

A Haunted Hike:
An Arctic Tale.

© 2022 Jeffrey Carl. Do not copy or distribute without permission.

Hiking on snow at twenty degrees below zero has a singular sound. There is a high squeak, formed from ice particles crushing together, too cold to quietly compact together. We felt the air freeze inside our nostrils, pulling them together, as if fusing them with super glue. We had a shroud of insulation around us. From the soles of our boots to the igloo shaped entrance to our hoods, everything was designed to protect warmth. Our breathing became stressed as the trail steepened through the arboreal forest. The shards of pain in our lungs passed to our chests. We cherished the heat from the air we exhaled.

It started as an afternoon hike to escape the monotony of winter in Alaska. My companion had chosen a trail called the Circle of Life trail, close to his estate near Wrangell National Park. The origins of name of the trail were not known, but most trails either bore the names of Indigenous tribal or pioneer lore. We could only bear so much of staying indoors in winter. We had to keep our minds fresh. There is something about being an Alaskan resident, a burden we embrace in winter. We need to conquer winter in our own way, if for no other reason than to justify our choice of living location. Later, by a warm fire, or even on warm summer evenings, we look back on our outings, regaling in our stories with laughter and food. We are proud we did not hibernate for the entire season. We will have some victories, we had some moments where we met the winter head on, and we won the season. Others will show pictures of aurora borealis with its triumphant glows. Each picture evokes a memory, a place in time, and people who shared the moment.

Our trail began with a moderate incline, which continued for a mile along our route. The slumbrous snow created a thick blanket over the sleeping arctic life below. Black spruce trees pierced the snowscape, hobbled by their stunted roots in a vain attempt to penetrate the frozen tundra below. Their branches grew in anguished contortions as they tried to gain the advantage of light and warmth during the brief growing season, only to be battered by nine months of cruel and unrelenting winter. After climbing a steeper incline, we came upon a ridge, our muscles thankful for the break.

It was a complete surprise when we spotted two men standing several hundred feet ahead of us, facing the eastern downslope. At first, it was the unexpected appearance of other humans, in the same unlikely location as us. Upon further inspection, there were strange things about their appearance. One man was dressed in a red plaid jacket, with red woolen plaid pants tucked into knee-high boots. The other man was dressed in a similar type of woolen outfit, with a deep green plaid. Their heavy jackets were fully appointed with pockets and straps to help haul equipment, but the insulation quality looked to be severely lacking in the frigid arctic conditions. Their garb came from pioneer days, back when the gold rush was in full swing, and men were lured by the promise of gold to this area. They wore fur hats, that, in another time and place, could be as warm as one could find. We could not see their snowshoes, but I imagined wooden frames with

leather bootstraps and gut webbing. A rifle was strapped to their backs by a leather strap which reached across their chests. Perhaps they were on a hunting trip.

We waved at them and called out a “Hello!” They moved quickly along the edge of the ridge, looking outward as if some other distraction had drawn their attention. We glanced in that direction, but our view was blocked by a thick cluster of black spruce trees, heavily laden with snow.

The appearance of the men did not concern me. It was a peaceful afternoon. There was no fog, no smoke. My attention was centered on their anachronistic appearance. I had heard many stories over the years about prospectors who originally explored and settled this region. They came from diverse backgrounds, but all of them had a longing that brought them here. It may have been for a better life, to flee from another life, or to fight their own demons in the only way they knew how. Many tried to find their fortune, but most failed. Many were able to leave with their lives, some lost their lives. A few lost their minds, and then their lives. There were stories told around evening fires that these men might hauntingly reappear in the smoke or the fog, which was so common in the mountains. I disregarded those notions. These men were physically there. I struggled to see if their breath was making any fog as they exhaled. I did not see any fog, but that did not discount from their existence. I quickly dismissed any thought of ghoulish apparitions.

We walked towards the men. My steps became easier as we approached. The comforts and ease of navigation improved with every few steps. My breath was less labored. My companion seemed to be feeling the same way. Warmth returned to my extremities. I felt relief from the pain and coldness in parts of my toes and fingers, soon it was replaced by the welcome comfort of warmth. Now I understood how these men could seem so comfortable in their out-of-place clothes. Somehow it was warmer where they stood. Perhaps there was some sort of thermal spring nearby. Perhaps there was a thermal vent that was pushing warmer air across this ridge. I did not care. I welcomed the comfort it proffered and wanted to explore this anomaly the way these men seemed to be distracted towards it.

I quickened my pace. My snowshoes became a hindrance in my attempt to go faster. As I moved forward, I stepped on a branch beneath the snow. The branch snapped and made a piercing noise across the distance between us and the two men. The noise startled them, and they turned to look at us. Their demeanor tensed when they saw us, but they moved as if to hasten us to follow them. They sprinted towards the west, where they had been looking. I could not follow their path. The black spruce trees, covered in snow blocked my view.

We increased our pace to a trot. We reached the spot where the men had been, but the snow was barely disturbed by the tracks of our strange new acquaintances. I hesitated, then looked in the direction they had traveled. The ridge sloped down toward a wide expanse of arboreal forest. From our position above the tree line, the black spruce looked like a field of grain, stretching outward. The low incline of the afternoon sun speckled the horizon with salmon shades of pink against endless scales of gray. I looked at my companion, and we knew we had to follow the tracks of the men, however faint. Our curiosity got the best of us. We had to find out more

about them. We needed to know for ourselves, and there was the underlying need for stories to tell in the coming weeks and months before spring finally arrived in the northern tundra.

