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Whiteout

This place is dead, I marveled as the Tahoe forest flew by. The dead remains of thousands of cold gray trees in combination with a soft white sky dotted the landscape and dirt-brown mountain tops. It was an all-too common sight – the overpowering effects of climate change ruining the weather system and killing forests en masse.

I stopped contemplating the state of the forest when I felt a slight buzzing in my right eye. A quick press on my headphones paused my podcast. I blinked, and the windshield fizzled as the holographic face of my friend Dana appeared before me. I relaxed as my old rental car took over the driving so I wouldn’t be distracted by our call.

“Google Maps shows you’re on the way, Ev,” she said with that Schrödinger smile of hers – the one looks both fake real at the same time but you can never tell. “Thanks again for coming down for the party. I know it’s not the best time, especially with all your research going on, but it means a lot to me.”

I shrugged and looked back at her with uncertainty. “As long as it doesn’t get too out of control. Besides, geophysics, the Alaskan Interior, and my family get dull after a while, so why not come down here? I was worried that Tahoe would be too similar, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Dana frowned at my words, maybe taking offense to them? I couldn’t tell. “It’s been fifteen years since Truckee’s had snow. I remember coming here a lot as a little kid and hanging around town all day,” she reminisced, and I reflexively felt bad at the comparison I had made.

“It was pretty run-down when I stopped there,” I said, and placed my feet up on the dashboard as the car came around another bend. I got a good view of the Sierra Nevada mountains as it did, a muted brown against the stark sky, and was slightly surprised to see a speckling of snow at the peaks. It was a far cry from the pictures Dana had shown me, though.

“Well with no snow and all the forests dead there’s not much to do here now,” Dana sighed, then shook her head and plastered that smile of hers back on her face. “At least it means no one’s around to care if we have a party. You feel ready?”

“I hope so,” I replied, nervous about that smile of hers. The anticipation of the party began to form a small knot in my stomach. “I still have nightmares about the last one.”

“It’ll be fine. The only people I’ve invited are close friends, and there will only be about a dozen of them. You won’t be overwhelmed like the last one.” Dana smiled supportively, then looked offscreen again as someone called her name. “Look, I’ve got to do some more prep work, so I’ll talk to you in an hour when you get here, ok?”

I nodded and smiled. “Talk to you soon,” I said, and ended the call. Dana’s face disappeared, replaced by the winding road and the car’s heads-up display.

I yawned, already tired after talking to Dana for only a few minutes. Social environments weren’t my expertise, and even just chatting with friends was draining. Hope those social guides help, I thought, but I wasn’t holding my breath. At least Dana would be there to help me out if I wasn’t having a good time.

I yawned again and figured a short nap would help me feel ready. It was only 3 in the afternoon; with another hour to go before reaching Dana’s place and then another hour before the party actually started. I pressed a few buttons on the car’s dashboard, programming the car to wake me up a few minutes before I reached my destination. With a confirming ‘beep’, the car accepted the new orders, and I reclined my seat to stare up at the gray sky before dozing off.

A loud warbling sound woke me from my brief slumber. I opened my eyes, expecting to see a gray sky and dead trees, but all around the outside of the car was white. I shot up at the unexpected sight, my eyes blinking frantically at the heavy snowflakes flying into my windshield. Being from Alaska, I knew a blizzard when I saw one, but I’d never seen one this intense.

The car’s HUD and my contacts weren’t providing me with my location, giving me a “NO SIGNAL” error when I tried to connect to the internet. The HUD gave an impossible outside temperature of 2 degrees Fahrenheit. It didn’t make sense: random blizzards don’t appear out of nowhere – especially with California’s ruined climate.

I was almost thrown from my seat when the car sharply swerved around an unseen obstacle. A glance out the windshield revealed the car drifting back and forth between the lanes as it beeped at me about the reduced visibility. I cursed, realizing how strained the car must be and shut off the auto-drive as my hands returned to the steering wheel in an attempt to take control.

That was a mistake.

The car jolted and slid as the tires lost traction. I screamed and hit the brake out of panic, which only spun me more. The car tore through the barrier with a metallic screech. My world spun as I bowled down the hill in my metal coffin. Like a light being turned off, my world went black.

I don’t know how much later I woke up, but when I did my head was ringing like a drum and every turn of my neck hurt. Panic and anxiety flooded my nerves as the adrenaline slowly brought me back to life. It was a struggle to lift my head to gaze at the carnage.

Somehow, I had survived. I could tell the car was unsalvageable, if the squashed interior was anything to go by. The windows were gone and fresh snow piled up on the seats. The outside was nothing but a wall of white, which the still-functioning headlights failed to penetrate. My bag of warm clothes was partially shredded, t shirts ang jeans were flung throughout the car. Fortunately, my e-contacts were still in my eyes. Getting new ones from the glovebox would be impossible, what with the passenger side having been caved in by a tree. *Must’ve hit my head on the* door. No wonder my skull was ringing… or was that someone talking? I couldn’t tell. *At least the airbag deployed*.

