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Zero

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WILLIAM POWERS

Zero

WINTER

They lay in the night in tent or snowhouse the same each of them thinking the same, that they stayed alive only to freeze more. They knew frostbite blisters sometimes on every finger the length of the finger, black, could not bend the finger, the very matter within the blister frozen hard become ice beneath the skin.

BE NOT DOWNTRODDEN

Winter ends.

SPRING

The nearer the earth, the warmer the air. The mosquito commonly lays its eggs on the south-facing north side of an arctic pond. In spring, snow melts and water rises in the pond. The eggs are inundated. Larvae hatch and become wigglers in the pond. Later they come ashore on a sunny bank. They crawl, staying low, staying warm. The wind may blow cold, but the mosquitoes are warm.

BLACK AND PEPINO

Black and Pepino lazed in the sun. They leaned against a boulder well up their hill, their tent such as it was and a bay below. A small pond, a pool only, lay off to one side blue water beneath a blue sky. The arctic wind, strong and steady, kept insects off. It was a pleasure to be sitting warm in sun and no bugs. But spring or not, the arctic wind is cold. Pepino slides a little down against the boulder, closer to the earth and away from the wind. Soon he is lying flat. He turns over, puts himself face down, head on his arms. He looks into grasses, moss, and lichen.

“Hey,” he says to Black, pushing up to his hands and knees. “Mosquitoes.”

Black leans. “Where?”

Pepino shudders. He is brushing them from his face and out of his hair.

“All over.”

Black is up. He stamps around and brushes himself at the same time.

Low white flowers cluster against the boulders on this hill.

Pepino picks a mosquito from the corner of his eye. He bends, again brushing his hair. Bending, he looks into the flowers.

“There’s mosquitoes inside the flowers.”

Black peers.

“Maybe honey in there,” says Pepino. “Wherever those bees get it.”

Black pokes a finger in among the blooms, stirs, pulls it back and shakes it, scattering pollen. He looks at what he has.

“Close the bone, sweet the meat.”

He licks a mosquito, pollen, and a little nectar from his finger. Swallows the three together.

“Forget it.”

They got along. They ate more than mosquitoes of what they had never imagined eating. The Arctic Woolly Bear Caterpillar is big. Big as a French fry. Big as a pea pod, a green bean. Big as a big shrimp. But a caterpillar. And woolly. It lives fourteen years as a caterpillar before spinning a cocoon, changing, and emerging for one short summer as a moth. During its years as a caterpillar, it starts small but grows a little larger each summer. In winter it freezes solid, ice hard, but in summer, there it is, thawed, crawling about, growing. Black and Pepino, they ate those. The hair of the woolly bear is long and brown-orange, soft as that of a teddy bear.

Black and Pepino wore furs dark with soot and grease. They smelled of fish and seal, liver and oil, blubber and blood.

“You see the ocean before?”

“No.”

“You like it?”

“Could be worse.”

“When it couldn’t be worse, that’s when it gets worse.”

Yet they were drawn to it. They walked the shore. They went inland for caribou. They took fish from the river. They took birds from the marsh. But they were drawn to the shore.

“Here.”

Pepino picked up a nail. Rusted, pitted, lumpy, soft. He handed it to Black. Black broke it twice, handed it back. Pepino rubbed the pieces between his fingers, threw them back into the ocean.

They had two days of wind heavy from the north. Ice came, loose floes that drifted into the bay, not winter again but winter's prophet.

"Look at that sucker."

A walrus lay on a floe. It pushed itself half up, a mass of loose heavy rolling fatty flesh. It seemed to look toward them, then it sank back, became a heap upon the ice the head of it held up by the length of its immense tusks.

"Ugly bastard."

"Mean looking."

They had yet to take walrus. They saw them sometimes offshore when the bay was open. When the ice came in, they saw them on the reef, sometimes like this one on a floe, sometimes drifting, sometimes slipping into the water, coming up again.

"Maybe they get something off the bottom."

"Yeah. Mud."

The walrus were often crowded together, two or three on a floe, sometimes more on the reef, sometimes inert piled one against another, sometimes loud snorting and coughing in their coming and going, sometimes pushing and shoving, sometimes an old bull driving a young one away.

"You think we could get us one?"

"You get it, I eat it."

"Hard to get."

"Take a few days to eat."

"I bet we try one day."

"Yeah."

This place was north of the tree line. Could they have made bows and arrows? No wood. They imagined spears with long straight shafts. No wood. They settled for driftwood, sometimes found a stick that would do for a club, sometimes something for a short spear, the best they could do.

Black stopped.

"See something?"

"No."

"Another day in the gray."

"You got that."

Black remained looking out over the sea. Pepino continued on. Toward the horizon Black saw the cloudy sky shining bright, a

reflection upward from ice over the sea below. He watched it. It blinked. Movement of the ice. Chunks of ice in the bay and sheets of it just past the horizon.

Pepino walked along the shore toward a point.

The arctic shore is barren, arctic beaches the most barren in the world, ground to rubble by sea ice, piled and torn, pressed back in low rises and graveled ridges. Sometimes a weed of sorts may wash in, sometimes a jellyfish. A whale may beach or its bones wash up. Little else. Here and there a deep set outcrop may persist, some rocky thrust upward but not on this shore where Pepino walked, bent, searching, the point of their bay no more than a finger of gravel ice hammered. He searched a desolate.

Black looked again to the dark water of their bay. He saw something in the water, low, flat, not far out. He was looking at a board. What current there was moved it along near the shore. The ebb and flow of the shallow sea lifted it a little, not much. It had come from he did not know where, but it washed not far from him now.

