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Revolver

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1
Wash Day, dusk

Even the dead tell stories.

Sig looked across the cabin to where his father lay, waiting for him to speak, but his father said nothing, because he was dead. Einar Andersson lay on the table, his arms half raised above his head, his legs slightly bent at the knee, frozen in the position in which they'd found him; out on the lake, lying on the ice, with the dogs waiting patiently, in harness.

Einar's skin was grey, patches of frost and ice still clung to his beard and eyebrows, despite the warmth of the cabin. It was only a matter of degree. Outside the temperature was plunging as night came on, already twenty below, maybe more. Inside the cabin it was a comfortable few degrees above freezing, and yet Einar's body refused to relax from its death throes.

Sig stared, and stared, in his own way frozen to the chair, waiting for his father to get up, smile again, and start talking. But he didn't.

They say that dead men tell no tales, but they're wrong.

Even the dead tell stories.

2
Wash Day, night

If.

The smallest word, which raises the biggest questions.

If Sig had been with Einar that morning, what then?

If Einar had been more honest with them, what then?

And what if, what if Einar had taken the Colt with him. Would he still be alive?

Questions began to surface in Sig's mind. The death-spell was breaking. He shivered once, violently, and saw that the stove was nearly out.

He cursed with a short old word, the sort of word his father would have used, but only when his new young wife Nadya wasn't around, because she was very strict about these words. And if Anna had heard him, she too would have given him a stern look.

'Father!'

Then she would have laughed. Of course she would have laughed, for she was always laughing, unless she was singing. Unless she was singing, or fighting with Nadya.

Sig waited, though he did not know what he was waiting for. Perhaps a sign of some kind, perhaps even just one single sound, but nothing came, and the only thing he could hear was the sound of his breathing, the breath on the back of his knuckles as he pushed his fist against his lips. Finally he moved from the chair, and realised that the shadows had crept across the room and draped it all in darkness. The cabin glowed softly in the light from the single oil lantern hanging from a stout metal hook in the centre beam of the roof. Their cabin. Their entire world, a single room, twenty-four feet by

twelve, plus the four feet square of the entrance hall, where the boots and coats waited until it was time for them to work again, and the larder room which was behind the other inner door in the hall. The larder room, which as well as holding all their food, candles, soap, tools and spare cloth, was at night home to Sig, who'd taken to sleeping curled up on the sacks of flour. At least it was a little inside space of his own. Outside, there was always all the space in the world; outside, there was nothing but the wide and empty cold of the North. The lake, the forest behind, the mountains in the distance.

Sig lit a taper from the embers of the fire, moving round the table, trying to decide whether he should look at his father or not. He supposed that when he started thinking of his father not as his father but as a body, that would be the time to stop looking.

He lifted down a smaller lantern from the long shelf over the main window, and magicked a flame alight with the taper, which he threw back into the belly of the stove.

In the hall, he pulled on his reindeer skin boots, and gloves, and though he didn't realise it, just the touch of the soft fur of the inverted skin made him feel better.

He shut the inner door to the cabin, put his gloved hand on the outer one, and then hesitated. He took a deep breath, preparing himself for the assault.

He tugged the latch and before he'd even stepped outside the cold had him, grasping him, squeezing his chest and biting his face. The wind clawed at his mouth and nose, but 100 miles North of the Arctic Circle, Sig had learned the trick of holding his breath inside until he knew which way the wind was attacking. Still it stole up the backs of his legs and his face, finding a way in to drain him of his heat.

Dipping his head, he hurried across the newly fallen snow to the log pile and grabbed half a dozen. On his way back, he saw the lake, shining in the light from a bright moon. Somehow he'd expected it to look different, marked by his father's death, but it didn't. He'd seen it look like this a hundred times, and then he understood what was hurting him.

It looked commonplace when life had just become anything but. It didn't even occur to him that come the spring when the ice melted, the place where Einar died would disappear completely, and become gentle wave crests of the wind whipped lake once more. But then, when snow covers everything and the mercury shows dozens of degrees below, any season but winter is an impossible memory to summon.

As Sig stumbled back into the hall, dropping the logs, and pulling off his boots, the question of the lake nagged at him. He gathered up the logs and bumped the inner door of the cabin open, his skin tingling from the sudden increase in warmth.

He made up the fire, wheeling open the air vents to allow the belly of the stove to suck in as much air as it could. Within moments the embers were glowing fiercely, and in a few moments more they caught some curls of birch bark and the resin underneath almost exploded.

It reminded Sig of what his father had told him once, about what happens in the gun, deep inside the gun, inside the brass casing of the cartridge, when it's fired.

But the ease with which he'd lit the fire also reminded him that his father had failed to light one, which was why he lay frozen behind him on the cabin table.

Why *had* Einar gone across the lake?

He'd taken the four dogs and the small sledge to Giron as usual that morning, following the track around the head of the lake, in and out of the trees, snaking around, making the journey from the shack to the town six miles when a crow would have done it in two.

