

RIVER OF FEAR

BOOK ONE

ENCOUNTERS

By

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It was mid January, and a perfect Monday morning. The sun was shining so brightly that the freshly fallen snow was sparkling with tints of reds, yellows, and blues. The tracks of deer, coyotes, rabbits and squirrels could be seen winding through the trees and bushes everywhere. The air was so cold that it could freeze the inside of your nose every time you took a breath. The sky was a deep blue, and there were gentle gusts of wind that made the trees creak in protest as little puffs of snow fell from their branches. Rob Day and his old friend Rudy were taking their usual daybreak walk one mile down a snowmobile trail to a beaver pond, and little did he know how traumatically his life was about to change.

Rudy was an eleven-year old basset hound that Rob affectionately called Toot-man, or Toot, and Rudy answered to both of them. Toot loved the morning walks and was acting like a typical basset hound in the powdery snow. Every track was something new and exciting to investigate, and he went at it with all the enthusiasm of a six-month old puppy. Rob totally loved walking with his old friend and watching his canine antics. He was always amused when Rudy pulled his head out of the snow after checking a particularly interesting scent. His furry face would be covered with snow and his long ears, that he so often stepped on, would look like they had been dipped in flour. Rudy respected the fresh fallen snow and he didn't wander far away from the hard packed snowmobile trail. Being two dogs long and a half a dog high, he had learned his limitations long ago. Rob guessed that at Rudy's ripe old age, unless the scent was seriously enticing, he wasn't about to do the dog stroke through soft snow.

The snowmobile trail they were walking down was actually an old logging road, and all the locals referred to it as the Harris Pasture Road. The road winds its way along the base of East Kennebago Mountain for a mile and a half before it begins a gentle rise to a clearing that overlooks Flagstaff Lake. East Kennebago Mountain is in the Longfellow Mountain Range that stretches from South to North along Maine's western border. Rob's mind began to drift as he admired the spectacular view of the early morning sun reflecting off the snow blanketing the southeastern slope of East Kennebago Mountain. He was able to come up to camp just about anytime he and Eileen felt the desire, and thanked God he had chosen a career that allowed him to function wherever there was a phone and computer.

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Rob spent four years in the Air Force, and during that time he learned that working for a large corporation, or even a small company for that matter, wasn't what he wanted out of life. He didn't like the idea of building or bettering a business for someone else without just rewards. Nor did he like the potential of ending up in a dead end position. Being an entrepreneur was the only option that gave him an opportunity to fulfill his dreams, but even that had defined parameters.

He had diligently explored many business opportunities, and it was several years before he found a niche that gave him everything he was looking for, and it came quite by accident. During a luncheon meeting with a business associate, the discussion drifted to one of his competitors in

a neighboring town. The man was about to lose everything he had worked for over the past fifteen years. His business had grown in leaps and bounds during the first seven, and it was still expanding, but at this point in time his profit margin was shrinking, and he couldn't find a key to turning it around. That discussion sparked an idea, and Rob wasted no time making contact with the businessman. He complimented him on the phenomenal growth of his company, and during the conversation asked him if he would be willing to discuss his formula for success over lunch.

That luncheon meeting launched a business that fulfilled everything Rob was hoping for, and over the next ten years he developed a reputation as being one of the Northeast's most successful turnaround consultants. He worked from his home in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, and also had an office at his camp, which allowed him the freedom to enjoy his vacation home whenever the spirit so moved him.

His relaxed mood came to a sudden halt when he and Rudy crested a hill overlooking a long deserted beaver pond. Rob glanced down at it to see if any wild life was in the vicinity, and he stopped short in his tracks. Something was taking shape over the center of the pond, and within moments a sphere of shimmering air materialized. It was about twenty feet in diameter and approximately twenty feet above the surface. The moment that it appeared, the forest turned stone quiet. The sounds of chirping birds, woodpeckers pecking on trees, crows cawing in the distance, and the chattering squirrels all stopped at once. It was as if someone had pulled the plug on Mother Nature's sound system. The sphere's shimmering surface reminded Rob of heat radiating off a tar road in the distance on a hot summer day. He was puzzling about it when he heard a static hissing noise that reminded him of the sound a TV makes when the station goes off the air. Then as though someone was turning up the volume it began to get louder, and as the decibels increased it seemed like the sphere grew in size. Just when Rob was getting ready to cover his ears, there was a noise that sounded like a drawn out *PHIIIIIP* ... and in the blink of an eye the apparition was gone.

Silence loomed throughout the forest as though everything had been suspended in time, and as abruptly as it had ceased, Mother Nature's symphony returned. When Rob looked at the beaver pond he expected to see the heat-like waves hovering over the center again, but this time everything appeared to be perfectly normal. He looked down at Rudy and saw that his buddy was shaking, and that was highly unusual. Rob felt a chill pass through his body and knew that it wasn't the cold that had caused it. He learned long ago that chills and his sixth sense were closely related. He reached down to scratch Rudy behind the ears, and then patted him on the side, which appeared to comfort him, but Rob couldn't shake his own uneasy feeling. He had spent a lot of time in the Maine forests and felt very much at home in them. He had a deep respect and a great love of the woods, and he was at peace whenever there. He never felt as uncomfortable as he did now.

He straightened up and said to Rudy, "Toot-man, what d' ya think that was all about?" He stood looking at his furry friend like he actually thought he'd get an answer. Rudy raised his ears, cocked his head to the right and gave Rob a quizzical look that could only be interpreted to say, "You're asking me?"

"Come on, Toot! Let's mosey on down to the pond and see if we can find something that'll shed some light on what we just saw." Rudy took a couple of unsure steps, and then paused long enough to lift his head to check the air around him. Apparently everything must have passed the sniff test because he began to follow Rob down the trail. Rob's senses were in high gear as they walked toward the beaver pond, and he tried to look everywhere at once. They were about fifty feet from the edge when a tree branch snapped. Rudy's ears perked up and he appeared to be somewhat skittish when he stopped to whiff the air all around him. Rob stopped too. His nervous system was electrified, and before taking another step he scanned the tree line where the sound had emanated from. But other than the snow laden pine trees bordering the swampy meadow at the western edge of the pond, nothing else caught his eye.

Rob continued walking down the snowmobile trail toward a bridge that spanned the east edge of the beaver pond. When he was about 20 feet away he could see animal tracks coming from the woods at the south end of the pond. They went about 75 feet out, and from where he was standing they appeared to end without a logical reason. He was studying them when Rudy came up alongside and nuzzled his leg. "Whatcha up to, Toot?" Rudy looked up at Rob with his basset hound happy face, gave a soft bark and started down the trail toward the bridge. Rob followed, unconsciously walking in Rudy's paw prints as he continued to look at the tracks out on the pond. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn't see his furry friend waiting for him at the bridge, and almost stepped on him. Rudy was old, wise and anything but bashful. He wasn't about to move and gave a sharp bark to get Rob's attention.

Rob stopped as soon as Rudy let out his sharp yip, but he didn't take his eyes off the tracks that he'd been fixating on. Talking aloud to himself, he said, "I can't see any tracks going back into the woods, and not only that, I can't see anything that indicates the animal turned around. Could it be the critter walked backwards in its own tracks?" Rob was about to say something else and stopped. He took a look around to make sure no one was close enough to hear him talking to himself, which is something his wife did a lot, and he never missed an opportunity to rib her about it. Looking down at his furry friend he said, "I'll tell you what, Tootman, if that animal walked backwards in his own tracks, I'll grill you a steak tonight!"

"Come on, Toot! Let's take a walk out there." Rudy was less than anxious to venture into the deep snow, and after a couple of steps Rob thought better of it too. "Toot, this ain't a good idea. Let's go back to camp, get the snowshoes and something to eat. This can wait for a bit."

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The walk back to camp seemed to happen in an instant. Rob was so deep in thought about the goings-on at the beaver pond that he didn't remember any part of it, nor did he realize that Rudy wasn't with him. He called out to him a few times, and when he didn't show up right away, Rob went into the camp. He wasn't a bit concerned about Rudy's absence since it wasn't unusual for him to find an interesting scent and spend some time checking it out.

When he stepped inside a mouthwatering smell of freshly brewed coffee and frying bacon wafted across his frosty nose. "Mmmmm, mmm! Eileen, that sure smells good, and man am I hungry!" Turning to look at him she said, "Well, while I'm finishing up the eggs and bacon why don't you set the table and pour the coffee?"

Rob muttered under his breath, "O.K. I'll play your silly little game. Why don't I!"

Either she didn't hear him or she chose to play *his* game and ignore him, because the usual exchange of words stayed put. Eileen is Rob's Gal Friday. Even while raising their two children, she was the backbone of the inner workings of his office. Unlike all their friends, they started their family right away, and there was a well thought-out reason for that. They wanted to have their children while they were young, and hoped their children would follow suit. They wanted the age gap between them and their grandchildren to be as small as possible, giving them the opportunity to enjoy them even more.

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Rob was setting the table and pouring the coffee while Garth Brooks sang about friends in lowly places, which Eileen said he really related to. He liked almost everybody that he met, and had friends and acquaintances from all walks of life. Some she approved of, some she tolerated, and some she'd have nothing to do with. While he was setting the table he told Eileen about the tracks that he saw on the beaver pond. "When we're done eating, I'm going to get my snowshoes and take the Skidoo back to the pond to check them out. I've *got* to satisfy my curiosity."

"Well don't take too long. Thad is going to be here at 11:00 AM for our trailside cookout, and he's always very punctual."

"Oh yeah, that's right! I'll make sure I'm back in plenty of time."

Just as he finished his sentence, Rudy made it known that he was at the front door, ready to come in. Rob walked over to the door, and as soon as he had it open enough for Rudy to squeeze through, he bounded in, making a beeline to his food dish. Rob got a smile on his face and said, "We don't have to guess if he smelled the bacon while he was doing his I wanna come in routine at the door."

Rudy gave his dish a brief sniff, and then turned his attention to Eileen, imparting to her his best sad basset hound look that usually got immediate results, but this time it wasn't the results that he was looking for. She yelled at him to go lie down, and as if he could really understand, she told him that his turn would come. While he was dejectedly walking over to his bed by the fireplace, and Rob was pouring his second cup of coffee, the phone rang. Eileen answered it and told Rob that it was Thad. He took the phone from her and said "Thad, mind if I call you back? Eileen's just putting breakfast on the table."

"Don't have to ... just reminding you that we're going to eat out on the trail today, or did you forget?"

"No sir! I wouldn't forget that for a flatlander minute." According to Thad, a flatlander minute was about as long as a mountain-man's memory, and Rob didn't know if that was good or bad, so he never asked. "I've been looking forward to it for over a week now!"

He could hear Thad's voice brighten as he said, "All right, see you at 11:00 A.M"

"Hey, Thad, hold on a sec. You're coming here, right?"

"Yup."

"All right, see you then."

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When breakfast was finished, Rob grabbed his snowshoes from the basement and went out to the shed to warm up his Skidoo Formula Deluxe. The snowmobile looked just like the day it came out of the showroom. He not only believed in keeping the sled looking good, he followed a strict preventative maintenance program. Even though it was still fifteen degrees below zero, it only took three pumps on the primer and one turn of the key to bring the engine to life. Rob heard Rudy's barking over the sound of the exhaust and knew exactly what that meant. Rudy wanted to go for a ride. He always looked sorrowful whenever he saw Eileen and Rob getting ready to go for a ride on their sleds. He knew from experience that they'd be gone for the day. To help take the sting out of his disappointment, Rob had gotten into the habit of giving Rudy a ride just before they left. Eileen always told their friends that it was more about Rob's feelings of guilt than anything else.

He went back into the camp and let Rudy out, and true to form, he made a beeline to the sled. Whenever Rob started the snowmobiles after they had been sitting overnight, and it was a windless day, a cloud of exhaust fumes would linger around the sleds until they were fully warmed up. Either because he was overly anxious or hardheaded, Rudy never learned his lesson and invariably ran straight into the cloud of fumes. As soon as he'd get a whiff he'd bury his nose into the snow, rubbing it this way and that to eliminate what had to be a very irritating sensation.

While the snowmobile was warming up, Rob lashed his snowshoes onto the back of the sled, along with a hatchet and small hand saw for good measure. By the time everything was tightly secured to the rack, the engine had warmed up enough to stop puffing plumes of oil-laden, grayish-white smoke. Before leaning over to pick up Rudy and put him on his lap, he gave the throttle a few quick bursts to clear any oil from the plugs. Rudy knew Rob's routine like he knew the inside of his food dish, and as soon as he heard him clear the engine he stood up and placed his paws on Rob's leg. He wasn't about to let him leave without him. Leaning over, he put his hand under Rudy's rump, lifted him onto his lap and then looked over at the living room picture window. He always waved good-bye to Eileen if she was watching, but this time she was nowhere to be seen. "OK, Toot-man, we're ready to roll."

The moment that they turned onto the Harris Pasture Road, Rob squeezed the thumb throttle and didn't ease off of it until they were doing forty miles an hour. Rudy's ears were flying out from his head like limp wings, and the powdery snow spraying out from the sides of his machine created such a huge cloud that everything behind them was left in a total whiteout. The walk to the beaver pond had taken them almost twenty minutes, but the ride took them less than four.

Rob stopped his Formula on the bridge by the beaver pond and let it idle for a minute while he looked the area over. It did not appear that anything had changed since he left.

When he shut off the machine Rudy struggled to get off his lap. The scene, less than graceful, was almost laughable. When he finally managed to slide off of Rob's lap his body twisted back and forth like a fish out of water the whole distance to the snow. Three shakes from head to tail and he was off at a trot up the snowmobile track they had just made. While getting the snowshoes off the back of his sled Rob momentarily wondered why Rudy had been in such a rush. But then something changed as he strapped them on, and he felt the dead silence. No sound came from the breeze as it worked tree branches back and forth. Nor could he hear the plane above, or the musical sound of the birds calling out to each other. There were no sounds at all. The dead silence made him feel like he was in a vacuum, but the warning sign didn't sink in. The tracks on the pond had his undivided attention.

