



By: Zach Dolager

Get Fucked and Die

Told by Zach Dolager



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This book is dedicated to all the poor souls whose hands are sore and calloused from making some rich asshole gobs of money while they get nothing. This book is written for the men and women who worked their entire lives to find their pensions gone, their houses foreclosed on. Also, it is for those who work multiple jobs to have to live in a station wagon and to be called, “Freeloaders,” for being on public assistance. This book is for all those with their noses to the grindstone, year after year, getting absolutely fucking nothing in return except a pay cut. If you’re fucking lucky, maybe you’ll get a, “Thank you.” This book is for my generation, the Fucked Generation, who was incorrectly promised that if they went to college and humped the American Dream that they, just like their parents who never went, would make gobs of money, and when the Dream failed the, “Laziest Generation” called us failures for refusing to work at McWalmart for an unlivable wage. This book is for all of those people out there that can’t afford the doctor’s bills that mandatory health insurance does not cover, for all the people working for even ten dollars an hour who can’t make end’s meat, and for the 99% who struggle every day while the top 1% laugh all the way to the bank with our blood, sweat, tears, and what Nu American People adore most: money.

Basically, if you live in America and aren’t some swindling fuck working for Wall St. or sucking Halliburton’s teat, this book is for you. Even if you are some Grandma’s pension-snatching motherfucker and you realize how fucked we are, even in just the most minute manner, keep reading. If not, don’t fear. Do what you always do:

Close this book and keep shopping.

Nothing to see here...

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By Zach Dolager

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Thank you for your cooperation.

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Finding Zach Dolager

I felt the cold, steel barrel of a gun on my neck before he said a word. I stopped dead in my tracks and instinctively raised my hands. I heard the, “Click,” of the hammer going back.

“Get on your knees, put your hands on your head,” he said calmly.

“Zach...”

“Get on your fucking knees!” he said angrily, and he pushed me to the ground.

He ripped off my backpack, and then patted me down. He took my knife and wallet out of my pants. I shook uncontrollably, taking panting breaths that materialized as vapor in the night air. It was pitch black except for the flashlight he was holding. I could see the shadow of a large handgun and the light moving as he checked through my wallet.

I heard him cock the hammer off and put his pistol in the holster.

“Rob?” he asked.

“Ya...yes,” I stuttered.

“Well get the hell up, man, I didn’t know that was you!” He shouted. He came around in front of me and extended his hand. I grabbed it, and he pulled me up into a hug. “Man, it’s been so long.”

“Yeah, it’s been years,” I said, hugging him.

“Come on,” he said, throwing my back pack to me. “My camp is nearby. Follow me.” He handed me back my knife and we started walking.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the base of a large pine tree. Zach pulled a makeshift, wooden ladder out of a pile of leaves and sticks and rested it on the backside of the tree. He shined his flashlight up the ladder, revealing another ladder of 2X4’s that were nailed into the tree just above the reach of the first ladder.

“After you,” Zach said. “I’ll be right behind you, watch the rope.”

I nodded and began climbing the ladder. About half-way up, I looked down to see where Zach was. He was tying the dangling rope to the makeshift ladder. A few moments later he was just two steps behind me. He pointed the flashlight up the tree.

“That’s a fake tree top. I nailed a bunch of branches to the bottom of my camp to make it look non-conspicuous.”

“Right,” I said, and continued up the tree.

When we got to the fake tree top, about forty feet above the ground, Zach said, “Reach around the tree, and find the hole. In the hole is a small piece of rope. Pull it, and then push up directly above your head.”

I reached around the tree, and with some trouble found the hole. I pulled the rope and heard a, “Click. “ I saw a crack of faint light appear above me. I pushed up and opened the hatch. Inside I could see a larger than expected tree house.

“Go on in,” he said. “I have to secure this ladder.”

“Okay,” I said, and I climbed inside.

Inside the tree house was nicer than I expected. There was a wood stove for cooking/heating in the middle of the room, a futon, a television with a DVD player and a bunch of movies, electric lights, a kitchen with a slop sink and shelves that held plates and other eating paraphernalia, a college dorm-room sized refrigerator, and two other rooms. One had the door closed; the other was too dark to see in.

“Mi casa, su casa,” Zach said entering the house. He shut the hatch and locked it. Then, he turned on the TV and changed the input to, “Video 2.” The screen was split ten different ways for each individual camera that he had. He studied the infrared images for a moment and then turned off the TV.

“How do you power all of this?” I asked.

“Mr. Sun,” he said. “I stole a bunch of solar panels off those radar-trap sign thingies the cops put up, and then I stole a bunch of car batteries and hooked it up to a regulator system I stole from some flatlander’s camp. You want a beer?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

Zach went into the other room, and a few moments later came back with an armful of wood and two Switchback ales on top of the pile. I walked over to him and took the beers, placing them on the table in the middle of the room, near the stove. Zach used his foot to open the door to the stove, and then he shoved the wood inside and closed the door.

“Should be good for tonight,” he said, walking over to his weather station. “Shouldn’t be too cold. Electric heat will kick on anyway.”

I opened both beers and handed one to Zach.

“Sit,” he said, motioning to the table

We sat down at the unfinished, wooden table.

“So, what’s up, man? What brings you out here this evening?” he asked.

“Well,” I paused. “Your parents want to know where you are...”

Zach sighed and slumped back in his chair. “You mean my Mom and that guy she’s fucking?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Also, more importantly, I miss you, man. I wanted to find out if you were even still alive! There’s a nasty rumor going around that you died in some skiing accident.”

Zach laughed so hard beer came out of his nose. “Fuck, that burns,” he wheezed. He ripped a paper towel off the roll on the table and wiped up the beer.

“Listen, Zach,” I said carefully. “We just wanted to make sure you weren’t dead or something. I mean, what the fuck happened? Some people say you died, others say you robbed the DMV and are on the lam. Do you know how hard it was to find you?”

“First of all, that’s all bullshit. Well, most of it...”

“What do you mean, ‘most of it?’”

Zach took a sip of beer and waved his hand back and forth. “Why do you ask, do I have a warrant or something?”

“Not...not that I know of,” I said, confused. “Your parents say your student loans are so out of date that they’ve actually gone beyond the statute of limitations on debt collection for your private loans. Your parents want to know how you’re getting along with the feds garnishing your wages on your federal loans”

“Wages?” Zach laughed. “Good luck with that.”

“Anyway,” I said, “I’ve been in town for a week, asking everyone about you. Finally, I found...”

“You found me because I wanted you to find me. I may be way out in the woods, but I have connections. I got a few contacts that I trust. You know, as much as you can trust another human. Lemme guess, you ran into Mike and he pointed you up West Hill, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said in a confused tone.

“Never thought they’d send *you*; didn’t even recognize you from Mike’s description. You’ve lost weight, cut and dyed your hair? You look good, man. What do you do for work? What’s your life all about? Why did you stop answering my calls, we were best friends?”

“I didn’t stop answering your calls! I was just really busy, and when I called back you never answered. Then one day your number was disconnected.”

“Hmm, I guess that’s my bad. I threw my phone away. I have one device I make VOIP calls through when I’m in town. I use this service that’s totally anonymous. That is, until they make it illegal or force them to turn over data.”

“What else are you up to?” he asked.

“I’m still working at the same place, doing construction and landscaping,” I said. I took a swig of beer.

“Oh yeah, how’s getting butt-fucked by rich assholes going?” Zach laughed.

“You know, it sucks. Like everyone else I’m barely making ends meet, working 50 plus hours a week. But listen, enough about me, what’s up with you? You’re a fucking ghost man!”

“I live up here with my daughter and old lady, and I am happy because all of our work and effort goes to us, not some rich asshole who doesn’t give two shits about our wellbeing. I got sick of being treated like a fucking computer, or a car, or any other piece of machinery; getting the shit beat out of me and then being thrown in the trash and replaced by some newer shit-head that is going to be loyal to some piece of shit corporation and get nothing in the fucking end,” he shouted.

“Well what the fuck happened?” I asked. “How can you just tell everyone to fuck off and live out here in the woods? You can’t just live in a fucking tree, what if you get hurt? What happens when you get old and can’t do this anymore? How are you going to retire? I just don’t...”

“Listen, it may seem crazy but I’m better off than you. At least my farts make noise. One reason Trump is president is because people are fucking sick of sucking society’s dick and having to swallow. Granted he’s a tool of the N.W.O just like the rest of them, but at least there was *some* hope. Anyway, I just did something about it, besides voting which we all know makes no difference. Our country was sold to the highest bidder long ago. I don’t pay taxes and I don’t make some rich fuck richer. I live my fucking life and take what I want. You wanna hear the fucking story about how I supposedly, ‘flipped out for no reason,’ well it’s not a short fucking story.”

“I got all the time in the world,” I said taking a sip of beer. “I’m on vacation.”

“All right,” Zach said. “Then listen the fuck up.”

The Beginning of the End

Even though I was wearing an external mic, I could barely hear my radio through my helmet.

“Three-eight-four to 827.”

“Go ahead,” I said, still skiing at full speed.

“Zach, grab the backboard from Three-six-nine on your way to that code.”

“10-4, I’m pulling up there now.”

I came to a stop in a cloud of white. I kicked off my skis as fast as I could and entered the ski patrol shack known as Three-six-nine, at the top of the bunny hill at *Sherburne Bowl Ski Resort*. I located the backboard, grabbed it, and was back on skis in a flash. I went into a full tuck, skiing as fast as I could on that bluebird, warm spring day.

As I came down the hill, I saw a crowd circled around something. There was a patrol snowmobile parked on the outskirts of the crowd. Somehow Hunter and Ned, my supervisor, had beaten me there. I quickly stopped, popped off my skis, and made my way through the crowd. In the middle was a young man, lifeless. He didn’t look to be any older than twenty-five. Hunter was in the process of cutting the boy’s shirt off with trauma shears.

“Zach, get the backboard underneath him,” Hunter shouted as he did compressions on the young man. Ned readied the AED and then applied the BVM to the boy’s face.

“When Hunter tells you, squeeze this,” Ned told a bystander. “Can you hold the mask over his face, please, like this?” he asked another bystander.

“Okay,” she said in a shaky voice. “I am a nurse. “

Blood, spinal fluid, and whatever was in his stomach poured from every orifice on his face. It was like giving a jelly donut CPR. His eyes were glassy and fixed: lifeless.

I put the backboard next to the young man.

“Let’s roll him up, stick the board underneath him, and strap him in,” I said to Ned and another bystander.

Ned, the bystander and myself clenched the young man’s pants and jacket.

“Okay, we’re going to roll him towards me, stick the board underneath him, and then roll him back down.” I said. “Anybody not ready?” I paused. “Okay, on the count of three: One, two, three,” I said. We rolled him on his side and stuck the backboard underneath him. “Count of three, and we’ll roll him back down,” I said. “One, two, three,” I said, and we rolled him back down onto the backboard.

As I spider-strapped the boy to the backboard, I took another look at his face. It was frozen in time, sort of like a deer head on the wall of a hunting camp.

Ned went back to manning the AED and finally turned it on.

“Analyzing rhythm, please stand clear!” the AED said.

Hunter jumped off the young man and shouted, “Everyone stand clear!” Everyone backed off the boy and waited for a few moments in silence.

“Shock not advised, continue CPR,” the AED said. Hunter got back on top of the boy and started doing compressions again.

It was eerily quiet. The only sounds were the occasional AED directions, Hunter counting under his breath as he did compressions, and the huffing of the BVM after every 30 compressions, attempting to get oxygen into his lungs. All our efforts only contributed to his remaining vital fluids spilling out onto the snow.

The patient took a gasp, but it was not the flicker of life: agonal breaths, the nervous system’s attempt to get oxygen back into a body that has gone into irreversible shock.

After a few cycles of CPR and the AED not advising a shock, we tied his hands and feet together and loaded the young man onto the stiff-hitched patrol toboggan that was attached to the back of the snowmobile. Ned got on the snowmobile and started it up. Hunter straddled the young man in the toboggan, continuing to give CPR.

“Zach, grab my skis,” Hunter said as the supervisor started the snowmobile.

“10-4,” I said, and the snowmobile lurched forward. A few seconds later it was gone.

The crowd began to disperse. One of the bystanders was using the snow to clean his blood-soaked hands. The bright-red, blood-soaked snow stood bold against the world of white surrounding it, the sun beaming down through a cloudless sky. A voice brought me out of my fog.

“Where are you taking my brother?” an anxious voice said. His face was pale, his eyes dim.

“Go with Matt,” I said, pointing to another patroller. He had just showed up on a snowmobile and hadn’t witnessed the scene. I barely knew him, as at this point I was only a part-time slave. “He will take you to the bottom of *Goat Mountain*, where the ambulance is waiting.”

“Thank you,” he wheezed.

“Matt,” I called out. He was taking a witness statement from one of the bystanders.

“Yo,” he said.

“Can you take him to his brother?” I asked.

“Of course,” Matt said, walking over. “Grab your gear, and get on the back of the snowmobile,” he said to the patient’s brother. The young man quickly gathered his skis and poles and hopped on the snowmobile. They roared off up the hill at break-neck speed.

Most of the bystanders were now gone. Now I was alone with the quiet, just me and my thoughts, and the massive pool of blood in the snow. At least it was a nice day to die...

And then I thought, “All this for \$9/hour?”

“Jesus Christ.” I said to Zach. “So that’s why you flipped your shit?”

Zach chugged the rest of his beer and slammed the bottle down on the table.

“I didn’t flip anything,” Zach said. “I came to a realization that has led to a better life. Anyway, I should probably start from the beginning.”

The Last Days in the Police State, and My Exodus to Vermont

“Fuck you!” I screamed at a car that sped up when I passed it. I swerved left, then right back into the lane, tires on the old van chirping the whole time just trying to keep the rig on the road. I was late again, having to live in a shitty apartment an hour away from the city because of my barely-livable wage. I was on the verge of going over the edge.

“Just turn the wheel,” I said to myself as I illegally passed a car on a double yellow, doing about a hundred miles per hour. A pedestrian started to cross the street but fell over backwards trying to turn and run away from my death machine.

“Hit the tree,” I muttered. “It won’t hurt. It’ll all be over in a second.”

“Watch it, asshole!” someone screamed out of their window as I violently swerved the van all over the road.

“No matter,” I thought, “It will be all over soon.”

I let go of the steering wheel and shut my eyes. Moments later, I heard a loud screech, and the honk of an angry horn.

“Fucker!” was all I heard being shouted from the oncoming car. It was all Doppler-effected and distorted. I almost went into a full slide, but I slung the wheel back and forth and straightened her out. Then, right there in the middle of rush hour, I slammed on the brakes and came to a full stop right in the middle of the fucking road.

The guy behind me nearly hit me as he also screeched to a halt. He started honking his horn. My hands were shaking and clammy with sweat. I started to cry and smash the horn with my closed fist. Everyone behind me started honking and screaming. That’s when I fell silent and my hands stopped shaking. It was then, at that very moment, the Corporate American Dream died for me. 9/11, the recession (really a depression by definition, but they like to lie to keep us content), that unnecessary fear of terrorism; all these things have been used by the scum-suckers in power to move along their agenda which represents only the big corporations, or whoever else’s dick they happen to be sucking at that particular time. They’ve used their criminal friends on Wall St. to pay for a media campaign that teaches us, through programs like the news and, “Here Comes Honey Boo Boo,” that you must accept less pay and benefits than the previous generation had in the same job title, and that

you must accept ass-rape without lube. You work exponentially harder while your pay stays the same, or in some cases gets worse. This leaves the intelligent employee struggling to cope with the fact that while their idiot bosses do nothing and make all the money, the average Joe is left to pay all the bills and taxes, which they cannot afford. With not enough money, these people, my generation especially, are forced to do things like move back home and be told they are, “Lazy” by a generation of ingrates and thieves who took their future and our future and our kid’s future and spent it *all*.

So where does this leave us? The TV box runs commercials 24/7 on how to consolidate debt, and how the Government and the cocksuckers running the big banks will take everything you own if you don’t pay up, reinforcing the fact that you should feel like a piece of shit for not buying the Dream. Like you should be some kind of degenerate, second-class citizen if you chose to feed your children rather than pay back some rich asshole eating Foie Gras on an island he bought with your Grandmother’s pension. They don’t even have to send leg-breakers to your house, they do it digitally, 24/7, 365 and ½ days a fucking year.

If you’re like 99% of us, just watching TV, listening to the radio, or the first of the month makes you depressed. And that’s where I was: depressed, talking to myself, flying down some back road late to a job I hated, contemplating ending it all instead of just giving everyone at work the finger and driving my shit-box van straight through my boss’ gigantic office window. Generally, I’ve found that the bigger the office, the less work that person actually does.

How would I pay back my school bill if I quit my job? How would I retire without the, “Huge,” \$16,000 dollar a year max pension I could make at my job as a clerk for the DMV? And then I thought finally, and for the first time, “Who fucking cares?”

Seriously, who gives a fuck? Most of the wealth in this country got it from slavery, either from the black slaves of yesteryear or the financial slaves (like you and I) of today, so who cares? I mean really, they can’t lock you up or hit you, but you can hit them by not paying back things like bullshit student loans you took out as an eighteen-year-old because you were told you had no other choice. “You have to go to college,” the Boomers said. Well, at least *my* parents did. “Doesn’t matter what it’s for,” they said. I would have been better off maxing out a few credit cards and declaring bankruptcy, or robbing a bank and burying the money until the statute of limitations wore off! For most people, both of those options have better outcomes than going to college.

Also, not too long ago, many higher-ups in various colleges were scrutinized for taking kick-backs from student loan companies. In 2007, the University of Pennsylvania, New York University, Syracuse University, Fordham University, Long Island University and St. John's University repaid a total of \$3.27 million dollars for encouraging students to steer towards scumbag lenders like Sallie Mae, who are like the Mafia in *Goodfellas*: "Fuck you, pay me." You can't even declare bankruptcy thanks to Bush Jr, that fucking swine. I'll admit, it is a good deal: steal billions, but only pay back millions. That's straight economics.

I will never forget this particular case of debt-slave economics because I was issued a reimbursement check for my silence on the issue. I think it was like \$50 bucks or something, issued by Umass Boston. The check was written by Bank of America, so I went there to cash it because my bank at the time took for-fucking-ever to cash anything, and I needed money. After taking my fingerprints like they were some kind of Nazi law enforcement agency, they told me it would cost five dollars to cash the check that *they* wrote. I told them where they could shove the check and took it across the street to good ol' Shaw's supermarket, where the nice lady behind the counter kindly cashed it for just one dollar, and she did not take my prints. They're not even a fucking bank, they are a God damned grocery store, and they still cashed my check for less than the bank that issued the check would do it for! Somehow that's all legal, but then again this is one of the banks that backed up its armored cars to the Federal Reserve and stole trillions of *our* fucking money. They are co-owners of the American corporation, and therefore basically above any laws that apply to you and I.

Anyway, it's mental conditioning through the media by the gigantic corporations that own America, and by the propaganda of the puppets currently in power that we just take this kind of abuse. Like paying five bucks to cash a check that they issued to silence us from yelling, "Rape!" in the bursar's office. We can't just accept the fact that we will always be poor, that we are squabbling for the rich's couch change, that we are truly Fucked. Some realize it, but just ignore it. Instead of throwing a bomb through the front window of Bank of America, we just put our collective heads down to the grindstone for permanent-poverty wages! No, I wouldn't stand for this shit! I decided fully, at that very moment, that the Corporate American Dream was dead for me and most of my Generation, but most would never realize it. Unlike most, I wasn't dumb enough or stoned enough to believe in it anymore. The only people left who do believe in the Dream are asleep, or really stoned. And they wonder why this is also the junkie generation? It pays more to be a junkie on welfare than it does to enter the workforce!

In this single moment of pure rock-bottomness, I found out that I'd rather die than work another day for the scumbags who make all the money, yet really do nothing. Sorry, but making bets with the future of America and not paying tax on the income does not qualify as work to me, especially when most money now-a-days has been handed down from one slave-owner to the next. They used to do it with chains and whips; now they lead you by the wallet.

I'd rather get fucked and die than follow that crock of shit.

This idea of dumping the main stream was solidified upon my late arrival to work. There was no one in the cash room, so I had to go find my dickhead boss. I walked down the secure hallway and out through the cubicles. Some customer was already yelling about something. I grumbled something under my breath.

"You're three minutes late," she said. "Mattapan is understaffed; it's your turn to go there."

This, "Under-staffing," issue was due to the fact that the Regional Manager had sucked cock to make her way up the totem pole, (also does not qualify as work to me, either) and she did not have a single brain cell in her entire cranial region. Not one fucking synapse. We'd have been better off making decisions with a fucking Plinko. Or maybe that's how decisions on the corporate level *are* made. I mean, why not, they know the workers will just fix it and make it work while they pat themselves on the back for such a, "Great idea."

For example, a monkey with syphilis could figure out that if you're understaffed and people go on vacation at a certain branch, you just might need more people from another branch to fill in. Therefore, you should notify other branches to see who wants to work there during that employee's vacation. Seems like a no-brainer, right? I mean when people go on vacation they give weeks, sometimes months' notice, especially at the bureaucratic bullshit department that is the DMV. I guess that kind of logical thinking was above my pay-grade anyway...

"Great," I said to my old cunt of a boss. "Mattapan, great, but there's just one problem."

"What's that?" she snarled, looking over a mess of papers on her desk.

"I don't speak Spanish or Haitian! Also, I don't get paid for travel time unless I fill out forms in triplicate and wait two months. I don't get paid enough to cover the DMV's travel expenses. Why can't Rosie go, she lives right there."

I stuck my head out of her office door and yelled, “Hey Rosie, would you go to Mattapan for me?”

“Of course, hun,” she yelled back.

“You will do what you’re told, Zach. Report to Mattapan, now!” she balked.

“You know,” I said to the old bag, “this is against union rules. You’re supposed to have a list of people and rotate it, or if someone volunteers they can go. This is the fourth time you’ve picked me in a row, and we have the right to refuse. “

Without looking up from her desk, she grabbed a pen and paper and wrote something. She handed it to me and said, “Here’s the number for Mr. Murphy. He’s the head of the union, take it up with him.”

I picked up a framed picture off her desk. “Is this him?” I asked. “Looks like a lovely day for a friendly BBQ...”

She looked up from her paperwork, and with a witch’s expression said, “*Get* to Mattapan.”

I had no intentions on going to that shit-hole branch, not after my ride into work; I had had it with that fucking bullshit. It didn’t bother me that I would be the only white guy within a twenty-block radius, or that my boss was only sending me there as cruel and unusual punishment. No, I wasn’t bothered by the fact that I’d be the only one in there that spoke English, or that I would be sent fifty miles in the wrong direction on a Friday when a person who lives five minutes from Mattapan would have been more than happy to go. What pissed me off more than anything was the fact that it takes more than a month to get reimbursed for the inconvenience. I wasn’t going to put another fucking mile on my twenty-year-old van that I could barely afford for anyone’s benefit but my own. This was the rig I bought for skiing, for my own personal use; it was my only way of gaining some freedom at the end of the week. All-the-while the fucks who run the DMV get to use tax dollars to fly state-owned helicopters to their hooker palaces or get to throw massive parties and write it off as a, “Business expense.” I have to scrape couch change together just for the gas to make it up north, let alone the price of a ski ticket. Shit, one time I had to call AAA and fake that I broke down because I didn’t have enough money to buy gas to make it home! Their gas is paid for by you and I. Management certainly wasn’t going to pay for a cracked head, or a busted radiator, or the tow for when I can’t find a fucking place to park in the city and I get towed by some Nazi meter maid whose job could be replaced by a camera.

The regional manager wouldn't even know if I didn't show up. She had her head too far up her twat to even take a breath of fresh air. However, I decided to at least try and do the right thing. I decided that before I did anything drastic that I must call this, "Mr. Murphy," that I pay almost a hundred bucks a month in union dues to.

After talking to two secretaries and a personal aid, I finally got in touch with Mr. Murphy. He confirmed that my union dues only secured me a shitty dental and vision plan, and that I had no rights when he told me it didn't matter what the contract said. I had to do it the old bag's way. After scolding me, he told me to get to Mattapan immediately.

I told him, "Okay," but I was lying, just like the way NAGE lies when they say they actually represent Government workers. Now I am definitely not saying all unions are bad, just this one in particular had become another branch of management.

The DMV makes more money than any branch of the State Government, while the workers get paid the least amount of money in any branch of State Government. At the time, I was making about \$14/hr after two years of working. After union dues, mandatory insurance that covers nothing (no really, basic check-ups cost \$75 bucks), and a pension fee for money I'll never see, it works out to about \$1600/month take home. Let's see how that works out for the month:

Rent for shitty room in dilapidated house:	\$500.00
Car insurance to get to job I hate:	\$130.00
Diet of Ramen noodles, irradiated Fukushima tuna fish:	\$400.00
Gas @ (then) \$3.50/GAL:	\$200.00
Student loans at life-time membership rate:	\$150.00
<hr/>	
Total Monthly Expenses:	\$1380.00
<hr/>	
Spending money left after \$1600/mo income:	\$220.00

Just imagine if I had a nice apartment and ate healthy food, I'd owe money at the end of the month (and sometimes I did!). Is it any wonder why DMV people are so angry? There's not even enough money left over for pot!

Hmmm, pot...

I picked up the phone and called this drug dealer I met at Umass, named Carl Stetson. He did not answer, so I started the van and headed

for the nearest generic coffee store for a coffee and a donut. While I was in line at the drive through, Carl called me back.

“Hey man,” I said, answering the phone.

“Hello, can I help you?” the menu-sign blared at me through a blown-out speaker.

“What’s going on, what’s good brotha?” Carl asked me.

“I’ll have a large black coffee, and uh, ahh, two Boston crème donuts,” I said to the mono-tone voice inside the menu sign.

“I don’t know, I’ve never heard of that strain of pot,” Carl laughed in my ear.

“No, I’m at Donk-Head Donuts,” I said.

“Thanks, drive up,” the sign blared at me.

“Righte-o,” I said to the sign. “Hey Carl,” I said into the phone. “I need the best pot ever, you got any of that?”

“Don’t worry, sir, it’s a fresh pot. We just made it,” the sign said.

“Fresh, uh, oh yeah, I’m driving up now, thanks,” I said to the sign. I clunked the van into drive and pulled up to the window.

“Yeah, gimme thirty,” Carl said.

“See ya then,” I said, and I hung up the phone.

“So, this is a fresh pot of coffee?” I asked the lady.

“Yes,” she said kindly. “That’ll be seven-twenty-seven, please.”

I handed her my debit card and she disappeared into the shop. She came back a few moments later with my card, a receipt, and the shit I ordered. She opened the window and handed me the items.

“Have a nice day,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, and I pulled away.

I drove down the street to the nearest establishment with free Wi-Fi and used my ancient laptop to check the skiing conditions for open mountains, which were excellent for mid-November. After that, I checked my checking account balance, which said I had like 820 bucks, because I had just gotten paid via direct deposit. However, I had been suspended for three days for insubordination two weeks prior because I gave the old bag lip about how she couldn’t tell me what to wear because there was no dress code, so I was still trying to make up for the lost money. I guess you could say we’ve had a history, my boss and I, and this whole Mattapan thing was the last straw.

“Fuck,” I said to myself, thinking about my expenses. “Oh yeah, fuck em’. Fuck em’ right in the fucking face!” I screamed. “I aint payin’ fo’ shit!”

Then it hit me: if I worked for a ski mountain I could get free skiing, so I checked the *Sherburne Bowl’s* online job board. They had a position open for snowmaker, so I applied. After that, it was time to drive to Carl’s house. I put my coffee down, put the van into gear, and headed off.

I pulled into Carl’s driveway about ten minutes later. I parked the van, got out, and went inside his house without knocking. This is the way he liked it. As he once said, “Only cops knock on the door.”

“Sup, man?” I said, making a fist and pounding it against Carl’s fist. He was about 5’6”, short, brown hair, blue eyes, and a pasty white complexion from a combination of never seeing the sun and constantly smoking Marlboro Reds.

“Nothin’ dude, it’s been a while. You got the day off or something?”

“Metal health day,” I said.

“Alright, alright, have a seat. You stayin’ to smoke, right?” he asked.

“Fuck yeah!” I said.

“Okay, how much did you want?” he asked.

“Uh,” I said, pulling out my wallet. “Hundred bucks worth.”

“Sure, sure,” he said, and he started weighing out a bag of weed for me. “So whatcha up to, man?”

“I’m headed North, bro. Skiing,” I said.

“Oh, nice, nice,” he said, pouring the contents from the scale into a sandwich bag. He rolled it up, licked it, and handed it to me. I handed him a hundred bucks, all in twenties, and put the bag in my pocket.

“I got one all rolled up,” he said. “You want a beer?”

“Sure, man, whatcha got?” I asked.

“Light this up,” he said, handing me a joint. “I’ll get you something frosty,” he said, and he got up and left the living room.

I grabbed the lighter from his glass coffee table and started the joint. I puffed softly at a high frequency for a second to burn the paper on the end, and then I inhaled slowly and deeply, holding the smoke in as long as I could.

“Good shit, huh?” he asked, entering the living room. He put the beer down on the table and sat down on the leather love seat.

“Oh yeah,” I said while exhaling. I started coughing like a bastard.

“Yeah buddy!” he said. “Oh, by the way, you want some mushrooms?”

“I got no cash money left on me bro, sorry,” I said.

“Ah, you can just have ‘em. I got ‘em for free and they’re not very good,” he said.

“Alright,” I said. He reached behind the love seat and pulled out a blue, glass jar with a lock-top.

He unlocked the top and handed me some loose mushrooms.

“Here you go,” he said with a grin.

“You got a bag?” I asked.

“Nope, you gotta eat them now or you can’t have them,” he said.

“Yeah, sure, why not?” I said, and then I ate the mushrooms. “Oh man, these taste like shit,” I gagged. I opened my beer and chugged the entire thing.

“Sweet, Long Trail. I love this shit,” I wheezed. My phone rang.

“Hello?” I said, not recognizing the number.

“Is this Zach Dolager?” the high-pitched voice asked. It was so shrill I had to turn down the volume on my phone.

“Yes, this is him,” I said.

“Hi Zach, this is George Hill, snowmaking supervisor at Sherburne Bowl Mountain,” the whiney, roller-coaster-pitched voice said.

“Yes, uh...hello, that was quite fast. I take it you got my application,” I said.

“Yes, and let me tell you I need people to work! We just had some fucking bitches quit, they couldn’t handle it! It says here you cleaned carpets professionally, and I know that is tough work.”

“Yeah, I cleaned carpets at night in college to pay for room and board, and all that good shit,” I said.

“Can you handle the cold, Zach?” he asked.

“I love it,” I said.

“Can you lift seventy-five pounds and drag it uphill?” he whined.

“Who is that?” Carl questioned. “I can hear his voice from here!”

I waved my hand at Carl. “Yes, definitely,” I said to Hill.

“Can you come for an interview on Monday, at noon?” he asked.

“Absolutely, George, I’ll be there,” I said.

“Great, see you then, Zach. You know where my office is, 10-4?”

“Yeah, George, I’ll figure it out. Thank you for the opportunity!”

“Okay, Zach, I’ll see you then. Bye.”

“Bye,” I said, and I hung up the phone. That’s when the mushrooms took hold of my brain. Carl’s face and the room started to melt, and I started to see trails. Not very good my ass!

“I gotta go to work,” I said, and I stood up.

“You alright man?” he asked, getting real close to my face. His eyes were melting into his mouth; his jaw melted to the floor. The ceiling fan blades turned into tentacles, which menacingly outstretched towards me. I covered my face with my arms.

“I’m great, I just gotta go. Thanks for the ‘shrooms!” I screamed, running out the door. I jumped in my van, started her up, and peeled out.

“Time to get to work,” I said to myself.

I could barely merge onto the highway. My vision was all trails of light. The cars looked like mutant dung beetles; the road looked like cracked chocolate. I sped towards Mattapan, and when I arrived I noticed there wasn’t a single space to park in. So, I parked on the fucking sidewalk, forcing several people to jump out of the way for their lives.

I grabbed my DMV I.D, jumped out of the van and screamed, “It’s okay, I work here,” to the angry pedestrians. I showed them my I.D. like it was some kind of police badge. I walked past the gigantic line that curled out of the door, and beeped my way through the security door with my I.D. I signed in, got my cash drawer, and logged into my computer. Since I had been there before and there was such a long line, no one even noticed it took me three hours to get there, not even the boss. I signed into the Q-Matic and pressed the buttons to make a voice announce, “Now serving A-197”

A few moments later some Haitian woman came up, and in my altered state she looked all wavy, like a flag in the wind. Her fat moved like the ocean as she began to scream in Haitian at me.

“Let me see that paperwork,” I screamed at an unreasonable volume and variable tone. The room was silent for a couple seconds,

which seemed like hours with all the floating eyes on me. She handed me the paperwork and I realized that she had been there before, and that her application for registration had been rejected because someone who supposedly actually spoke English fucked up her title when they transferred the car to her.

I inputted the correct information into the computer, and then said, “Two hundred bucks, please.” This is when the lady lost her shit and really started to scream, prompting a young boy to stand up and come over.

“What tis da problem?” he asked.

“See this, her title is fucked up. She’s supposed to wait a month for the duplicate, and then complete the transfer without fucking it up, like this one,” I said, showing him a correctly filed title. “But, I can get around this right now for two hundred bucks, tax, title, plates and all.”

The young man said something to her in her own language, and her scowl turned into a smile. She said something to the boy, and the boy said, “She said ta man told ha last time tha’d I’d wood be over a tau-sand dollars, man. How dis possible?”

“Tell her it’s seventy-five for the title, seventy-five for tax, and fifty for the registration and plates, that’s two hundred bucks,” I said. “The reason it was more is because some asshole charged her the top-rated value for this ’92 Windstar she bought, and I charged her the lowest value, because it’s clearly a ’92 Windstar.”

He said something to her in their language, and then she pulled two hundred bucks out of her bra. It looked like she was pulling out a serpent from her wavy, fat breasts, and for one second I was so frightened that I put my hands over my face to prevent from getting bit. I quickly realized it was just money, so I slipped the money into the drawer, pressed the right keys on the computer, and everything went through. I gave her plates and registration.

“Thank you!” she said in perfect English, and then she walked away.

“You are a good mon, Zach,” the young boy said.

“Don’t mention it. Fuck this place,” I said.

“You a crazy white boy,” he laughed, walking away.

I hit the Q-matic button again, and the robot-woman voice said, “Now serving, A-214.”

Somehow, I got the only white guy in the building. He was wearing a very expensive, Armani suit, Maui Jim shades and a douchebag grin. You know, the scumbag white-collar criminal look. He was sporting a leather briefcase. As he was walking up, I tripped out and thought his suitcase was a case of ammo and I imagined a machine gun in his left hand.

“Oh God...” I cowered at my desk.

“Okay...” the man said, confused. “I am here because you *assholes* fucked up my shit, *again*. All I’m doing is trying sell these repo’d cars, and you guys are giving me the run around. I want to speak to your manager.”

“I am the manager,” I lied. “How can I assist you?” I said in the most fake-nice voice I could possibly conjure.

He threw his paperwork at me and screamed, “By putting these through!”

I looked through his paperwork and found nothing, because this was way beyond my pay grade. I could see from the paperwork that the cars were being repo’d for various reasons, including non-payment of student loans, credit cards, and other things that happen to normal people that live in the United States of Oligarchy.

“Good news!” I screamed with a smile. “I can definitely get this completed for you, sir! However, I have to make some phone calls and do some paperwork so it’s going to take a while.”

“What the fuck?!?” the asshole screamed.

“Now just calm down, sir, I’m going to make this my priority. I’ll do whatever I can to make this go through, just go sit down and I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“You’d better, you little shit. Do you even know who I *am*?” the guy screamed at me. Then he walked away, muttering something in douchebagenese.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around, and the branch manager said to me, “Hey Zach, I didn’t even realize you were here. How long have you been here?”

“A couple hours,” I lied.

“You must be hungry,” he said, his lips floating around in his face.

“Yeah, I am starving,” I lied again. I was too fucked up to be hungry.

“Go ahead to lunch,” he said. “Or, you can work through it and leave here at three.”

I looked at the clock: 12:30.

“I’ll just work through lunch,” I said.

“Great, I’ve got to go home now. I forgot my dog-sitter was away this week on vacation. I have to make sure Fluffy gets his steak cooked for him on time or he gets sad and I have to take him to the doggy-therapist. You see, he eats at four in the morning, and four at night...”

“That’s so excellent,” I said in my fake voice with my fake smile. “I’ll be working hard here so you can go take care of your... what kind of dog is it?”

“She’s a Tibetan Mastiff; I got her for a steal at five grand!”

“Great, good, that’s a great price! Enjoy your day!” I said

“Will do, thanks for working through lunch!” he said, walking away.

“Cock sucker,” I muttered under my breath.

I watched him talk with another employee for a minute, and then he left. I took a look at the repo paperwork, and then I spent a half an hour making fake receipts in MicroSuck Paint on the computer for the titles he wanted. Then, I snuck out of the back door and went to my van, which was covered in parking tickets. I made myself a rum and coke, smoked a joint, and then I went across the street to the pub and had a few beers.

When I came back to work at 2:30, the man with the repo’d cars was hovering over my desk, looking like he was floating off the ground. The noise of the room visually surrounded him, and I could actually see the sound waves.

“It’s been two hours!” he screamed, spittage coming from his mouth. “Where have you been? You shouldn’t even get a lunch; my taxes pay your salary!” I could see veins in his head enlarge.

