

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

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Who Knew?

At dawn, the rising sun had illuminated the snow-capped peaks of the Mahoosuc Mountains, crowning them with gold. There was no heat given off by this light; the radiance merely marked the dividing line between the mountaintops bathed in the bright light of a new day and their slopes that still hugged the lingering shadows from the previous night. There was also no heat given off by the truck's defroster, which labored mightily but to little effect.

We knew before we left Rhode Island that the heater in Pete's truck was barely working, and that knowledge hadn't diminished our usual high spirits for a winter adventure. The inside of the old pickup truck had gotten noticeably colder once we got north of Boston. Now, deep into the Great North Woods of Maine, the cab of the truck was about as comfortable as a meat locker.

"We're fine," said Pete with a grin, his breath fogging the windshield that he had just cleared of frost with his glove. "It'll warm up once the sun has been up for a while."

I just looked at him out of the corner of my eye. "Yeah, yeah, sure, sure, tell me another one Pete," I said, shaking my head in feigned disgust.

Frequent stops every few hours had given us the opportunity to enjoy a hot "cuppa cawfee" and stomp around to get the circulation back into our feet. At this point, my feet, which had once been the victim of a poor choice in winter footwear, were telling me that we were due for another coffee stop.

Once again, Pete pulled off to the side of the road and cleared the inside of the windshield of frost. I filled my pipe, got out of the truck, and struck a match. I watched as it sputtered and burned in the sub-zero air. As I held the match to the tobacco and began to draw on the pipe, the car in which the other members of our group, Johnny Bee, Cinni, and Dave were traveling, pulled in behind us to enjoy the view from their (much warmer) vehicle. The passenger's side back door opened and Dave got out with his camera. I hurried over and asked if he wanted to switch vehicles for a while. He said that I wouldn't like it in John's car; it was too warm. He laughed, snapped a picture, and quickly ducked back into the car. I showed him the international hand signal for "table for one", and went back to the truck.

"It's only about another hour to the lake, and then not quite another hour to the cabin," said Pete, breathing into his hands. "We'll find someplace that's open and stop for breakfast."

With the thought of a hot meal making my stomach rumble, I waved to the car behind us. Cupping my hands around my pipe and using it as a hand warmer, I climbed back into the truck, and we were off again. Thirty miles or so ahead of us was the logging road that would lead us into the heart of the Rangeley Lakes Region.

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Rangeley Lake in Maine was farther away than our usual winter jaunts into the White Mountains of New Hampshire, but the distance was just an added flavor to the experience. We had decided to trade in sleeping bags under a trail tarp in the Great Gulf Wilderness for a cabin on the shore of a remote lake in Maine. The extreme cold was a factor we still enjoyed, part of what was needed so we could say that we had “...*clinched and closed with the naked North...*”. The adventure of camping out at below zero had lost some of its appeal as we had grown older and somewhat wiser. A wilderness cabin and a good wood stove to keep the frigid winter temperatures *outside* seemed a nice change of pace. However, at that moment, the balky truck heater wasn't making much of a difference between inside and out.

As we drove along, the road began to slowly descend into the broad valley that announced our approaching destination. The main portion of the valley was Rangeley Lake itself; the land surrounding it carpeted in dark evergreen, its edges trimmed in snow white. A broad, flat expanse of ice, it gave the northern winds from Canada an open runway down which they howled, scouring the surface with blowing snow. The rising sun had reached an angle which now produced a glare off the ice, which almost made me put on my sun glasses. Cross-country skiing across one of these wide-open, frozen lakes was the perfect opportunity for snow-blindness if you got careless.

“Pete, you got your sunglasses with you?” I asked.

“Sure do, ski goggles too,” he replied.

The *Clear Cut Café* was located at the turn-off where the dirt logging road we were going to take branched off from the hard top and ran off into the deep forest. Once he saw that it was open, Pete didn't hesitate to pull in to the lot and park the truck. John came in next to us and we all made a dash from the parking lot and piled through the front door into the warmth of the restaurant. The air inside was redolent with the smells of freshly-brewed coffee and cooking bacon. The decor was strictly “north woods”; the walls were adorned with old whip saws, double bladed axes, snowshoes, fishing poles, black and white photos of people holding big fish or standing next to big dead deer – even the obligatory moose head was looking down at us as we shed our hats and coats and occupied the large booth nearest the counter.