He yelled out for Rudy to come, and started down the bank to the beaver pond. When he was about 25 feet out onto it, he glanced over his shoulder to see where Tootman was, and almost lost his footing at the same time Toot started down the bank to the pond. The tracks that Rob wanted to investigate were about 150 feet from where he left the snowmobile, and the closer he got to them, the more he thought they looked like stick holes in the snow. But an up-close careful examination revealed that they belonged to a large deer. He also saw where its belly had rubbed the snow between the tracks. He followed them back to where they emerged from the pine trees and saw a well used deer run just inside the perimeter. He didn't find anything unusual and slowly retraced his steps back along the holes in the snow, closely examining each one along the way. He was hoping to find anything that could give him a hint the deer had skillfully walked backwards in its own tracks. He already knew that was highly improbable, but he had to make sure. When he reached the spot where the tracks ended he was totally convinced that all of them were made in a forward motion.

He studied the surrounding area for the better part of 15 minutes, and everywhere he looked there was nothing but unspoiled snow, with one exception. About six feet to the left at the 11:00 o'clock position, he spotted something that looked like a round depression. It was about two inches deep and at least a foot and a half in diameter. Scratching the back of his head, he muttered, "This is beyond me," and headed back toward his snowmobile. It suddenly occurred to him that Rudy wasn't with him and he called for him to "come" several times. He began to wonder where in the heck he had gotten off to, but he was sure it wouldn't be very far.

When he got back to the bridge he took off the snowshoes, tied them back on the sled, and then sat sidesaddle facing the pond while he waited for Rudy. He was just about to call out to him again when he glanced to his left and caught sight of Toot running down the road, and he kept to the middle of Rob's snowmobile track the whole time. "I don't know how you got up there, Toot, but I'm glad you're back." Then he thought for a couple of seconds, gave Rudy a questioning look and said, "Where the heck did you get off to?"

He was about to pick Rudy up and put him on his lap when he heard the static-type hissing noise again. He looked down at Toot and watched as the hair on his back and neck stood straight up. He glanced across the beaver pond to where he had just been, and felt a chill shoot up and down his back as his eyes settled on the circle of shimmering air. Only this time it appeared to be pulsating. Then he noticed a hawk making lazy circles in the sky about 100 feet off to the left of the sphere. It must have spotted a mouse or some other choice tidbit because it suddenly slowed its forward motion and started making very tight circles. Rob had seen this behavior many times

and made the assumption that it was trying to zero in on whatever movement below had caught its attention.

The static-type hissing noise ended as suddenly as it started, which prompted Rob to look back at the circular wavering air. It was no longer pulsating. It was just hovering in one position, and then unlike the last time when it made its noisy exit, it simply faded from view. Rob looked back at the hawk to see if it was still nearby. He found the bird of prey making its lazy circles once again, and they were getting closer and closer to the perimeter of the beaver pond.

He started the Formula and looked over his left shoulder at the pond. Everything appeared to be normal. Just as he turned his head to start across the bridge, he saw the circle of distorted air reappear out of the corner of his eye, and when he turned to look directly at it, he noticed that it was smaller, maybe about ten feet in diameter. The hawk, now only 20 feet away, appeared to be wobbling its wings up and down, similar to the way a pilot moves his wings to say good-bye after performing in an air show. Suddenly the hawk looked like it was trying to fly backwards, and then let out a screech as it shot across the 20 feet and into the circle of shimmering air. It reminded Rob of a piece of paper being sucked into a very powerful vacuum cleaner. He heard that PHIIIP sound again as the hawk hit the surface. His eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped when the hawk and the circle of air simultaneously disappeared.

Rob was frozen in the same position, and eyes and mouth were still wide open. He did not believe what he had just seen, and was having trouble coming to grips with the whirlwind in his mind. Then he felt Rudy shaking and that jarred him out of his paralysis. He squeezed the throttle to head back to camp, and went up the trail about 250 feet to a large area where he could turn around without using reverse. Backing up in this deep soft snow could mean a walk instead of a ride back to camp.

When Rob reached the bridge by the beaver pond, he slowed down to a crawl so he could look the whole area over. Then he decided to stop and shut his engine down. His nerves were on end, but he wanted to see if anything else would happen. After 20 minutes passed, the only noises that he heard were the chirping of birds and the occasional sound of snow falling off a branch. Rudy started to fidget and when Rob looked at his watch he saw that it was 10:15. He gave Rudy a couple of pats on the head and said, "We'd better get back to camp, pal."

While heading up the trail to camp, Rob recalled the first time that he had seen a strange circular object. He and Eileen were dating at the time, and had gone to their favorite passion pit in Roosevelt Forest on a hot and humid summer evening. They had been parked for over thirty minutes with the windows open, and that was very unusual. The area in which they were parked bordered a large swamp, and in warm weather hordes of mosquitoes would swarm through the windows in just minutes. Another characteristic was the loud peeping and croaking of hundreds of frogs that were in search of a mate. But there were no sounds at all this night. Both of them remarked about how quiet it was and the fact that there were no mosquitoes. Then Rob looked out his side window. He saw a light about 40 feet away that was about the size of a large beach ball. The light, which appeared more like a glow than a light, was steadily pulsing from a very dim light to a brighter dim light. He could not believe his eyes and thought that he was probably seeing things. He turned away from the ball of light several times, but each time that he looked back the pulsating light was still there. Finally, Eileen asked him what he was so preoccupied with, and he clearly remembered her comment when she looked over his shoulder to confirm that he wasn't hallucinating. It was simple and to the point, "I think that we should leave."

He was in the mood for more time in the passion pit, and had no desire to leave. He was convinced if they stayed that he had a real good chance of getting lucky that night, but then again he always had that feeling when they were there. Somehow the lucky part never materialized, but he did develop a very good understanding of what the term "Lover's Nuts" meant.

In the past, while camping he had seen phosphorous glow on rotting logs during the night, but this light was different. His curiosity got the best of him and he got out of the car to take a

closer look. He wanted to know what was causing it. As he walked toward the light he kept wondering what kind of phosphorus could create this type of pulsation. His thought process came to a screeching halt as a bolt of fear shot through him. He saw three round lights about the size of a quarter emerge from the pulsating light. They were in a perfect triangular formation that was about the size of a pool table rack, and as they started moving toward him the urge to pee in his pants became overwhelming. He stopped in mid step, freezing in his tracks, and stared at the unbelievable scene unfolding before his eyes. Eileen had slid across the front seat to look out the driver's side window. She saw Rob standing in mid-step and wondered why. She looked past him and saw the three small circles of light moving across the ground in his direction. As soon as her mind registered the situation in front of her, she let out a blood-curdling scream, which was all the catalyst Rob needed to break his paralytic state of mind. His survival instincts promptly took over as he twisted around and bolted to the car like the devil himself was after him.

The dirt road going into Roosevelt Forest was a maze of boulders jutting up here and there, and Rob always had to carefully pick his way up the road. After he turned the ignition key and the engine roared to life, he didn't bother to negotiate the humps and bumps on the way out. Sparks flew every which way as he left his entire exhaust system behind.

The ride to Eileen's house would have been quiet if it weren't for the blaring noise of the exhaust from his 59 Ford Fairlane 500 Retractable Hardtop Convertible. The road was very dark, and they hardly ever saw any cars on it at this time of night. Suddenly the sphere of pulsating light appeared right in front of them, electrifying their nervous systems way beyond anything they had ever known, and Eileen let out another blood-curdling scream.

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Rob was still deep in thought about the ride from Roosevelt Forest when he found himself pulling into his driveway, and he was surprised that for the second time that day, he didn't remember the trip back to camp. He parked his sled next to Eileen's and stood his snowshoes up in the snow next to the propane tank. When he walked into camp his mind was completely focused on the events at the beaver pond. He plopped into his chair, totally unaware of his surroundings, and almost jumped out of his skin when the phone rang. He finally noticed that Eileen wasn't anywhere around, and reached over to answer it. He thought that it was his friend Thad calling again, and said in his normal jovial way, "Top of the morning!" But as the fickle finger of fate may have it, the person calling was a stranger and didn't quite know how to respond to Rob's unconventional way of answering the phone. After a few moments of hesitation, a female voice that was unfamiliar to him asked if Mrs. Day was at home. In an attempt to hide his embarrassment Rob enthusiastically answered, "Sure, hold on a sec."

Eileen picked up the phone as Rob headed down into the basement to stoke the wood furnace, which he had dubbed "The Monster!" When it's really cold, like -25° F to -50° F, he loaded it with three two-foot logs, nine to ten inches each in diameter. That single load of logs would maintain the camp at a comfortable 70° F for ten hours. He had learned the hard way that the logs need to be significantly smaller when the temperature's above 0° F, otherwise the camp would turn into what Thad calls 'tee-shirt weather' real quick!

When he came back upstairs Eileen was still on the phone, so he heated his coffee cup with hot water and poured his third helping for the day. Heating the cup with hot water was a cold weather trick that he learned from Jack King, an old hunting buddy that knew a lot about keeping his coffee warm, but seemed to lack a ton of knowledge in personal hygiene.

About ten years back, Rob and Jack had gone on a Mule deer hunting trip in Utah with two of their friends, Josh Randall and Phil Bennett. A local rancher brought them to a remote area in his Ford Bronco, gave them the nickel tour of the immediate camp site to familiarize them with the conveniences, which consisted of a ten by twenty one room cabin with three double bunk beds, a table with two benches, three oil lanterns, a sink, wood furnace and wood stove, and a three-holer outhouse which was about fifty feet from the cabin. The minute the nickel tour was

over the rancher left them, and they were on their own for the next seven days. Early in the morning on the fifth day, Josh brought down an eight pointer that dressed out at 265 pounds. He and Phil were not really experienced hunters like Rob and Jack, and when Josh yelled for help, Jack was the first to arrive. He found Josh standing there with his foot on the big buck, and he wore a huge toothy victory grin that seemed to cover his entire face. Jack asked him what he was waiting for, which brought a blank stare from Josh.

“What d’ya mean?”

Jack responded, “You can’t just leave a deer like that, you have to dress it out, so get to dressin’.”

“I ain’t never dressed no deer before. You’re the great white hunter, how about some help?” Jack pulled his buck knife from a leather sheath attached to his seriously worn belt. Sometimes he’d be asked when he was going to buy a new belt, and his standard answer was, “This one’s barely broken in.”

He made a few skillful cuts that would have impressed a surgeon, stepped back and said, “The rest is yours.” For a moment Josh looked like he was going to lose his breakfast, then set his jaw and went to work. He knew that if he didn’t, the never-ending ribbing back at camp would be unbearable.

That night it was Jack’s turn to cook and he pulled out his trusty buck knife to cut apart the chicken that he was getting ready to prepare. Josh happened to look over and nonchalantly said, “Hey, Jack, did you wash that knife?”

“Nope!”

Josh’s face paled like it did that morning when Jack went to work on his deer and said, “What d’ya mean, nope?! Isn’t that the knife that you used on my deer this mornin’?”

“Yeah, what of it?”

Josh muttered some remark that no one could hear, and Jack just continued in a conversational tone, “You think that’s somethin’? I’ve been here five days, taken at least that many dumps and ain’t washed my hands yet!”

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Rob’s mind journey came to a screeching halt when he heard Eileen yell at the top of her lungs “Oh screw you!” – which was followed by a loud crash as the handset was slammed into the cradle.

“Wow! What was that all about?”

“It’s getting so I can’t stand to talk with phone solicitors!”

“Why, what’s wrong?”

“They just won’t accept ‘no’ for an answer. The girl that just called was selling magazine subscriptions. I was very polite and said; thank you for the call, but I’m not interested.”

“I hate to tell you, Eileen, but that’s not what it sounded like to me!”

“Well you didn’t let me finish. This phone solicitor just wouldn’t stop. She kept saying, ‘let me just confirm your address’, and I kept saying, ‘I’m not interested.’ Finally I did explode and hung up on her.”

“Hung up on her! I’ve never heard you like *that* before.” She gave him one of her ‘that’s enough’ looks, which quickly ended the discussion.

Just at that moment, and only for that moment he was tempted to tell her about the phenomenon at the beaver pond, but he decided to keep it to himself. She and Rob had experienced several unexplainable events over the years, which usually happened when they were together. The only witness he had to this event was Rudy, and Rudy wasn’t talking, so Rob figured he’d better not either.

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With his fourth steaming cup of coffee in hand he reached up to get Eileen's snowmobile boots from their convenient drying place on the overhead support beam between the kitchen and living room. The camp was only a shell when they bought it. They, along with their children and Rob's best friend Shane DeLong, spent many long hours completing the construction on the inside. The objective was to make the camp rustic, but homey. The walls were finished with rough-cut shiplap pine boards that varied in width, and were nailed vertically on inside walls, and at a 45° angle on the outside walls. The ceiling was left open to give it that "campy" feeling.

Rob was 6'2", and had no trouble reaching the boots. His dark brown eyes were sparkling as he tossed them over to the couch where Eileen was sitting. She jumped at the loud thump the boots made when they hit the floor, and because they landed rather close to her feet she shouted a few remarks at him, which he conveniently (his standard operating procedure) made like he didn't hear. He decided that his absence was the better part of valor at that moment and grabbed his knit pullover hat. He brushed back his thinning hair and slipped it onto his head as he hustled over to the hall closet to get a broom. He figured the whole scene would blow over while he swept last night's powdery snow off the front porch. His ever-increasing scalp visibility frequently prompted more than just a little kidding by friends and family, but he always took the harassment well. He had to because he dished it out whenever the opportunity came his way.

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Rob and Eileen met at a church youth dance during summer school break and became high school sweethearts. Those that knew them said they seemed to be inseparable. Rob still wonders after 20 plus years of marriage exactly what it was that drew him so strongly to her. She loved to dance and was very good at it, but dancing wasn't high on his priority list. She was only five feet tall, and he often kidded her by saying that he thought that she was still growing when they got married. When he thought long and hard about it, the only thing that made sense to him was that in addition to her beauty and stunning figure, which was accentuated by her long, flowing, auburn hair and hazel eyes, she had a personality that radiated across the dance floor. The magnetism that brought them together turned out to be a home run. While a lot of their friends' marriages had floundered and eventually failed for one reason or another, Rob and Eileen's marriage, though not totally smooth (they definitely had their moments), had flourished. They were pretty much on the same mental wavelength and often they would come up with, and sometimes verbalize, the same thought at the same time.

