

The Cabin
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I ask your forgiveness.

So read the first note which Sprouls found in the little cabin. Just that one handwritten sentence, the wording curiously old-fashioned – none of the contemporary polite-imperative please-forgive-me variations, no *I'm sorry* with the forced informality of a contraction. Simple, declarative, stating of fact, hoping for resolution.

Sprouls had been stuck here for two nights and three days so far, as the snow blew up against the window panes and the wind howled and forced its way in little stabbing needles through unseen crevices in the walls, between the bricks of the chimney, penetrating the fibers and polyester fill of his cheap sleeping bag. The cabin had appeared out of the whiteness like a drab epiphany. *The BVM in a piece of toast. The spinning lights in a night sky. The cabin in the blizzard.* Vacant, unheated until he got the fire going. Canned food. No water, but he needed none as such: he just opened the front door and carved out a potful of snow, bringing it back into the sixty-degree interior. Leave a little unmelted if he just needed to drink, bring it to a boil if it was coffee or soup time.

He had no idea why he'd agreed to the wilderness trek in the first place. Ginny, his daughter, had certainly tried her damndest to talk him out of it. ("For heaven's sake, Dad, you're forty-three years old!" "Yeah, I am. And I thought you were eighteen," he'd said, sarcastically. "Maybe I was wrong. What are you, a helpless infant?")

And their boss, Templeton, had hit the roof. Not satisfied at all with Sprouls's suggestion: "Just tell the clients all four of us are off at a convention someplace." Not satisfied, heh, more like ceiling-high pissed off.

Four of them when they'd set out, anyhow. Only Sprouls himself left now and

maybe, *maybe* one other – Evan, if anybody, whose showy muscles and wind-beaten leather complexion asserted his fitness for outdoor life. But the last time Sprouls had seen Evan, the rugged jackass was tumbling out of sight off the edge of a plateau some thirty yards distant, shouting and pinwheeling, a blur of limbs and snow.

Even less than he understood why he was here in the first place, though, Sprouls did not understand *here* itself.

The maps – gone with Evan – had said to expect nothing here, nothing at all. The Jeep was parked way back in the little turnout where the copter had picked them up and dropped them sixteen miles deep into the badlands; nothing at all man-made was supposed to exist between the drop point and the Jeep. No roads. No 7-11s or Wal-Marts, no schools or industrial parks or fountains or sundials or For Sale signs. Not a single housing development, not a single house, not even a vacant cabin.

Let alone a vacant cabin stocked with firewood, canned and freeze-dried food, a plain bedframe and thin mattress, and a dozen handwritten notes.

Sprouls appreciated the notes, he really did. He hadn't thought to bring books or magazines – too much superfluous weight to lug around (even if the giant stormfront hadn't unexpectedly entered the picture). Evan had brought a deck of cards but hadn't – the (ha ha) selfish bastard – hadn't even tried to toss it to Sprouls as he went over the edge.

So the notes gave him something to think about, not least because only the first was complete and legible.

That one, the first, he'd found in a little drawer suspended beneath a shelf in the freestanding pantry alongside the front window. The paper was old, or maybe just aged by the elements, and the soft gray edges of the scrap – it was a scrap, after all, ragged and asymmetrical – seemed almost unraveling. The writer had used brown ink, or maybe the ink too had just started out as something else and been umbered by time and air. *I ask your forgiveness*. Sprouls wondered about that – that someone who lived in a vacuum of geography, certainly by choice, would bother apologizing to someone. And then bother hiding the apology.

But that wasn't quite right, was it? Not hiding it. *Securing* it. Not leaving it out on

the wooden table, say, exposed, ready to disappear at the first blast of air through the open door. But rather, in the pantry, in a drawer – surely among the first receptacles a visitor would inspect. As though meant to be discovered.

Sprouls didn't come to that conclusion all at once, but rather over the course of half a day: staring out the window, wondering about the weather and when it would relent, lying back on the mattress, lacing his hands behind his head, occasionally getting up to toss another thick foot-long stick into the fireplace, heating a can of soup. Thinking about Evan – what he would be doing if he were in Sprouls's place. And also thinking about Terry and Mark, both of whom had insisted – showing off for Evan – on “taking the point” as Terry said, getting too far ahead, recklessly charging out onto the not-frozen-enough river. They hadn't even shouted or screamed, just dropped as if down a trap door...

Gotta think about something else, Sprouls interrupted himself. And that was when he wondered about the note's placement.

