

“Blizzardness”

Kane couldn't see. And it was pissing him off.

Usually, the snow descended in stilted patterns, pleasant. Two mornings ago, he remembered marveling over the slow fall outside his bedroom window, sipping on a coffee, assured in his ability to maneuver a part of nature. He had called Paul, and they'd agreed on a hike before real winter threatened. It was only October, after all. What fools they'd been. Real winter was waiting for them all along, hiding.

For the twentieth time, he removed his glasses to wipe off flakes. Sweat lined the lenses, further impeding his ability to see. Not that much was visible in the white wasteland he and Paul currently blundered across.

Stupidly, he'd skipped lunch, which spilled over into skipping dinner. His stomach bloated into knots of hunger and fear, and he couldn't figure which was worse.

"I'm so hungry, I could eat my elbows," Paul lamented, nearly tripping as his foot sank into a snow drift.

"You and me both," Kane chuckled.

Paul's country phrases always amused him, especially as they contrasted nicely with Kane's. They had grown up in different worlds, like the city and country mouse. If they hadn't shared the same class in ninth grade, they probably never would've been friends.

"What would you eat, Trash Can?" Paul wanted to know.

The name brought with it memories of jello mixed with meatloaf, and then milk. Sometimes pizza sauce. When he had gulped down pee, his legend as Trash Can was born. The dares had always been an easy way to make money, because no one thought such combinations edible. But Kane knew better.

"I dunno, ya got five bucks? I'll eat tree bark."

Paul chuckled, digging in his pockets. His held up empty hands. "Sorry, man."

A flash of onyx flitted between the trees. Kane shook his head and focused, but all he could see was white brilliance. He almost nudged Paul, but thought better of it.

They trudged on, with pins and needles spiking through Kane's limbs. He wondered how much longer until one of them admitted what they both knew. The path had disappeared hours ago. Neighbors in this corner of Georgia were few and not at all in between. Another thirty minutes, and the daylight sank, casting a grey haze over the once blindingly ethereal landscape.

Finally, Kane couldn't take the numbness anymore. He leaned against a tree, panting.

"What are we gonna do?"

Instead of answer, Paul stared at what Kane assumed was nothing. There was nothing for miles, just trees, rolling hills, and more trees. Stupidly, they had packed two trailmix bars, and those had been consumed a while back. Hunger still knotted up and down Kane's insides, and he knew Paul had to be just as weary as he was.

While still gazing ahead, Paul said, "Snow. The only time '8-10 inches' has been associated with something white."

Kane assessed his friend, trying to figure what had been said. When the joke struck him, he barked out a laugh, instantly regretting it for the freezing exposure it brought to his coarse throat.

"Seriously man, what are we gonna do?"

Paul was the planner. When he wanted to hang out, he'd add the event to his phone calendar weeks in advance. Kane usually made plans a few hours ahead, like the hike. He worried his friend would realize who was at fault for their predicament.

"We sleep." Paul set his backpack down.

The thought struck Kane as crazy. "Sleep in this?"

But Paul was already rifling through his pack. "We've got the sleeping bags, might as well use 'em. Plus, we don't wanna be going through the white in the dark."

At first, Kane heard, *white and the dark*, and couldn't help thinking that could be the name of their buddy sit-com. Then thoughts of juicy turkey bombarded him, and he was lost.

As they set up camp, images of moist piles of meat continued dancing through his head. Suddenly, like an answered prayer, Paul held up a small bag.

"Beef jerky?" Kane was sure he was delirious.

"It's a goddamn miracle!" Paul said, ripping open the bag to offer Kane half the contents.

They scarfed down the meager dinner, checking the bottom of their backpacks for anymore hidden snacks. But their luck had been spent on the beef jerky.

"Ah, well," Paul set aside his pack and laid down. "Gnite, bud."

Settling back with his hands laced behind his head, Kane mumbled, "Nite."

Then came the dreams.

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Well, Kane wasn't sure they were dreams at all. Especially because of Him.

Drifting off in the snow was harder said than done. Cold leaked through the sleeping bag, rendering his backside numb. Snow continually rained in swirling patterns. It was their erratic fall that kept him awake. They couldn't just fall straight, more like sideways.

Traces of moonlight spilled through the snow-laden branches. Shifting shadows rose and fell, adding to Kane's discordant mood. Not five feet away, Paul snored loudly. He had little trouble falling, or staying, asleep.

Even as branches snapped nearby, the wind picked up, and a red haze drew over the sky, Paul's snoring droned on. Part of the noise was Kane's chattering teeth, and he snapped his mouth shut with great effort. Still, something moved nearer, the near-silence amplifying their every step.

Kane was sure it was a squirrel. He squeezed his eyes shut, clutching the sleeping bag closer to his chest.

"Pssst."

Kane's eyes flew open.

At first, his vision refused to focus. Eventually, he made out a dark figure skulking over Paul.

"Hi-yo!" the figure whispered, voice quivering in multiple layers.

The face was indiscernible, but it definitely wasn't a squirrel.

Kane's mind froze. His mouth was unable to form words.

