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## Frozen Animals

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WINNER  
JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE FOR FICTION  
Owen King  
**Frozen Animals**

*Winter 1925*

The three men moved in a close line, tied to one another by a hemp cord: Kosskoff, the biggest man, took the point; second in the procession was Funt, the other trapper, and third was Pinet, the dentist. A heavy snow was falling, thickening the pass, and slowing the trek. They were on their way to Kosskoff's wife. The trappers had a cabin and a meat house on the south side of the mountain, three or four more miles up. Kosskoff's wife had something wrong with her teeth. She was pregnant; it wasn't safe for her to travel.

The way between the two cliffs was a bottleneck of snow curving gradually up and out of sight. It narrowed as they ascended, but there was still room for as many as five men to move comfortably. Whorls of deep freeze marked the rock faces on either side. Rising hundreds of feet, the cliffs folded in jutting piles of slate, stopping only where they seemed to meet the sky—a sliding gray-black mat of clouds—as if the weather were made of something solid. The snow fell over and across everything.

Several times the third man, the dentist, seemed to lag, perhaps staggered by the wind, perhaps tiring. He would pause, appearing to collect himself, and rub his arms through his parka. The dentist would touch his scarf-covered throat with a mitten, appearing to check for a pulse. Then, he would plod forward.

Behind the men, their tracks walked away on the wind.



Powerful, intermittent gusts obscured Funt, the second trapper, from Pinet's window of vision. The dentist was still a bit drunk; he worried something would happen and the line would break and they could be separated. In his life Pinet admitted that he was far from guiltless—he had, for instance, been unfaithful to his wife—but he felt

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that a death by freezing was a punishment that should be reserved for sins greater than his own. He understood that he was a weak man, susceptible to temptation, cringing in confrontation—and wasn't the knowing of it punishment enough? This was the way the dentist was thinking as he walked, putting one heavy boot in front of the other, the nose on his face like a stalactite.

The prospect of spending the night with two trappers and the woman made him gloomy. In this weather there was no chance that they would be able to go back down the mountain until the next day.

Pinet knew Funt vaguely from the town's only tavern, and disliked him. The tavern, a black belly of a place, windowless and airless, had only a few tables and on a couple of occasions the dentist had been forced to sit with the small trapper. Funt was crude and bad smelling, and talked of nothing except whores and killing animals; he seemed emblematic of everything Pinet disliked about the backwoods town and the life it condemned him to. Once, over pints of half-rancid potato vodka, he told Pinet a horrible story about a prostitute with no legs who performed obscene magic tricks. For a period of weeks the dentist suffered from recurring nightmares about the poor woman.

Kosskoff he had never seen before. He was large, and, Pinet guessed, very stupid. The big trapper had been brief when they woke the dentist, simply explaining the situation, and producing the wad of bills from an inner pocket of his great coat. In the lead of Funt and Pinet the man climbed tirelessly, the black train of his fur coat sliding over the snow like a living creature.

Moving uphill against the wind, and with the snow in their faces and stinging their eyes, Pinet tried to imagine the life of the woman who was stuck—*trapped*, by his way of thinking—in the same cabin with them. A toothache probably seemed like relief to her. The dentist shivered; he was tired and he needed a drink; the shiver collected in his groin, and Pinet realized that he needed to piss, badly.



He yanked on the cord. The other two stopped, and waded back to the dentist, pushing through waves of snow.

Kosskoff drew the other two men into a huddle, their arms over

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each others' shoulders, heads together. In the circle of bodies they could speak with relative ease while the wind rose in a muffled roar at their backs. All three men wore heavy weather masks with holes for the eyes and nose.

"You stopped," said Kosskoff.

"I have to piss," gasped Pinet, "Stand there, please. I can't go in the wind—I'll freeze up. Just give me a minute." He bit at his mitten, trying to pull the ice-stiffed thing off.

"The vodka, right? Rum?" Funt sounded merry.

"Just stand there and break the damn wind," said Pinet, getting the mitten loose. The tips of his fingers were without feeling. He fumbled under his parka, searching for the buttons of his fly.