Up he got from the bed then even though it was now nearly midnight, his eyes scanning the room, trying to pick up another small flash of white against the dark log background. Put one and then two logs on the fire, not so much for the heat as the extra light they would give him.

The second note he also found in the pantry, tucked between a box of granola and a canned ham. This one was disappointing, though, a scrap not just of paper but of thought: *not now*, it said and that was all, all letters lowercase, the “w” roughly chopped off at the right. The third, discovered within the next ten minutes on the top shelf of the pantry under a big can of orange juice, offered barely more: *best (something) will not know*, the second word smudged and illegible, as if a drop of water had landed right there, somehow, magically passing through two thicknesses of tin and a quart of OJ.

Sprouls emptied the pantry but found no more notes there. He turned over all the cans and boxes and sacks, thinking he might find more stuck to the bottoms or wedged between folds in the cardboard. Nothing. He left all the stuff on the floor, added a log to the fire, unrolled his sleeping bag on the mattress, and was unconscious within a quarter-hour, his dreams roiled with words in faded brown.

That had been his first night. By the time he awoke, maybe five or six hours later (his watch had stopped, naturally), the fire was nearly out and the temperature in the cabin had probably dropped twenty, thirty degrees. As he successively piled on more tinder, kindling, and finally a few small logs, the wind outside continued to dig, relentlessly, at the cabin's exterior, seeking seams and cracks as though to tear it apart. Occasional gusts blew down the chimney, sending harmless orange sparks scattering, but never threatening to extinguish the flames. If Sprouls could do anything, he could build a fine fire.

As he sat at the table warming his hands with a cup of weak coffee, he regarded the mess he'd left the previous night: pantry door open, cans and plastic jars and boxes and sacks stacked or lying on their sides. The three scraps of paper were still on the table, where he'd weighted them down with silverware. *I ask your forgiveness; not now; best (something) will not know.*

A jigsaw puzzle. Yet none of the edges of the paper matched any of the others. More like an anagram whose elements were whole words and phrases, not mere letters.

Coffee finished, a small bag of lemon snaps consumed – Sprouls didn't care much for breakfasts – he moved all the scattered containers back into the pantry. To keep his mind occupied, he tried to organize it in some way or ways that made sense. Items with earlier expiration dates towards the front of the shelves. All the boxes of instant oatmeal over here on the left of a single shelf, not distributed apparently at random across all three shelves, zig-zagging. All the little cans of tuna and white-meat chicken stacked as high as possible on the top shelf.

While he was arranging the towers of canned protein in their little neighborhood, he peeked up to see how much room there was beneath the underside of the board which formed the top of the pantry; a valance nailed to the front created a dark recess.

That was when he saw the small flash of white, up in the corner. Wedged like a wad of gum between the back wall of the pantry, the board at the top, and the right side.

It wasn't a wad of gum, of course, but another note – another scrap, folded and re-folded and finally its corners crimped over so it would stay in place in that corner.

Nor was it really white. The same dim pale gray as the others. The same coppery ink. The same enigmatic verbiage: *on the most recent occasion* up near the top of the paper, then several inches which had been torn off so the words there couldn't be read, and then the two words *and I*. Although there was ample room on the scrap for another line or two below that one, the space was empty.

At the table, Sprouls placed this scrap with the others and once again tried (without success) to align if not their physical edges, then at least their semantic ones. Something about this fourth note bothered him, and Sprouls knew what it was: unlike numbers 2 and 3, this one had been clearly, by intention, *put* where Sprouls had found it; and unlike the first scrap, this one had been obviously put there with the intention that it not be found – had been hidden.

He got up from the table and took the now lukewarm pot back to the door. The snow was still coming down, coming down hard, and with the wind blowing so ferociously, the flakes felt like sleet against his face. He dumped the pot of water, creating a little well in the snow into which he peed, briefly, and then he scooped up another potful of fresh snow.

As the snow was melting and water was again heating to a boil, Sprouls unwrapped a Snickers and sat at the table.

Thinking.

Fighting his new eagerness to get to the heart of the mystery.

Fighting it, because at some level he recognized it as a weakness but a useful one. He didn't want to consider his plight, which might or might not be – or sooner or later become – desperate. The storm showed no sign of abating, if anything showed signs of getting worse. He had no idea where he was. No one else, did, either. He had no cell phone. Yes, the pantry was still close to full, and the chest-high woodpile wasn't in danger of running out soon, and the water supply seemed, ha ha, all but infinite. Even so, despite all these ingredients for short- to mid-range survival, even with strict rationing, he'd exhaust them all eventually.

