In the house below, Koric yelled at Helen and Helen yelled back.

Zemke hobbled across the playground's gravel to its carousel. He struggled to pull his jeans on, shivering, then skipping most of the buttons on his flannel shirt. The buttons could come later. On the carousel's worn boards he sat to pull his shoes on, afraid he'd hear a shotgun blast.

Jacket, he thought as soon as he had tied his shoes.

"Oh, fuck," he said aloud.

He'd left his jacket, lettered with his nickname, *Tip*, on Helen's backdoor coat rack. The jacket's other lettering said *Babe Ruth SE Alaska Champs, 1956*.

He'd been at the dump with Lewis shooting rats when Helen had come bouncing in in Koric's pick-up. "To throw away the asshole's stuff," she'd said. Zemke's friend, Lewis, had

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recoiled at hearing *asshole* said in front of Helen's little kids. Zemke wouldn't let himself show shock.

"Ten years of shit and now it's done." Helen lifted a box of toy soldiers out of the truck. "If he wants his stinking soldiers he can come and get them."

Lewis, timid in the face of anger, strode off with his rifle, studying the garbage heaps for rats. Helen's boy, named Vasil, trailed in his wake.

With a violent sweep, Helen flung the soldier figures, in their hussar uniforms, in an arc across the dump.

Her smaller girl began to cry, and the bigger one turned to Zemke looking shocked.

"Hey," Zemke said. He placed his rifle in the bed of the truck. He moved to gather the tiny soldiers so he could make a gift of them to the crying child. He had loaded her hands with the colorful figures when Helen swept down. She seized the toys and threw them deeper into the dump's smoking piles of trash.

A rat, astonished to be pelted with miniature hussars, skittered away.

Helen laughed. A sobbing note in the way she laughed let Zemke glimpse an opportunity.

The jacket he'd left at Helen's lay balled up at his front door next morning. In it was a turd.

"You better hide," Lewis told him. "Koric is crazy."

Lewis had come to return Zemke's rifle. He'd taken charge of it when Zemke had climbed into the pick-up with Helen. Zemke lived in a studio apartment on the first floor of a square, three-story building. He slept on his couch and ate and brought his girlfriends to his combination living room-kitchen, the only room he had beside his bathroom. The square building sat surrounded by decaying homes linked in a spider-web way by a gray boardwalk.

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“He don't scare me,” Zemke said.

He was checking his rifle, a Remington 700 .30-06 he'd won playing poker, for any nicks it might have suffered in his friend's Rancho. He didn't expect Lewis to believe him. Lewis had just learned about Zemke's nude climb. He asked how Zemke managed to escape with Koric yelling at Helen.

The rifle passed muster. Zemke sighed. “You know her place?” he asked his friend.

Buck-toothed Lewis had a hayseed grin. “Sort of. The neighborhood. That sort of thing.”

Helen lived behind the hospital in a house off a long flight of stairs. The city called those stairs a street but that was just a courtesy name. No real street would ever be built up the steep slope the stairs climbed. Houses on the hillside perched on exposed foundations. Zemke had made his escape through a basement room with an outside door.

“It's true what I told you; he's crazy.” Lewis had listened to Zemke describe his flight. “He crushed that Filipino's throat.”

“Didn't kill him, Lewis.”

“Yeah, sure.” Lewis arched his eyebrows to make his words a warning.

When Zemke said he wasn't frightened, that was a lie. Helen's husband had lived through World War II in Lublin. Whatever measures he'd had to take to keep himself safe, he had taken. He'd used those same skills to make his way to the West.

Koric—the only name he went by; if he had a first name Zemke didn't know it—was already in his forties when he married Helen, whom Zemke had dated in high school.

Not being scared is different from showing reasonable caution. Zemke didn't want worry to curtail his life, but he developed a taste for the quieter bars instead of the honky-tonks where Koric might be found. He stayed out of the alley that curved behind the Moose Club. He kept

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watch on the waterfront, and whenever the tugboat Koric crewed on was absent from its berth his feeling lightened and he let himself walk with a cockier step.

