

## The Yeti

Todd Zepperneck sat back in his chair and sipped his Cape Codder. The fire in front of him blazed, slowly defrosting his frozen limbs. He unbuckled his ski boots, dislodging chunks of ice, and pushed out the tongues, freeing his stiff ankles. He was an old forest of noises. Snow pants swished and the leather chair creaked beneath him as he melted into it. Tired joints groaned when he stretched. He hadn't felt this good in a long time.

Today Todd was celebrating. Yesterday he was mailing in his daughter's final college tuition check. Madison, the last of his kids in school, would be graduating in May with a B.A. in political science and Todd would finally change the password to the family's Netflix account. It was a small luxury, being able to watch his own Netflix account whenever he wanted. A luxury that Todd was never afforded. One of his kids always watching *Narcos* or *House of Cards*. He had given up many things so his family could be comfortable and happy. Window seats on airplanes, final pieces of bacon, iPhone upgrades and innumerable hours of sleep. In the moment he never minded, but now, as he tallied it up, it seemed unfair.

He ordered another round. The waiters had switched shifts and Todd explained to his new waitress, a cheerful young woman named Candice, that a Cape Codder was just a dignified way for a grown man to order a cranberry vodka. She laughed and told him it was her favorite drink as well. Of course it was.

He was in the ski lodge on the peak of Heaven's Gate Mountain, warming up after a few icy runs. Most of the seating was picnic tables and benches, save for two glorious armchairs in front of the fireplace, where Todd sat relishing in the crackling heat. The bar

was simple, but well stocked, and the man behind it had hands tough as sandpaper. He was missing his left index finger. Todd imagined that he lost it from frostbite or a hiking accident. He probably chopped his own wood and carved small woodland creatures into pine while sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of his cabin deep in the snow covered forest. Todd studied the exposed beams striping across the ceiling. He felt passionate about mountain life. Things like rustic architecture, wood grain, and whittling. Things he frankly, knew virtually nothing about. It was late and only a few others occupied the lodge, finishing their drinks before heading back down the mountain. The conditions were rough. The wet snow had adhered itself to his goggles and froze, completely obscuring his vision. A thin layer of ice had formed on his coat and every time he moved it had cracked, fallen off, and reformed again.

By the time he finished the second drink he was thawed out, vodka and fire finally seeped into his blood. He retrieved his facemask and gloves, drying on the rough stone in front of the fire, lingered in the warmth for a moment, and suited back up.

By the door, the bartender was wrapping a scarf around his neck. His grey ponytail stuck out at the bottom.

“Heading home?” Todd asked.

The bartender pulled the ponytail out from under the scarf. Nodded.

“Do you get to live out here? On the mountain?”

“No,” The bartender pulled open the door and braced himself against the wind. “I’ve got a condo downtown.”

Todd followed him outside, pulling his helmet on. “If you don’t mind me asking. What happened to your finger?”

The mountains sprawled before them. The sun perched on a peak, ready to roll off the edge.

“A raccoon bit it when I was a kid. Damn thing got infected and they had amputate. Said I was lucky to keep my hand.”

Todd was disappointed. He had hoped for a more exciting story. “Sounds painful.”

“I can feel it sometimes. You know, like it’s still there.”

Todd glided down Mountain Run slowly, savoring the last few rays of sun on his back. He thought of the bartender’s phantom finger and condo downtown and chased his shadow all the way down to his cabin.

Six Heaven’s Gate Drive, fondly nicknamed “Purgatory,” by his wife Julie who wasn’t much of a skier, had been in his family for decades. It was one of the few slopeside residencies left on the mountain that hadn’t been bought out and turned into a multimillion-dollar resort or rental. Since 1982, when his Aunt Jill had financed the addition of the sunroom and ripped up all the shag carpeting, virtually nothing had changed, down to the calendar in the kitchen still stuck on March of 1984. Out of the three bathrooms, only one shower worked and was tepid at best. Cellular service was nothing more than modern mythology. The cabin smelled like mothballs, rotting wood, and Hartley Parker Scotch. It reminded him of his father.