Well, there was no way I was getting to Dana’s house now. I couldn’t stay in my car though, judging by the thick snowflakes landing on the dashboard. I looked at my door and felt something in my ear gently pull back. A glance back and I spotted my headphone cable leading into the space between my seat and the armrest. I reached down and felt the cold metal of my phone between my already cold fingers.

“That’s something at least,” I mumbled to myself. It took some effort, but I managed to pull my phone out of the space. The bezel-less screen was completely cracked and the back cameras were shattered. Fortunately for me, it still functioned. Smiling weakly, I unlocked it with a quivering finger. I already knew I wouldn’t have any reception what with the intense blizzard, and my phone only confirmed it with no solid bars. Calling for help wasn’t what I had in mind though. I had installed several survival guides a while ago – I’d hoped they’d never have to be used, but it pays to be prepared, no?

A shiver ran down my spine. The cold was starting to set in and my party dress wasn’t going to cut it. I grabbed a jacket lying on the passenger seat and opened up one of several survival apps on my phone. My chest pounded with leftover adrenaline and I looked through the categories of survival tips.

“Dating suggestions, party tips, profile advice… what is this crap?” I wondered. This wasn’t what I wanted! I needed instructions on how to build a fire and survive in the harsh cold, not guides on how to survive social situations and large parties! I closed the current app and opened another one, but it was more of the same. I had probably downloaded these one night in the hopes they’d help me deal with a large party or something. I couldn’t remember.

I opened the app store, but without signal I couldn’t get to the front page. I squeezed the phone in exasperation, dropped it on my lap, and hit my fist against the car door. *Ok Evelynn, don’t panic. You don’t have survival guides, but that doesn’t mean it’s over. Just take a deep breath and relax.*

I took a deep breath and winced. My chest didn’t like that, so something was either cracked or broken. *Great, that’s going to be an annoying hospital bill.* I leaned my head back against the head rest, closed my eyes, and tried to settle my thoughts on what to do.

“Hey, how ya doin’?”

I opened my eyes when I heard the faint voice. What was that? Who was that? It sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it.

I looked around for the phantom voice, but I couldn’t see anything or anyone in the car that could be making noise. It had to be coming from outside. Did someone find the smashed guard rail back up the hill?

 I was also left with a dilemma: stay here and wait for the storm to subside, or go out and find whoever was talking? Maybe it was Dana and some friends? *If that’s the case, I’d rather try and find them than stay here and freeze in the car*.

I fiddled with my seat buckle and unclipped myself after a few tries. The movements made my head throb again, and it only got worse once I managed to force my door open and allow the powerful blizzard into my car.

My teeth clicked and chattered uncontrollably as my fingers already started to numb from the cold. I wrapped my thin jacket tighter around my chest and put one foot out of the car. The icy cold that shot up my leg made me realize that was a bad idea, and I pulled it back into the car and slammed the door.

“Dammit!” I groaned. There was no way I’d last for long out there. I had to try though. Another quiet voice whispered from somewhere outside. Getting out of the car and finding someone who could help would offer me the greatest chance of survival. I looked around my car at the scattered clothes. They weren’t like my clothes back home in Alaska, all thick parkas and snow pants, but they’d certainly help.

When I got out of the car again, I was wearing my thick scarf, a hat, and some thicker pants. I found my regular walking shoes too – trying to walk through the snow in high-heels would be a disaster waiting to happen. I tucked my phone and headphones into my jacket where they wouldn’t get cold and glanced around. The wind had died down, so it was easier to see and hear, but the area was still blanketed in white. I still couldn’t pinpoint what direction the people were talking from, but if they were trying to help me they’d be somewhere near the road… maybe.

Trying to find the road or other walkable path in the middle of a snowstorm to find whoever was talking, wearing nothing but some party clothes, is not a good idea. I realized this too late when I started walking through the trees and felt the cold air creep its way into my extremities. *I hate the snow*, I told myself, as I trudged through the several inches of freshly fallen white powder.

There was something eerie about walking between the dead trees as it snowed. Some of the trees looked like they were stuck in the poses of dying creatures. I couldn’t help but look up and watch as snowflakes piled onto dead tree limbs and caused them to sag. I had seen snow covering healthy tree branches, but never anything like this. Both the snow and tree limbs were cold, depressing, and a variant of the color gray. A gust of wind blew the snowflakes against my face. They stung, and I looked away.