When he went to help his mother she asked if he had heard about Helen.

“What about her?” Zemke spoke impatiently. He was dumping out the cat’s old litter and filling its tray with fresh. His mother’s arthritis made it difficult for her to bend. Zemke hated the tray’s urine smell but he went twice a week to help.

His mother, Lana, spoke from the living room couch, which was also her bed. She confined herself to half her house and closed the rest off. She said she did it to save on heat but Zemke knew walking hurt her knees.

“She got the cops against crazy Koric, her husband,” Lana said.

Zemke told his mother he didn’t want to hear about Koric.

“Why? What’s he ever done to you?”

She didn’t need to know about the turd. “You’re the one who said he’s crazy, Mom.”

His mother let his peevish answer pass, but after a few seconds she said, “I can’t imagine what it’s like to live with a person so nuts.” She said her husband, Zemke’s father, had been a saint compared to Koric.

Zemke replied with a complaint that changed the subject. “The house smells like cat piss.”

“He doesn’t always make it to the box.”

“He’s going to ruin your rug.”

“I see him do it and I yell but I can’t get up and chase him. You should put him down. Your father used to shoot cats when their bladders got like that.” She pretended to aim a rifle. “Boom.” Then, to Zemke, “You got a gun.”

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“Put him to sleep, mom.”

“You know what they charge?”

Her cat, a brown tabby, as if he knew his fate was being weighed, raised his head from his plump cushion and meowed.

“You don't have to worry; Koric is out of town,” Lewis said the next time he and Zemke met.

“In or out. Doesn't bother me, Lewis.”

What he said was so obviously bravado Lewis didn't answer. He made circles on the table with the sweaty bottom of his beer bottle instead.

The friends were in the Lotus Club, a bar off the lobby of a downtown hotel.

After a few seconds Lewis said, “I just thought you'd like to do something besides be here.”

“What's wrong with here?”

Two women talked at the bar. One was the bartender, a thin blonde, and the other was her mannish friend. The friend had wandered in with a lumbering gait, bringing a cup of coffee through the arch-shaped entrance to the lobby. She had planted her bulk on a stool, her back to the room. She and the bartender carried on a subdued conversation in a light as pale as an aquarium's tank.

“Where did she get the coffee?” Lewis asked.

Zemke shrugged to say he didn't know. He had been thinking about Helen. “Koric's not even really married to her anymore. They're separated. They'll get divorced. He shouldn't even care who fucks her now.”

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Lewis tilted his bottle up and swallowed the last of his beer. He thumped the table with the empty before he spoke. "He shit in your jacket." His thump caught the bartender's attention. Lewis signaled for two more beers. "Ruin your jacket?" he asked Zemke.

"I put it in the wash; that ruined it."

"Too bad. You had that jacket—what? Ten years?"

The bartender arrived and set down their beers. She collected the empties and wiped the table. The two men sat silent until she'd made her way back to her friend.

"The thing is," Zemke said as soon as the bartender was where she couldn't hear, "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. If he came in here right now and said, 'You fucked my wife. Come on outside; we're going to settle this,' I could give as good as I got. We're talking fair fight here. We're not talking jumping someone in an alley."

"Everybody knows he fights dirty." Lewis avoided Zemke's eye.

"If he really did something dirty to me, I'd get my rifle. I'd shoot him. I wouldn't give a fuck."

"You wouldn't have to shoot him; you just have to let him know he can't fuck with you."

"He *can't* fuck with me,"

"Tell him."

Zemke had been studying the yellow, beer froth clinging to the side of his nearly empty glass. He raised his eyes. He caught Lewis gazing at him in a way that spoke of sympathy. Lewis had already said sympathetic things. He'd said everybody knew Koric fought dirty. Dirty meant kicking. Koric wore shoes with steel toes. They were made to protect the toes of men who worked with jackhammers or engine blocks. For Koric, though, the steel toes were weapons. He'd kicked and crushed the Filipino's throat. Any person with a man as mad as Koric for a foe

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would naturally be scared. Lewis's eyes communicated that unwelcome thought. Zemke frowned.