Todd wandered around the cabin, reacquainting himself with the layout. He hadn’t been back since his kids were kids. God he was old. He walked down the stairs to the basement and fumbled with the light switches. Sliding glass doors looked out onto the

mountains. Few lights dotted the gaping landscape. The wind howled outside, an unwelcome guest, clawing at the doors, trying to find a way inside. A worn out pool table sat in the middle of the room, scratched from decades of abuse. He walked across the room to the extra linen closet that was never used and reached into the back behind the moth-eaten quilts and itchy wool blankets. He smiled. It was still there. An old limited edition Jameson he bought almost thirty years ago and stashed in the closet for some distant special occasion. This was it.

The steps and his knees cracked as he made his way upstairs. Once in the kitchen he set the whiskey down on the butcher-block counter and rifled through the cabinets for a cup. A chipped mug was the best he could find. He sat at the head of the kitchen table and drank slowly, savoring the warmth as it burned down his throat. He considered the mug, clasped between his hands on the table. He always imagined he would have had a nicer glass. A real whiskey tumbler, crystal maybe. And he would be sharing it with a pretentious business partner or politician or even his father, wrinkly and bitter with age, but alive and proud. "You did good kid," he'd say, pipe between his teeth. Instead Todd sat alone at the table meant for eight and took another sip.

Unhindered by others, Todd settled into an efficient routine. Everyday he was up by seven-thirty. Brushed his teeth. Skipped shaving. He'd never had anything more than a day or two's worth of stubble and he admired the growth on his cheeks. Sure it was patchy, grey, and itchy as hell, but the small rebellion felt good. He ate two fried eggs with toast and a cup of coffee. Got dressed, pulling on clothing straight from the dryer. And was outside, skiing down to the lift at eight o'clock sharp.

The chairlift hit the backs of his knees and swept his legs from under him, scooping him into the air. He pulled down the bar and placed the weight of his skis on the footrest. Lazy snowflakes meandered down, falling past where he sat suspended. The mountain was quiet, just beginning to wake. Trees rustled, stretching their stiff icy limbs. The slopes were smooth, covered in fresh powder from the previous night's snow. Four days had passed since Todd arrived. One until he was supposed to go home.

He skied for a few hours and ate a peanut butter and banana sandwich outside on his porch still wearing his coat. He sipped a cold beer, watched people zip by beneath him and at noon, just when everyone else was heading in for lunch, he was back outside. He skied for a few more hours and by the time it was three o'clock Todd was so exhausted he fell asleep on the couch. When he woke it was dark.

He settled in a decrepit chair in the sunroom and waited for the TV to warm up. The cavernous room was always freezing, because of all the windows. He wrapped himself up in a quilt, ate mac n' cheese with a wooden spoon directly from the pot, and sipped a cranberry vodka from the same chipped mug he had been using the entire trip.

When the TV finally flickered on, he flipped through all three channels about twelve times before settling on the local news. An elementary school's production of Peter Pan was on. He watched the entire thing.

Todd waited on the singles lift line, shuffling forward in tiny increments. He surveyed the crowd, the families with young children struggling to stay together, the

couples smiling at each other through layers of gaiters and the groups of young friends regaling themselves with the pits and peaks of their last run.

He thought of the first time he and Julie took their kids skiing. When Madison dropped the car keys down a sewer grate and told Todd with giant eyes, “I don’t want to tell you what I just did.” How Emily got herself kicked out of ski school because she wanted to ski with Justin. And when Justin, always so recklessly adventurous, got lost on the wrong mountain after all the lifts had closed. Julie spent an hour yelling at ski patrol. and Justin got the ride of a lifetime down the mountain in a snowmobile.

He got on the lift with a man named George. Todd guessed he was about a decade older than he. He was here for the weekend, celebrating his recent divorce. George asked how long Todd was here for. Todd shrugged. He didn’t want to go home.

George pulled down the metal crossbar. “That’s the dream man.” George whistled. “Ski everyday and never go back. You got a wife?”

Todd nodded.

“Linda, my second wife, was a total head case. Took half my money and the damn dog. But I’m better off without them. You know why?”

Todd couldn’t begin to imagine. “No idea.”

“They were both bitches. Hated the cold. Never stopped shivering—the dog. Ugliest son of a bitch I’ve ever seen. Some yappy Chihuahua mix. Linda named him Ziti and was always dressing him up in these ridiculous outfits. She never let me go skiing. Now I’m a free man. Just like you.”

