

Deep in the Woods

Matt Rickert was cross-country skiing in a park in the northern part of the state, not far from the Canadian border, when he became lost. Though he had been athletic in his 20's, some 25 years before, now he was overweight and woefully out of shape. A long day of skiing had not been in his plans. Moreover, the day was becoming colder and a light snow, whipped by the wind, had started to fall. The park was extensive, with a complex network of trails through the pines, birches and poplars. It all looked the same.

When, tired and achy, Matt finally decided to head back to the parking lot, he had difficulty taking the same route in reverse. He kept thinking – or trying to think – that he was on course, but he was proceeding on fading hope, fueled by denial. Snow fell heavier. A brisk wind covered over his tracks.

Matt had become lost because of an incident with the founder of the company for which he worked, one Mr. Ramon. He had interviewed Mr. Ramon and spent two weeks writing a profile of him for the company newsletter. He thought it was the best piece of writing he had ever done. He showed it to his co-workers in the Communications Department, who were suitably impressed, and sent a copy to Mr. Ramon. He felt sure that he had captured the essence of the founder, and he only regretted that the copyright belonged to the company. Then, first thing that morning, Matt had received an e-mail from Mr.

Ramon lambasting him for the profile he had written. In a page-long, mean-spirited rant,

the old fellow had summoned sufficient creative fire to tell Matt in many ways how bad the profile was. In a word, he said it was awful and would never be published, anywhere.

Matt was thunderstruck and hurt. “Clearly,” he thought, “anything less than St Paul’s acclamations of the Lord would be an insult to the little bastard.” He kept referring to the old gentleman – a nice enough, but somewhat touchy old fellow – as a “narcissistic old fart.” Taking a notion to do something, anything, to get the rancor off his mind, he told his boss he was ill, went home, prepared to go cross-country skiing – an activity he did perhaps twice a winter – and headed for a park, some hundred miles north, he had never visited before. Fulminating all the way to the park, he set off skiing, still cursing the old man, going deep into the park without a thought for where he was in the network of trails. When he came to a choice of going one way or another on the trail, cursing Mr. Ramon, he took whichever way struck him. He was too angry to bother with niceties of direction.

But now all thought of Mr. Ramon was out of Matt’s mind. His thinking was more along the line of, “How do I get the hell out of this damn woods?” His feet were starting to sting and his hands, too, were cold. He pushed on, as hard as he could go.

For a time, Matt was able to keep his optimism alight. “This has got to be the right way,” he would tell himself. “Yes, now everything is starting to look familiar. That parking lot will be right around the bend in the trail. I’ll see it when I get there.” But around the bend was just another stretch of trail and another bend. When he rounded that bend and the next and the next, it was the same. The whole thing was so disheartening. Everything

looked the same – the pine trees; the trail; the snow; the somber, overcast sky – and it all seemed to be mocking his feeble efforts to get out of the woods.

Matt tried to warm his hands by making fists inside his gloves, but they only became cold right away when he gripped the poles again. His feet stung painfully. When he stopped moving, even for a few seconds, the cold settled over him, like a pall, invading his parka, creeping into his ski boots. He thought that the light of the hidden sun had dimmed, as the snow continued to fall and the cruel cold seemed to intensify.

Trying to keep calm, Matt determined to approach being lost as a mental challenge, in the same way he would tackle a problem at work. He studied his surroundings, memorizing details of the terrain. Once, he came to the conclusion that it would be best to turn back in the direction from which he had come, but he could not go far that way, and turned back again. He kept going, though he now was sure the other way was correct. It was all very frustrating. He recalled details from an article he had read about being lost in the wild. Nothing seemed useful. In fact, he was dismayed that he recalled so vividly the accounts of people who had become lost and perished, even though, in some cases, they were only a short distance into the woods. No matter how hard he tried, he always lighted on the same thought, “Where the hell am I?” It was like a bone stuck in his throat, a nagging irritant he could not rid himself of. At one point, he had the chilling thought that none of the surroundings cared about him. He might freeze to death and arouse not the least sympathetic note. He shook off the thought with a harsh epithet and pushed on.