* * *

Thad Cook was a very good friend of Rob's. He was one of Baldwin Plantation's old-timers, and Rob would never tire of listening to his stories of days gone by. He stood about 6' 3" and had a pair of feet that would support a man twice his size. At seventy-six years young he still enjoyed riding his snowmobile, four-wheeler, and paddling his canoe across lakes, ponds and down rivers. For many years, and at his own expense, Thad maintained the trails and bridges around the immediate area that were used by snowmobile and ATV riders alike. He seldom got any thanks for it, and never any money. He mentioned a few times that some younger person needed to take over, and Rob thought that he might be hinting for him to do it. Rob was more than willing to help out when he was around, but unlike Thad, he didn't have a lot of extra time on his hands.

Thad's camp, which was located at the beginning of Big Foot Hollow Road, was a little over a mile from Rob's, and everyone around, including Thad, said that he had a million dollar view. From his front porch you could see Bigelow Mountain, Sugarloaf Mountain, East Kennebago Mountain, and the surrounding valley. It was a breathtaking view that one never tires of, especially in the fall when the leaves change color. Thad had a CB in his camp, and when some other CB'er yelled for "Bigfoot," Thad would reach for the mike and the chatter would banter back and forth for quite sometime. The conversations usually revolved around local gossip, and according to Thad, the gossip sometimes got "pretty juicy." One of the conversations that Thad

shared with Rob regarded a local waitress that spent, on the Q-T, a long evening (actually all night) with a temporary resident. A temporary resident is also known as a weekend-warrior or a flatlander camp owner. Supposedly the waitress was hired to do some work at the flatlander's camp, but when she spent the night there, the second-guessing went wild.

Thad's camp-mate was a golden retriever named Ginger. Ginger was a great lover of dog biscuits and just about any other doggie treat that came her way. Rob never saw her turn her nose up at anything, and her canine figure definitely showed it. Her days of jumping into Thad's pick up truck were definitely on the wane, because in addition to her abundance of fur and flesh, like Rudy, she was on in years.

Ginger was showing lots of gray on her snout and face, but true to the breed, she still loved to play. Many years back Thad bought Ginger a Frisbee, and she continually walked around with it hanging out of her mouth, all the while sporting a goofy "I dare you to take it away from me" look on her furry face. If anyone managed to wrestle it away from her, she would get all perky and prance around while waiting for the inevitable, and once the Frisbee was in the air, she'd waddle along as fast as she could to retrieve it.

Rob thought it was really neat the way Ginger would strut around with her Frisbee in her mouth, so he bought one for Rudy hoping he'd do the same. Of course Rudy had a little difficulty carrying it since he's so short. Anyway, Rob's hopes went up in flames as soon as Rudy decided to eat it, and that was the end of that.

* * *

While Rob was getting all their snowmobile gear together, Eileen finished up the breakfast dishes. The smell of bacon still lingered in the camp, and Rudy went to his dish in hopes that he'd find a tasty morsel or two. Once he determined that there weren't any scraps of bacon in it, he gave Rob his best "I'm really disappointed" look. Rudy learned long ago that unlike Eileen, Rob was a major soft touch, a real sucker for a "sad look." Rob didn't have to glance Rudy's way to know what was going on, and like a perfectly programmed android he went directly to Rudy's favorite cabinet to fetch him a biscuit.

Sitting up to beg is not part of a basset hound's repertoire, so Rob never made a fuss when giving Rudy a treat. Toot could be very affectionate, but when it came to food he had the manners of an aggressive kennel dog. He snatched the biscuit from Rob's hand, barely missing the ends of his fingers, and wasted no time bringing it to his favorite eating spot, the living room rug.

Rudy usually missed Rob's fingers, but on one occasion Eileen was not so fortunate. When that happened, Rudy instantly knew that he had goofed. His first clue was Eileen's scream of pain. His second clue was the sound of her stomping foot, and at that point Rudy's distinctive character came shining through, demonstrating an uncharacteristic canine trait. He dropped his biscuit down on the floor, which *had* to be very difficult for him because he was salivating before he even took it, and he put his nose close to Eileen's leg while looking up at her with an obviously concerned look on his sad furry face. Rob was convinced that he was trying to say that he was sorry, and Rudy stayed there until he received a forgiving pat on the head. So it came to pass that when Eileen gave Rudy a biscuit, she would simply toss it to him.

* * *

With Eileen's blessing, Thad and Rob had decided that their trailside cookout would be wherever the spirit brought them. Thad called again at 10:40 AM, just as Eileen was hanging up the dishtowel. It was obvious that he was anxious to get going, so Rob went out to get the snowmobiles ready.

When he stepped out onto the front porch he checked the thermometer hanging on a huge red pine off to the right. There was a picture of a deer jumping over a fallen log on the face, and the needle was laying right over its nose, pointing to the 10° F mark. Rob said more to himself

than anything else, "I guess the weather man's going to be right, 20° F for a high today. That'll be perfect for the cookout."

* * *

Eileen's a warm-weather girl and was clearly happy that the temperature was expected to go all the way up to twenty. When they were riding their snowmobiles she seldom complained when she got cold, but she *would* make it known, and that meant a homeward bound direction was forthcoming. Rob didn't have a clue as to how they were connected, but when Eileen's nose got cold, so did her hands and feet.

The sleds' gas and oil reservoirs had been topped off and Rob was just heading back into the camp for his helmet and gloves when Eileen came out and insisted that he put the handlebar mitts on her Skidoo. He said, "For crying out loud, Eileen, it's going to be warm today ... why in the heck do you want those on? I mean, you've got heated handlebar grips and thumb throttle, why do you need those things, too?"

She didn't say a word. She just tossed the mitts down on the snow in front of Rob before heading back into the camp. He yelled, "Fine! I'll put the dang things on!" and then muttered to himself, "Give the little lady what she wants."

* * *

Whenever Eileen asked him to do something for her that he thought was contrary, he'd always remember the day when he took her shopping to get a steak to cook over a red-hot charcoal fire. On that particular day, as far as he was concerned there were several nice looking steaks in the meat display case. Nonetheless, she didn't see one that met her requirements, and the meat cutter that was waiting on her obviously didn't want to cut another steak. He tried to convince her to take one of the steaks on display. The storeowner, or maybe he was the manager, overheard the conversation and said, "Give the little lady what she wants." Rob saw the smug look on her face and decided that within reason, he'd always try to do just that.

Rob and Eileen were watching a couple of deer walking through their back yard when they heard Thad Cook's snowmobile coming down the road. The sound of his machine was unmistakable and it made such a racket that it scared the deer. Rob and Eileen watched as they gracefully bounded for the safety of a thick stand of pines just across a small brook that meandered through their back yard.

No one around had a snowmobile that sounded like Thad's. They did at one time, but no more. Thad would never say die when it came to keeping one of his toys going. His sled, a 1965 Arctic Cat Panther, sounded like a lawn mower that has been modified to accept a super charger. However the sound was very deceiving because when the pitch said that he must be doing at least 70 miles per hour, he was actually putting along at 15.

About ten years back he built a small storage shed to keep his Panther out of nature's elements, and he usually didn't put it in there till the snow was gone. Two days ago Rob went to visit Thad and the Arctic Cat was nowhere to be seen. He asked him where it was, and Thad nonchalantly replied, "In the Cat House ... had some work to do on it and just haven't taken the ol' girl out yet." It wasn't the first time that he heard Thad call it the "Cat House", and he still wasn't sure if Thad was putting him on or not.

Thad came down the driveway with his feet propped up on the tunnel rails and sticking out from the sides of the hood where it ties down. His felt lined snowmobile boots made his feet look much larger than his size 13. As a matter of fact Rob thought that they sort of looked like clown shoes, and he almost expected to see the top half of Thad's feet flop forward as he brought his snowmobile to a stop. He didn't have his face shield down and when Rob went out to greet him, Thad's eyes and nose were dripping, and his nose looked like he could give Rudolph some competition. Rob tried to come up with some smart remark, but all he could think of to say was, "Cold, ain't it?"

Thad's cryptic reply was, "It's 'snot' bad at all."

Thad led the way, turning left out of the driveway onto Kennebago Settlement Road. Eileen and Rob followed him for about two hundred feet before he made a right hand turn to head toward the beaver pond and ITS 89. As they approached the beaver pond, Rob slowed down and carefully looked the area over. Everything appeared to be the same as it was earlier after the hawk had disappeared. Rob was convinced that he'd never forget the phenomenon, and he hoped that he'd never see it again. He pressed the thumb throttle on his liquid-cooled Skidoo Formula 500 Deluxe, and slowly picked up speed while taking several quick looks to his left, giving the entire pond a thorough once over. After he crossed the bridge bordering the eastern edge of the pond, he increased his speed to catch up with Thad and Eileen. As he was leaving, the sphere of shimmering air emerged over the western edge of the pond.

He went about a half a mile before hitting the ITS 89 Snowmobile Trail, and when he looked to the left he spotted Thad and Eileen just topping a hill in the distance. The Arnold Trail Snowmobile Club maintains this section of ITS 89, and as Rob and Thad anticipated, the trail had just been groomed. It was as smooth as a newly tarred highway. The only snowmobile tracks on the trail were those made by Thad and Eileen. After turning onto ITS 89 he quickly accelerated to 40 miles an hour, wanting to catch up with them as fast as possible. As he crested the hill he suddenly had to hit the brake. Thad and Eileen were sitting alongside the trail and appeared to be admiring the view of Saddleback Mountain and all the ski trails that meandered down its northeastern side.

Rob brought his sled to a skidding stop and walked over to “chew the fat” with Thad. As he approached him he noticed that he had a far away look on his face, like he was in the middle of an intense daydream. “Hey, Big Foot! Whatchya so intent on?” Thad’s return look was something that he had never seen on his face before.

“You OK, Thad?”

“I think so. Age must really be catching up to me ‘cause I don’t remember a thing since I went over the beaver pond bridge. It’s like one second I’m crossing the bridge, and the next second I’m sitting here on the side of the trail looking at you talking to me. You want to know what’s really weird?”

“What’s that?”

“At first I see your lips moving, but I don’t hear your voice. Then as I’m about to tell you to stop playing games with me, because I know I’m not deaf, it was like you finally decided to put sound to your lip movement. You trying to mess with my mind or somethin’?”

“Thad, I like to bust your chops, but I wasn’t bustin’. My lips weren’t just moving, I was talking all the time, trying to find out what the heck you were concentrating so hard on. Do you want to head back to camp and make this trip another day?”

“No. I’m all right. Let’s go. By the way, I’m going to stop at the Seven Gulpers for a break

and we can check the camp. That OK with you?"

"Sure, lead the way."

* * *

When Thad reached the Seven Gulpers he pulled off the trail and parked his Panther right in front of the camp. The camp was about five miles into the woods and about half way up East Kennebago Mountain. It sits in a one-acre clearing, and although it has a great view of the valley and lakes below, it does not begin to measure up to the view that Thad had from his camp.

Rob and Thad always stopped to check on the Seven Gulpers camp when they were in the vicinity, kind of like a backwoods Neighborhood Watch, similar to what they have in the suburban areas to keep crime down. Only here it was intended to make sure that Mother Nature's elements didn't cause additional damage after evidence of a break-in was found. The locals and temporary residents automatically keep a vigil making sure that all's OK when they go by an unoccupied camp.

On more than one occasion Thad had found something amiss at the Seven Gulpers' camp, and he took the necessary steps to temporarily fix the problem. Once he got back to camp he always called his buddy, John Spencer, to let him know what he had found, and what he did to help out. John and six of his friends had built the place sometime after the Korean conflict. Whenever the group got together there, they always put away a serious amount of beer while playing poker or pinochle, or just plain "chewing the fat". A few of the locals that joined them in their festivities from time to time dubbed them the Seven Gulpers. John and his friends liked the name so much they painted it onto a sign and nailed it to the front of their camp.

Whenever Thad called John about a problem he had found at their camp, he would always chat some about the new areas that were being logged, and all the locations where different companies had removed their logging equipment, not to mention all the juicy gossip being passed between and amongst the residents of Baldwin Plantation and Stratton. Without exception, he covered all those subjects before he got around to telling him the reason he called. Of course, that drove John crazy because the only times Thad called him was to deliver bad news about the camp. So whenever he picked up the phone and heard Thad's voice, his stomach would start churning in anticipation of the news that he was about to receive. He really didn't want to hear stories regarding Baldwin plantation gossip, or anything else for that matter. He just wanted to get the bad news over with. But that idea never occurred to Thad. He did the chitchat thing so as to help soften the news he was about to deliver.

One of his calls to Spencer had been to tell him about a bear that had literally busted into their camp, making splinters out of the front door. John was really pleased when Thad described in brutal detail the incredible mess it had left behind.

As usual, Thad checked the front entrance to make sure that everything was secure, while Rob took a stroll through the soft snow around the entire camp. As he worked his way down the opposite side of it he almost tripped over a cable that was buried in the snow. One end of the half-inch thick cable was attached to the floor joists under the camp, and the other end was anchored to a huge pine tree. Over the years the camp started to slip as the footings settled into the ground on the downhill side. John and his buddies were at a point in life that camp time meant playtime, which never left any time for major camp repairs, and leveling the camp would be a major project. The tilt didn't bother them, so as long as the pine tree was alive and well, and they figured the tree would most likely outlast them.

* * *

Once they deemed the camp was OK, Rob suggested that a ride to the top of East Kennebago Mountain was in order. Thad looked like he may have some other spot in mind so Rob piped up, "It's as clear a day as I've seen in a long time. You can literally see forever. Come on, Thad, you know that you like the peace and quiet up there. Besides, whenever we go

snowmobiling in January, how many days do we get like this with such a clear view?"

Thad grunted his agreement, started his snowmobile, and without hesitation pulled back onto the trail. Eileen pulled out right behind him, and Rob brought up the rear. Single file they worked their way up the steep and twisting trail to the top of the mountain. The ride was spectacular with the fresh fallen snow weighing down the pine tree branches on both sides of the trail. Most of the way up the mountain, the sun was in the right position to reflect miniature rainbows here and there off the snow-laden branches.