“Now calm down, sir, I took care of it. I wasn’t at lunch; I was taking care of your paperwork. It went through, but it’s going to cost you two thousand, two hundred and fifty dollars,” I said in my fakest of fake nice voices.

“That’s outrageous!” he screamed. “Here,” he said sarcastically. He pulled out a wad of money and painstakingly counted it out. “Take this,” he said, and dropped it on my desk.

I counted out the money, and then I hit the, “Print,” button in the Paint program and printed him out the fake title receipts for the cars.

“About fucking time,” he snarled, snapping the papers from my hand.

“You’ll get the titles in about a month,” I said. “Have a great day!”

“Fuck you,” he said, and he walked away.

Once he was gone, I put the money in my pocket, closed up my desk, signed out, filled out the cash sheet and put the money from the real transactions in the safe. Luckily, this branch was old, and I knew they had no cameras.

After that, I left the building. When I got outside, there was a tow truck attempting to back up to my van. However, he could not back up due to the massive amount of people on the sidewalk that were bottlenecked trying to get into the DMV. To my right, I noticed the kid who had translated for my first customer.

“Hey, kid, do me a favor?” I asked him, handing him ten bucks.

“Sure, mon, what cha need?”

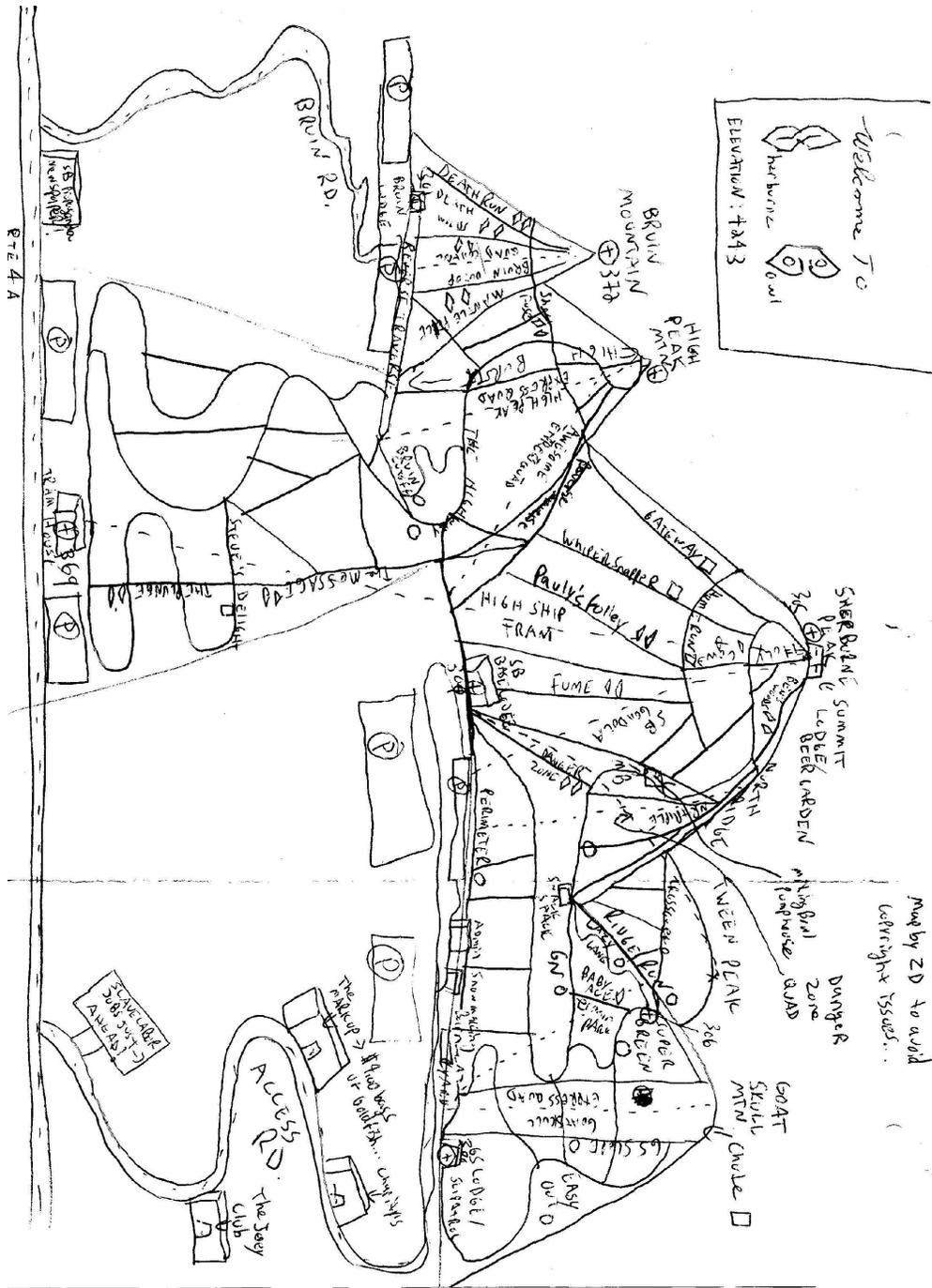
“That’s my van. Go distract the driver!”

He shook my hand and ran down to the truck. He started waving his arms and got right behind the truck. The driver beeped his horn and began to yell at the kid, calling him all sorts of racial slurs. I took this opportunity to get into my van, start her up, and peel out in reverse. Some people screamed as I nearly hit them. I backed over the three-foot sidewalk, shooting sparks everywhere and nearly hitting a Yukon Denali behind me. I jammed the car into drive and activated the windshield wipers. I rolled down my window and reached out to grab some of the tickets from the moving wipers. I stopped next to the tow-truck driver. He stared at me in disbelief.

“Fuck you, fascist, you pay em’,” I screamed, leaning over my passenger seat and throwing the tickets through his open, driver’s side window. One of the tickets hit him right in the face.

“Ow, fuck, my eye!” he screamed.

“Get fucked and die, you fucking tool!” I yelled as I peeled out. The crowd clapped and cheered and someone else screamed, “Fuck you,” to the tow truck driver.



The Snow is Always Whiter...

I had made a nice home for myself in the van over that weekend in the HR parking lot. No one seemed to care. People worked twenty-four hours a day here, so they didn't tow cars from this particular lot. *Sherburne Bowl*, I noticed, was a happening place. The base lodges were always packed, and the lift lines were crowded. The accommodations were top notch, with a few cheap hotels along the access road. The bars and restaurants were always full, and food and drink flowed like the money coming into this place. It would be a high-paying gig for sure. How could it not be? This place looked like it raked in hundreds of millions of dollars each season in profit. Shit, they had a gondola *and* a tram *and* the hamburgers were fucking fifteen dollars. I spent my stolen money on lift tickets and booze that weekend, finally feeling free from that shit-hole they call Massachusetts.

Monday at noon I showed up for my interview. I asked around and finally found Hill's office. Nervously, I knocked on his door.

"Yeah, come-in!" Hill shrieked. His voice was like fingernails on a chalk board.

"Hi, I'm Zach," I said, shaking his hand.

"Hi, Zach," he said. He was a shorter guy, skinny, brown hair. He was wearing dark sunglasses, even though he was inside. He had on muck boots and one glove on his right hand for some reason. "You ever been up on the hill before?"

"Yeah, I helped a friend of a friend make some snow on Saddleback a couple of times at night. They have fan-guns there."

"Oh good, good. Hold on a second," he said, picking up his radio. "Six-two to Six... John... John Reynolds!"

"Six-fourteen, *Goat Mountain*, go ahead George!" the annoyed voice came back.

"Ok, John, I need you to kill every other hydrant from just below you, down. There's a boulder about forty-five, maybe seventy yards below you, something like that. It's the *brown* boulder, not the *black* boulder. I need you to drag the hoses from behind the boulder to the pump house, 10-4?"

"10-4, George."

He put the radio down and said, "So the job is pretty brutal, as you know. I need you to work nights, seven to seven, four days a week. Four on, three off, you get guaranteed overtime every week and a season's pass. Sound like something you'd be interested in?"

"Yeah, George, definitely," I said.

"Tonight. Be in the barn by seven!!" he whined, his inflection pitching upward towards the end of the sentence.

"Okay, sounds good. How much does it pay?" I asked.

"Nine-fifty per hour to start, with a twenty-five-cent raise if you come back next year."

I needed a job, so reluctantly I said, "Okay. Do I get a little more for snowmaking at night at least?"

"Zach, I can replace you with a Honduran if you want," he said sarcastically. "Come back at seven tonight, or don't, I really don't give a fuck!"

"Okay," I said, curling my brow. "See ya then."

I spent the rest of the day searching for places to live on Craigslist, ripping up the glades on my skis, and smoking copious amounts of pot. I took a powernap in the evening, and I was refreshed and awake when I made it to work by seven.

I grabbed my backpack, got out of my van, and took nervous, baby-steps towards the snowmaking barn. I entered through the drying room, a twenty by twenty locker room that was kept extremely warm so the guys could dry out their wet clothes. There were all sorts of hangars, benches, and a giant cloth tube that inflated with the hot air from the exhaust of the air compressors. There were holes cut in it, and piles of gloves, hats, socks, etc. were shoved in the hole. The smell was unbelievable: fresh pot and stale socks.

"Can I help you," someone asked.

"Yeah, I'm Zach, I uh, work here now, night snowmaking," I responded.

"Oh, what's goin' on man, I'm Darrell," he said, putting out his hand for a shake. "I'm the night supervisor here."

I extended my hand, shook his with a firm grasp and said, "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, man," he said, turning around and opening his locker. "Go through that door right there, take a left and

check in with Hill. He's still in the control room for some reason; I can hear his voice in here even with the heater on!"

"Thanks, man," I said, and I went into the control room.

I shut the door and stood next to the radio rack, waiting to be acknowledged. Hill was talking to some guys, pointing at a map of the resort on the wall. Different colors indicated what Hill wanted to do. Green indicated guns that were running and should stay on, red was for guns that were on that should be shut off, etc; it looked like someone had puked on the map. To the right was another room that had computers in it. I looked in and noticed the computer monitors had some program on it that showed the system's status: temperatures on the mountain, pressures of the water lines, air pressure, the status of control valves, etc.

"Hello, Rob," George said.

"It's Zach," I said.

"Whatever," he barked. "That pile of shit over there is yours," he said, pointing to a chair with some clothes and boots on it.

"Size ten and a half boots?" I questioned.

"Uhhh," he mumbled, picking up a stack of papers on the desk to the right of him. He shuffled through them, found my application, and after a quick review said, "That's what you filled out, that's what it is."

"Word, thanks George," I said.

"No problem Zach, thank you, I hope you like it. Now get the fuck out of my office and make some fucking snow!" he whined

I nodded, got up, picked up the pile of clothes and boots and attempted to leave the room. I fumbled at the door, and when I finally got it open and onto the other side I stumbled and dropped my boots.

"Let me help you," someone said, picking up my boots. "Here you can have this locker, I already raided it. Some moron funewguy (pronounced FAH-NEW-GEE) couldn't hack it so I stole his shit. Day crew bitch!"

"Fuckin' day crew!" Darrell screamed, lacing up his boots.

"Fu..newguy?" I asked.

"It's short for, 'Fucking new guy'."

"I'm Max, by the way," he said, opening my locker for me. I pitched all my shit and my backpack in my locker and extended my hand. He was short but looked incredibly strong: a hockey puck. He had curly, blonde hair, and blue eyes.

“I’m Zach,” I said, shaking his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Max nodded, walked over to his locker, and sat down on a chair. He began to lace up his boots.

“Put on your shit,” he laughed.

“Right,” I said with an Australian accent.

I turned around and started putting on my work clothes. I took off my regular boots and put on the black, company snow pants with the *Sherburne Bowl* logo. Next, I put on my hard-mountaineering boots. After a short inspection, I found that they were pretty much destroyed. The shell had a hole in it, the liner was a size too small, and the laces were ragged. After some fumbling, I finally got them on. They were uncomfortable and too tight, like a shitty, rental ski boot. After that, I put on the fleece they gave me, followed by the company-supplied black jacket and red hardhat.

“Fucking Hill,” Darrell said, handing me another awkward bundle of shit. “Here is your lantern, belt, and channel locks. I took the liberty of quickly filing down the end of the ‘locks for you, but you’ll probably have to file it down more to get it under the quick connects.”

“Thanks,” I said, wondering what the fuck he was talking about. I sat down in a chair and attached the battery pack for the lantern to the belt, the lantern to my hardhat, and struggled to get the channel locks in my belt without them poking me in the balls or falling out.

“Let’s go,” Max said, leaving the drying room. I stumbled awkwardly out into the night.

The Art of Snowmaking at Night

“Here’s your sled. You’ve seen the safety video, signed the liability waiver?” Darrell asked.

“I may need a refresher on the video, but I’ve ridden hundreds of times,” I lied. I’d ridden a snowmobile exactly four times ever, and not one of those times was up a mountain at night. “I’m a little rusty, though.”

“That’s okay, we’ll watch the video later. It’s easy though! See, choke and pull!” Max said, yanking the pull chord. The engine sputtered out, so he pulled again. This time it started right up, and he revved the engine unnecessarily while sporting a shit-eating grin.

“Yeah bitches!” he screamed. He sat down on the machine, pinned the throttle and went tearing off into the night doing a wheelie.

I hopped on my sled, activated the choke, and pulled several times. On the fifth time, the engine caught, and she started up. Darrell yanked his pull chord and his sled came to life in one pull.

“Shit,” I thought. “They’ll know I’m a flatlander soon.”

Darrell revved his engine several times and then took off into the night at a medium pace. I hit the gas to follow, but my engine flooded and cut out. I took the choke off, yanked the pull chord for a good minute, and then the engine finally came to life once more.

“Thank God,” I thought.

I revved the engine several times and then gunned it hard. I held on for dear life as I went full-tilt through the cat yard and up *Chute*. I had no idea how fast I was going. The speedometer was cracked and the needle only moved when I hit a bump. I was catching up to Darrell though, and that’s all that mattered: keep up with the boss. I couldn’t even see Max’s headlights anymore. He was fucking gone.

It was then I remembered what Xavier had taught me up at Saddleback: lean, motherfucker! When I came to my first turn, I never backed off the throttle, I just leaned as hard as I could. My front left ski came up and I had to slam my weight down on it to keep the sled from flipping over.

“Jesus,” I thought. “This is fun as shit.”

I followed Darrell up *Chute*, and onto *Great Northern*. The conditions were pretty good for that time of year, but it was a little icy. My

track slipped a little on the upper steep, and I thought I was going to go backwards, but I was okay and caught up to Darrell as he was dismounting his machine at *Mixing-Bowl Pumphouse*. He had parked his snowmobile right next to Max's. A light snow started to fall. I pulled up next to Darrell, hit the kill switch, and dismounted my beast. Upon closer inspection, she was a Skidoo, and a beat up one at that, especially compared to Darrell's machine. His machine was brand new, and even had heated handlebars and seats; mine had a windshield held on by duct tape.

"We're lighting up upper *Chute* and *Great Northern* tonight," Darrell said, pulling a bowl out of his pocket. "You smoke?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Good. Max doesn't smoke, so..."

Suddenly the door to the pump house opened and Max screamed, "Hey you fucking greasy fucking stoners, am I gonna do all the work here?"

"Shut up and valve that shit," Darrell laughed. "Zach and I will light the guns; you can stay here and fuck off if you want."

"Fuck that, its boot-skiin' time! Hurry the fuck up and smoke that shit, we don't got all night," Max said, then he slammed the door shut.

"Fuckin' Max," Darrell said sarcastically, lighting the bowl. He inhaled the smoke into his lungs, and then exhaled it all in one tumultuous uproar.

He handed me the bowl and the lighter. I took a hit and passed it back to him.

"Honestly most people don't make it far up here," he said. He took a hit, exhaled and said, "You seem ok, though. You have any experience?" He handed me back the bowl.

"Yeah, my buddy showed me some shit at Saddleback. Just fan guns though, no heavy artillery." I took a hit and handed it back to him. "It's done," I said.

"Mhmm," he muttered, tapping out the bowl. He put the bowl back in his pocket and took out a cigarette.

"You want one?" he asked.

"Sure, why not?" I said. Up to this point I had quit, but I figured what the fuck? I'll just get fucked and die one day anyway. Besides, I'll never be able to retire, so I might as well enjoy it and then refuse chemo later on. Dying young was the only retirement plan I could afford.

He handed me a smoke and his lighter. I lit it up, took a huge drag, and exhaled. I handed Darrell his lighter back.

“Let’s do this,” he said, and we walked inside the pump house.

It was a rather large building, with pipes and valves everywhere. Snowmaking hoses littered the floor. We had to walk up a sketchy set of stairs to find Max.

“You got this shit yet?” Darrell said.

“Yeah,” Max said, hitting the safety valve with his channel locks. “There we go, fucking piece of shit...”

He turned the valve slowly and said, “Six-seventy-two to Six-hundred” into his radio.

“Go ahead Max,” Hill’s voice answered.

“Jesus, what’s he still doing here?” Max said. He keyed his mic again and said, “We’re ready to charge.”

“10-4 Max,” George said. “Go ahead and open the valve, slowly!”

“10-4,” Max said, and he cracked the main valve slightly open.

“Ok Max, go for it,” George’s voice shrieked over the radio.

“Max!” Hill’s shrill voice said through the radio. “Have you opened the valve just a little bit? Not too far, not too little, 10-4?”

“Yes,” Max said angrily into his radio.

“Oh, now we see pressure,” Hill’s voice said over the radio.

“No shit dumbass,” Max laughed. Max slowly opened the valve some more.

“No, you need to open it a little more,” Hill said.

“10-4, opening more,” Max said over the radio in an annoyed voice.

“A little more, Max, you’re only taking 250 GPM.”

“10-4,” Max said into his radio. He opened the valve a little more.

After a few moments, Hill said, “That’s good right there, Max.”

“10-4,” Max said. “Six-seventy-two to Six-eighty-six.”

“Go ahead,” a voice said over the radio.

“You can set your overflow,” Max said,

“10-4,” the voice said.

After a few moments of silence, Hill came over the radio and said, “Ok Max, looking good. Light them up like I said. You have the map I drew you?”

“Yes,” Max said over the radio reluctantly, like a child being told by his parents that he’s a fucking dumbass.

“10-4 Max, I will see you tomorrow.”

“10-4,” Max said over the radio. He un-keyed his mic and said in a mocking, high-pitched Hill impression, “Get back to work you fucking peons!”

“Let’s get outta here before this pipe blows up again,” Darrell said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“This snowmaking system blows up all the time, leaks everywhere. It needs to be updated, but that will never happen. That would cut into the bottom line,” Darrell said.

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah man, look around,” Darrell said. “This place makes billions and they don’t put a dime into the infrastructure. They just use band-aids when the pipes fail. They import foreigners by the hundreds to run the lifts, and the resort gets a tax break for it! They don’t even speak English, and we have to compete with them, all while the fucks up top get all the money. We can even be fired for not smiling. I wish I owned this place and had slaves to work it for me.”

“Must be nice,” Max said.

“Yup,” said Darrell. “Get fucked and die, but not before they take all your money. Come on, let’s get the fuck to work.”

Max sighed. We left the pump house.

“You can ride with me,” Max said.

“Get on,” Max said, pointing to his machine. He pulled the cord and the snowmobile sprang to life. I got on first and then Max squished himself in front of me. I felt so awkward with all my gear on. My boots pinned my feet so hard I swore the circulation was gone, the cord to my lantern caught on everything.

He pinned the gas, and it was all I could do to keep my helmet on. One hand was holding my helmet, the other was holding on for dear life. After a few short minutes, we reached our starting point at the bottom of the *North Ridge*.

Max parked the sled next to the lift and screamed, "Get off! I'll be right back!" He slammed the throttle down, pushing the front of the machine into a wheelie. His light quickly disappeared into the night. I was alone. It was pitch black, with a slight wind. All I could see was the natural snow coming down through the beam of my headlamp. In this moment, I was the happiest I had been in a while. Sure, the job didn't pay shit, but what job does? You work all your life for nothing anyway, so you might as well be happy.

"Our politicians and others in power are just like the owners of this mountain," I thought. "Getting all they can out of us before they tank the place and jump ship with their golden parachutes. No matter, I'll just take whatever I want, too. Might as well, there's no hope left for this Fucked Generation anyway."

All of the sudden a snowmobile came flying over the ridge, catching air and almost throwing the passenger off. In the beam of my headlamp I could see Max's face, and behind him an angry Darrell. Max turned the snowmobile around hard, almost flipping it over. He came to a screeching halt in front of me. He turned off the machine and it backfired before it finally sputtered off.

"Max, you are *not* fucking driving next time!" Darrell screamed as he dismounted the snowmobile.

"What's the matter bitch? You want me to call your mommy to come and pick you up?" Max said sarcastically, pretending to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"Fuck you, Max," Darrell laughed. "Let's light these guns!"

"Make the funewguy do it!" Max screamed.

"Okay," Darrell said. "Let's walk."

We started walking down the hill, and after twenty-five yards or so Darrell signaled me over to a set of hydrants. "This is a K3000," he said, pointing to a snow gun. "It has a nozzle on the front, which you can adjust to make the snow more wet or dry." He pulled out his channel locks and twisted the nozzle on the gun clockwise. "See, I closed it all the way. They used to calibrate these things every summer, but when Snow Corp. took over they got rid of most of the summer help so they didn't have to give them bennies. Anyway, you close it down, then open it however many notches past this line," he said, pointing to a line scratched into the gun, just above the nozzle. "You call 600 for the setting, which depends on the wet-bulb."

"Are all the lines the same?" I asked.

“Fuck no!” Darrell laughed. “Pay attention! The setting tonight for where we are is a base, so I’ll open it to the, ‘B,’ setting,” he said, and he turned the nozzle counter-clockwise until the, “B,” on the nozzle lined up with the line scratched into the gun. “Now,” he said, “the top quick connect on the gun is air; the bottom is water.”

“Okay,” I said.

“So, get to it, hook it up!”

I fumbled to get my channel locks out of my belt. I tried to connect the hoses, but there was ice caked inside of the quick connect.

Darrell grabbed the hose from my hands. “Twist it inside the quick connect on the gun, then chip the rest with your locks,” he said, doing just that. With the ice removed, the hose connected with a little effort and banging. “Make sure you hit the quick connect itself with your locks and not the ear. They’re brass, they’ll break right off!” He banged on the quick connect while he pressed down on the ears with his hands.

“Okay, let me try!” I said. I grabbed the other hose, twisted the ice off the quick connect, and then banged it into the gun while holding the ears down. In a flash it was connected!

“Now, the hydrants,” Darrell said. “Always do an air and water check before connecting the hoses.” He cracked open the air hydrant and a few acorns went flying into the night. “

“And that’s why you *fucking* check them,” Max piped up.

“Yup,” said Darrell. “Now, we check the water.” Darrell opened the water hydrant a quarter turn, and green water came out.

“Gross,” I said. “It smells.”

“Yup, it will come out every color of the rainbow and then turn clear... like this,” he said. The water had turned clear. He closed the valve on the water hydrant and said, “Now, hook up the hoses to the hydrant like I showed you.”

“Okay,” I said. I traced one hose back to the top part of the gun: air! I connected it to the air hydrant, and the other one to the water hydrant. Max pulled the gun out onto the trail and forcefully banged the three feet of its tripod into the ground.

“Air!” he screamed, turning around to face us and moving his head in a circle. Darrell opened the air hydrant, and the gun whistled.

“Hear that? That means it has no ice in the line,” Darrell said. He turned off the air.

“Water!” Max screamed, moving his head in an upward motion.

Darrell turned on the water, and a few moments later water poured out of the gun.

“Air!” Max screamed, making another circular motion with his head.

Darrell turned on the air and the gun sprang to life. It was as loud as a jet engine, even through my ear protection.

“Listen and watch,” he screamed. I could barely hear him. He turned the water off, and the gun whistled. Then, he opened the water hydrant until the gun stopped whistling. “Now it’s pressurized.”

“When the whistle goes away?” I screamed. Darrell nodded.

“Come on,” Darrell screamed. Max moved his head from side to side. “That means the quality of the snow is good, so let’s move on.”

Darrell keyed his mic and said, “Six-thirty-two to Six-hundred.”

“Six-hundred.”

“*Rim Run* hydrant one, online K3,” Darrell said.

“10-4.”

“You always call in your guns either first run, when you shut them off, or turn them on. That way Steve in the control room can monitor the pressure changes,” Darrell screamed.

We walked to the next hydrant, about ten yards away. I bent down and fumbled to get the hoses on the K3000, and then I fumbled at the hydrant.

“Darrell,” I screamed. “This water hydrant won’t turn on!”

“Well,” he said. “It’s frozen. Normally we’d torch the fuck out of it, but *someone* forgot the fuckin’ thing...”

“Outta my way,” Max said. He walked over to the water hydrant and unzipped his fly. “Turn around, man, I can’t go if you’re looking.” I turned around, and after about thirty seconds of Max pissing on the hydrant I heard water start to trickle out of it.

“So, you just... pee on it?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah, bitch! If you can get three on one run it’s called a, “Crims,” Max said. “He is a fucking legend, that guy,” Max said.

“Yeah,” Darrell said, “one time he even ate a moldy bagel we found next to a hydrant.”

“Decent,” I said.

“Come on, Funewguy, hook this fucking gun up!” Max screamed.

I struggled and fumbled and swore, but I finally got the gun hooked up and turned on. I even adjusted the nozzle to the correct setting.

“Nice work, rookie,” Darrell said. “You might just make it around here.”

“Of course he will,” Max said. “He aint a junkie, so he pretty much qualifies for what they pay us.”

Darrell laughed. “This is the test,” he said. “You see that stockpile of guns there by the side of the trail?”

“Yeah,” I said, noticing a shiny pile of snow guns in the dim light of my headlamp.

“Grab four of them.”

“Okay,” I said, and I attempted to pull four of them down the trail. I immediately fell over and the guns landed on top of me. Darrell and Max started laughing hysterically. Rage rushed over me and adrenaline pumped through my veins. I stood up, screamed, and awkwardly dragged the guns out of the woods.

“There we go,” I panted.

“Okay,” Darrell said. “Drag one of them to the next hydrant, and out into middle of the trail.”

“Sure,” I said. I muscled the gun, hoses and all, into the middle of the trail at the next hydrant.

“Hurry up, rookie bitch!” Max screamed. “Hook it up!”

I stumbled over to the hydrant, hoses in hand. In each awkward step I felt like a C-clamp was tightening around my foot. I pulled up my pants, which were being weighed down by the battery pack attached to my belt. I traced the hoses back to the gun, and hooked up water to water, and air to air. This was becoming easier for me to do, but I was still awkward as hell with all this equipment on.

“Ready!” I screamed.

Max adjusted the nozzle on the gun. “Air!” he screamed, moving his head in a circular motion. I opened the air hydrant, and the gun crackled. Max ran over to the hydrant.

“Rimed up,” he said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means there is rime ice in the air line,” Max said sarcastically.

“Oh. What do we do about that, get new hose?”

Darrell and Max burst out laughing. “Fuck no,” Max said. “We rime it out. Hook the air line up to the water hydrant, run some water through it, and then blast it with air. Works mint. You do that, I’ll go drop the water line on the ground for more flow.”

“10-4,” I said, and I began to switch the hoses from air to air, to air to water.

“Yup!” Max yelled. I wasn’t ready. “Come on, dude! Hurry the fuck up!”

“Got it!” I screamed, and I cracked the water hydrant.

“More!” Max yelled. I opened the hydrant a little more. Water sputtered out of the gun at first, and then became a steady stream. “Good enough, dude, hook it back up correctly!”

I was sweating, even in the cold. I unzipped my jacket and then I reconnected the gun in the proper manner. “Yup!” I screamed.

“Air!” screamed Max. I opened the air hydrant and the gun whistled. It was clean. I turned it back off.

“Yup! Water!” screamed Max.

I opened the water hydrant until water came out of the gun, and then I opened the air hydrant. I backed the water off until the gun whistled, and then I opened the water hydrant until the whistling stopped. For the first time in my life I was getting better at a job that didn’t make me want to slit my wrists. Max adjusted the nozzle on the front of the gun, and then he moved his head side to side, indicating the snow quality was good. He paused for a moment and then motioned for me to go out into the trail.

“Wet-ass production shit, funewguy,” Max laughed as I stumbled up to him.

“What do you mean?” I screamed.

“Stand here, under the gun but far enough away to get a good read on it. See how most of it sticks, it’s white, and it bounces?”

I looked at my jacket in the light of my head lamp. “Yeah!” I screamed.

“That means its wet, but not water. It’s, ‘Durable,’ as Hill says. We want this wet because it’s a good base and will stay for the season and hopefully not melt.”

“10-4,” I screamed.

“Also, when you’re riming the gun out let it run WFO for a few seconds before adjusting it.”

“WFO?” I asked.

“Wide fucking open,” he yelled. “Okay, let’s get this over with. I got some business to attend to in an hour or two!”

I walked back uphill, grabbed the other three guns and began to stumble down the mountain. My feet hurt, my muscles felt like they were filled with acid; everything ached. Somehow, I got through this brutal run, and we ended up starting about twenty K3000’s before we came to guns that were already running. Our snowmobiles were parked across the trail.

Darrell, Max and I walked across the trail to the two snowmobiles. As I was about to mount my machine, Max said, “Hey funeguy, I’m drivin’,” and he hopped into the driving position. He started the machine, revved the engine a few times, and signaled for me to hop on.

“Your funeral,” Darrell said. He lit up a cigarette and pulled the cord to start the machine. He tried this four or five times, then screamed, “Goddamn fucking piece of shit!” He took his channel locks off of his belt and proceeded to smash the handlebars of the snowmobile.

“Come on,” Max said to me. “He’ll be fine. Get on.” Max grinned an evil smile, patted the passenger seat, and revved the motor. I stupidly got on the back.

I was barely on when Max pinned the throttle. He catapulted the snowmobile into a wheelie, never letting off the gas. I nearly slipped off, but luckily my hand found the passenger hand grip. It was snowing heavily now, and with our two headlamps and the machine’s headlight bouncing off the snow it felt like we were stuck inside a Windows 98 screen saver. All I could do was hold on for dear life and try not to piss my pants.

All of the sudden, I could no longer feel the machine bouncing underneath me in the uneven, hard packed snow. It felt like we were on ice or something, because the ride was super smooth, and the engine sounded like it had no more ponies to put into motion; it was fucking pinned. The moment was serene, really, like when you’re drowning and

you finally take your last breath of water. You accept your fate. The song, “Take my Breath Away,” by Berlin (no, not the fucking shitty pop-song by whoever-the-fuck, the one from, “Top Gun”) started playing in my head.

Then we hit the ground. We had been aloft for so long I thought we were still on the Earth, but the sound that piece of shit snowmobile made when we came out of orbit signaled the opposite. The sound was a horrific combination of the clanging and clashing of broken shocks, bending metal, and shredding track. Somehow, neither of us fell off.

Max slammed on the brakes and the track fell off the snowmobile. The whole front end was wobbling like a bastard. The snowmobile veered sharply left, then right, and almost tipped over as Max steered us away from a tree. Bogie wheels and bearings were flying everywhere. A few moments later, we finally came to a rest in a cloud of smoke as the engine seized to a halt. The only lights left illuminated were Max’s and my own headlamps.

“Holy shit,” Max screamed. “Holy shit! That was fucking awesome!”

We both burst into laughter.

“You okay?” Max laughed.

“Christ, man, yeah. That was one hell of a ride. I didn’t even know we were in the air until we weren’t!”

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

A moment later, we heard the sound of a snowmobile barreling ass towards us, throttle pinned. It was Darrell.

“Jesus Christ, Max, looks like you need a tow! What happened?” Darrell asked, hopping off the sled.

“Well, the track fell off and it musta bent the skis, I dunno...”

“Yeah right,” Darrell quipped sarcastically, throwing his hands above his head. He turned, put his hands on his hips and said, “Anyway, Zach, hop on my sled.” I got off of Max’s destroyed hunk of metal and plastic that used to be a snowmobile and hopped on the back of Darrell’s sled.

“I’ll be back for you, Max,” he said, and he got on in front of me.

Darrell drove slowly and cautiously back to the snowmaking barn at the bottom of the mountain. Once we arrived, Darrell killed the motor and we hopped off. I looked at Darrell. He didn’t *have* to say anything; you could see it in his eyes. But, he said it anyway.

“You know man?” he asked. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. He took one puff, exhaled and screamed, “Fuck Max. Hill’s gonna give us hell tomorrow, I know it.”

“Goddamn,” I said.

“Oh, you don’t worry about it. It’s just, like, take it easy man, don’t be a *fucking* moron like Max. I’ve been making snow for a while now, and granted when I started I didn’t know shit, and I’ve been involved in some close calls...” He inhaled another couple puffs of his smoke, exhaled, and said with some volume, “Its fucking bullshit! Don’t go fast, we get paid by the hour! There’s just no need for this! You get me, right?”

“Yeah man,” I said. “No problem.”

“We all break sleds, flip them from time to time, or whatever, but there was no need for *that*. Anyway, you get inside and warm up.”

“10-4” I said.

Darrell nodded and hopped on his snowmobile. He threw his cigarette butt down on the ground, started the sled, and slowly drove away. I watched him disappear into the snowy evening, although I could hear the engine for a few minutes more.

Suddenly, I was alone with only the glow of the florescent spotlight on the barn to keep me company.

“I’d better go inside,” I said to myself. “See if my underwear has streaks in it.”

I walked through the door of the drying room, turned on the switch to the dryer tube, and sat down on a bench. I proceeded to take off my jacket, gloves and helmet. I unzipped the leggings of my snow pants. Just as I got comfortable, I heard a sled pull up to the barn. A few moments later, Darrell and Max came walking through the door.

“Oh, stop it! It was an accident,” Max said.

“You almost killed the funewguy, you fucked up the sled; I know this place is a fucking joke, but come on, man!” Darrell said angrily.

“Who gives a fuck, anyway?” Max screamed. “Buy another one you rich motherfucker!”

“Whatever, Max. Stop fucking around!” Darrell said in a stern tone, pointing his finger at Max.

“You know how we do,” Max said. Darrell put his hands up and shook his head from side to side.

“What do we do now?” I asked. They both turned their heads toward me and gave me an expression that made me think I had two heads.

“Well,” said Max. “*I* have to meet someone for something in the parking lot.”

“Take your time,” Darrell said sarcastically. “Zach and I will do a run. But I want that fucking sled towed down before we get back!”

Max cut him off, “Oh stop, you sound like a bitch,” he said, and he walked out of the door.

“You,” Darrell said, pointing at me.

“Me?” I asked.

“Yeah you. What do we do *now*, huh?” he asked in a mocking tone. Then, he walked out of the drying room. He came back several moments later with a large cooler and placed it on the floor of the drying room.

“This is what *we* do,” Darrell laughed. He pulled a six pack out of the cooler and broke two off the ring. He threw the rest back into the cooler and then threw me one of the beers.

“Nice, PBR. *They* say it’s the hipster beer, but I’ve been drinking it way before hipsters were even hipsters. Back when I was in the PBRme,” I said, opening the can. I took a sip.

“PBR-me?” Darrell asked, opening his can of beer and taking a big chug.

“Yeah, a couple of my friends from high school were the three riders of the PB Army, or PBRme it became. Ya know, like gimme a PBR?”

“Mmmhmm,” he nodded.

“Anyway,” I said, “we were only an army for like three hours. We got pulled over goin’ to Wendy’s at three in the morning with no taillights ‘cuz my buddy is a moron.” I took a big gulp of my beer. “He said he didn’t know why the taillights were both out and the brake lights, etc. It turned out it was that all the light bulbs were burned out.”

“No shit? What happened?” he asked. He chugged down the rest of his beer, burped and then crushed his can. Then, he threw the can in the trash.

“We went to jail,” I said. I finished my beer, crushed the can, and threw it into the trash.

Darrell burst out laughing. “Yeah, shoulda figured,” he said. Then, he took off his outer-layers, helmet, boots, and hat. When he was finished, he sat down on the cooler.

“You know,” he said, “I normally don’t drink at work. I’m an alcoholic for sure, just never at work... mostly.” He squatted next to the cooler, grabbed the rest of the six pack, broke two from the ring and threw me one. He placed the last two beers on top of the cooler and sat back down. “But this place is getting to me.”

“How come?” I asked.

“I’ve been here six years and I just became a full-timer. I’m only making thirteen bucks an hour, and after healthcare premiums and Vermont’s bullshit tax rate it’s more like ten bucks an hour,” he said opening his beer. He chugged the entire thing down in three big gulps, crushed the can, and threw it in the trash.

“Jesus,” I said.

“You said it, man. This place makes a shit-ton but you’ll have to fight with the state for weeks to get unemployment when they lay you off for the summer. Even then you’ll be lucky to get 200 bucks a week. You can’t live on that. I’ve worked here for six fucking years, seen many people come and go, busted my ass, and for what? I have to work with that fucking asshole out there,” he said, pointing towards the parking lot. “And all I’ll get is a, ‘fuck you very much,’” he said, mocking Hill’s shrill voice.

We both burst into laughter.

Darrell picked up a beer, pulled out a knife, and preceeded to shotgun the beer. He crushed the can and threw it in the trash. He opened the last beer, took a huge chug, and said, “I’ll be right back.” Then he stood up and walked out of the room.

I stood up, stretched, and went over to my locker. I opened the front pocket on my backpack and glanced at my watch: 12:30.

“Damn,” I said. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

Just then Darrell came back in with a thirty rack of Bud Light.

“I forgot about these,” he said. He put them in the cooler and started putting his outer-layers back on. “Is your shit dry?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling my coat for dampness.