With increasing difficulty, Matt clung to a desperate hope. At every turn, he would see only the trail stretching off through another expanse of pine trees flocked with snow and another turn far ahead.

Coming down a dip in the trail, Matt lost his balance and fell hard on his face. His swearing shook the cold air. He struggled to his feet and pushed on, not bothering to brush away the snow on his clothing. His thoughts became an angry muddle. He complained about the terrain, the cold, his bad luck, how cold his feet were and the unreasonableness of circumstances. “All a guy sets out to do is ski around a little and this happens,” he blubbered. His attempts to think clearly became shorter and more wretched.

Finally, Matt began to succumb to the first shades of desperation. Moving on seemed only marginally better than sitting down in the snow. He tried not to think, but in trying only gave more thought to his plight. What would become of him if he had to spend the night in the woods? At the very least, his feet would freeze. His progress was reduced to a slow shuffling, like the efforts of an old man. As he shuffled along, forlornly, with scarcely the faintest hope, he began to mutter, through his tears, “I don’t want to die out here.”

At this juncture, looking into the distance, Matt descried another skier. As the skier was distant – just a moving, small, black object – at first he thought it was a figment. He stopped, frozen, and blinked hard several times. It was still there! Clearly a skier, moving

slowly away from him. He began to shout. When he saw the other skier turn to look toward him, he rushed forward.

Finding remarkable energy, Matt came on hurriedly, though somewhat awkwardly. He kept looking up to see that the other skier was still there. When he saw that the skier was standing still, watching him come on, he was happy and relieved. Once, in his mad rush, he fell, but got up quickly and hurried on. Another time, he called out, "Don't worry. I'm almost there."

Puffing and panting, Matt came up to the other skier. "Boy..." he said, trying to catch his breath, "glad to see you ... out here... I've been ... skiing ... in circles..."

He saw it was a woman.

"Been a little lost ... actually," he said, trying to smile at her, taking deep breaths. "I've been skiing ... in circles all day. I was beginning to think ... I'd be stuck in this place through the night. Freezing my...head off. Luckily ... I saw you." He smiled at her. She regarded him with a placid expression. "Which way to the damn parking lot?" he asked.

"My name's Jeannie," she said.

"Hi, I'm Matt." He extended his hand to her. She took it and released it.

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She was short, round-faced, round-butted, of about his age. Her nose and cheeks were a dark red, her eyes were dark, too, and slightly apprehensive.

“You look cold,” she said.

“I have to get to the parking lot,” he said.

“So do I.”

“Where is it?”

“I’m not sure?”

“What? – Do you know where you’re going?”

“I think so.”

“You think... How far are we from the parking lot?”

“A long way. We’re in the northern part of the park. Apparently, you’ve been spending a lot of time skiing away from the park entrance. If you had kept going perhaps you would have ended up at the border to Canada. If you don’t have your passport, they might not let you in.”

“Right now I’m not interested in vacationing in Canada. I want to get back to the parking lot. Besides, I wouldn’t care if the Canadians put me in jail, as long as it’s warm.”

“You look cold,” she said. “We better move.” She slid off down the trail. He followed after her.

“Are you sure about the direction we’re heading?” Matt asked after a short distance.

“Reasonably.”

“Well, okay, I’ll rely on your reason because mine isn’t worth much right now.”

The snowing had stopped. Matt felt warmer, livelier, hopping a little from time to time to keep the feeling in his feet. They passed a stand of birches with leaves that shimmered like spangles in the breeze. The sun had come out.

“Did you say you were lost?” Matt asked.

“I don’t think I am.”

“So we’re not lost.”

“I’m not sure. I think we have to go this way. I don’t recognize anything, yet. But I think I will.”

“Have you skied in this park before?”