For work, Zemke cut meat in a grocery store, the same store he'd worked in since high school. He wore a white jacket and white cap and waited on customers from behind the meat counter's display case. He liked his job both for the camaraderie among the meat cutters—there were three and he was the youngest—and for the chance to banter with the housewives studying the steaks and chops in the case's stainless-steel trays. He rarely thought of his banter as flirtatious but that's almost always what it was. When Zemke was around a woman, jokes sprang more quickly to his lips. It was as if he made it his business to brighten their day. He was chatting that way with a customer named Coral Melkin, teasing her about her new, horn-rimmed glasses, when he lost track of the pleasantries he was offering. Helen and her kids had come into view.

Zemke's position at the meat case gave him a clear line of sight down two aisles. Helen appeared at the far end of the cereal aisle. Her children, arguing over Cheerios and Rice Krispies, slowed her progress. She wore a knee-length coat of electric blue, an unnatural color. Her hair looked greasy, and she kept a grip on her black purse as if she feared a thief might grab it.

Zemke returned his attention, now sobered, to Mrs. Melkin and wrapped the breast of chicken she had chosen. No customer after her needed attention. Zemke raked the display-case ice because stooping to do that let him spy unseen through the case's gleaming glass.

He saw Helen bark at her older daughter. The girl shrugged. Helen's look darkened. She and the children were heading his way. Zemke, almost ducking, scooted to the employees' bathroom. He was peeing in the stained urinal when Sol, his boss, came in. "You dodging that cutie out front? The one with the kiddies?" Sol asked.

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“I hardly know her, Sol.”

“Turn on your charm. You might get lucky.” His boss, waiting to use the urinal, shaped his pompadour in the mirror above the sink. He had spoken of a boy's world of swagger and privilege. Minus Koric, the world would have been Zemke's natural one. But there was no way to minus Koric. The Pole was as real as a rifle, and Zemke, when he took his place before the mirror to shape his hair, couldn't stop the shaking of his hands.

On the night before Halloween, prodding a steak on his two-burner stove, Zemke heard his phone ring. He guessed his mother would be calling to tell him what to bring on his next visit, but when he said hello no one answered. The dial tone didn't sound, so whoever had called hadn't hung up. Zemke stood with the phone to his ear and prodded his steak. He said hello another time and then another before he guessed a prankster might be on the other end. He had the phone poised over its cradle when he thought, *It's Koric*. He put the instrument to his ear again. As soon as he said, “Koric?” he heard the dial tone buzz. Whoever had called had hung up.

Steak grease spat in the black pan. Zemke let the bleeding slab of meat, with its sizzle and rapturous smell, command his attention. He plunked his Worcestershire sauce down on his table. He stirred baked beans from a can into the dented pan on his two-burner stove. Wind rattled garbage cans below. The clatter gave Zemke a feeling of burrowing in from a storm.

His phone rang a second time. He stiffened at the jangle, and, when he picked the phone up he barked, “Yeah,” not as a greeting so much as a way of acting tough.

The caller turned out to be a friend named Sanders, the man Zemke had won the Remington from in a poker game that spring. Sanders went through the usual courtesies of greeting and then asked if Zemke would sell the rifle back.

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Zemke at once said no.

"Fair price," Sanders said.

Zemke again said no.

He'd answered with that single syllable twice and his failure to go into detail must have left Sanders at a loss. A second went by when nothing was said, then Zemke offered an explanation, one he made up on the spot. "I'm going hunting."

Sanders let a second of silence signal doubt. "You got a license?"

"I know where to get one."

Zemke pictured himself in a sporting-goods store buying a license and shells

"Do you know where you'll hunt?" Sanders followed his question up with advice about his own hunting spots. Zemke listened as if he knew the places his friend spoke of. He recognized some of the names but he couldn't place them on his mental map.