“Put your shit on, we’re going for a run.”

“Okay,” I said, and I started to put on all the clothes I had just taken off.

It took us about ten minutes to get ready. By the time we were ready to go, I was dying from the heat of the drying room. We stocked my backpack full of beer and a bong that Darrell kept in his locker. We left the drying room, got on Darrell’s sled, and rode it carefully towards the top of our run. We parked the sled and headed down the hill, me stumbling behind Darrell who casually smoked cigarettes and barked orders at me. We went over, again and again, how to adjust the nozzle of the gun, how to move the guns around so they didn’t make one big pile in the same spot on the trail, and, on a few occasions, how nice his bong smoked and how cold the beer was. My equipment weighed me down, made me awkward and slow, but we got through the run in about two and a half hours. The second run of the night was just a, “Maintenance run,” as Darrell put it, but I was still tired when we got back to the barn.

“I took care of everything while you two were jerking off up there,” he said.

“Everything?” Darrell quipped. “Like what, tow the sled down you wrecked by being an idiot?”

“Aw, stop being such a bitch,” Max stated. “We only got one more run left anyway.”

“Yup,” Darrell said, hanging up his coat to dry. “I gotta go fill out the report, Hill will be here soon.”

“Cool,” Max said, and Darrell left the drying room. “Hey, uh, was it Rob?”

“Zach,” I said.

“Yeah, sorry, where you livin’?” he asked.

“Currently in my van,” I said.

“I got a couch you can crash on. Sorry, but the hallway is already taken,” he laughed.

“That’s okay, man; thanks anyway. I got a couple of places I’m going to check out later. I’m good in the van,” I yawned.

“Zach, how’s it going?” Hill asked, sticking his head through the door.

“Great, I love the job,” I slurred.

“Great! You look tired, though. You gonna make it another run?”

“Oh yeah,” I said.

“Good,” Hill said, rubbing his hands together. “Max, I need to see you in the map room, *now*.”

“Sure,” Max said, and Hill left the room. “He’s here super early. You know what I do when I’m not scheduled to be at work?”

“No,” I said.

“I don’t *fucking* come to work,” Max laughed. “Come on; let’s go see what the fuck the claw wants.”

“The claw?” I asked.

“Yeah, his hand is, well. I’ll tell you later, let’s go!”

We left the drying room and entered the map room, which was a few doors down the hall, on the left. Darrell was filling out some paperwork while pretending to listen to Hill shriek orders.

“Good, you’re finally fucking here!” whined Hill. “We’re going to have a group meeting on *Danger Zone*. You guys, Faubert, and Nick are going to setup the trail. I have a stockpile of guns behind *Mixing bowl*, so you’ll have to drag four guns with setups a piece, walk back up and grab four more, and then do that once more. Then, you’ll have to walk back up again and grab splitters. I want every hydrant to have a splitter, except hydrants, I think, twelve, twenty-four, thirty-two, and the double stand at the end. 10-4?”

Darrell curled his brow and sighed, “10-4.”

“Now go get some water and food but hurry up. It’s almost four and I need you to be done by seven because we are not approved for any more than eight hours of overtime per person. 10-4?”

“10-4,” we groaned in unison.

“Oh also,” said Hill, “while you eat show Zach here the snowmo video and have him sign the safety notes, 10-4?”

“10-4, George,” Darrell said. “Come on, guys, let’s get going.”

“Okay,” I said, and I followed Darrell and Max out of the door, down the hall, outside of the building and into the other snowmaking barn where the break room was. Inside the room were more lockers, a picnic bench, a microwave and a door that lead to a room filled with snowmaking hose and a work bench.

“Zach, why don’t you go grab your lunch, and then come back here? I’ll grab the T.V. and we can watch the snowmo video at the same time.”

“10-4,” I said, and I ran out and grabbed my lunch. I couldn’t have been gone for more than three minutes, but by the time I got back Darrell had already grabbed a T.V. cart, just like the Fucked Generation used to have back in grade school.

“Good, you’re back,” Darrell said. “I’ll start the video, but first meet John Faubert and the legendary Crims.”

“Hello, I’m Zach,” I said, sticking my hand out for a handshake.

“Hi, I’m Crims,” he said, sticking his hand out. His shake was nice and firm. He was of average height, maybe five-foot ten. He had a carefree smile, jet black hair, and green eyes. He was about my age, around twenty-five. He was skinny, but it was all muscle. He wore an American flag bandana.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. Crims sat back down at the table and opened a Tupperware container. He had an amalgamation of random shit, including tea bags, chia seeds, muffins, a tuna fish sandwich, and an avocado, amongst other things. None of them were individually packed, and they were crammed in so tight that when Crims removed the lid the muffins began to decompress. He shook some chia seeds out of the mug that was, for some unknown reason, also in the Tupperware container.

“And I’m John, but they call me Surfer Dude,” he said, not even looking up from his Smartphone. John was on the taller side, maybe six-foot-two, and he had the build of a pretty boy: blonde hair, blue eyes, skinny. He wore glasses and a cammo baseball cap. He looked to be about eighteen or nineteen years old.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, sticking my hand near his face. He dejectedly looked up from his phone and gave me a very weak handshake. John was munching on pre-sliced, gourmet cheese and drinking a Coke.

“Everything a growing boy needs, eh Crims?” I asked, sitting down at the bench.

“Fuck yeah,” he garbled through a mouth full of food. “What do you got?”

“Some take-out from *Charity’s*,” I said, plopping the take-out container down on the bench.

“Dude, you need more than that. We burn like 7,000 calories in a shift,” Crims said.

“Unless you’re a pickle-smoker like John who can’t even pick up a running B.R.,” Max said, entering the room.

Crims and Max laughed. John sighed. Darrell was not amused.

“Shut the fuck up! We’re watching this fucking video, and then we’re gonna bang out this last run! We gotta setup *Danger Zone!*” screamed Darrell.

Everyone grumbled under their breath. Darrell dimmed the lights and hit the, “Play,” button on the VCR. The tape creaked to life, showing wavy lines and white lettering that read, “Auto Tracking.”

“Fuckin’ A, the snowmo video! Shit is old school!” screamed Max.

“Oh yeah,” Darrell said. He handed me a piece of paper that was titled, “Snowmobile Safety Training Notes.” “Sign it,” he whispered.

So, for the next ten minutes or so we wolfed down our food and watched the outdated snowmobile video, circa 1994. Darrell told us that, unlike the video, we had to wear helmets and eye protection, amongst other things that were different now in the corporate world of 2011. When the video was over, we quickly cleaned up our food and headed to the drying room to suit and boot. It was five o’clock.

We suited, booted, and were up the hill by five fifteen.

“Okay,” Darrell said. “John, you go maintain the guns.”

“10-4,” John said, and then he walked down the hill.

As soon as he was out of sight, Darrell said, “I sent him out because that’s all he’s good for.”

“Yeah, he’s a pussy-ass fag,” Max laughed.

“That’s an insult to gay people,” said Crims. “I know flaming homos that work twice as hard as he does.”

We all burst out laughing.

“Okay, you all know what to do,” said Darrell. “Max, Zach, Crims, just grab guns and bring two to each hydrant, except the ones marked with a red, ‘X,’ on the map,” Darrell said. He handed the map to Max.

“Looks like a fucking tampon. What the fuck are all these lines for?” Max asked.

“No clue, just don’t bring two guns to the hydrants marked with a red, ‘X.’”

“10-4,” Max said.

Crims, Max and I grabbed four guns a piece. They all had two, fifty-foot snowmaking hoses attached to them, which are about the same diameter as a fire-fighting hose. It was a heavy, awkward mess. All I can

say is, “Thank God I had gravity on my side.” *Danger Zone* was a pretty steep racing trail, and the pitch helped out enormously. I heaved and hoed, slipped and tripped on the thinly covered rocks that made up the trail. I couldn’t unzip anymore; I was sweating like a bastard. We leapfrogged hydrants. Darrell was right behind us with a snake of splitters so that we could run two guns off one set of hydrants. We got about half way down before we were out of guns.

“Nice,” panted Darrell. “Now we have to climb back up and drag four more down a piece.”

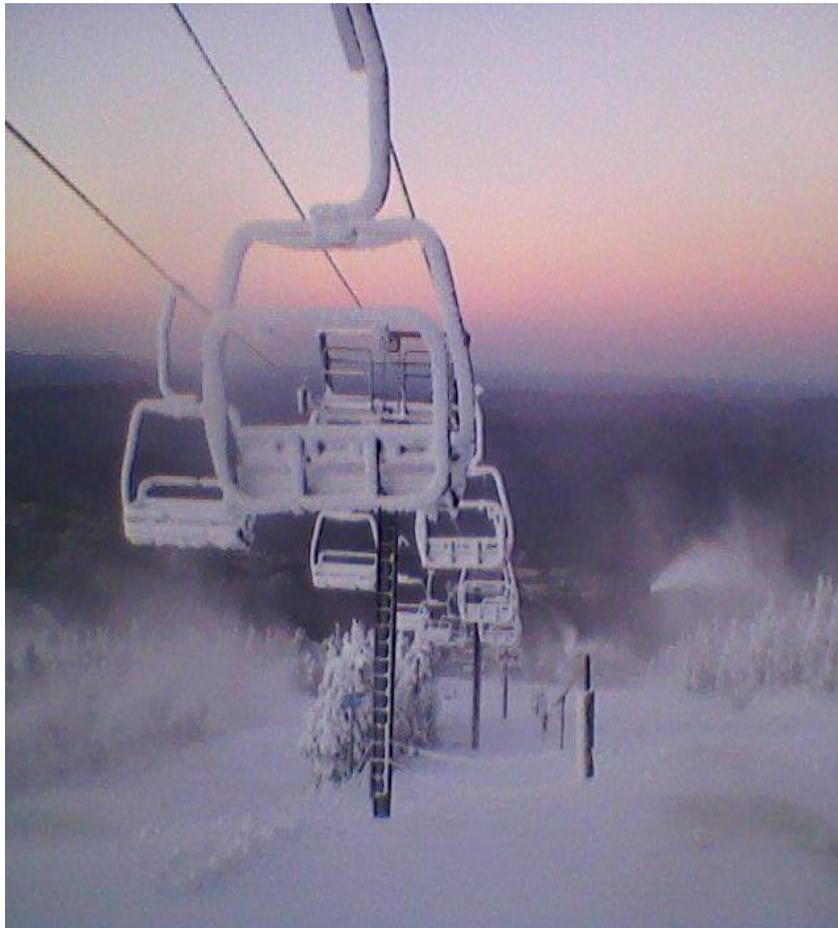
“Couldn’t we just drag some up from the bottom, or use a snowmobile or something?” I asked.

“No, that would be too easy,” Max said. “It’s called getting, ‘Hill’d,’ where you have to do everything ass-backwards in order to make it seem like George has an important job.”

Everyone laughed. I wanted to quit. This shit was worth *way* more than \$9.49/hr. But then I guess that is the fate of every American moron who just takes it up the ass so the boss can make more while he gets fucked.

We panted, complained, swore, and screamed our way back up the mountain. No wonder they couldn’t find any help! But just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore, the sun poked out above *Bruin Mountain*. The sky had cleared up, and the morning light bounced off the white-streaked mountains like the glare on a calm lake. It was truly serene.

I stopped for a moment to take in all the beauty and take a shitty flip-phone pic:



“Well,” I said. “Beats the hell out of working for that cunt at the DMV.”

“C’mon, funewguy, let’s fucking go!” Darrell screamed.

“Okay,” I panted, totally out of breath.

We made our way back up to the stockpile of guns, each grabbed four, and headed back down the trail. Nothing could describe the pain I was in. My feet felt like they were on fire, and my lungs felt like they were filled with lava. I tripped and fell down at least twice, which was actually nice because it gave me time to catch my breath and not get yelled at.

“I’m gonna fucking quit,” I thought to myself. I would have muttered under my breath, but I didn’t have any left. My knees ached, my back was spasming in pain, and just when I thought I’d walk right off that

mountain and back to Massachusetts, we were at the bottom of the trail, headed back to the barn to finish our night.

When we got back to the barn, I immediately went into the drying room and started undressing. My clothes were soaked with sweat, my feet bleeding from the uncomfortable, ill-fitting, hard-mountaineering boots. With my last ounce of energy, I put on my street clothes, shoved all my snowmaking gear into my locker, and punched the fuck out. It was 7:15 AM. I headed out to the parking lot and got into the van.

I started the van, which shook to life after the second try. I took out my phone. I looked up, “Work,” in the contacts section of my shitty, fourteen-dollar flip phone and pushed the, “Send,” button. I got my supervisor’s voice mail:

“Hello, you have reached the DMV supervisor’s desk. Please leave your full contact information and a brief message and we will get back to you as soon as humanly possible for the allotted time and date you called, keeping in mind that messages left during certain hours or dates may also be at peak times or dates, which will result in a delayed return of message. If you need immediate assistance, please hang up your telephone, pick it up again, listen for the dial tone, and then dial 1...8...0...0...2...9...3...6...4...0...0... Thank you for your time and patience on this matter of possible delay times based on time and date allotments for certain messages. Here at the DMV, we aim to be as efficient as possible, eliminating all unnecessary steps in order to serve you the best that we can. Thank you for your time!”

Then, a computer voice said, “Please listen to the following high-fidelity voice messaging prompts, as our highly-automated, digital DMV customer and employee menu choices have changed. Press, “One,” on your telephone to leave a message...”

I pressed and held in the, “One,” button on the keypad until I heard a, “Beep!”

“Hey, this Zach. Not comin’ in today, I guess I’m sick. Bye.” I hung up the phone and laughed. “Sick of working for you, bitch.”

I let the van idle while I smoked a bowl. When the van was warm, I shut it off, put the keys in my pocket and climbed in the back. I wrapped myself in every blanket I could find, and I put the keys next to me. Before I knew it, I was out like a light.

I woke up around five. I fumbled to find my keys, but when I did I hit the auto-start button on my key chain and waited for the van to get warm before I took my blankets off. I climbed into the driver's seat and checked my phone. It indicated a bunch of missed calls, including one from the DMV, and several messages. The mountain had free Wi-Fi, so I pulled out my laptop and searched Craigslist for a while. Finally, I found a place that looked decent that was not in Rutland. I just came from a city, I didn't wanna move back to one. So, I called the guy.

"Hello?" a voice said.

"Yeah, my name is Zach. I'm calling about the room for rent you have on Craigslist."

"Oh yeah, hey. My name is Mike, by the way. The room is available, and its 400 bucks a month, everything included. What kind of car do you drive?" Mike asked.

"An Astro Van."

"Oh..." he paused. "That's two-wheel peel?"

"No, it's all wheel drive," I said.

"Oh, okay, perfect, because you're going to need it."

"Awesome," I said, "that's the kind of place I'm looking for. I have to work tonight, but can I come and see it tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll be here all day. Just give me a call before you start out. Not much service up here."

"Okay, Mike, thanks! I'll call before I leave here. I'm in Sherburne currently."

"Kay, bud, see ya tomorrow."

"Will do, thank you."

"Okay, bye."

"See ya," I said, and I hung up the phone.

I arrived at work a little before 7, having spent a hundred bucks at the local market, apparently known to the locals as the *Sherburne Bowl Markup*, or just the *Markup*. This barely got me enough food to last until my next paycheck, and at that I would be eating Ramen Noodles by the end of the pay period. Good thing I had some loot left from that ordeal with that fucker at the DMV. Just like my other shitty job before this one, I was paid every two weeks, which allows the company to make interest off your money while fucking you over even more because you pay tax on

two weeks' worth of pay, not just one. These thoughts went through my head over the loud buzzing of the heater fan, and the squeak of whatever was wrong with the motor.

I turned the van off and hopped out. It was just starting to snow, the white flakes reflecting in the harsh glow of the parking lot lights. Max pulled in at about 100 miles per hour, pulling his e-brake and doing several 360's before parking his shit box Maxima in the space next to mine. Smoke was pouring from under the hood as he got out.

"Sup bitch, ready to earn your \$9.49 an hour?" Max asked.

"Yup," I said, opening the sliding side door and grabbing my backpack and some supplies: microwave chicken meal, twelve pack of PBR, some weed and a bowl, rolling papers, instant rice, Ramen Noodles, and some peanut butter crackers. I shoved them all in the backpack, closed the door to the van, and followed Max inside.

"Darrell is not in tonight," Max said once we were in the locker room. "It's just Crims and John King, the supervisor."

"Okay," I said, getting all my clothes out of my locker.

Max and I suited up in about ten minutes, and then I followed him to the control room where George was just getting finished talking to the day crew.

"Go home, pussies, night crew is here to fix your fuckups," Max said.

"Whatever, Max," one of the day crew jokers said.

"Shut up, bitch," Max said. "Go home."

"Shut the fuck up, all of you!" yelled George. "Boys, I'll see you all tomorrow, good work."

"Good work my ass," Max muttered to himself.

"Max!" George whined. "You wrecked a snowmobile last night. What happened?"

"Well, it was snowing, and I must have hit a bump."

George sighed. "Well, the snow covered your tracks, so we couldn't see how much air you got, but do it again and I'll go down to Home Depot and replace you with a Mexican who will work twice as hard for half the pay! Now get the fuck out my office and go make snow!"

"Okay," Max said, and we left the room.

In the hallway stood a man that I had not yet met and Crims. They were already suited and booted and on their way into the control

room. The man was of average height, in his early 40's, and was bald. He constantly wore dark sunglasses, even at night or inside. He reeked of high-grade marijuana and pipe dope. He was definitely in charge.

"Hey, I'm Zach," I said to him.

"Hey Zach, I'm John King," he said, extending his hand for a shake.

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. "Sup, Crims?"

"Not much, bro," he said.

"First things first, I have to administer your drug test," John said.

"D...d...drug test?" I shuttered.

"Yes, and be honest or I'll fire your ass right now."

"Okay..."

"Do you smoke weed?" he asked, arms folded, face in a frown.

I paused for a moment and then reluctantly said, "Yes."

John's face turned into a smile and he said, "Great, you passed your drug test. Now if yer not lazy, you'll do fine here. Go check out the sleds and I'll be out in a little while."

"Okay," I said, and Max and I headed outside.

Max lifted the hood to one of the sleds. "You're supposed to check oil, the belt, brake pad wear, and if the exhaust springs are all still there. This one has enough oil; usually the supervisor will fill it up with oil and gas at the end of a shift. Everything else looks good from my house." He slammed the hood down and pointed to the track. "Make sure the track is on, and the bogey wheels are all there."

Max checked the gas situation on that sled, and after he confirmed it was full we checked all of the other sleds to make sure they were in good running order. After a while, Crims and John came outside.

"Tonight, we just maintain, boys, no major changes," John said.

"Awesome," Max said.

"Max, you and Crims go check *Danger Zone*. Zach, you and I will make sure everything is running from *North Ridge* down. The plan is to groom it in the morning and have it open for the public to ski top to bottom tomorrow."

"Okay, sounds good," I said.

We all started our sleds, let them warm up for a minute, and then headed out. I hopped on the back of John's sled and we headed up to the *North Ridge*. We parked the snowmobile next to the lift and headed down the mountain. John came to a valve station and signaled me inside. I entered the station. John handed me a bowl.

"So, what have you learned so far?" he asked.

"I learned how to start a K3000, how to rime it out and set it and all that good shit," I said, taking a hit off the bowl. I passed it back to John.

"Good, good. There are some BR's on this run, and some HKD towers. Have you seen them yet?" he asked.

"No, but I don't imagine it's that hard to figure out."

John frowned, exhaled his hit and handed me the back the bowl. "Not everyone can do this job," he scowled.

"Oh, I know that, I didn't mean it was easy," I said. I took the final hit from the bowl, tapped it out, and handed it back to him.

"Well, it's tough work. Anyway, let's do this," he said, and we exited the valve station.

The first gun we came to was a K3000.

"Six-fourteen to Six-hundred," John said in his microphone.

"Six-hundred."

"Can I get a K3 setting for *North Ridge*, *Mixing Bowl*, and *Admin*?"

After a slight pause, Steve said, "Half above at *North Ridge* and *Mixing Bowl*, and a base down at *Admin*."

"10-4," John said. "You know what you're doing?" John asked me.

"Yup," I said, and I began to pick up the hoses out of the snow. Next, I went to the gun and tapped off the snow. I hit the airline, and it crackled. "It's rimed up," I yelled to John. He nodded and shut the gun down. We rimed it out, and then I set the gun on a half above base and told John to do an air check. The gun whistled, so I called for water, and then air again and the gun roared to life. I went out into the trail and checked the snow. It was a little dry, so I eked the nozzle on the gun open a little bit more. I checked the snow again. It was good. John came out into the trail and checked the snow, too.

"Good," he screamed. "Nice to see someone who actually fucking listens."

So, we continued down the trail, him giving me pointers and tips. He said he was pleased with my training and all, and for the first time in my life I was happy with where I was at, work-wise that is. He even showed me how to pressurize a BR by sound, and how an HKD tower, and all towers for that matter, need more water pressure in order to dry them up, not less. So, you check it with your locks, and if the water line feels soft, you turn up the pressure to make the snow drier.

“Shit,” Zach said to me. “It’s two o’clock in the morning. I gotta go to bed!”

“Okay,” I said.

“I’ll finish this story eventually,” he said, standing up and grabbing our empties. He went into the kitchen area and put them in a plastic barrel labeled, “Returnables/Targets.”

“Yeah, I’m confused as to how you went from living the dream to becoming a hermit out here in the fucking woods.”

“Well, bud, the snow is always whiter on the other hill, and it was more like just another nightmare. The harder you work, the more you get fucked, especially if you are in a position to move up in the world. Everyone around you wants to bring you down so *they* look better, and all for their piece of like twelve bucks an hour... Anyway, I got shit to do in like three hours.” He left the room for a minute and came back with blankets and a pillow.

“Goodnight, dude. If you think of it, go through the door and grab some wood in the morning for the stove.”

“Okay, man, goodnight.” I said.

“Goodnight. Sleep well, you’re gonna need it,” he laughed. Then, he exited the room, closing the door behind him.

I made up the couch with the blankets and the pillow, took off my clothes and plopped down on the couch. “Jesus,” I thought, “I wonder what happened to make him loose his shit?” I yawned and was asleep in no time.

The Next Morning...

When I awoke the next morning, the house was empty. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and threw off my blankets. I stood up, folded the blankets, and placed them nicely on the couch. I scratched my ass, yawned, and put my clothes on. I noticed a percolator on the wood stove, and I went into the kitchen looking for a cup. After some scrounging, I found a nice mug that said, "Protected by .44 Magnum" on it. The handle was even shaped like the handle of a pistol. I went back into the living room and poured myself a cup of coffee. Then, I remembered what Zach said about throwing a log on the fire. I put my coffee down on the dining room table and went through the closed door to find some wood.

Behind the door was a cold room. It had some wood in it, some beer and other supplies, a chest freezer, and another door that lead somewhere else. It also had a window, but it was so cold that the condensation had frozen to it, and you could not see outside. Only light came through. I stacked some wood in my arms and was leaving the room when I heard some noise going on outside. I shifted the wood in my arms and reached out to scrape some of the ice off the window. All of the sudden, an upside-down deer head smacked the window, leaving a blood stain that oozed down.

"Holy shit!" I screamed, dropping the wood.

I heard a muffled voice outside saying, "For Christ sake, Zach, you're gonna break the fucking window again!"

"Sorry babe," Zach yelled. "Shit, I broke the window again! Dad's gonna *kill* us."

I heard some muffled laughter.

I opened the door to see what was going on. I shielded the blinding sunlight from my eyes with my hand, but I could make out that Zach had hung a deer by its back legs over the porch of his tree house. There was another ladder leading up to another, smaller tree house, and a pulley attached to the floor of the second house that Zach obviously used to hang deer, or whatever. Zach tied the rope to a cleat on the porch and turned to me.

"Mornin'," he said. He was wearing all camouflage. His hands, face, and sunglasses were smeared with blood. "Mind closing the doors?"

"Oh, yeah, sure, sorry about that," I said. "I'm gonna go inside anyway, throw some logs in the stove."

“Don’t worry about that,” Zach smiled. “I already stoked her up for the day.”

“Is that Rob?” I heard a voice say from down below.

“Yeah,” Zach said.

I leaned over the railing, and there stood Zach’s wife and daughter. “Hi there, nice to meet you,” I said.

“You too, Rob, my name is Karen,” she said. “This is Julia, our daughter.”

Julia waved and said, “Hi.”

“Hi Julia, are you helping your daddy and mommy hang the deer?”

“Yes, I help them,” she said. She had a toy shovel in her hand and was digging up some snow.

“Hey, my feet are getting cold, I’ll see you guys inside,” I said.

“Okay, yeah, shoulda put some shoes on I guess,” Zach laughed.

“Oh yeah,” I said, and I went back inside, making sure to close the doors on my way back in. I walked over to my bag and pulled out a towel, which I used to dry my feet. I picked up my coffee and sat on the couch. A few minutes later, Karen and Julia came through the door that led to the cold room. Karen was carrying a plastic bag that she put down in the kitchen. When they approached me, I stood up and extended my hand out to Karen for a shake.

“Nice to meet you, Karen,” I said, shaking her hand. She was about five feet, four inches tall, brown eyes, brown hair, and stocky.

“You too,” she said, shaking my hand. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I could eat,” I said.

“Good, because I’m cooking up a storm today. Zach just shot a five-pointer, so we’re celebrating,” she said, and then she walked into the kitchen. I watched her pull out a dozen eggs, a cryovac package of sausage, potatoes, onions and peppers. She pulled out a few pans and a knife, and she chopped up the potatoes, onions, and peppers on the counter.

“Mommy,” Julia said. She looked like she was five, but in reality, she was a little over two years old. She was a very cute kid, with brown hair and green eyes. She looked pretty tall for her age, about forty pounds. “I want my sipper.”

“How do you ask, Julia?” Karen said.

“Please,” Julia said, jumping up and down.

“Yes, Jules, can you go get me the milk, please?” Karen asked.

“Yes, Mommy, I go get the milk,” Julia said.

She walked over to the fridge, pulled out a growler of milk, and placed it on the floor. Then, she awkwardly slammed the fridge door. She grunted and groaned, struggling to bring the glass bottle of milk to Karen.

“Heavy,” she groaned.

Julia managed to get the milk over to Karen, and Karen pulled a sipper cup out from one of the cabinets. She filled up the sipper with milk and handed it to Julia.

“Thank you, Mommy,” Julia said, taking the sipper cup from Karen.

“You’re very welcome,” Karen said.

“Mommy, I want my movie!” Julia said.

“Rob, could you help her out? The DVD is input one.”

“Yeah, no problem,” I said.

Julia and I walked over to the DVD rack, and she pulled out a, “Curious George,” movie.

“I want George,” she said.

“How do you ask?” Karen piped up from the kitchen.

“Please,” Julia asked.

“Of course you can,” I said.

She handed me the DVD. I turned on the TV and DVD player, turned to input one, and inserted the disc. After a few moments, the movie began. Julia sat down on the couch and started drinking her sipper cup. I walked into the kitchen.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked Karen.

“Yes, grab the pan with the sausage in it,” she said.

“Sure,” I said, and I grabbed the pan.

We walked over to the stove and put the pans on to cook.

“Wow, that smells amazing,” I said as the pans started to heat up.

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s venison sausage, almost the last of it from last year. It’s a good thing he shot that buck. Usually *I* have to do it. He needs glasses but won’t admit it.”

“Sounds like he hasn’t changed much,” I said.

“No, not really, although he’s actually happy now and not fucking miserable.”

“Huh,” I said. I had always remembered him to be unhappy, always complaining about getting fucked at work, school, etc. “Where does that milk come from?” I asked, pointing to the growler of milk on the table.

“It comes from the farm I work at. I raise the calves there, and do other chores a couple days a week, and in turn I get a little bit of cash and I get to keep chickens and a bull there. It’s awesome because I basically don’t have to feed them; they just eat with the other animals. Every spring we get a yearling Angus or Herford, and every fall we butcher it ourselves. We mix it into the venison so it’s not so dry.”

“Nice,” I said.

“Oh, and all the produce we have we grow ourselves. Part of our bargain to use this land is that we hey for the landowner, and Zach does chores, and in turn we have this house and a plot of land to grow our veggies on. We grow a ton more extra than we need, and we sell it all summer at the farmer’s market or trade for things we need. It’s a nice, tax-free way to make a living.”

“That’s cool,” I said. “You make enough money to live?”

“Money?” she balked. “We barter for almost everything we need. Zach is sort of a jack-of-all-trades, so that helps. He’s good with electronics, and often helps the farmers fix things they normally wouldn’t fix themselves. Like, you know, computers and stuff. At first it was hard, being pregnant and then having a newborn child living in the woods.”

“I’ll bet,” I said.

“But we made it through. Zach had his last real job then, the one that made him, made *us* realize we would never be happy living on the grid, grinding our bodies to dust while we get poorer...”

Just then Zach came through the door from the cold room.

“Man, that smells *amazing*,” Zach said, kissing Karen. “I guess you *can* cook.”

Karen lightly punched Zach in the shoulder. “Ho ho,” he winced. “Can you hit me in the other arm at least?”

“I do have a knife, you know,” she joked.

“Yeah right, you’d be fucked without me,” he said.

“I think that’s the other way around,” she laughed.

“Anyway, sorry about that, Rob, I had to take a shower. Speaking of which, do you need to take one?”

“How is it that you can have a shower, anyway?” I asked.

“Well, it’s a little redneck, but it works. If the sun is out, like it is today, I have black barrels above the master suite that heat up real nice. When it’s real cold out, I have use a propane-powered, on demand heater. I have a hundred-pound tank I can load in the back of Mike’s truck and take to town. Everything here has two backups: electric and wood heat, with propane as a backup, electric, and propane hot water, you get the idea. When you have a kid, you need to have the heat and hot water at all times.”

“Neat,” I said. “I’ll probably take a shower tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Zach said.

“Hey, hunny, can you finish the home fries? I hate doing the paper bag thing.”

“Sure thing,” Zach said. He walked into the kitchen and grabbed an oven mitt that was hanging from a nail in the wall. He walked back to the stove and pulled off the pan that had the home fries in it. Then, he walked back into the kitchen, placing the pan down on a circular stone on the counter. He motioned to me to walk over.

“You see,” Zach said, pulling a brown paper shopping bag out of one of the cabinets. “When you do home fries, you have to put them in a bag and shake ‘em around, like this,” and he did just that. “See all that fuckin’ grease the bag picked up?”

“Yeah, it’s all wet,” I said, touching the bottom of the bag.

“Exactly,” Zach said, and then he poured the home fries back into the pan. “Voila! Nice, non-greasy, crunchy home fries!”

“Hey,” he said to Karen. “Is the rest of that shit ready?” he asked.

“Five minutes!” she said, stirring the sausage around. It crackled and popped and smelt so good I wanted to eat it and the pan. “Hope you like scrambled eggs, Rob, ‘cuz that’s all I know how to make.”

“Jesus Christ,” Zach said. “I said omelets!”

“Well, they *were* omelets, until I tried to flip them. Only you know how to do that!”

“That’s fine, I like scrambled,” I said.

“It’s a fucking good thing,” Zach said sarcastically.

“Shut up and set the table,” Karen said, stirring the eggs. “Pass me the mitt.”

“Sure thing,” Zach said, walking into the kitchen. He threw Karen the oven mitt, and then proceeded to grab eating paraphernalia out of the cabinets. “Sit down, Rob, I got this,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and I went and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Julia, breakfast!” Karen yelled, putting down circular stones on the table. She walked to the stove, and then came back with the pans, placing them on the stones.

“Julia!” she yelled. “You want a spankin? I’m not gonna ask you again... One... *Two*.”

“Okay Mommy, I turn off the movie?”

“No, it’s not dinnertime. You can leave George on for now; just come sit at the table.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Julia said, hopping off the couch.

Julia climbed into her booster seat at the table. It was clearly handmade; a stained cherry-wood, very nice. Zach came to the table with a stack of plates on his arm; one hand full of utensils and the other had placemats and napkins. He proceeded to set the table, and when he was done he pushed Julia’s seat in closer to the table. A few moments later, Karen came to the table with some condiments in various size mason jars and reused, plastic containers.

“Do you guys make these?” I asked.

“Some,” Zach said, sitting down at the table. “We make the ketchup, but not this hot sauce here. This shit is awesome. I traded for it at the market. This butter we make, it’s pretty easy. You just leave the milk in a bowl overnight in the fridge, scrape the cream off the top, put it in a Tupperware container with some marbles, and shake until its butter.”

“So, you take the marbles out, right?” I asked.

“Yes, Rob,” Zach said sarcastically.

“What do you want to drink?” Karen asked from the kitchen. She was refilling Julia’s sipper cup with water from the sink.

“Orange juice,” Zach said.

“Get it yourself, I was asking Rob.”

“Oh God damnit,” Zach said, getting up.

“Were you going, Daddy?” Julia asked.

“To get some drinks, Jules,” Zach said.

“I want water, please,” Julia said.

“Mommy is getting you some right now,” he said. “Rob, what do you want to drink?”

“Can I have some of that O.J.?” I asked.

“Yeah man, of course,” he said, and he walked over to the fridge. Karen sat down next to me.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked.

“No, I’m good, thank you,” I said.

Zach handed me my glass of orange juice and sat down opposite of me.

“You mind if I give thanks?” Zach asked me.

“Not at all,” I said.

Zach put his hands together and closed his eyes. Everyone else, including me, did the same. “Nature, thank you for providing us with the land to grow these vegetables on, and for sending this delicious buck within the range of my 30-30.”

“You mean sending him *my* way,” Karen said. “I shot last year’s deer.”

“Also, that,” Zach said. “Thank you for giving us this tree to live in, and for protecting us from the harsh brutality that the idiots refer to as, ‘Civilization.’ May we never have to get buttfucked by it again. Amen.”

“Buttfucked,” Julia said, slurring the word.

Karen reached across the table and lightly smacked Julia upside the head.

“Hey!” Julia screamed. She held her head and whined a little bit.

“That is a naughty word only mommies and daddies use. You can say, ‘screwed.’”

“Ska-whoop?” she sobbed.

“Yes, screwed is fine,” Karen said.

“Dig in,” Zach said, piling some sausage on his plate. He passed the pan to me, and I did the same.

We all took our share of eggs, sausage, and home fries. Karen cut up some sausage for Julia and gave her some eggs and home fries. I took some ketchup for my home fries; Karen slathered it all over her eggs and

put a little dab on Julia's plate. Zach just about emptied the hot sauce jar all over his eggs.

"You like hot shit?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I'll try a little bit," I said.

"Better have those home fries ready to eat, man," Zach said.

"I'm no pussy," I said, and I used my knife to take a little sample of the sauce. Stupidly, I put the whole bite into my mouth. My eyes began to water, and I shook my hands as I always do when I eat something too hot. Had I just ingested lava?

"Little hot, bud?" Zach asked.

"No, I'm good," I wheezed, fanning my mouth with my hand. I chugged my orange juice and shoveled home fries into my mouth. Julia started laughing, and eggs were falling out of her mouth. Then, we all broke into laughter.

"Oh man," I coughed.

"Well, that's better than most people do," Zach said, taking a bite of sausage.

I took a bite of sausage, chewed, swallowed, and then said, "This is really good, thank you."

"And to think you nearly left here in a box last night," Zach said, taking a sip of juice.

"Oh, ignore him. He wouldn't hurt a fly," Karen said. "Julia, stop banging your fork on the table and eat your breakfast."

Zach smirked and violently stabbed his sausage.

Julia ignored Karen and started banging the fork even louder. Karen took the fork away, and Julia screamed, "Mommy, I need that fork!" She put her hands over her eyes and put her head down on the table.

"Are you going to eat your food?" Karen asked sternly.

"Yes!" Julia screamed.

"Okay, no more banging," Karen said angrily.

"Okay, Mommy," Julia said, looking up. Karen handed her back the fork. "Thank you, Mommy," she said, and began to eat her food again.

"Well, I would kill anyone that tried to hurt my family. Strangers aren't welcome here," Zach said. "But no, it's been a long time since I've

wanted to literally end someone's life. Now that I'm not caught up in the rat race, it's much easier."

"Yeah, emphasis on the rat," Karen said.

"So," I said to Zach, "you were telling me your story last night, but it got late."

"Oh yeah," Zach garbled through a mouth full of food. "Where were we?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Karen said.

Zach swallowed his food. "Sorry. Where were we?"

"You were making snow with bald-headed John, and were going to find a home," I said.

"Oh yeah! Well..."

The Story Continues...

It was a bluebird day the next day and I had it off, so I went to meet Mike to see about a room. It took me about an hour to find it. It was, well, you know, we're on his property now. That first house you see, that is his. I knew instantly that this was the place for me: cows mooing, a picturesque mountain view, and not a neighbor for miles. I pulled up to the house, got out of my van, and knocked on the door.

A man that was about 5'9", grey hair, blue eyes, and a muscular but skinny body answered the door.

"I'm Mike," he said, extending his hand for a shake. "You must be Zach."

"Yes," I said, and I gave him a firm handshake.

"You have a good handshake for being in the Cupcake Generation," Mike said. "Come on in."

I entered the house. It had two small rooms, a tiny kitchen with a window, and a door leading to a backroom. I followed Mike to the backroom, pausing for a second to look out the window. It was the last house at the base of a decent sized mountain. The sunlight glistened off the snow with such intensity that I had to look away.

"First things first," Mike said, sitting down at a table in the back room. On the walls were posters, maps, and *Three Stooges* memorabilia. "Do you smoke?"

"Uh, yeah," I said, taking a seat.

"Good, 'cuz that's been a deal breaker. The rent is \$400 a month, everything included."

