Hidden

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Hidden
by T. Lane Williams

You wake to the darkness in your hut with a gnawing in your stomach. Reaching out, you grab a carrot to soothe. Moving its length around your molars, you find a spot least offensive and grind down upon the root. Slowly, skillfully, you chew until the purple shaft becomes mud and you swallow. Moving the cowhide flap from the door, you walk out into the sun. Your nakedness warms from the rays and your body shivers from the northern wind. It is a few weeks after the sheep have begun to show which will begat and which will be ate. Yet, the cold has not left the village. The skies have rivers of black clouds, with gravel edges, hiding the sun more and more each day that comes.

You are early to rise, as has been for the past nineteen moons. The aches make it hard to sleep long. Being alone gives you time to clean without eyes’ pity upon you. You take a short branch leaning against the thick logs stacked for the wall of your hut. With your right hand you start scraping the dry leaves and branches over your thick skin, bark brown, akin to the land from which we all come. And which we all go. Skin that was once more beautiful and supple in your youth. Skin which never had pity. Now your breasts droop; flesh sags from your arms; wrinkles march across your face; your body is rough and stained from your years of keeping sheep. Scars on your hands and feet from the work of extracting metal in the way your father taught you before he disappeared. Tattoos marking each year of your life scattered on knees, ankles, wrists, hips, even hidden from your eyes on your back like the drawings inside caves. Your sex barren and slack under your loincloth.

Here in the valley the grass grows thick for the sheep to graze. Soon, the sheep will need to move higher up the side of the mountain when the valley is filled more with piles than pasture. Now that is for your child to care for. Your child. It is a joke to call him your child. Your child has a child of his own. He has his own life and his own worries. He is still required to respect and worry about you.

Finishing up, you take a small twig and between your front teeth you fray the end. You rub the end of the twig gently over your teeth and between them where it fits. You spit. Blood and spit. Walking twenty paces behind a tree, you finish your morning detail. Blood and spit and piss and shit. You wipe with your left hand. Spit and clean. You pour a cup of water into your hands from the bowl sitting on the rocks next to the firepit. The knots of your knuckles knocking together among the ropes of your fingers.

Today is the day. Forty-five years is enough for one man to carry.

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You tamp embers into the bark bowl at your camp to warm your midday meal. Today you get meat. Flesh for flesh. The pains of your middle are quieted, not silenced. You untie your shoes from your leather pants and rub your swollen ankles and feet. The wet grass in your shoes you scrape out and toss to the side. From within the backpack, you pull out dry grass, carefully packing it into your shoes for your hike back up the mountain pass. Sliding your shoes back on your feet, the fur brushes over your toes causing a childish giggle to escape. You deftly string and tie your shoes back to your pants without causing your right hand to rebel.

Using the stave which you began to shape yesterday, you pull yourself to stand. You check to make sure your leather pants and belts are tight against your hips. Your long coat of bear hide has served you most of your adult life, even with all the rips and tears, it continues to keep you warm, and each sinew used to mend has a story of its own. From your belt hangs several small pouches and your dagger. From the ground you take the grass mat which served as your bed and tie it around your shoulders like a cap. Quiver on your back and a furry cap tied with a chin strap, all are in place for you to start your day. You
slip the stave into your belt behind you and walk a few paces away from your camp to a trio of trees with dense canopy such that the ground in between them is blacker than night. You reach into a small pile of leaves laying there in the darkness and pull out your axe.

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Your father’s axe. Your mother’s father’s axe. A dowry fit for a village chief. The handle has been replaced over the years, not the head of the axe. The copper head of the axe is the prize which many have sought from you for years. It was given to your father upon his taking your mother to his hut. Your mother, her skin dark like the copper, itself. The skin that bound you and her together against the lighter skin of your father and the villagers. The skin she brought with her with her family on their travels of many months walking from the east. They brought the copper with them. They brought their knowing with them. They brought their craft with them.

It was this copper which made your father take your mother north from the shore of the endless sea. He heard word of the metal in these mountains, much closer than the copper of this axe. Just like your mother, he wanted to make the metal his. No other man he knew had your mother. No other man he knew had his axe. He learned from your mother’s father how to find copper. How to smelt it. How to shape it. How to harden it. How to sharpen it. How to use it. Once he was sure, they walked north. You were with them. They just did not know it, yet.

For years, your father kept sheep while he searched the mountains around the village for the ore. You grew at his side, learning both how to care for sheep and how to search for the metal. One day your father came out of the mountains with fewer sheep and yet, with something more. His muscles rippled as he untied the leather satchel from the back of one of the sheep. You, a mere pup, ran to him to hug and he pulled you in, shoving a large brown rock into your arms.

“We take what the earth hides and make it ours.”

It still took years for him to learn how to work the copper. Each day you stood at his side. You learned. You gleaned. You gleamed as the two of you made the rock give what it had not given before. It was small. It was copper. Your father was no longer simply a shepherd of sheep. He was a shepherd of men. A revered leader and master of the earth.