His steak stopped sputtering. Its juices pooled and darkened. A film spread across the top of his baked beans. He kept saying, "Uh-huh," until Sanders ran out of recommendations. Sanders brought up the rifle again but only to say if Zemke changed his mind to give him a call.

After he'd hung up, Zemke ate with no pleasure. He eyed the Remington, propped against his couch. He had kept it in his only closet, a closet barely bigger than a cupboard, until the early darkness of the shorter days began to depress him. He had begun thinking about a wall-mount for it, and his thoughts were on brackets when the phone rang again.

He said hello.

He heard silence.

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He wanted to say, "Hey, asshole," because this time he had no doubt the caller was Koric. He did get the *Hey* out but not in the forceful way he wanted. His voice squeaked and before he could properly say *Asshole* the line went dead.

When Zemke told his mother he might go hunting she said she had room in her freezer for venison. Until then he hadn't thought about the practical result hunting might bring, but he liked the idea of being a provider. It let him cast himself in a more heroic role than meat cutter, or bar-hopper, or shooter of rats at the dump.

His grocery store butchered deer carcasses, a service to Boon's hunting population. That work let Zemke quiz his meat-case friends about their own hunting experiences, and later on, when he was retelling some of their stories to Lewis, Lewis suggested a Saturday hunt. They spent their evening, a bar evening, in enthusiastic planning and on the next Saturday morning, long before it was light, Lewis picked Zemke up in his Ranchero and together they drove to a gravel pit beyond the settled part of town. They smoked in the Ranchero's cab, watching a watery look come to the sky and predicting snow to each other. As soon as they had light enough, they climbed a logged-off hill. When they reached the line of trees, they paused for another smoke.

"We won't see nothing after ten," Lewis said.

Zemke asked about arrangements for meeting again.

"We'll meet at my car. I won't lock it."

Zemke watched Lewis grind out his cigarette and enter the woods. Zemke himself enjoyed a few more puffs, his gaze on the shrouded mountains across the gray Narrows. Everything he wore, from his long underwear to his wool jacket and wool pants, was winter-tested. He'd oiled his boots to guarantee water-tightness. His hat shed water. His jacket shed

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water. He wore mittens on the advice of one of his meat-cutting friends who had told him a mitten pulled off easier than a glove when he needed to free his hand for shooting.

Exploring the woods to find a spot to wait for deer, he reached a muskeg pond in a bowl-shaped clearing. From the edge of the clearing, he looked down on weeds and scum-clotted water. 'Good place,' he thought. He sat on the moss of a fallen log up-slope from the weedy water. Underbrush screened him. He wouldn't be seen, and, with luck, he'd have time to fire at a deer.

The sandwich he carried in his jacket pocket tempted him, but he told himself to save it for later. He opened and tilted his thermos to sip. With his free hand he dusted drops of wetness off his rifle, which rested on his lap.

He was screwing his red thermos cap back when he heard *Zemke* said in a soft voice. The speaker was Sanders. He had come so quietly Zemke didn't know he was there until he heard his name.

Zemke jumped. Sanders, the one-time owner of Zemke's rifle, said, "Sorry." He lifted himself over the log and settled against it, half standing and half sitting. In a voice barely louder than a whisper, he said, "Don't go back the way you came."

"Koric?" Zemke asked. He darted a look at Sanders. His friend nodded yes.

"He say anything?"

"Not to me."

Zemke ran his hand across his rifle's stock. To his friend he said, without looking up, "You know another way back?"

Sanders eyed the walls of greenery to his right and left, then he picked up a stick and cleared away snow to make a circle the size of a saucer. "This is where we're at," he said. He

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made another circle and said, "This is where you want to go." He started a meandering line that connected the two points. At each angle in the crooked line he cleared another palm-sized patch and described the landmark Zemke should look for—a splintered stump, a boulder bursting out of mossy earth, a bluff, or some other feature. "Where are you parked?" he asked when he had finished.