He opened the top of a coffee can that was sitting in the middle of the table and pulled out some weed from a bag. He grabbed a paper from the can and began to sprinkle the pot on the paper.

"Can you handle living up here?" he asked, starting to roll the joint.

"Yeah, I know this is the place for me. There's good energy here."

Mike finished rolling the joint, licked it, and put it down.

"That's awesome; I'm a firm believer in energy. I teach Kung Fu and Tai-Chi, so I'm a firm believer. Do you know how to breathe?"

“Uh...”

“No, I mean, really breathe? Belly breathe, right here, see?” He pointed his stomach and said, “Two fingers below the belly button. Breathe in, one, two, three, four, breathe out, one two, three four. Always equal breathing in and breathing out. Stand up,” he said.

“Hit me in the stomach,” he said, belly breathing in and out.

“You want me to...”

“Yes, I want to show you something.” One at a time, he kicked his legs in a circular motion and then took a horse stance. “Hit me.”

“Okay,” I said reluctantly. I thought about it for a second, and then I punched him in the stomach. Mike released his breath in a short grunt.

“Again, harder,” he said.

I hit him again, this time with most of my strength.

“You can do better than that,” he said.

This time, I hit him as hard as I could. Mike snorted and said, “That was better. Let’s sit down and smoke this joint.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“Iron abdomen. I had to train for a long time to do that. I kept fucking it up because you’re not supposed to drink or have sex while you train. I kept slipping up on the sex part,” he said, lighting the joint. He took a few puffs, and then passed it to me.

“That’s awesome. Can you teach me shit like that?” I asked. I took a few puffs and then passed him the joint.

“Sure. But first things first, what do you think of this place?”

“I love it.” I pulled the wallet out of my pants and gave him \$400.

Mike counted the money and smiled. He took a few more puffs and then handed me back the joint.

“Yup, that works. Only thing is, you can’t move in for a couple days, I need to clean the room.”

“That’s fine, I have the next couple of days off, and I have to take care of some shit anyway,” I said. I handed him back the joint and stood up. Mike stood up too, and I shook his hand again.

“Great to meet you, Mike, I’ll see you in two days.”

“You too, Zach, I have a good feeling about this.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said. “I’ll just let myself out.”

“Okay, bud, just gimme a call before you come. You got a lot of stuff?”

“Nah, just some skis and shit,” I said.

“Alright man, see ya in a few days.”

“See ya,” I said, and I left the backroom and the house.

I hopped in my van and started her up. I drove back down into town, where I found the nearest public Wi-Fi connection. I used my laptop to send that old cunt at the DMV this message:

To whom it may concern:

I, Zach Dolager, hereby resign from the DMV due to metal health concerns.

Thank you,

-Zach Dolager

I went into the local grocery store and grabbed some supplies: food, beer, cigarettes, and water. I hopped back into my van and headed south to Massachusetts, blasting *Quiet Riot* and other hair metal. It took me about three hours to get to Boston, and the traffic I faced solidified the fact that I would like to never return to actual society ever again. I just wanted to run every one of those stupid pricks off the road. You know how you know you’re driving in Mass? When people brake going uphill, the dumb fucks. Anyway, like four hours later I got to my old, shithole apartment. It was a basement apartment filled with mold and no windows. I spent the rest of the day loading only essentials into the van: my guitar and amplifier, clothes, drug paraphernalia, a small nightstand that was a family heirloom, my camera, photo albums, desktop computer, and my journals. I then took the rest of my shit, like the few pieces of furniture I had, my shitty bed, and whatever else, and dragged it to the street for

trash pickup. The last thing I did before I left for Vermont was write a note and leave it on the door to the basement.

ZD has left the building, forever. Good luck with your shit-hole.

-Zach Dolager

So, I moved into Mike's a few days later. I spent my days off shredding it up in the woods and getting more familiar with the mountain. I ended up skiing with that kid, John Faubert, and we became good friends. I mean, we drank together, skied together; he was pretty much my only friend, and I thought I could trust him.

So, the year went on like that. I got really good at my job and became fast friends with Mike and best friends with John. He always came over, and we were always doing something crazy. By the time we started making snow on *Highb Peak*, John and I were sent by ourselves to make snow. Really it was me in charge and John tagging along, him being a little bitch and not having the strength really to do anything but look at his phone. Typical cupcake.

Our typical day was show up at seven, suit and boot and be out the door by eight and stay the fuck away from the barn until seven the next morning. We'd smoke bowls and drink beer and have a good time. Sometimes shit would fuck up, but we'd figure it out. We made all the snow on *Highb Burst*, *The Highway*, and *Reverse Traverse*. Things were going great, and I even stayed on with snowmaking until almost March. I was one of the last people to go to lifts because John liked me so much.

Lifts is where everything started to fall apart. John King promised me that I could take runs whenever I wanted, because other than that running lifts sucks ass. Here's a job description: arm goes out, prick goes up. Some people, however, some of the fucking rats, like this guy Josh, ruined it for me.

So, John Faubert, Josh, that rat fuck, and I for the most part all worked on the *North Ridge* lift. Josh usually had weekends off for some reason, probably because he was a total piece of shit: middle management material for sure. I remember that one Saturday he did work, the Saturday that signaled the end of lifts for me. It was an epic powder day, and John was stuck up in the top shack. We had the lift ready for the public with about twenty minutes to spare. I ran inside the lift shack to put my ski boots on. Josh came in right after.

"Mind if I take a run before we open?" I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “We’re not supposed to take runs on the weekends, in case it gets busy.”

“Dude, there’s twenty minutes until the lift opens.”

“Yeah, I know, but what if something happens?”

“I’ll ski down.”

“You can’t take a run,” he frowned.

“Do you sign my checks? Than go fuck yourself,” I said, and I left the shack. I self-loaded myself onto the lift. I turned around and saw Josh making a phone call. I knew what he was doing, but I didn’t care. I got freshies through the woods and returned to my post with plenty of time to spare. I even took the first shift putting rich pricks on the lift.

For the rest of the day, I barely talked to that rat fuck. He kept a smile on his face, asking me, “Do you have a problem.” I lied and said that I didn’t just to save face. He pretended to be my friend, like most two-faced assholes do, so just before we left for the day I turned the DIN setting on one of his skis down to zero.

The next morning in the lift office, John told us all that we couldn’t take runs anymore. I reminded him of what he told me, but he claimed we never had that conversation, so I spent the next week miserable and having to listen to Josh over the radio. He had been transferred to the parking lot after taking a nasty fall while skiing. Apparently, one of his skis just, “Came off...”

“Base, this is Josh,” he said over the radio one day, not even using his call sign. “I have a person here with a box of alcohol; I’m going to confiscate it.”

“If it were mine, I’d punch you right in your rat face,” I said over the radio.

And that was it after that. Everyone in lifts heard the transmission, and since Josh was good at sucking corporate cock and looking like the good guy, I was transferred out of lifts. This was a good thing, however, because some guys from Ski Patrol also heard the conversation, and they thought it was funny as shit. I guess they didn’t like his, “I’m God,” attitude as much as management did. They quickly took me on for a special, spring training session. I even convinced Faubert to come along

I told Mike about it over a joint that night in the backroom.

“Good, I’m glad you did that,” he said. “Up here you have to kinda bow down a little bit to make money, but if someone fucks with

you like that you gotta tell them to go fuck themselves.” He took a few puffs and handed me the joint.

“Yeah, I start ski patrol tomorrow, 0700 hours,” I said. I took a couple of puffs and handed it back to him.

“That’s great man,” he said. “That’s where you should be anyway.”

“It’s a pay cut to nine bucks an hour, but I still have some money left over from my vacation days I never got to use at the DMV, so I’ll be okay.”

“Speaking of which, sorry to have to do this to you, but you gotta move out by May. My estranged son is coming to live with me.”

“Okay,” I said, a little shocked. “I’ll figure it out.”

“It has nothing to do with you, I just don’t have the space for all of you and he really needs my help. He’s a little fucked up.”

“You mean *your* kid is fucked up, what a surprise,” I laughed.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m not happy about it either.”

“Its fine, you’re giving me plenty of notice. I owe you a lot anyway; when I first came here I had no idea about anything.”

“Over-confident,” he said.

“For sure. Now I have respect. I never even knew how to use a wood stove!”

“Yeah, I remember when you tried to use lighter fluid and almost exploded the fucking house!”

“Or the time when I slid off the road,” I said.

“You mean times,” he said. “Now you get it. Just wait for mud season, bud, it’s even worse. You gotta choose, rut or no rut, and stick with it.”

“I can’t wait,” I said sarcastically. “But seriously, now I know how to survive, and I owe it to you.”

“No problem. When I first moved here, I didn’t know shit either,” Mike said. “Fuck, it’s getting late, I gotta hit the sack.”

“Me too, I got a big day tomorrow,” I said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight dude, good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” I said, and we both went to bed.

The Storm

“So, you went to patrol?” I asked, finishing the last bites of breakfast.

“Yeah man, and it was great for a while,” Zach said. “Seems like that’s the way it goes in the real world: everything’s great for a while until you realize you’re just a slave. You can switch jobs all you want, but you’re only making someone else richer.”

“Yup,” Karen said.

“Excuse-ee,” Julia said. “I want to get down.”

“Okay, Jules,” Zach said, standing up from the table. He walked over to Julia and wiped her face. Then, he picked her up and put her down on the floor. She walked over to the couch, got on it, and started watching her movie again.

“Karen, you mind taking care of this shit? Rob and I have to batten down the hatches, big storm coming in.”

“I guess,” Karen said sarcastically.

“Thanks,” Zach said. “Rob, put on some warm clothes and meet me at the bottom of the tree. You’ll have to earn your keep today.”

“No problem, man, I’ll be down in a few minutes,” I said.

I put on some socks, boots, my jacket, hat and gloves and climbed down the ladder to the ground.

“Next time take the elevator, it’s much easier,” Zach said, pointing up to the deck. There were all sorts of pulleys attached to the tree high above the deck, and a metal cable was threaded through them that attached to a wooden box.

“Hmm,” I said reluctantly.

“I built that when she was pregnant. I had Julia in mind, too. I was thinking straight I guess, ‘cuz she can’t really climb yet.”

“Good thing,” I said. I looked up at the sky and said, “Nice day, huh?”

“Calm before the storm,” Zach said. “Follow me, I need your help.”

“Sure, I said,” and we walked through the woods for about five minutes until we came upon a shack with solar panels on the roof.

Zach pulled out a walkie-talkie and said, "Come in Karen."

"Yeah, I'm here," Karen said.

"We're gonna manually fill the buckets."

"10-4," she said.

"Okay, Rob," Zach said, unlocking the door to the shack. "Come on into the nerve center."

I stepped through the door and onto a grated floor. A stream was below us, and there were batteries, circuit panels, switches, and blinking lights everywhere. In the middle of the room stood two stationary bikes that had belts around their rear wheels. The belts went from the bikes to two water pumps. Hoses came up from the stream, into the pumps, and out of the shack through the wall.

"Get on the bike; we're gonna fill up our tanks manually 'cuz we got two people."

Zach turned off a big, metal switch on the wall. Then, he turned another switch on.

"I just disengaged the main water pump and put all solar energy into charging the batteries. We may need the extra juice," he said.

Next, he turned some valves that controlled the water piping system.

"This shifts the water filling system from electric to manual," he said. "Come in Karen," he said into his radio.

"Go ahead," she came back.

"Ready to charge," he said.

"10-4."

"Okay, Rob," Zach said. "Start pedaling!"

I started pedaling. Zach hopped on the other bike and did the same. We pedaled for what felt like forever until Karen said over the radio, "Okay, Zach, it's coming out of the overflow."

"10-4," Zach said. "Keep pedaling for a minute," he said to me. I nodded, and he hopped off his bike and turned some valves. "Okay, stop pedaling."

I got off the bike, and Zach said into his radio, "Okay, shut the valve now."

"Valve is off," she said.

Zach reached down and turned a valve on. Water started pouring back into the stream.

“She’s all set now. This just drains the excess water back into the stream, so the pipe doesn’t freeze,” Zach said. He looked over all of the systems and then said, “Yup, we’re good. All power is diverted to charging, a few lights and Julia’s movie of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “This is a crazy system; how did you learn how to do this?”

“Youtube and snowmaking. They all treated me like an idiot, but I was paying attention. I’ve always been good with computers, and as I said, snowmaking taught me valving. Speaking of which, we’d better get the hill in order.”

“Hill?” I asked.

“Follow me,” he said, and we left the shack.

We walked for about an hour until we came to the base of the mountain. There sat a pickup truck with half a truck-bed left and the drive axle exposed. On top were some old speakers that were ratchet-strapped to the roof. The frame was broken, and rust holes were everywhere; the glass was all cracked so badly I was surprised it hadn’t shattered. It had a shive for a rear wheel, and around that a rope. I looked up the mountain and saw it went all the way up. I could barely make out a return shive up top. Zach kicked the driver’s door a few times, and eventually it creaked open. He hopped inside and started it up.

“Get in the passenger side,” he screamed over the loud exhaust.

I climbed in the truck. It was an old, black 1992 Chevy Cheyenne 1500. The interior was fucked. The seat was ripped, and springs were poking me in the balls as I squirmed around in an attempt to get comfortable. The dash was cracked in several places, as was the windshield. The CD player seemed to be the only thing that worked. Zach flipped down the visor, which contained a CD holder. He popped in an unlabeled CD, and, “Sugar,” by, “System of a Down,” began to blare over the speakers.

Zach screamed over the exhaust, “She’s not much to look at, but she runs like a top. All these trucks rust out because the state retards use salt, not sand, and even worse salt brine.”

“Don’t you need salt?” I yelled.

“You know how much salt Alaska uses? Fucking zero! I swear there’s a senator with either a new car stealership or a salt mine. All you need is sand!”

“Yeah?” I yelled.

“Okay, she’s warm,” he screamed. He slammed the truck into first gear. The transmission made an ear-shattering grinding noise, and the truck bucked a little bit.

“Yeah, there she goes,” he said, shifting into second. He set the cruise control and hopped out of the truck. I followed. We stepped back away from the truck, so we would hear each other.

“Yup, runs like a top. Supposed to get two feet overnight,” he said.

“Nice, but I don’t have skis,” I said.

“No worries, I got you covered. You like a ten and a half-sized boot?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Wait until you see the tuning room in the master suite,” he said, walking back over to the truck. He hopped in, revved the truck down, and turned her off. “You have to leave her in first, set the parking brake or she could roll back. Not likely with a rope tow, but you never know!”

“I’ll remember that,” I said.

“You’d better; you’re the only one besides Karen, Mike and I that even know this exists, let alone how to run it. Someone’s gotta tell the story.”

“Is that why you let me find you?”

“Sorta,” he said. “Come on, it’s getting late, we have to go gather supplies and board up the windows.”

“Okay, no problem,” I said, and we headed back to the tree house in silence.

We spent the next couple of hours chopping wood, gathering food from his root cellar, and boarding up windows. We ate a late lunch, and after that he showed me the master suite. It was through the cold room, out on the deck, and up a short, ten-foot ladder. The hatch opened just like the hatch to the main house, but it also had a red-neck elevator just like the main house has. I winced at the idea of putting a two-year old child in it, but I suppose Zach did a lot of things that were out of the ordinary.

“So, I’ll give you the grand tour,” Zach said. “This is the living room, and you can see it’s heated by the wood stove.”

“It says, ‘All-Niter,’ on it,” I said.

“Yeah, I bartered for it and the stack,” Zach said. “I had to replace the seals, but it runs good. I like the round dampers. I barter meat and fish for dry hardwood. There’s an old logger in town that loves trout but never has time to go fishing.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I like to burn potato skins in it every week, so it gets the fire hot enough to burn the creosote out of the stack. Also, when summer comes I take the stack apart and clean it, and I trim the branches away from the roof.”

“How do you get up there?” I asked.

Zach pointed to a ladder that was attached to the wall. “Follow me,” he said.

We climbed up the ladder and through a hatch. We came into the daylight and onto a porch that had railings and a ramp that lead to the top of the other house. It too had a porch with railings.

“Wow,” I exclaimed. “Look at that view.”

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” he asked. “Whenever I am having a shitty day or need to think, I come up here and just relax. I watch the clouds bounce off the peaks, the colors of the changing leaves during foliage season, and the winter storms roll in. In the summer, I bring lawn furniture and a fridge up here. I stock it full of beer.”

“Nice,” I said with a smile.

“Sure is. It reminds me of why I came here: to get away from the concrete jungle and the rats that run it. Even the corporations mar and tar the picturesque scenery here,” he said, pointing to a mountain in the distance that clearly had ski trails cut into it.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That’s the *Bowl*,” he said, scowling.

“You mean where you became a ski patroller?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Well didn’t you like doing *that* at least?”

“Of course I did. I’ve liked a lot of jobs, but the pay and the people made them so overbearing that I could barely convince myself to get out of bed in the morning. Anyone that is happy in today’s world is either rich, or stupid.”

“Amen to *that*,” I said. “So, what happened?”

“Well, I’ll tell you the good part, I guess. The bad part will come later. I even worked up there part time after I officially quit, up until Mike and I built our ski hill.”

He paused for a second, staring at the bowl.

“Anyway,” he said, “I’ll tell you the good part, and then we can finish the tour and have dinner. Karen is cooking up some venison and she’ll kick my ass if we’re late...”

Patrollin'

I remember being nervous walking into the ski patrol station at the bottom of *Goat Skull* Mountain that day. A rain storm had just gone through, followed by a freeze and a couple of inches of snow: dust on crust. I walked into the room, which was a twenty-by-thirty dungeon with some chairs and some beds and sat down on one of the chairs that were arranged in a semi-circle. Faubert sat down next to me. We had carpooled that day.

“Hey, I’m Greg Wayne,” the kid next to me said, sticking out his hand. He was a handsome, twenty-one-year-old kid. He was of average height and had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a muscular build. He had a good, firm handshake.

“I’m Zach Dolager, nice to meet you,” I said.

“I’m John,” he said, also shaking Greg’s hand.

“Good morning, rookies,” a man said, walking into the room. “I’m Ned Haskle; I’ll be your teacher.”

He was a shorter, stockier man, about thirty-two years old. He had blue eyes, and brown hair. His voice was deep and loud.

“So, this is an accelerated class that will take only two weeks. The written test, well, it’s designed to fuck you,” he said sternly. “The practical exam will be nerve-wracking, but it’s not that bad. You’ll be ready, don’t worry. Lastly, there is a tobogganing test where you’ll have to take someone down something steep. We’ll do three days book learning, two days ski training, and be ready for the test in two weeks.”

We all nodded and smiled.

“Let’s tell a little bit about ourselves. As you know, my name is Ned, I am thrice divorced, and I live in a van down by the river!” he yelled.

We all laughed, getting the allusion.

“Seriously, though, I’m thirty-two, I am married, just got back from a tour in Afghanistan, and I used to be a *little* crazy,” Ned said. He pointed to me.

“Oh, I’m Zach Dolager. I’m originally a Masshole, and I’ve been skiing since 1987.”

“Dude, I wasn’t even born in 1987,” Greg said. “I’m Greg Wayne, I’m originally from Rhode Island, I am a lifeguard in the summer, and when I was ten I had a guard tower fall on my face.”

“Holy shit, really?” I asked. “You look great for having a tower fall on your face.”

“Yeah, I had to have facial reconstruction,” Greg said.

“You can’t even tell man,” John said. “You’re good looking.”

“Thanks, man. I was so afraid at first that I was going to look like a freak, but it kinda gave me a new outlook on life. I’m just glad to be here, and I enjoy every day,” Greg said.

“That’s awesome man, I hear you on that,” Ned said. “How about you?” He pointed to John.

“I’m John Faubert; I’m also from Rhode Island. I started off in snowmaking, like Zach, and followed him here.” he said.

“No shit, what part are you from?” Greg asked.

“Jamestown,” John said.

“I’m from Narragansett,” Greg said.

“That’s cool,” I said.

“Okay guys,” Ned said. “Go to your cars and grab your skiing shit. Before we even start the learning, I’m going to make sure you guys can actually ski. Now, some of you might be racers, or whatever, and you need to forget that shit. Speed hides a lot of problems, and it is not the way you take a patient down, so just forget going fast. So, go get your shit, put it on, and meet me in the parking lot in ten minutes.”

We all dispersed, went to our vehicles and put on our shit. Then, we met up with Ned who was driving the Ski Patrol truck. It was a brand new, white, Chevy 1500 crew cab with a big cross and “Ski Patrol,” written on it. We loaded our skis and poles into the truck and drove up to the parking lot that was nearest to the gondola. We parked, hopped out, and got on the gondola. We rode to the top, got off, and circled around the summit lodge to the top of *Holy Cow* headwall. It was a steep, icy trail filled with moguls.

“I’m going to ski down to the bottom and watch you guys hit the bumps,” Ned said. “Go one at a time, I’ll signal you.”

Ned skied with his legs together, poles out in front, using them to hit the moguls and then turn with a loud scratch from the boiler-plate ice

underneath. When he reached the bottom, he turned around and used his ski pole to signal one of us to come down.

“I’ll go,” I said, and I lurched myself over the headwall with my poles. I hit the bumps with the best form I could, leaning forward to hit, and then bouncing off the moguls while turning with an icy, scratching noise: the sound of New England.

“Nice, Zach, you don’t need to bounce that much though. You’re not on straight skis anymore,” Ned laughed.

“Old habits,” I muttered.

“You’re fine, bud.” He signaled the next rookie to come down.

Greg was next, and his form was okay, sorta backseat but nothing too serious. When he got to the bottom, Ned said, “Pretty good, just keep those poles forward. Always have your hands in front of you, even when you catch an edge.”

Greg smiled and nodded. His teeth were perfectly straight and white.

Next was John, who nearly fell down when he caught an edge. He was all back seat and looked horrible. His style was that of a park rat. Clearly, he hadn’t learned anything I taught him.

“Okay...” Ned said sarcastically. “Nice recovery, but you need a little more work.”

John scowled at first, but then smiled and said, “Will do.”

“John,” I whispered. “Lean *forward*.”

“That seems counter-intuitive,” he balked.

“It may seem however you like it,” I said, “but you gotta lean forward.”

“Okay,” Ned said. “I like what I see here, although you could all use some improvement. Now, I want to see you make as many short turns as you can. I’ll ski down a bit and show you, then signal you down,” Ned said.

He headed down the trail, making turns in rapid fire succession. Once he was a little way down, he turned around and signaled for one of us to come down.

“I’ll go first,” Greg said, and he headed down the trail. This time his form was nearly perfect, and he showed good edge control. I could make out Ned saying something to him, and then he signaled for the next rookie to ski.

“Me now,” said John, and he skied down. This time his edge control was better, and he only leaned back a couple of times. It was good, but far from perfect. Ned chatted with him for a while, and then signaled for me to go.

I skied down, making perfect turns in rapid succession. This was my specialty; after all, I grew up skiing through the woods in the days when that was a pass-pulling endeavor. Today’s Cupcake Generation gets to do whatever they want. They’re so brainwashed they think if they place some Chinese garbage on their head that they are invincible.

Anyway, when I got to the bottom, Ned smiled and said, “Awesome, Zach. Not perfect, but pretty good.”

I smiled. I could tell he was just giving us shit. I knew I was going to have a good time with these guys, it just felt right.

“Okay, boys, let’s...” Ned was interrupted by his phone ringing. His ring tone was that song from *Super Troopers* when the swinging, German couple gets pulled over in the stolen Porsche.

“I simply cannot afford another ticket in mine Porsche,” Greg said in a German accent.

“You didn’t say Car-Ramrod,” I said.

“I forgot,” John said.

“I had it written right here,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” John said.

We all burst into laughter.

“You guys like that movie?” Ned asked.

“Yeah,” we said in unison.

“Hail to thee, old Paroon,” he said.

“Hail to thee,” we said.

“Hail to thee,” Ned laughed. “All right, boys, you pass for now. Let’s get to the bottom as fast as we can and learn some shit. We don’t have much time; this is a very sped up-course.”

“Let’s do it,” I said. “The levels, I mean, not sex.”

Everyone burst out laughing, getting the reference to *Grandma’s Boy*.

We took off down the mountain as fast as we could. At first, Ned was in the lead, but I went into a full tuck and passed the shit out of them. I was back at the bottom of *Goat Skull Mountain* in a flash. To say I was

fast was an understatement. I took off my skis and headed inside. About a minute later, the guys piled in behind me.

“Hey speed racer, did you valet your bed?” Greg asked sarcastically.

“No, but I will self-park it in your asshole,” I said.

“I’ll pistol-whip the next guy who says shenanigans,” Ned said.

We all laughed and sat down on our chairs. Ned went into the other room and came back a few moments later with some phone-book sized text books.

“This is the OEC manual. It’s large and confusing, and the final test is designed to fuck you,” he said, passing out the textbooks. “You all get one, for free. You’ll be reading about one hundred pages per night to get through this on time. I suggest you all study together. We’re a team now, and we all need to rely on each other.”

“Same team, man, same team,” John said. We all started laughing.

“Okay, open up your textbooks to the first chapter,” Ned said.

We did as we were told, and we got through the first chapter by lunch time. Lunch was provided for us, and we shot the shit while we ate. I liked Greg. He has since gone onto bigger and better things, but we still communicate.

Anyway, after lunch we practiced some scenarios. Ned would choose a patient and tell him the symptoms while the rest of us had to respond and figure out what was wrong. Then, we’d package him and put him in a toboggan. All scenarios were done outside to simulate a real emergency. We were introduced to pulling traction with the KTD for mid-shaft femur breaks, as well as the antiquated ski pole traction, blanket roll, blanket carry, and the proper use of a backboard. I got sort of tripped up by the diabetic patient but was able to get him some candy before he went into a coma. My head was swimming by the time five o’clock came around.

“Okay, boys, good work. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Ned said.

“See ya,” I said.

“Bye,” John said.

“Hasta la vista, baby,” said Greg, putting on his Ray-Ban sunglasses. Once again, we all burst out into laughter.

So, this went on for like two weeks, us all quoting random movies, practicing blanket rolls and how to apply the KTD, etc., as well as

our book and toboggan training. All the while I was reading a hundred pages per night and getting quizzed every day. Most days, we'd go to the bar and study there. Next day, all hung-over we'd go out skiing and be trained on how to run the toboggan. You have to be able to kick your skis sideways; it's not really a turn so to speak. If you ski a toboggan like you'd normally ski, you'd mow the lawn, or have it swing in front of you, which is very bad news. You also have to be able to snowplow down steep shit, get across the flats by skating, and know how to tail rope. We pulled the sleds down everything, from the green trails to the steeps with Volkswagen-sized moguls on them.

By the time the test came around, I was ready.

That morning I was sweating bullets waiting for my turn for the practical exam. I had passed the written test with an 80%, the lowest score you can get and still pass. This wasn't half bad, however, as you are allowed to take it twice. John had to, and he barely passed the second time: more money than brains. Greg somehow scored an 88% the first time. What a bastard!

Anyway, they let me into the room and I went from station to station. I had to show the proctors that I could administer oxygen, apply a backboard, apply a KTD, and do a blanket roll for a person with a dislocated shoulder. I did okay, but I fucked up the blanket roll halfway through. Nervously, I redid the roll correctly, applied it, and left the room. I thought I had failed.

We were all standing in the hallway, nervous wrecks. After what seemed like hours, Ned came out of the room with a somber look on his face. He lowered his head and shook it side to side.

"Boys," he said in a somber tone.

I was biting my nails. Greg was pacing back and forth. John was rapping his fingers on the windowsill.

Ned raised his head, smiled, and joyfully said, "You passed! Got you good, you fuckers!"

"Awesome prank, Farva," I said with a smile.

"Better than the crap you pull, Mac," Ned said.

We all broke out into nervous laughter.

"Okay," Ned said, "We'll break for lunch, and then meet me at the top of *Holy Cow* for your toboggan test."

We all had lunch, put on our gear, and met Ned promptly at one o'clock at the top of *Holy Cow*. There were also two other patrollers there, Hunter and Pat. On the ground sat three toboggans that were ready to go.

"This is Pat and Hunter, they're going to be the patients so we can get this over with and get you guys out on the hill."

"I'm Pat O'Connell, 8-11," he said. He looked to be in his late thirties. He had a friendly face, and a decent beard.

"I'm Hunter, or 8-7, rookie scum," he said in a low voice. He sort of sounded like the comedian, Stephen Wright. He was very tall and lanky. His face was expressionless, emphasized by his blacked-out goggles.

"I'm just kidding," he smiled. "Don't be nervous, Ned is a good trainer. I'll see one of you down there."

"Okay, boys, let's do this. Take a toboggan and meet up with one of us. This is going to be a full scenario, but nothing crazy like in the practical. You won't have any diabetic femur patients that are crowning. Good luck," Ned said, and the patrollers skied down the trail.

"Good luck dudes," I said to John and Greg. We all pounded fists, and then took our sleds down the hill. I carefully ran my unloaded toboggan through the moguls until I came upon Hunter. He was holding his knee.

"Okay, scene safety, BSI. Hi, I'm Zach from ski patrol. What's your name, may I help you?"

"Yeah, my knee is fucked up. My name is Hunter," he said like Stephen Wright in pain.

I parked the toboggan next to him and drove the handles into the snow. Then, I took my skis off and kneeled next to him.

"Did you feel it break or pop?" I asked.

"Yeah, I felt a pop."

"If I exposed and inspected this would I see any blood or a noted deformity?"

"No, just swelling."

"Okay, I have to do a full body assessment on you, and then we'll get you into the toboggan and down to the first aid room, okay?"

"Hurry up, I'm almost out of beer," he said.

"So, you've been drinking?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah," he smiled.

“Okay,” I said. “So, it’s your right knee?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” I said as I palpated his leg. “Tell me if it hurts anywhere.”

“No,” he said, “my knee just hurts, but not when you touch it.”

“Can you wiggle your toes?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Any loss of sensation in your feet?”

“No.”

“Okay, positive CSM,” I said, and then I started palpating the rest of his body. “Did you hit your head?”

“No.”

“So, no dizziness, loss of consciousness, it doesn’t hurt when I palpate your spine or head?”

“No, just the knee.”

“Okay, so I’d make my radio call.”

“Yup,” Hunter said.

“8-34 to base,” I pretended to say into my radio.

“Go ahead,” Hunter said, pretending to be base.

“I’m on *Holy Cow* with Hunter, headed to 304, code one.”

“*Holy Cow*, Hunter, 304, 10-4,” Hunter said, pretending to be base.

I un-strapped the sled pack from the toboggan and started preparing the sled for the patient. Sled packs look like one of those vinyl pizza holders, but inside are two folded blankets with cravats and cardboard leg and wrist splints. I put the splints back into the pack, placed the pack on the sled and unfolded the blankets on top of the pack. Then, I moved the sled parallel to Hunter but perpendicular to the fall line, making sure the sled was facing the right direction so Hunter’s injury would be uphill.

“Hunter, do you think you could scoot yourself into the sled?”

“Yeah, if you help me,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and I kneeled in front of him. “First, we’re going to move your legs into the sled, and then I’m going to come around behind you and lift your butt in, okay?”

“Okay, but I’m getting sober, and it’s really starting to hurt.”

“Okay, on the count of three we’ll move your legs in. One, two, three,” I said, and I moved his legs into the sled. I moved behind Hunter and grabbed his ski-pants. “Okay, Hunter, on the count of three we’ll move your ass in the sled. Are you ready?”

“Yeah.”

“One, two, three,” I said, and I picked up his butt and moved it into the sled.

I started wrapping him in the blankets and asked, “Can you still wiggle your toes?”

“Yes.”

“No loss of feeling?” I asked. I put his skis and poles in the sled next to him.

“No.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?”

“Three.”

“What’s the worst pain you’ve ever been in?”

“I was in a car wreck before rookie training and broke my leg, so a ten.”

“Dang,” I said. “How long ago did you hurt the knee?” I asked, strapping him in with the leather straps, making sure to crisscross them.

“Twenty minutes ago.”

“Do you have any allergies?”

“No.”

“Any medication?”

“Insulin.”

“Have you taken it today?”

“Yes.”

“What was the last thing you had to eat today?”

“Bag of Doritos and a Snicker’s Bar.”

“Have you ever hurt your knee before?”

“No.”

“Can you describe in your own words how you fell?”

“Yeah, I was shredding the gnar and I fell down and twisted my knee.”

I put his skis next to him in the toboggan and tightened the straps to secure him in. “Okay, Hunter,” I said, standing up. “We’re gonna go down to the first aid room and take a look at that knee. If anything changes, I’m right here. Just call my name and we’ll stop and reevaluate.”

“Okay, thanks,” Hunter mumbled.

I put my skis back on and grabbed the toboggan handles. I dug them out of the ground, attached the ears, and put the chain down.

“Ready?” I asked Hunter.

“Ready.”

“Here we go,” I said.

I turned the toboggan down the fall line and whipped my skis sideways. I got outside of the handles and swam the sled through the icy mogul field, just like I was taught over the course of the past two weeks. I’d come to a mogul, let the front of the sled hit it to shave speed, push or pull the toboggan around the mogul, and slide over the mogul with my skis making sure the toboggan stayed in the troth of the mogul field. It felt like forever, but I finally made it to *Home Run*.

“How’d I do?” I asked Hunter.

“Good. Now take me down *Fume* and then you’ll pass.”

“Okay,” I said, and I skated the toboggan over to *Fume*.

Fume was also an ice mogul field, but with a double fall line. However, it was not as steep as *Holy Cow*. I really paid attention to the fall line and made sure not to go too far right and get trapped in the woods. Once again, it felt like forever, but I finally made it down to the base lodge at the bottom of *Sherburne Peak*.

“Okay, do I pass?” I asked.

“Get the wheels and wheel my ass to 304, rookie scum,” he said sarcastically.

“Okay,” I said, and I retrieved the wheels.

The wheels are a contraption that you can put a toboggan on to get it across the gravel to the first aid room. However, it’s kinda tricky in ski boots. I managed to get the toboggan onto the wheels, and wheel Hunter over to the first aid room.

Once there, I asked him, “Hunter, if I help you, can you hobble inside?”

“I think so,” he said.

I slid the sled off the wheels and parked the wheels in a snow bank. I bent down and un-strapped Hunter.

“Okay, Hunter, let’s slide those legs out opposite of how we got them in, on three. One, two, three,” I said, and I moved his legs out. Then, I stood up and extended my hand. “Now, I’m gonna pull you up on the good leg, on three. One, two, three,” and I pulled him up onto his feet.

“Put your arm over my shoulder,” I said.

Hunter draped his arm over my shoulder, and I helped him hobble inside. I set him down on a cot, filled out my paperwork, and took his statement. I exposed and inspected his knee, checked for positive CSM, and gave him some ice. John and Greg were already there, finishing up with their patients.

“Good job, Zach, you pass,” Hunter said with a smile. “The only thing I’d have to say is don’t leave your skis over there, these fucking vultures will steal them. They think ‘cuz we’re ski patrol our shit is shiny.”

“10-4, good looks. Thanks man,” I said.

“How’d he do?” Ned asked Hunter.

“Passed with flying colors,” said Hunter.

“The fuck took you so long?” Ned asked.

“I made him take me down *Fume*,” said Hunter.

“You dick,” Pat laughed. His voice was soft but firm.

“Well, boys, you all pass!”

“All right!” I screamed.

“Yeah!” said John and Greg. We all slapped each other five.

“Get the fuck outta here, guys. Well, repack and take the sleds over to the gondola and you’re done for the day. Tomorrow you start being real patrollers. First, you’ll shadow a patroller, and then that patroller will shadow you, and then you’ll get your cross. Don’t get too drunk tonight, and I’ll see you all tomorrow at 0815. Don’t be fucking late!”

“10-4,” we said in unison. We all walked into the closet where the sled packs were, took one a piece, and left the first aid room.

“This is awesome,” I said, walking over to my sled.

“Oh yeah,” Greg said, pretending to be the Cool-Aid man.

We all strapped in a new sled packs, grabbed our sleds and dragged the toboggans over to the gondola. Then, we put on our skis and skied down *Perimeter* back to the first aid room. We went inside and took off our ski gear. We put our boots on the boot heater and the rest of our ski gear back in our lockers. We got a surprise when we opened our lockers; we each had a red jacket with no cross.

“Almost there, man,” I said to Greg who had a locker right next to mine.

“Fuck yeah,” he said.

“Wanna kick it sideways tonight?” I asked.

“You know it,” he said. “Hey John, you wanna get white-girl wasted tonight?”

“Fuck yeah!” he said. “Where at?”

“My place,” I said.

“It’s kinda far,” John said.

“Beer is cheaper,” I said.

“Fine,” said John, closing his locker. “I’ll meet you guys there, I gotta pick something up.”

“10-4,” I said.

“I gotta get some beer and shit, too, I’ll meet you up there,” Greg said.

“10-4,” I said, and we all took off for my house.

I stopped by *The Markup*, and they bent me over for a case of beer, two bags of chips, a jar of dip, a bottle of red wine for Mike, some cheese and crackers, soda, plastic cups, a bag of Funyons, some candy, and a twenty-four-ounce PBR can for the ride home. Whenever I shop there, I feel like the bill should come with lube, or at least a cigarette...

I called Mike before I left the *Access Road*; just to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything. Also, I wanted to make sure it was okay that I had my friends over. Sometimes he was a bit crotchety.

“Hey man,” I said to Mike over the phone.

“What’s up, bud, you pass?” he asked.

“Fuck yeah, we all did!”

“That’s great!”

“Hey, I got you some red wine, and some chips and shit. Is it okay if I have my buddies over to celebrate?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s fine. I’m kinda in the mood to party anyway. It’s been a long week.”