The snow dropped in sheets, powder rolled off their shoulders.

Popping the buttons loose, Pinet touched his penis and winced at the cold of his fingers.

He looked up, suddenly aware of the closeness of the other two men huddled around him; they still had their arms over his shoulders. They were watching him through the gaps of their masks. "Back up a little," said Pinet. "I've got to piss."

"The vodka, right?" Funt smiled and nodded.

Kosskoff blinked a few times, but said nothing. There were flakes of ice on his beard.

"Back up," said Pinet. "It'll only be a moment. If you don't back up I'm going to piss on your shoes."

Funt's smile widened. He chuckled.

"What?" The dentist was getting irritated. He clutched his penis beneath the skirt of the parka. His bladder throbbed.

Pinet looked again at Kosskoff. The big trapper shrugged and took a couple of steps back. Funt took a couple of steps back.

"Thank you," said Pinet. The dentist had heard stories about trappers, about men who lived together in the mountains. He didn't like them standing there, but it was too cold to piss against the wind.

The dentist lifted up the skirt of his parka. It was still very cold; the shock of the air brought tears to his eyes. His testicles shrank with goosepimples. He ground his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. His urethra stung at the effort, but nothing came. For a second he

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thought a piece of ice had lodged itself into his urethra, but when he looked down at his penis—a blue tinge had colored the tip—he saw there was nothing.

“Turn around,” he called to the trappers. “Fucking turn around—I can’t go with you watching me.”

The two trappers exchanged glances. Funt laughed, but the sound was whipped away by a hurtle of snow. They turned slowly around until their backs were facing the dentist.

Pinet was trembling and there was a wobbly feeling in his knees. Looming through the rolling snow devils, the lead cloud cover seemed to press against the cliff tops. Pinet felt a touch of vertigo and wondered what would come first, the piss, or the vomit. The house call was worth fifty dollars, no small sum to the dentist.

He made the water in painful spurts. The yellow water pattered in the snow at his feet, and a few droplets blew onto the dentist’s own boots.

When he was done, Pinet put his penis back into his pants, and took several deep breaths. Maybe he wouldn’t be sick.

He hauled on the nylon cord and the other two men turned around. They huddled up again.

“You think that’s bad,” said Funt, “The clap, *mon ami*—it’s like broken teeth chewing—”

Pinet bent forward, gagging, but managed to hold back from vomiting. The mixture of vodka and bile was coppery on his tongue. He dropped to his knees in the snow. He wanted to lie down and hug himself. Kosskoff grabbed the dentist’s elbow and pulled him up straight.

“Not much farther,” said Kosskoff. “My wife will make food. You can get a drink then.”

The snow rained against their bodies. The weather seemed to be getting heavier. Pinet’s groin burned from the exposure to the cold. He wasn’t used to this kind of exertion. He gradually felt his balance returning.

“Not much farther?” he asked.

Kosskoff shook his big head, No.

“And there’s something to drink there? Vodka?”

“You bet,” said Funt, winking, “Vodka and whores and cards and an accordion player who sings out his ass. Steaks, too. Big fucking steaks. Yessir, we got a saloon up there, and it’s a pretty nice one.”

Pinet shrugged off Kosskoff’s hand. The other two men started to move away. The dentist watched the cord that connected them together as it played out, snaking uncertainly through the snow.

Something occurred to him—it was often like that lately, things would rush up at him from nowhere, things that didn’t make sense, and he’d find his hands were trembling, his heart crashing, his head crowded. The shelves of the rock gathered around them, bearded with ice, the spinning snow, the sliding gray mat of the sky, the clawing lifelessness of it all, had brought it back to him: as a boy, he’d been a great keeper of pets. He’d had a pair of black gerbils. Twins, his mother said, and he named them Molly and Polly after two girls in a storybook. Pinet let Molly and Polly run up and down his arms, squeaking and playing. He stroked their fur carefully, with just his index finger, because they were small and fragile. Pinet was a very young boy when he kept Molly and Polly. And he loved the black gerbils and tried to take as good care of them as he knew, but an illness got one of them; he couldn’t recall which one. It happened over night and in the morning, they found the one chewing on the other, nibbling its leg. Of course, that meant they had to kill the living one, too, because it had got the sickness from eating its sister. Pinet had observed dutifully as his mother put the survivor in the steel ice box they kept in the basement. Pinet had been permitted to give the gerbil a few strokes to say good-bye. There wouldn’t be any pain, his mother promised, but thinking of it now, he wondered.