"Gravel pit. Lewis drove."

"If you don't show up, Lewis will get help."

Sanders spun his drawing stick away into the woods.

"You could come with me," Zemke told him.

"You got anything to eat?" Sanders asked. Zemke pulled out his sandwich. He tore it in half, and he and Sanders stood in companionable silence, each munching dry bread and cheese. After he had swallowed his last bite Sanders said he couldn't go with Zemke because he'd split off from his brother and had promised he'd meet up with him again. He said, "See you," and "Good luck," then he nodded goodbye and, with his rifle strapped to his shoulder, made his way back to the woods.

Zemke slumped down lower against the mossy log. He didn't move until the damp cold had penetrated his outer garments. When he felt the touch of ice, he rose and cast a cautious glance around the woods. He fished out a cigarette. His hand shook and the match wobbled. *Fuck it*, he thought, and once he had his Marlboro lit he stood as if in defiance of any marksman who might be lurking in the woods, smoking the cigarette down to a half-inch butt. When he'd ground that fragment out, he set off on what he hoped was the path Sanders had mapped out.

He stomped fallen branches to pieces and kicked the remnants aside. He dodged low branches and skirted tangles of brush. The effort had him sweating by the time he came to a

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splintered stump, the jagged remnant of a tree toppled by the wind. He hoped the stump was the one Sanders meant. A path angled off from it in sharp descent, and Zemke, his spirit lifted, slid and stumbled his way to the bottom. There, in a cul-de-sac of underbrush, the path dissolved.

From the woods came a rustle. Zemke visualized Koric. Seconds passed before he could remind himself the woods were full of rustling noises. It could have been a porcupine he heard.

Back at the splintered stump, a fifteen-minute climb, he drew on a cigarette for his reward. When he released smoke in a long stream he told himself he wasn't lost. He pushed back his sleeve. His watch said noon. He could spend another hour finding Sanders' trail. Another hour wouldn't hurt.

After he'd snubbed out his cigarette, he climbed on the splintered stump to sight which way to go. Downhill made no sense. He'd return to the snarl of brush. He told himself he'd missed a turn somewhere. He retraced his steps until the trail divided. He guessed which path to choose, but after only a few minutes he doubled back and followed the other. That trail eventually fell so sharply he had to grab at salmonberry bushes not to slip. He reached a stand of devil's club with its threatening needles, and struggled back up the slope he'd just descended. The trackless woods turned him one way, then another. Two hours passed before confusion made him stop. He cast glances here and there at the wall of trees. He knew he was lost and that he'd spend the night with bears and wolves. He'd need a fire. He still had the wax paper from his sandwich. He had matches. He could kindle twigs. The logic of everything he planned reassured him until he glanced up at hemlock limbs swaying in the wind. 'Nothing can be done about your plight,' the calm movement of the limbs seemed to say. Their slow paddling spoke of a world that didn't need Zemkes.

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Zemke felt a flooding of despair, but as his feelings sank a movement among the trees caught his eye. A figure bulled forward. Zemke recognized Koric and clutched his rifle tighter. Koric's glances left and right, Zemke guessed, meant the other man did not see him and was as lost as he.

In the second of deciding what to do, Zemke saw, above the wall of woods, hussars ride in sight in battle line. They were not the toy soldiers he had seen scattered at the dump. They sat splendid astride their horses in dashing uniforms, their short jackets knotted with gold braid, on their heads a busby or a shako made of fur. They brandished shining sabers. They pointed long lances and spurred their mounts with a hoorah, as if to charge undaunted into the blaze of enemy guns.

Those imaginary warriors vanished in a blink, like smoke. The woods stayed silent. Zemke could have shot a bullet into Koric's heart. He could have raised his rifle and by firing into the air let Koric know another human being, also a lost hunter, shared his perilous situation.

Zemke fired no shot. He gave no shout. He stayed alert and frozen with his rifle aimed.