The board was long, low in the water, heavy seeming. They wanted that. It drifted along the shore as much as toward it, seemed not to be coming closer. They wanted that board. Black waded out. Lord, the water was cold. He went out to his waist, nearly to the board, big, big as it had seemed.

Come on, board. He made paddling motions in the water with his hands as if to draw it to him.

He had brought in pieces of far trees, sometimes limb, sometimes a root, once a stump, never a board. He had a hand on it then, both hands. Two by eight by ten or twelve feet. Oh, what a board. More than a board, a plank, a beam, a timber, and he was touching it. He leaned to it.

He heard Pepino.

“Here, bear. Here, bear.”

Black had the end of the board, clean sawed wood gray with water and salt but new looking, hardly used at all, beautiful. Lumber, this was lumber.

“Here, bear.”

Black looked behind him, not letting go of the board.

The bear was watching him much as he had watched the board. Its forefeet were just in the water. The face was brown, legs and belly light, sides tan. A dark streak ran from its head back along its spine

to the tail. No neck. A hump at the shoulders. Black nose, black lips, and mosquitoes, gnats, flies a cloudy thick swarm around it.

It took a step toward him.

“Here, bear. Here, bear.”

Pepino was running along the shore calling for all he was worth.

Pepino had never before seen a bear, but he knew one just as he had never owned a dog or even touched one but knew what it was without seeing or having touched it when one bit his leg coming on him from behind. Now he knew what to call. “Here, bear. Here, bear.”

The grizzly has no predator. The grizzly does not daunt. It eats plants, berries, stems, roots, grubs, fish, hare, fox, wolf, caribou, seal, goose, duck, swan and every egg in a nest, the nest as well. A grizzly will attack a whale in shallow water.

This grizzly waded out.

Black held his board.

Pepino got there. He waded into the water behind the bear. He grabbed at its tail.

It is a short, thick, flat tail. Stiff. Hard to grasp.

Pepino seized it pulling with both hands.

Bears stink. It is everything they eat.

The bear turned its head to look at Pepino. It had never before been taken by the tail, nor would it ever again. Surprise is not the word, no more than it was for the gnats and mosquitoes which then swarmed Pepino conjoined with the bear.

Black dragged the board up and out of the water, two by eight by twelve, water heavy. It weighed some sixty pounds. He swung it as best he could, a long slow drooping arc, striking the bear on the shoulder and side of the head.

Thunk.

The bear turned back toward Black.

It was all Black could do to get the board back up from the water and around again. He did it.

Pepino still at the tail and in water to his knees pulled for all he was worth.

Black swung again.

Thunk.

The sound was heavy wet flat wood on thick hair over bone.

Nothing.

The board slipped from Black's hands. The bear stood its full height. Pepino fell backwards into the water. The bear fixed its gaze on Black.

Everything stopped.

I am bear.

Black froze bent down as he was, the board in the water before him, one of his hands on it, he a low wet bundle. His breath went away. The bear held him with its gaze. Pepino choked. The bear turned its head from Black and looked at Pepino, who sat fallen back into the arctic water, his face upturned to the bear. He was wearing a skin cap he had made for summer wear, kept the bugs from chewing his head. It had slipped down over his eyebrows. He peered up from under his cap, his eyes two eggs in a frying pan.

A bird sang, an arctic warbler, a breed that seems to have strayed from Siberia found now in the western American arctic, this one at the limit of its range, its call piping, singular, lone.

The bear filling the sky above him, Pepino heard the bird, the warbler. Bird, he thought, and no place a tree for it.

Perhaps the bear was not hungry. Perhaps it was tired. Perhaps it had seen bugs enough. The grizzly is territorial. Perhaps this one had wandered outside its range, had found no improvement, was ready to conclude this exploration, ready for home. Perhaps the bear simply found these two to be of no account at all. It would not have been the first. It settled back to its four feet and turned away from them, stopped once to look back, shook its head where it had been hit or at the swarm still around it, and went on up the shore. It left.

They watched it go.

"Everyday the same," said Black. He was having trouble standing in the water. The strength was out of him.

"Bugs," said Pepino. "Mosquitoes." He got himself up, got over to Black. The two of them pulled the board up on the shore. They dropped it and sat down on it. Water drained from them.

"Here, bear," said Black. "Damn. Here, bear."

Pepino shrugged. A shiver ran over him.

"Smelled bad," he said. He could not stop shaking.

"Yeah. Come on." Black pushed himself up. "Get you warmed up."

"You sure hit him."

“Yeah. Well, you had him held.”

They dragged their board back to the tent. Pepino lay a long time getting warm in skins. He raised himself up some after awhile. “No more bears, okay?”

“Okay.”

He lay back.

“No more bears for me.”

“Another day, another way.”

The plank became a ridgepole for the tent, set on one end low on rocks, at the other end, the entrance, propped high on skull bones of whales. Then they made a low rock wall around the sides. Good tent.

SMALL FAVORS

Fall that year was a little warmer than most years.

WINTER ORDINARY

Try to eat, gnaw at frozen bone of seal some hard bloodied shred of meat, fingers hurt so much dropped it tears in the eyes. And try again. Pick the bone up and bite. Pop. Tooth breaks. Hurt? Put some ice on it.

VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON'S DESCRIPTION OF AN ARCTIC MEADOW

We were in a beautiful region of rolling hills and fertile valleys, everywhere gold and white with flowers, green with grass, or mingled green and brown with grass and lichen. Sparkling brooks ran through the valley, sometimes dipping into crystal rivers flowing easily over bright gravel bottoms.