

Thin Ice

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The '78 Ford pickup comes to a rolling stop in the snow covered field entrance, sputtering as I turn off the ignition. The old girl has seen better days. I reach over and pick up my blaze orange hat from the empty passenger seat. Empty for the first time in ten years. He was just a boy then, barely twelve years old, out on his first hunt. He sat right there in that seat bouncing, his eyes alight with excitement. And I had felt a father's pride. Ten years by my side on this day, and now the seat is empty.

Steeling myself I climb down from the truck and scan the countryside as I strap on my tattered leather belt and holster. Forty or so yards of barren corn field follow the base of the valley before funneling into the sharp ravine that comes down from the bluff. Snow is gathering in furrows where the broken half stalks stand in crooked rows leading to the darkened edge of timber. I reach into the truck and pull the scarred and battered gun case from beneath the seat, opening the rusted clasps to reveal the ancient Smith & Wesson .357 mag. As I put rounds into the cylinder I can't help but remember.

It was spring, blinding sunlight reflected down off the thin layer of snow that still managed to cover the ground. We were in the pasture out back of the house, staring at a sheet of plywood propped up on two fence posts twenty yards down range.

"Just take your time with it, breathe easy son. Now when you're ready ease the hammer back and squeeze the trigger. Don't anticipate the kick. Hold her steady."

Six rounds later he had an inch grouping torn through the spray painted makeshift target.

"I think you killed him." I said. Looking over at him and smiling inwardly at the pride painted across his face. He had always been a quick learner, and I taught him everything I knew.

Snow is filling the back of the truck now and has blown over the Gore-Tex sheath holding my shotgun. I brush it off and pull out the gleaming 12 gauge Remington 1187, glossy oak finish meeting the cold gunmetal matte finish of the barrel and action; it was pretty, for sure. I've just never felt the need for a fancy semi-auto like this, but then again I didn't originally intend it for me. He had always liked playing with these sorts of things. But now, well things are different now.

I won't need the full five rounds, but I load them anyway, four in the mag, one in the chamber. It's always better to be prepared. I check my pockets one last time, license, tag, knife, rope, gun, gun. A couple hours yet before night sets in. Time to head in.

The bluffs and ravines can be dangerous enough in summer, but come winter they can be deadly. Steep slopes of uneven frozen ground covered with fallen trees and broken branches layered with a blanket of dead leaves slick with moisture all hidden underneath a heavy coat of ice and snow. And beyond that the occasional outcropping of rock or hole in the ground all enclosed by thick brush and thorny vines bent on pulling you in or tripping you up. There is little room for carelessness out here. I choose my footing carefully, watching for tracks and trying to tread lightly, all the while my eyes swiveling back and forth, searching for any sign of life I might scare up in front of me. A few squirrels here, a crow cawing in the distance, but no sign of the deer I'm after today.

Eventually I come upon a heavy trail, tracks going both ways so thick it's hard to distinguish them all, on the outskirts I can see deer tracks, the twin prongs behind the cloven foot easily mark it as a buck, not bad size, but not the one I'm looking for. I follow this as it winds down to the bottom of the ravine, where I cross the stream and begin my ascent up the other side. As I near the area of my tree stand I begin to see more signs of deer, here some droppings, there melted patches of snow where a few spent the night, and even a couple decent rubs, the bark flayed clean from one side of a massive Cottonwood. And finally, overlooking the crossroads of two heavy game trails I come upon my stand. The climb up the steel pegs screwed into the trunk is difficult with my bulky clothes on, but in this cold, I know it's worth it. As I sit myself down to wait on the setting sun, I look down to see the wide white scar running across the joint of my thumb.

I heard the phone ring while I was lying on my back in the dirt, looking up at the engine of the pickup, dirt and oil coating my hands and face. I let the answer machine get it, figuring it was just the neighbor down the road wanting to borrow something or other again. By the time I got the leak fixed and myself cleaned up I had forgotten the phone call, and was surprised to find a message on the machine. I hit the play button as I started cutting up potatoes for dinner. I nearly cut my thumb off when I heard his voice. Since he'd left for college phone calls were becoming more and more rare.

"Hey Dad, it's me. I figured I hadn't called in awhile and was just checking to see what's up. I might come home this weekend if you're not busy. Just give me a call when you have time."

I dropped the bloodied potato on the counter and washed out the cut under the sink, it was too deep to just wash and ignore. I grabbed a towel from the rack and put pressure on it before digging through the junk drawer for the superglue.

After getting my thumb closed back up I called him back.

"Sorry I missed your call earlier; I was out playing with the truck and couldn't get to the phone."

"Giving you trouble again?" He asked.

"No more than usual. So you're thinking about coming up this weekend? Everything alright?"

"Oh yeah everything's fine. I'm just missing the country, you know how these big cities are, rush rush rush all the time. I could use some time back home." He trailed off here, seeming almost timid. "Unless you're already busy, I don't want to get in the way."

"No I don't have anything going on, it'd be good to have some company back here, you can help me butcher the chickens, I know how much you enjoy that."

