

The Warm Reprieve

Daniel Goodman stood tall and lean against the horizon and scanned the gray and white hell where he would either live or die; everything depending on his reaching the line shack. Despite years in the saddle, his horse had thrown him--most likely spooked by the blizzard--and taken off in the direction of the ranch house and barn, some nine miles away.

There was no way to call for help; finding that shack was his only chance. He knew, from just sighting a marker he'd nailed to a tree some years back, that the tiny cabin sat a good two miles ahead on a path which was now invisible. Trying to calm himself, he pointed toward a calculated spot where he hoped to locate six enormously tall aspens from whence he could detect his obscured path. A tiny shudder of pride warmed him as he remembered that he'd stowed a compass for just such an emergency.

Preparedness, mental and physical, was his trademark. "Nothing could defeat the man who had it all worked out in his mind," his father had always said.

Onward Daniel pushed against the cutting wind, the below zero temperature, and the stinging pellets of snow. He could barely see, his chest heaved, and he repeatedly slipped on the icy ground.

With great joy he stumbled upon the aspens and checked due north, then tried to keep that as his heading. Traversing land in such fashion at such a time was not an easy task; you could veer off a half degree or so for just a hundred or so yards and never see your intended goal, then surely freeze. He proceeded especially slowly even when he was

pretty sure he was on a line which would prove correct, and the snow grew deeper and deeper with drifts reaching his thighs.

After nearly an hour and a half, well after dark, he sighted the structure. A flood of relief surged through Daniel giving him strength, yet he knew even in the shack he could succumb to the arctic air during an upcoming night such as this. Not quite yet, he thought.

He carefully chipped away at the ice that had completely seized the bear-proof latch he had installed a few years ago. Despite his pain and his intense shivering he tapped meticulously, knowing fully that each second counted, and he made each count with his accuracy and his careful strokes.

Finally, the latch popped open and he burst through the door. To his utter glee he realized all the wood he had piled inside the one room shanty still sat intact. Thank God the ranch owner, his boss, had not used the shack as a respite on a late autumn elk hunt. The fireplace stood, ready with the kindling he had prepped in August. Though he had a lighter, he went to a small drawer in a makeshift cabinet and pulled out one long match, then meticulously lit his fire.

Within several minutes he savored the blaze which warmed the tiny enclave. He checked the two canteens he'd filled just that afternoon in what flowing water hadn't hardened in the stream that divided the ranch. Both remained full so he took a couple of refreshing swigs and then replaced the cap slowly as he felt the chilled liquid slide down his dry throat. He also checked his coffee stash and beef jerky. Beyond tired, he hung his coat, Levis, hat, and scarf near the blaze and crawled onto a cot, snuggling into a sleeping

bag covered with army blankets. Never had he felt better, happier, warmer, or more secure.

And so went his life. Night after night, the same daydream, the same warm, accomplished feeling, and the welcome succumbing to sleep; it was his routine and what kept him going. For Daniel Goodman was down to his imagination. His world presented only worthlessness and despair, and only the one he created inside his brain had any remote value.

Some thirty-eight years ago Goodman had gone absent without leave from his army unit in basic training. It was a stupid decision, one he regretted almost instantly. Bewildered and terrified his first time away from home, he'd left with five other recalcitrant soldiers, four of whom he didn't even know. All were sick of the intensity of basic, the mental cruelty of the drill sergeants, and the fear of upcoming war.

On their first evening of freedom, they'd gotten drunk--senses-numbing drunk--and Daniel had become severely ill and eventually passed out. Lapsing in and out of his stupor, he realized the others continued to drink, and from what he could gather must have picked up a rather boisterous girl. He vowed to abandon his mates in the morning and report back to the fort, take his punishment, and be the best soldier he could be going forward.

When Daniel awoke at dawn to hushed voices, he remained still and caught the gist of their situation. They were in a house trailer, some kind of mobile home. Someone was droning on and Daniel picked up the heart-stopping news that the girl was dead. Voices soon raised and Daniel realized his comrades had each raped her. There followed

more hushed talking, and Daniel quickly surmised they were talking about removing their only witness--him.

When he heard footsteps he sat up, horrified that one of them might blast him over the head with something.

“What happened to the girl? I wouldn’t mind another turn.” he’d said, out of some dark instinct he hadn’t realized he possessed.

This question obviously took his mates aback. Somehow this new possibility--despite their hasty meeting in the next room, their hung-over confusion, and perhaps their reluctance to commit another murder--must have saved him.

“When did you get in there?” one asked.

“I thought right after you, or maybe Scanlon. Hell, I’m not sure. I don’t remember leaving the bed, but I woke up on the floor out in the living room. That’s okay with me, that broad was crazy, I may have even punched her.” He said, hoping he hadn’t overdone it.