As they entered the clearing on the top of the Kennebago, Rob pulled around Thad and parked his snowmobile at the highest point, which, as far as he was concerned, was the best place to take in the awesome sight below. The three of them simply sat on their snowmobiles for nearly ten minutes without talking, just absorbing the peace and quiet while enjoying the panoramic view. The beauty of the valley below could only be described as awe-inspiring. The distant mountains were shrouded in shades of blue, shadowed here and there by scattered white puffy clouds that looked like giant cotton balls floating overhead. They had been quietly sitting there, deep in their own thoughts, when a fox walked out from the low pine trees just to the right of Rob, and stopped not more than five feet from him. Its thick winter coat was a mixture of various shades of rust brown, with a blending of black here and there, and it had such a luster it looked as though it had just been bathed in a rich shampoo. Rob wasn't surprised to see the fox come so close, as this was not the first time that it happened. During hunting season a couple of years back, he was sitting quietly on a camouflaged folding stool about 50 feet from a deer run, when a fox came by and stopped right next to him. It stood there for about a minute before realizing Rob was right beside him. In fact the fox was so close he could've reached out and touched it just by moving his arm. However, when the fox noticed him sitting within accurate spitting distance, he made a very hasty retreat, and a smile worked its way onto Rob's face. The critter had reminded him of a cartoon character trying to make its getaway. Its legs seemed as though they were going like crazy for a second or two, before it got traction and quickly disappeared.

But this fox was different. When he casually looked over at them sitting on their snowmobiles, he made no attempt to run away. After a moment or two, Rob decided the fox was studying them. He was very surprised when it took some free-and-easy steps forward, and nonchalantly sat down. It seemed as though the fox was taking in, and enjoying the same view as they were. After five minutes went by he was beginning to think the fox was mimicking them, but then he thought to himself, "Man! That's really far out! My imagination's in overdrive today!"

When the fox took a long slow look over its shoulder at Rob, a strange feeling came over him. This animal did not act like any fox he had ever seen before. His sixth sense slipped into high gear and he began watching the fox very closely, looking for any sign that it could have a loose screw, or worse yet, rabies, although that was not very likely this time of year. This past fall he had heard on the Bangor Country Western station that rabies was running rampant in Maine. However the fox did not act or appear to be sick. Just the same, it was disconcerting that it did not seem to be afraid.

The fox sat and blinked in the bright sunlight for at least ten minutes, then he slowly hunched around like he was doing a stretching exercise, and casually scratched his left shoulder. Once he had apparently satisfied his itch, he looked back over his shoulder at the group, then stood up and slowly walked around the clearing, stopping here and there to sniff whatever interested him. A downy woodpecker landed on a nearby tree that obviously had been dead a long time. The sparse stubby branches gave it the appearance that it would make a good prop in a horror movie. Almost in unison, Rob, Eileen and Thad turned their attention to the busy bird. It was doing its sporadic skip up the tree looking for something tempting to eat, and after the woodpecker flew off in its continuing search for food, Rob remembered the fox and decided to

see what it was doing. It was now sitting about ten feet away from them, with its tongue hanging out, and looking very perky. He could almost swear that it had a canine grin pasted on its face, just like he was watching a funny scene in a sitcom.

Rob decided the fox wasn't sick, nor a threat, and turned his attention to pulling a candy bar out of the rear compartment of his snowmobile. As he started to tear the Mounds bar wrapper open, he noticed that the fox was paying very close attention to him. As he made the first tear in the wrapper the fox stood up and trotted over to him, just like Rudy did when he knew food was at hand. The fox covered most of the distance to the back of Rob's snowmobile before it sat down, and at that point only five feet separated them. His ears were fully perked up as he stared at Rob with a happy, expectant look on his face as if to say, well it's about time you brought out the goodies!

"I'll be darned, he's a moocher! That's why he's been hangin' around."

Rob broke off a piece of the candy bar and tossed it toward the foxy critter, no pun intended, and it landed about one foot in front of an inquisitive nose that didn't waste much time checking it out. The fox quickly picked up the succulent morsel, pointed his snout toward the sky and after chewing it four times, swallowed. Then he looked back at Rob with an expression that could only be interpreted to say, "Well, that was good, how about some more?" Just like Rudy! Rob couldn't resist the fox's charm, and he tossed it another piece. As soon as the candy left his hand it looked like it had sprouted wings, and floated much further than Rob had intended. It looked as though it was going to bounce right off the fox's nose, and in fact, if the fox had its mouth open the candy would have dropped right in. The fox may have been a mooch that wasn't afraid of humans, but he sure made it obvious he wasn't stupid. As the piece of candy neared his nose, he moved his snout slightly to one side and let it drop onto the snow. He gave it a quick sniff to make sure that it was what he expected, and it too disappeared. When the fox finished swallowing the last piece he sat down like a well-trained dog, and gave Rob another expectant look.

Eileen spotted the look, and knowing full well that Rob was a soft touch, she piped up and said, "Hey! That's my candy bar, and I want the rest!"

Rob could hear Thad chuckling as he turned to the fox and said, "Sorry, pal, you lose." The fox continued to keep an eye on Rob as he picked up the candy bar, folded the wrapper over and put it into a zip-lock bag. He looked over at the fox as he placed the bag back into the compartment and realized that he had more than just a little feeling of empathy for the furry mooch. The snow was soft and deep which meant the crafty hunter would have to be lucky enough to find carrion to survive, and Rob felt even worse when he saw that the fox's ears were drooping. It reminded him of the way Rudy looked when he felt he had been wronged.

He looked over at Thad and said, "You have anything that we can feed this guy?"

"Maybe, let me check." As Thad turned around to look in the cooler he had mounted to the rack on the back of his sled, the fox ran to the center of the clearing and began to growl as if trying to warn something off.

They were watching in stunned silence when it suddenly yipped and jumped like something had hit it.

Rob looked at Thad and said, "What the heck do you suppose that was all about?" Before Thad could answer, the fox crouched down and began to growl louder, and after a couple of seconds it started to inch its way backward, toward the other side of the clearing.

Rob yelled to Thad and Eileen, "Start your sleds! This fox might be sick after all!"

By this time the fox was running in circles like it was chasing its tail, but the circles were larger than that. Rob yelled to Thad, "Maybe this fox is schizophrenic. Its acting like it's chasing a phantom. Let's get the heck out of here before it turns on us!"

* * *

Rob took the lead, and while they were negotiating the steep descending trail as it twisted its way down the mountain, a great spot for their cookout popped into his mind. Shortly after they were back onto ITS 89, he turned to the right onto an obscure trail that was about three quarters of a mile from the Seven Gulpers. The trail was short, seldom used, and led to a camp that was built by one of Thad's friends. The first time Thad brought Rob here to see the view, he told him a buddy of his by the name of Fred Powers owned the place. Rob knew that in this particular case, saying that Fred *owned* the camp was not true in the strictest sense of the word, mostly because the camp sat on land that was leased from a paper company. But leased land or not, as far as Rob was concerned, Fred had made a great choice. The camp overlooked the Little Kennebago Lake from the northwest side of East Kennebago Mountain. If you looked due west past the Lake you could see the distant mountains in New Hampshire.

Fred Powers, now a retired high school English teacher, had built the camp about 30 years before, and it looked like it took more determination than skill to get the structure up. The camp was about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. The roof and sides were covered with rolled roofing that was as unsightly as acne. Fred periodically had a problem with hikers breaking a window to get inside, and it was likely they needed to get out of some bad weather. There was never any damage other than the broken window, and they never took anything. But Fred wanted to bring the problem to a screeching halt, so he built a multifunctional wooden shutter for each window. The shutter was not typical by any means. It was fastened to the top of the window casing with inside hinges rather than being mounted in pairs on each side, and he used different length hooks to hold the shutter up. He used the very long shank hook when he just wanted to let the daylight in, and the short shank hook when he wanted to have a wide-open view of the outside. When he dropped the shutters down and hooked them from the inside, the camp was break-in proof (to a certain extent). But according to Thad, with all the light shut out, the camp became a haven for mice.

As Rob approached the clearing surrounding Fred's camp, he pointed the nose of his snowmobile toward the front door, and turned to the left just a few feet from the snow covered steps. The snow was soft, and if they were going to walk around without sinking out of sight, it would have to be packed down, so Rob continued to ride his machine round and round in the clearing while he waited for Thad and his wife.

Thad and Eileen didn't realize the real reason Rob had eaten part of Eileen's Mounds bar while they were on top of the mountain, and had no way of knowing that Rob had made an executive decision to have their trail-side cookout in front of Fred's camp. Actually Rob was famished, and if that fox hadn't come along the candy bar would've been history.

Just as he was completing his second circle Rob saw Thad and Eileen coming up the camp trail. They both quickly put two and two together and joined him in the parade. After a couple more passes each, the surrounding area was sufficiently packed down to keep them from sinking in.

* * *

Rob parked his snowmobile at the mouth of the trail exiting the clearing, and set the brake. Thad and Eileen shut their engines down while Rob took his camera out of the rear compartment of his sled. "Hey, you guys, stand fast a moment. I want to get a picture of you two with the lake and mountains in the background."

A deep scowl formed on Thad's forehead and Rob knew why. He didn't like to have his picture taken, and Rob usually tried to soften him up by saying, "Just think about all the fond memories we'll have while going through these pictures during one of our happy hours." In fact, once, out of exasperation Rob just blurted out, "What's the matter, Thad? Do you believe in that old Indian tale ... that part of your spirit is lost to the picture?" That statement had flashed into Rob's mind because in the past he and Thad had many discussions during their happy hour ritual about the other side.

Thad wasn't a great believer in the teachings of the church. As a matter of fact he wasn't much of a churchgoer at all. He claimed that his last recollection of being in church was when he was baptized a few months after being born, and that happened only because his mother, a very good and God loving person, insisted upon it. Rob always took a firm stand that there wasn't any way Thad could possibly recall his baptism. He told Thad he probably had seen pictures that were taken by some family member during the baptismal ceremony, and maybe some pictures taken at the usual family gathering afterwards, and *that* is what he truly recalls. However, Thad always insisted that neither his parents, nor any other family member for that matter, even knew cameras existed at the time.

Thad loved to reminisce during their happy hours, and one day he told Rob about a particularly nasty session that he had in the hospital, and how it changed his philosophy regarding the spirit world and the hereafter. About six years before, Thad had a cancerous section of his colon removed, and once a year he had to go into the hospital for an exam to make sure that no new polyps had grown. He claimed his beliefs regarding the spirit world and the other side all stemmed from a colonoscopy exam that he had about four years back. The doctor who had performed the colon surgery on Thad had moved out of the area shortly after the operation, and Thad asked his family doctor to recommend a specialist for his yearly check ups. Dr. Claymore, who according to Thad was so old, that he must have driven a tin lizzy, recommended a Dr. Rebecca Rosen. Thad was up in his years, but he wasn't beyond modesty, even when it came to a physician. So when Dr. Claymore recommended a female, Thad fought him long and hard for other recommendations, still, Dr. Claymore convinced him she was the best.

Dr. Rosen found several polyps during the colonoscopy and snipped them off. Thad thought she snipped them a little too close because he bled a lot. In fact he continued to bleed for several days after the polyps were removed. He refused to stay in the hospital, and against his doctor's orders, signed himself out. He told her that he could convalesce better back at camp than he could with some busybody nurses fussing over him and interrupting his sleep during all hours of the night.

Late one night, about two weeks after he had signed himself out of the hospital, Thad had a real bad spell. He woke up from a deep sleep completely disoriented and very dizzy. On nights when there was no moon to cast shadows in Baldwin Plantation, especially if it was overcast, it was impossible to see without a light. As a matter of fact, you could put your hand right in front of your eyes and not even be able to see its silhouette. There was electricity in the area at that time, but Central Maine Power hadn't run the lines as far as Thad's camp, and he had to depend upon a generator. This particular night wasn't only moonless, it was also overcast, and it was pitch black in the camp. Thad fought a psychological battle for a few minutes, just trying to piece together where the heck he was. He finally began to put things in their proper perspective, and realized that he was in his camp. He carefully groped around in the darkness to find the phone on the nightstand alongside of his bed. When he found it, his heart almost jumped into his throat. Even though he had been cautious, he almost knocked it to the floor. Thad had thought ahead about dark nights and the fact that he may have to make an emergency call, and had bought a phone with a large keypad. He felt for the numbers and dialed 911.

* * *

Alan Hanbury was on duty when Thad's call came in, and he'd made the trip to the old timer's camp several times before. As a matter of fact, his last trip to Thad's wasn't very long ago. Thad called after a heavy piece of angle iron had fallen off a shelf in the Cat House and hit him in the temple. He told Alan that he had just regained consciousness, but felt like he was going to black out again. Alan was very concerned, and made short work of getting to Thad's. As a matter of fact, it took him about 32 minutes to cover 24 miles of a miserable road that had more twists and turns in it than a river flowing through a level valley.

Alan's adrenalin was still in high gear when he arrived at Thad's door that night. Moose were plentiful in the area, and just after he crossed Dyer Stream Bridge he almost had an intimate relationship with a cow and her two calves. The three of them were taking up almost the entire road, and he quickly decided that he would hit the calves, because they would cause the least amount of damage, and just maybe he'd be able to continue on his way to Thad's. Fate, luck, providence, or whatever you want to call it, was Alan's best friend that dark night. Right at the moment when he thought it was inevitable that he was going to hit them, the group parted. The calves went to the right and the cow moved to the left, just in the nick of time. Alan's eyes were wide and his heart was pounding as he jerked the wheel to the left and zipped right between them.

* * *

However, this trip to Thad's was not made at breakneck speed. He just didn't sense the urgency in the old timer's voice like he had the last time. But when he drove into Thad's driveway he felt a shiver go up his spine and he became very concerned. There were no lights on inside. With flashlights and medical kit in hand, he and Jimmy Grant took off at a run to the front door. Ginger was there to greet them, whining and obviously very nervous, which gave Alan even more reason for concern. Alan went over to the bed to check on Thad while Jimmy lit the gas lamps, and as soon as three of them were burning brightly, he joined his partner.

Alan glanced at him and said, "He's unconscious and his vital signs are pretty weak. Get the gurney, we need to get him to the hospital fast!"