The dentist pulled on the cord again. Kosskoff came back. Funt threw up his arms.

“Yes?” asked Kosskoff.

“We’re not going to freeze are we?” asked Pinet.

Kosskoff squinted at him.

“I don’t want to freeze,” said Pinet, “I just want a drink.” He knew it was unreasonable, maybe even mad, but the memory of the gerbil, curled up in a comma, fur stiff with ice, black eyes clouded white, seemed like a premonition.

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“You’ll live,” said Kosskoff, “You’ll have a drink. But only if you move your ass.” He reached forward and gave the dentist a firm push, square in the chest. Pinet staggered.

The big trapper turned and went forward. Funt let him get ahead, then followed.

Dragging his boots—one step and then another—Pinet started, too.

The snow thickened, and even Funt disappeared. The dentist concentrated on the cord. One step and then another. It was like sleep-walking, but he did not dream.

Over and across everything, the snow fell.

When he awoke, they were banging on the door for the girl to let them in, out of the storm.



“I’m divorced,” said Pinet. Funt had asked him if the mark on his neck was a love bite. They were in the cabin.

The trapper’s wife was cooking fish and the room was close with the smell. She was a sparrow of a girl, whose distended belly stretched her stiff dress to a second skin.

Pinet sipped vodka from a tin cup. He was okay now, he was calm. The vodka was horrible, but it would do; he rolled it around in his mouth. The dentist wasn’t sure how long it had taken them after the piss break, but he was warm again, that was the main thing.

Outside, the wind roared and whipped, throwing snow against the house.

“You’ve learned your lesson,” said Funt. The light of the small trapper’s cigarette ember painted deep hollows in his thin cheeks. Above his lip the trapper had an unbecoming wisp of mustache and his hands were small and white around his own cup. “Stick to whores, keep it business.”

Coming in from the cold, the girl had helped the men discard their frozen layers. Stripped down to their long johns they had sat on a bear skin a couple of feet in front of the stove and she had draped them in furs. The sound of the wind was a faint roar.

“Sure,” said Pinet.

“Just a piece of business,” said Funt, “I always approach a whore

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just that way. 'Whore,' I say, 'I got a small piece of business I'd like to transact with you.' That's just what I say."

Except for the closet that contained the toilet, the cabin was only a single room. The stove was in the middle of the room. Shelves, neatly arranged with jars and pans, lined one wall. Furs were piled on the beds. Two small oil lamps were strung from the center rafter, exuding a weak light which failed to illuminate the corners of the room. Pinet, who lived poorly in a two room apartment and kept his practice in the basement of another boarding house, thought it was a ghastly place. He imagined Kosskoff humping the girl, and Funt in the next bed, smoking and watching, tending his mustache with flicks of his black tongue.

Pinet drank steadily, unconcerned about his ability to examine the woman's teeth.

Kosskoff's wife served them the fish on tin plates and stood watching them eat. She hadn't spoken, yet, and Pinet supposed she wouldn't.

The food was blackened and tasteless, and even if the dentist had cared for fish, he doubted he could have eaten much. The sound of Funt and Kosskoff, barbarically crunching the tiny bones, eating the creature whole, nauseated Pinet. He didn't want to be sick. It embarrassed him to think of the way he'd behaved on the mountain. The dentist drank steadily.

When she was certain that the dentist was finished poking at his food, the girl took his plate and went to sit on one of the beds. She ate with her fingers.



After awhile, Kosskoff said it was time for the dentist to work. "Fix her mouth now," said the big man.