“A number of times.”

“Well, then, you know where we are.”

“I think we have to go this way.”

In silence, he continued to follow her for some time, sliding slowly along in her tracks. The trail led, in shade, through a stand of pines. When they came out into the sun, as there were two sets of tracks in this section of trail, he came up alongside her. The sun seemed to Matt almost warm.

“I had my purse stolen in this park two years ago,” Jeannie said, all of a sudden.

“You had your purse stolen... Two years ago...”

“Yes, I left it in the car and they broke the window and took it. I told the park ranger who called the police, but I never got my purse back. Now I hide it under the seat.”

“Good idea. You gotta be careful. The world’s full of jerks.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way.”

“I would. Take the founder of the company I work for. I’m a writer. I wrote a wonderful profile of the guy and what does he do...” He looked at her. She didn’t look back. “He sends me a mean-spirited message telling me I’m a lousy writer and the profile is crappy. Yup, the world’s full of jerks. Half the trouble of life is dodging the jerks, the other half is money. Money I can handle, dodging the jerks is more problematic. About once a month, I end up running face first into another jerk, like our founder, Mr. Ramon.”

“Perhaps he’s unhappy... Maybe he’s lonely...”

“Perhaps he’s a jerk... Maybe he’s a narcissistic old fart...”

“Don’t use that kind of language around me.”

“What? ... Look, I had just written a gracious tribute to the man. The guy’s just a precious old bastard.”

“I asked you not to talk that way around me.”

They skied past a frozen bog in silence.

“I’ve worked with some difficult people,” she said. “They have problems, too. Maybe your company’s founder was unhappy.”

He stared at her.

“I once worked for a man named Ernie,” she said. “He seemed so unhappy so much of the time. Oh, he’d get so mad, and shout, and everybody would run for cover... I’m sure he had serious issues in his life.”

“I know the type... I’d be inclined to tell Ernie what to do with his hissy-fits, and to do it to such an extent he’d have to hire a plumber to extract them.”

“How you talk,” she said sharply.

“And I had half a mind to tell that old fart Mr. Ramon the same thing.”

“Well, just maybe Mr. Ramon thought the writing you had done about him wasn’t the kind of thing he wanted.”

“He’s a precious, narcissistic, old fart.”

“If you continue to talk that way, I won’t ski with you, anymore.”

“What? We’re lost. It’s cold, the wind is blowing. If your directions are off, even a little, we are in for a very, very hard night.”

“You can go your way, and I’ll go mine.”

The wind whistled through a stand of pines. A field mouse scurried for cover.

“Maybe your company’s founder had been hurt.”

“Well, his wife did pass away a few years ago.”

“See.”

“Look, Jeannie, do you know where you’re going?”

“I think so.”

They skied on in silence for a time passing a small lake. The white, frozen expanse struck Matt forebodingly.

“Are you married, Jeannie?” he asked.

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She nodded.

“Why are you skiing alone?”

“My husband doesn’t ski,” she said, looking away into the woods.

“Kids?”

“A son. He’s eleven, but doesn’t like to ski, either. I take him out but he doesn’t even give it much of a try. ‘Let’s go home,’ he says, after five minutes. Nothing I can do after that. He just complains until we go.”

“He’ll grow and change,” Matt said. “Whatever he likes to do, you’ll always have a son around. Many years from now, he’ll be visiting you in the assisted living center. You won’t be able to get rid of him.”

“He’s more like his dad,” Jeannie said, smiling. “He likes cars, too.”

“Oh, your husband’s a gear-head.” He smiled at her.

“He buys cars, fixes them up and sells them. I don’t even like to drive on the freeway...”

He looked at her. She returned the look, then looked away, embarrassed

“I just don’t like it,” she said. “In the city, with the cars, you know, zooming in and out...”

“Let me see if I understand this... You go out cross-country skiing alone in the dead of winter, perhaps get lost, maybe have to spend the night in the woods – a highly problematic undertaking – but are afraid of driving on the freeway?”