* * *

The emergency staff at Farmington Hospital found that Thad's blood pressure was very low, and that wasn't normally his problem, usually it was high. According to Thad, they had to put four pints of blood into him before all was said and done. He thought that he must've blacked out again after he called 911, because the next thing he could recall was freezing and being hurled down the inside of a swirling tunnel of trillions and trillions upon trillions of tiny little lights, and it reminded him of being inside of a tornado. He said that the tunnel was pretty big, but he had no recollection of how much room he took up in it. Then he said he could see one steady light in the center of it up ahead, and it kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. As he got closer to that light he began to get increasingly warmer along the way, and he had a feeling of being very glad, but then he changed his mind and said it was a happy-time feeling. He had difficulty in describing it. But the feeling kept getting stronger by the second. Then all of a sudden he was at the end of the tunnel, and the light that he had been looking at was everywhere. He felt like he was being absorbed, or maybe sucked into it, again having difficulty describing exactly what was happening. It was right at that moment he had a most incredible feeling, and described it by comparing it to a sexual climax, but he went on to say it was much more than that, that it was more like the greatest sexual climax ever. But he felt even that statement was inadequate, and went on to say, "But multiply the intensity of that feeling times a million." He paused for a few moments, and then said, "I began hearing words telling me something, and it was like the answer to life. It explained why everything is the way it is." Most of all, he remembered saying to himself, "Boy, I have to remember that! That is *so* simple!" Then, the next thing he knew, he was back in the tunnel again, hurtling at a tremendous rate of speed.

Thad paused at that point for a few moments like he was vividly remembering the experience, and Rob finally asked, "What happened next?"

He didn't look at Rob, or anything else for that matter. He was just staring into space and said, "Bam! I'm in a bed freezing cold, and I was shivering like crazy. Then I saw men and women dressed in green and white that were standing all around me, and the first thought that came to my mind, 'I must have finally bought the farm, and the good and bad are arguing over who's gonna get me.' But then I remembered that the bad guys don't wear green and white."

Thad went on to say, "Little by little my focus and reasoning came back, and I realized that I

was lying in a hospital emergency room, and it was doctors and nurses that were looking over me. One of the doctors leaned over and asked me how I felt.

"I told him I wasn't sure if I was disappointed or relieved; and it was obvious that Dr. Chan didn't know how he should respond to my statement, so he chose to ignore it. He told me I gave them quite a hard time, and that he thought they had lost me for a while.

"I asked him what happened and he told me I had some internal bleeding and lost a lot of blood. He said that in addition to four pints of blood, the nurses administered some blood coagulants to stop the bleeding, and if that didn't work he'd have to operate."

"Just about then, a burst of light went off in my head like a flash bulb in an old-time camera. I told Dr. Chan I had a colonoscopy two weeks ago, and that I had internal bleeding afterwards because the doctor came too close when she snipped off some polyps."

"He told me that he'd check it out and let me know. Anyway, I spent a few days in the hospital while they ran some tests, but I never did find out what made me lose the blood."

That episode was a milestone in Thad's life. His pride had been shattered. His woman doctor was right and he had been wrong. That did not compute in his way of thinking, and he was having an extremely difficult time accepting it. But he also had another startling thought. Dr. Chan had told him they almost lost him. Thad began to wonder what he had meant by that. Little by little he recalled he had heard voices as he was hurtling toward a light, which he found extremely soothing and comforting.

Then he completely recalled his trip through the tunnel, and also remembered the soothing light, the light that gave him comfort in a way he'd never known before. He felt a great sense of loss that touched his very soul. And the knowledge! But as hard as he tried, he couldn't remember the answer to life, and why everything is the way it is. He could only remember that he knew. Now he fully understood why he was both disappointed and relieved when he first woke up.

From that time on, Thad was firmly convinced life goes on after the body quits, and he would share that information with anyone willing to listen to him.

Thad wasn't a well-educated man in the academic sense, but he was a well-read man. More than once he told Rob that there's an energy source inside our bodies, and when we die that energy travels to another dimension. He also believes that sometimes a person's energy doesn't quite make it there, and that's when spiritually sensitive people have a ghostly experience.

For the most part, Rob agreed with him, but he had some convictions of his own. One day after Thad had finished pontificating about life and other dimensions, he said, "Thad, I think this is purgatory that we're in, and the past deeds we have to atone for determines how long we're goin' to be here."

Thad took a long look at Rob and said, "How did you come up with a bright idea like that?"

"Well, Thad, how many people do you know on this earth that don't have any problems at all?"

"None."

"That's my point exactly. No matter who you are, no matter how much money and influence you have, you still have issues to contend with."

* * *

They needed to make a fire to cook the burgers, and Rob broke a path to the stone fireplace overlooking Little Kennebago Lake. Fred built the fireplace shortly after the camp, and it was a masterpiece in comparison. According to Thad, Fred designed it, and a friend who was a stonemason built it, but Fred still took credit for the creation himself. Everyone who knew Fred knew the real reason why he built the fireplace. He loved sitting in front of a blazing fire on a starlit night, watching as the flames licked out at the frosty air, and listening to the logs snap, crackle, and pop their hypnotic tune. The mesmerizing flickering flames, commingled with the

noises of burning logs and East Kennebago night sounds, always succeeded in putting Fred into a euphoric state of mind unmatched by anything else he had ever experienced. If the truth were known, Fred used the fireplace much more for relaxation than cooking.

Adding to the mystique of the fire is the panoramic view of the night sky that houses the Milky Way and sheds an occasional dying meteor. The air up on the East Kennebago is so clear that on a cloudless night, at first glance, the Milky Way almost looks like haze way up in the night sky. Then as your eyes adjust you can see, or maybe it's just your imagination, the billions of individual stars.

* * *

Rob brushed the snow off the fireplace while Eileen and Thad unloaded the burgers, fixings, kindling and That Stuff™ from her sled. By the time Thad walked over with the armload of goodies, the fireplace was ready to go. Thad set part of their lunch and some other items down on the left wall, and had Rob's complete attention as he reached deep into his coat pockets. Rob's face lit up like a five hundred watt bulb when Thad pulled out two frosty Buds, and he said, "Thad, ol' buddy ol' pal, I can really count on you to think of everything!" Eileen never understood how they could enjoy a cold drink when, as far as she was concerned, it was freezing out.

Rob took That Stuff™ from among the items Thad had set down on top of the fireplace wall and placed a handful of it in the middle of the tinfoil. Then he piled kindling on top of That Stuff™, and within just a few minutes of lighting the match, the fire started spewing forth yellow and blue flickering flames. Once it was burning freely he leaned over and grabbed his beer that was sitting in the snow alongside of his left foot, and took a couple of lingering sips to savor the flavor of the barley and hops as he stood back up.

Eileen interrupted his enjoyment saying, "I'm so hungry I feel like I could eat the back side of a cow," as she handed him the grate and burgers. He gave her an ear-to-ear grin that said, "OK." He placed the grate on the fire and made sure that it was as level as possible. Then he took the burgers and set them on it side-by-side. As soon as he was satisfied that all was well, he picked up his "King," and turned toward Thad as he was getting ready to take another sip. Once he had eye contact he said, "What d'yah think about that business with the fox?"

"It's funny you should ask. Just as we were leaving, I glanced back at the fox and it looked like he was jumping up in the air to catch a bird that just took to flight. Only there was nothing that I could see right off that the fox could be jumping at, so I stopped to get a better look."

And that was it. Thad just stood there sipping his beer and casually looking around like he was taking in the view. Rob couldn't believe that was the end of the conversation. "Yo! Thad! So what did you see?"

"Well, actually I was trying to figure whether I should tell you the truth or make it up as I went along."

"Thad, I've never heard you talk in riddles before. What gives?"

"I've never seen the likes of it, Rob. It was like the fox had reached around and somehow grabbed himself by the neck! It looked like he was pulling himself up and down. I may be on the long side of my sunset years, but my elevator isn't skipping floors yet. I thought long and hard deciding whether I should tell you about this or not, but that feeling I had ... I just *had* to tell someone. Even if they did think I was flipping out."

"Tell me about the feeling that you had, Thad."

"I felt like time stopped. I felt like the only thing in the whole world was me watching that fox do his crazy aerobics."

For a moment, Rob teetered on the brink of telling Thad what happened at the beaver pond that morning, but quickly decided he should keep it to himself.

* * *

The burgers were long gone when they threw snow over the remaining glowing embers. Rob watched the steam rise a short way up into the air before it dissipated, and when the foil was cool enough, he picked it up, leaving nothing but hard packed snow behind. As he headed over to his snowmobile he saw that Thad was tying the knapsack and grate onto the back of Eileen's sled, and said "Hey, Thad, thanks for that!"

Rob stepped onto the tunnel rail of his Formula, swung his leg over and sat down on the soft cushiony seat. One pump on the primer and the sled started right up, making that 'Bombardier' hum that he loved to hear. He was switching the hand warmers and thumb warmer to high to take the chill out of his gloves when he heard Thad yell for him to take the lead. He nodded his acknowledgment and started to head down Fred Powers' 300 foot driveway, if you could call what looked like an old skidder trail a driveway. The driveway was fairly straight and Rob kicked his Formula up to thirty miles per hour in what seemed like the blink of an eye. When he reached the end, he checked his mirrors to see if Eileen and Thad were right behind him, but there was no sign of them. He figured that they were just taking their time, and he hooked a right onto ITS 89 heading toward the Seven Gulpers.

He didn't pay much attention to any of the scenery on the way back because his mind was wrestling with the strange events of the day. In all his life, he had never experienced more than one unusual episode in a year, let alone one morning. He wondered what in the name of God was going on? First the distorted air over the beaver pond, and then the stone silence, which was followed by a static hissing noise and the feeling that time had stood still. When he coupled that scenario with the fact that Thad also had a feeling that time stood still while the fox was doing what seemed to be the impossible, Rob knew he wouldn't quickly forget this day. The upside to his thought process was that Eileen didn't have a clue to what was going on. That was good because she had an over active imagination, and these events would likely shift it into overdrive.

* * *

Rob was almost half way through a mile long straightaway after reaching the bottom of the mountain when it dawned on him that he should check his rear view mirrors for Thad and Eileen. They were nowhere to be seen. Feeling a little bit uncomfortable that they weren't behind him, he decided to pull over to the side of the trail and wait. It wasn't the first time that he'd had to wait for them, but recent events made today a whole lot different. He knew they sometimes rode the trail slowly while trying to spot a moose or deer that might be foraging in the woods, and of course, if they did spot one or the other they would stop to watch the animal until it was out of sight. If it was a deer, it was usually history pretty quickly. On the other hand, moose are not typically afraid and take their sweet time about whatever they are doing. He always told Eileen the reason moose are so slow is because they were dealt a short hand when it came to brains.

Of course he wasn't much different because he stopped whenever he came across a deer or moose, or the occasional fisher, but sometimes he liked the thrill of pushing his sled hard, especially on a weekday when there's not many other riders around. But today he didn't think he'd been pushing his sled that hard and he assumed Thad and Eileen must have stopped to watch some kind of a critter. He really couldn't remember if he had hustled down the mountain or not. His mind had been totally absorbed in the crazy events of the day, and had no recollection of the trip down.

Five minutes went by and they still hadn't shown up. Now he was positive that they must be watching a moose taking its time eating some branches off a tree, so he shut his sled down to enjoy the peace and quiet while he waited. Another ten minutes passed and he still couldn't hear their sleds in the distance. Everything was stone quiet with the exception of a chattering red squirrel that sounded very upset. But he didn't give it much thought because unhappy squirrels are not uncommon in the Maine woods, especially when some venturesome rodent invades its neighbor's territory.

After another ten minutes went by and he still couldn't hear the sound of Thad's super

charged Panther screaming along at 15 miles an hour, he started getting very uneasy. Finally he decided he'd better head back up the trail to find out what's wrong. Maybe Thad's vintage sled had decided to give him some grief and Eileen was sticking by until Mister-Fix-It solved the problem.

He fired up his sled, popped it in reverse and did a u-ee. As soon as he had his machine headed toward East Kennebago Mountain, he put the throttle to the handle bar and was doing sixty in the blink of an eye, or at least it seemed that way. When the trail curved and started winding its way up the mountain, he backed off on the throttle, but only enough to maintain control of the sled as he used the weight of his body, leaning this way and that to work it over bumps and around the curves. His adrenalin was pumping hard and he knew that it wasn't just the thrill of the ride; it was his growing fear something worse had happened than a broken down sled.

* * *

Thad had started out behind Rob as they were leaving the clearing in front of Fred Powers' camp. However when they hit the main trail, instead of following Rob toward the Seven Gulpers, he made a left and headed back to the top of East Kennebago Mountain. Eileen didn't see that Rob had turned right and followed Thad, thinking all the time that they were following Rob.

The moment they got to the top of the mountain Eileen was surprised that Rob was nowhere around, and when she turned to ask Thad where he was she stopped short. Thad was sitting on his machine with his helmet in his hands and his eyes had a blank look, like he was in a trance. Eileen put her mitten-covered hand on his arm and softly said, "Thad?"

No response. She started getting a little frightened and said louder, "Thad!"

He looked at her, but still said nothing. Then again, you couldn't say that he really looked at her. It was more like he looked through her. She shouted his name this time, "Thad!"

Slowly, recognition began to show in his eyes and he stood up to look around. Then astonishment took over every feature on his face. "How in the heck did we get back here? And where's Rob?"

"You're kidding me, right, Thad?"

"I'm not kidding at all. The last thing I remember, Rob had just put out the fire, we packed the sleds and I told him to take the lead. What're we doing back here? And where's Rob?"

Eileen took a very close look at Thad to see if he had a smirk on his face, but there was none. He appeared to be dead serious. She asked him again, "Thad? You're putting me on, right?"

He could see that Eileen was concerned and just making sure he was OK, but now *he* began to get an uneasy feeling. This was the second time in one day that he had CRC (Can't Remember Crap). If he was a young fella just coming off a bender he could understand a loss of memory. But up until today he had experienced no recall problem, and he was having difficulty coming to grips with the reality of it.

"Maybe I'd best make an appointment with Dr. Claymore to see what's wrong. If one of you guys weren't with me when I decided to kick my brain into neutral, I wonder what would've happened to me?"

Eileen looked past Thad's left shoulder and saw something that looked like a fur stole drooped over the stubby branch of a dead tree. She started walking over toward it, and as she drew closer she could see that it looked just like the fox Rob had been feeding.

Thad said: "Is that the fox we saw this morning?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Is it alive?" He started walking toward the tree to get a closer look when the fox suddenly rolled to the left and fell off the stubby branch, dropping to the snow below. After a few seconds went by its eyes settled on them, and it had a look about it as if to say, 'help', as it slowly sank

into a sitting position. After a few more seconds went by it struggled to stand back up, and it was obvious that it required a tremendous effort. They could see its hind legs shaking every inch of the way up, yet his attention remained focused on them. Once it was standing on all fours it shook itself off, and right at that moment Thad's entire body began to tingle with the type of nervous sensation one gets when their sixth sense slips into high gear. The sensation started in his toes, quickly traveling up his spine and all the way to his head. He could count on one hand the number of times in his life that had happened. He grabbed Eileen's arm and said, "Let's move slowly over to our machines, but try to do it as naturally as possible."

