

A Short Trudge

I.

It was cold. Remarkably cold – oppressively cold. So cold the weight of the bitter air pushed you down, like it was trying to grind your bones into the dirt.

And dark.

Don't forget the dark.

A pitch black that makes you forget you even have eyes; that blurs the lines between earth and space.

Any sane man would have died right off, but not us. We hadn't been sane in years.

No, instead we trudged. The snow came well past our thighs and we were almost soaked through. The only dry thing we had between us was Bateman's hat, which we shared. That stupid hat. Handmade by someone who knew him, I guess, but who can remember these things? We couldn't even remember what we were doing alone in the snow.

"remind me where we are headed again, Dan?"

"Forward"

"Oh, right. I forgot..."

...Can you see Forward, Dan? Is it close?"

Conversations like these were frequent. Sometimes I answered, sometimes I didn't. I never liked giving bad news – or at least, I think I never liked giving bad news. I had almost as few memories as Bateman. What I did have, though, was a feeling. I had a strong

feeling I was a smart enough guy to not trudge voluntarily or for sport. We were here for a reason. We had to be.

II.

One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the other.

We had been walking for weeks. I have no evidence or memory to support that statement, but who cares? We had been in this cold dark mindless hell for a long time – so it might as well be weeks.

Bateman's sanity had been waxing and waning as of late, and that kind of thing doesn't happen over night, so, yeah – we must have been here for a few months. Probably a year even.

That's the thought that scares me most though. Not that I have been trudging through a perpetual winter wasteland for a goddamn year, no that I could deal with. But the thought that no one is looking for us keeps me up at night.

Or least it would, if I knew when night was.

Someone had to be looking for us.

Right?

I trudged on clinging to that hope. Convincing myself of it. But that's just the thing, isn't it? Knowing something and feeling it are two entirely different things. And if I had to bet on it, I'd say it was more likely that we were looking for someone, not the other way around. Good thing I'm not a betting man.

Why are we here? Why can't I remember...

“Dan, I—I...”

Bateman put his hand on his stomach and looked at me like he had just been shot. He was hungry. And now that I was thinking of it, I was hungry too. With this realization my shoulder suddenly felt heavy, as my body woke up enough to remember I was carrying a pack. I riffled around until I managed to find something that might be food. It felt like a candy bar, but I knew we couldn't be that lucky. I tore it in half and listened as Bateman slowly managed to chew and swallow. I took a bite, which confirmed that my dreams of chocolate and nugget were just that—dreams. It instead was the all too familiar taste of a company issued protein meal supplement. Chalky, tasteless, and teeth shattering in this cold.

Wait.

It was like the haze around my brain had suddenly cleared – In an instant I became aware of myself and my situation. Countless useless facts and memories came pouring back to me, including the fact that this had happened before, and I probably didn't have that long before they all poured out just as quickly. Amazing, the brain. Sometimes all it needs is a shitty protein bar, I guess.

In my window of clarity, I took proper stock of the situation and, with my new found focus, my eyes half adjusted to the dark. I looked over at Bateman, he was still trudging, God love him, but he didn't look at all well. I noticed his hat was gone – It was on my head. I took it off and pulled it onto his. He looked over at me as I did so. There was a hint of relief on his face. Like he had just taken a deep breath of clean air after being in a coal mine.

I shifted my attention to the bag over my shoulder. Also company issued. We were here on business – how could I forget. We were – we were here because....

Shit. It was fading away. Everything I took for granted 3 seconds ago was...

They weren't all gone yet, but it was like all my memories were traded in for carbon copies of themselves – hazy and hard to read. I could feel the place in my brain where they used to be, but then—

Going...

What was I looking for in this bag again?

Going...

I panic rummaged around, trying to feel for anything that might spark my fading memory. Wait, what was this?!

Gone.

Fuck it was cold. And dark. And here I am, on my 4000th year of trudging in the goddamn snow.

III.

Silence is overrated if you ask me. Sure, it's dark, and it's fucking cold. We might as well be in the void of space – except the noise. That blissful noise of us crunching through the snow. An indication that at least one of my senses is working. An indication that Bateman is still here beside me. The only thing helping me cling to reality.

Reality.

What a word. Do I even remember what reality was? My reality, that is. It's been this for so long I had started doubting that there was anything else. Like I had finally tapped into the World As It Is. This was it. This is where we live. Everything else is just helpless delusion.

Jesus, listen to me. I'm so sick of myself.

"Don't do this"

The words lurched me out of my trance. It was Bateman.

"Do what?"

"You don't want to do this"

Something in his tone of voice told me he wasn't talking to me. Was he dreaming...while awake? I mean, if you could call what we are "awake." I think we needed a new classification at this point. What's in between awake and dead?

"Don't!"