Betty, the waitress, looked up from the crossword she was working on and came over to the booth, a smile on her face and pot of coffee in her hand.

“Hi fellas, some coffee to help thaw you out?” she asked, smiling broadly at the chorus of affirmative responses. After expertly pouring five mugs of the fragrant brown liquid, she put the empty pot down on the counter and took the pencil from behind her ear and, poising it above the pad held in her other hand, asked, “Well, what can I getcha this morning? The ‘Logger's Special’ is a good deal, and Harry can tell you first hand that it's mighty tasty. He's had one for breakfast almost every day for twenty years.”

As we considered her suggestion, she went to the coffee urn where she pushed the button to brew a fresh pot, and then went through the swing-

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ing door into the kitchen, asking Harry for a ten letter word that meant, "only slightly relevant or related."

Betty and Harry were married, and together they owned the establishment. They had been working at the café since it opened over twenty years ago, and had jumped at the opportunity to buy the place when the original owner had put it up for sale. They had the easy going attitude of people who had seen a lot of life in the intervening years, and weren't fazed by much having learned that finding the humor in a situation was the best way to deal with it. Betty came back out of the kitchen, paused to write an answer on her crossword, then came towards us, slowing only long enough to pick up a fresh pot of coffee that had just finished brewing.

She refilled our mugs, and was happy that we had all taken her suggestion and decided on having Harry's favorite breakfast. She disappeared through the swinging door into the back of the house with our orders, followed quickly by the sounds of Harry bringing the kitchen to life. She breezed by one more time with refills for our cups before heading back into the kitchen, the swinging door slapping closed behind her.

Cinncy and Dave had been arguing over the merits of flavored syrups versus traditional maple when Betty returned, a food-laden tray hoisted on her shoulder. She set our orders down, and in no time I was wading into the short stack of pancakes, two eggs, two sausage links, two strips of bacon, home fries, toast and another coffee that made up the special. Fifteen minutes later I was on the verge of a food - induced stupor, but that didn't stop me from sopping up the last bit of egg yolk with the remaining corner of a piece of toast. I was in the process of wondering how Harry's arteries were still clear after twenty years of "Logger's Specials" when Betty returned and asked if we'd like anything else.

"Just the check", was our reply.

The Great Syrup Debate had subsided by the time we got up and out of the booth (a noticeably tighter squeeze than when we first sat down) and while Pete, Cinncy and Dave hit the restroom, John and I went to the register where Betty took our money with a smile. John asked if there was a newspaper for sale and Betty told him that we had beaten the delivery truck that morning, but it should be there shortly. Well, we didn't need a newspaper anyway; we were looking to get away from the outside world and all that was happening in it.

So off we went, ignorant and happy, back into our vehicles and on the road again. We were now within striking distance of the cabin, just under an hour away, and we wanted to get there and get settled in. The day was shaping up to be a good one, and as we rolled out of the parking lot, we passed the delivery truck that was bringing in the daily newspapers. It was still early and we had the whole day ahead of us. We were looking forward to relaxing and enjoying the tranquility of Nature. But before that could happen, we needed to reach the cabin, unload our gear and a week's worth of supplies from the truck, and get a fire lit in the stove to make the cabin habitable.

The sun, which had risen so brightly, was now hidden by high, grey clouds rolling in from the south. Their dark undersides spoke of snow,

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and a few drifting flakes had already wafted to the ground. There was nothing like a little fresh snow to cap the winter experience.

Betty watched us leave the parking lot and smiled. We had provided more than a little conversation and comic relief, plus been generous tip-pers. She and Harry hadn't seen folks from Rhode Island in a while, and she found it interesting to hear another accent other than the "you cah'n't get they-yah from he-yah" Maine dialect. She was still chuckling at the way we had said "cuppa cawfee" when Bud came through the door with the bundle of daily big city papers sent in from Augusta. He placed it on the counter and cut the string. Another day begins at the *Clear Cut Café*.