"Why? What's wrong, Thad?"

"I don't know. But something sure doesn't feel right."

They continued to talk as they walked toward their sleds. They had gone about ten feet when Thad looked back to see what the fox was doing. It was nowhere to be seen, and that suited him just fine.

* * *

The snowmobiles were warm and purred to life as soon as the starter was engaged. Thad took the lead as they eased their sleds toward the trail at the far end of the clearing. All of a sudden Thad's taillight flashed bright red and Eileen saw the rear end of his machine slip around to the right. When he came to a full stop, he jumped off his sled and came on a trot back to her.

"What's wrong, Thad?"

"Listen, that fox just ran across the clearing, jumped in front of my sled and sat up like Ginger does when she wants a treat. I ain't never seen no fox do that before, and moocher or not, it just ain't right!"

"Where's the fox now?"

"He ran off into the woods when I stood up. I'm headin' down that mountain and I ain't stoppin' for nothin'. You stay right behind me and do the same."

"Now you're scaring me, Thad."

"Look, this ol' sled of mine isn't very fast, but that thing you're ridin' is a rocket, and I know you can really make that machine talk when you want to. If I start doing strange things, stick your thumb throttle to the handlebar and don't slow down until you get back to camp, and make damned sure you don't stop for nuthin'."

"Thad, if you stop, I stop. I'm not gonna leave you behind."

"Listen, if you do have to leave me and I don't catch up after a short while, have Rob call the game warden to get some help to look for me. The two of them would be of more help to me than you. No disrespect."

"None taken."

"Remember, you kick that sled of yours if I start actin' funny."

"OK, but I still don't like the idea."

* * *

Rob was absolutely cooking up the trail when he saw snowmobile headlights ahead, and instantly backed off the throttle. At a quick glance it looked to him like Thad was in the lead. He pulled off to the side of the trail and was stepping off his sled when Thad blew right by him. Rob put his arms up in the air as if to say, "What the heck?" He was dumbfounded because Thad acted like he didn't even see him.

"Hey, Thad!" Rob yelled as he went by, and thought, "Yeah! Right! Like he can hear me over the screaming of his Cat."

Eileen stopped on the trail opposite Rob and met him half way across.

"Hey, Eileen, what's up with Thad? Does he have diarrhea or something?"

"Rob, I'm worried. Thad had another fugue a little while ago."

“Another one? Where did it happen ... back at Fred’s camp?”

“No, back up on top of the Kennebago, and don’t you give me that look! I thought Thad was following you, and I went along for the ride. When we got there I walked over to him to find out where you were and how come we went back up the mountain. I’ll tell you what, Rob, he didn’t *know* why we were there, and I got a little scared ‘cause he really looked spaced out.”

“Welllllll, it’s a good thing you followed him instead of me.”

“You mean it’s a good thing I didn’t see which way you went, ‘cause if I did I would’ve followed you! And if that happened ... who knows what would’ve happened to Thad.”

“Hey! We’d better get goin’ and catch up to him. The way he went by me, he could be having another one of his fugues.”

By the time he turned his sled around, she was already a quarter of a mile down the trail, kicking up a cloud of snow. She must’ve really been cutting a trail! Rob was working his machine hard, and still couldn’t lay eyes on her five minutes later.

* * *

Rob’s machine was purring at 45 miles an hour when he reached the bottom of the mountain where the trail made a sharp turn to the right. He glaced at the spot where he had waited for Thad and Eileen, and at that point expected to be able to see her somewhere up ahead on the one-mile straight- away. But she was nowhere to be seen, not even a cloud of snow.

“Man! I must be taking a Sunday drive compared to her!” Then his mind shifted gears and he wondered to himself why she was going so fast. At their normal speed of thirty-five to forty miles per hour, it wouldn’t take long at all to catch up with Thad. He felt the beginnings of an uneasy feeling spread throughout his body as he put the thumb throttle to the handle bar. His sled catapulted forward and almost immediately he was going so fast it seemed like he was skipping from the top of one mogul to the top of the next, and his Formula performed just like it was normal business. He had never pushed his sled like this before, and his body was vibrating with an adrenalin rush, the likes of which he hadn’t experienced since the time that he almost fell off a 500-foot cliff.

At the end of the one-mile straight away the trail made almost a complete U-turn to the left, crossed over Delaney Brook, and then twisted its way back toward the base of East Kennebago. The trail remained level for about two miles before starting an ascent up the southwest side of the mountain. Thad and Eileen were sitting off to the right side of the trail just past the Delaney Brook bridge, and appeared to be having a normal friendly chat as Rob pulled up.

Trying to make light of the way that he really felt, Rob yelled over to Thad, “Hey! How come you blew right by me back there? You becoming anti-social all of a sudden?”

“Nope. Just wasn’t ready to stop. Besides, I knew you’d catch up right quick.”

Rob looked at Eileen and said, “I’ll tell you what, you really kicked that machine of yours, huh?”

“You might say so.” And being more than just a little coy said, “Why, did you find it hard keeping up?”

“Nope.” Rob’s macho was about to come through loud and clear when he decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

Then he looked at Thad saying, “What happened up on top of the mountain?”

“Not much to talk about. Catch you later.” Thad started his machine and was gone ... just like that.

Turning to Eileen, Rob said, “Did I do something wrong?”

“I don’t think so. I think Thad has a lot on his mind with what happened to him today, not to mention how the fox spooked him.”

“What happened?”

“I’ve got to pee and I don’t want to do it out here on the trail. So let’s get going and I’ll tell you back at camp.”

* * *

Before he knew it they were at the Harris Pasture Road turn-off. They made the turn and Rob slowed down to a crawl as he approached the bridge by the beaver pond. Off to his right he could see a faint circle of distorted air, which wasn't nearly as pronounced as when he had seen it earlier. Actually the circle of shimmering air seemed to be drifting toward him, as if blown by a gentle breeze, but there was no breeze, the air was very still.

He was tempted to stop and see if anything would happen this time, similar to what happened to the hawk this morning. But when he thought about Eileen, and the fact that she had to go the bathroom, he changed his mind. After going about 200 feet he saw a deer run across the trail in a panic, and its eyes looked like they were wild with fright. He didn’t think he could've scared the deer that badly. The snowmobile trail passed alongside the deer’s wintering yard, and they had to be used to hearing and seeing snowmobiles, so he slowed back down to a crawl and looked around to see if he could spot what had terrorized it. At first he thought that coyotes might've done it because their tracks could be seen everywhere in the vicinity. He expected to see a couple of them run across the trail in hot pursuit of the deer, but nothing showed up, so he motioned to Eileen to take the lead. Just as she came up alongside of him he jammed the throttle to the handlebar, and the race was on!

Unbeknownst to Rob, the shimmering air had started moving quickly toward them just as their machines shot forward.

* * *

Thad did his best to keep Harris Pasture Road as smooth as ITS 89, but it was almost impossible. Harris Pasture Road was heavily traveled by the weekend temporary residents that came up to the mountains for a getaway, distancing themselves from the rat race, taking mind and body off the stress machine, as well as enjoying some great riding. Thad towed a homemade drag behind him to groom the trail, which he had made from an old steel bedspring, and he had to go slow to make sure the loosened snow filled the holes in as much as possible. On the other hand, the Arnold Trail Snowmobile Club equipment was state of the art and the trail it left behind was smoother than most highways.

Racing on a trail groomed by Thad was a real challenge. As a matter of fact, just staying on the snowmobile was a challenge. Depending upon who's describing it, Harris Pasture Road either empties into, or starts from, an open field that borders Kennebago Settlement Road. The wind blowing along the curving tree line whips the loose snow in front of it, creating a large snowdrift at the Harris Pasture Road entrance. With all the snowmobile traffic going to and from ITS 89, the drift gets firmly packed, and at this time of year it's a bump to reckon with. Rob and Eileen came shooting out of the ITS 89 connector, and when they hit the snowdrift, they went sailing through the air for about 20 feet before touching down. On the way across the road to their camp, Rob thought that it was a good thing Thad did not witness this stunt, because if he had he would have called them a lot more descriptive names than just flatlanders.

They parked their snowmobiles in front of the shed and Rob went to get the gas cans to top the tanks off. Eileen, while doing her pee-pee dance, untied the grate and knapsack to bring them into the camp. She opened the front door and was greeted by Rudy, and he was wagging his tail so hard that his whole body was moving from side to side. Eileen reached down to pet him on the head, but before she could touch him he bolted to the front door, making her think that he too had to go very badly. “OK, Rudy, hold your horses. I’ll let you out!” Eileen had barely opened the door two inches when Rudy jammed his nose into the opening, and the force was enough to tear it out of her hand.

Rob was pouring gas into Eileen’s tank when Rudy ran up to him, carrying on like he hadn't seen him in a week. “Hey, Toot-man! Really happy to see me huh?” Rob set the gas can down as

he bent over to scratch Rudy behind his ears. Rudy let out a grunt of satisfaction and sat down, acting as though he expected this to go on for quite a while.

The loud crack of a dry and brittle branch, which sounded like it had been snapped off a pine tree, echoed in the woods just behind Rob. Rudy let out a soft “woof” and took off at a trot toward the sound. He reached the edge of the woods in short order and raised up his nose as high as he could, all the while sniffing the air in all different directions. Rob gave a casual look around the immediate area, but nothing caught his attention. Evidently it was the same with Rudy, because he was doing his typical carefree trot back to Rob, and his ears, swaying side to side, were sweeping the trail along the way. When he sat down next to Rob with that expectant look on his furry face, Rob said, “Sorry, pal. I’ll take care of you later. Right now I wanna finish topping off these sleds.”

It was early in the afternoon and, as far as Rob was concerned, one of the ten best days of this winter. He really didn’t want to quit riding just yet, and was trying to decide whether to cover the sleds and get caught up on some paper work, or go for a ride to Flagstaff Lake. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that he didn’t notice everything turning stone quiet. He looked over at Rudy when he heard a whine that quit almost the moment it began, and that’s when the same static noise he heard at the beaver pond filled the air.

Both Rob and Rudy stood very still while trying to look in every direction at the same time. He glanced down at his old friend and saw that he was shaking again. He leaned over, put his hand on Rudy's head and gave him several reassuring pats. After a few seconds he started to look up in the air for any sign of the distorted air, the same as, or similar to what he had seen at the beaver pond. But he couldn't see anything in the vicinity that was out of place, which was very unsettling because he could still hear the static hissing noise.

"Toot-man, let's take a walk into the woods and have a look around." Rob walked past the shed to get his snowshoes that were sticking up out of the snow next to their four hundred-gallon propane tank. The tank had been casting a shadow over them, and even though the temperature had risen considerably from when he and Rudy took their walk on the beaver pond to check out the tracks, the neoprene bindings were still pretty stiff. The moment Rudy saw Rob grab his snowshoes he came bounding over with his basset hound happiest sad face and stood right beside him. When Rob glanced down at him, it looked like his whole body was wagging his tail.

As soon as his snowshoe bindings were good and tight he said, "OK, Toot-man, let's take a look-see!" They climbed up over the snow bank that had been left by the snowplow alongside the shed, and headed toward the woods. Rudy zigzagged from one snowshoe track to another as Rob broke the trail.

He was heading toward a break in the wall of pine trees that was actually a well-travelled deer trail. It was one of many that twisted and wound its way through and along the edge of the deer's wintering yard, where they forage till spring. The pine trees in this area were about ten feet tall and stood very close together, providing great cover for both rabbits and deer.

Once they reached the tree line, Rob paused to see if he could still hear the static noise, and Rudy sniffed the air all around. He didn't know if it was his imagination or not, but the static hissing noise seemed to be coming from everywhere. He looked back across the clearing and into the woods on the other side of Kennebago Settlement Road, where he could see the trees were gently swaying from side to side. Yet, he couldn't feel the air moving where he was standing. He was checking the dead leaves remaining on the nearby poplar trees for movement when everything turned stone silent, and he immediately developed the sensation of being in a vacuum.

He started to move into the pines along the deer run, and after going about twenty feet he began to feel something like a tingling sensation over his entire body. He stopped short and looked behind him to see how Rudy was doing, but he was nowhere to be seen. The only evidence that his furry friend had been behind him was his tracks. Suddenly the tingling sensation was gone and Rob felt a gentle breeze. He looked down at Rudy's tracks again because something stuck in his mind about the way they looked.

On closer examination the tracks looked exactly like Rudy's normal gait, and they simply ended right behind him without any indication that he had come to a stop. Rob unbuckled his snowshoes and inched his way around on them, being extra careful not to disturb anything. He

squatted down and looked under the low branches to see if somehow his old friend had managed to jump to the side to investigate an interesting scent, but the tracks should've had snow sticking up to one side, which would've been caused by Rudy when he pushed off to make his jump. It's no secret that a basset hound doesn't have the ability to jump very far to the side from a walking position, and Rob checked everywhere Rudy could've possibly landed, and beyond. But the only visible tracks were those of snowshoe rabbits, which wound their way in and around the base of the short pine trees.

"Hey, Toot-man! Where are ya!?" Rob listened to see if he could hear Rudy working his way back to him, but he didn't hear any of the usual telltale sounds.

"Hey, Toot! Come on boy!" Still nothing, and that wasn't like Rudy, unless he was on a hot rabbit track, and if he were, everyone for a mile around would know it.

"This is impossible!" Rob said to himself. He stepped off his snowshoes to the right, and started crawling in a semicircle through the powdery snow, working his way back to the clearing near the shed. When he got to the edge he let out a low groan. While crawling through the low hanging branches, powdery snow frequently fell onto his neck and eventually soaked him all the way down his back. To add insult to injury, along with the melting snow, dead pine needles also managed to work their way inside his shirt.

* * *

Just as he reached the clearing, Eileen walked past the corner of the shed looking for him. He didn't notice her standing alongside of it and he was a sight to behold as he did his best to keep more snow from melting down his back, not to mention the laughable movements he was making to keep the pesky pine needles already there, from sticking him more than they were. He stopped his outlandish movements when he heard Eileen laughing, and he eased his way around to see where she was.