But his worst threats lay within: boredom; panic; despair; the first tickles of a fear of losing his mind, a fear which itself he feared instinctively because of its potential to

spiral into obsession. A word floated into his consciousness, jetsam from college-days memory: *testudo*, the Roman army's practice of carrying shields overhead and to their sides in such a tight formation that no arrows could penetrate. The mystery of the notes was his own *testudo*. He needed to hang onto it, for as long as possible.

Even better, he needed to enlarge it. *Think about it*, he said to himself (he didn't believe he'd spoken aloud). *Somebody intentionally placed at least two messages* (they were messages, weren't they?) *in the pantry...* The first had been the easiest to find, practically a gimme, and the last the most difficult. The ones in between, well, maybe a little harder than the first but not as hard as the fourth.

Was he being led somehow? Ridiculous. But suppose he were. Where was he being led and for what reason?

He tossed the Snickers wrapper on the fire and made another cup of coffee, a stronger one this time. Then he once more removed everything from the pantry and searched it, meticulously, methodically, completely.

Like the fourth, scrap the fifth was wedged into a corner – this one on the underside of the very bottom of the pantry, towards the front. Number six eluded him until he thought to remove the inner shelves and inspect their edges: there it was, folded into a thin sliver and placed into a slit gouged in the back edge of the shelf. He had to dig it out with a knife.

Now the mystery had two more facets to be joined, somehow, to the others. Number five read, *Please do not try to*; number six, *there will simply be nothing*.

Sprouls stared at the half-dozen pale little flags arrayed across the table in a semaphore of surrender. Surrender? He didn't think so. But he needed to do something else, something now to distract him from hooking his panic to a completely different wagon, locked within his own *testudo*.

He resumed the earlier interrupted task: reassembled the pantry, shoved it back against the wall; organized its contents, and replaced them all on the shelves. He was running out of silverware so he weighted the scraps of paper down with cans of potted meat. He built the fire back up again. He looked out the window: no sky, no landscape, no figures nor ground. He tried, unsuccessfully, to nap. When he sat up on the bed he

looked over at the table. He looked away from the table, back to the pantry. Heated water for some instant soup.

While he spooned the yellowish broth into his mouth, he again regarded the six aging messages. Yes. Messages. They may look like evidence from a possible arson at a fortune-cookie plant, but no, they were *messages*. Pieces of a larger message, in fact. The rest of which would be---

He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening searching the rest of the cabin, as the wind continued to pick at the scars and the snow continued to mount up to the windowsills. Six more scraps he found, hidden in corners of the walls, slipped into a groove at the back of the tabletop, fluttering down from the roll-up window shade, wedged like a secret *mezuzah* into the surface of the door frame, rolled up and slipped inside a leg of the bed, discovered only when he pried off the rubber tip at the bottom.

In the dim light cast as the day's last logs caught and started to burn, he could barely read the twelve notes. He'd check again in the morning, assuming snow didn't cover the windows, but for now he was satisfied there were no more anywhere in the cabin.

He would have to sleep soon, he knew. But he had found, out of sight in the shadows at the foot of the woodpile, a small bottle of brandy and a cigarette, too, propped there like Tiny Tim's crutch. He cracked open the sealed cap on the neck of the bottle and took a sip. He hadn't smoked in fifteen years, and the tobacco was most likely stale, but he took his time before lighting it, savoring the anticipation of the first drag.

Sipping from the little bottle, puffing absent-mindedly on the cigarette and tipping the ash into an empty can, he sat there at the table reading and re-reading and considering what the author might have meant, or what the author *thought* he or she meant, anyway:

I ask your forgiveness.

not now

best (something) will not know

on the most recent occasion (something) and I

Please do not try to

*there will simply be nothing
quite sharp, actually
happens quite suddenly
the terrible sound
Surely I shall never
have always, always regarded (something)*

No. There was nothing there, he almost convinced himself. It was all too vague, lots of function words, weak verbs, and even the most specific elements – the *quite sharp*, the *terrible sound* – even they didn't communicate much of anything meaningful. Not even the twelfth note's single word, startling though it was, seemed to say anything:

meat

Sprouls stacked the notes up and placed a single can on them. Extinguished the cigarette (already wishing he'd found a whole pack), sealed the cap on the one small remaining sip of brandy. Tossed another couple logs into the fireplace. And staggered to the bed. He did not dream at all.