We moved quickly over the edge of the ridge, as fast as we could, without losing our traction. But the steep incline fell faster than we anticipated. Before we could slow down, we were rocking and rolling downwards, trying in vain to control our descent with our snowshoes hindering our coordination. The snow started to fall away in front of us, as if it had piled up loosely to give the appearance of a gentle slope while the true steepness of the hill was concealed. I finally tumbled into a rush of powdery snow as a small avalanche carried me down the side of the hill. Smashing between trees and falling over rocks I looked for my companion, only to see him falling as uncontrollably as I was.

I came to rest, sprawled on a flat surface, with no trees around me. My momentum had carried me beyond where the avalanche of snow ended. I was surrounded by open, flat snow, with a very soft pack below me. I held still for a few minutes, trying to understand if I was hurt. My years of experience in the wild kicked in. I had a mental list prepared. First, know if you are hurt before moving something that may cause a lot of pain. Second, try to move and see if you can feel any injuries. I pulled myself up on my two hands and arms and knelt at the knees. I felt no pain. Third, look around and assess your situation. I picked my head up to look around. I had been very fortunate in my fall. My companion was lying ten feet away from me. I shouted out to him.

“Hey, are you OK?”

“Yah, I think so.” He replied.

Looking around, we found we were in a clearing. There were trees lining the open area. Smaller ones at first, with larger ones behind them. I recognized the pattern I saw. We were laying on a frozen kettle pond. There was a small outcrop of rock behind us, where we must have fallen off as we tumbled down the hill.

I stretched my legs backwards. It seemed miraculous that I felt no excruciating pain. There were no shards of shooting agony from a broken bone or dislocated joint. I was lucky to be unhurt. I had been in worse situations before. My companion was moving around easily as well. It would take all the strength we had to climb back up the ridge and get back to my friend’s estate. Kettle ponds like this one are common across the tundra of Alaska. They are called kettle ponds because of their appearance. They are typically small circular ponds only a few yards to several hundred yards across, yet deceptively deep. They are left behind from the glacial period, and there are thousands and thousands of them across the land.

I rose upright on my knees to get a view across the pond. There was nothing but silence. No sign of the men who disappeared ahead of us. No rising smoke from a local cabin which might have a respite from the cold. I thought of the cold. It was not the extreme arctic cold of our hike. It was not the brutal Alaska cold I expected.

I bent over and scraped away snow from the ice. Beneath the white powdery snow was the blackness of clear ice. The contrast was striking. The black ice fell into nothingness below. The

only things that belied the nature of the ice were frozen bubbles trapped as the ice formed last autumn. I could see about a foot down. I scraped aside more snow, wanting to see more. As I cleared the snow, my glove hit something that fell away from me. It was something with color, something red. Looking closer, it was a big red apple. It was in perfect shape, as if it was just picked from an orchard. I called my companion. He quickly came over to look at what I had found. How could an apple appear in perfect condition right next to us? I looked around. Maybe somehow the men we were following had left it for us. I cleared more snow away, widening my view of the ice. In the blackness below I could see deeper and wider. I found another apple in the snow. It looked so good, so perfectly ripe, and ready to eat. We were famished. I handed one to my companion and soon I heard the crisp snap of biting into it. I held my apple in my hand, considering our fortune in coming across this food at this time. I would not forget.

As I held the apple something appeared in the ice below. At first, I did not make out what it was. There was something, a fish, a tree, something that was moving. I knelt back down on my knees to get a closer look. It was a piece of heavy cloth, some fur, and some hair. It was suspended beneath the ice. Suddenly, it rotated. The ghostly white face of a human appeared just inches away from me. The profile and clothes were unmistakable. It was the man wearing the green wool coat. His face was frozen in a scream, his face decayed, stretching his skin into strips with only blackness behind them. He moved away, as if beckoning to me from below. I turned to my companion. He was violently vomiting. His hand held the half-eaten apple in his hand. Only now it was decayed, rotten beyond anything consumable. I looked at the other apple I held. It too had decayed in my hand. I turned to scream to my companion, to come and look at the specter I saw beneath the ice. What was this sorcery?

I tried to stand, but was held back, bound to the ice. "Help!" I cried. Shards of pain roiled through my right leg. I looked down and saw my leg violently twisted in an unnatural position. I shrieked in fear and pain. My other leg was similarly frozen to the black ice. Was it bound by nature or something supernatural? I could not tell. Below the ice the man remained, his hollow frozen eyes staring at me, now laughing. I understood the cruelty of the trap they had set. He, along with his companion, must have frozen on this pond ages ago as trappers. And now they had trapped us. I looked to my companion. He was also staring through the ice. Presumably at the other man frozen below. "Help!" I heard him cry.

But there was no help to come. The extreme cold, which we had taken for granted as gone, came back with a vengeance. The temperature dropped again to twenty below zero. My lungs froze as I inhaled. Shards of pain came into my lungs, even as the pain in my leg agonized my brain. There would be no escape. We were too far away. We tried desperate consolations towards each other, hoping beyond hope that some miracle would save us. I lost consciousness as the early sunset started to fade in the western sky. A last sunset, but without the hope of a story to tell about it.

Soon after sunset, we lay in the dark, frozen and dead on the ice. No one would find us. We would stay, frozen, until a late spring or early summer day when our bodies would fall into the kettle pond. We would join the two men who had lured us there, along with any others who may have met their doom in a similar way. Next winter, ice would reform again, a lid on our frozen

tomb. The only thing that would survive would be the enduring cold, and the desperate struggling life along the edge of our pond. The eternal blackness of the water told the cold truth of our fragile lives and death. Perhaps, a hundred years or more from now, some other men will venture to our pond. Perhaps we can beckon them and lure them in. Perhaps that will give us relief from our eternal suffering below the surface and pass it on to them. Perhaps, this is the true circle of life, and death, in the arctic.