“Goddammit, where are you Dana?” I yelled, unable to find the voices I kept hearing. They were all around me now – closing in, getting louder, like the crowd at a bar when they see someone who doesn’t fit in… I stopped and leaned against a nearby tree. *I can’t-I need a break.* My chest rose and fell with deep breaths of the icy air. I winced with every breath, but I needed to breathe and recompose myself before I descended into a panic attack. If whoever was out there found me in the middle of one, I’d die from the embarrassment.

I pulled out my phone and tapped the screen. It was almost 7 PM, and I still had no signal. I wasn’t surprised by that. What did surprise me was the ongoing notification that my podcast was playing. I squinted at the screen and thumbed the button for increasing the volume. The faint voices that I had previously heard solidified into several people talking at once through my one earbud.

That tense, icy knot formed in the middle of my stomach as I realized just how stupid I’d been. Wandering through the forest, searching for random voices that turned out to be coming from my dying phone… I was almost happy no one was actually around so they wouldn’t see how foolish I was. I tapped the screen of my phone and stopped the podcast before it could waste more of the battery and my sanity. At that point I knew that my headache was probably a concussion, if my poor decision-making was anything to go by.

*You deserve the humiliation, to be honest*, someone whispered in my ear. My eyes widened and I looked around with a renewed fear. “Alan?” I asked into the wind, praying that what I heard was a mistake. “Is that you?”

There was no response. I had to be hearing things. My brother was back in Alaska, hunting and fishing and helping my aging parents at the house.

A cold gust of wind brushed its icy fingers against my face, pulling me away from my thoughts. My surroundings started to glitch and fizzle and fog up. I shook my head and blinked a few times to make the world look right again, but the cold had already taken its toll on my e-contacts. *How did I forget that e-contacts and freezing temperatures don’t mix?!* I berated myself. I had to wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, but it barely helped.

It was when my eyes started to sting that I knew I was in trouble. The painful sensation caught me mid-step, and the suddenness startled me and threw me off balance. I tripped and fell into the fresh snow and let out a pained grunt. One of my ribs landed on a tree root. Cold spread across my chest, and I could feel the fresh snow melt and soak into my clothes – the worst nightmare for someone stranded.

I rolled onto my back and clawed at my eyes to get my contacts out. I needed to see. My breath shortened and that knot only got bigger with every failed attempt to pull out my contacts. I couldn’t do it though. My fingers had become too numb to make such fine movements necessary when playing with one’s eyeball, so I had no choice but to let the contacts remain.

I couldn’t stay down on the forest floor though. The blizzard showed no signs of letting up, and at this point I began to wonder if I had any chance of making it out of the forest alive. With my eyes not working and without any stumps or branches or bushes it was a challenge to get back onto two legs. It’s funny how much you take your eyesight for granted when it works.

There was one small problem I hadn’t realized when I set earlier: I had no idea what direction led back to the car, and when I checked the ground for my footsteps I only saw slight indentations in the snow. *Dammit, why didn’t I leave a trail of something?*

I wiped my eyes again and bent low to the ground to make out my old footsteps. I shuffled forward to follow the disappearing depressions before the snow could claim them.

I traced my footsteps back for a few minutes before something started creaking loud enough that it could be heard over the wind. I stood up and glanced around. My breathing picked up as my mind raced with hundreds of images of what could be making the sound. The creaking soon turned into a groaning noise, and the groaning turned into cracking as a tree in front of me snapped and fell to the ground.

“Shit!” I crawled backwards from the fallen tree and stumbled to my feet. All around me trees creaked and cracked and crashed to the ground. It was a cacophony of falling wooden giants and howling wind. I scrambled out of the way of another branch and ran. Adrenaline pumped through my veins. My brain switched to flight.

I don’t know how long I kept running, but at some point, the noise of falling trees and howling wind faded from my ears. I stopped and tried to catch my breath, but it was hard and I could only manage slow, shallow breaths. My lungs filled with ice-cold air. My stomach was twisted in so many knots that it felt like my insides were scrambled.

The wind had fortunately died down a bit, but the whiteout was still in full force. Seeing more than a meter in front of my face was impossible, and my e-contacts only made it worse. Still, I had to press on. I had to get back to my car. I had to get warm.

Each step became harder as the cold set in until my feet went numb. Where was I again? Why was I down here? I felt drowsy, like the cold was sapping all the energy out of me.

Then my brother started talking to me. His voice was loud and clear, as if he was inside my own head, opening up a beer and sitting at the table.

*And you call yourself an Alaskan, heh! You should just die here and spare our family the humiliation.*

“No, that’s not true!”

*You know Mom needs you here. She can barely piss herself. She's depressed. And you just go out, leave her here and study the color of rocks.*

"I'm not coloring rocks, it's geophysics. It's important. Besides, you're here and so is Dad."