His hair and face grew longer and let it be known that when he was to pass on from this earth, it was his desire that he take his beloved axe with him to the next life. One more he was gone. The axe was next to the bedding your father shared with your mother. She was there. It was there. He was gone. He never returned. From that day, you took over your father’s work. First you had to find your father’s ore.

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Thirty years you have searched while keeping sheep. You have found lost rocks along the paths you take the sheep for grazing; you have not found your father’s ore. You are many years older than he was when he disappeared. You have done well for yourself and your family. You have not found your father’s ore.

You pack away your belongings. You kiss your mate goodbye. You tell your child. Ha, that word again. You tell him that you are off to find the ore you have not found for so long and will not return until you have. He asks to join you; you are old, and they worry. Your mate agrees with him, and the argument begins. It goes round and round as the sun flies across the sky and the black clouds grow thicker and the cold bites deeper into your bones. You finally give in and tell them that you will be off tomorrow morning with the child in tow.
When the moon is high in the night, and your mate is high with the fermented wheat from the evening’s meal, you gather your trappings and make off on your hike. Alone.

You take your usual path winding up through the mountains to the west, where the sheep like to graze in late summer days. From the green valley of your home to the dense wooden forest, the cloak of night keeps your travel out of sight. You break through the tree line and limp onto the crisp snow just as the sun does the same. Turning around, you look back on where you came through the darkness and into the light. The grit of the clouds scours the sun’s rays of its brilliance and warmth. The air is tinged with familiar smells. Like that of the metals which fall and drip away from the heat of your furnace when pulling out copper’s golden-brown blood.

A bare boulder juts out proudly from the hardpack moat of white and you use your bow to test each step before you make it to assure you will not fall through an unseen chasm beneath the snow. What should be a short trek ends up taking much more because the smooth hide of the soles of your shoes causes you to slide halfway back for each step you take. You shuffle your feet, one barely in front of the other. Finally, your goal is within reach, and you climb atop the stone. You look down into the valley below and see your village where you imagine your mate and your child quarrelling with the other about their failure to keep you safe. You chuckle while removing a bit of tinder fungus from a belt pouch and add some small sticks, leaves and needles picked overnight for such a function. You strike your flint until the batch smolders and fire comes alight. You reach down from the edge of the rock and punch through the snow to add to your bowl of grain for a warm porridge in the morning.

You find yourself waking with your face close to the dying fire. You turn on your side and see it is no longer morning and the day half gone. Cursing to yourself, you gather up your things and tamp embers into your bark bowl. As you steady yourself on the snow and use the outcrop as a crutch, you see your child coming out of the evergreens. He calls out for you to stay; you do not respond in-kind. Throwing caution to the wind and keeping your bow on your back, you start to shuffle off the other way.

You do not get far. Your left foot slips and you feel yourself leaving the ground for a moment. Only to land square on your back, the bow splintering under your weight. Your body starts to skitter over the snow, a white blanket sheet that glitters even in the darkening sun. You try to dig your heels in to stop your slide and find the hardpack is stronger than your feeble kicks. Your child’s voice grows fainter with each passing moment. All you hear in your ears is your own wailing and the wind as it whistles past your ears.

Faster, faster you slide. You watch as the clouds roll across the sky as if they were the rapids of the river. Turning your head to the left and right, you see only the endless white and sky. The tree line and your child are now hidden beyond the crest of the side of the mountain.

Faster. You cannot catch your breath because the air evades your nose and your mouth. It scrapes against your cheeks like the gravel in the sky, like the gravel on the ground.

Faster. If you do not stop soon, you know this is how you will end. You remember your axe at your side.

Faster. You take it in both hands. Your right above the head and your left on the handle.

Faster. Raising your axe above your head, you bury it behind you.

It feels like your shoulders are being ripped from your body. You are slowing down. The snow roars as it is torn apart behind you.

Slower. Your hands grow colder. First, they tingle and then go numb.

Slower. You look to your side and see darkness approaching across the cold white way. You close your eyes.

Slower. Your axe is ripped from your hands. You turn side over side and roll until you skid to a stop in the scrabble just before an evergreen patch.
You take a deep breath. You open your eyes and just as you do, your axe slows to rest next to your face. Looking beyond the axe, you see you have slid nearly halfway down the mountain on the other side of the ledge from where your child broke through the tree line to find you.

Hot fire shoots through your right hand. You bring it up to find you have cut your palm across the full width. From thumbpad to small finger, where you see white bone peeking out.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. You curse and spit at yourself. No better than a worm after a heavy rain. You swiftly reach into your pants with your left hand and pull out a length of your loincloth to bind your wound. You fumble with your right to find your dagger still sheathed, unbelievably, in your belt and hand it over to your left to cut a strip. You take care in wrapping your hand and then find that you have no other injuries. You get to your hands and knees and crawl toward the evergreens.

Once in the safety of the trees, you stand and take inventory. Your bow is gone and a few arrows, as well as a bark bowl. Everything else seems to be intact. Maybe those that have gone before you are on your side – save for teaching you a lesson for going on your own. You stagger forward, deeper into the evergreens and search for a branch to replace your bow. The day is shorter than in your memory. The night closes in.