That weekend we sat in the basement over a fold-out table. Chickens on my left, blood still leaking from their severed necks. Garbage bags on my right, and him sitting across from me. I could tell something was on his mind. At times he would pause in his work and just stare at the table for minutes, finally looking up at me and then going back to work. I waited.

"Dad, can we talk?"

"Talk away, I'm listening." I said, glancing up at him from the chicken I had just placed on the table.

He looked up at me then, I could feel his eyes watching me. I continued with my work.

"I'm not really sure how to say it." He said at last, looking down and spinning the knife between his palms.

"If it's something hard to say the best way to do it is usually to just get it over with." I said

For a long time he just sat there, spinning that knife, watching the blade glint in the fluorescent lights. Then taking a deep breath he looked up at me.

"Dad, I'm gay."

CRACK

Instinctively I freeze, my eyes swiveling to the source of the sound, ears strained for any hint of movement. Then I see it, ghosting through the snowy underbrush, alert, but not alarmed. It's him. I've been watching him for some time. He's old, as far as deer go. He's got a body the size of a small horse, probably weighs close to two hundred fifty pounds. Typical wrack, but broad and thick, at least 16 points, plus the double drop tines. His coat has grown oddly dark over the years, and the standard ring of white around his muzzle is now a distinctive silver almost reaching his eyes.

I wait patiently for him to come into range, hardly daring to breathe as I slowly raise the gun to my shoulder. Fifteen more yards. Ten. Five. I grunt at him, and he stops broadside and looks in my direction. Perfect. I look down the barrel, his vitals in my sights, and begin to squeeze the trigger.

Suddenly another sharp crack rings out from a nearby tree as the freezing sap expands. The buck, my buck, whips his head up and takes off. I fire a shot off as he sprints through the trees away from me, cursing my luck. I jump down from the tree stand, half climbing, half falling, and head for the spot I shot at him.

Thankfully there, next to the trail, is a slimy mucous filled pile of blood and scattered hair. Beyond that is a semi-circle of red misted through the white snow. I hit him through the lung. He won't survive. As I start following the scattered trail of crimson I look back to the West and see the sun falling close to the skyline, bathing the woods in a haunting amber. I don't have much time.

"What do you mean you're gay? I didn't raise you queer and you aren't."

He just stared at me, with that pitiful look in his eyes.

I looked away and began tearing at the chicken I was plucking.

"Dad-" He began.

"Why?" I said, glaring at the chicken, ripping out tufts of feathers by the handful.

"Dad it's not a choice, it's just the way-"

"The hell it isn't!" I slammed the lifeless bird down on the table and looked up at him, tears were beginning to streak down his cheeks and he just stared at me, hurt and pleading in his eyes, his mother's eyes.

The blood trail is becoming sparse. It's taking longer and longer stretches to find drops. And the sun's starting to sink below the horizon. If I don't find him soon, I might not at all.

"I'm still the same person! I'm still your son." He said, his voice cracking.

"No son of mine is a homo. I don't know what they're teaching you at college, but this gay bullshit is over." Now I was tearing bits of skin off in my attempts to get the remaining feathers.

"This isn't going to change Dad. This is me. It's who I am." now he was standing there glaring at me, tears freely flowing down his cheeks, anger tingeing his voice. "I didn't think it would matter to you. I thought-" In a rage I grabbed my carving knife and stabbed it through the mangled bird into the table beneath, and froze, "Get out of my house."

"No Dad, I-"

"I said get the hell out of my house!" I jumped to my feet catching the table and flipping it over. Blood, guts, feathers, and pieces of butchered chicken spewing across the dirty concrete floor. "Now."

He closed his eyes, clearing them of tears for a moment, and then opened them looking at me, pain and anger twisting his face. "Fine." It was almost a whisper.

I can hear the river ahead, but it's too dark to see. The broken trail of blood looks like it winds its way toward the bank. I hope he didn't try and cross, he'd never make it with that hole through his lung. With luck he stopped here and bled out. I slow my pace, and watch my footing, careful to step over leaves and sticks in the path. Now the river is in sight, bubbling and frothing across its icy surface. The blood is getting thicker, he slowed down here. This is it. I'm walking slowly now, listening, watching, studying every shadow, every bush and thicket that he could be hiding in. He's close, I can feel it.

Suddenly a burst of movement from the shadows, and a dark shape blows past right in front of me. Startled I take a step back. My foot lands on something smooth and slippery and loses its grip, sliding out from under me. As I fall backward everything seems to slow down and I see him. He's lying in a pool of blood under a short pine tree next to the river, obscured in shadow and barely conscious. At the sudden sound and movement his head swings up, panic in his fading eyes. He lurches to his feet, stumbling out onto the narrow shelf of ice encircling the shoreline. He takes one frenzied look back at me as my back hits the snow covered ground.

On shaky legs he spins back to the river and leaps out, slipping on the wet ice and crashing through. He lets out a pitiful bleat as thrashes wildly through the ice logged water. I jump to my feet and start for the water's edge, not sure what I'm going to do. But there's nothing I can do. As he sinks under for the last time I realize I'm too late. He was so caught up in the moment and the fear, so busy running, he didn't realize where he was going. And now he's gone, lost to the depths.