And that was his second night.

On the third day, Sprouls wasn't sure but he thought the snowfall might have relented a bit. It was still coming down, all right, but the flakes were big and fewer. The light from the sky was brighter. He knew it was foolish – after all, he still had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten here, and even his tracks from two days ago would be long gone – but even so, he clung to the possibility of rescue or, failing that, of simply walking back to civilization.

As he was reheating his first pot of water left over from the night before – he didn't bother to scoop out a fresh pot's worth – he thought he heard the sound of an engine, dimly, from outside and above. A plane? He rushed to the door but when he yanked it open, he saw that the snow had drifted up against that face of the cabin, right up against the door: chest-high. He lunged against it anyway, straining to get his head and upper body out from under the eaves, waving frantically, his shouts subsiding and

his voice breaking, finally, when he realized whatever it was (if it had been something in the first place) had to be long gone.

The snow, partially trampled and flattened by his frenzied flailing, had fallen across the threshold onto the floor, and the door didn't shut tightly at first. He brushed it inside completely, away from the door frame. He didn't care if it melted on the floor, he just needed to get the damn door closed against the snow (light or otherwise), the wind, and the damn hallucination of rescue.

Coffee. Instant oatmeal. A couple more logs on the fire. Oatmeal package tossed on the fire, the guy in the powdered wig and broad black hat seeming for an instant to switch from vapid smile to ugly scowl as the heat crumpled the package just before consuming it completely.

Back to the chair. Back to the table. Back to the can and the scraps of paper on which it rested.

Still no sense there. Or maybe, rather, a cloudy sort of half-sense. Seemed to be lots of negatives. Things not turning out quite as planned. (Ha, you got that right.) Illusion, vague threats.

What would Evan do, confined here like this? (Assuming the son of a bitch didn't still have his deck of cards.)

Still seated, Sprouls looked around the cabin, searching for anything that his versatile friend might be turning to use as a tool to, well, signal somebody. Raise the alarm. He guessed he could always take a can outside if the sun were shining, maybe Morse-code an SOS with reflections off the can bottom.

Or maybe...

...*smoke*. Of course. If he could get a big enough fire going, maybe there'd be enough smoke to attract attention – even from miles away. Unless the wind shredded it first. So no. Not yet. Soon, maybe. If the storm was indeed going to abate soon.

But the woodpile...

Sprouls almost slapped himself in the forehead about his stupidity: he hadn't searched the woodpile. Jesus, there might be a hundred notes stuck all in there – for all he knew, he'd already burned a hundred notes because he hadn't been inspecting the

bark, the splits in the wood. What an idiot. Evan would be laughing his ass off---

It took him almost two hours to remove and inspect every log, every stick of kindling, turning them round and about and end over end and then restacking them closer to the fireplace, carefully keeping the ones he'd already cleared apart from the ones he hadn't looked at yet. Almost two hours. He didn't find a single note.

But he found something even better: cut into the floor beneath the woodpile, a one-foot square, slightly loose, of flooring. He pried it up, pulled it to one side. And inside the cubbyhole, a battered tin box, perhaps four inches by six. And within the box:

A black-and-white photograph, sepia-stained, the glossy surface craquelured with many years.

It seemed to be a formal portrait, taken outside in a wooded, hilly area – perhaps the very area surrounding this cabin. The subject was a woman, depicted from her upper arms to the top of her head. While the background landscape was interesting, beautifully interesting, the woman riveted Sprouls's attention.

Her dark hair spilled in ringlets from a center part, framing her face, apparently held in place by a loose sash of some kind. She was attired, it seemed, in some sort of dress or robe from the Medieval or maybe Renaissance period, or even later: laces tying together the two sides of the deep neckline, and buttoned above. Maybe this was one of those corny photos from the vendors at country fairs at such – the ones in the old-timey wooden wagons, with old-fashioned box-and-black-drape cameras and wardrobes full of “historic” garb for people to pose in.

Maybe. But Sprouls didn't think so. This woman was not out on a lark. Her face showed no sign that she had ever enjoyed anything, even *imagined* enjoying anything.

The skin of her face and neck was immaculate, blemish-free, even (as the cliché had it) porcelain. All the better to set off her mouth, and her eyes. The mouth was small and not broad, bowed slightly down, lips compressed. It apparently had been many years since raised into a smile. There were certainly no crows'-feet of laughter at the corners of the mouth – or the eyes.