*His liver is a piece of concrete. And the only thing we get from Amazon is Jack Daniels. He's useless. And now look at you. You're alone. You've always preferred being alone with your rocks. Do you even have any friends, besides rhyolite and obsidian? You're in a dress for a party you don't want to go to. You're freezing to death. If you knew how to make a fire and get your ass out of a book, maybe you'd survive this. If you had ever come on a hunting trip with me.*

"I don’t eat deer meat.”

*That not the point. And you know it.*

My brother’s rant was cut short by the appearance of two bright lights cutting through the whiteout. A car! Finally!

“Hey!” I called out and raised my arms as far as they could go. “Help me!”

There was no response except the whistling of the wind. I dragged my legs forward and tried again. “Hello?” Again, nothing. The car didn’t even look like it was moving. I pressed forward, hoping the occupants were around the car somewhere.

The body of the car finally came into view, and my heart dropped even more when I realized it was *my* car. A layer of snow covered it, but it was till mangled and dented from the crash. I fell to my knees from a combination of despair and exhaustion. My vision began to dance.

I tried to make words but my lips were too numb. I wanted to cry. I wanted to scream. I wanted to get warm, but I just couldn’t.

*Fire is your friend.*

I willed my legs to shuffle the final few steps towards the car. The driver side door was still open, and I collapsed onto the snow-covered seat. My limbs were cold and exhausted, and I couldn’t feel my toes or fingers anymore. I had to get warm, I wouldn’t survive the next hour.

My eyes caught sight of a bottle of alcohol. How did that get here? I didn’t remember packing it in my bag. I couldn’t refuse it though, given it was my best chance to start a fire.

I pulled open the top with clumsy hands, and some of the alcohol immediately spilled out and onto my clothes and seat. *Shit.* I didn’t want to catch fire.

I didn’t have any sticks around, but I remembered I packed a lighter into my toiletries bag (why I remember packing that and not the alcohol I don’t know). As if God was gazing on me with pity I found the bag behind the passenger seat. The lighter was in it. My fingers were useless. I gave it a few flicks using the heal of my hand, like an old cowboy and his smith and Wesson.

I set the branches down on the passenger seat and dropped some clothes on top of them. It was a challenge to pour the alcohol. My hands kept quivering, and a third of it landed on the seat itself. I didn’t care – I need to get this fire going. Obviously, I wasn't thinking very clearly.

The alcohol caught fire, and the warmth was welcoming. Flames licked the ceiling and spread onto the seat, but I didn’t care. I needed the heat. The cloud that hung over my mind and made thinking difficult evaporated away. I raised my hands to the fire and let the flames lick my fingers.

I realized I made a mistake when I felt heat along the top of my head. I glanced up and found the roof of the car was on fire. Thick black smoke began to roll out of the windows. I choked on the fumes.

“Shit!” I scrambled out of the car before the fire spread. Tendrils of flame licked my feet, eager to consume me. Now I *really* felt the heat and watched in shock as my rental car burned. My clothes, my electronics. My attachment to the world.

Smoke and steam emanated from the ground as the fire melted the new snow. The fallen trees, all dead were perfect as fuel. They ignited, and soon a ring of fire began to grow around me.

I don’t know how long I remained sitting and watching the car and trees burn. At some point, the blizzard began to subside. It was slow at first: the wind went from a high howl to a low moan. The snowfall slowed, and the flakes that had stung my face now gently landed on my shivering hands. The white haze that descended upon the forest began to recede, like a monster that had been exposed to the fire.

The fire continued to burn and spread. My eyes remained fixed on the dancing flames that skirted the forest. Smoke billowed into the air, clashing with the white, overcast sky. Surely someone had to see it.

*Nice job sis. Now how are you going to get out of here?* Alan was right. I had no car, no food or water, and even with the blizzard gone I was stuck in freezing temperatures. The fire would rage for a while, but once night settled it would get too cold for me to survive. I looked down at my fingers and tried to move them.

 The howling of the wind changed to the howling of sirens. My eyes widened and I looked up at the hill as the first of the fire trucks rounded the corner. They stopped where my car had smashed through the guard rail.

Several firemen dragged long hoses down the embankment, white snakes uncoiling from the trucks. I heard their shouts and heavy voices.

“What the hell happened here?” he looked at me quizzically. I tried to speak, but I couldn’t move my lips. He wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and smiled. “It’s going to be okay. It’s good thing that blizzard subsided, else we never would’ve seen the smoke from the fire.

He paused and stared at the fire that I started. He whistled, and pointed to the skeleton of my car.

“That must’ve been an intense crash. Pretty amazing of you to survive that in the blizzard,” he stated. I nodded, but couldn’t find the words to say to him. Even though he was a complete stranger, I didn’t feel the knot in my stomach anymore.

“Well let’s get you home. Your family must be worried about you.”