“It’s only Monday,” I thought to myself. “Okay man,” I said to Mike, “I’ll be there in a bit.”

“Okay, see ya.”

“See ya,” I said, and I hung up the phone.

It took me about forty-five minutes to get to the bottom of *West Hill Road*, and in that time I finished my PBR and smoked a bowl. As I turned the corner, I reached in between the front seats and opened the case of beer. I pulled one out, cracked it open, and slowly sipped it on my ten-minute journey to the house. The dirt road had barely been treated, as is commonplace for Vermont. We have the fifth highest tax rate in the United States, and they can’t even keep the roads safe. If you followed the money, you’d probably see it going into some senator’s pocket; most likely the one who owns the salt mine.

Anyway, I got home, unloaded the groceries, and rolled a joint before the guys made it up. I was just putting out the chips and dip when they walked inside.

“Jesus Christ,” John said. He was carrying a twelve pack of Long Trail. “How do you live up here?”

“Just wait until mud season,” Mike laughed.

“How are you, Mike?” Greg asked with a smile.

“Great! Congrats on passing,” Mike said.

“Thank you,” we said in unison.

“Come on guys, let’s go in the backroom,” I said, and we went out back.

I clicked on the propane space heater. We sat down at the uneven, wooden table and I lit the joint. I took a few puffs, and then I handed it to John.

“So how was your toboggan test?” I asked Greg.

“Simple, just a knee,” Greg said. “I heard you almost failed the practical for that blanket roll. You redid it though, so they let you pass.”

“Yeah, I know, I was a nervous wreck. Covered in sweat.”

“I was a little bit,” John said, exhaling his hit and passing it to Greg.

“Fuck that, I was wicked nervous,” Greg said. He took a hit of the joint and passed it back to me.

Mike walked into the room with a glass of wine and sat down at the table. He tossed a pack of Pal Mal Reds and a lighter on the table. I passed him the joint and said, “Take a couple.”

“Thanks,” Mike said, and he puffed on the joint until it was about done. Then, he put it in the ashtray. He reached for the pack of cigarettes, pulled one out and lit it. “So, congrats again, guys, you’re like the mountain Nazis now?”

We all laughed.

“Something like that,” Greg said. He grabbed a few chips and shoved them in his mouth.

John, Mike and I all grabbed chips and started eating.

“You guys want a beer?” I asked.

“We got this twelve pack here,” John said.

“10-4,” I said. I reached down next to me and pulled a beer out of the case.

Mike took a sip of wine and asked, “So, was the test hard?”

“Oh my God, the fucking written test was impossible,” John said. “I failed the first time.”

“Yeah, it was like choose the best wrong answer kinda test,” Greg said. “The practical was pretty easy. We had a diabetic with a mid-shaft femur break, and that was the hardest part. We had to call for a backboard, apply a C-collar...”

“Yeah, and the patient’s hair was so long, it was getting in the way,” I said.

“I pulled out my trauma shears, threatened to cut it,” John said.

“Oh man,” said Greg. “That would have been ridiculous.”

“I woulda done it in real life,” said John.

“Yeah, me too,” I said.

Greg reached into his pocket and pulled out a bag of weed and a bowl.

“I’ve been saving this for a special occasion,” he said. “It’s called the brown bomber, ‘cuz when you smoke it, you get so high you shit your pants.”

We all laughed, getting the reference to *Grandma’s Boy*. Greg packed the bowl and handed it to Mike.

“You own the house, thank you for having us,” he said.

“Thank you, bud,” Mike said, lighting the bowl. He took a big hit, blew out the smoke, and then started coughing heavily. “Good shit,” he wheezed in between coughs.

“Dudes, I can’t believe we’re patrollers and we’ll get paid to ski. Gimme five!” I said. The three of us slapped five and continued to pass the bowl around. A cow mooed loudly in the distance.

“Shut up, cow, I got company, dude!” Mike said.

We all burst out laughing.

“It’s gonna be a great rest of the year. I’m glad we all share similar interests...” Greg said.

“Like beers and weed?” John asked.

“Well, yeah,” Greg laughed. “But I mean we all love to ski, have a sense of humor, we like the same movies and shit. I feel like we can rely on each other.”

“Fuck yeah,” I said. “A toast to us.”

We all raised our beers and clinked them together. Then, we chugged what was left of our bottles. We grabbed new beers, opened them, and took sips.

“So, Mike,” John said. “How is it that you came to own all this land, and that Zach came to live with you?”

“See this scar?” he asked, pointing to a Frankenstein-looking scar on his neck. It was just missing the bolts...

“I was a CO at a prison in Massachusetts. I was good at my job, and it was a good state job, with supposedly good benefits. I was so well liked that I made my own hours. Everyone else was seven to three-thirty, but they offered me a job as councilor where I got to write my own hours. I choose six to two-thirty, so I could miss roll call because the guy was a fucking dick.”

“Which prison?” John asked.

“It was a prison for the criminally insane. I had some pretty shitty details before I got in the minimum-security wing. I remember my first

night; it was max security. They don't even let these guys out of their cells, ever. You open a slot in the door to give them food, and there's a hole in the floor where they take a shit. If they need a shower, you stick a hose through a slot in the door and douse them," Mike said. "Anyway, that first night I was doing the rounds, making sure the psychos didn't hang themselves or whatever. And I'll never forget it, I looked through the little viewing window and the fucking guy wasn't in sight. All the sudden he popped up, face smeared with shit, and he screamed, 'Gimme a flush!' Scared the shit outta me."

"So, what did you do?" I asked.

"I stepped on the button on the floor that made the hole in the floor flush."

"Jesus," John said, munching on a chip. "So, what about the scar?"

"Well, eventually I made my way into that counselor job. One day I was counseling this sick fuck, raped and beat a little boy to death with his shoe, and he attacked me. He bit a chunk out of my neck and it got infected. I spent a month in the hospital."

"So, you got a settlement?" Greg asked.

"Yeah, after three years of having to live in a trailer on my brother-in-law's property out in Western Mass. I did odd jobs under the table just to eat. The union claimed I had a, 'Pre-existing,' condition, and that they wouldn't cover it. I had to hire a fucking lawyer. They said, 'Oh, hire him, he's on billboards and shit.' I did all the fucking legwork! Eventually I got \$200,000, but they took out \$50,000 in back child support to pay my crazy ex."

"That sucks," Greg said.

"Yeah, especially since I had been giving her cash the whole time. She just lied and said I never paid, almost went to jail for it. No, it was worse than that, actually. She agreed to pay me back the \$50,000, and then never did. I was like, uh, what the fuck? I finally got her to sign a paper saying she received the child support, but she got a lawyer to say I sent her a picture with a gun to my head sayin' I'd kill myself if she didn't give me the money. I got fucking nothing. I'll tell ya, women have all the rights, and we bend over fucking *backwards* for them. Well, at least you Cupcakes do."

"That's for sure," I said.

"Anyway, I had a job for a while in finance because my buddy had a car financing company. We did exotic cars and RV's, big money. I

was making \$100,000 a year, but I was fucking miserable dealing with rich fucks all day. A bunch of educated idiots who think they're better than everyone else, yet if the internet went down for good they wouldn't even be able to handwrite a letter. When the economy tanked, I just asked to be laid off so I could move the fuck away from people and come up here. I found this place and fitted it with solar panels and a small hydro-generator in the stream. I heat with wood I find on my property. I'm still hooked up to the grid, but I barely use it. My power bill, when I have one, is like fifteen bucks."

"Nice," Greg said. "I wish my power bill was fifteen bucks. I live in a shit-hole on the access road for \$1,000 bucks a month, and my power bill is like a hundred bucks!" He paused for a second to take a swig of beer. "And I'm never *fucking* there!" Greg exclaimed, raising his hands up.

"Our grandfathers gave these scumbags property rights to put up their power poles, and here we are a hundred years later, and everyone has forgotten the fact that power companies put their shit on free land. They shoulda told them to go fuck themselves, but I guess there was more camaraderie back then. People were more concerned with the betterment of mankind than running over their own children to make a buck," Mike said.

"Amen to that," I said.

"I use propane too, just a little bit. It's always good to have a backup plan," Mike laughed.

"Fuckin' A," I said. "When I came up here, I was just a Masshole. Mike carved my ass outta stone."

"You're still a Masshole, Zach. You have experience, though. Now you know to always have a tow strap in your van, and not to be overconfident!" Mike said.

"And to carry extra clothes, water. I got even bought a come-a-long," I said.

"You can't rely on anyone but yourself," Mike said.

"Well, you have to have some people to rely on," I said.

"They may not be there to save your ass," Mike said.

"This is true," said John.

"I remember the first night I spent here," I said. I took a sip of my beer. "I didn't even know how to stoke the fire."

"Now you know," Mike said. "Fill it up, open it up, let it burn, then shut it down. Always have kindling for the morning, and some paper

just in case. Then you fill it up, open it up, let it burn, put the percolator on it, drink some coffee, and shut her down for the day.”

“Oh man, I love making coffee on the wood stove. And cooking burgers, and eggs!” I screamed. “So good slow cooked like that.”

“It’s good to know, just in case the propane runs out or the electric fails,” Mike said. “The best way you can fight the bullshit is to disappear and do everything you can to not pay taxes. I showed Zach here that you can sell vegetables at the Farmer’s Market, sugar, and even barter meat and fish for anything you need. I got this place all paid off by doing that. I don’t even barely pay for utilities.”

“I hear you,” said Greg. “We have to pick up dead bodies for nine bucks an hour.”

“Nine bucks?” Mike scoffed. “What a bunch of pricks. They probably cry poor, too.”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “They dick us on overtime when a burger is fifteen bucks, and tickets are eighty, and that’s for a fucking week day. It’s like when you like a job it doesn’t pay shit, so their mentality is you have to get fucked and die for a living wage.”

“Be happy just to have a job, Zach,” John scoffed.

“Slaves,” I said. “We should just shoot these motherfuckers and take what we want. That’s what our forefathers did.”

“How are you gonna fight drones and the Government kill forces?” Mike asked.

“Just look at Hitlary’s body count,” Greg said.

“Better off just to disappear and not pay taxes, become self-sufficient,” Mike said. “Once they run out of money and people to wipe their asses for them they’ll be fucked. They literally are so fucking dumb that if society failed they would instantly die, and that’s what we want: for the rich to die so we can take their shit. Most of their wealth is on paper, so they’ll be extra fucked when it all fails. They can’t even operate a weapon! You think a bodyguard is going to protect them when money is worthless? I doubt it!”

“The meek will inherit the Earth,” I said.

“Damn right,” Mike said. “Anyway, it’s always important to have a positive attitude. Don’t let the pay get you down. Make adjustments, not excuses...” he paused.

“I need more wine,” Mike said, and he got up from the table and exited the room.

John pulled out his phone and scoffed, “You got no Wi-Fi here?”

“Dude, I don’t even miss TV,” I said. “I got my movies and books, anyway. So much better than the bullshit they ram down your throat on TV. I don’t need to know what’s happening with the sheeple, and I certainly don’t need CIA-NN telling me what to do or think.”

“I couldn’t live without TV or Wi-Fi,” John said.

“It’s not even available here, despite what Scum-lin claims,” I said. “Otherwise, it’s satellite which is like a hundred bucks a month. A hundred bucks a month to be controlled by the corporate media, to be watched in everything you do? Yeah, no thanks.”

“I guess,” said John. “But I don’t do anything wrong, so they can watch all they want.”

“That’s not the point,” I said. “Ever consider that based on your information they can accurately predict what you *will* do?”

Greg’s jaw dropped.

“My Dad was telling me that in the 60’s they had a punch card program that, based on your life’s profile, could predict what you would be doing three weeks out with like an 85% rate of accuracy. Imagine what the accuracy is now with modern computers and your Facespace profile?” I said.

“That’s scary,” John said. “But not enough to make me give up my phone.”

“Fucking Cupcake Generation. I bet you guys don’t even know how to write in cursive.”

The room went silent.

“Let’s some another bowl,” I said. “Hey Mike!” I yelled into the other room.

“Yeah!” he yelled.

“Grab the bong! And my weed, in the top drawer of my dresser!”

“You should never throw a bong, kid, ever,” he screamed.

We all burst out laughing. We finished off the chips, opened some more beers, and I stole one of Mike’s smokes. A few minutes later, Mike came back into the room. He had the bong all packed up and ready to go. He put it on the table and sat down.

“Nice bong,” Greg said.

“Hit it,” I said, passing the bong to Greg.

He put his face on the top of the bong, lit the bowl, and sucked in with a, “Gurgle, gurgle.” He held in the hit, and then exhaled with force. He coughed extremely loudly, and his face turned red.

“Kinda gets you by the boo-boo, doesn’t it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Greg wheezed, and he passed the bong to John. “So, where you at tomorrow?” Greg asked me.

“I dunno,” I said.

“The schedule is online,” he said.

I smiled at him.

“Oh, right,” he laughed. “I got it downloaded here, let me just look real quick.” He looked at his phone and then said, “We’re all together for the rest of the week up at the peak, and we all have Thursday and Friday off.”

“Sweet,” I said. “You wanna go fishing on Thursday?” I asked.

“Sure,” said Greg. “I don’t have a license though.”

“I don’t fish,” John said.

“That’s okay, we have a pond out back that’s stocked, and I have all the ice fishing equipment. You don’t need a license on private land,” I said. “John, you’re a pussy.”

“I got bigger tittles to lick,” John said. “Plus, I just don’t like fishing.”

“Whatever,” I said, taking a hit from the bong. I exhaled the hit and sat back in my chair. “I call her Hasta Manana, because if you hit this thing at night then I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

“Yeah, speaking of that, we gotta go,” Greg said.

“Alright man, I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” I said.

“See ya guys,” Mike said.

We all stood up and shook hands.

“See ya,” I said.

“Bye,” John said, and they left the room.

“They seem like good kids,” Mike said. “John’s handshake is weak, though, is he gay?”

“He claims he likes girls,” I said.

“Okay then,” said Mike sarcastically. “It’s getting pretty late, I’m going to bed.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We spent the next few minutes cleaning up, and then we went to bed.

The next morning, I was hung-over as shit. I barely made it to work on time, but I managed to put on my ski gear and make it up the mountain in time. In the morning I had miles of fencing, slow signs, and bamboo to put up. We had to get it all done before first chair at nine. I worked so hard that my whole body hurt. You get pretty good at skiing with awkward shit when you’re a patroller, and especially if you’re a rookie. Huge piles of bamboo, tower pads, and miles of trail rope just to name a few awkward items.

Around ten we started getting slammed with calls about injured people. I followed Hunter to about five, “Codes,” or reports of hurt people, in the morning. A code one is just a hurt person that is to be taken down, a code two is calling for a backboard, which is accompanied with either a code three, or call the ambulance, or a code four, which is rush the ambulance, the fucker is dying. By the afternoon, Hunter said I was ready to go into reverse-shadow mode.

We got the call around three o’clock.

“Base to 305,” the radio said.

“305,” our hill chief, Pat, said into the radio.

“Report of a code, *Ben’s Woods*.”

“305 copies,” he said. “Zach, why don’t you take this one? Could be bad.”

“Sure, I said.

Ian and I exited 305, and we put our skis on. I skied up to a toboggan, flipped it over, and then skied over to the entrance to *Ben’s Woods*. I was super nervous. “Well, this is it,” I thought to myself, and I headed down into the woods.

Ben’s Woods was a super steep rock garden through tight trees. Being spring-time, the snow was soft, almost corn snow, with moguls wherever there wasn’t a tree. I slowly and cautiously made my way through the trees, stopping every once in a while to scream, “Hey, anybody hurt?” Eventually, I got my answer.

“Help,” I heard a muffled voice say from down below.

“This is Ski Patrol; we’ll be down in a second!” I screamed, and I started down.

“Help,” the voice wheezed again.

We found him about twenty yards below us; just skier’s left of the main trail. His legs accordioned against a tree.

“Help me,” he wheezed. “My leg is broken!”

I skied up to the patient, parked the sled, and took off my skis.

“I’m Zach from Ski Patrol. What’s your name?”

“Alex,” he winced.

“May I help you?” I asked.

“Yes, please, my fucking leg is broken! I’m in a shit-ton of pain!” he exclaimed.

“Where does it hurt?” I asked.

He pointed halfway down his upper leg and said, “Right here, I heard it crack. This is the most pain I’ve ever had!”

“I’m going to palpate the rest of your leg, just to make sure nothing else is hurt, okay?”

“Yeah,” he said painfully.

I palpated his broken leg, and then the other one.

“No pain, there, just right here,” he said, pointing to his femur.

“Can you wiggle your toes; are you loosing sensation in your feet?”

“No, I can feel my toes. I can wiggle them,” he said.

“8-34 to base,” I said into my radio.

“This is base, go ahead.”

“I’m in *Ben’s Woods* with Alex, code two, code four; I need a KTD and oxygen.”

“*Ben’s Woods*, Alex, code two, code four, KTD and oxygen. 305 do you copy?”

“305 copies,” Pat said over the radio. “Hey, Zach, are you on the main trail, or in one of the finger chutes?”

“Just off the main trail, skier’s left, about half-way down, just above the cliff line.”

“10-4, Zach, I’m sending John and Greg.”

“10-4, thank you.”

“Hunter, we need to un-jam him from this tree.”

“Okay,” Hunter said, squatting down in front of Alex.

“Alex, we’re going to start with your good leg, then move to the bad. We have more help coming with a backboard and a splint that is special for your break, but I have to have your leg straight.”

“Okay,” Alex winced.

“On the count of three,” I said. Hunter and I grabbed his good leg. “One, two, three,” I said, and we straightened out his good leg.

“Now the hard part, Alex,” Hunter said. “This is going to hurt more than anything you’ve ever experienced, but if we don’t do it you could bleed out and die.”

“Oh, okay,” Alex cried. His breathing was labored, his face was white as a ghost.

Hunter and I grabbed Alex’s leg. “On the count of three. One, two, three!”

Alex screamed a blood-curdling scream as we straightened out his leg. He was hyperventilating and crying.

“Alex, you’re doing great,” I said. “I forgot to ask, did you hit your head at all, lose consciousness?”

“No,” he said.

“So, it doesn’t hurt at all when I do this?” I asked, palpating his spine and head.

“No,” he cried. “Just the leg.”

Just then, John and Greg arrived with the backboard, oxygen and KTD.

“Alex, this is John and Greg. They’re here to help,” I said. “Greg, can you and Hunter apply the KTD?”

“10-4,” Greg said.

“John, administer the oxygen at fifteen liters per minute, please.”

“You got it,” John said.

“We’ll be outta here before you know it,” I said to Alex.

“Okay,” he said. His eyes revealed his immense pain.

I helped Hunter and Greg apply the KTD. We measured his good leg with the plastic stick, and determined we needed the full stick.

We laid the two sticks next to his leg, and I strapped his boot to the traction device while Greg strapped in his thigh.

“Okay, Alex,” Greg said. “Zach is going to pull traction, so you need to let us know when it feels better. It’s not going to cure your pain, but it’s going to provide a lot of relief.”

“I’m ready,” Alex said.

“Here we go,” I said, and I pulled traction until Alex said, “Oh my God, stop, stop, that’s it.”

The fear vanished from his face. His eyes perked up, and he said, “That’s better.”

“Great to hear,” Greg said. He began to tighten the rest of the straps on the KTD.

“Okay, now some oxygen will make you feel better,” John said. Alex nodded, and John applied the mask to his face. Alex’s hyperventilation stopped, and he started to breathe normally.

I pulled off my butt-pack of medical supplies and grabbed my air splint. I put it around the break in his femur, zipped it up, and inflated it.

“Okay, guys, we need to get him on the backboard,” I said. “Greg, can you prepare the spider straps?”

“No problem,” Greg said, and he removed the straps from the backboard.

“John, can you place the backboard just uphill of Alex?”

“10-4,” he said, and he did just that.

“Alex, we’re gonna have to pull you up a little bit to get you on the backboard.”

Alex nodded.

“Okay, Greg, you support his leg. Hunter, John, we’ll pull him up parallel with the backboard.”

Everyone nodded. Greg bent down and carefully picked up Alex’s injured leg very slightly. Hunter and John grabbed Alex by the top of his ski pants, and I grabbed his jacket by his shoulders.

“Anybody not ready?” I asked. “On the count of three: One, two, three,” I said, and we dragged Alex uphill, and parallel with the backboard. Alex shrieked.

“You okay?” John asked Alex. Alex nodded.

“Okay, John and I are going to roll Alex onto his good leg, and Greg you’ll slide the backboard underneath him, okay?”

“Got it,” Greg said.

Greg put the backboard right up to Alex’s bad leg, and John and I grabbed Alex’s pants and jacket in a crisscross formation.

“We’re gonna roll him onto his good leg now,” I said. “Anybody not ready? On the count of three: One, two three,” I said, and we rolled him onto his uninjured side. Greg shoved the backboard underneath him. “Now, we’ll roll him onto the board. Anybody not ready? Okay, count of three, one, two, three,” and we rolled him back down onto the backboard.

A few minutes and a few minor adjustments later, we had Alex all spider-strapped to the backboard and strapped into the toboggan. We also wrapped him in blankets to prevent shock. I put my skis on and took the handles. Hunter was my tail roper.

“Okay, Alex, can you still wiggle your toes?”

He nodded.

“Okay, here we go. If anything changes, just yell, we’ll be right here.”

“Thank you,” he muffled through his oxygen mask.

“Zach, you’re awfully close to the cliff line,” Hunter said. “Let’s traverse left.”

“Easy for you to say with those telemark skis on,” I said.

Hunter and I heaved and hoed Alex about a hundred yards left. My ski got caught under the deep, wet snow and came off twice, but we made it over past the cliffs. We slowly made our way down the steep trail ever so carefully. We weaved our way through the incredibly tight trees, sometimes even side-hilling the toboggan, until we came to the final drop. It was all I could do to keep my edges from slipping down the side of the hill. The handles were even above my head at one point. Hunter eased the tail-rope out, and then skied down the chute himself.

About forty-five minutes later, we were out of the woods and down to the first-aid room at the bottom of *Shelburne Peak*. The ambulance was waiting, as was Ned. It is customary to have a supervisor investigate any serious injury in case of a lawsuit.

“Femur, I see,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

The EMT's unloaded a stretcher from the back of the ambulance and lowered it to the level of the toboggan.

"We got it from here," one of the EMT's said.

"10-4," I said.

"I'll ask the patient some questions for the report, and you can fill out the rest," Ned said.

"10-4," I said.

I went into the first-aid room, grabbed a sled pack, and went back outside to repack my sled. By the time I was done, Ned had asked the general questions and filled out that part of the form: name, address, DOB, height, weight, previous medical history, was he renting skis, was he wearing a helmet, his statement of what happened, etc. He handed me the form, and I filled out my part: where I found the patient, snow conditions, treatment I did on the hill, weather conditions, any witnesses, etc.

When I was done, Ned looked over the paperwork. By this time, the rest of the patrollers had come back outside.

"Hmm," he said. "How'd they do, Hunter?"

Hunter smiled and said, "They're ready."

"Okay, you guys are released. Can I have your jackets, please?" Ned asked

John, Greg and I handed Ned our jackets. He went inside, and a few moments later came back with three brand new jackets. We pulled them out of the plastic and examined them. Finally, we all had our white crosses. We were real patrollers!

"Last chair has come and gone, so I'll take John up on the snowmobile. The rest of you can just head home. I'll do a snowmo sweep to make up for the lack of patrollers," Ned said.

"Thin coverage," Hunter said through his frown.

Ned smiled and said, "As always. Imagine if they actually staffed us? Anyway, we'll see you guys. John, let's go."

"See ya guys," John said through a big smile.

"Peace," I said.

"See ya," Greg said.

Hunter just waved. We all grabbed our shit and skied down *Perimeter*. Once inside the ski patrol building, we took off our shit. Hunter

congratulated us on doing a good job and let us know we weren't rookie scum anymore. Well, we *were* still rookie scum, but we had done a great job.

And this went on, Rob, just like that every day. John, Greg, especially John and I became close friends. We worked and played together, and I even got him to go fishing. He never touched the fish or the bait, but whatever. We responded to codes, swept the trails at the end of the day, and hung out at the bar every night. We skied hard and drank even harder. We even took a trip up to Jay Peak. We trusted each other with our lives. When it came time to get laid off, around the end of May, I even moved in with John. Greg headed out west to Colorado for the summer instead of going back to lifeguard.

The last night I stayed at Mike's, he helped me shove all my shit in the van and even rode with me to John's place to help unload it. We spent the night carrying on and talking about the winter and our experiences. I could tell by the way Mike was talking, and especially after we had a few too many, that he really felt bad about kicking me out. I had never missed a rent payment, and I had helped him repair and fix a bunch of shit around the house. He showed me how his solar array and hydro-plant worked, as well as how to DIY a bunch of shit. He even told me that if I needed a place to stay, I could always pitch a tent on his property. That's how I came to live here in this tree. He said that I could live on his property, but that he didn't want a structure that could make his already ridiculous property taxes go up.

When it all went bad with John, Mike helped me build this place. Those were dark times. Karen was pregnant, and we were basically homeless. Mike let us stay at his place for a little bit, but then I put up a big tent that I put a king-sized bed in. She just stayed home and cried all day. I know a lot of it was hormones, but it was tough. It's mighty depressing being an economic slave in our neo-feudal, debt-slave plantation economy, especially with a kid on the way.

Dinnertime

Zach looked into the distance with a blank stare. The sun had just gone down behind the mountain ridge, and I shivered a little bit in the cold of the coming darkness.

“So, how did you meet Karen?” I asked.

“She and I worked at that same farm she works for now. Mike got me a part time job there: cash. She raised the calves; I mostly just shoveled shit, but I milked some and learned about raising them,” Zach paused. “But enough of this, the rest of the story is pretty hard to tell, and I’ll need a few beers in me before I can tell you. Besides, I’m hungry as fuck. You hungry?”

“I could eat the ass out of a dead rhinoceros,” I said.

“Good. It smells like Karen is almost done cooking. I’ll show you around the master suite before we go,” he said.

Zach walked over to the hatch, opened it, and climbed down the ladder to the master suite. I followed him down, making sure to close the hatch behind me. The master suite was about the same size as the main house and similar in setup, except it lacked a kitchen or TV. There was a woodstove in the middle of the room, and the walls were that cedar tongue and groove you’d see used in a mobile home from the 70’s. There were also several book shelves filled with books; one was filled with just children’s books.

“I stole all that from the plywood factory that shipped all of its jobs to China,” Zach laughed, pointing at the walls. “Karen fuckin’ hates it, but it was free. We’ve got better walls in our new home.”

“New home?” I asked.

“Yeah, this place is getting too small. We’d like to have another child, hopefully a boy. Well, she wants a girl, but then I’ll be really outnumbered. I just hope the next kid is as smart as Julia, but less whiney. Man, she can be a whine ass!”

I laughed. “She’s two, that’s what two-year-olds do.”

“True, but one disadvantage of living here is that there are not many babysitters. Mike watches her sometimes, but he smokes in the house.”

“Shit, Zach, when we grew up there was smoking in malls, restaurants, fucking everywhere, and we turned out fine,” I said.

“This is true, but I want her to have a better life than I did. I want her to have the best food, and to not live the corporate lie. College is a pyramid scheme right down to the textbooks. The only thing that pays off now-a-days is finance, which is just making poor people poorer while they do nothing. We should just kill them all and take their shit,” he said, getting angry. “Ah fuck it, Rob, let me show you the main bedroom.”

Zach opened one of the four doors that led out of the main room. It opened up into a medium-sized bedroom with a king-sized bed, a few dressers, and a nightstand. There was a closet on the right wall, two southern-facing windows, and another door, which Zach opened. I followed him inside.

“This is the tuning room and armory,” he said, turning on the lights.

This room was just as big as his bedroom. Two walls were covered in skiing related posters, as well as a poster about different sized bullets, and a few band posters. There was one window and a work bench with a few vices attached to it. There were drawers below it, which he started opening.

“Wax,” he said, opening a drawer that contained a bunch of chunks of different colored wax.

“Ski tools, iron,” he said, opening another drawer. “Files, other shit,” he said opening another. “Last drawer, gun parts, tools, and cleaning supplies. Ram rods, brushes, all that shit,” he said, and he closed the drawer.

“And over here, we have the safe,” he said, going over to the other side of the room.

Above the safe were a bunch of different skis and boots, ranging from wide, powder skis and four buckle boots to old school straight skis and rear-entry boots. Next to the safe was a small bench, and underneath was a metal, shoe-size measurer thing that you see in ski shops.

“Sit down, take off your boots and measure your feet,” he said, pointing to the bench.

“Okay,” I said, and I sat down.

I started taking off my boots, and Zach used his thumb print to open the safe. He opened the door, but inside was another door with a keypad on it. He entered a code, and I heard a, “Click.” I put my foot in the metal measurer and began to measure my feet. Zach opened the door, and I peered over to look inside.

“Shoe size?” he asked.

“Uh, ten-and-a-half,” I said.

“No, Rob, in Mondo, please,” he said sarcastically.

“Uh, twenty-seven point five,” I said, squinting to read the chart.

“Same size as me,” he said. “Very common.” Zach reached up and grabbed a pair of three buckle Dalbellos. “Try these,” he said, handing me the boots.

I put them on as Zach fiddled around inside of the safe. Once they were on and buckled I stood up, saying, “Yeah, these will do.”

“Well, walk around in them,” he said.

I paced back and forth a few times and then said, “Fine.”

“Check this out,” Zach said, handing me a rifle. “This was my Uncle’s M16, full auto.”

“How can you own full auto? You need a license?” I asked.

“You would if Hitlery was president. No, just a tax stamp. It’s an heirloom, I hardly fire it. It’s more sentimental. Imagine if the libtards knew people collected guns as a hobby. They think everyone that has a gun is a nut, but the ironic thing is that if Hitlary got elected they’d *need* guns. The reason that politicians are afraid of guns is because it’s the last check and balance against tyranny, and most of those corrupt motherfuckers know which end they’d be on if the people ever woke up.”

I looked the rifle over and handed it back to Zach.

“I’m not that comfortable with guns,” I said.

Zach put the rifle back in the safe and said, “You will be by tomorrow night.”

“Okay, so this is a twelve-gauge shotgun,” he said, picking it up. “A Remington 870 Mag, I found it in the sporting goods aisle of S-mart. Shop smart, shop S-mart, you got it?”

I laughed. “This is my *boom* stick!” I screamed.

Zach laughed and put the gun back. “I also have this Smith and Wesson Sport Two AR with a night-vision scope...”

“Assault rifle,” I said.

Zach scowled and said, “No, Armalite Rifle. An assault rifle is fully automatic, this is only semi-auto. You’ve been listening to too much NPR.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Anytime, Kid,” he laughed. “It’s great for killing the coyotes around here, and other vermin. .223 is one of the best varmint calibers around, especially in semi-auto. The libtards would have you believe only psychos and people in Iraq should have them.”

“Or Mexican drug cartels,” I said.

“That too,” he laughed. “On this shelf are my pistols. You know this guy,” he said, pulling out the .44 magnum and handing it to me. “It’s a single action, which means you have to cock the hammer back for it to fire. It’s a great guide gun, an Iver Johnson from the 1970’s”

“Yeah,” I said, fumbling with the gun.

“Don’t fucking point it at me,” Zach scolded. “Point it over there and keep your finger off the trigger.”

“I’m sorry!” I said.

“It’s okay. I know in Mass they make you afraid of guns and don’t teach you gun safety so that if you ever do encounter one you are ignorant as fuck and even more dangerous,” he said. “So always keep it pointed in a safe direction, and always make sure it is unloaded. Flip this hatch here and cock the hammer back half way.”

Awkwardly, I cocked the hammer back halfway and opened the hatch.

“Now spin the wheel,” he said, and I spun the wheel.

“It’s empty,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Even if you think it’s unloaded, never trust that it is. Always treat all guns as if they are loaded. Cock the hammer back all the way, and then pull the trigger while easing the hammer down with your thumb.”

“Okay,” I said, and I awkwardly did as I was told.

“Good. Now hand it over,” he said.

I handed him the gun.

“Good, you kept the barrel pointed down when you gave it to me, that’s good learning.”

“Always treat it as if it’s loaded,” I repeated. “Say, was the gun loaded when you put it to my head last night?”

“Pay attention,” he interrupted. “Are you right or left handed?”

“Right,” I said.

“Okay, well, I’m a lefty, but the procedure is the same,” he said. “Okay, so take your right hand and put it on the grip, and cover it with your left hand, like this. This gun kicks like a mule, so when you fire it you want to really have a good grip on it.”

He handed me back the pistol and said, “Now you try.”

I did what he told me to do, then Zach said, “Good, good. Now raise it up to your eye and look through the sights at the target. Aim for that *Door’s* poster, right for Morrison’s head. Line up the two dots on the rear sight with the dot on the front sight, but don’t concentrate on the dot; look through the sights and keep the target in focus.”

“Okay,” I said, closing my left eye and looking at Jim Morrison’s head through the sight.

“Get your finger off the trigger!” He yelled.

“My bad,” I said. My hand trembled holding the heavy pistol.

“It’s all good, rookie mistake. Anyway, cock the hammer back.”

The hammer clicked, and the cylinder rotated slightly as I cocked it back.

“Steady your sight, and when you’re ready to make a shot put your finger on the trigger and pull.”

I looked for a few seconds, and when I was ready I put my finger on the trigger and pulled.

“Wow, it didn’t take much to drop that hammer,” I said.

“I did some trigger work. It’s got a hair trigger. Don’t anticipate the shot, though. I saw the barrel go down when you pulled the trigger. Squeeze the trigger, don’t pull it.”

“Okay...” I said, confused.

Zach reached into the safe and pulled out some bullets and leather holster.

“These are called caps; they are fake, training bullets. Cock that hammer back half way and load them through that hatch I showed you,” he said, handing me the caps.

I loaded the caps carefully, spun the cylinder just to be a cowboy, and cocked the hammer back off.

“Put this on your belt,” he said, handing me a brown, leather holster. “Get used to the gun; sleep with it while you’re here. Everyone should know how to use one. Remember, a gun is a tool just like any

other tool. You need to read the fucking safety manual and practice with it to become a master.”

I hooked the holster to my belt and put the pistol in it. The gun weighed about three pounds, but it didn't really feel that awkward.

“What are you going to use if I took your pistol?” I asked.

Zach smiled and said, “Oh, I got it covered.” He raised his pant leg, revealing a small pistol. “Taurus snub-nose .44 mag. This will break your fucking wrist,” he laughed. “Also, I have these,” he said, pointing to the safe.

“I got this Smith and Wesson, M & P chambered in .40, and a Taurus Slim 740 also chambered in .40, although that's Karen's weapon,” he said. “I also have this .22 pistol, two Ruger 10/22 rifles with scopes for plinking, a HiPoint carbine 4595 chambered in .45 handgun ammo. *That* gun is a fun gun to shoot, and I have all the tactical shit on it: red dot scope, bi-pod, and trigger work, ya now. I also have my deer rifle. It's a Winchester chambered in 30-30. It has a notch scratched in it for every deer it's killed and is also an heirloom. Last but not least, I have this Chinese SKS I updated to a tactical stock and put a scope on it. The Archangel build makes it compatible with Promag thirty round mags without having to file down the wood furniture.”

“It has a bayonet?” I asked.

“Fuck yeah! See, a lot of people invest in many guns, but that's stupid. What you want is a couple of guns you are good at using and a whole bunch of this,” he said, popping a latch on the wall. Then, he moved the whole safe open like it was a door. I didn't even notice it was hinged to the wall before he did this, but once he moved the safe I saw another safe door behind it. He opened it with another fingerprint/key-code combo.

“Five thousand rounds hollow point .40 cal, five thousand hollow point .45 cal, five thousand FMJ 7.62 by three-nine rounds for the SKS, five thousand rounds .44 magnum hollow points, five thousand rounds of 30-30 soft points, a thousand rounds .44 magnum soft points, ten thousand rounds of FMJ 5.56 NATO, and also five thousand rounds soft point, and twenty thousand rounds various .22 ammo,” he said, pointing at the copious amounts of ammo cans.

“Wow,” I said, stunned. “What's the difference in ammo?”

“Well, hollow points expand for a bigger exit wound, maximizing blood loss and ensuring whatever you shot is fucking dead. FMJs, or full metal jackets, are what you use in war. They go in and out, so not much exit wound, but good against armor or for going through buildings and

cars and whatnot. Soft points are for hunting. They expand inside the animal for maximum internal destruction, but don't leave a big exit wound that ruins the meat."

"Sweet," I said.

"Now take off those boots, I'm fucking hungry!"

Zach closed the safe and left the room. I took off the ski boots and put them under the bench. Then, I went back out through the bedroom making sure to turn off the lights. Zach was waiting for me in the living room.

"Okay, so that's Julia's room, that's another cold room slash wood room, and this is the bathroom," he said, going through the door.

Zach clicked on the light to reveal a basic bathroom: sink, shitter, shower/tub combo. However, on the walls were switches.

"This one here turns on the electric, on-demand, backup water heater. This is only when the propane one goes out, or when I forget to refill the propane or whatever. We don't need it, it is off. If I turned it on, this green indicator light would illuminate, and I would need to re-valve some shit on the roof."

"Got it," I said.

"This is the tank water heater and stirrer, which is already on, and needs to be on when it gets below freezing. It is indicated by this green LED, here. It just keeps the water from freezing in the tank, and it can either be powered by propane or electric. Electric is the main, propane the backup," he said.

"You have a backup for the tank?"