This ploy was never questioned. They’d told him the girl--a comely sixteen year-old named Connie--had had way too much to drink and in the morning she’d either died of alcohol poisoning, or smothered in her blankets, or maybe drowned in her own puke. Daniel never saw her, never saw what was left of her bloodstained fingernails or her deeply bruised throat. He knew now was not the time, but he began plotting his escape when an opportunity presented itself. What then? Back to the base? Or directly to the police? He refused to dwell on it deeply for his nerves made him shake nearly uncontrollably.

At ten that morning they set out in an early fifties Oldsmobile. Daniel didn't know where the car came from and thought it best not to ask. Despite some mechanical troubles all went reasonably well for another day; they had two hearty meals in roadside restaurants and slept three to a bed at a motel in Carmi, Illinois. Then, seven hours into their second day with Windsor, Ontario, as their eventual goal, they were picked up by the Indiana State Police near South Bend. They spent nearly another day separated in the county jail where they were questioned for hours. Then, in a short span of days, they were extradited back to Missouri.

Within weeks, the trial came. "Satan's Six," as they were dubbed by the media, had been isolated from one another since their arrest. For a few days, Daniel stuck to the story they'd planned in the stolen car. Though it made little sense to do that now, he still feared greatly the wrath of his ill-chosen comrades. He lacked facts the others had, and this did him no favors.

For the system, the main break in the case occurred when, offered a deal, the angel-faced seventeen-year old amongst them, Mikey Miller, agreed to talk. He told everything, gave Daniel a fictional and damning role, but was quick to add that when his own turn came he was too nervous to do anything and retreated to the living room with the girl still in good health.

At trial, Miller's testimony and the other evidence inundated Daniel and the murderers like a tidal wave, and their defense seemed weak and contrived at best. Several times Daniel's words from that morning in the trailer, lifesavers then, came back to haunt him on the stand. The trial did not last long; Daniel thought that each day, though he was

not free, was still a day where he was not pronounced guilty or sentenced yet. He yearned for the trial to last and last.

When the guilty verdict came, a sense of loss the likes of which he never imagined overwhelmed Daniel. The feeling consumed him, and he could not help but compare it to eternal damnation. He felt low, like scum, not worthy of anything. At eighteen he was gone forever, and all the hopes of finding and loving a beautiful wife, of riding the open range on vacations, of raising children, of fishing, of being active in his church, of helping the poor, of breeding Border Collies, of a successful career as a commercial artist, of a quaint Wyoming mountain home, all suddenly slipped away. He felt the iron door on his life slam shut.

A life sentence--at first his thoughts were of physical survival. What would this day, today, be like? He muttered the first few mornings. What would seventy or eighty years inside this fortress of demented predators do to him?

Daniel Goodman lost all contact with his old world; his parents disowned him and never wrote, and beside one high school chum the same could be said of his friends. He had his mortifying moments of rape and submission in the early going. Then, as he sat in his cell reading a book, a hooded intruder suddenly rushed and stabbed him twelve times--because of his perceived crime he had become nothing more than a target of opportunity for many inmates.

Of his companions on that ill-fated flight, Mikey Miller got three years and was out in twenty months. Within the first year after the trial, his original friend from the AWOL/crime escapade committed suicide; two more of the bunch were murdered, and

one escaped and was never caught. Only one other remained in the prison and he had convincingly spread the rumor that Daniel was the real rapist and killer.

In time a guard convinced him to turn on a prison gang known as Siberian Death and provide information about several murders at the facility.

The protection he was afforded afterward--the protection given a snitch--had saved him. Nearly forty years agonizingly ticked by. Reading, exercising in his cell, writing letters to strangers, attempting novels in spiral notebooks, working some volunteer tasks like painting were his pastimes. He followed baseball and football and basketball, becoming an expert on baseball stats. He read the Bible and came to the conclusion that it was the message--the gist--not the debatable details that mattered.

“You’re as dead as dead can be,” one of the inmates on the other side of the chain link barrier between the main and the protection unit told him as recently as two weeks before. “A rotten snitch has no life. And should you ever get out? Boom! Dead, forget it. Even if it’s eighty years from now.”

The harassment never waned. There existed an empty time continuum that spawned a hopelessness to which he nearly succumbed hundreds of times. Yet somehow his life settled into a shaky groove of acceptance and tolerance and he grew into his imagination.

Each evening he yearned for lights out, though they were never all dimmed, and he enacted his great dream of the blizzard and his victory over it. It was always cold in his cell. So as he shuffled about oblivious to all else, the snow seemed possible, even real, as he trudged on to earn his warm reprieve in the line shack. Then, his rest came: peaceful, warm, cherished, and all he had.