

The Gift

He trudged on through the never ending whiteness that is desolation. He can no longer feel his face and his feet are useless clubs of ice. Stopping, he cocks his head as if listening for something. Then he hears it. The faint chirping of a small bird just out of his sight. He walks towards it. It's all he's got in this world of white.

He continues to follow the bird across the frozen land until he can go no more. Lying there in a snowbank his mind begins to drift like the snow around him. For the first time he wonders what he's doing here, but he wonders in vain. Sleeping with his eyes seemingly frozen open he dreams. And when he dreams he remembers.

He sees breaking glass and twisted steel in his dream. The concrete wall that suddenly becomes illuminated before the pain. A girl's shrill yell and her hand tightening on his knee and then it's over. He wakes in a sweat despite the cold.

Shivering now he thinks what so many people have thought before when put in these kind of situations. He thinks he'll just close his eyes for a moment and let his body warm up. His last thought before the drifts off is of the girl's touch on his knee.

it seems so right.

In the waiting room a family of five join hands for the fourth time that morning. They believe in prayer. As they silently pray a tear makes its way down the soft cheek of the youngest girl. The father sees and bends down to hold his little girl. Nobody except the girl sees the daddy's tears. She's never seen him cry before and is scared by his quiet display of emotion. The only thing she knows to do is to hug tighter. She does.

In the ICU a girl of nineteen softly cries and tries to wipe away the tears with the clean white hospital sheets. She remembers it all too well. The car. The wall. Everything. The doctors won't tell her about her fiance. She believes him to be dead. She begins to cry again.

Alone, she prays to whatever god there may be. Her prayers are a different sort than the family she knows in the waiting room. They pray for the life of a young man. She only wants to be with the young

man, so she prays to be in the only place she thinks her fiance could be. She prays to visit the afterlife. She prays for her death.

He digs his fingers into the snow as the creature begins to circle. The bolld out of his arm matches the blood on the creature's muzzle. After circling for a few minutes the creature dissappears into teh storm, it's job is completed.

His frozen legs push him up and he shivers from the cold, cold from the fear. The bleeding has stopped, probably frozen stopped, he thinks. He couldn't fathom why the creature had let him live and soon forgets about it as he pushes ever on, one foot after another, following the bird he has yet to see, He believes the bird to be his only hope.

As before he soon ties and salls to one knee. Hearing something behind he turns in time to see the wolf-like creature, belly to the ground, sneaking up to attaaack. In a flurry of snow it pushers off toward him and before he can react the creature rakes it's teeth across his leg, drawing blood again. He stumbles forward and the creature is gone.

His breath freezes before his eyes as he cocks his head to listen for his hope, for now hes ears must take over where his snowblind eyes are failing. It's been hours since the second attack, and he's learned, very painfully, that the creature stays behind as long as he keeps moving towards the bird. It won't let him rest. He's come to think of it as the force pushing him on, for without it, he surely would have stopped long age. He thinks the wolf is some sort of external drive, of sorts. It won't let him quit.

He feels a wind and the clouds break fo rhte first time, revealing a cliff that reaches the sky. It's in the direction he's going, the direction the bird is leading him. The clouds soon draw closed ad he's left with only the white again.

He thinks of the girl and his pace slows. For a second he recalls the smell of heer hair and blinks his eyes rapidly to rid themof their tears that could freeze, painfully. He longs for something. Something he can't remember. A growl from the creature and he quickens his pace.

Time slips away from him as he walks. He thinks about how far away the cliff was and how cold it is. How he's ever going to get out of here. He begins to doubt the bird, to be afraid that it's going nowhere.

With these thoughts in his head he walks as if asleep, not noticing the different creature, that is not his, sitting sitffly, jaws quivering, waiting in his path. It's hungry.

The bird ceases to chip.

In a small white room with mintors everywhere and the scent of hospital cleansers a woman with the hearta of a mither fights back the tears. She's trying to be strong for her son lying motionless on the bed as he has been for three days. She want to hold him in her arms and tell him its alright, but everywhere on him there's bandages and hoses. She holds the tip of his fingers because that's all she can do.

She loses the fight, as she knew she would, adn the tears start their slow cascade. She wipes her now wet hand and her black dress and hopes she never will have to wear it again. The black dress. She hates funerals, doesn't understand why people have to die. She explained being dead to children when they were young and was relieved when they never asked why.

She wore her black dress this morning to the funeral of her son's fiance. How is she going to tell him that the girl he loves is dead? She cried at the funeral not for the girl but for her son, who was partly entombed there too. THe mother knew that when they lowereed the girl into the grave they were also lowereing part of her son. His heart.