"Yes, we have two main tanks and a backup, which we keep empty unless we need it. It is full right now, and you can see that here on these water-level indicators," Zach said, pointing to some fuel-like gages.

"Okay," Zach said, pointing to another switch. "This switch will release the water from the tanks into the propane, on demand heater, and this switch turns on the heater. Now it's all gravity fed, and the tanks are high above us, so we get about a hundred pounds of water pressure with no extra pump. So, when you take a shower, hit this switch and you'll be in business."

He walked over to the shower, pointed to a valve on the wall of the shower, and said, "Then, open this valve and water will come out."

"How, how do I adjust the water temperature?" I asked.

“You don’t,” he said. “It will be hot enough to take a shower. And don’t take a long shower, either; I don’t wanna have to fill the tanks again until we shovel out. It’s just another chore, and I wanna ski and shoot guns tomorrow.”

“No problem,” I said.

“When you’re done, just turn off the valve and switch,” he said. “Don’t touch anything else,” he said sternly.

“Got it, bud,” I said.

“Hey, is there a backup for the electric valves for bringing the water to the on-demand heater?” I asked.

“Yes, and they are open right now, so you don’t have to fuck with them,” Zach said. “They’re on the roof, I forgot to show you when we were up there. I got distracted with my story, and food.”

Zach’s eyes lit up and he said, “Oh yeah, food, let’s fuckin’ go man!”

“All right,” I said, rubbing my hands together. “I can’t wait.”

Zach and I exited the bathroom, went through the hatch and down the ladder to the porch. Then, we entered the main house through the cold room. When we arrived, the table was set and the food was ready. Julia had already started eating.

“I miss you, Daddy,” Julia said.

“I missed you, too, Jules,” Zach said, kissing her forehead. Julia smiled, and then took a drink of water.

“Daddy, you read me book after dinner?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said, walking over to the fridge.

“Karen, Rob, whatdya want to drink?” he yelled.

“I got myself some milk while you were off gallivanting,” Karen said, sitting down at the table.

“Rob?”

“You got a beer?” I asked.

“Does a frog have a watertight ass?” he asked.

“Uh, I hope so,” I said, sitting down at the table.

Zach sat down and handed me the beer that he had already opened. Karen, Zach and I passed the food around and filled our plates. Venison steak with mushrooms, peppers and onions, mashed potatoes,

rainbow trout, and green beans. All of the home-made condiments were also passed around. My mouth watered.

“Surf and turf,” Zach said, cutting a piece of trout and putting it on his plate.

When we finished filling our plates with delicious food, Zach spoke up.

“I’d like to thank Nature,” he said.

Everyone except Julia put their hands together, lowered their heads and shut their eyes.

“Thank you, Nature, for providing this bounty of food for us. Without you, we’d have to go to a supermarket and pay some asshole all of our money to eat GMO poisoned food. Amen,” he said, opening his eyes.

We all started shoveling food into our mouths. In between bites I said, “Zach, you were going to finish that story, right? Of how you came to live here?”

Zach finished his bite of food and said, “Yup.”

“Yeah, you were all done with patrol, and you were living with John,” I said.

“I told you that kid was a piece of shit,” Karen said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Zach said. “Anyway, Mike got me the job at the local dairy farm, and I worked there under the table while I collected unemployment from Massachusetts. I was getting like \$400 bucks a week from both places, but of course I blew it all on partying and guns.”

“But if you hadn’t worked there, we wouldn’t have met,” Karen smiled.

“Yeah,” Zach garbled through his mouthful of trout. He put his finger up for a minute while he finished chewing. After he swallowed his food, he said, “Nature works in mysterious ways. Anyway, I shoveled shit there, switched the cows...”

“Switched cows?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “There are two groups of cows, the producers and the non-producers. Grain is so prohibitively expensive that they don’t give grain to the cows that don’t produce a lot of milk. Also, this farm has stalls, and not a parlor, so you have to switch the two groups without mixing any of them up, and then chain the new group to the stalls in the milk barn.”

“How the hell do you do that?” I asked, taking a bite of venison.

“Well, they all have collars, and there’s a railing that you chain them to in the front of the stall.”

“How do you switch them?” I asked.

“There’s a pack barn connected to the milk barn via a hallway, and in the pack barn there are two sides: an aisle, where food troughs are, and a big area filled with sawdust. There are two ghetto-ass gates on either side, so when it’s time to switch you push the group in the pack barn out of the feed aisle, into the larger area, and you shut the gate.”

“How do you get them to the other side?” I asked.

“You just get in front of them, and usually they move in the other direction.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Well, I have an escalating scale of violence that I use. First, I hit them in the ass with a broom. If that doesn’t work, I hit them in the face. If that doesn’t work, I get the shovel.”

“What if the shovel doesn’t work?” I asked, horrified.

“Never had it happen. I hardly ever used the shovel, only on the dumbest heifers. They learn quick,” he laughed.

“I like cows,” Julia said.

“What does the cow say, Jules?” Karen asked.

Julia turned her head sideways and shouted, “Moo!”

We all giggled. She was a cute kid.

“So, I’d push all the non-producers over, and then open the gate to the milk barn. As the farmer would finish milking a row, I’d push that row out into the feed aisle, and let in the appropriate number of cows to fill the row of stalls so that there was never a lull in production,” Zach said.

“And all this went smoothly?” I asked.

“Fuck no!” he laughed. “Cows would break the ropes that kept them out of the full rows of stalls being milked, they’d try and turn around and go back in, I’d let too many in, some flatlander would open a door and they’d make a run for it. Cows aren’t stupid, they’re assholes!”

“They can be,” Karen said. “I never had a problem when *I* helped switch.”

“Yeah right,” Zach said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. He took a sip of beer and then said, “That’s how we met, though. She’d always help me clean up the old feed in the milk barn before I’d lay out new feed. It’s a huge pain in the ass because they milk the same way they did in the 1950’s.”

“Can’t you just use a tractor to pick up the food? Or a skid steer?” I asked.

“Nope, we used shovels and the oldest wooden wheelbarrows ever. I’d dump the wheelbarrows into the bucket of the tractor and use it to feed the baby bulls, because they’re fucking useless in terms of a milk farm. You can only keep so many for breeding, and the rest just waste resources,” Zach said.

“What about veal?” I asked.

Karen rolled her eyes.

“That’s what *I* said,” Zach laughed. “Don’t talk that way around Karen, though.”

“I raised the calves; you’re not going to fucking eat them! They’re so cute,” she said.

“Well, if they were smart, they’d veal them out, but they had a B and B so they didn’t want the flatlander, yuppie douche bags to not stay there,” he said. “But, most dairy farms have to veal out their calves.”

“Why is that?” I asked, helping myself to more green beans.

“Because they only pay the farmers like a dollar twenty a gallon for milk,” Zach said.

“What?” I asked, confused. “Then how is it four dollars a gallon in the store?”

“Because get fucked and die, that’s why. You get fucking middled. That’s the story of modern America: the workers do all the work and get poorer while the rich do nothing and get richer.”

“I guess,” I said. “I just can’t believe that!”

“Well, believe it,” Karen said. “There’s a reason that they’re the only dairy farm left in the valley. Everyone else has switched to beef because you can actually make a living off of it. Pretty soon you’ll get your milk from factory farms only, and all the mom-and-pop farms will be out of business. Once they made the sale of raw milk illegal, the family farms started dying. How can you compete with a farm that only has a hundred head against a factory farm that has ten-thousand, is receiving

Government subsidies, and hires Mexican illegals for four dollars an hour? You can't!"

"Seriously, go down to the farm on your way out of town. Bring by a bottle of mountain dew and the farmer will let you take a couple of gallons of milk from the bulk tank. Just make sure to agitate it for a couple of minutes or you'll have skim milk," Zach said.

"Tell him we sent you," said Karen.

"Isn't it sketchy to drink raw milk? Can't it make you sick?" I asked.

"Sure, if you don't trust your farm. You can get listeria, but unless you're old or young you just get the shits. Totally treatable," Zach said.

"I get the shits every time I eat McDonald's," I said

"Exactly," said Zach. "Plus, you can trust their milk."

"I've been drinking it my whole life and I never got sick," Karen said. "My parents drank it, and their parents, and so on and so forth back to the beginning of fucking time! Julia drinks it, and her kids will drink it too."

"Yeah, the real reason it is illegal is so the corporate fucks can middle the fuck out of you, and make it so only giant companies can turn a profit, while wages go down and the animals get treated like shit. You think the shovel is bad, you should see how cows live in factory farms!" Zach screamed.

"They don't even let them out to pasture," Karen said.

"They never see the sunshine!" Zach said.

"Damn," I said. I took a few more bites of food and then said, "So how did you get to love each other?"

"Love her?" Zach asked. "I can barely stand her," he said sarcastically.

Karen punched Zach's shoulder.

"Damn, woman, do you always have to hit the bad one?" he winced, holding his shoulder.

"I asked him to Mike's Fourth of July party," she said.

"She gives good head, that's the secret..." he was cut off by Karen punching him in the other shoulder a few times.

"Jesus," he whined. "At least it's the good one."

“We just got along, I guess. We both like guns and bowling and are attracted to each other. He’s a good kisser too,” Karen blushed.

“Yeah, I dunno, really. After that night, we spent all of our days together. I just love her, I can’t really explain it. She pisses me off to the point where I wanna shoot her, but I can’t because I love her so much.”

“Ditto,” Karen said. “For me it was after we kissed that Fourth of July.”

“I liked the h…” Zach said, but was interrupted by Karen.

She waved her fist at him and said, “Don’t even think about it!”

Zach laughed and then said, “I loved her at first sight, as gay as that sounds. Plus, she’s the only woman who has been able to put up with my shit. I’m definitely an asshole.”

“That’s for sure,” Karen said.

“Asshole, asshole,” Julia said, banging her fork against the table.

Karen smacked Julia and said, “You don’t *say* that word, it’s just for mommies and daddies. You can say butt hole. And stop banging your fucking fork on the table!”

“Okay mommy,” Julia cried. “Butt hole, butt hole, butt hole. Freakin, freakin, freakin butt hole.”

“There you go,” Zach said to Julia. “Now finish your green beans.”

“Okay, Daddy,” she said, stabbing a green bean.

Karen and Zach held hands and smiled. “We’re much happier now out here, together, as a family should be,” Karen said. “All these assholes want you to send your kid to daycare, so you can work fifty hours a week to pay someone else an entire week’s wage to barely watch your kid. I stay home with Julia unless I have to work at the farm, and Zach stays with her when that happens. We read to her constantly, and she already can count to twelve, say her, ‘ABCs,’ and knows the colors.”

“Wow,” I said.

“They want our kids to be stupid so that no one challenges their slave status in the corporate world. At least my college degree in English will finally go towards something,” Zach said.

“So, she’ll be home schooled?” I asked.

“No,” Zach said. “We’ll send her to regular school, but I will make sure she has all the knowledge that I know, and I will teach her what

they removed from school in the '60's: logic. The Cupcake Generation lacks all of that."

"You know, technically we're in the Cupcake, or Millennial generation, right?" I asked.

"Fuck *that*," Zach said. "80's babies should not be lumped in with those fucking Martians. Those Facebook addicted morons can go drink almond milk out of their baby bottles after their Soros-funded protests over the President, even though statistically most of them didn't even vote."

"Those Killary supporters give women a bad name," Karen said. "They're just mad she didn't win, and that's all. It's what happens when you don't let kids fail and you give them a trophy for participation."

"Yeah, at least we played dodge ball and were told we sucked when we lost. Competition is almost illegal now. There's no more schoolyard justice, so instead of kids having fisticuffs they open fire on their classmates," Zach said.

"So, you both voted from Trump?" I asked.

"Fuck no," Zach said. "I voted for Bernie, the guy Killary rigged the primaries against. Anyone who can vote for a party that rigged an election is a fucking moron. And they're so up in arms about, 'Labeling,' people when they label everyone who voted against Killary a, 'Racist bigot.' God damn libtards. They're taking over this state, trying to grab our guns and make it a land of second homes for Massholes and Joeys."

"Joeys?" I asked.

"Yeah, Jersey Joeys. They're all like, 'Eh, Joey, let's go to the *Pickle Barrel* tonight, I hear there's a Journey cover band playing there," Zach mocked.

We all burst into laughter.

"They're the only ones who can afford the taxes. Vermont is becoming gentrified. The only way to afford to live here is to do what we do: do nothing that they can tax and shoot at anyone that comes looking to audit you," Karen said.

"Yeah, we even get taxes back. If everyone did what we did, the IRS would be fucking bankrupt and the central banking system would fail. All the fat cats on Wall Street and in big pharma, charging so much for meds that little Johnny now has to die from a bee sting, all of those fucks would lose everything and be fucked. Then we could finally shoot them in the face and bury them in a shallow grave. They fucking *deserve* it," Zach said, violently stabbing the last piece of food on his plate with a fork.

“That’s why we worked with Mike to make it so hard to find this place,” Karen said. If the state ever knew about this place, Mike’s taxes would skyrocket, and those Act 250 assholes would be all over us.”

“Butt hole, butt hole,” Julia said.

“I never even had to shoot one, although I’d like to,” Zach laughed. “Pretty soon they’ll be trying to resettle refugees here.”

“No,” Karen said. “Why would they live out here when they all have cushy jobs at the hospital in Rutland, and guaranteed housing?”

“Maybe we should renounce our citizenship, go to Iraq, and then be refugees here. We’d get a free house, nice job, retirement. Never mind that children are living in station wagons and starving to death, and veterans are fucking homeless,” Zach said, getting up from the table.

Just then, a huge gust of wind blew, and the tree house shook a little bit.

“Storm’s here,” Zach said, taking the empty plates into the kitchen.

Karen also got up from the table. She let Julia down, who immediately went over to the couch and picked up a book. Karen helped Zach clear the table, and then she started washing dishes. Zach cleaned the table with a sponge, and then got a beer out of the fridge and gave it to me. Then, he started turning off the lights. He went into the cold room and came back with several kerosene lanterns. He placed them all around the room, and then turned off the last of the lights.

“We need to conserve power just in case,” Zach said.

“Come in, Zach,” a voice said from somewhere.

Zach pulled out a walkie talkie from a cabinet and said, “Yeah, go ahead Mike.”

“You guys okay out there?” he asked.

“We’re good, man, thank you.”

“Storm is really bad, lots of wind. They’re saying up to sixty mile-an-hour gusts.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Zach said. “If you need anything, let me know, Mike. I got some extra wood if you need it.”

“Nope, I’m good bud. I got my wine, just made supper. I’m going to eat, stretch, do some exercises and hit the sack. I’m exhausted.”

“I hear ya. Rob made it here, thank you, I meant to call earlier.”

“That’s good, he looked like a Cupcake to me, but I guess we won’t have to bury another one in the backyard, huh?”

“I guess not,” Zach laughed. “I got your skis tuned up if you wanna take a run tomorrow.”

“Thanks bud, but I got a ton of shit to do.”

“No problem. Hey, I gotta turn off my radio to conserve power. It’ll be on tomorrow though; I’ll be skiing so I can use the one in the truck. If there’s any emergency, you know what to do.”

“Yup, fire the 30-06 three times. Alright bud, I’ll keep mine on just in case. Goodnight,” Mike said.

“Goodnight man, thank you,” Zach said, and he clicked off his radio and put it back in the cabinet.

Zach started helping Karen wash the dishes. He turned to me and said, “Bud, if you need to take a shower, do it now. There’s a towel in the closet in the bathroom. You remember how to use it?”

“Uh, yeah, “I said.

“Make sure it’s short,” Karen said.

“Will do,” I said.

“Also, dude, you can use the toilet if you need to shit, fuck the outhouse for now. If you need to piss, just piss off the deck,” Zach said.

“What about the deer?” I asked.

“Karen cut it up and put it in the freezer,” Zach said. “Normally I leave it hanging longer, but there’s a storm coming.”

“Nice,” I said, getting up from the table. I grabbed my backpack and headed for the master suite.

When I opened the door to the deck from the cold room and got out onto the porch, the wind nearly knocked me down. I struggled to close the door in the wind, and then almost fell off the icy ladder leading to the master suite. I managed to get the hatch open, throw my bag up, and then pull myself inside. It took nearly all my weight to close the hatch.

“God damn,” I said to myself.

There were two lights on in the master suite, one in the living room and one in the bathroom. I made my way into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Okay,” I said to myself.

I flicked the switch labeled, “Valve #1.” I heard the water run, and then stop. Next, I turned on the switch labeled, “Main Heater.” I set my backpack down and grabbed a towel from the closet. I took my toiletry bag out of my backpack and set it on the sink that was next to the shower. I took the pistol out of the holster and placed it on the tank of the toilet. Then, I got naked and turned the switch in the shower to the on position. I held my hand under the stream to test the water, and a few seconds later it was warm enough to take a shower. I wet myself under the barely warm stream, and then turned the water off. I leaned out of the shower and pulled out shampoo and soap from my bag. I scrubbed myself down, then I turned the water back on and quickly rinsed myself off. I leaned out again to grab a towel, which I used to dry myself off. Once I was dry, I got out of the shower and took a shit. After the shit, I flushed the shitter, got dressed, and turned off the water-heater and main valve. Then, I drained the remaining water in the pipe out through the showerhead, leaving the valve open.

I put the pistol back in the holster and exited the bathroom. I left the master suite, once again almost getting thrown off the porch on my way back inside.

Zach looked up from the book he was reading to Julia and asked, “Hey, did you drain the water from the pipe through the shower and leave the valve open?”

“Yeah, I figured.” I said.

“Good, ‘cuz I forgot to tell you,” he said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’m gonna go turn off the lights and put out some lanterns,” Zach said. “There’s beers in the fridge.”

“Cool,” I said. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he said.

I walked over to the couch and laid down on it. The pistol was jabbing me, so I took it out and put it under my pillow.

“Can I help you with anything?” I yawned.

“No, you’re a guest, Rob, I’m all set,” she smiled.

“O...Okay,” I yawned, and I put my head down on the couch.

The Powder Day

“Wake, up, Rob, wake up!” Zach yelled.

“What, what happened?” I asked, groggily. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The sun barely shone through the windows. Zach must have taken the boards off while I was asleep.

“Dude, it’s like nine-thirty, lift is open,” he exclaimed.

“Jesus,” I yawned.

“I’ve already taken a run, conditions are pretty good. It’s a bit sticky, but there’s plenty of coverage!”

Zach walked into the kitchen, his ski boots clunking on the wood floor with every step. He grabbed something, and then came back over to me. He handed me a breakfast sandwich and said, “Eat this. Karen and Julia are already on the hill; we brought all of the gear over. Come on, eat, hurry up! I gotta take care of some shit, be ready in ten!”

“Okay,” I said.

Zach climbed through the hatch and down the ladder. I wolfed down my sandwich and put on my clothes. I had no ski gear, so I just put on a few cotton layers and some jeans. I heard an engine roar to life, and a few moments later Zach popped his head through the hatch.

“Come on,” he said, looking me over. “Jesus, you’re a fucking gaper, I knew it!”

“I don’t have any gear with me. I didn’t know we’d be skiing,” I said.

“Never mind, let’s go! And don’t forget your gun!” he said, disappearing down the tree.

I retrieved the gun from under the pillow and put it in the holster. Then, I followed him down the ladder, making sure to shut the hatch behind me. Waiting below was a very old snowmobile with a utility sled attached to the back with a pintle hitch.

Zach hid the wooden ladder so that no one could get up into the tree house, and then climbed onto the snowmobile. He patted the back of the seat and said, “Get on.”

“Okay,” I said, hopping on the snowmobile. “I’ve never been on one before.”

“This is a Wankel; it’s from the 70’s. Modern sleds suck ass in the powder, but this one will go anywhere. It’s a bit slow, but it’s got a lot of torque. Just remember to lean when I lean!”

I got on the sled and Zach revved the motor. “You good?” he yelled.

“Yeah,” I said, and he gunned the throttle.

It took about twenty minutes to get to the ski hill, and Zach pretty much held the throttle wide open the whole time. It was pretty flat getting there, and there were only a few turns, so I wasn’t nervous. Zach was a skilled snowmobile driver.

When we arrived at the ski hill, Zach parked the snowmo behind the truck, which was running. Karen and Julia were riding up the rope tow on a toboggan. About a quarter of the way up was a big flat spot, and that’s where Karen let go of the rope. She quickly got off the toboggan, turned it around, and used the rope in front to drag it to the middle of the narrow trail. She then got on the toboggan, straddling Julia in between her legs, and zoomed at breakneck speed down the hill and way past us; Julia and Karen were both laughing hysterically.

“Oh, that’s too much fun,” Karen said, dragging the toboggan up to us with Julia in tow. They were both sporting large smiles.

“Winter is our vacation,” Zach said. “It’s harder to survive, but we’ve worked our asses off to prepare. We have plenty of meat, veggies, beer, cider, wood, fuel; everything we need. Sure, shit fucks up, but we use less power because we don’t have to refrigerate anything. Of course, our water lines freeze now and again, but that’s what the torch is for. Anyway, we’ve worked hard, and now is when we get to have our fun.”

“Is that why you built this ski hill?” I asked.

“Well, Mike and I built this for us, but yes, it is fun for me to ski all day instead of sitting in some box watching rich assholes have all the fun,” Zach said, smiling. “Plus, we got a bunch of firewood from cutting the trails!”

“Hey butt holes, I wanna go again!” Julia screamed.

We all laughed loudly.

“How do you *ask*, Julia?” Karen asked.

“Please!” she cried.

“Here we go again!” Karen said, and then she dragged the toboggan back over to the rope tow.

Zach and I walked over to the truck. "Space Cowboy," by the Steve Miller band blared from the speakers. He pulled out two pairs of skis and dropped one pair on the ground. The other he handed to me.

"I know you can ski, so I got you these. They're my old Atomic Crimson TIs," Zach said.

I took the skis apart, dropped one on the ground and flexed the other one. "Stiff, just how I like it," I said.

"Good," Zach said. "Your ski boots are in the truck. I took the liberty of giving you a fresh tune and fitting the boots to the bindings."

"Thanks, man, I'll go put my shit on," I said. I dropped the other ski on the ground and went into the truck to put the boots on.

I hopped in the truck and noticed my ski boots tucked under the dash. The heat was cranked all the way up and set to, "Feet." Rush's, "Tom Sawyer," was now blaring through the speakers. I saw a pair of snow pants on the bench seat. I struggled to put on the pants and boots, but after a few minutes of squirming and swearing I was all set to go. I hopped out of the truck, clicked into my skis, and skated up to the lift.

"Your poles," Zach said, skating up behind me. He handed me some neon pink poles.

"Thanks," I said, taking them. "They're a bit short."

"Yeah, well, beggars can't be choosers," Zach said, turning around. He put his poles in his right hand and grabbed the rope with his left. He shot off up the mountain like a bullet.

"Here we go," I said to myself. I put my poles in my right hand, cupped my left hand around the rope, and slowly tightened my grip. I shot up the mountain after Zach at breakneck speed.

"Yeehaw!" I screamed.

Zach turned his head towards me and shouted, "Rope tows are fucking fast! Watch out for the last steep, we're almost there!"

About a minute later, we began to ascend the last steep. It was almost vertical, and I struggled to hang on. Finally, the mountain flattened out and we were at the top. It had been cleared for about a hundred yards in each direction, and I could see that chutes were cut to make some gladed ski runs. There was a little shed up top next to the return bull wheel, and I could see propane tanks outside of it. There was also a culvert on saw horses that contained a ski patrol toboggan.

“Stole that from Ascutney, along with a lot of pipeline and pumps and other shit for my house. They just left hundred-pound propane tanks up there, full!” Zach laughed.

“Nice,” I said.

“Follow me,” Zach said, and he skated far skier’s right.

I followed him, and we began to ski a very steep, narrow chute through birch trees. Conditions were okay, but the snow was sticky so we both had to basically jump to make our turns. I was so close to Zach that I could see the sparks flying off of his ski edges when he hit the occasional rock.

Just as I was getting my ski legs back, enjoying my run, Zach screamed, “Waterfall!” and I found myself about thirty feet in the air, still going full speed. I got so much air that I had to wave my arms to keep from tumbling backwards. When I hit the ground, the impact was so great that I landed on my ass, but I was able to bounce up before the cloud of snow settled. I made one turn and then stopped next to Zach.

“Damn, you can throw down, Rob,” Zach laughed.

“Well, I do my best hucking when I don’t know it’s coming,” I said sarcastically. “I like that you cut a field here, takes some of the margin of error away.” I looked back at the cliff, and saw it was a frozen waterfall. The ice cracked below us.

“This is a shallow stream, don’t worry,” he said.

“So that’s why we were hitting all those rocks!”

“Yup. Alright, let’s go do another run!”

We took off, and the chute widened out a little bit. Before the trail flattened out, Zach and I cut left and came out just skier’s right of the rope tow. We skated over to it just as Karen and Julia went flying by, laughing hysterically. Primus’, “Shake Hands with Beef,” played over the speakers.

We grabbed onto the rope tow and were off once again. When we reached the top, Zach skated far skier’s left and dropped in. I followed him into a much wider trail that had tree islands in the middle. I followed him at full speed through one of the islands, which unbeknownst to me contained a large jump. Once again, I was in the air. The trail got very steep after the jump, however, so the landing wasn’t as flat as the waterfall. We both stomped the landing, and then went into full tucks down to the bottom.

“Oh yeah!” I screamed, stopping next to Zach at the rope tow. We slapped each other five.

“You passed,” Zach said.

“Passed what?” I asked.

Just then, Karen came up to us with the toboggan and Julia in tow.

“We’re going back to the house; do you need anything?” Karen asked Zach.

“No, I got lunch and beers up in the shed. You got your radio?” Zach said.

“10-4,” she said, picking Julia up. She tossed the toboggan in the bed of the truck, and Julia began to cry.

“I wanna go *again!*” she screamed.

“Don’t you want to go for a ride on the snowmobile instead and go have some lunch with milk?”

“Yeah,” Julia sobbed.

“Then stop crying!” Karen sighed.

“Okay Mommy,” Julia cried. She turned around and stumbled through the snow to the snowmobile.

“I love you,” Zach said, kissing Karen.

“I love you too,” she said.

Karen walked over to the snowmobile. She set the parking brake on, pulled up the emergency shutoff button, and pulled the chord. The motor sprang to life. She picked up Julia and put her on the front of the seat near the handlebars. Then, Karen hopped on the sled, straddling Julia between her legs. She let it warm up for a minute, turned off the choke, and carefully took off towards the house.

“Another run?” Zach asked.

“Fuck yeah!” I said.

“Dude, is this, ‘Mr. Bungle?’” I asked.

“Fuck yeah,” he said as, “Desert Search for Techno Allah,” blared from the speakers.

“No lift lines here, huh Rob?” Zach asked me when we got to the top.

“No, this is awesome!” I screamed.

“Are you ready for the black diamond?” Zach asked.

“I was born ready,” I said.

“Okay, follow me,” he said, and I followed far skier’s right, into the woods.

We traversed across a ridge for a while before we began our run. The trail was steep at the top, almost vertical, with very tight trees. We both made jump turns around the trees, the trail being so steep that snow from our last turn would cascade down into us. Eventually, the run leveled out, and we followed a curvy ridge for a while until we came to another, nearly identical extremely steep set of trees that we jump-turned down. Those trees also led to another, curvy but somewhat flat ridge.

When we got to the next steep, I could see it had been cut wider than the upper part of the trail, and it contained six small cliffs in succession. My knees, legs, and lower back were on fire, but I managed to drop five of the six cliffs. On the sixth cliff I caught an edge, but I was able to land, although awkwardly. I tried to stop, but I just fell over in a cloud of snow.

“Haha!” Zach laughed. “I did that same fucking thing this morning,” he said, sticking out his hand.

I grabbed his hand and he pulled me up. I dusted the snow off myself, picked up my poles, and pushed myself off in front of him.

“Oh shit,” I heard him say as I took off.

The rest of the run was like a race course through the woods, being very steep, windy and single-track.

“Head left!” Zach screamed. He was right on my ass.

We headed left and came out of the woods quite a-ways from the lift. It took a few minutes, but we finally skated back to the lift and got on it. By the time we got to the top, my whole body hurt.

“Dude, I need a beer,” I said.

“We can take a break,” Zach said. “Let’s go to the shed.”

“Okay,” I said, and we skated over to the shack.

Once at the shack, we took off our skis and headed inside. The shack was small and basic, but it had a few cushy chairs, a coat rack that was made from a ski, a table, and most importantly, heat. Our ski boots clunked and squeaked on the plywood floor. I took off my coat, hat, gloves, and goggles, and hung them on the coat rack. Zach did the same.

“Hey, you mind getting the beer?” Zach asked.

“Sure, where they at?” I asked.

“Behind the shed, in the cooler,” he said. “Actually, just bring the cooler; we can have an early lunch.”

“No problem,” I said, and I exited the shack. I went around back and found the cooler. It was nestled in the snow right next to what looked like a trailer that was converted into some kind of steam roller. I grabbed the cooler and went back inside.

I put the cooler on the table and pulled out two beers. I handed one to Zach. Zach pulled out a bottle opener from the table drawer and opened his beer. He slid me the opener so I could crack mine. Then, we both took a sip.

“Hey, what’s that steam roller thing out back?” I asked.

“That’s the groomer; I attach it to the snowmobile and groom the lift line. Sometimes I groom the wider run, the second one we did,” He said.

“That’s neat,” I said, taking another sip of beer.

“You’ll help me groom tonight,” Zach said. “If we have time. It’s not a priority.”

“Yeah, no problem,” I said. After a few minutes of silence, I said, “So what happened with Faubert?”

“Well, as I was telling you, Karen and I met and fell in love. John said it was okay that Karen moved in, as long as we paid a little extra in rent. So, she moved out of her parent’s house and moved in with me. I worked at the farm until next ski season, when I went back to work at the mountain...”

Fuck Fucking Society

I arrived ten minutes early to the *Bowl*, but I couldn't punch in because if you punch in more than five minutes early they will write you up. That's a fact, just like you can get written up for not smiling. Here's an idea: pay people a living wage and they'll fucking smile.

Anyway, I had just worked another fifty-hour week with no overtime, at night no less. They do this by rescheduling your days off so that even though you worked fifty hours, the way the bullshit two-week pay period is split your overtime hours always fall in the next pay period. So, you get fucked right in the ass.

I forced myself to get out of the van, and head into the snowmaking barn. The season had gotten off to such a rocky start. Much to my chagrin, I either had to make snow or be unemployed. This was an issue, as I had become snowmaking's bitch. Because I took a run that I was promised and pissed off that asshole in lifts, and because when snowmaking was done I got to go to patrol, everyone was jealous. I became the barn bitch and dig-whore. To make matters worse, I had just quit smoking everything, so I was bit of a mess.

"Zach!" bald-headed John King yelled at me. I was in the barn, endlessly repairing hydrants, blowing out snowmaking hoses and doing other bitch-work.

"Suit up, you're going out on the hill."

"Fucking finally," I shouted. All I wanted was a cigarette, but they were just too expensive. The state is no better than a coke dealer; lure you in with a low price or a free sample, and then when you're hooked jack the fucking price.

I went over to the locker room, suited and booted, and was ready to make snow about fifteen minutes later. Faubert came through the door with a few new guys. The guy who couldn't even hold up a BR was running crews now while I got fucked. He looked at me and screamed, "It does!"

That had become sort of my catch-phrase. "It does," meaning it does what it's told. "It," being me, as I was treated no better than the snow guns or snowmobiles: rode hard and put away wet.

“You know it,” I smiled. “I finally get to go up on the fucking hill.”

Just then, bald-headed John came into the locker room. He put on his helmet and said, “You’re coming with me for re-training. Whoever trained you last year obviously didn’t do it right.”

“Darrel trained me, and now he’s the fucking head day *foreman* you fucking prick,” I thought to myself. What I actually said was just a sarcastic, “Yup.”

I followed him outside and went to check out a snowmobile. He just stood there with his arms folded.

“Needs oil,” I said, and I ran to the barn to grab some oil. I was back in a flash, and carefully filled up the oil reservoir. Then, I went back to the barn to return the oil-filler.

Upon my return, I started the sled and lit it idle for a while. John was just standing there, with his arms still folded.

“Where’s your sled?” I asked, very annoyed.

“That *is* my sled. You aren’t authorized to ride one.”

“But I’m a fucking patroller,” I said. “I am totally authorized to...”

“Seems like you’re in snowmaking to me. Now get on the back and shut up.”

It was all I could do not to punch this asshole right in his smug fucking face. But, I got on the back like a good little slave and a few minutes later we were somewhere on the hill. I don’t even remember where because all I could think about was burning this motherfucker with the turbo torch and then smoking his cigarettes and weed.

We got off the snowmobile and headed down the trail. Last year, I had taken my time to assess everything, to rime all the guns out, and to check the snow. John had other ideas. He was such a fucking genius he could tell the guns were running right without even checking the snow, and we basically ran down the hill while he screamed at me. He should have had a whip. It went like this: I’d adjust the K3000, move the gun to where I wanted it, and before I could even check the snow he’d run out there and fuck with it. All the while, he yelled at me for doing it, “Wrong.”

At the bottom of the trail he told me we were going to light two more guns, even though the weather was supposed to warm up. The guns were all on splitters, and day crew had (surprise, surprise) hooked them up

backwards. Bald-headed John just stood there while I moved the guns into position and sorted out the splitter mess that day crew had left me.

“What the fuck is taking you so long?” He yelled.

“The fucking splitter mess!” I screamed, face beat red from anger. “Fucking asshole,” I muttered under my breath.

“Come on, air check!” he screamed.

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. I slowly opened the ball valve on the air hydrant. No sound came out of the guns: the air line was clogged somewhere, and the pressure wasn’t bleeding from the lines.

“Air check!” he screamed again.

“Dumbass,” I muttered. “I’ve gotta rime this out,” I thought to myself. I used my channel locks to crack open one ear of the air hydrant to bleed the pressure out of the line. This obviously takes a little time when there’s almost ninety pounds of air in the line.

Apparently, it was too much time for the fuck-head.

“What the fuck is taking so long?” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” I screamed.

I had had it. I stood to the side of the hydrant, put my head down, and used my helmet to cover my face while I popped the other ear of the hydrant. A loud, “Boom!” echoed off the mountains and the hose shot into the trail. I ran to retrieve it, and then started the rime-out process.

John came running over. “What the fuck are you doing?” He screamed.

“I don’t know!” I screamed. I don’t even know why I screamed that, but I did. I guess it was whatever, because no matter what I said that’s what he was thinking.

“Well that’s fucking obvious!” he yelled. “Obviously, there’s ice in the fucking line!” he yelled, and then he started following the air line all the way out to the guns, whacking it with his channel locks.

“I guess this is how cave-men make snow,” I muttered as I hooked up the air-line again.

“Air check!” he screamed.

“Air!” I yelled, and I purposely banged the air hydrant. The lines crackled and hissed, but I didn’t care anymore. I closed the valve.

“Water!” John yelled.

“Water!” I yelled back. A few moments later, he moved his head in a circle indicating I should open the air valve. Once again, I banged the valve with no regard for safety. John did a little adjustment and then we walked back to the barn in silence.

Once back in the drying room, I threw my helmet on the ground and my channel locks at a locker. Then, I sat down in a chair. I was soaked with sweat and angrier than hell. There was no one else in there, and John had gone away to help management drop the Plinko chip to see what our next move was.

I was almost asleep when John came in.

“We’re shutting down,” he said. “We’re losing temperatures fast and there’s a leak. You’ll go with Faubert to the dig. We’re letting him run the excavator because we just made him a hill-chief.”

“Wonderful...” I muttered.

They made me walk to the dig site in the dark. Faubert was already there.

“What took you so long?” he asked, obviously annoyed.

“I had to fucking *walk* here,” I muttered.

“You wanna smoke?” he asked.

“No! You know this!” I said angrily.

“Jesus, alright, alright. Maybe if you were more of a team player you wouldn’t be the barn bitch.”

“Hey, you went to patrol, too,” I said.

“Yeah, but I’m all snowmaking now. Besides, you don’t smoke anymore. What are you a cop?” He laughed.

“Yeah, I’m a cop,” I laughed sarcastically. “Can we just get this over with? I’m only here to watch to make sure you don’t fuck this up. Do you even know how to run this thing?”

“*Yes*,” he said, sarcastically. “My parents had all sorts of toys like this back in Rhode Island.”

“Must be nice to be rich,” I muttered.

“What?” he asked.

“Nevermind. Let’s just fucking do this,” I said. “Get in your rig and dig!” I said, parodying the line from the Queen song, *Fat Bottom Girls*.

John laughed. He got in the excavator and started to dig. I could see him biting his lip as he struggled to control the machine. I stood way

back. Just then, it started freezing raining. I stood like a slave in the freezing rain for hours; shivering, angry, wet, and hating my life.

“Isn’t this what I was trying to escape?” I asked myself.

“Zach,” John screamed out his window. “I need you to dig, I think I found the leak.”

“Yup!” I screamed. “You got a shovel?”

“Yup!” he yelled. “It’s over there!”

He pointed over towards the valve station. I went inside and found a shovel next to some capped pipes. I stared at the pipes with confusion, and then I remembered there was a whole other mountain that used to be part of the resort. They abandoned it, however, because the environmentalists gave them such shit about encroaching on a major bear habitat. The resort made some back-door deal with the State so they’d buy it back. That’s what they do: socialize the costs and privatize the gains. Might as well fuck the taxpayers, right?

I exited the valve station and walked over to the hole. I dug for about ten minutes before I hit something metal. I cleaned the pipe off with my hands. The beam of my head lamp shone through a massive hole and reflected off the inside of the pipe.

“Found it!” I screamed, giving John a thumb’s up.

