



Illustration: Wayne Allison

The two young hunters had spent the previous night wrapped tightly inside their winter sleeping bags. Pitched on the snow beside the truck, their tiny tent offered little protection against the sub-zero temperatures.

Rick had slept well, in spite of his companion's constant shivering. Scanning his share of the horizon as they drove along, his mind wandered back to his boyhood rabbit hunts in Ontario. To keep his chum's fingers from freezing he would exchange gloves every half hour or so, warming the other's stiffened mitts. He had always enjoyed excellent blood circulation in his body, requiring only light exercise to keep him warm. Odd though, how he seemed drawn to friends of such contrasting physical stature to his own.

As a boy, his closest friend had towered over him, like a thin tree over a stump. His present mate was definitely portly, if not plainly overweight,

but to Rick, even that was part of the other's personality. He never mentioned Dan's size, not even in Jest. That was Dan. Take him or leave him. As a person of shorter than average height, Rick had become extremely sensitive to criticism of things over which he held no control. And he lived that tolerance.

Hunting had been bleak here in the foothills, seventy-five miles west of Calgary, Alberta. The closest thing to meat that they'd found was day-old tracks. This trip to the forest reserve was not going to fill the empty freezers back home.

Rick was reminded of his father's favorite saying in similar situations. He'd say, "you can't eat tracks," emphasizing "tracks" as if they had substance or body. Funny how those wise old proverbs never really solved anything. Maybe his dad was trying to imply that it wasn't a unique problem, but one that had been faced

and dealt with before; maybe he meant to bolster his sagging enthusiasm, suggesting that only obstinant perseverance would ultimately prove successful.

In retrospect now, it seemed to Rick that his dad had been simply snubbing his nose at some invisible deity sent to test everyone's self-faith. Small comfort today.

The afternoon was wearing on and both men were becoming gradually discouraged. Daylight ended abruptly near the mountains; darkness came in minutes like the falling of some giant loosened curtain.

"About two hours before dark," muttered Rick.

"Yeah. Might as well work our way in the direction of home."

"You taking your kids to the Ice Capades tomorrow Dan?"

"You bet. Been planning on it for weeks. You?"

"Not this time, I just can't get excited about spending a full afternoon with a million kids besides my own. I don't know where you get the patience."

Dan's big brother attitude to his children never failed to amaze and at the same time shame Rick. Away from the family, Rick always silently vowed to himself he would work harder at tolerance and understanding, but back in the same room with his kids, his patience would quickly evaporate.

Dan slowed the truck, interrupting Rick's thoughts. Instinctively reaching for his clip, Rick searched Dan's eyes to follow their direction.

"Calm down," the other laughed, "I just noticed a good trail leading down into the valley to the West there. What do you think?"

"Sure, let's try it. It's going to be the last chance we have this weekend."

Dan had stopped the truck by now, and gratefully got out to lock the hubs. Pausing by the rear wheel, he couldn't help but admire his awesome surroundings. This time of year it would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful location. The late afternoon sun saturated the snow with a soft, pink glow. Tall spruce framed a postcard *view* of distant white peaks; so full of grace and yet somehow silently menacing in their oblivion to time and man.

Nearly a mile of winding, climbing trail led them to a dead end, atop an unusual formation. From their perch, they were at the same altitude as the main toad, visible to the east.

Looking south, they saw a secluded valley opening before them, at least two miles in length. Dan shut the truck off. Showing renewed energy he forced himself out of the cab.

"Let's stretch our legs and see what's down in that muskeg. You coming?"

"Might as well, but just remember, we've only got about an hour and a half of light left. We can't go too far."

Even as Rick said these words, he remembered last night's full moon. The flat white reflection from the snow cover had produced almost daylight conditions.

"Don't worry," replied Dan, "I've no intention of stumbling around in the dark. Anyways, we'll soon have moonlight. Just want to see a little for next time."

Throughout the years that Rick had hunted in the Rocky Mountains, he'd never been paranoid about carrying an emergency kit or compass. There were always visible landmarks to judge from and secretly he harbored the contention that he was a natural-born navigator.