Pinet had the girl stay on the edge of the bed. He had Kosskoff bring over the lines attached to both lamps and hang them above the bed; they dangled above the bed like lynched partners. The trappers gathered close behind the dentist to watch.

Face-to-face with her now, Pinet saw that the girl was not quite plain. She was dark, probably a full-blooded Pasamaquoddy or a Penobscot, and had striking blue eyes. Her nose, slightly crooked to



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the left, had been broken once and never set. It was pretty in a way, the dentist thought, and he would have liked to touch it, to run his finger over the healed place where there was a tiny bump.

“What seems to be the problem?” the dentist asked.

The girl blinked at him.

“She can’t sleep. Her mouth hurts,” said Kosskoff. “It hurts to eat.”

Pinet nodded, sipped from the cup. He noticed a puffy swelling on the left side of her jaw, just below the mandible. “Open wide,” he said.

Her breath was bad; this didn’t surprise or bother the dentist, who was, after more than two years of exile, well-accustomed to the unhappy mouths of country people. The girl’s teeth were stained in the typical red and yellow tints of the chronic tobacco chewer. Pinet doubted if she’d ever brushed her teeth in her life. The discoloration of the gums indicated the beginning stages of gum disease. Pinet noticed a little flake of meat stuck between the upper right cuspid and the upper right lateral.

He probed the girl’s mouth with the small mirror, walking his eyes over the rows of dying teeth. He gave Kosskoff’s wife ten years before she needed a full set of falsies, and maybe not that long. It was a shame, thought the dentist. He could visualize the nice straight set of teeth that she might have enjoyed with proper dental treatment and care. Pinet could see the yellowed, meat-jammed upper right cuspid as it ought to have been: a tiny pinnacle of bone, glistening enamel, smiling with a tiny fleck of chocolate, before a sweet girlish tongue swabbed it clean. Pinet lifted his cup to his lips, but it was empty.

The immediate problem was the two abscesses side-by-side, one of the lower left first molar and another of the lower left lateral. The lateral wasn’t as bad. He touched them with the dental pick at the opposite end of the mirror: the tell-tale rotten softness of each tooth gave a little beneath the prick of the needle tip. The girl winced, but stayed still.

“Where do you hold your pouch?” asked the dentist.

The girl touched her mouth in the area of the infections.

“You’ve got two abscesses,” Pinet lightly touched each tooth,

“here and here. An abscess is an infection in the tooth. These are from diet—you eat too much meat—and from tobacco juice.

“The one in the back has to go. It’s dead as well as rotten. I can probably cap the other one, give you a root canal, but you’ll have to come into town for me to fill it. If you can’t come to town in the next couple of weeks, then we should pull that one, too, because it won’t last any longer.”

The girl blinked and wrinkled her pretty crooked nose.

“How far along are you?” asked Pinet.

“She’s got about a month,” answered Kosskoff.

“That makes one month and thirteen years until I take the little critter down to Maisie’s and treat him to the whole house,” said Funt. “Those girls’ll work him until his pecker falls off.”

“Be quiet,” said Pinet.

“Is it safe?” said Kosskoff. “Is she too far along?”

“*Pardon, mon ami,*” said Funt.

“Probably,” said the dentist, “It’ll probably be fine. I won’t be able to give her anything really strong for the pain. And, of course, there’s always a chance that something could happen with any procedure. But I don’t—”

“—Pull,” said Kosskoff’s wife. “Pull both.”



Using his finger, Pinet dabbed vodka around the girl’s gums, doing what he could to numb the tissue. He also soaked his pliers in vodka. He set out some cotton balls. He told the two trappers not to stand so near behind him. He had a tin bowl for the teeth.

Braced beneath her lower back by some pillows and bedding, the girl was tilted at an angle for the surgery. Calmly, she folded her hands across her pregnant belly. Her dark face, the blue eyes and the handsomely bent nose, registered nothing. She waited with her mouth gaped, like a child expecting a candy drop. Pinet thought she would do very well.

The dentist was drunk, but not overly so. He was confident of his abilities under far more impaired conditions.