She didn’t respond for some time.

“I won’t say you’re strange, Jeannie...”

She looked at him.

“I wish you’d tell me where we are,” he said. “We aren’t going to have to spend the night in the woods, are we?”

“I don’t think so.”

They passing through a stand of popular trees that tossed in the wind, throwing a dusting of snow on them.

“Do you like cars, too?” she asked.

“I love them. I have a new Mustang in the parking lot, which I’d like to drive again some time.”

He saw she was smiling broadly.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“I’m okay. How about you?”

“My feet...but as long as we keep moving... I’ll be okay.”

“Going this way on the trail,” she said, “I’m sure we’ll either come out on the road or at the parking lot. If we hit the road, it’ll just be a short hike to the lot.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Overhead, three osprey floated on the updrafts, making lazy circles, up and down.

Jeannie pointed them out. Matt seemed delighted.

A little further on, Jeannie suddenly said, “Oh, look, Matt! Deer!”

Eight deer, all doe, stood in the trail, feeding on the grass that poked out of the snow. As Matt and Jeannie came closer, three of the deer looked up and regarded them, steadily. Jeannie held out her arm, stopping Matt, saying, “Let’s watch.” The deer went back to feeding. After a few minutes, Jeannie said, “Let’s see how close we can get,” and they slid slowly forward. Each time the deer looked up, they stopped, till the deer again went back to feeding. Then – they were not 30 paces away – the largest doe suddenly bounded into the woods, and the others, like quail flushed from cover, bounded after. “There they go!” Matt yelled. “Too bad we didn’t have a camera,” Jeannie said. For a time, they stood basking in the delight, then Jeannie said, “We have to go on. It’s getting late.” “Yes,” Matt said, “we do want to get out of the woods before dark.”

By now, they skied along easily together. Matt had adjusted his strides to the length of hers, so as to keep readily alongside her. Looking about more, he thought he would never forget the pines flocked in snow and glistening in the sun.

“How are you handling this ordeal, Jeannie?”

“I’m fine... We’ll be fine...”

“Does that mean we’ll get out of here before nightfall?”

“Yes.”

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“Well, do keep in mind if we get stuck out here, I have to die first.”

She smiled at him. They continued to ski, mostly without talking, for almost an hour.

“Can you skate-ski, Jeannie?” Matt asked, breaking a long, blissful silence.

“Yes, of course. Watch.”

She took off down the trail, pushing her skies from side to side, poling hard. He came after her.

“My goodness,” he said, puffing as he came up alongside her, “you’re very good.”

“So are you.”

They went on together.

After a while, Jeannie said, “Matt...”

“What?”

“I just saw a vehicle.”

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“You saw a what? Where?”

“Just ahead. We’re not far from the road.”

In a short distance, they came out of the woods a few yards from the road. A car was passing just as they came in sight. “We made it, Jeannie!” Matt exclaimed. She looked at him, smiling delightedly, and nodded.

They took off their skies and headed toward the parking lot, a half mile away.

“Well, it was more than I’d bargained for,” Matt said. “Out for a little afternoon ski in the woods, and what happens – get lost, almost end up fighting for my life through the night – Damn!”

He looked at her. She seemed to be trying to hold herself off away from him, even as she walked beside him.

“Luckily, I met this lady,” he said.

She didn’t say anything or look at him all the way back to the lot.

“This is my vehicle,” she said, stopping behind a pickup. “My husband’s, I mean...”

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“Well, Jeannie...” he said, standing before her – she was looking up at him – shaking his head slightly. “You saved me.”

She smiled, eyes glistening. “It was nothing...”

“Yes, it was,” he said. “Thank you.” He touched her cheek, aflame, then, slowly, bend down and kissed the spot he had touched.

“Good-bye, Matt,” she said, turning away.

He went off to his car. But he waited outside till she had driven off, and then watched until she was out of sight over the horizon.