A dozen miles down the logging road found us at the turn-off that should have led to the cabin. The lumber company kept the road pretty well plowed, with four to five-foot berms of snow tossed up on either side. Unfortunately, one of these was blocking the turn off and we weren't able to drive up to the cabin. It waited for us, out of sight, about two-hundred yards into the forest at the end of a spruce-lined path. Pete parked the truck on the road, parallel to the wall of snow thrown up by the plows, and John parked just in front of him. I hopped out and dropped the tail-gate of the truck, stepped up onto it and climbed onto the top of the snow berm. Pete and Dave began handing up the various packs, coolers, cross country skis, and boxes. Johnny Bee and Cinncinatus joined me and began loading the gear onto the plastic sled we had brought for just such a purpose. The sooner we got into the cabin and lit the stove, the better. The sky had totally grayed over and a steady snow had just started to fall.

With the sled loaded, Johnny Bee in front pulling and Cinncy in back pushing, they moved about two steps down off of the berm before the two of them sank up to their waists in the unpacked snow. This necessitated a change in strategy. They changed footwear from their insulated hiking boots to their cross country ski boots and stepped into the three pin bindings on their skis. They were now both in front, gliding across the top of the snow, pulling the sled behind them. Taking our cue from them, Pete, Dave and I put on our skis, shouldered our packs, and set off after "Buck" and "White Fang".

The snow began to fall heavier, and by the time we made the cabin, our heads and shoulders were covered in white and the tracks we had left as we made our way through the woods away from the road were filling in and would be totally erased within the hour. Cinncy and Johnny Bee's skis and poles were leaning against the wall next to the porch and they were busy offloading the sled and moving its contents into the cabin. As we came through the door, we could see Cinncy in the dim interior light, crouched in front of the stove.

"Does anybody have a match?" he asked.

I removed my gloves and dug a pack of matches out of a pocket, and tossed it to him. He had already piled some small twigs and curls of birch bark in the dark interior of the stove, and the match, once struck, illuminated his face with a flickering light that slowly grew in intensity as the flame consumed the kindling. He placed finger-thick pieces of wood on the growing flames, and they licked hungrily at the fuel. Soon, a cheery blaze was going. Wrist-thick pieces of branches were next placed onto the

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fire. Johnny Bee had gone out onto the porch and returned with an armful of wood, which he dropped into the box next to the stove. There was a good amount of firewood outside, and plenty of standing dead wood in the surrounding forest with which we would replenish the supply. You did that as a matter of common courtesy for the next people coming into the cabin.

Cinncy closed the door to the stove and adjusted the damper. Brushing his hands off, he stood up and said, "My work here is done." He then crossed the room and launched himself onto the bottom bunk of one of the two sets of bunk beds that lined each of the two side walls. After a while the fire had warmed the stove, and then it added its heat to the air, bringing the temperature up to a level that took the edge off the chill in the air. The cabin had sat empty for weeks, and the interior temperature had risen and fallen in tune with the outside temperature. It would take a while for the fire to drive out the cold completely, but even so it was a whole lot better than being outside.

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Settling into the cabin, we soon had our supplies and equipment in a semblance of order. Since refrigeration wasn't a problem, we simply pushed the coolers into a far corner of the cabin away from the stove, and packed the dry goods in plastic, mouse-proof containers. We had learned our lessons early on when it came to dealing with mice. The shelters in the Great Gulf and especially the shelter on Imp Mountain were mouse hotels, especially in the cold weather. On any given night the mice outnumbered the humans a dozen to one. Lose your morning oatmeal enough times to roving bands of rodents and you learn to take precautions. Granola, pasta, cookies, crackers, *anything* edible was placed in the protection of plastic. Even toilet paper was protected or it would end up shredded as nesting material is some mouse condominium.