He screwed the pliers tight around the molar until there was a crunch: this was the sound of the rotten tooth fissuring from the pres-

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sure of the squeezing pliers. Some of the infection, a gray-red pus, drooled over the girl's lip. She flinched, but that was all.

"Stay still," said Pinet.

He yanked: the tooth pulled easily loose, the roots tearing free. A few drops of blood leaked from the small black roots of the tooth and the pliers heads. "Sorry about that," said the dentist, meaning the stain on the girl's dress.

The bad tooth pinged in the bowl.

Pinet reached into her mouth and with his bare fingers the dentist squeezed the infected gum area. More of the red-gray pus oozed out. The girl clenched and unclenched her hands. He continued to press until the blood was clear. He wiped the area with vodka and gave her a piece of cotton to hold against the area of the wound.

"It was ready to go," said Pinet. "You practically didn't need me at all."

She smiled, displaying the new bloody gap.

"One more," said the dentist. "Want to get it over with?"

The girl nodded.

Funt tapped the dentist on the shoulder and handed him a fresh cup of vodka. "You're doing good, doc."

Pinet thanked him and took the cup. He soaked the pliers again. He took the piece of cotton from the girl and looked at the empty socket. It was fine, fine.

"Okay," he said, "right."

Kosskoff had come up close again, scratching his beard and looking with something like amazement at his wife. Pinet told him to back up.

The dentist locked his pliers around the girl's lower left lateral tooth. He turned the screw. It was more difficult this time; there was living material still left in the bone; he turned the screw again. The girl shivered. The dentist turned the screw again, and the tooth splintered, cracking all the way through. He staggered back, and the pliers flew from his hand. The pliers clattered against the far wall and onto the floor. Blood splashed from the girl's mouth and she gave a shriek.

Funt caught the dentist from falling over. Kosskoff, roaring, grabbed the front of Pinet's long johns. The big trapper's fist, like a

giant mallet, was drawn behind his head, ready to slam down.

"I'm sorry," said Pinet, "I'm sorry, Jesus—the tooth—that happens once in awhile—Jesus, I'm sor—"

The girl's laughter froze her husband's fist. He let it drop to his side.

"Look," she said, her voice garbled by the blood in her mouth. The three chips of the lateral tooth lay on her palm. She laughed with her lips very wide, revealing the new bloody space. A couple of tears dribbled from her eyes.

She stood up. Her laugh fell down so high, it seemed to bounce. She patted her pregnant belly. "Pretty soon, he have more teeth than me."



They celebrated the successful procedure with the dentist's rum. Kosskoff's wife mixed it with maple syrup and snow, then garnished it with brown sugar. Together they shared a single bowl.

When the desert was gone, they went back to the vodka.

One of the oil lamps sputtered out, dimming the room. Snow scraped the cabin walls, wind whistled through an invisible crack.

Pinet told the girl about how he tried to urinate outside in the storm. She laughed, showing her bloody gums. Kosskoff excitedly banged a pot with a spoon. "It's true," he said, "it's true."

"I thought it was gonna freeze clean off," said Funt, reaching over and slapping Pinet's knee.

"You could have sent it to my ex-wife," cried the dentist.

Kosskoff roared and drummed the pot.

The girl laughed, laughed, laughed. She also cried, because it made her mouth hurt even more to laugh.

For comfort she brought out her bag of chewing tobacco and took a pinch. Pinet meant to tell her it was bad for her teeth, that it would surely aggravate the raw gums, but instead heard himself asking for some.

He had never chewed before, and the sickly sweet taste revolted him. He spat it out. "Shit," said the dentist, "that's shit."

The others laughed. Kosskoff beat the pot. Pinet laughed himself.

From his leather satchel the dentist removed his tooth brush and

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the jar of paste. Briskly, he scraped his teeth until foam came from the corners of his mouth. Some of it dripped over his chin.

It was not until he finished, rinsing his mouth clean with water and spitting it into a cup, that he realized that the two trappers and the girl had been watching him, fixated.

"Does it hurt?" asked the girl, her cheek puffed with tobacco. She absently touched her own front teeth, as if to check that they were still they were there.