It was Wash Day, and though the miners themselves would work six days, Einar's work for Bergman at the Assay Office only occupied five. Wash Day however, Einar still always had some business or other to attend to, discussions with Per Bergman, the owner of the mine, drinks to be had at the bar of the Station Hotel, before heading home to his family for what remained of the afternoon.

Sig loved those Wash Day afternoons. His memories

of his real mother, he could perhaps count on one hand, but his father's new wife, Nadya, would get all the washing and cleaning and other housework done. Then, like Vikings of old, they would take their weekly bath. Nadya and Anna boiled buckets and buckets of water on the stove, and Sig and Einar would make trip after trip to the pump for more. Einar would fetch the tin bath from the hook on the outside back wall of the cabin, while Nadya strung a blanket over a line across the far end of the room.

The girls, Anna, Sig's sister, and Nadya, Einar's wife, would be allowed the hottest and cleanest water, and would go first. They would talk women's gentle talk, if they weren't fighting; they would spit silence at each other if they were. When they'd finished, Einar and Sig would take their turns. Sig loved sitting in the warm water, knees tucked under his chin, watching the snow fall through the end window of the cabin if it were winter, or the shadows moving in the pines if it were summer. What he loved most of all though, was the time spent with his father after the bath, as Nadya and Anna prepared supper.

It was at these times that Einar told Sig important things. The things a son should learn from his father. It was at these times that he told him about the gold days, and the gold lust, or about the revolver, which sat in its original box, like a princess's jewels in a case. And Sig, like a good pupil, would listen, always listen, with maybe a rare question now and again.

'A gun is not a weapon,' Einar once said to Sig. 'It's an answer. It's an answer to the questions life throws at you when there's no one else to help.'

Sig hadn't understood what he meant by that. Not then.

And it was at a time just like this that Einar would say to Sig,

'Never cross the lake once you see a hooded crow. They only return when the weather's warming. And never cross the lake by the river mouth, the ice is always thinner there. Even wintertime.'

So why, when Einar had followed his own advice and taken the twisting track round the head of the lake when he went to town that morning, had he come home directly across it?

3
Wash Day, night

'You smell so much nicer now,' Anna would tease her little brother, each and every Wash Day. There were enough years between them that they'd never been rivals, only friends, and until Nadya had come along, Anna had been Sig's mother as well as his sister.

These days he felt as if he had two mothers, and God knew there were very few years between the two, with Anna now a woman and Nadya twenty-five years younger than her husband.

But this Wash Day, there had been no bathing, no talk, no laughter and no Einar.

The three, Sig, Anna and Nadya had waited all afternoon, until the bickering between the two women who were not his mother grew so bad, that without explaining where he was going he decided to head out and look for his father. At least he could meet him half way home on the track and ride home on the sledge. Maybe Einar would flick the dogs into a run and they'd rush like the North wind through the scrubby trees that surrounded the lake.

Even in the depths of winter, Sig spent much time outside, thinking, thinking, thinking. Trying to work out what to do with himself. When they'd arrived in Giron, he'd spent a couple of solitary years in the school the mining company had opened in town, but though he learned a little, he learned little about people. He'd always been the misfit boy, the newcomer, son of the new assay clerk who seemed to think he was too good to live in Giron like anyone normal. Turning fourteen, he'd left. Now he had to decide what to do with his life, when

in truth there was small choice but to join the mine, like everyone else. From time to time he would help Einar at the Assay Office, but otherwise he chopped wood, mended fences, repaired the cabin, looked after the dogs, and, trying to find himself, got lost in the forests instead. And though he spent much of his time looking, thinking, watching, he could never quite shift the feeling that he was waiting for something.

Maybe it had something to do with the life they'd led. What is it that gets lost, gets lost somewhere in the snow, when you spend almost all your life on the run, with no mother and the cold snapping at your heels every moment of every day of every year?

Whatever it was, Sig didn't even know its name.

Growing impatient to see his father, he'd shuffled into his boots, then fetched his skis down from the pegs under the eaves at the short side of the cabin, and poled away across the track, glad to be out listening to nothing but silence. His skis had tugged in the snow as he went, and he knew he should have done what his father had been telling him to do for days, and rub a candle across their flat fat faces.

'Even whalemen rub oil on the bottom of their whaleboats,' Einar had said, 'so the water doesn't stick. And you can't see the point of a little wax on your skis!'

It had been hard going, and Sig was just wondering whether to ignore his father's advice again and risk the much easier and much shorter trip to Giron across the ice, when he looked out across the frozen lake.

He stopped.