John turned off the excavator and got out of the machine.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed. “Well, it’s 6:30. We’d better get out of here. Day crew can handle this. They’ll need to bring the welder in.”

“Yup,” I said. “Hey, what’s the deal with the capped pipes going to the old hill? Did they remove all that shit?”

“Not that I know of,” John said. “I was under the impression it was all still there.”

“Hmm,” I said.

John went over to his snowmobile and started her up. We let her idle for a minute, and then he drove us back to the barn. I had to do all the leaning because he fucking sucked at driving it, and we almost tipped over twice.

Back at the barn, I unsuited as quickly as possible and just shoved my shit back in my locker, soaking wet. I noticed that they had changed my days off again so I would be off for the next couple of days. That way, they could work me to death with no overtime. I had just changed into my street clothes when bald-headed John came out.

“Zach, punch out and head to HR for orientation.” He said.

“I don’t even get paid?” I asked.

“You’re not authorized for overtime,” he scowled. “You’re not making snow, just helping us fix shit.”

So, I punched out and went to the orientation. There were about 100 people there, all shoved into a much-too-small room. Most of them were foreigners that the resort bussed in from South America, so they could pay them slave wages. It was a good racket for the mountain: pay them nothing and own the buildings the slaves rent to get it all back anyway. Most of them actually end up in debt for coming here.

They showed us some bullshit propaganda movie where they interviewed high-level managers and marketing goons who proclaimed how good of a place it was to work at. They claimed they never missed a powder day because of their job. I hadn’t had a powder day since I left patrol, and even then it was spent picking up hurt Joeys and Herbs and explaining to pissed off people that no, nothing was groomed that day due to powder. Fucking morons.

The movie continued on to remind us how we were always supposed to smile and make sure the rich fucks who came here just to complain about the conditions were pampered. It made no mention of our slave wages.

I yawned and shut my eyes. What a crock of shit. Everyone else ate it up.

The movie stopped, and the lights came on. I woke up a little.

“How many of you have flown lately?” The HR lady asked. No one raised their hand.

“You don’t pay us enough to fly fucking anywhere,” I thought.

“Okay,” the lady said. She had a puzzled look on her face.

“Well, how many have you been to the Mt. Washington hotel?” she asked.

“Where the fuck is that?” someone near me whispered.

“You don’t pay us enough to go to a place like that,” I thought.

“Well, anyway, customer service should be like what they have at the Mt. Washington hotel, and not like when you fly. Get it?” she asked.

Everyone grumbled a, “Yes.”

“Okay, that’s it! Orientation is over!” she said with a huge smile.

“What a rich cunt,” I thought.

I stumbled outside and went over to the van. I started that rusted out, un-inspect able, shit-box van and drove off. Thanks to Scum-lin’s new inspection laws, my van was ready for the junkyard. In any other state it would have passed, but not Vermont. It wasn’t worth the work to replace the rocker panels and other rust holes caused by the salt the morons working for the state spread on the road. Now they use salt brine, which not only makes the roads instantly turn to slush but eats your cars even faster. Not to mention that inside sources tell me that Champlain will be completely devoid of life in twenty-five to fifty years because it is quickly becoming brackish water. Blame the farmer, though. I guess when it finally becomes the land of flatlander second-homes, everyone will already have a new car and the rest of us will have moved away. You know how much salt Alaska uses? None, they use fucking *sand*.

I clunked my shitbox around the building and saw John and a new guy loading the brass I had stripped off the broken hydrants into the back of a company truck. I rolled down my window and asked, “Whatcha doing?”

“Loading up the brass to take to the scrap yard, barn bitch,” bald-headed John laughed. “At least you did something for the company today!”

“And what would that be?” I asked.

“You made us about \$1500.00”

“Really, just in that small tote?”

“Yup,” he said closing the tailgate.

“Hmm,” I said. I rolled up my window and headed off.

When I got back home, I parked the shitbox and went upstairs to the apartment.

“Karen?” I asked, closing the front door.

“I’m in the bathroom, I’ll be out in a minute,” she said.

I sat down on the couch and took my shoes off. A few minutes later, Karen came out with a pregnancy test in her hand.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, starting to cry.

I got up from the couch and hugged her. “Guess I should have stayed on unemployment, it pays better.”

Karen sobbed. “Are you happy?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’re going to be poor forever, might as well do what we were put here on the Earth to do: spawn.”

“Good,” she cried, hugging me even harder.

“We need to find another place to live,” Karen said.

“I know, but thanks to my student loans, lack of income, and seasonal jobs, we’ll never get a loan.”

“Yeah, and I have no credit.”

“It’s not like I’m not trying,” I said.

“I know,” Karen sobbed. “You work hard and try to find good work, but no one will hire you.”

I sighed. “It’ll be alright. I want to quit my job, but I guess I can’t now.”

“Nope,” she said, drying her tears.

She stopped hugging me. “Did you know that John is gay?”

“What?” I asked. “He has a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, but when I came home today from work I caught him making out with some guy on the couch.”

“Oh well, I don’t care. Does Lilly know?”

“No, I asked him about it. He was really angry with me!”

“Shit,” I said.

Just then, John came through the door, smiling as always.

“Hey guys,” he said.

“What’s going on, man?” I asked.

“Nothing, how about you?”

“We’re pregnant,” I said. “We’re going to have to find another place to live, I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, no problem, congratulations, guys!” he said, but I could see by his countenance that he was full of shit.

“Thanks,” I said. Karen went down the hall and entered our room. I followed.

“Babe,” she said. “John is not your friend.”

“What do you mean? He’s my skiing and fishing buddy; he’s letting us stay here!” I said.

“Yeah, but he’s totally two-faced. I just have a feeling he’s going to fuck you over. He was all mad at me earlier, and now he’s acting like nothing happened, that fag,” Karen said, upset.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t think you’re right, but we’ll be outta here soon.”

“Okay,” Karen said reluctantly. She sat down on the bed and sighed. “I have a headache,” she said, “I need to lie down.”

“Sure thing, can I get you anything?” I asked.

“Just the computer, I wanna look for a new place to live,” she said.

I handed her the computer and kissed her forehead. “I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too,” she said.

I left the room and shut the door. John was on the couch. He patted the couch for me to sit down. I sat down, and he leaned in to try and kiss me.

“Dude!” I screamed, pushing him away. “Listen, I don’t care that you’re gay, but I’m not.”

“Then why are you living with me?” he asked.

“I guess I didn’t get the signals, I thought we were friends.”

“Oh, come on, we buy each other birthday gifts and shit. Ditch the bitch and live with me!” he said.

“Wow,” I laughed. “She’s pregnant, dude, I am not gay.”

“You went to college, I’m sure you messed around with guys,” he said.

“Uh, no...” I said.

“Come on Zach,” John said, annoyed. “Everyone goes both ways now-a-days.”

“It’s not a choice!” I yelled. “I’m not a fucking fag!”

“First of all, you can choose to be whatever you want. You can choose your gender, race, or who you want to fuck. Secondly, they should ban your hate speech! Fag makes me feel uncomfortable, and it hurts my feelings!”

“Too bad,” I said. “This is America, not Soviet Russia. My dick fucks pussies, I’m a white guy, and I don’t give a fuck about your feelings. If you don’t like the first amendment, move to China.”

“You should be locked up for saying that. You are so antiquated. You own guns and don’t even have an iPhone!” he yelled. “They should take your guns away and put you in jail.”

“Fucking cupcake!” I yelled.

John put his fingers in his ears and started screaming, “I can’t hear you, I’m in my safe space!”

“Whatever,” I said. I started to walk away.

He took his fingers out of his ears and said, “You guys aren’t going to tell Lilly, are you?” he begged.

“No, dude, that’s none of our business. As I said, I don’t care; I just want to be friends.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, getting up. “I’m going back to Rhode Island for the next couple of days. I’ll be back Sunday.” He acted like nothing had happened.

“Okay, man, “I said awkwardly. “Have fun.”

“See ya,” he said, and he left.

I looked out the window and made sure he had driven away before I went and told Karen what had happened. Karen was obviously shocked, but not surprised. Always trust a woman’s intuition!

We spent the rest of the day searching through sites like Craigslist looking for affordable places to live that would be suitable for a newborn child and two adults. The only things that were coming up that we could afford, and barely afford at that, were over-priced crack-hole shanties in Rutland with two-page lists of rules: first, last, security, pet deposit, cleaning fee, baggy pants tax, clean water fee, etc. We’d be cleaned out just to pay someone else’s mortgage! We searched for a few hours, and then went out to *Applebee’s* to celebrate our baby. That was the most expensive restaurant we could afford. Plus, she loves that place.

After working Sunday night, I went to Rutland to get some groceries. Karen had gone to her parents for an early breakfast, so I was shocked when she called me around nine.

“All of our shit is on the lawn!” Karen sobbed over the phone.

“What?” I screamed.

“Yeah, John threw all of our shit on the front lawn. There’s a note on our door telling us to get out. I *told* you he was two-faced!”

“Okay, okay,” I said, “I’ll be there soon.”

I hung up the phone, finished shopping, and was back to the apartment in a flash. I calmed Karen down and we loaded up the van with our menial possessions, leaving the things that were broken right there on the ground. It took us about an hour to load everything we owned into the van. Luckily, I was storing my guns and ammo at Mike's house, so my most important shit was safe.

"The dressers and bed are still inside," Karen said.

"Yeah, I wish he would have left our clothes in them instead of throwing them on the ground," I said.

"What are we going to do?" Karen asked, angrily.

"I'll give Mike a call," I said, and I pulled out my phone.

"Hello?" Mike answered.

"Mike, I need your help!" I said with a shaky voice.

"Anything, what do you need?"

"Can Karen and I stay at your place until we find a place to live? John threw all of our shit on the ground, left a note that said we had to get out!"

"What the fuck did you do?"

"He came onto me, he thinks we're going to tell Lilly he's gay I think," I said.

"That's fucked. Not surprising though with that weak handshake. Yeah, I'm not at home, but come right over. We'll figure it out. My kids gone, he stole my money and left for Florida."

"Wow, what an asshole."

"Yeah. Anyway, I'm about to do a Kung Fu class up here in Newport. Make yourself at home; I'll be there later on."

"Okay Mike, thank you so much."

"No problem. Oh, get beer!" he said.

"Will do," I said. "See ya later."

"Bye," he said, and I hung up the phone.

"Mike said we could stay at his place for a while," I said to Karen.

Karen smiled. "That's great!" she exclaimed, and she got in the van.

I hopped in the van, started her up, and peeled out as hard as I could across the front lawn. The all-wheel-drive had stopped working, so

I did donuts on the front lawn for about fifteen minutes. Dirt, rocks, and mud sprayed the side of the house. The tenants from the apartment on the first floor were smoking weed on the front porch, and they ran for their lives. I straightened out the van and proceeded to run over John's raised vegetable garden. I stopped right on top of it, did a brake stand, and then peeled out onto the road, giving the gaping onlookers the finger. Karen was laughing hysterically.

Karen rolled down her window and screamed, "Get fucked and die!" as we sped away.

We stopped at the local super-market, where things are labeled, "Organic," and, "Local," are really just code-words for bought at Walmart in Rutland, driven out to the country and marked up 200%. We bought enough dinner for all of us, as I had not bought enough food for all three of us in Rutland. We splurged a little bit on steak, potatoes, designer beer, mixed vegetables, ice cream, soda, fudge sauce and Reese's Pieces. We also picked up some cold cuts, bread, margarine, mustard, a whole bunch of soup, and some other shit for breakfast so that we didn't have to go out again. We were down to one vehicle, my shitty van, which was going to be even harder now that we would be staying a half an hour further from our jobs. Luckily, at the time she was down to only working mornings at the farm, so she didn't have to take me to work.

We arrived at Mike's late in the afternoon, and we set up his guest room so that we could stay there. I made dinner while Karen organized what was left of our shit. Dinner was just about ready when Mike came home.

"What the fuck happened?" Mike said, coming through the door.

"Well, I thought he was my friend, but I guess he wanted to be my lover and couldn't handle Karen in my life."

"Told you he was a fag," Mike said.

"Yeah, but I told him I didn't care," I said.

"It's fucked up that he kicked you out," Mike said.

I handed him a beer from the fridge. He opened it with his lighter and took a sip.

"Yeah, especially since I told him that Karen was pregnant," I said angrily.

"Holy shit!" he coughed, spitting out his beer. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks man!" I said.

“You don’t need friends like that anyway,” Mike said. “You can stay here as long as you need to.”

“I don’t need any friends anymore,” I scowled. “Well, except for you, Mike. You’re not a shithead.”

“Glad to hear it,” he laughed. “But you need friends.”

“Nope. My best friend from back home stopped answering my calls about a year ago, all my supposed friends from work now treat me like shit, and now this. The rest of the people in my life, besides you and Karen obviously, are two-faced assholes hell bent on selling their own children for an extra buck. I’m done with humans.”

I paused for a minute and then said, “We’re looking at places now on Craigslist and whatnot,” I said. “They’re all so expensive. We can give you rent...”

“No, no,” Mike said. “Just clean up after me, vacuum, take out the trash, that kinda shit, and we’ll call it a deal for now.”

“Thank you so much,” said Karen. She got up and gave Mike a big hug. Mike blushed.

“So, what happened with your kid?” I asked.

Mike rolled his eyes and sighed. “I came home, house covered in blood, and a bunch of my stuff and money were gone. I found him in town waiting for the bus. I gave him enough money to go back south, I guess my sister is taking him in. I always bent over backwards for him, but he’s crazy just like his mother.” He paused for a minute and then said, “Enough of this sad shit. Whatever you’re cooking smells awesome!”

“Steak, potatoes, vegetables, and even some ice cream with fudge to put on it,” I smiled.

“All right!” he yelled.

Karen set the table, and then we all sat down and ate. We talked about how everything was fucked in the world and how guys like us could never make it. I told him how my job only gave me enough hours for starvation wages, and how I was treated like a bitch.

“You should throw a bomb in that place!” He screamed. “It’s too bad we can’t just kill one of these scumbag drug dealers that are hooking all the kids on heroin.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “They have more rights than we do!”

“And they make a shit ton of cash,” Mike said.

“It’s not like the cops can even do anything in our criminal-friendly state. These fucks go down to New York City and bring back heroin, making a shit ton of money. They get caught every once in a while, make bail, and pay their lawyers who golf with the judge a ton of money and they’re back on the streets in a week doing the same shit,” I said.

Karen got up from the table and started clearing it.

“It’s not like you haven’t tried to be honest, Zach,” Karen said. “How many jobs have you applied for?”

“I have a notebook full of them,” I scoffed. “Most of them never even get back to me.”

“It’s not like it used to be,” Mike said. “Back in the day, if you lost your job you could find one on the way home. You could even pump gas and make enough to live. Now-a-days businesses love recessions and depressions because they can clean house, get rid of pensions, take away benefits, and then lower wages and hire educated idiots.”

“You’re telling me,” I said. “The only job I found around here was some bullshit position at the school where I was titled, ‘Librarian,’ but they wanted me to work like sixty hours a week doing everything from teaching English to Math. They wanted to give me \$16,000 a year with no benefits! I make more at the *Bowl* swingin’ chairs for Christ sake!”

“Yeah, and that bitch who runs that place pushed out all the men and replaced them with women who wouldn’t put any pressure on her to do anything right. She goes on these lavish vacations under the pretense of training for school shit, and she takes all her friends with her. That place is in the shitter,” Mike said.

“You guys want ice cream?” Karen yelled from the kitchen.

“Yes please, Karen, thank you!” Mike screamed.

“Yeah! Thanks,” I screamed.

“Okay!” she said, and I heard the microwave click on.

By this time, Mike and I had consumed a bunch of beers. We started talking more about robbing drug dealers, and about how the corporation that owned the resort made millions while all the workers get the shaft.

“Typical,” Mike commented.

Karen came back with the ice cream, which we all wolfed down in silence. After that, Karen cleared the table and Mike smoked a bowl. He was surprised that I had quit smoking.

“Mike, I see you have Wi-Fi now,” said Karen.

“Yeah, I need it for the Red Cross so I can see when my classes are,” Mike said, lighting a cigarette. “They just made it available up here. Before, I was on dial-up. Scum-lin claims all Vermonters have access to high speed internet. What a fucking joke.”

“Fucking non-profits,” I laughed.

“Okay guys, I’m going to bed. What is the Wi-Fi password? I want to look at places to live,” Karen said.

“It’s GETFUCKEDANDDIE,” Mike said.

“Okay,” Karen laughed. “Goodnight guys,” she said, giving me a kiss.

“Goodnight,” we said in unison, and Karen headed off into the other room.

Mike and I continued to consume beers, getting madder and madder at the whole situation.

“I’d like to kill that motherfucker, John,” I said angrily. “And rob that rich motherfucking faggot. You know, I guess the writing has been on the wall for a while and I just missed it. He’s been telling me to dump Karen for a while and now I know why. Here, look at this.” I handed him a note John had left me. Karen hadn’t seen this one:

Call me when you dump that fat cunt. You’ll be much happier and we can be friends again.

-John

“Fucking asshole,” Mike said. “Let’s rob him and the local drug dealer.”

“Wait a minute, we can’t just *do* this shit,” I said.

“Why the fuck not?” he asked. “I’m sick and tired of working my ass off while these people just answer a phone and make bread. This guy is an entitled motherfucker, too. I was down at Jim’s garage the other day, and he flashed his piece because his truck wasn’t fixed yet.”

“Wait,” I said. “Are you talking about Faubert?”

“No,” said Mike. “I mean the drug dealer fucker that lives down the street.”

“Oh, *that* fucker,” I said.

“Yeah, well, you know Jim, he grabbed his shotgun and told him to take his truck and get the fuck out. I guess that guy pulls his gun out on everyone for like no reason.”

“What a piece of shit,” I said, finishing my beer. I looked at the clock: 1:12 in the morning. “Mike, I gotta go to bed.”

“Okay, bud, but keep that shit in mind. You got a kid coming, have you even thought about how you’re going to pay for it?”

“Nope,” I frowned. “I should have just robbed a bank instead of going to college, because I’d be out by now with a bunch of money.”

Mike laughed. “Damn straight,” he said. “No matter where you go, no matter what job you have, you’ll always be a slave in this debt-slave, serfdom, neo-feudal system they call America...”

That’s when it hit me for the second, and last time. Mike was right; I was done being a slave. I would take whatever I wanted and stop being a slave. I was done with society, and especially with what American has become: a third-world shithole run by conmen and commies.

“What are you doing for the next couple of days?” I asked with a smile.

“I see that smile,” he laughed. “What are you up to?”

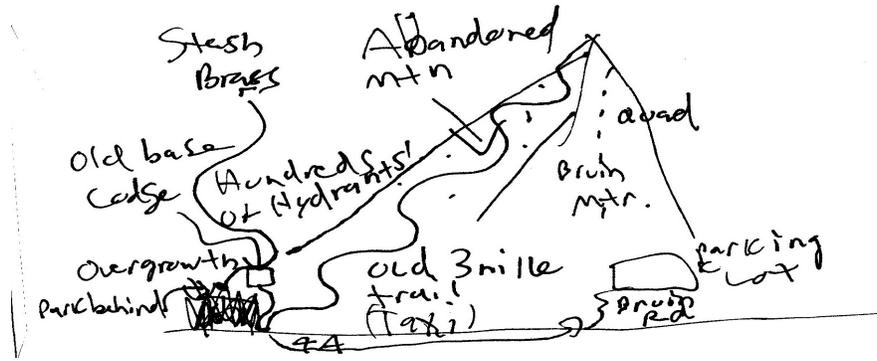
“You still talk to that guy down south that owns a scrap yard?” I asked.

“Yeah, why?” He asked.

“Are you aware that brass is up?”

“Way up, yes,” he said. “You got a source?”

“Yes! I have a plan. Let me draw you a map,” I said. I grabbed an old envelope and drew a map of the old mountain:



“This trail here used to have snowmaking, hundreds of hydrants. Each ball valve and the main valves are chock-full of brass.”

“How are we going to get it all?” he questioned.

“Well, I’ve already stolen a big pipe wrench and turbo torch from snowmaking, and we can park here,” I said, pointing to the old, abandoned base lodge. “If we park around back, no one will notice. Then we can just hike it out.”

“Not worth it,” he said, folding his arms. “It’ll take us a decade to get all that down.”

I sighed.

“How about another beer?” he asked.

“Yeah, what the hell.” I said.

Mike got up and went to the kitchen. “Mind if I turn on the radio? I want to hear the weather on the 7’s.”

I looked at my watch: 1:16. “Sounds good,” I said. “I haven’t been paying attention to it since I’ve been a barn bitch.”

Mike clicked on the radio and turned the volume up.

“We’re back, and now for the weather,” the radio blared. “Looks like a big one folks, finally a good storm to kick off the season. A front is moving in from the Midwest, and plummeting temperatures will lead to an estimated twenty to forty inches of snow...”

“All right!” I screamed. “Finally...” I paused. “Mike, get in here, I got it!”

“What, what?” he asked. He handed me a beer and I took a sip.

“We store a toboggan here, at the top of *Bruin Mountain*. I’ll put on my patrol coat so no one will question us. We’ll simply ski the old trail, and just work downhill!”

“How much can you take on that thing?” he asked.

“As much as it will hold before it breaks. We can take it easy, make a few trips. We’ll simply store the brass in a pile, load the toboggan in the van, and make a few runs.” I said. “And, I have the next two days off.”

“Perfect,” Mike said. “We’ll park the van at the abandoned base lodge and use my truck to take us up to the mountain. My skis are ready to go. It’s getting late though, so let’s get to bed.”

“Absolutely! Goodnight, man,” I said, getting up from the table. “Thank you again for letting us stay here.”

“No problem,” Mike said. “Goodnight.”

I crawled into bed with Karen and was out like a light.

The next morning, I was up early. I told Karen I had some side-job shit to do with Mike, and that I’d be back later. Mike and I loaded our ski gear, the pipe wrench and turbo torch into his truck. Luckily, I kept my patrol coat from last year, so I didn’t have to figure out how to get it from the ski patrol locker room.

There was so much snow outside that I had to bash it out of the way with the door to the van just to get inside to start her up. Of course, it rattled and squeaked to life, the piece of shit. I turned the heater on defrost and started cleaning the snow off the windshield. Mike had already plowed the driveway.

“You ready?” Mike asked.

“Yup, let’s do this,” I said.

I got in the van, and Mike climbed into his truck. I clunked the van into low gear and jammed on the gas.

“Oh shit” I yelled. The plow had been by, and there was a five-foot wall at the end of the driveway. I jammed harder on the accelerator and bashed right through the wall.

“Yeeshaw!” I screamed, and we were off to the mountain.

It took us a little while to get there, but we parked the van in back of the old base lodge and then headed up to *Bruin* mountain. I wanted to avoid the main hill, as I did not want to be spotted. Mike and I put on our

ski gear in the parking lot, and then I handed him the pipe wrench and turbo torch.

“Why do *I* have to carry this?” Mike asked.

“Just shut up and follow me,” I said. I put on my patrol coat, locked the truck, and we walked up to the lift.

We put on our skis and skated through the lift maze. Mike struggled to hold the pipe wrench and turbo torch.

“Snowmaking missions with the rookies,” I said to the ticket-checker.

“Okay, go ahead,” he said.

I took the torch from Mike, and as we loaded the lift he whispered, “Now I get it.”

It took about a half an hour to ride the lift, steal the toboggan, and get down to the abandoned trail. This was because the snow was very sticky, Mike hadn’t skied in a while and was being cautious, and I took a roundabout way to get there as to not be seen.

“Wanna do the honors?” I asked Mike, handing him the wrench. We were standing beside the first hydrant we came to.

“Sure,” he said. He was covered in sweat from skiing in the sticky snow.

Mike sized up the teeth on the wrench and pushed with all his might. He let out a grunt, and the ball valve spun. A few moments later, he had unscrewed it from the hydrant.

“Keep going,” I said, taking a smaller pipe wrench out of my bag. “I’ll strip these down to just the copper. I can do it quickly since it’s my job to, ‘No-make’ now...”

Mike laughed and shook his head. We headed down the trail with as much speed as we could. Some of the hydrants required the torch, and a few just wouldn’t budge. That was OK, because we had more than we could handle. The trail was pretty flat, so we did more tugging on the toboggan than actually driving it. When we filled the toboggan to the brim and couldn’t haul anymore, we left the torch and large pipe wrench on the hill and heaved and hoed the toboggan down to the abandoned base lodge. We hid the brass, loaded the toboggan into the van, and headed up to the hill. Once we got back up to the mountain, we drove both Mike’s truck and the van back down to the base lodge, parked the van, and drove Mike’s truck back up to the lift: we had a taxi system going. Over the next

three days (I called in to work, fuck 'em), we repeated this until both my van and Mike's truck were absolutely full to the brim with brass.

By the time we completed our daily missions, we were exhausted. Mike plowed the driveway, and then Karen made us an awesome dinner. On the third and final day, we passed out early. The next day, I helped him hook up the trailer to his truck. We unloaded my van and loaded up his truck and trailer. His entire truck, from the crew cab to the bed, was fully loaded. The trailer was, too.

"I'll be back in a few days. I decided we're not going to split this 50/50," Mike said.

"Okay..." I said.

"60/40, with you getting sixty. My present to you."

"Thanks Mike," I yelled. "I could hug you right now"

He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Don't," he laughed.

"Mike came back a week later with a little over forty grand," Zach said to me. "His guy never asked any questions, and he never gave him any answers. They never did figure out that I stole all that shit, and I got enough money to build what you see here and bury a ton for Julia's future. I never found another place that I liked. I just couldn't stomach spending five grand to make some rich slumlord richer, so I did the next best thing and worked out a deal with Mike. I gave him five grand for the rights to build my tree house on his property, and we spent the rest of the summer stealing, bartering, and sometimes buying the supplies for the place. We were able to finish the main part by winter, and we even installed the redneck elevator on the porch for Karen and the baby. She had kind of a hard time climbing up the ladder. I was even able to till and ready the plot of land for my vegetable garden, although obviously I didn't get it in before winter really set in,"

"What about all that snow?" I asked Zach.

"Well, Rob, it rained like a bastard a few days later, and all of the snow melted," Zach said. "So, I stole all my snowmaking gear from the *Bowl* and never showed up for work there again. The company handbook clearly states they can fire you without notice or reason, so I figured I should be able to fire them from being my employer in the same manner."

“What did you do then?” I asked.

“Well, Mike and I took advantage of the warm weather and built the basic tree house. Over the years I have expanded, but at the time it was very basic. At first, we had chamber pots; no power or running water! Good thing Julia wasn’t born until late Summer! It gave me time to upgrade. I also started working at the farm again, where I started all this bartering business.”

“Did you ever get John back for what he did? Did you ever get your dressers?”

Zach smiled. “I chalked up the dressers as a loss. As for John, I’d like to say I turned the other cheek, but I didn’t.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Did you know they just sell liquid nitrogen to anyone?” he asked through an evil grin. “All you need is a Dewar flask and cash.”

“Uhh...” I said, startled.

“What I find amazing is how susceptible safety systems on a car are to freezing.” He paused for a minute, and then said, “That’s all you need to know. Nobody fucks with Zach-fucking-Dolager and lives...”

He paused for a moment and then said, “In the beginning of all this, it was a depressing time. The house was drafty, and shit constantly fucked up and froze. I liked working at the farm, but it just didn’t pay. I was able to crawl out of it though. I did side-jobs and made a name for myself. Mike and I set up taps and now can over 200 gallons of syrup a year. Luckily, Karen qualified for Medicare because she was pregnant, and we got food stamps because I worked sixty hours a week and was still 130% below the federal poverty line,” Zach said.

“Did you ever try and find a better job?” I asked.

“Sure, for a little while. I applied all over the place, but always got rejected. You see, we are lumped into the useless Cupcake Generation, the fucking Millennials who can’t even write in cursive and had everything handed to them. 80’s babies like us get fucked. The only jobs I could get didn’t require a degree and paid, what Craigslist called, a ‘Competitive wage,’ which is code for minimum wage. I finally realized that you can fail when you compromise, so you might as well not compromise. This place here is what happens when you follow your dreams and don’t bow down to the man.”

“I hear you,” I said. “I work construction because that’s the only way I can make enough to pay the rent, but it’s barely enough. I hate my

job; I have to deal with rich fucks all day that have no idea what they're talking about."

"It's the same in every profession," Zach laughed. "We're supposed to bow down to these fucks as they ram it on home without lube. Wake the fuck up! The only way a peon like me can take on the power is by stealing as much as he can and using as little as possible. We can't shoot them, we can't stop them, but we can stop buying their slave-made, Chinese trinket bullshit. When they finally run out of cash, they'll be fucked because most of them can't even wipe their own asses; they pay someone else to do it."

"Well, what about ski patrol?" I asked.

"Fuck em'," he said. "As Mike says, 'It aint worth your time.' I did patrol the next year, part time, but they paid me minimum wage. Eventually, I said good luck with your Mexicans from Home Depot. Just remember that when you get hurt, you're being treated by someone who makes slave wages. Well, I've been told that some of the more senior guys got a raise, but ten times zero is still zero. It was a few pennies thrown to them so they'd be dumb enough not to leave. They should really just burn that place to the ground!"

"You can't harbor that shit, man, it'll give you cancer." I said. "You forgive someone not for them, but for yourself. Then, you can forget about the hate and move on. That's why people are so divided today, they just can't let go and realize that one day they'll be in a box so who gives a fuck? Live your life for you, your family and friends, not for money, and you'll be as happy as you want."

"I hear you on the, 'Living for the family and not money,' part. But fuck that, 'Not holding a grudge,' noise. I can hold a grudge forever! It's pretty easy for me!" Zach said.

"What about that kid you were talking about? The one that smashed the tree?" I asked.

Zach got up and looked out the window. The wind blew so hard the shack shook. Zach's eyes grew dim and he shivered. He paused for a minute, and then grabbed another beer from the cooler. He opened it, chugged the entire bottle, and burped.

"That's the other thing that changed me. I was working part-time that Saturday. It was such a clear day when he died. He was like twenty-one or two; his brother watched it happen. There was so much blood we couldn't cover it with a shovel. I'll never forget his eyes: glossed over, lifeless. I complained to Hunter about how little we got paid, and he told me that, 'Rescuers just don't get paid much, we do it because we love it.'

At first, I thought he was just another idiot sheeple, but I realized he was right. You have to do things for what they are, not for anything else, especially not for a few shekels. I don't really want to watch kids die for free, so I can't do it anymore."

"That's horrible," I said.

"Yeah, I didn't sleep for days. Sometimes I still think about it. But that's what separates the men from the boys, some people can hack it, and some can't. Apparently, I can, just not for free. That's when I realized we're all going to die and there's nothing we can do about it. That's what separates people like me and Mike from the rest of the world. We know we are going to die and we don't fear it, just as we don't fear birth," he said.

"You don't fear death?" I asked.

"Where were you before you were born?" he asked.

"Uh, I don't know," I said, confused.

"Then it doesn't matter, does it?" he said. "The Government has everyone so afraid of their own shadow that they sacrifice all their rights to be safe. But, like I said, it doesn't matter because whether you die in a terrorist explosion, a gunfight, or in your sleep, you are going to die: get over it. No helmet or seatbelt or law can stop you from getting chucked into the clay. People are so afraid of not having enough money to buy food that they can't realize they can just grow it. We can't rely on the Government, especially when it is so unjust. Thoreau said something like, 'If a Government imprisons unjustly then the only place for just men is in prison.'"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It will only be when all of us are in prison for not paying our taxes that go to enslave us to the wealthy and the corporations, or when we all bug out like my family did so they *can't* tax us, that the Government will fail and we can finally live in happiness."

"But Zach," I said, "That's crazy. Not everyone can do what you did, it's impossible!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because, not everyone has the skills to do what you did."

"No, the real reason is because of fear," he balked. "We live in a country of fear, run by fear-mongers who know it's the only way to keep us in line and enslaved. You don't speak up for your rights because you might lose your job, and if you did that you couldn't pay tax or eat and

would be on the street, or in jail. If we weren't so afraid to go to jail or to be on the streets, we would all be in those places or in the woods, and the corrupt Government would collapse under its own weight. Then, we could behead all the senators and start over again, without all the, 'Xs' and cross-outs all over the Constitution."

I sat back in the chair and gulped down the last bit of my beer. I had never really thought about life in such callous terms.

"If we just banded together as human fucking beings, and if we actually cared about each other, we could all barter and we'd never need money. Without money, there is no evil, because you are spending your life surviving and bettering yourself and your community instead of running over your children for a few extra bucks. Humans will repeat the same way of life we've been living for ten thousand plus years if the shit doesn't change. It's funny, with all the modern advancements of the internet, electricity, whatever, we are no more advanced than the people in the Fertile Crescent. A society gets built, they get greedy and take over whatever they can, and then some other greedy society or a group of outsiders crushes them, only to build an even greedier society. I can't wait for it all to fail."

"Zach," I said. "I sorta agree with you, but I still think that everyone can't do what you did."

"Good," he said. "Fuck em?. It only takes one man to do what I'm doing to change it all. It only takes one person who is more concerned with love and happiness than money to make all the evil crumble. Look at everyone around you, everyone you know. Do you know anyone who thinks that the way things are going is good?"

"Yeah," I said, "But they're either idiots or rich."

Zach laughed. "Exactly," he said. "If I could cause a landslide of love over fear, hate, and money, I would. I know that's not going to happen, and I don't have forever to live, so I'm not trying to do everything I can in the name of good, but I *can* do *something* that is good, and that's what I'm doing: starving the evil Government of funds so it cannot broadcast evil anymore."

Zach turned around and went over to the cooler. He pulled out two sandwiches and handed me one.

"Jesus, we've been here a while," he laughed. "Enough of this, you get why I'm here now, right?"

"Because you don't give a fuck anymore?"

“Exactly!” he exclaimed. “If everyone didn’t fear death and prison, we could all be free like this. Anyway, I’m getting hungry! Let’s eat and take some more runs.”

“Ok” I said, and I started to eat my sandwich.

Zach and I ate our lunches, and then we skied until the sun went down. By the time we were done, my knees ached. It also felt like I had pulled or torn every muscle in my groin and thighs. Zach told me not to worry about grooming the lift line after he saw me struggle to climb into the truck to take my gear off.

I could also barely climb up the ladder to the tree house when we got back. It was all I could do just to hobble upstairs to take a shower. My legs burned with every step, and my left knee was swollen and barely able to hold my weight. I had torn my ACL years ago on the job. Of course, I was scared of losing my job, so I worked on it until I was laid off in the winter. Nothing like having to eat ramen noodles and wash your clothes in the kitchen sink out of fear of where your next buck will come from.

When I was done washing up, I limped over to the couch and crashed down upon it. The only thing that kept me from passing right out was that smell of fresh venison slowly cooking on the wood stove. I could hear the crackling of the meat when Zach flipped it over in the pan. The smell of garlic, peppers and onions saturated the air and made my mouth water.

“Dinner,” Zach said, setting the table.

“Dinnertime, Rob!” Julia shouted from her chair. “Dinner!”

“Okay,” I whined, struggling to get up. Even sitting up hurt, my core ached and felt weak. I used my arm strength to move my legs off of the couch, and then I pushed myself up by the arm of the couch. I hobbled over to the table and sat in the only chair that was unoccupied. Everyone was already helping themselves to food; Julia had stabbed a pre-cut carrot with her fork and was banging the handle end against the table.

“Don’t play with your food!” Karen yelled. She swiped the fork away from Julia.

“Hey, I need that!” Julia cried. She started to blubber some crocodile tears.

“Okay, are you going to *eat* your food?” Karen asked.

“Yeah,” Julia cried.

“Okay,” Karen said. She fed Julia the carrot and then handed Julia back the fork. Julia commenced to stab a piece of meat, which she ate immediately with no funny business.

I started to help myself to some food and noticed that Zach had placed two, full glasses and a bottle of Advil in front of my plate. One glass was filled with water, and the other was filled with a dark liquid which smelled sort of like maple syrup. I picked up the bottle of pills and read the label. They were 200 mg pills. I helped myself to 1200 mg and chugged the entire glass of water to wash it down.

“What is this?” I asked, pointing to the mysterious liquid.

“Just drink it,” Zach smirked.

“Oh, okay,” I said reluctantly. I took a sip and was overwhelmed both by the maple flavor and the strength of the drink. “Strong, but good,” I said.

“It’s sap beer,” Zach said, taking a bite of his food. “I make it from the sap at the end of the year, the crap that tastes like leaves and shit. You can’t really make it into syrup, so we boil it half way, mix it with hops, sugar, and yeast, and stick it in the root cellar until the 4th of July. It’s a crapshoot every year to see if it’s any good, but this year it turned out decent.”

“Yeah, it’s great,” I said. “Can you pass the hot sauce?”

“Sure,” Karen said, passing me the hot sauce.

I shook a little onto my plate, and then I filled my plate with venison, peppers, onions, roasted garlic, mashed potatoes and carrots that had been caramelized with maple syrup.

“You guys eat like kings,” I said with my mouthful.

“Believe me, it’s far from a Utopia,” Zach said.

“It’s not easy,” Karen said. “We work very hard to live here, to live this way of life.”

“Oh, I can see it’s not for everyone,” I said. “New Yorkers living in the city would have died on day one doing what you’re doing.”

“Bostonians might make it a week,” Zach laughed. He took a bite of food, chewed it and swallowed. He took a big gulp of sap beer and swallowed. “At least they go outside.”

“I guess you can take the asshole out of Massachusetts, but you can’t take the Masshole out of the guy,” I said.

Zach and I had a big laugh.