Still laughing out loud she said, "Rob, just what in the heck are you doing? Are you trying to choreograph a new kind of limbering up exercise?"

"Very funny! Rudy disappeared. He was behind me one minute and gone the next. I've called out to him more times than you can shake a stick at, but there's not even a hint he's around, so I decided to crawl through these stupid pines to see if I could find his trail. And I'll tell you what! Unless he's learned how to walk backwards, step for step, retracing his steps without disturbing any of his tracks, he's done the impossible and disappeared right into thin air. What-da-ya think about that!?"

"I think I'm going to go back into the camp, sip some Swiss Miss and work on my puzzle. That's what *I* think!" Then she looked over at the snowmobiles and said, "I see that you still haven't covered our sleds. Are you going to go back out again? 'Cause if you are, it's a beautiful day and I'd like to go to, that is, as long as you don't stay out too late."

"Yeah, I was plannin' on it. I thought that maybe we'd take a ride to Flagstaff Lake, but I want to find Tootman first, and I also want to know what happened with you and Thad on top of the Kennebago after we left Fred Powers' place."

"OK. I'll wait inside for you, and I hope you find Rudy soon."

"Yeah, me too."

* * *

Still not wanting to disturb any of the tracks he and Rudy had made when they walked through the clearing and into the pine trees, Rob waded through the snow alongside of them. It became much more difficult when he reached the pines. He continued calling for Rudy, but his furry friend still hadn't surfaced by the time he reached his snowshoes. He strapped them back on and started to painstakingly recheck the area immediately around him. He took his time, inch by inch, looking for any clue at all that Rudy had backtracked. Quite frankly, he thought that scenario was totally impossible. But still, he had to be absolutely sure.

It took him a lot more time than he had estimated to reach the end of Rudy's tracks, which is actually where they began at the snow bank, and as he had anticipated, he didn't find a clue to what might have happened. Each and every one of Rudy's tracks had a little tuft of snow sticking up on the backside, and four holes in the front where his nails had dug into the hard pack below, which indicated only forward movement. Even though the idea was totally unappealing, he decided to crawl under the pine trees and check the whole area one more time. He had to be one hundred percent sure that he didn't overlook something during his last search. Unfortunately, when all was said and done, he was not only thoroughly soaked and itchy again, he came up with the same results.

At times like this he would always talk himself through a routine to find a solution. "I must have missed somethin'. Logic tells me that he couldn't have just plain disappeared. I think I need to poke around some more. I've already made a semicircle to the right. Making a semicircle to the left makes sense, and I'll keep expanding the circle on both sides until I find some sign of him."

He completed the circle and expanded it several times. After a little more than thirty minutes he managed to work his way beyond the thick growth of pine trees to a stand of hardwood trees, which had recently been logged. He stood at the edge of them and scanned the area for any sign of Rudy, and when checking the terrain off to his right he spotted what looked like a circular depression in the snow. The land sloped upward at about a 30° angle, and he could see that the imprint was about 20 feet in diameter. It was like someone had dropped a huge ball in that spot. But what he found extremely strange was that the depression did not vary in its symmetrical appearance, even where there were small trees (which were left as seeders by the logging company for new growth) within its perimeter.

He walked up to the edge of the circular depression and continued around its entire perimeter. The snow was soft at the edge, and loosely packed inside. Other than the occasional rabbit and bird track, he couldn't see any other disturbances in the snow around the depression. He took his time checking everywhere around him, and then up toward the sky, and as he recalled the strange events of the day he muttered to himself, "And the day isn't over yet!" He felt somewhat overwhelmed and that wasn't a feeling he was used to. He rubbed the back of his head as he said out loud, "What in the heck is going on around here?"

Whenever he had reached the end of his rope in the past, he would experience a sensation not unlike a small charge of electricity that traveled through his body, starting at the tip of his toes and continuing all the way to the top of his head. Suddenly he felt that same sensation, but he couldn't fathom why! He didn't feel like he was frustrated, it was more like being confused. He made up his mind that he'd used up all his options, and said to himself, "I think I'll head back to camp. Maybe Rudy'll be asleep on the rug and this will all seem like a weird dream."

* * *

Once again this day, before he knew it he was back at the camp, and like the other times, his mind had been so wrapped up in the day's events that he didn't remember anything along the way. He took off his snowshoes and just stood there for a few minutes, and anyone nearby would've thought he was in a trance. Finally he set them behind the propane tank and headed for the front door, hoping all the while to hear Rudy bark a greeting when he opened it, but disappointment continued to reign supreme.

He stepped in and was putting his gloves on the end table when he said to Eileen, "Rudy's not here?"

"Nope. Did you see any sign of him?"

"No, I didn't, and that's got me real worried."

"Rob, Rudy's probably gone off on a rabbit track. He's done that before and we didn't see him for a few hours. He'll be back soon."

"I don't think so, Eileen. I couldn't find any sign of him at all, and what's more, if he were out there working a rabbit, we'd hear him baying from time to time. I was out there for more than thirty minutes looking for him and I didn't hear him once. That wouldn't bother me if there was a strong wind that could drown out his howl, but the wind's calm. Nah, as strange as this may sound, based upon everything I found when checking Rudy's backtrack, he just flat disappeared into thin air. And I'll tell you something else, I kept expanding my circles looking for some sign of him, and you know where the stone wall is in back of the pines, where the hardwood growth begins?"

"Sure."

"When I searched the clearing there was a about a twenty-foot circular depression in the snow. I walked around the whole thing and it was really strange, the angle of the depression was symmetrical, even around the trees in the imprint. It was like somebody had set down a huge Wiffle Ball, and the holes lined up just right to fit around the trees. Eileen, up until today I could always rationalize my way through most anything, but when I think about the way Thad acted today, that crazy fox, and now this! I've run out of rationalization. I think it's a first for me. I don't have any answers that make any sense. There's something else. I didn't tell you about what happened when Rudy and I took our walk this morning."

"Why, what happened?"

* * *

Rob filled her in on everything he had seen that morning when he and Rudy took their walk, plus when they went back to investigate the tracks on the beaver pond, and the static-like noise around the camp, as well as the strange tingling sensation he felt just before Toot disappeared. Then he said, "What happened to Thad up on the Kennebago? You still haven't told me about that! And my instincts tell me that it's gonna be weird. Even if it isn't, when you put all this crap together in one day, how could anyone in their right mind rationalize it?"

Eileen was quiet and appeared to be deep in thought, so Rob said: "What are ya thinkin' about?"

"I was just trying to think of something that might make sense, but nothing comes to mind except that I think that we should pack up and go home."

"I might agree with you if I found Rudy, but since I didn't, it's not an option. I can't just abandon him. He may love to chase rabbits and be woods-wise, but he certainly doesn't have the ability to survive on his own. An animal not only has to have cunning to survive in these Maine woods, it also has to have speed, and speed's not Rudy's forte. Before we do anything, I need to get a hold of Thad and Jack King and tell them about Rudy and what I've seen. I want their feedback. You know, I'm gonna have to be very diplomatic when I present this information to them, especially Jack. It's so far fetched that *I'm* having a hard time believing it, and it's likely they'll accuse me of being too far into my tequila!"

He was quiet for a few moments before saying, "I'm going to take my sled up to Thad's. Do you mind staying here in case Rudy shows up?"

"No, that'll be fine. I've got my puzzle to keep me busy and my Swiss Miss to keep me warm. Don't be gone too long though, I know how you guys like to talk, and I'll bet the conversation could go on forever considering the subject matter." Then as if someone had secretly reminded her she said, "Furthermore, based upon what you just told me, I certainly don't want to be here by myself any longer that I have to."

He was about to reassure her nothing would happen, but a feeling of foreboding made him change his mind. Instead he said, "Trust me, it won't be that long. I'm not only concerned about Rudy, I'm also worried about you. I'll get back as soon as I can." Rob grabbed his helmet and gloves and headed for the door.

* * *

The key was still in the Formula's ignition and he turned it to the start position, pulled up the kill button and pressed the primer three times. As soon as he turned the key to engage the starter, the engine came to life with its deep throaty purr that he loved to hear. He finished putting his helmet and gloves on and gave the Formula some throttle. As he went by the camp he saw Eileen standing by the picture window. She waved to him just as he squeezed the throttle and shot past her toward the end of the house. He lifted himself off the seat and leaned forward as he approached the snow bank. He was airborne for a short distance and out of sight in the blink of an eye. Eileen smiled as she thought to herself, "Boys remain boys".

He didn't like to ride his sled down the Kennebago Settlement Road after the snow had melted off it, so he made a trail that went through the woods to the right of his camp. It was about five hundred feet long and emptied into a huge field that butted up to Thad's property, a little more than a mile away. Whenever he went to Thad's this time of year he'd usually ride his sled across the field, hoping spot some wild life along the way, but today his quest was different. He didn't take the same path directly to Thad's, instead he skirted the woods all the way hoping to catch a glimpse of Rudy.

* * *

He emerged from the woods behind Bill James' camp and turned to his left to follow the tree line along the edge of the field. If he took a straight shot it was a little over a mile to Thad's, but following the tree line as it juts in and out of the field adds another half mile. He scanned the forest the whole way, every now and then wondering if he was being realistic with himself? After all, he didn't find any sign that Rudy had been anywhere expect directly behind him, so why would he be over here? But being a quitter wasn't part of Rob's vocabulary, and he pushed the thought aside.

He poked along the tree line and stopped periodically, shutting his machine off each time. He wanted to see if he could hear the Tootman howling his happy tune while in pursuit of a rabbit, but when all he heard were the sounds of birds and squirrels, the effort to maintain a positive attitude became progressively more difficult. As he approached a small rise at the opposite end of the field where Thad's camp was, he could see the tips of several fence posts protruding above the wind-blown snow. The fence marked a boundary between the camps on Bigfoot Hollow Road and the old Nile Homestead. Thad must've just thrown some logs into his wood stove because there was a thick column of smoke billowing up from the chimney.

* * *

Thad was standing in the front doorway of his camp watching Rob as he rounded the turn into his driveway. His land has four buildings on it; the camp, the outhouse, the cat house/workshop, and a shed that's filled to the brim with all types of items that you'd find in lumber, electrical and plumbing supply stores. One of his favorite pastimes was going to garage sales, and invariably he came home with something that was sure to come in handy sometime in the future, usually when he decided to tackle a project around camp that tickled his fancy. God help him if Murphy's Law reared its ugly head turning his small project into a major problem. Whenever that happened Thad would scour through his treasures for the part he needed, and usually he'd find it, but it'd normally be at the bottom of the pile. As far as Rob was concerned, all that effort wasn't worth it. When he took into consideration all the time that it took to dig out the part from the pile, assuming that the part was there, and all the time that it took to put everything back, and the dollar value of the time spent . . . it would be much cheaper, and quicker to go into town to buy the part!

* * *

Rob parked his sled next to Thad's big blue three-quarter-ton Ford pickup truck, and before he had time to turn off his machine, Ginger was doing her happy face waddle over to greet him. He reached over and gave her a friendly scratch behind the ears and under her chin, and it soon became apparent that Ginger was in the mood for affection. She wouldn't move out of the way

when he tried to get off his sled, and the moment that he stopped petting her, she'd use her nose to nudge him with canine authority, letting him know that as far as she was concerned, the job wasn't finished.

Thad already knew Ginger was in the mood for attention because she hadn't left him alone since he returned from the trailside lunch. When it became obvious his young friend had been corralled for a while, he walked over to chat with him. By the time he got there Rob was scratching the full length of Ginger's back, all the way from her head to her tail, back and forth, and the Golden stretched her skin taut wherever Rob was scratching to get the maximum benefit.

* * *

"What're you doing here? I thought that you and your better half would be back out on your sleds. You'd make good time without having to stop and wait for the ol' man now and then."

In spite of his effort to stop it, a big smile crept onto his face as he said, "Yeah, I know, we were going to, but Rudy's missing and I can't find him." He brought Thad up to date with everything that happened, and when he was finished Thad lifted his hat to scratch the back of his bald head as he said, "There's been a lot of strange things goin' on today, not to mention my brain periodically taking a hike into neutral. As a matter of fact I just got off the phone from talking with my doctor. After I told him what happened he scheduled me for an appointment to have an EEG done on Wednesday. I guess he wants to see if there's anything wrong between my ears, and after what I've been through today, maybe there is!"

"Welllllll, it's not a bad idea to get yourself checked out." He paused for a few seconds, trying to think of the right words, and then just blurted out, "Thad, I need to ask a favor. Would you mind bringing Ginger down to my camp? I'd like to take her to where I last saw Rudy. She and Toot really like each other, and if he's in the vicinity she'll find him." He waited several seconds for an answer, and when Thad didn't say anything, he continued by saying, "You know as well as I do that if she picks up his scent she'll go looking for him, and besides, she can get around under those low pine tree branches a heck of a lot easier than me."

"Sure, I'll be happy to bring her down. Why don't you head back to camp and tell Eileen to put on a pot of coffee. I'll chew the fat with her while you and Ginger go out looking for Rudy."

"Ya got a deal, Thad! See ya back at camp in a short short."

Thad went to get his keys and coat, and Rob cranked up his machine. He turned it around and headed for the tracks that he made on the way over. He figured that one more look along the tree line was worth a try.

* * *

He was just walking into his camp as Thad was turning into the driveway. He stuck his head in the door and noticed that Eileen was sitting on the couch, hands in her lap just looking straight ahead at the TV, but the TV wasn't on. As a matter of fact, neither was the radio. The camp was stone silent and the only noise that Rob could hear was the sound of Thad's truck coming down the driveway.

"Eileen, you okay?"

She glanced over at him with a blank look in her eyes, the same blank look Thad had earlier in the day. Her lips started working like she was going to say something, and within a few moments the movement stopped as her face metamorphosed into an expression that said she was about to cry. Then the flood began, and he couldn't begin to imagine what brought it on.

He walked over to the couch, sat down next to his wife, and didn't take his eyes off of her as he slipped off his helmet and gloves. It was warm in the camp and he was already starting to break a sweat. He began to pull the zipper on his coat while he put his other arm around her shoulders.

"What's the matter, hon?"

She brought her crying under control and said between her hiccupping sobs, "I don't know,

Rob, I just don't know. I was sitting here thinking about Thad and Rudy when you came through the door, and all of a sudden I just started crying. I don't understand what brought it on."

"Well, that's just another thing in the list of weird for today. You okay now?"