There was a black smudge on the ice, a quarter of a mile out, maybe more. His mind slowed for a moment, as it made a connection. He told himself that the smudge could have been anything, but he knew this sight; the black on the white. Sometimes there'd be a murder of crows hopping around the smudge, the carcass of a reindeer that had fallen for some reason in the snow. The crows were bold, unafraid of humans, and would only flap lazily away at the last second, as Sig and

Einar approached to inspect the dead beast, its ribcage already stripped bare by the birds. Sig remembered the very first time he'd seen such a thing, perhaps eight years old. His father had beckoned him closer to have a look, but Sig kept his distance, not scared, not upset, but just watching.

It was starting to snow.

He looked up and down the track again, straining his ears, but he could hear nothing. He looked back at the dark blotch on the whiteness. It hadn't moved. With that, he turned his skis and slid down the lake shore.

He tested the first few feet of ice with his pole. It held, but that proved nothing, only his full weight would be a true test. He looked out to the black dot and for a second couldn't see it, then there it was again, slightly off to his left.

Suddenly, despite the cold, and the freezing air catching in his nose, he began to prickle with sweat. He had realised something. The smudge lay exactly on a path to the cabin if you were to come straight from Giron, which he could place precisely from the sky-high plume of smoke and steam that rose eternally from the iron works. A path that would go dangerously near the river mouth.

At that point, Sig knew exactly what had happened.

Heedless of weak ice, ignoring the creaking beneath him, he pushed onto the lake and poled his way with silent desperation towards the smudge. It took very little time for the dot to become a distinct huddle, and then a whole series of shapes.

When Fram, the lead dog, saw him, she began to bark a welcome. She stood, and this made the other three dogs get to their feet too, but Sig was staring only at the shape of his father lying on the ice.

The horror of seeing his father frozen to death hammered into him, but there was something worse. As Sig looked frantically but hopelessly around, he pieced together what had happened, and he knew his father had died an utterly pathetic and pitiful death.

His body lay twisted on one side, arms splayed slightly

above his head. His legs and the bottom half of his torso shone with the gleam of ice, the rest of him did not. For some reason he had taken his gloves off, a ridiculous thing to do in this cold. His Assay Office satchel lay on the ice, and then Sig saw the little matchbox, and the jumble of matches near his father's hands, looking like a microscopic version of the log jams the timbermen make on the river in summertime.

None of it made sense, until Sig saw what a stranger to the North might have missed. A slight disturbance, a couple of jagged edges with less frost aging than the rest, sticking up out of a patch of ice. Sig knew what it was.

It was the weakspot on the ice, the hole his father had fallen through, a hole which he had somehow managed to scramble out of, and which in the merciless temperatures had already frozen over again.

The ice on Einar's body showed he had fallen in up to his waist, perhaps his chest. If he had gone right in, the lake would never have let him go again, and even so it must have taken an heroic effort to drag himself free.

Sig saw the whole scene now as if he'd been there.

He saw his father pulling on the ganglines of the dogs' harnesses, the dogs themselves fighting to stay on their feet, claws scraping frantically. Somehow he gets enough of his body out of the hole and hauls his legs up after him. He knows he has to work fast. His clothes are already freezing onto him, and though home is only a mile away he'll be dead before he gets halfway. Unless he can make a fire.

He has no wood, but then he sees clearly. The sledge is made of wood, there are papers from the mine office in his leather satchel. And he's got matches. But with gloved hands he can't even get the box out of his pocket.

He risks pulling off one glove with his teeth and fishes the box from inside his fur-lined parka, but it's bad now, his body is shuddering with great convulsions, as the ice forming on his legs and feet greedily sucks away his body heat. He drops the matchbox in the snow, and, kneeling down to get it, it takes him many attempts just to get his fingers to close

around it, already numb.

At last, at last, he holds it fast, then realises he should have got the papers and broken up the sledge first. He wants to cry, but he can't. He can't even think straight, he pulls at his satchel with his gloved left hand, but even that is hard, because he can no longer control the muscles in his arms.

Knowing his chances are slipping away, he pushes the tray of the matchbox open, but then he shivers and pushes too far. The box and tray separate and all the tiny wooden lifelines spill into the inch of snow on the frozen lake ice.

Sig sees it all, just as if he'd been there. He knows he'll never forget it to the end of his own days. He wonders what it's like to die. To die alone.

Now, Einar knows he's dead. He can't pick the matches up with his bulky, shaking gloved hand, and he can't pick them up with his free hand, because it has frozen into an unworking claw. Frantically he tries to push the heads of the matches against the striking paper on the side of the box. He tries to use his lips to pick them up, but it's no good, he's lost all feeling in his face.

Finally, with a hideous irony, his fumblings against the box randomly strike head against paper, and a small chemical miracle invented by some Swedes, involving among other things glass, phosphorous, sulphur and potassium, occurs out there on the frozen lake in the middle of a Northern nowhere. A single splutter of flame catches as the match head ignites, lying on the ice. It burns halfway down the wooden stalk of the match, and all Einar can do is watch it burn for a second, and then die.

An hour later, and he's dead too.