Slightly crossed, those eyes were, or maybe it was just a trick of perspective. Lightly lidded. Above all: dead. Not literally, no, but dead to life, to *experience*. The light

in them flat. Miserable, even. *Please*, the eyes said, *please help me, release me – but I do not expect you to.*

Sprouls put the tin box back into its hiding place and then replaced the little trap door as well, but the photograph he kept. It went onto the table with the notes, which he scattered in a ring around it.

Was the woman in the photo the “I” of the notes? the “you”? Was she involved with the notes in any way at all, for that matter? Maybe they’d been hidden by two entirely different people. The notes, after all, had simply been secreted in pre-existing locations; the trapdoor hiding the tin box, on the other hand, had been a modification of the materials at hand. Surely this indicated two entirely different modes of problem-solving (or mystery-making) at work...

Abruptly, Sprouls was tired. Tired of this game which wasn’t a game. Tired of kidding himself, pretending that the unsolvable mystery of the notes and now the photo was the most important thing in his world. Tired of the whiteness of the light, tired of the creak of the walls under the wind’s fingernails, tired of throwing log after log onto the fireplace (although not so tired that he didn’t do it again). With a last glance at the table, he pushed the chair away and staggered in two steps to the bed.

This time, he did fall asleep.

When he awoke, the day’s light wasn’t gone but it wouldn’t last much longer, either. The fire had gone down and he added a few logs. He remembered a can of beef stew in the pantry, pulled it out, put it in the pot and put the whole thing on the fire to heat. The label on the can curled up, shriveled. *Idiot*, he thought, *you’ll never be able to handle the damn can to eat out of it, why didn’t you just dump it in the pot?* Hell with it. He’d eat it when it cooled.

While waiting, he sat at the table. Shoved all his found treasures and their collective misery to one side. As the light outside continued to dim, he pulled his wallet out of his hip pocket and began to go through the contents. A Triple-A card, expired two years ago. Driver’s license and insurance card. His HMO identification, old receipts and ticket stubs. He pulled it all out and sorted it into two stacks, mentally labeled *chuck* and

keep. When the wallet was nearly empty he took the *chuck* pile and did exactly that, throwing it into the fire.

Yes, nearly empty: he'd saved the best of the *keep* stack for last – the wallet photos.

The one thing he loved about his ex-wife was that she was gone, utterly, from his life. And from his wallet. But the pictures of Ginny (short for the damn thing her mother had saddled her with, “Ginevra,” supposedly a family name) were precious. Ginny at three. Ginny at eight and twelve. Christmas, age 16. High-school graduation...

He remembered holding her, age two, on his knee that one night as his foot bounced up and down, the way she laughed, the way the ex-wife had burst in the kitchen door like she always did, drunk ditto, and ahead of her, skittering across the floor, tongue flapping, happy-happy-happy, the damn Lab-Golden mix named Spike they used to own. He remembered jumping up protectively and knocking over the kitchen chair, almost brained the damn dog---

The chair.

He'd done everything but dismantle the damn cabin. Brought all the pieces of the puzzle back to the table, twelve notes and one photo. Sat there staring like an idiot for every one of them, singly and collectively.

Sat there on the one thing he'd never inspected closely: the chair.

He lurched to his feet, upended the thing. Dead center, a little rectangle of white taped there. Afraid he'd damage the note by pulling it off, unable to read it here in the dusky light, he carried the chair upside down over to the fire.

Have to add another log or two soon. But just enough light for now to read, bending, squinting...

Behind him, from the direction of the door, a sharp sudden crack and splintering and a gust of wind blowing across the room. The light from the fire flared briefly, nudging his understanding over the edge into full comprehension. He just had time to register it as a complete sentence. Just had time, in the last split-second, to recognize how perfectly it fit the other words, the other scraps of paper, the photo too for that matter, but especially the first note: *I ask your forgiveness*, that note had said. Then he

realized in the last micro-second that it was, indeed, the last micro-second.

The chair fell to the floor. The screaming stopped. Sometime later, soft footsteps padded across the cabin floor and out into the wintry night.

Back in the cabin, white scraps of paper – mocking the snowfall – fluttered off the table and down onto the floor, soaking up the deep red. The chair still lay on its side by the fireplace. The light from the fire, ever dimmer now, barely illumined the words taped on its underside:

I, said the thirteenth and final note, am a mountain tiger.