"Yes."

Just then Thad knocked on the door and it was no surprise when Ginger came in first. She headed directly to Rudy's dish to check it out. One quick sniff was all it took to tell her it was empty. Just like Tootman, the next place she headed was to the cabinet where the dog biscuits were stored, and unceremoniously parked herself right in front of it.

Rob said a little facetiously, "Now I know why you're so thin Ginger," as he got off the couch and started to head over to the cabinet. Stopping short he turned to Eileen and said, "I'm going to take Ginger over to where I last saw Rudy. Wanna put on a pot of coffee? Thad would like to have a cup while he's chewing the fat with you."

"Sure. Thad, how many cups do you want?"

"Two's good for me."

"Rob, do you want me to make any for you?"

"Sure, I'll have a cup when I get back."

* * *

He nudged Ginger aside with his right knee so he could open the cabinet door to get the box of dog biscuits. At the same time he also snapped a piece of paper towel off the roll to wipe Ginger's drool off the floor. "Guess you really want this biscuit, huh, Ginger?"

Holding the treat in front of her, like the proverbial carrot hanging out in front of the donkey, he headed to the front door. As he opened it he said, "See you guys in a little bit."

The moment they got down the steps, Rob gave Ginger the biscuit. While waiting for her to finish the snack, he looked all around hoping to see Rudy running up to greet them. But Toot wasn't anywhere around, and he gave himself a pep talk to bolster his resolve.

He gave her a few moments to diligently check the area around her for some tiny morsel that might have escaped the trip to her gullet. When it looked like she was convinced nothing remained, he said, "Come on, Ginger, time to find Rudy." They both started walking over to the tracks he and Rudy had made on their way out to the pine trees, and once they reached the snowbank, he stepped aside and said, "Go ahead girl, go find Rudy!"

He didn't really expect her to go charging over the bank, but he was still disappointed when she ambled along, taking a casual sniff here and there. Of course if he really stretched his imagination he could've interpreted her actions as being very thorough, but that was a *real* stretch. Then he thought to himself, "At least she figured out she was supposed to go first."

Rob kept his impatience in check as he followed her along the trail, and just when she paused to give something a sniff he heard a chickadee make its chicka-dee-dee call in the pine trees up ahead. A split second later the static noise began. Ginger's head snapped up with her ears fully erect, and she tilted her head from side to side as she tried to comprehend the sound. Both of them were looking in every direction around them when Rob heard a soft "whump" that could be best described as a muffled thump. Then silence pervaded throughout the area.

Ginger took a couple of hesitant steps in the direction of the "whump", then quickly picked up her pace, which exploded into a run. Rob didn't want to lose sight of her since he still had no clue what happened to Rudy, and he yelled for Ginger to come back. But she'd have none of that and kept charging forward, full speed ahead. She didn't slow down one iota when coming to the pine trees, and in the blink of an eye she disappeared among them, running as fast as she could on the track Rob had made earlier. He couldn't remember the last time he saw Ginger move so fast. He took a couple of steps and thought briefly about getting his snowshoes, but he didn't want Ginger to get too far out in front of him. Even though he had already broken the trail, the snow wasn't firm enough to support his weight, so he had to do a hopping-type of run all the

way.

When he reached the pine trees he held his hands out in front of him to keep the branches out of his eyes, and constantly kept a vigilant eye out for Ginger. She just might stop, and the last thing he wanted to do was trip over her. When he came to the backside of the pines where the hardwood growth began, he saw Ginger and Rudy just 20 feet away. They were wagging their tails like crazy and sniffing each other all over.

Rob was overjoyed, and yelled, "Rudy, Ginger, come!"

The moment that Rudy saw Rob, he began to bound in his direction. Actually, it was more like he was swimming through the snow, adding a hop here and there. Ginger, on the other hand, just stood where she was, head up, sniffing the air in every direction. He yelled, "Ginger, come!"

Slowly but surely she began to move toward him, pausing every few steps to look behind her. Rob watched her all the way, and wondered what was so interesting back there. He took a long, hard look, and didn't see any tracks beyond where they found Rudy. He also wondered where Toot had been all this time and made up his mind there'd be no more snowmobiling today. He decided to take both dogs back to camp, and then come back to give the area a thorough once over. He wanted to know where Tootman had been.

* * *

Thad and Eileen were sitting at the kitchen table sipping the remains of their coffee, and a couple of empty paper plates were directly in front of them. Eileen spotted Rudy and jumped up from the table to greet him, and he quickened his pace to meet her when he saw how happy she was. Typical to a basset hound, he sat right down the moment she started to caress him. Eileen looked at him for a couple of moments, just to make sure that he was OK, and then gave him a big hug as she said, "Where'd you find him?"

"Actually, Ginger found him about 50 feet from where I last saw him. It's really kind of weird. I looked everywhere, and I mean everywhere in that area. I didn't see one thing that could've given me the slightest clue that he was anywhere around. I was convinced that he had just disappeared into thin air".

Thad piped in and said, "I know you well enough and I've seen how good you are at tracking. I don't think you missed anything. As a matter of fact, sometimes I think you're part Native American Indian."

"Guess what Thad? I *am* part Indian. According to my Grandmother before she passed away, *her* grandmother was a Passamaquoddy, but we never really checked it out."

Rubbing the back of his bald head, sort of like he was trying to bring it back to life, Thad said, "Just add this little episode to the next chapter in the 'Book of Weird' for today."

Eileen decided to put her two cents in and said, "You had to miss something, Rob. Things just don't disappear into thin air, except in an illusion at a magic show, or in the movies."

"You're right. I'm going to head back out there, but I'm leaving the dogs here. I want to do a thorough check before it gets dark."

Eileen looked at Thad and said, "Would you mind staying with me until he gets back?"

"Sure. Just make more of those tasty biscuits and some coffee."

"That's a deal. Rob, make sure you're back before dark. I don't like what's been going on today."

"Neither do I. Don't worry, I'll head back as soon as I see the sun go down behind the Kennebagog. Thanks for stayin', Thad."

He nodded an acknowledgment and Rob headed out the door.

* * *

The warmth of the day was waning and Rob felt the air bite his nostrils as he took a deep breath. He also felt a little bit of a chill upon leaving the warmth of the camp. He strapped on his

snowshoes and followed his tracks out to the pine trees, and in less than five minutes he reached the hardwood growth on the other side of them.

Before leaving camp he decided that the easiest way to determine where Toot had been, was to follow his back track. He headed directly to where Ginger found Rudy, and his snowshoes made a crunchy sound each step of the way. The afternoon sun had melted a tiny layer of the powdery snow from last night, and it was beginning to freeze over. He checked the area around him each step of the way, but he didn't find anything that looked like tracks made by Rudy. He stopped and stood in the very spot where he first saw Ginger and Rudy together, and scanned the area all around. He just finished what was going to be his first sweep of the area when he felt the same vacuum sensation begin to settle over him that he experienced earlier. All his senses jumped into high gear, waiting for the static hissing noise to begin. But nothing else surfaced except that feeling.

He started rationalizing, but the longer he wrestled with the problem, the more confused he became. He started another scan around him, shifting his eyes back and forth about fifteen degrees each time before continuing on to the next segment. The sun had shifted somewhat and now he could make out what appeared to be another circular depression in the snow about twenty-five to thirty feet away. It was similar to the depression that he had seen earlier, but he knew this one was different because there weren't any saplings within the perimeter. This was another imprint! What could have made such an imprint? Had it been here before? Had he missed seeing it? Possibly, but he didn't think so.

Walking backwards in snowshoes wasn't something that he had mastered, so he did his best to turn around without disturbing too much of the snow, just in case he wanted to come back and have another look. Once turned around, he walked back to the edge of the pines and followed the track he had made earlier to the first depression, closely checking it the whole distance for any sign that Rudy had walked in it, but he drew a blank.

He reached what he had labeled the "Wiffle Ball" depression. Nothing had changed ... except for a new rabbit track going through the far side of it, and a few bird tracks that, judging from the size, must have been made by a ruffed grouse or a raven. He looked in the direction of the other depression, but wasn't able to see any of it from where he was standing. While he was doing a three sixty scan, keeping it to a fifteen degree sweep again, he noticed that he no longer felt the vacuum sensation and wondered when it had stopped. And then a realization hit him. The sun was much lower in the sky than it had been a few minutes ago, or *was* it just a few minutes ago? He couldn't have spent more than 20 minutes to complete all that he had done since leaving camp. Even if he allowed thirty minutes, how could he possibly account for an hour and a half? There just wasn't that much ground to cover. It didn't make any sense. As a matter of fact, this *day* didn't make any sense.

He gave the area around the "Wiffle Ball" depression another thorough scan before heading back down his track and over to the area he just labeled as depression number three, but changed his mind when halfway there. The sun was dipping behind the Kennebago, leaving the whole area in its shadow. Exasperated, he headed back to camp. He had no answers, only questions, and that wasn't a note that he liked to quit on.

* * *

When he walked into the camp Ginger immediately greeted him, but Rudy didn't budge from his bed. As a matter of fact, he didn't even raise his head to give Rob a visual greeting. He just opened his eyes for a moment and went right back to sleep. Rob thought that was highly unusual and Thad, still sitting at the kitchen table said, "Either Rudy's in total La La Land, or you just got the cold shoulder. Either way, that's something *I've* never seen him do before."

"You got that right, Thad! Hey, Tootman, what's up?"

Rudy didn't budge. Rob went over and gave him a gentle pat on the head and a scratching behind his ear. Still no response ... not even his normal grunt of pleasure. He didn't even attempt

to open his eyes.

"I've never seen you like this, Toot! Not even after a long hunt. I'll tell you what, you guys, wherever he was, and whatever he was doing must've really knocked him for a loop."

Finally Eileen chimed in saying, "You know you're probably right. I don't remember seeing him move at all since you went back out. What about you, Thad?"

"Nope!"

Rob studied his old friend for a few seconds and said, trying hard to be cheerful, "I'm sure that he'll be himself by tomorrow morning."

Just then Eileen remembered the call that Rob got while out back and said, "By the way, Jack King called while you were out."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him that you were taking a walk and that I'd have you call him when you got back in."

"That's it?"

"No. He asked if we're going to be here for the weekend, and I told him that I wasn't sure."

"OK. I'll give him a call in a few minutes." And with that Thad said, "Well, I guess that it's time to get back to camp and start supper."

Rob looked at him and said, "What'chya havin', Thad?"

"I've got all my leftovers since Friday that I'm gonna throw into a pot. It's an easy night for cookin'."

"That doesn't sound very appetizing to me, Thad. Ya want to have supper with us?"

"I'd really like to, but I should get to those leftovers before they become Ginger food."

Eileen knew how to convince him to stay and said, "Thad, I called Tommy Lemieux yesterday and he's delivering some lobsters a little later. If I call right away I can probably catch him and have him deliver a couple more. What d'ya think?"

"Eileen, deal! As far as I'm concerned those leftovers just became Ginger's."

"Fine, I'll call Tommy now."

* * *

As soon as she got off the phone she looked at Rob and said, "I want to give you my two cents before you call Jack. You found Rudy and I don't want to stay here another day, let alone over the weekend. I'd be much happier if you called Frank Lovett and told him that we're heading back to Portland. If he's busy, he and Lindsey can always pick up the Explorer at Rangeley Airport any time before it snows, and put it in the garage. He doesn't have to drive us there."

"Listen. If you want to go home ... fine. But I'm just gonna turn around and come right back. This is my sanctuary and something's messing with it. I have no desire to leave until I understand what's going on around here. Besides, desire has nothing to do with it. I wouldn't be able to concentrate on *anything* with the events of this day still burnin' a hole in my mind."

"All right, I'll stay, but on one condition. I don't want to be here by myself, especially after dark!"

"No problem. I wouldn't feel very comfortable leaving you alone anyway. Where I go, you go. Fair enough?"

"Not really, but OK."

* * *

"Thad, you mind if I call Jack King right now?"

"Help yourself. Mind if I turn on the TV and watch the news while you're chatting?"

"You know how to operate the TV and the antenna. Help yourself."

Just as Rob reached for the phone, it rang. “Hello. Hey, Jack! I was just gettin’ ready to call you!”

“Yeah, sure. And the IRS is refunding all income taxes that everyone paid over the past ten years too!”

“Hey, Eileen! Wasn’t I just picking up the phone to call Jack when it rang?”

She yelled back, loud enough to be sure that he could hear her, “That’s right Jack!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You lie and she swears to it.”

“Quit bustin’ ’em off on me, Jack! I’ve had one of those days.”

“Sorry, buddy. What’s goin’ on?”

He told Jack about the distorted circle of air, including the static noise at the beaver pond and out behind the house, and all the other details that went along with it.

When he finished, Jack was silent for a while, let out a soft whistle and said, “Sounds like I should come up now and not wait for the weekend. The women can keep each other company while you and I check things out. That sound good to you?”

“Sure, as long as you can take the time away from your business.”

“No problem. Actually I really wanted to head up in the morning anyway, but I didn’t want to be pushy and interfere with any plans that you and Eileen might’ve had.”

“When it comes to you and Nancy, there’s *never* a question. We all like to do the same things, and as usual, you’d just blend into whatever we’re doing.”

“Fine. You want to meet me at the Rangeley Airport in the morning?”

“Sure, what time?”

“Nancy and I’ll go to the airport now and load up the Cherokee, which means all I’ll have to do in the morning is a preflight. We should get to Rangeley Airport at about 8:00 AM. I’m going to stop at the shop and pick up some of my electronic equipment to load on. Maybe we can get a feel for what that static noise is that you been hearin’.”

“8:00 o’clock is fine. I’ll clear the snow from the space next to my Cessna, and have the tiedowns and chocks waitin’ for you.”

“OK, buddy, thanks for that. See you in the morning!”

Rob hung up the phone and remained sitting on the loveseat for a few minutes. His mind was already working on an agenda for when Jack and Nancy arrived. Thad was buried in the news and had no clue that Rob had finished his conversation, and Eileen was talking to herself in the kitchen, a thing Rob never understood. It totally escaped him how people could have a full-blown conversation with themselves. He settled further back into the loveseat and let his mind play with the different scenarios a new day would bring, and the longer he thought about them, they seemed endless. If he didn’t bring his thinking under control, he wouldn’t be getting much sleep. Before getting off the loveseat he said to himself, “Tomorrow’s not going to be *just* another day.”