The woman with the mother's heart never understood why the girl died. She was in better shape than her son, and he was somehow holding on. What she didn't consider was taht when athe light of summer leaves a flower and winter sets in, the flower dies. So it was with the young girl whose spirit left to seek her love.

The creature in his path was upon him before he could react. Ripping and tearing, ot was going for the jugalar, as it was it's nature. It acted as if ot wanted to get inside, where it could hibernate and eat of him when it chose. Then it was gone. Pushed off him by the creature taht wouldn't let him stop. Burying his head in the snow he heard the creatures run off into the storm.

He lay there and listened to the snarls and the sound of flesh being torn asunder. He knew they were far off but thought he could feel the ground shake beneath. There was a break in the fighting and he heard the creatures run off, further into the storm. He sat there, alone. Without hope, without the sweet sound of the bird.

The chirping woke him and the growl behind him caused him to stumble up on legs still asleep. It was a familiar, if menacing, growl. He began to walk, following the bird and being followed in turn by the creature.

How far he didn't know, but after awhile he cam across the frozen carcass of the creature that had

attacked him. He stands there and looks at it and knows it for what it was made of. He steps over it and plods on into the never ending white.

Later, he wonders if the cliff had been just a trick of the light and the snow. The creature behind lets out a low growl, as, miles behind, a creature thought dead opens its one remaining eye.

In the bathroom of the hospital a brother finally breaks down in the forth stall. He cries and cries and there's nobldy there to hear. That's the way he wants it. He wants to be strong for the family, give them strenght to believe that their other brother is coming back, despite what the doctor's say. But he's so scared himself, especially when he goes in to visit.

Once there, he talks to his injured brother of times shared and people known, trying to get a response, but its useless. The talkingonly makes him sad, for he talks in the past tense, speaks of the good times as if they were gone forever. As if there were no more to come. So he cries alone in the bathroom stall and says a small prayer for his brother, knowing he must be the thousnadh person to ask such a gift in the hospital bathroom, where no one else can see.

When he returns to the waiting room he puts an arm around his younger sister and wonders where his dad is. Soon he returns, and with him he cariies the wallet the brother must have left in the fourth stall. The son looks at the father and knows that his dad was there in teh bathroom, silent. The father looks back, somehow manages a smile, and winks at his son in the way only a dads can.

The son pulls his hat down to hide the tears that are now flowing and his dad hugs him for the first time in years.

He looks up as high as his frozen eyes will allow, hearing hte bird chirpping up there somewhere. He takes a step forward and meets resistance. A wall in the fog. A rock wall. A rock wall that could only be teh cliff. He wants to rejoice but can't spare teh energy. He thinks there's no chance of scaling that cliff and he guesses that the creature will finally get his meal.

Then he hears it. The steady pounding of feet drawing ever nearer. He knws its the other creature. The creature behind hears it too, and rushes out to meet it in the fog. It's growling as it runs.

He listens for the bird and it is no more, but it left a direction for him to follow. Up. He hears the death cry of his creature and knows that the victor will soon come to claim it's prize. Him.

The thought of that vreature crawling inside of him brings a rush of adrenalin he thought was forever gone. He reaches for a handhold on the cliff, finds one, and begins the ascent.

Fingers bleeding and knees raw he rests on a ledge, not daring to look down. The first and last jump of the victorious creature has left a gash in his calf that he knows is bellding all too fast. He wants to sleep, misses the creature that kept him going before, misses the bird he never saw. Misses the touch of his girl. As he begins to climb again he doesn't care whether he falls to the crggy rocks below or not. It's all the same to him.

He sees the light of the moon shining bright somewhere above and as he looks up realizes that he's not alone. On the edge of the cliff is someone, silhouetted against the silvery light of the moon. He climbs faster.

Almost to the top, he reaches for the edge a little too soon and loses grip with his other hand. For a moment he hangs, arm flappign about like wings. Then a familiar touch catches his wrist and pulls him up to the top. Somwhere out of sight, the bird begins it's song again.

He takes his girl in his arms and cries, feeling her long hair blow across his face. She's cyring too, and as he looks into her eyes he's mesmerized by how bright they are. Like stars he thinks, they're all he sees. Then his girl is gine and he's staring at two stars in teh eastern sky that were her eyes a moment ago. Across the distance he can feel her loving him and he hopes she can feel him loving her. The last words to pass his cold lips before he drifts off to sleep are "I'll always remember you."

The woman with the heart of a mother is the one that finds him. Not in his bed but propped up against the window. His lifelines are all ripped out and his broken leg is at an odd angle. His eyes are frozen on the predawn light taht comes before the sun. A pair if stars shine brightly in the glow. He remembers her. His girl.

In the melting frost outside of the third story window are rubbed the letters that spell "I love you." On the inside of the window a young man has circled the words with a heart.