“He took us there once, to go to the aquarium in Boston,” Karen said. “When we entered the tunnel, he was weaving in and out of lanes, doing about eighty. I said, ‘The speed limit says thirty-five!’ He told me just to close my eyes and go to a happy place.”

“Sounds about right,” I said. “If you’re not aggressive, you’ll ever get anywhere in Boston.”

“True that!” shouted Zach.

“Speaking of which,” I said, “I have to get back there tomorrow. I really appreciate you guys letting me stay here. It’s been wonderful to meet your family and to see you, Zach. I really missed you, man.”

“Yeah, man, me too. Living out here like this is a double-edged sword. It’s nice to be alone out here, but sometimes it gets too lonely. I mean, Karen and Julia are wonderful, and I love them...”

“And we love you!” shouted Karen.

“I love you too, Daddy,” Julia said.

“And I love you, guys,” Zach said, “but sometimes you need some outside interaction.”

“You’ve got Mike,” I said.

“Yeah, but I mean besides Mike. Sometimes I want to hang out with someone else, you know.”

“I can see that,” I said.

“My family has pretty much disowned me because I don’t give a shit about money, and I don’t think the value of my clothes determines my self-worth. In fact, I’d like to see everyone wear leather clothes and shoes made out of old tires, that way these clothing stores would tank like the rest of our hedonistic society,” Zach rambled. “Anyway, as I was saying, don’t be a stranger.”

“But don’t just drop in, either,” Karen said. “Zach is a little paranoid; you should have seen the last time the tax assessors even came close to here.”

“Sparkler bombs,” Zach said with a full mouth.

“Sparkler...bomb?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Zach said, swallowing his food. “Youtube it. You take like ten bucks worth of sparklers and e-tape them together, leaving one long one for the wick.”

“And it explodes?” I asked.

“Let me put it this way,” Zach laughed. “Aint nobody from the state been around these parts since then. They’re all afraid, and that’s a good thing.”

“I thought you said before that a society of fear is bad?”

“Yes, but that’s when the *people* are afraid, and that’s the United States of Fascism we live in now. When the Government is afraid of the people, well, that’s when you have yourself a democracy. Without Government being fearful of the people, they are free to do as they please, and they do. They’d even like to see us pay tax on our barbers, but good luck with that. You know how I roll,” Zach said.

I took another gulp of my sap beer. I could feel the drink begin to take effect.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m starting to see now. It’s pretty unbelievable that you made this all work.”

“Yup, it comes down to who and what you know. This is why the Cupcake Generation is fucked, because they have no skills. If we lost all electricity tomorrow, they’d be committing suicide rather than face the fact that their entire world is bullshit. They’re so dumb that they allow their homes to be wiretapped, their rights to be taken away, and they actually *pay* the government to do it. They’re so busy being keyboard activists and wearing vagina hats to fight shit that will never change they can’t see that if they just stopped consuming the wheels would fall off the fucking bus! Occupy? Fuck that, they should be bugging the fuck out and doing everything they can to not pay a dime in fucking tax. As long as there are cell phones and 200 channels of shit on TV nothing will ever happen. They’ll continue lining up for their fucking. Not fucking me or my fucking family, that’s for sure.” He took a huge gulp of his sap beer.

“You pay tax,” I said, “Every time you buy something in the store.”

“That’s why we buy very little, and when we do we take Mike’s truck down to West Lebanon or buy shit on EBay in order to avoid paying that sales tax. You’re supposed to report it and pay tax when you do that, but why should I? Vermont has some of the highest taxes in the nation, and yet they can’t even fix the fucking roads. Property taxes have gone up nine percent in ten years, while people’s salaries have actually gone down. And for what? So they can do a shitty job of plowing and spread salt all over the road so that my car can’t pass the bullshit inspection they’ve made up? Gimme a fucking break!”

“Zach, calm down, you’re spitting,” Karen said, holding his hand.

Zach took a sip of sap beer and then sighed.

“Everything we have, or should I say *most* of all the shit we have we either stole from the rich or bartered with our poor neighbors to get. As I said, I do hay, I fix computers, I do brake jobs, oil changes, and other mechanic work with Mike in the garage attached to his house. I muck stalls, drive trucks, and occasionally steal, although I haven’t done that since we built this place. Karen works at the farm in trade to keep our chickens there, and for the space for our cow.

“It’s a bull!” Karen screamed, annoyed.

“Sometimes, we take cash gigs and stash it, although we do have a bank account for some things.” Zach said. “I regret having the account, but at least it’s with a local credit union. In a perfect world we’d never deal in cash, but unfortunately you always need a backup plan.”

“Speaking of which, I have to work from noon to ten or so tomorrow at the farm,” Karen said.

“No problem,” Zach said. “We’ll get up early and shoot guns, then I’ll snowmo Rob back to his car. Does that sound okay to you, Rob?”

“Sounds good,” I said. “That’s about the time I need to be on the road anyway.”

“Good, good,” Zach said.

We both gulped down the rest of our beer, and then Zach got up for a refill. He didn’t ask me if I wanted more, he just filled both glasses and then sat back down. We finished our meals in silence, and when we were done Zach got up and let Julia down while Karen cleared the table. Zach started a movie for Julia, and he sat back down with me.

“You feelin’ that drink?” he asked.

“Yes, my muscles thank you,” I said.

“We skied hard today,” he said. “Snow was pretty heavy, too.”

“Yeah it was. I’m wicked tired,” I yawned.

“Me too. We’ll finish these beers and head to bed,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “Say Zach, do you ever plan on going back to society?”

“Fuck no,” he laughed. He chugged the rest of his beer and said, “I know the way I live sounds crazy, but it’s really not. The problem, as I’ve said before, is fear and laziness. I’m not afraid, and I’m not lazy, and I know that one day I’m going to die. Happiness doesn’t come from your wallet, the clothes you wear, or the car you drive. It comes from doing

work that actually benefits *you*, that actually benefits your family and your community, no matter how small. The day we all stop making the rich richer by working jobs that we hate to buy shit we don't need, all of this bullshit, fake society comes crumbling down and people will be *forced* to no longer have fear or be lazy. Or, they'll just get fucked and die, which is fine by me. There are too many investment bankers in this world anyway. If everyone lived like we do, then we'd stop thwarting Darwinism and only the strong would survive. It's what our species needs: we need a fucking reboot soon or they'll be nobody left but my family. Well, that and Keith Richards."

I finished my beer and put the cup down. I slouched back in my chair and thought about life in the woods, almost disconnected with society, being concerned only with your own survival and not yearning for material objects.

"When I think about it, I already work fifty to sixty-hour weeks, and I have no life outside of work, basically. I drive a nice car and live in a decent apartment, but for what? I can't get a loan because banks only give to the rich, so I can't buy a house, and therefore all that rent basically goes down the toilet every month. I think I could hack this life. I mean, I'm definitely a flatlander..."

"It's okay, Rob, so is Zach," Karen yelled from the kitchen.

"Daddy is flatlander," Julia yelled from the couch. "Flatlander, freakin' flatlander..."

"The first step is admitting that," Zach smiled.

"But it seems like, if you have the will, you can be self-sufficient. It's not for everyone, it's not even for *most* people, but it seems like even though you work real hard and life is uncertain out here that you are actually happy."

"Damn right," Zach said. "And if I'm having a bad day, I just go up to the widow's walk and stare out into the rolling mountains under the blue sky. When your labor all goes to you, you can't help but be happy. I don't think anyone actually stops and looks at the world around them anymore. They're content with a digital picture of it, one you can't smell or taste."

"I can see that," I yawned. "The only thing I know I can't do is hunt."

"Or even shoot, but I'll teach you some of that tomorrow," Zach said. "Besides, the forest is full of food. You like to fish?"

"Now *that* I'm actually good at!" I said.

“That’s good to hear,” he said. “I’m glad you agree with me, though, almost no one gets why we live out here. Everyone else is consumed by trying to buy the next best thing, when all it does is break and end up in a junkyard. Out here, shit is built to last. I’m not saying it never breaks, but my shit works for me, I don’t work for it,” he said.

“Well, don’t get me wrong, I like nice shit,” I said. “But I never knew about the alternative. Man, I gotta lie down.”

I tried to get up from the table, but nearly fell over. Zach immediately stood up and came over to me. I put my arm around him, and he helped me to hobble over to the couch.

“Be right back,” he said, and he exited through the cold room.

A few minutes later, he came back with another unlabeled mason jar.

“Rub this on your legs before you go to sleep. It’s some Chinese, herbal shit I traded Mike a bunch of carrots for. Its real-deal shit. He uses it on his hands and legs after training.”

“Thanks man,” I yawned.

I opened the container and rubbed a bunch of the stuff on my leg. It burned like a bastard at first, but then it was cool. I closed the container, put it on the coffee table and finagled my legs so that I could lie down and not knock Julia off of the couch. I struggled to take off the .44, but I managed to get it off and put it under my pillow. In a few moments, I was fast asleep.

My Last Morning with Zach

I awoke to the rap-tap-tapping of automatic gun fire coming from above me.

“What the fuck?” I asked myself, rubbing my eyes.

My legs weren’t in as much pain as they had been the day before, but they were still very sore as I stood up from the couch. I put on my clothes, boots and the .44 magnum and walked outside through the cold room.

I cracked the door to the outside and yelled, “Yo, I’m coming out.”

“10-4!” Zach screamed. “I’m up on the widow’s walk; get your ass up here!”

I struggled in pain up the ladder to the master suite. Karen and Julia must have been in the bathroom, as the door was closed and there was no other sign of them. I made my way slowly up the other ladder to the widow’s walk. I made sure to close the hatch. First light was showing, but the sun had not risen yet. I saw that there was a blue, fifty-five-gallon drum and a fold-out table. On the table lay an array of guns and ammo. I looked toward the horizon. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

“Glad you could make it,” Zach said. “How’s the leg?”

“Better,” I said, “but not great.”

“Always hurts more the second day. It’s because you didn’t stretch. Anyway, put this on, it’s a noise-cancelling headset. It will allow you to hear my instructions but won’t hurt your ears when you pull the trigger,” Zach said, handing me the headphones.

I put them on and stepped behind the table. Zach pointed to the .44 on my hip, and he pointed to a box of ammo. I took out the .44, unloaded the snap caps, and proceeded to load the .44 with live ammunition, making sure to point the gun in a safe direction at all times.

“Good,” Zach said. “Gun is in a safe direction...” he paused as the sun peaked out over the mountains.

We both stopped and watched the sunrise until it was just over the peak. The brightness bouncing off the snow nearly blinded me, so I put my hand over my eyes. Seeing this, Zach handed me a pair of safety sunglasses which I immediately put on.

“Wow, Zach,” I said. “I haven’t stopped to really watch a sunrise in years.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” he asked. “Man was never supposed to get this far away from Nature. Mom can kill you in a fucking second, but she also gives you mornings like these. Now-a-days only the rich can afford to watch a sunrise like this, while the rest of us are forcing out a shit so we can get stuck in traffic to be on time to make the boss more money. But here, I watch every sunrise, and try to watch every sunset. I take the time because I’m finally glad to be alive,” he said, picking up his M16.

Zach pushed a button and the magazine fell on the table. He immediately loaded another mag into the gun and pulled the charging handle back all the way. He let go of it, and the bolt slammed shut.

“You see the targets now?” he asked, pointing into the distance.

I could see various metal targets in the treetops near us. All of the sudden, Zach flipped the safety switch to, “Auto,” and open fired on the targets. The headphones worked perfectly, and I could barely hear the sound of the gun barking. Zach would pull the trigger for a few seconds, and then lay off. He repeated this until his magazine was empty, which took about five seconds, if that. The fallen shells were steaming in the fresh dusting of snow that blanketed the widow’s walk.

Zach placed the gun on the table and picked up a pair of binoculars. Then he said, “Now your turn.”

I aimed the pistol at a target and gripped the gun with both hands, like Zach had showed me. I acquired one of the targets through the open sight, and I cocked the hammer back. I took some deep breaths in, put my finger on the trigger, and exhaled as I pulled it. The pistol roared to life, and it kicked back on me so hard that my hands went above my head.

“Low, left,” said Zach. “You’re anticipating the kick. Say, ‘Squeeze’ to yourself as you pull the trigger. Don’t think about the gun going off, in fact you should be surprised when it does.”

“Okay,” I said.

I repeated what I had done before, this time saying, ‘Squeeze’ to myself as I squeezed the trigger.

“Still low, but you hit it! Nicely done, man,” Zach said, putting the binoculars down. “Now unload on that fucker.”

I proceeded to slowly unload the gun, acquiring different targets with each shot. I missed only one other time, and that was with the farthest target away that I could see.

“Were you going for the one far out?” Zach asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s like three hundred yards away, kid, you’d be lucky to make that shot. Let me see that thing.”

“Okay,” I said, and I handed Zach the gun without pointing it at him.

Zach handed me the binoculars. He quickly discarded the spent casings and reloaded the pistol. Then, he leaned on the fifty-five-gallon drum, using it as a rest to steady his hand. I looked out through the binoculars at the far-way target. I heard the clicking-back of the hammer, and the muffled, ‘Boom’ of the gun as it barked a bullet out three hundred yards. The target spun...

“Hey man, nice shot,” I said.

“I’ve put thousands of rounds through this gun. Practice makes perfect. You heard about the kid who wanted to get to Carnegie hall?”

“Yeah, practice,” I said.

“Nope,” he said. “Money.” He picked up the spent shells from the M16 as I unloaded the .44. He put all the spent brass from the M16 and .44 mag into a bag. “I know a guy who reloads these for me. I pay him in syrup.”

“Sounds like a good deal,” I said.

“Not really, he makes out on it. Syrup is a pain in the ass, especially with the arch we have. Takes for-fucking-ever. Anyway, shoot this whole box at the targets. Try to get a little faster, just make sure to put the brass in this bag,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, and I proceeded to shoot the rest of the ammo in the box at the targets.

I was getting pretty good at shooting by the time I was done, and I was comfortable now and not nervous as I had been before. I guess I had always been told that guns are bad and only evil people own them, so I was conditioned to be afraid of them.

“Good, good,” Zach said after I put the last of the brass into the bag. “Now, the only other gun we have time for today is the 30-30. These are the two weapons you’d use most when hunting, although you can legally hunt them with the AR.”

“What about the M16?” I asked.

Zach smiled, “Can’t legally shoot them with a machine gun. I’ve *never* done that before,” he said sarcastically. “Anyway, take the rifle.”

Zach handed me the rifle and a box of shells.

“Load the ammo into the tube on the side,” he said, pointing to the side of the gun.

“Okay,” I said. I grabbed a box of ammo and carefully slid the ammo into the tube.

Zach picked up a bullet off the table and said, “The tips are flat so the ammo doesn’t accidentally set each other off in a chain reaction that blows up the gun, and your face.”

“Got it,” I said.

“Now push the lever up and then back down. That’ll chamber a round,” Zach said.

I used the lever to chamber a round.

Zach said, “She’s hot. Hold the hammer with your thumb and pull the trigger. That’ll let you ease the hammer down and not fire the round.”

“Okay,” I said nervously. I tried to push the trigger to get the hammer down, but nothing happened.

“Oh, I forgot,” Zach said. “The safety is holding the lever tight to the stock. Make a fist like a man and hold that lever tight to the stock.”

“Okay,” I said, and I did as he instructed. This time I was able to ease the hammer down.

“Alright,” Zach said. “Take aim at a target. When you’re ready, pull back the hammer and let her rip.”

I nodded, and then I took aim at the 100-yard target. I clicked the hammer back, took in a big breath, and exhaled while I pulled the trigger. The gun reported so loudly that I could actually feel the, “Boom.” The recoil was so strong that the gun shot up in the air. I managed not to drop it.

“High, right,” Zach laughed. “Kinda barks, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice cracking.

“Do it again, this time hold your gun like a man and put that stock in the pocket more, like this.”

Zach picked up the M16 and held it tight in the pocket of his armpit. I did the same, only this time I held onto the gun with all my

strength. I chambered another round using the lever, and the spent shell flew out of the top of the chamber. This time I left the hammer up, as I was already in shooting position. I acquired the target, put my finger on the trigger and exhaled as I squeezed down.

Once again, the gun reported extremely loudly. This time, however, I was ready for the recoil.

“Nice shot!” Zach exclaimed. “Where’d you learn to shoot like that?”

“7-11,” I said.

We both laughed, getting the *Back to the Future* reference.

“Okay, try the 300 -yarder,” he said.

I used the lever to chamber another round, and then I focused in on the 300-yard target.

“Remember, this gun is only good to about one hundred yards, so aim a little higher.”

“Okay,” I said, and I aimed a little higher and squeezed the trigger.

“Missed,” Zach said, putting down his binoculars. “Do it again.”

I chambered another round, acquired the target, and squeezed the trigger.

“Wow, man, nice shot. I can’t even see that far without the binoculars. I think you’d make a fine hunter!” said Zach excitedly. “Although, shit gets real when you’re killing something that’s actually living. You never know how you’ll react.”

He looked at his watch. “It’s getting late; I need to get you back so that Karen can go to work. Just leave all this shit here, including the holster, and be ready in twenty minutes. I made cinnamon buns, they’re on the counter. I’d let you take the .44, but the Constitution is illegal in that communist country you’re going back to.”

“Thanks man,” I laughed. “I’ll see ya downstairs.”

“10-4,” he said.

I took off the holster and the .44 and put them on the table. Then, I went back down to the main house.

I got my shit together, ate some cinnamon buns, and climbed down the ladder to the ground. Karen was outside with Julia, and she had already started the snowmobile. She was loading some supplies into the redneck elevator while Julia played with a toy shovel in the snow.

“Rob,” she said to me, giving me a hug. “Thank you for coming.”

“The pleasure was mine,” I said. “Your way of life fascinates me, and I’ll be sure to tell the world about it.”

“I wouldn’t bother, but thank you,” she said.

“Why shouldn’t I bother?” I questioned.

“Because, as some Indian said something like, ‘Only when all the water has dried up, all the plants are withered and dried and the animals are all gone, only then will the white man realize that he cannot eat money.’”

“Well, either way, it was nice to meet you, and you, little Julia,” I said, bending down.

Julia came over to me and gave me a hug and a kiss.

“Bye, Rob, thanks for coming to my house!” Julia said.

Just then, Zach came down the ladder. He kissed Julia and Karen, and said, “Be back soon.”

I got on the back of the snowmobile, and then Zach hopped in front. He revved the motor a few times, and then we lurched forward. I turned around and waved goodbye to the rest of the Dolager family.

It took us about an hour to get back to Mike’s house, as Zach insisted on taking all sorts of switchbacks to show me the easiest, but longest way to get back to the house. On the way he tried to have a conversation, but most of it was muffled by the loud exhaust of the two-cycle snowmobile motor. He did point to a lot of interesting items, like a huge, snow covered boulder, a maple tree so big you couldn’t even hug it, and a small pond not yet quite completely frozen.

When we got back to my vehicle, we hopped off the snowmobile.

“Please,” Zach said, giving me a hug and patting my back. “Come back some time, I could really use a trustworthy friend to help me out and give us company some time. I can pay you in syrup,” he said.

“Of course, man,” I said.

“Oh, speaking of which,” Zach said, going back over to the snowmobile and lifting up the seat. “Take these.” He walked over and handed me two mason jars filled with maple syrup.

I opened the door to my vehicle and placed them on the passenger seat. I stood on the running board and started her up.

“For your help,” he said. “I haven’t had the chance to get any of what I told you off my chest, well, at least to someone with an outside opinion. So, thank you, man.”

“No problem,” I said. Then, I reached in the back and grabbed a snow scraper. Zach helped me clear the snow off the truck, and then I hopped in the driver’s seat.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Zach said, handing me a piece of paper. “This is the number you can reach me at, and my e-mail. Either way, leave me a message and I’ll get it. I check it at least every Wednesday. Man, it’s been great seeing you! Make sure to bring your skis next time, though, and fucking stretch!”

“Will do bud, I’ll see ya soon!” I said, closing the door.

I rolled down the window and waved to Zach as I made my way down Mike’s driveway. I could see in the rear-view that Zach was waving back. He pull-started the sled, and then got on. He hammered the snowmo into a wheelie and disappeared out of sight just as I turned a sharp corner in the driveway. I picked up the syrup and gave it a look. It was unlabeled and began to slosh around inside the container as I hit a great deal of potholes coming onto the main road.

“Probably the best syrup ever,” I thought to myself. “Everything is better in unlabeled jars...”

Nine Months Later...

Although I have been in contact with Zach, I have yet to return to Vermont. I have been too busy with my work, as most people find that's how they spend their time. In fact, we have not spoken of our time together; just of how life is going, and such things. Zach's world is far from a Utopia, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He lost his hydro-generator and had to work in a mechanic's shop for a month before he could afford a new one. I know the feeling. I've been working on this mansion for some prick who argued with me that the things on the wall that provide heat in his house are called furnaces, and not radiators. It was better that I let him continue thinking this than try and argue the truth, as he is a lawyer for a construction company and he *knows* that radiators are indeed wall-furnaces.

I guess that's what we've come to as mankind. We no longer need to *know* anything as long as we have money. In the city, no one does anything for themselves. You'd be hard-pressed to find a person who even does his own laundry at a laundromat: Zach washes all his clothes in a redneck washing machine that's hooked up to a bicycle.

To quote Jim Morrison, "All our lives we sweat and save, save it for a shallow grave. Everything must be this way, everything must be this way."

However, I have finished my work on this house and collected my shekels. Today, I check my mailbox and find a letter from Zach:

Rob:

Have you considered coming up to Vermont? Some new things are happening, and I could use your help. Maybe you could even stay for longer, if your work will allow, and work on your own happiness for once. The door is open, just make sure you beep three short blasts in Mike's driveway, otherwise you might encounter some gunfire.

Thanks, and hopefully see you soon,

-Zach

I do want to go and watch a few sunrises and sunsets at the expense of my creditors, as someone once said. I'm not going to say who, because for 10,000 years until recently no one gave a fuck about bibliographies. Anyway, I'll steal a few days from my creditors and head up north. Hopefully, I can still remember the path to the house.

So, I pack my truck with supplies, and then I stop by the pier and talk to some fisherman that I went to school with.

I can smell the low-tide smell of the marsh. It's a smell most people find foul, but I find it as warm as apple pie. Seagulls caw and crap on the old, abandoned building where the fishing boats used to unload their swelling catches. I look off in the distance, over the moored boats and floating docks, past the lighthouse now all but dormant, and out by the mile-marker buoy. I can barely make out my buddy's boat steaming towards the dock on a flat-calm sea, being trailed by a thousand birds that can smell the fresh catch.

I walk down the gangway and onto the floating dock. The fleet is just a fourth of what it was when I was a kid. I walk to the end and wait for the boat to dock. About ten minutes later, he throws me a line.

"Hey bud," I say to the fisherman, tying off the bow.

"Hey Rob," he says, jumping out of the boat and tying off the stern.

"Good haul?" I ask.

"Yeah, much better than those pussy environmentalists say are out there. There's more cod in the fuckin' ocean today than there has been in fuckin' forever, but because they fuckin' suck at fishing they think there's none. Anyway, we got haddock, and some lobsters for now, until the regulations finally crush us."

"I remember when this pier was alive," I say. "There were like a hundred boats here, from sword to lobster boats."

"Well, not anymore," the fisherman says, lighting a cigarette. "It costs so much just to buy a plot to fish that the old-timers make more *not* fishing. They just sell the rights to their part of God's water. Pretty soon it'll be all corporate boats, and the little guys like us will be crushed." He pauses for a moment, taking a drag.

"Hey, Dave," the captain yells. "We don't got all fuckin' day here!"

“For Christ sakes, hold on a fuckin’ second, I’m makin’ a sale here!” shouts the fisherman. “How much do you want?”

I hand him one of the half-gallons of syrup Zach had given me and said, “This much.”

The fisherman looks it over and says, “Dark amber, this is the shit *I* like. Homemade?”

“Straight from Zach in the woods of Vermont, made with a wood fire so it tastes amazing,” I say.

“Sweet,” says the fisherman.

The other crew members pass by the fisherman with fish buckets filled with fresh fish and lobsters.

“Holy shit, guy, that looks fuckin’ good,” says the captain.

“It ‘aint no Auntie pancake syrup bullshit, that’s for sure,” says the fisherman. “He wants to trade.”

“Barter? I like it! No fuckin’ tax that they just take to make it harder for us to eke out a living. Make sure you hook him up,” says the captain.

“Okay, Rob, you help us with this load and I’ll take this syrup, and we’ll hook you the fuck up. Come on!” says the fisherman, flicking his cigarette butt into the ocean.

I jump on board and grab a tote of fish. I follow the others up to the refrigerator truck that has showed up to bring their haul to market. I help them load it all and pack everything in ice, except for one tote that the fisherman has saved for me.

“Here’s a couple of lobsters and a few pounds of the freshest haddock you can get,” he says.

“Thanks man,” I say. “Zach will appreciate this.”

“How’s he doing anyway? I heard he went off his rocker.”

“No. Well, sorta, he lives in the woods of Vermont in a tree house, miles away from civilization.”

“Sounds like he’s lost it,” the fisherman laughs.

“No, he’s just sick of the rat race and paying taxes that just go to make his life more miserable.”

“They certainly aren’t going to pave the roads,” the fisherman laughs.

“You bet,” I say. “Anyway, I’m going up to visit him for a few days, and to go over the manuscript for his story, sorta like a biography, autobiography thing.”

“Tell him I said, ‘Hi,’” the fisherman says.

“Will do,” I say, picking up the tote. “Thank you.”

I head back over to the truck and unload the fresh catch into my cooler. Then, I bring the tote back to the crew, who are already washing the other totes out and starting to refill the boat with all the essentials to head back out to sea after they have lunch. It’s sad that they work harder than you and I ever will, but they can barely make a living thanks to some environmentalist who sucks at fishing and gets hard by just thinking about making rules to ruin the livelihood of whoever he can.

I go back to the truck, start her up, and head to the gas station for some ice, beer, and gas. I gas up the rig, check the oil, pack the cooler, and take a second look to make sure I have everything. Even though it is an extremely hot, August day, I have packed cold weather gear as well, including the ski gear: you always need a backup plan in Vermont. Besides, maybe I’ll just stay. Fuck it.

I pull out of the gas station, down the coastal road that passes endless marshes teeming with birds and other creatures, over the bridge, and onto the highway. Soon, I am through the concrete jungle and headed north on 93. All the stresses of my life dissolve as I enter New Hampshire. I go through the toll at Hooksett and take a right at Bow to merge onto route 89. Then, it’s a flat-out, high-speed burn all the way to Vermont, past the rolling hills and mountains alive with a vibrant green set against the background of a blue-bird sky. I go past West Lebanon, and soon I am looking down to my right to see the postcard-perfect town of South Royalton. Soon, I am off the highway and headed to the backroad where Zach lives.

Almost four hours after I start, I am pulling into Mike’s driveway. I give the horn three honks, even though I do not see a car in the driveway. I see a flash in the window that quickly disappears; no doubt a reflection of the sun off of a rifle scope being withdrawn. I hop out of my truck and grab my backpack full of supplies. I leave the cooler, as it is too heavy to carry the long distance to Zach’s tree house. I lock the truck, and head out into the woods.

As I turn the corner past Mike’s house, I see an old four-wheeler with a trailer attached to it. I pick up the note that is taped to the handlebars:

Rob, please use this to carry your shit. I have marked the way with red trail marker. Please remove them as you pass, and make sure that no one follows you.

See you soon,

-Zach

PS- Only has rear brakes.

“Thank God,” I say to myself. I hop on the four-wheeler, start her up, let her idle for a minute, and then I head back for the truck. I load everything, including the cooler, into the trailer, and then I set out for Zach’s place, making sure to stop and remove the trail markers on the way.

It seems like it takes forever, but I am finally at Zach’s house. However, there is no one here. I find the ladder hidden in some brush, and I place it against the tree. I climb up, unlock the hatch, and go inside.

“Hello?” I yell. No response.

I go outside through the cold room, now a hot room in the summer heat, and onto the porch. I lower myself down with the hillbilly elevator, and then I load it up with all my supplies. I hoist everything up, and then I use the ladder to climb back up. Once again, I go out through the cold room, but this time I head up to the master suite.

“Hello?” I yell. No response. I head into the bedroom.

“Hello?” I yell again. I go into the armory.

“Zach?” I call out. Then, I notice a note on the safe:

2765

I put my thumb on the fingerprint lock, and the door clicks open somehow.

“How did he get my thumbprint?” I wonder out loud to myself. Then, I enter the combo: 2765.

The second door clicks open, and inside there is the .44 magnum pistol, the holster, a few boxes of ammo and a note underneath the gun. I put the holster on my belt, put the gun in the holster, move the boxes of ammo, and pick up the note:

Dear Rob,

I have finally completed my second home, which is right near the hill we skied some nine months ago. It is much bigger and has actual drywall and not that tongue and groove shit from the 70's that Karen hates. It's funny, really, that we are so far removed from society and yet without it we would not have these tools and supplies in which to build things like this tree house, or to store things in the safe you have just opened. However, I suppose one day if we all lived like this, after the collapse of society, we could build it ourselves and not be burdened by over-regulation and bullshit tax that goes in the pockets of the rich.

Anyway, this house is yours if you wish to stay. There is just enough summer left for you to prepare for winter. I have left you some wood for cooking, and the power system is once again stable. If you are reading this, I have seen you on camera and I will be by soon to meet with you and show you the new house. Also, the four-wheeler is yours to use while you stay here. I traded some venison for it, and got it running decently.

The only things running on power are the fridge, freezer, and water systems, so I'll have to show you how the whole system works when I get there. Settle in, and I'll be there in time to make dinner. Hope you're hungry.

-Zach

I grab the boxes of ammo, and head down the ladder and back to the porch. I take the cooler into the cold room and unload the fish into the fridge; I put the lobsters into the freezer. I am careful to pick them up, as the lobsters are so fresh that they don't have rubber bands on their claws. I look one in the eye, and he raises his claws up at me and pinches the air. I feel so wild holding this creature that I want to smash him on the ground and eat him raw. Not that I am hungry, but I feel that I should fill the part of the ape-man I might soon become.

I head back out to the porch and load the rest of my stuff onto the other red neck elevator that goes into the master suite. Then, I head up the ladder to the master suite. I close the main hatch, and then I open the hatch to the elevator. Next, I haul up my belongings. I throw my bag and other things in the bedroom, and then I head up to the widow's walk to think.

I sit down in a lawn chair and stare off into the distance. I can see waves of heat coming up from the valley, and that the ski trails of the *Bowl* that were covered in white are now all a vibrant green, with patches of

purple and red from the flowers that grow on them. The wind blows slightly, and I take a deep breath of refreshing mountain air. I ponder against this background if I should ever leave. I hate my fucking job. Actually, I *like* to construct, but the construction only gives me a weak paycheck and almost no satisfaction. My client, on the other hand, gets a dwelling in trade for the bullshit he spews out to the court. He gets paid to argue, and handsomely at that, while I actually do something *real* and barely get paid. I have no lease, just month-to-month, and like Zach my student loans, coupled with the non-lending banks, have crushed any chance for me to buy a real house.

I chuckle to myself at the thought of how advanced we think we are, and yet all savages of old owned their own homes and paid a meager tax, if any, to their respective Governments. Today, almost no one really *owns* their own dwellings; the banks do. But the bank doesn't own these woods, and they certainly don't own this house. In fact, they don't even know this place exists.

I also chuckle at the irony of living here. Yes, it is basic, but without society one cannot have the tools to live outside of it. One must coexist with it, I suppose, as it stands now. However, if built correctly and maintained with prudence, we shouldn't need to make anything new. That is why all the shit most people buy is plastic, Chinese junk: if it lasted forever, we wouldn't need to buy new shit, and our landfill-economy would collapse. There are islands filled with this philosophy, mountains of junk higher than Everest. Around here, nothing gets wasted as everything is made of metal, stone, and wood; made to last, or at least to be repaired.

Maybe one day a new society could emerge from the old. One that is less wasteful and more conscious of Truth and Good, rather than rewarding those who run over their own mothers for two shekels. All we need is food, shelter, and clothing. Sure, there is power and modernity here, but if this place burned, Zach, Karen and Julia could walk out the front door with everything they needed to build again.

With this thought, I decide to stay for at least the winter. I'd need to go south to tie up some loose ends, but luckily my Generation is so destitute I have nothing of real value that I am leaving behind.

I stretch my muscles and relax in my chair. I study the mountains, the valleys, and the river in the distance. For the first time in a long time I actually smile.

Then, I hear the sound of a motorized vehicle approaching...

Some Final Thoughts

It has been over a year since I first decided to stay here in the woods with Zach, and we have painstakingly gone over his story again and again to present it to you, the reader. Since I have come here, I have learned how to kill, gut and prepare a deer for the freezer, and how to fish in the river with worms I collect on a warm, moon-lit night. I have learned how to till and sow my share of farmland to produce vegetables, and how to can them for a cold winter's dinner. I have learned of the hardships of winter, the icy death and barren waste it brings to the landscape. I have also learned that powder days are the best when there are no lift lines, or scrape-apes to destroy all the fresh snow.

I have not learned what true happiness is, but I have come closer than before. Perhaps true happiness is just an illusion, but what is certain is that modern society squashes any Truth right out of it. I did learn that hard work can directly benefit you and the people around you, and not some seemingly foreign entity from Washington with his hand in your wallet, taking your money just to convert it into death abroad and more tax breaks for the rich. I have also learned that if it's mechanical or electrical that it will fail. In fact, everything, and I mean *everything*, from the chair you are sitting in to the universe itself will fail, given ample time to do so. I have learned not to fight Nature, but to live within her bounty, and to be grateful that I am alive. It is within this scope that I am closest to true happiness. Sure, I have some bad days, but the landscape and people around me within this tiny community quickly perk my spirits.

So, with that said, Zach wanted me to finish the story, but we have an issue: there really is no end to it.

You were probably expecting some kind of moral to come about, with me pointing my finger at you and waving it in your face, telling you to beware, or to become like us. However, no one telling anyone anything ever made that person even the slightest bit more moral or just. Certainly, the experience of an individual is never headed with as much caution as even a television commercial in our, "Modern," times. So, we'll leave the brainwashing and morals to the government stooges and pedophiles in white robes.

Sure, some of you that are lumped in with the Cupcake Generation do not feel connected to those ingrates and may even think it awesome what we have done here. You may be sick of immoral, evil men, whose only thought is to drive you into the ground and take all of your

wealth, however trivial. You know, these New World Order, globalist pieces of shit who should be dragged out of their mansions and disemboweled in the streets.

For those that are awake, you never *needed* to know about us, but it does help to understand that these things *can* be done. And you *can* do these things without taking such drastic measures as Zach and I have done: you can do them right in your own communities. It doesn't even have to be physical, for even if you escape immorality for the Truth just in your own mind you have changed your whole being. But, as I said before, this may be something that has been on the backburner of your mind if you are so inclined not to think as you have been programmed. If so, hopefully this story has kicked it up a notch.

For the rest of you Cupcakes, and especially for the real young folks who don't understand that happiness does not come from your wallet, what would be the point of giving you a moral? The TV box never told you to live for the Truth and not for wealth, so why would you ever listen to us anyway? In fact, we don't give a shit if you got anything out of this story. You will always live by what you're told to do by some entity you have never seen, as the puppet master controls his puppets. We don't even have space for anyone who contributes nothing and only follows gold, especially those from a Generation who can't even change a tire. Just remember that when your food runs out you will get fucked and die. We will watch from the widow's walk with glee: America is way beyond the point of saving anyway. If you're smart, you'll get the fuck out yourself.

As I have said before, there is no end to this story, as there is no end to the human condition, save by fire or ice. And when *that* happens, Zach and I will be smoking a joint on the widows walk, watching with smiles as Nature finally rids herself of the virus known as mankind. However, until this happens, or at least until we are chucked into the clay, we will be creatures of Morality and Truth, and will not be concerned with the trivialities of luxuries we cannot afford. Sure, we will never see France, or go on vacation to the Bahamas, or own a Cadillac, but we don't have to: we need not take a vacation because our lives *are* our vacation! We are slaves to no one but the elements.

We don't need cars, or jewelry, or a house in the Hampton's because we don't need materials to take the place of where happiness was in ancient man. We live as domesticated men turned wild, like the barn-cat who wasn't touched by human hands, or the dog that breaks through his master's screen door and goes to live with his wolf brothers. We're the New World Order's worst nightmare: zero-spenders that are armed to the teeth and have no qualms about which side of the rifle most of our non-representative representatives should be on.

It would be nice if everyone could cast off their prejudices and try to live without any luxury for a day, or an hour, or even just one fucking minute. If you take the time to really watch the sunrise, or at least go for a fucking walk without your goddamned phone and really observe Nature, all your stresses will fade away if you just let them. Even the most Facebook-addicted Cupcake, or old person who thinks we can go on living like heathens because we buy our neighbors useless crap on December 25th, is able to see the horrible way we live when the Truth of Nature is juxtaposed against the polluting nature of the concrete jungle we have created. We believe people like us exist, but they will soon be crushed in total tyranny. The rest of you will continue to self-destruct, thinking your phone is your God.

So, I'll leave you with this, this non-moral moral, as it were. The zombie apocalypse is already here, for your minds have been diseased by the inherent immorality of modern life. You *can* live like we do; in fact, it is the *only* choice you have left in this land that once celebrated freedom of choice. You can either live for the Truth, casting unnecessary luxury aside for happiness, or you can get fucked and die like everyone else. It's really that simple: live for yourself or be a slave. If you can't see it now then you're fucking doomed, and you will continue to be an economic slave until your inevitable death.

Either way, we really don't give a fuck.