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Birdsong brings the morning. Waking up, you are curled up like a bug found under a rock. Calloused hands slide into your coat and grip your gut. The battle in your middle – the sharp pain under your right breast and your stomach turning sour – tells you that your day starts as bad as the one before had ended. You bite down on your tongue to keep the growl strangled deep in your throat. As much as you want to howl to the spirits of those who have gone before you, doing so will alert your child to your camp.

Even if he is only one hundred paces away, your child could not know. The trees stand close guard, arm in arm. Your fire ebbs in the ring just out of reach and the icicles that are your hair tell you that it is long from keeping your bones warm. The streaks of smoke sneak through the thick branches and wide leaves in their attempt to escape the canopy of the forest. Not until midday will the sun’s warmth tickle the blades of blue grass which are your bed and melt the thin patches of snow weaving around the trunks.

Again, another piercing shot through your center. An endless thrust from a spear wielded by a giant the size of ten or twenty men. Teeth chatter and tears freeze in their tracks while you whisper for relief. The tattoo which the shaman placed at pain’s point did naught good. His chants to the spirits while slicing your last bit of soft flesh gave you peace in the moment just a year ago. The sacred black dust ground into those three weeping cuts promised; lied. They are an etched memory that never truly heals.

From within, without warning and without worry, a large belch bursts forth from your chapped lips. Rotting meat is its stench; death is its flavor. Your shit will be black water for days. Just like the moon making its rounds, so does your black shit. Ever since you were a child at your father’s side. You cannot stop the shit; you can quiet the pain.

You open the flap of leather on your backpack and tip it on its side. You sit up and reach in, pulling out an old sheep’s bladder filled with ground wheat. With your left hand you mix a bit of the wheat with a handful of snow and warm it over the cooling fire. You throw on a few sticks to rekindle the flame to melt the snow, and you, too. With your left hand you scoop the mush and shovel it into your mouth. You cough. Through the gap between your two front teeth, the same gap you loved in your mother’s smile those many years ago, seeps a bit of mush blackened and dribbles down your chin.

With your right hand you wipe the dark drool from your face. Another shot of pain. Under the leather strap ripped from your loincloth. Under the grass matting. Under the herb sprigs. The gash in your
right palm throbs from its call into service. You spit profanities into the fire and curse your stupidity. You
are a mess. You are sheep’s scat. You are useless. Why do you keep on?

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Placing your axe into your belt, you limp back through the forest and upward through the
evergreens to break, once more, beyond the tree line. The black clouds cover most of the sky and the sun
is blood red. Three-legged now, with your stave in your left hand, you hobble along to find a less
dangerous hike back up the mountain in your search.

Between two ridges far to the west from where you had your fast flight from your child, you take
each step deliberately while the sun slips in and out of its confines. When the sun is at its highest point,
you are within reach of the mountain’s peak. Even in your state, you know you can make it before night.
You choose to rest before moving onward. You settle in and from your pack, you take some deer and ibex
jerky. You look into your bark bowl, finding the embers cold. Instead of bothering to light another fire,
you decide to warm the jerky in your mouth before slowly chewing. It is dry and salty. The fat is difficult
to grind apart. Still, it is delicious. You add a pinch or two of grain to your mouth to help break down the
meat and after some time, you are full.

Putting everything back into your pack, you stand back up and point yourself to the peak. Your
feet feel heavy with each step. Your head joins in the throbbing with your right hand, and you begin to
wonder if you will make it to the top before nightfall.

Something to the left catches your eye. There, in a gully, between those rocks, is that what you
think it is? Years peel away and you rush over to look. You drop to your knees and use both hands to clear
away some of the snow covering your find. There. There it is. Ore.

Snow begins to fall. Not white, gray. The landscape speckles. A smile comes to your lips. Your
mother’s smile. You lean on the stave to lift yourself back up to stand. You hear a whistle in your left ear
and then a snap. Fire explodes in your left shoulder. You fall face first.

Blurry-eyed, you wake only seconds later with the fire still in your shoulder. The ground around
you is covered in red liquid, steaming your face. You know it is your blood. Your face lays across your
limp left arm. Reaching up with your right, you feel a shaft buried deep into your left shoulder. Gathering
your strength, you pull at the shaft and free it from your flesh. Your rage and pain fill the air, the snow
and grit making way from its force. The arrowhead is nowhere in sight.

Rolling your head to the side, you see your attacker. A fair face. An unknown face. Simply a face.
The person owning that face walks your way a few steps only to fall to their knees and then to their face,
revealing your child’s face as he stands behind the prone body. His axe is in hand, covered in blood. You
see tears freeze upon his cheeks.

And then you see nothing.

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Two people hiking the mountain see you laying in that gully and check on you. They see your
golden-brown skin basking in the late summer sun. They tell others. Five thousand years, give or take a
moon, have passed since the snow and ice hid your flesh. Your name they will never know or why you
were there; they call you Ötzi. Ötzi the Iceman. They will tell their own stories about what happened to
you.

They take what the earth hides and make it theirs.