Todd could not get off the lift fast enough.

Todd flew down the mountain. Past slow snowboarders, through trees. Fast enough things blurred past her peripheral vision. He stood low in his boots, knees bent, thighs burning as they absorbed the dips and plunges of the uneven ground. Wind stung his nose, which poked out of his facemask no matter how well he tucked it into his goggles. Distracted, he missed the turn off for the trail he wanted. One second the speed was invigorating and the next it was unruly. He threw his skis sideways, a futile attempt to stop. Instead, he skidded through an icy patch, hit a bump, flailed in the air and landed like a small meteorite. He tumbled down the mountain, losing skis, dignity, patience. He thought of the conversation he had with Julie that morning. "What do you mean you're not coming home?" She said. He didn't know what to say, but he wasn't ready to leave yet. "Well figure it out quickly. If you're not home in three days I'm coming to get you." He did not want to think what that would be like.

His momentum eventually slowed, then halted. Lying flat on his back, he opened his eyes. Breath clouded above him. Trees peered into the edge of his vision. People began to crowd.

A chorus of concerned voices, "are you okay? What happened? Should I call ski patrol?"

"No." He sat up. Lightheaded, the world twirled in front of him. "Fine. I'm fine." He saw one of his skis shoot past him down the mountain. He would have to go get that. "I don't need ski patrol."

A young man around the same age as his son Justin offered a hand. "Let me walk you down the mountain. Help you find your skis." He hauled Todd up and introduced himself as Steven. Steve. He was a ski instructor at Heaven's Gate. He had a goggle tan

line and wore a red coat that said, “ski school” in big white letters. He said he saw the fall. “Flew too close to the sun man. Happens to the best of us.”

Todd almost laughed.

Steve popped off his skis and carried them over a shoulder in a casual way that Todd could never pull off. “You sure you’re not hurt?”

“Let’s just find my skis.”

They waddled down the mountain in their boots.

The first ski was found under a bush. Todd sat on his haunches, leaning forward and trying to dislodge it from a thicket of snow covered bushes. The binding was caught on a branch.

Steve leaned over his shoulder. “You sure you don’t want help?”

“I got it.” Todd yanked it from the bush. Branches snapped and the leaves shivered and dropped their snow. The ski broke free, momentum almost knocking Todd on his ass.

The second ski was found at the bottom of the mountain, blending in amongst the other skis left outside of the lodge. Todd scanned the unattended skis on the ground, searching the area for his own. Steve held one up above his head like a trophy. “This it?”

Todd sat down on the steps to the deck. He ripped off his sweaty layers. His hair stuck up straight and snot crusted his beard. He wiped at it with a sleeve. “That’s it.” Todd deflated. He sat down on a step and poked at his knee—an old injury, flaring up from the fall. It hurt when he extended his leg fully, but he’d be fine.

Steve dropped the ski in front of Todd, right next to the other.



Todd stood up gingerly, careful not to put too much weight on his knee and picked up the skis. "Let me buy you a beer. It's the least I can do after all your help."

A fireplace roared in the heart of the lodge, filling the room with syrupy heat. They sat at the corner of the bar, still in their pants and clunky boots. Steve ordered a craft beer and told Todd about being a ski instructor. "The kids can be a pain in the ass, but they're cute. And nothing beats being on the mountain everyday."

Todd wondered what it would be like to take a chairlift to work instead of the Long Island Railroad. He dreaded the thought of going back to the office next week. "What do you do in the summer?"

"I've got a gig at a sleep away camp as the waterskiing instructor. I bartend sometimes. Anything that pays the bills and keeps me moving. I'm never in one place too long."

"What happens after that though?"

"That's the point." Steve smiled. "I don't know."

He limped down the aisles of the grocery store, one of the few local places with cell service, and asked Julie questions over the phone. It was an old timey country store that sold lots of homemade jams and pancake mix. "I have the sirloin and the potatoes. What else do I need?" He knew she worried about him when he was alone. If he was eating well.

"Is there garlic at the house? What about rosemary?"

“I didn’t check. I’ll get it now.” Todd grabbed things as he moved. Eggs, milk, coffee. “Anything else?”