"If you're hungry, why not try the white meat?" Scant light shone from the sky, throwing a crimson glow over the stranger's face. He had black pools where his eyes should have been, and a mouth curved in a perpetual Joker-smile. In any other lighting but red, his skin would've been alabaster. He muscled body glistened under the red moon. Though the snow still fell, and it had to be twenty degrees, he wore not a stitch of clothing. Then he spoke again, revealing teeth filed down to sharp points. "You've thought about it by now."

With that, his head dipped down as he bit into Paul's leg. However, even his canines couldn't make it through a layer of jeans and two flannel pants.

"Who!" He wiped at his mouth, chuckling. "That's still gonna smart in the morning, you betcha."

"A dream, just a bad dream." Kane clamped his eyes shut, hoping he wasn't next on the dude's meal list.

"No such thing as a bad dream."

The words carried over the wind, close, yet far.

Kane forced one eye open, and only saw Paul, drool oozing from the side of his mouth.

~*~

The morning started off with blood.

Kane sat up, back creaking in all sorts of bad ways.

"Paul?"

Next to his friend's sleeping bag, a dark red patch stained the snow.

Scrambling awake now, Kane stood, nearly falling as blankets bunched about his legs.

"Paul!" Despite his better judgement, he yelled in the stark morning light.

If that man was still out there, yelling was a stupid choice. Then again, Kane hadn't earned the nickname Trash Can because he was smart.

Something stomped through the underbrush. Kane steeled himself for another meeting with the black-eyed baddie. Moments later, Paul emerged from behind a powder-laden bush.

He held a rag to his nose. "What's up, man?"

Kane's heartbeat slowed, and he tried in vain to steady his breathing. "Nothing. You okay?"

Paul nodded, carefully removing the rag. "Just woke up with a nosebleed. Happens when my nose dries out." As he moved closer, Kane noticed a limp.

"What about your leg?"

Paul knelt, grimacing. Before answering, he rolled up his sleeping gear.

"Weirdest thing. My leg feels like it got caught in a damn bear trap. Really smarts."

The phrasing, same as the stranger's, caught Kane in the chest. His breathing picked up.
"Can I see it?" he heard himself asking.

Paul looked him over like he'd asked him to strip. "Naw, it's no big deal. I can still walk and all."

Though, that proved to be an optimistic, if not a misleading outlook.

For the rest of the morning, Paul limped along, pain and sweat rippling across his face. Whenever Kane suggested they rest, Paul shook his head.

If they didn't find the road by nightfall, they would be sleeping in the open again.

Kane wished to avoid that at all costs. He feared a return of the stranger.

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Night found them anyway.

Paul's mobility had been on and off throughout the day, waning considerably as the temperature fell.

"Sorry. Promise I'll try harder tomorrow," Paul said, rubbing his leg with tears in his eyes.

"Dude, it's okay."

But they were beyond the realm of okay. They hadn't eaten all day, grudgingly chewing ice chunks as they trudged along.

"So hungry," Paul groaned.

They were snug in their sleeping bags, side by side at Kane's insistence.

"Just imagine the burgers we're gonna down tomorrow," Kane said.

The lie hung in the air. Paul sniffed, turning away from Kane.

He had the impulse to tell him to turn over, for them to stay together, to stay awake in vigil for Him. Yet, he remained silent, staring at Paul's ice-crusting coat.

As soon as Paul's snores began, branches snapped from nearby.

Kane promised himself that it was nothing, a trick of hunger. Even when the alabaster figure crept over Paul's sleeping form, he assured himself of the delusion.

"Good evening, sir!" The multi-layered tones dragged through Kane's ears

The stranger hovered in Kane's face, smiling without having to smile at all.

"Please, who are you?" Kane whimpered.

His answer whistled past razor teeth. "Just a fella who appreciates a good Paul-burger!"

Then, his mouth yawned open, catching hold of Paul's arm.

"Stop!" Kane could do nothing but watch.

The stranger had chomped through the clothing layers. Blood soaked Paul's blue coat, but he barely stirred.

Kane's vision swam. Before he lost consciousness, he heard:

"Where's some ketchup when ya need it?"

~*~

"Hey, I found a few berries."

No answer.

"Paul?"

Ever since waking up, his friend had been in a catatonic state. Well, he'd mumbled "Morning", and then nothing.

Kane had woken up, sleeping bag damp from sweat, vying to inspect Paul's wound. Yet, there seemed to be nothing wrong. And instead of a blue coat, Paul sported a red coat.

Dreams distort details.

Even as Kane sought to reassure himself, another voice caught on the wind,

There's no such thing as dreams.

The tones rippled in layers, and Kane shivered. He popped the few berries in his mouth, savoring his last meal.

The prospect of finding the road before they froze to death seemed less and less likely.

"Are you okay?" Kane waved a hand in front of Paul's face.

Paul stayed on the tree log, looking ahead.

"Is...your arm okay?"

That finally drew Paul's attention. As though his head were on a swivel, it rotated until he faced Kane. Two blank eyes assessed him.

"I'm not okay, Trash Can."

No more. Paul didn't speak again after that.

Kane chewed the frozen berries, worrying about his friend. He also worried about the failing light, which meant nightfall and sleeping bags. And Him.

Kane was certain Paul wouldn't survive the night, but he was less certain about his own lifespan.

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