I had chosen a top bunk and unrolled my sleeping bag, letting it regain its loft after having been compacted in its stuff sack. It was a good bag, rated to minus twenty degrees, more than needed for a cabin with a stove, but better to be prepared for the unforeseen. Pete had taken a top bunk across the room, and had filled his pipe for a smoke. John and Cinni were rummaging through a duffle looking for a deck of cards while Dave had put a Dutch oven on top of the stove in which he was beginning to prepare dinner. There had been a promise of pot roast and Dave was the one who could pull it off in style. Peter cocked his head towards the door and I nodded. We stepped out onto the porch, and I filled my briar. The snow was falling heavily, and you couldn't tell that anyone had come down the path to the cabin; all trace of our tracks was pretty much gone. There were close to six inches of newly fallen snow that hadn't been there on our way in.

"Hope this keeps up," I said, striking a match and drawing on my pipe, "there'll be great skiing out on the lake."

"Sure will," said Pete, leaning in to use my match, "but I wish I knew how long it's gonna last. Don't want it to get too deep, or we'll be breaking trail waist deep in it."

"S'matter Pete, you getting soft?" I grinned at him.

"No, just practical. How much skiing do you think we'd get done if we had to slog through deep snow just to get out to the lake? The wind would keep the center pretty clear, but the windward shore would be one heck of a drift to break through, and guess which side we're on."

"It's quiet too," I said wistfully, "it reminds me of last February."

I thought back to the previous winter when I had been visiting a friend up in Alaska and I had gotten delayed by snow while driving the Park's Highway between Palmer and Talkeetna. Snow had been falling thick and heavy, and I had pulled into a recently plowed rest area and gotten out of the car for a stretch and a pipe. I couldn't hear a thing. It was as if silence was falling from the sky instead of snow. Couldn't see the mountains, couldn't see the sky, just gray falling silence.

"You have to get back there sometime Pete."

He automatically knew what I was talking about

"I know, Vudsie, I know. Some day," was his reply.

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It had been twenty years since we had packed up a rented car and, along with another friend of ours, driven to Alaska. It had been a dream of ours to go to there and that trip had been Pete's only visit. I, on the other hand, had been back over a dozen times and after each summer trip, I brought Pete back an Alaska spruce seedling for him to plant in his back yard. If he wasn't going back to Alaska, I was going to bring Alaska back to him.

Cincci opened the door, a rectangle of yellow lantern light framing his shadow in the doorway. He stood there peering out at the falling snow.

"Hey c'mon, shut the door! You're letting the cold in!" were the shouts that followed Cinncy out onto the porch. Quickly closing the door behind him, he said, "Hey, we can't find any cards. Either of you bring a deck?"

Peter acknowledged that there was one in the glove compartment of the truck, but that *he* wasn't going to be the one to go and get it.

"S'matter Pete, you getting soft?" asked Cinncy.

"I already asked him that once..."

"Ok Pete, ok," he said, "I want them so it's only fair that I go get them. But if I'm not back in half an hour, send the dogs out to find me."

"He really wants to play poker tonight Pete. We'll have to let him deal first if he goes to get the cards."

"It would be the fair thing to do Vudsie, just remember to watch his hands, not his face."

"Cheating amongst friends?" Cincci asked, pretending to be hurt by the suggestion.

"Friends are the safest people to cheat if you're gonna cheat," said Pete, "and since we're playing for pretzel stix, no harm done."

Cincci zipped up his parka, and put on his mittens. He pulled his balaclava down over his head, stepped into the bindings of his skis and headed off to get the cards from the truck. We watched him as he blurred into the falling snow, a gusting swirl of white finally removing him from our sight.

We could tell that the temperature had been dropping, but unknown to us was that the barometric pressure was dropping too. In and of itself, the snow was a major force to be reckoned with, but when it collided with a Canadian low-pressure system, the building winds whipped the snow into blinding, white out conditions, and the result was a brutal blizzard that seemed intent on stopping anything that moved. Animals in the wild knew enough to hunker down and ride out such a storm. Some people, especially in the more rural areas, would share the same sentiment, respecting the power of the Wild due to their living in such close proximity to it.