"No," Pinet assured her, "it's sweet. It feels good."

The girl shook her head. "Does it *really* hurt?"

"I knew a whore, brushed her teeth all the time," lied Funt, "She had a whole collection of fancy tooth scrapers. It was something to see."



For whatever reason, the spectacle of the tooth brushing quieted the group. The girl chewed her tobacco, seeming to think. Funt and Koskoff drank, and appeared to think of nothing. Koskoff's beard was as big and wiry as an eagle's nest.

The dentist felt oddly embarrassed, as if he had done something wrong. He was reminded of the unfortunate episode with his wife, the one which had resulted in his ignominious dismissal as a spouse: his wife had caught him with another woman, a prostitute with an underbite. They had only just come to an agreement—services in exchange for services—when the dentist's wife unexpectedly returned home.

"I ought to have insisted on going to her rooms," said the dentist. He was too drunk to remember that he had not told them about his wife, and how she had walked into the room, and how she had walked back out of the room, for good.

The others showed no sign of having heard the dentist's words at all.

"Who is going to deliver the damn child, anyway?" asked Pinet, suddenly offended that no one was paying attention to him.

"Let's get out the good stuff," suggested Funt, and Koskoff grunted his approval. The trapper's wife got up and found another bottle.

"The child?" Pinet asked, weakly. "Who will deliver the child?"

Opening his mouth wide—the dentist saw rows of crooked yellow-green teeth—Funt let loose a long, pungent belch. The small trapper screeched with laughter. “That’s it,” he said, “that’s it!”

Koskoff hit the pot several times.

Fresh cups were poured all around.

The dentist made no further effort to speak. He concentrated on the drinking. The new vodka was more potent—his mouth burned and his eyeballs felt as though they were drying up in the sockets—and he half hoped that it was poisonous as well.



In college the dentist had taken a trip west with his wife-to-be and her brother. They had gone by train, and it was difficult for the dentist and his girlfriend to find the privacy to make love, but they were imaginative and persistent. Once, they did it in the luggage compartment, rolling around on top of bulky pieces of portage, handles and strap buckles jabbing them in their backs and buttocks. In the frenzy, the dentist kicked over a parrot cage, releasing the bird: it flapped, screeching above their heads, while the lovers tumbled.

Somewhere beyond the Rockies, in the desert, they smoked peyote and drank wine with some of the kitchen staff. It was a good time. The desert was so black, there seemed to be no end to it.

The peyote gave the dentist a vision, but he had no memory of it. Later, his future wife related it to him: “You said you saw a giant mouth and that it was going to eat everything. ‘It’s eating the world!’ you screamed, and then you started crying, and just a minute or two later, you said, ‘Oh, oh, I’m sorry! It’s on our side. The mouth is on our side.’”

“You were crazy,” said his wife, making eyes. They had only recently been married when she related the story.

“It’s true,” he had responded, “and I still am—come over here, I’ll show you.”



“I asked you about your wife,” said Funt.

Pinet stared at him. “Fuck you,” he managed.

But the trapper had already forgotten his question. He pondered a ragged hole in his long underwear, plucking the threads with a black-

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ened finger.



The dentist groaned. The vodka had killed most of his body—only his face was alive. He was being moved, propped between Kosskoff and Funt, but the motion was odd. His eyes rolled in their sockets like greased ball bearings. Pinet tried to catch sight of his hands, but only saw the walls of the cabin, which appeared, incredibly, to be melting in the cold. He seemed to be sinking into something. The trappers laid him on the bed.

He blinked up at the large faces of the two trappers. They loomed above him: Kosskoff bristling with beard, Funt licking at his mustache. Then, the girl's face slid past. She bent over the dentist, until her lips brushed over his nose, his chin, his lips. Pinet smelled the tobacco on her breath. Fingers gently peeled back his lips. A tongue slowly licked across his teeth.

The dentist groaned.

Her bloody mouth stopped at the sore mark on his neck. She kissed it.

The earth shook below him. Pinet realized that the two beds were being pushed together. The dentist's limbs flopped about him. "The bird's out of the cage," he managed to say.