The formation on which they had parked was like a colossal ant hill growing from the valley floor. It was only a few hundred yards in diameter and rose some eight hundred feet from the muskeg below. The men easily descended the south side of their lookout, and began slowly working their way along the willow and poplar lowlands.

Reflexively, Rick glanced up at the sky, vaguely sensing a subtle change in light. The sunset was growing deeper in hue, but something had started soaking up the remaining daylight faster than usual. His head turned to the north, behind them.

For a moment, he stood confused, his eyes glued to the sky. It was too abrupt, too much of a surprise. The rise harboring their truck, now about one and a half miles due north, was totally obscured by a ground-hugging, advancing bank of purplish black clouds. He could clearly see the speed and direction of the living mass as

contrasted by the mountains along the west edge.

The southern edge of the liquid force, now only minutes away from enveloping them, was alive with vertical, black lines.

"Dan!..., Dan! Look behind you! C'mon, we've got to get back to the truck!"

Even as the men faced the tidal wave rushing at them, they sensed simultaneously the futility of hurrying to meet it. Daylight was now perceptibly disappearing. The last thing Rick saw was his own barely controlled panic, reflected from the glassy eyes of his partner.

"Rick! Stop for a minute. We've got to stay calm and make sure we don't get separated!" Dan's voice was being sucked away from his lips by the growing wind. There were only willow bushes near enough for protection and they huddled behind them, overtaken by the dark wall of water.

In seconds they were soaked to the skin by the sheets of near-freezing rain. The sugary snow under their feet turned to slush, then instantly froze. Before they could react, the rain became huge, fuzzy flakes of snow, sticking to their wet clothing, quickly creating two living snowmen.

The leading edge of the storm soon passed beyond them leaving them trapped within its body. The peripheral wind was gone and sodden silence prevailed. Black, snow-filled air surrounded them. By now, the sun, somewhere above the suffocating blanket, had released its weakened grasp *on* the night's growing darkness. The moon, rising with its broad face beaming of rested energy, would imbue the top of this creeping, hungry growth with a silver magnificence. But no light would penetrate the storm's frothing interior.

Dan and Rick plodded forward together, Rick leading in the direction he instinctively felt was towards the truck. Now, yet another black cloud crossed Rick's mind. He remembered how they had parked the vehicle on the top of that circular mound. If they missed the hill by only a few hundred yards, they would pass it unknowingly.

Rick could feel Dan shaking from the cold wetness of frozen clothing. He had matches in a plastic container, but couldn't even imagine finding anything dry enough to burn. They were

walking slower now, finding every step more arduous, the crusted snow sucking at their boots, their body heat absorbed into the heavy, saturated winter clothing.

As if to warn him, Rick's mind flashed a picture of a once read newspaper article regarding a phenomenon known as hypothermia. Then, just as quickly, it was lost again in the numbness of his brain.

"Hold it for a minute... stop... stop... I've got to rest a minute... let me sit down and rest," Dan's confiding tone betrayed his overwhelming exhaustion.

"You can't sit here," Rick begged, "you're soaking wet. You'll stiffen up... c'mon, just keep moving... we'll take it slower."

"I can't do it, Rick... I can't, I didn't get any sleep last night... I can't feel my feet anymore... just let me rest here. Look, you go *on*, Rick, find the truck and toot the horn, I'll find you then. We're probably walking around in circles anyway."

Rick couldn't believe that Dan would give up that fast. Later, however, he would realize it had been due to the deadly combination of no sleep, the wet clothing, and the extra weight that Dan carried. Right now, Rick was almost angry that his friend would quit. He sensed if he left Dan here now, he would never see him alive again.

Everything Rick had ever read about situations like this, advised sitting out the storm, or staying together at the location of the emergency and waiting for improved weather or rescue. But surely this situation didn't adhere to those narrow guidelines. He could see Dan was freezing, his friend's brain succumbing to fatigue and cold.