“Did you buy any vegetables?”

“Yeah I have some carrots.” He was lying.

“Go buy a bag of spinach. Sautee it with oil and garlic. Real olive oil not that spray crap that has been in the cabin since the cold war. It will be good with the steak.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Season the steak with lots of salt. Nothing else. Sear it in a hot pan, very quickly and then stick it in the oven for a few minutes. Cook the potatoes first. Roast them with oil, rosemary, salt and pepper at four hundred degrees for almost an hour. Check on them after forty-five minutes. Make sure you stir them. And go buy a nice Cabernet. Please don’t drink cranberry juice with the steak.”

“Got it.” He scratched at his beard, still foreign to him. Like some strange creature emerging from hibernation.

“Okay. Well, we miss you honey. Please be careful out there. Don’t overdo it.” He hadn’t told her about his fall. He knew how she worried.

“I know.”

“It’s supposed to snow a lot up there so you better stock up on food. Just in case. You know how the roads get.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m leaving early. Way before the snow should hit.”

She sighed. “You’ll be home tomorrow.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. Home tomorrow. I Love you. Bye.”

“Love you too.”

Ice coated gravel crunched under his feet in the empty parking lot. His car stood alone. He had left his gloves at home and his hands were numb from the short walk between the front door of the store and his car. He didn't think he would need them for such a quick drive. He dropped the groceries onto the passenger seat and blew hot air into his hands. He got the keys into the ignition and tried to start the engine. Nothing happened. The car wouldn't start. Cursing he threw open the door and walked back to the store, hands shoved deep into his pockets. The bells chimed against the glass door when he walked inside the store for the second time.

Todd approached the cashier, a sweet old woman in a turtleneck. He explained what happened. "The battery has been acting up and it must have died. Any chance there's a mechanic open this late? I think I'll need to replace it."

She shook her head. "Not after five, no. You'll have to try tomorrow morning."

Todd took the groceries from the passenger seat and started the walk home. It wasn't that far, just over a mile, but it was steep and dark and cold. He zipped his coat all the way up to his neck and tucked his hands into the sleeves.

The night was quiet. The only sound was his cloudy, panting breath, steady footsteps, and growling stomach. His legs were sore and his knee hurt and all he wanted was to eat some steak and go to bed. He wanted a hot shower. He wanted to chop off his infernally itchy beard. He wanted to tell Julie about George and Ziti the Chihuahua and his sweaters.

When the warm glow of the cabin came into view Todd walked faster. When he turned into the driveway he ran.

His hands burned and itched when circulation returned. His skin was red and chapped. The skin on one of his knuckles has split. The blood was hot on his hand.

He overcooked the steak slightly, but the potatoes were rich and crispy. He ate standing over the counter, straight from the pan, too impatient to wait any longer and sit down. His knife was dull and barely cut through the meat, so he ripped at it with his teeth. He didn't care very much about the spinach, but he inhaled that too. He ate everything in the span of a few minutes. He left the cabernet unopened in the corner and dumped the dishes in a pile in the sink and went to sleep.

He drove fast. Outrunning the blizzard, nipping at his heels, so that he could make it home. After getting his car fixed he was behind schedule. Snow pelted the windshield. He thought about turning around and driving straight into the heart of the beast. Face the storm head on. No lifeline, no mercy and no second chances, just him against the wind. He imagined himself opening the door of his truck, abandoned somewhere in a snowdrift, and walking into the forest. The keys still in the ignition and the door left wide open the dashboard would ding at him in warning, but he wouldn't look back.

He could live with the wolves. Hunt rabbits and tear into their throats with his teeth. Relish in the feeling of hot blood dripping down his neck. He'd never shave again. He'd let his ear hair grow tufted and feral. Howl at the moon and mourn his old life. The monotony and listlessness. The vacation homes and extra cars. Never being allowed to eat what he wants or sleep when he wants or go where he wants.

He could become Bigfoot or a Yeti. The hulking frosty man forever wandering the unforgiving mountains. Every morning he would thaw as he watched the sunrise over the top of the mountains and every night he would stretch his arms wide and engulf the north east in his cold dark embrace.

"In a half mile, merge right onto 149 west," said the GPS.

Todd looked in the rear view mirror once. Twice. He merged right.