Somehow his long johns had been stripped away. The dentist supposed he had been skinned alive. One had to skin a fish before it could be cooked. Gerbils did not require skinning. Gerbils could keep their skins. Gerbils could be frozen. Gerbils were best eaten cold. "Don't put me in the ice box," insisted the dentist wildly, as Kosskoff laid down beside him, and began to kiss his ear. The wires of the big trapper's beard tickled Pinet's ear.

The pregnant woman's belly pressed against the dentist thigh. Her breath was near, but he could not find her mouth.

Then, there was a hand reaching between his legs, and a soothing voice spoke, "Here it is, *mon ami*," and the dentist was swept away, lifted on the wind, frozen in the snow, painted black.



When he awoke he was alone in the single bed. The beds had been pulled apart again. Someone had shifted the dentist onto his side

to keep him from choking if he vomited. Shafts of daylight stabbed through the gaps in the boards which covered the windows.

Or perhaps the beds had never been pushed together.

The dentist was naked and achy beneath the furs.

He stumbled to the bathroom closet. There was a bucket of cold water and he washed himself as best he could. He came out, feeling no better, but thinking more clearly. There was no one else in the cabin. His clothes were folded on a chair.

After dressing, Pinet searched for a bottle of something to pick himself up. In a cigar box tucked in a corner he found a few dollars and a watch with no lid. He took these things.

But there was no liquor and Pinet settled instead for some weak, cold tea that had been left unfinished on a sideboard. He would have to wait until he got home to the boarding house.

With shaking hands, the dentist gathered together his pliers and swabs, packed his satchel. Then, he went outside to look for the others.

Half out the door, Pinet leaned against the frame and squinted at the brilliant vista of snow and light and line and sky. In the clarity of day he saw the small distant shape of the pass they had walked through the previous evening; the cliffs were merely outcroppings. Farther off, much farther, he saw the lake where the local children went to swim in the brief northern summers. The spire of the town's Methodist church was not visible.

A little way off the ice-sheathed, clapboard structure of the meat house puffed gray smoke from a stone chimney. It was an open-faced structure, the three walls making a C and the last wall just a pair of large barn doors, as with a wheel house or a blacksmith's shop. A pair of large hooks hung from the front of the slanted roof.

Head down, Pinet made his way down to the meat house.

The dentist found them just inside, scraping down a mink skin. Funt and Kosskoff held the skin flat across a cold-scarred table, while the pregnant girl dragged a blade, nicking off the bits of gristle and muscle. Steam came from their mouths despite the presence of the fire burning in the chimney grate. The guts and body of the mink were in a pail on the ground; steam came from this, too.



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Watching them, Pinet decided that he had imagined the previous evening entirely. He was a drunk, he told himself, and the mind of the drunk was easily confused. It was the same argument he had made to his wife. The pregnant girl chewed on her lip as she worked the blade, inching it over the flesh parchment. Sweat beaded on her temples.

“I have to go,” said Pinet.

“We paid you,” said Kosskoff.

“*Tabernacle*,” swore Funt, straining to hold down his end of the skin.

The smell of the animal guts drifted to the dentist. When he had been married, his wife, a careful shopper, had often bought tripe rather than the butcher’s more expensive meats. Pinet had never complained; in fact, he liked it, liked the taste, the richness, the salt. Over dinner his wife had giggled to him once, abruptly, that when the tripe was raw, it smelled to her like it did when they made love. Pinet had been confused. “Do I smell?” he had asked. “No, No,” said his wife, “I wasn’t talking about you. I was talking about—about the love we make together—I was just saying—it’s not a bad thing, that smell—” She had pinched his cheek and kissed him. Taking the plate from Pinet, she had fed him chunks of the meat with her fingers.

“Why are you standing there?” asked Kosskoff.

“It smells like fucking out here,” said Pinet, and gave a short screechy laugh, pointing to the bloody bucket. His drunk hand fluttered up. The dentist slapped it down, against his thigh.

The girl spat something dark in the snow.

HP