"No... no... *no*," Rick argued, pleading and pulling *on* his buddy's coat, "we can't rest!" But he could see the futility in the situation. Even with a compass, they might still miss that narrow target. They might have missed it already. Panic, confusion, and helplessness crowded his thoughts. "I can't leave him here," Rick repeated to himself.

Rick let Dan sink down onto some brush, then took a few steps away. His eyes searched the softly falling flakes around him, trying *to* focus beyond their mesmerizing dance. "Please," he

whispered, "we've got to get out of this."

Total, tangible silence filled Rick's ears. The faltering fat snowflakes fell as if in a soundless dream around him. They had a calm, hypnotizing effect on his ragged mind. Somewhere, an irritating sensation pricked at his peace. For a second, he cast it aside, lost in growing reverence, but somehow it continued to grate against his dulling senses.

Then he recognized it. The fitful sound of a car struggling along, high on the main road, finally registered in his brain.

"Dan!... Dan! I hear a car! Listen ... it has to be the main road!" Rick's excitement sent new rushes of adrenalin to his vitals. He felt warmed blood coursing through his limbs.

"You can hear a car? Where? How far?" Even Dan's plaintive reply was heartening to Rick, just to hear confirmed what he had said. With surprising recovery, Dan struggled to his feet, moving closer to his mate.

"We've got to head to the road, it's our best chance." Neither could be sure who had actually uttered the words. Both thought he saw the lips of the other mouthing exactly what he was thinking.

At least the noise emanated from the correct direction according to Rick's bearings. It was comforting to know that his innate sense of direction was still working. His heart had no argument with his brain, and he led off confidently towards the now silent road.

Stumbling blind in the blackness, they crawled over brush and downed trees, felt new wetness on their numbed legs from ice-coated ground water. In daylight, they would have been able to choose their footing and avoid obvious obstructions. But Rick knew if he strayed from what he sensed to be a straight line for any reason, he could easily corrupt his route.

Dan had been silent now for some time, uttering only grunts of surprise as he walked into a branch or tripped, tangled in long, frosted grass. Rick's fingers seemed frozen to Dan's jacket arm, a tangible energy link between the two, somehow affecting a bond which created more strength than the sum of both. When one body lurched into an unforeseen hole, the other cushioned his fall.

One thought filled Rick's consciousness. "Let there be another truck." And this prayerful chant played over and over in his mind.

"I can't do it any longer... Rick... I can't do it any longer, I've got to rest." Dan's second wind had evaporated. He was bitterly exhausted, now walking mechanically, aware only vaguely of something trying to pull him along.

"We're almost there... almost there... listen, Dan, there's another truck... I hear it. Hear it?" Standing bone weary still, both men stared glazedly into the gloom, hearing only their own heartbeats pounding in their heads.

Then it was there, and Rick's eyes moistened in thankful relief. Even Dan could hear it now, only another few hundred feet away. They would make it.

On all fours now, the men crawled stiffly up the last steep incline to the road. They would be alright now. With no resistance against their legs and no invisible branches to tear at their faces, it suddenly seemed easy to walk.

They knew they had to go to the left to locate the entrance of the trail where they had left the truck. In the struggle to survive, they had fought their way at least four times the distance they would have gone in daylight.

The next mile and a half registered a blank in the men's memories, a succession of painful, endless steps, each one the same as the last. Reaching the truck, Rick noticed Dan's words becoming slurred and heavy, and he suspected early signs of hypothermia. The truck was the prettiest sight they could remember for a long time. Even opening the door was painful, mentally forcing numb fingers, to clasp and turn a key in the lock. With the truck's heater full blast, both men laboriously stripped themselves of the heavy, clinging clothing, visibly shaking as if they had just emerged from a freezing swim. Drying themselves, they sat huddled over the heater, gradually sensing their fingers and toes cry out in angry relief.

in later years, each of them would often think of this night, remembering not only the pervasive sense of desperation and futility, but as well, the heightened awareness of the power of combined wills against elemental odds, and how lucky they each were, not to be alone. •*