With this one he snapped out of it a little. He looked at me and pulled his hat on to my head. That charitable bastard. My ears were just about to go numb. Now I'd have to start all over again. I heard him rifle around in his pocket for something.

Wow, pockets. The forced memory brought a smile to my face. Maybe it wasn't a useless freezing void of a world after all – we had pockets.

I'm convinced the only reason I didn't think about pockets until my dying breath is because of what Bateman did next. He reached over and threw whatever he was holding into my pack.

I have a pack?!

How did Bateman know I had a pack if I didn't even know? How could he even see? Whatever took over him didn't last long though. He forgot what he was doing the second he finished doing it. He looked at me for a long time – I could feel it. And then finally just said my name. Very matter of fact.

"Dan"

"Bateman"

And then we just kept on going.

IV.

Clarity. De je vou. Whatever you want to call it. I blinked hard and my eyes started to adjust again. I looked at Bateman. We couldn't keep going like this. But if we stopped? I didn't want to think about it.

I rediscovered my pack. It was a little too empty for my liking. Like racoons had rummaged through it. I had an awful sour feeling in my stomach that told me we were the racoons.

For unknown reasons I grabbed a small piece of paper drifting amongst the crumbs at the bottom of the bag. Even in normal circumstances it's always a little nerve-racking to find a crumb covered note that you forgot you even wrote – so you can imagine my apprehension as I squinted at the scrawl across what I blissfully remembered was called a "post-it." At first it just looked like random marks – one of those rare moments that your brain forgets what language is. Man, I gotta tell you, nothing puts you in your place like when hundreds of thousands of years of human history falls away and you're just some weird meat popsicle trying, and failing, to read in the dark. I looked over to Bateman for a second to see if he was somehow having the same existential crisis as I was. He wasn't. But he wasn't the one holding the post-it.

I tried again. This time the marks looked eerily familiar. It was my handwriting. I took a deep breath of cold air and looked for a third

time. This time I could make out the letters. I said them out loud. I'm not sure why. Maybe to prove to myself that I could.

"TURN BACK"

Well shit.

V.

I'd like to say that the perpetual trudging thing became so perpetual that we barely noticed anymore, but it wasn't the case. We – well at least I – was excruciatingly aware of it. Bateman I think hadn't been aware of much for at least a couple miles. He hadn't spoken in... a long time. But I could still hear him. Crunching through the snow with labored breath. He'd become less of a half-wit companion and more of a three-dimensional shadow at this point. But I was glad he was there.

If it's even possible the temperature got colder. The snow had developed a hard ice crust and it jabbed into my thighs every time I took a step. This really pissed me off. Nothing made any fucking sense. What were we doing here? What kind of bizarre ass place is perpetual night hip deep in snow?

A word formed involuntarily in my mouth.

Alaska?

I pondered for a moment.

Fuck no, no way I'm in Alaska. Why would anyone in their right mind go to Alaska?

VI.

It was my turn with the hat. That stupid hat. That fucking stupid hat. I had it in my head that it was the only reason we were trudging. It spent most of its time on Bateman's head, watching me. Compelling me to keep going. The sadistic creep.

But as my ears started to warm the misery and anger took a back seat to what must have been a glimpse of my actual personality.

What's this? I looked at my hand.

Why am I holding a post-it?

The Post-it!

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

Ok. Right. Don't lose your grip.

Well – don't lose more of your grip.

As I ruminated over the two brutal words more information poured back into my head. We were here on business. We were going somewhere. I – at some point – thought we should turn back. So why hadn't we? Or worse – had we already and we were now in danger of doubling back? Or worst – we had already done this multiple times and were now going in a perpetual circle.

No. Don't say that. Never say that.

I again rummaged through my newly discovered pack. Not much left, but...

Another piece of paper?

Another piece of paper!

I took it out and uncrumpled the folds. This time I remembered how to read right off. My language processing neurons jumping at the opportunity to fire.

This one wasn't in my handwriting. In neat block letters it read:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: EVERYTHING IS ON MY LOG.

This had Bateman written all over it. Stuck in an endless icy shit hole, and he still managed to address his post-it note. "To whom it may concern" my god.

A second glance revealed something else. A piece of smaller, messier, script down at the bottom. The saddest letters I've ever seen:

TELL CAROL I LOVE HER

VII.

It occurred to me, seeing as the cold and the snow and the dark weren't going anywhere anytime soon, that maybe I should have an out-of-body experience or something. I've seen things like that before, people in extreme scenarios come out the other side, altered. Not a different person, per say, but just different. Always for the better though. But I guess people who undergo a stressful scenario and turn into more of an asshole don't get written about. Unfortunately for me, I couldn't remember my resting level of asshole to compare anything to, so I sluffed off the idea.

Probably for the best.