But there went Cincci, not giving full consideration to the power of what was swirling and blowing around him, unaware that, like it says in our favorite poem by Robert Service, that "*...the Wild must win in the end.*" So you can imagine how small he looked against the backdrop of a Mother Nature in a very bad mood. Pete and I finished our pipes and went back inside as Cincci was swallowed by the swirling snow.

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It took him three quarters of an hour just to find the vehicles. He had strayed away from the cut-off and ended up coming out to the road a quarter mile below the truck. It was luck that told him to go left once he hit the road. Any landmarks were obscured by the wind-whipped snow, and he was practically on top of the truck before he noticed its snow-covered bulk loom up in front of him. He wasn't cold; his clothing and the exertion of skiing had kept him warm, but now stopping would cause him to chill down if he lingered too long. Clearing most of the accumulated snow away from the truck door, he opened it and shoved his head and shoulders into the cab, the snow that had accumulated on him falling onto the seat and floor. He fumbled with the glove box handle, reached in and got the deck of cards. Stowing them in a pocket, he climbed the berm and headed back to the cabin.

We heard someone stomping out on the porch, and in a moment, the door opened and in stepped Cinnci, looking like a real-life Frosty the Snowman. As he took off his hat, parka, and then his ski shoes, clods of snow fell to the floor. They turned into puddles as the warm temperature melted the snow which had been brought inside, where the wood stove held sway.

"Hey Cinnci, you gonna clean up that melting glacier you brought in with you?" asked Johnny, looking at the liquefying snow pile in front of the door.

"From now on everyone cleans off outside," I said. "This mess is going to eat up most of a roll of paper towels."

"But I got the cards!" Cinnci said, holding up the deck triumphantly.

"And you have a puddle to wipe up before you get to use them," said Pete.

"It's ugly out there," Cinnci said, "I lost the cut off at one point, couldn't see much more than five yards ahead of me in the gusts."

Dave checked his watch and lifted the lid to the cast-iron Dutch oven he had put on top of the hot stove an hour before. The aroma of pot roast filled the cabin, setting our mouths to watering. The roast was accompanied by the usual potatoes, carrots, onions, celery, and whatever spices Dave had put in. They were simmering nicely, and Dave said there was about another half-hour or so before we'd be eating.

"Yeah, the secret to a good pot roast is a touch of ground cloves," he volunteered, moving the ingredients around with a spoon, "but I didn't have any ground cloves, so I stuck two whole cloves into a potato. That'll work fine," he said, replacing the lid. "Just watch out when you bite into your potatoes," he added, going off in search of some flour to make gravy when the time came. We were definitely going to be eating better here than any time we had ever bivouacked in the Great Gulf!

"Hey Vudsie, remember how bad those freeze-dried meals used to taste?"

"Yeah Johnny, I remember...."

Although great strides had been made since then, there remained memories of "turkey tetrazzini" and "beef noodle casserole" that were

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eaten because the only thing worse would have been having no food at all.

But that was then, and this was now. We were older, (arguably) smarter, and less enthusiastic about putting up with discomfort and hardships. The ground was harder, winters colder, and aches and pains lasted longer. That's why we were in a cabin, comfortably tucked away from the storm that was raging outside. There was one past winter trip when we were huddled around a campfire thrilled to find that the temperature had tumbled to minus 30 degrees; another time we spent two days snowbound in a trail tarp shelter with a seemingly endless supply of snow dumping down on us, thinking that it was great! The memory of it *was* great, but the reality was that we weren't as young as we used to be. With the sprouting of grey hairs and "smile lines" we knew that we no longer had anything to prove.

Being together on this kind of trip was still something we looked forward to. Let the wind howl and snow fly. Those details would be incorporated into yet another story that would get told and re-told, the snow getting deeper and temperatures colder with each telling. For now, I was totally enjoying the smell of that roast that Dave was cooking and wasn't shy about being in a hurry to the table when he announced, "Grub's on!"