Still, it made me wonder if Bateman was having an out-of-body experience. He was still there, I could feel him, 45 degrees off my left shoulder like always. It was too dark to see him though. A shame, if I

couldn't have one myself, I'd like to see someone else do it. Does it look like anything? Can an outsider tell if you're re-wiring yourself? If they pick up on it, are they more or less likely to go into the same state? Life is weird like that, always mimicking things it doesn't understand. But, hell, if a yawn can be contagious, why not self discovery?

VIII.

TELL CAROL I LOVE HER

The words stung as I read them. Not for the obvious reasons, I hate to admit. What really gutted me was the realization that Bateman, in some form of lucidity, didn't think we were going to make it. Here I was, thinking he was following me out of necessity, but maybe he was the one babysitting me. Sticking around for support until I finally realized we had lost.

The thought made me sick.

Lost what? The question was infuriating. All the questions were infuriating. I was done questioning, I wanted answers. I needed answers. I needed something. Another stupid shitty protein bar, or a minutes sleep. A moment to just breathe. I could figure this all out.

What really pissed me off is the fact that I had made it past this part before. I had left a note for my future self. I had figured out where we were going – how else would I know to turn back?

Here I am, losing a no-win scenario, and I'm mad that I'm not as smart as I used to be. What the fuck is wrong with me.

Maybe I could get there again. I could be who I was if something—anything—happened. Any change would help. ANYTHING.

*God must think he's one funny son of a bitch:
It began to snow.*

IV.

Snow is weird, if you think about it. Water in general, really. It doesn't make much sense. Its solid form is less dense than its liquid. Ice floats. And sure, there's a reasonable explanation for it. There's a reasonable explanation for everything if you look hard enough. So yes, you could tell me why ice floats. But now...I don't think anyone could tell me why I thought it was so damn poetic.

Every so often my brain tricks me and I think I can see for a second. Sometimes, just in those brief moments, the snow is gone. At first I didn't think much of it. But now, when that happens, I panic. I miss it somehow. It's become my second companion. A symbol of hope, something to strive to be like.

Maybe that's where the poetry lies. Ice floats when other solids sink. Bateman and I trudge while other men die.

X.

It was a while before I had another whiff of memory.

It must have been – reading required a little more effort this time. But soon I was right back where I was before. How many times before is the part I chose not to think about. "EVERYTHING IS ON MY LOG." I still had no idea what "everything" entailed, but I knew it wasn't good. Nothing good results in trudging.

My pack once again appeared in my hands. And then: a small device. The weight was familiar... it wasn't company issued though. No – this was Bateman's personal....thing. He'd taught me how to use it once. I just couldn't remember. What a surprise. It couldn't be too complicated, right? I wonder what this button does—

--"D-Dan?"

Oh, right! I could just ask Bateman.

I turned to address him, but as I did something I hadn't heard in a while flooded my covered ears.

Silence is overrated if you ask me.

I shuffled as quickly as I could back to Bateman, who had collapsed and sunk deep into the snow. I dropped the notes and Bateman's log and pulled the hat on to his head. But that was all I had left. The cold on my ears was unbearable.

I fell into my own little snow casket and looked up at the sky. Still black. Still indistinguishable from everything else. Knowledge and thoughts and memories poured out of my ears and froze instantly in the snow around my head. A frigid halo of who I used to be.

The last thing to leave was a just a name. "Carol." I couldn't remember who she was or what would make my last living thought be about her, but I didn't question it.

It didn't matter now.

XI.

"Over here"

Johnson motioned her partner over to the bodies of two collapsed men laying lifeless in the dirt.

"Last two of the wreck accounted for." She said to herself. Tiny ice fractals forming on the inside of her helmet as she spoke.

"Jesus. How'd they even get this far?"

"Looks like they were taking turns with the oxygen"

"Fuck"

"Yeah...Must have been trying to gun it to the comms tower a few miles from here."

"Why would you send your scouts out with one oxygen tank? That doesn't make any sense."

She was right. It didn't make any sense. Actually, now that Johnson was thinking about it, nothing about this wreck made sense.

"Johnson?"

"Hm? Yeah, sorry. Just – yeah, let's just get these guys back with the others."

"Sounds good to me, I'm freezing my ass off

"..Hey, what's this?"

Johnson was handed an analogue tape recorder.

"There are a couple notes too..."

The officers looked at the notes, and then each other, and then at the tape recorder.

Johnson took one more glance at her surroundings and hit playback.

THIS IS WILLIAM BATEMAN OF THE COMMERCIAL FRIGATE
CONCORDIA. DON'T TRUST THEM. THEY'VE TAKEN THE
SHIP. THEY-1ST OFFICER-THEY'VE KILLED THE CAPTAIN
AND TAKEN THE SHIP. WE'VE TAKEN ON INTERNAL DAMAGE
DURING DESCENT; WE'RE GOING DOWN. THE REST OF THE
CR-

DON'T DO THIS.

YOU DON'T WANT TO DO THIS.