



Night Trek

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Chapter 1

Helen Beaver added a little more water to the pot of rabbit stew simmering on top of the wood heater in their small wilderness log cabin. Since her husband, Frank, had found the body of the young bush pilot in the plane wreck out on the lake, game had become scarce. Reflecting on the day they took the body away, she remembered seeing his face briefly. Even in death he still looked attractive. She'd come to know the young man that summer at the fly-in fishing lodge, even making a sandwich for him on occasions she knew he hadn't eaten since the dawn came up. He was married. Her heart briefly felt like it was cut with a fillet knife. How would she make out if Frank died? She willed her pain to fly on the wings of an eagle and comfort the young man's widow.

The door to the trapping cabin opened, letting in the bitter air. Frank, her husband of seven winters stomped his moccasins free of snow before shaking his head. Helen read the message and went to her man, holding him close, ignoring the cold from his parka seeping into her chest. He had always been a good provider, and she held no blame against him for the lack of meat in the cabin.

Thinking back, she had never worried when the Government men had

flown in to look at the plane wreckage out on the lake, but fed them with the genuine hospitality she had learned from her mother. Later when another group of men came in from the airline to dismantle the airplane and haul it away, she'd seen her winter food supply diminish. Now, with spring still months away, they had hoped to kill a moose to see them through the season.

"Even the rabbit snares are empty," Frank said, rubbing a gloved hand on Helen's back. "I cannot understand it. Perhaps the Great Spirit is displeased with the white man dying on our lake."

Helen stood back. "Kitchi Manitou does not punish us because we helped the white men. I have faith he will provide for us. Tomorrow will be better."

"I do not think so," Frank said, taking off his gloves. "How is little Joseph?"

"No better. I think he is getting worse. He would not feed from me."

"That does not sound good," Frank said, removing his gloves and walking over to the baby in his ticanoggan. "He is very warm."

Helen slipped her son out of the cradle and held him close, feeling his forehead. "He was not like this earlier."

"Maybe it will pass in the night."

"Come," she said, helping her husband out of his parka. "We eat."

Lifting the lid of the pot, she said, "Rabbit stew."

Frank stuck his finger in the pot and tasted it. "Little thin."

"It's the way the Americans eat it," Helen said. "I heard Vivian at the fishing lodge talking about this thin soup, all water. Very expensive."

Frank broke into a forced smile for his wife. "No wonder they come all the way up here to eat fish from our river, then."

That night, while his older brother and sister slept soundly,

baby Joseph kept his mother awake with constant fussing and crying. By morning both Helen and Frank knew something was seriously wrong with their son.

"Take him to the Hudson's Bay post," Helen said, dabbing a cool cloth on the baby's head.

"No."

"You must. Frank, he is very sick. I do not know what is wrong with him, or how to help him."

"I cannot leave you and the children here without food."

"You will walk faster alone."

"I will not leave you here."

Helen felt her husband's pain. "Then we must all go."

"It will be a hard journey without food."

"But we will travel light," Helen said. She saw Frank eyeing the small pile of furs. "Don't worry. You can come back for them, and maybe trap some more before spring. I will stay at the reservation with the children until you return."

Chapter 2

Under a clear blue, winter sky, with the temperature hovering around twenty-five below, Frank followed Helen as she broke trail with her snowshoes, creating a semi-packed trail for him to follow, dragging the sled with their children behind. Helen had wanted to pack what little food they had and some necessities for overnighting in the bush, but Frank refused, only allowing her to carry the rifle. Bundled up in their winter clothes, sitting on the toboggan, the two older Beaver kids sat wrapped up in furs. Tucked under blankets in the ticanoggan strapped against Frank's chest, little Joseph continued to whimper as his fever worsened.

Head down, her breath visible against the brisk morning cold,

Helen steadily broke trail for two hours, before Frank called her to a halt. He felt they were making good enough time to stop and let the kids stretch and move around while he made a small fire and boiled snow for tea. Two hours later, they stopped again and ate the meat Helen had separated from the weak rabbit stew.

Mid-afternoon light was fading and Frank wanted to reach a dense grove of trees to make camp by nightfall. Drifting into his own thoughts while pulling the toboggan, Frank was startled by a shot. He looked up to see Helen running off the trail. Dropping out of his harness, he dashed after her, catching up as she dropped to her knees in the snow, both hands buried in her face.

"I missed," she said so softly. "I'm sorry."

Frank patted her shoulder then gently slipping off the ticanoggan, gave the baby to Helen. Taking the rifle, he stood and walked ahead. There in the snow the tale was written in footprints. Frank judged it to be a small deer. The tracks showed it had startled, taken one leap forward, then turned and ran off into dense brush. There would be no point in going after it. The wind was at his back.

Returning to the trail, he found Helen sitting on the sleigh, holding their little one close. She shook her head slightly. Frank read the message in her eyes and stepped closer. Removing his mitten, he touched his son's forehead, feeling the fever in spite of the 35 degree cold.

Helping Helen as she sat on the sleigh, he covered her with a blanket as she tried to get him to nurse. After a few minutes she looked up at Frank, again shaking her head. "He won't even try," she said. "Frank, I am worried. We must go on."

"No, Helen. We cannot keep travelling all night without rest."

"My baby's sick." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "And I am going to walk all night. Alone if I have to."

"You will not walk alone."

Helen cast her husband a determined look. "Yes, I will."

Touching his son's forehead, Frank felt he should be the one to run all the way to the Hudson's Bay post with his son, but knew that after the day's march, he couldn't. "In that thicket," he pointed ahead, "I will make a fire."

Helen started to protest.

Frank held up his hand to silence her. "We will eat the rest of our food, then rest until the fire burns out. Only then will we walk on."

"It is good," Helen said, casting her eyes to the ground in submission.

Frank's voice softened. "You take the kids over to that thicket. I will gather some dry wood."

Helen obeyed as her husband and began pulling the toboggan toward the thicket. Later, sitting in front of a blazing fire on fresh cut spruce boughs Frank had cut, they watched the container of rabbit stew come to a boil over the fire and all had a few spoonfuls of the meagre meal. It wasn't enough to sustain them, but being warm inside prepared them mentally for the journey ahead.

"Will we make it?" Helen asked, after the two kids were asleep.

"We must go on. The moon will be full tonight and it will light our way."

Helen slipped an arm from under the blanket covering the baby and wrapped it around her husband. They sat quiet, looking at a black sky dotted with sparkling pinpricks of light. "It is beautiful."

Turning, Frank look into the eyes of his wife. "Kahzah,"

She squeezed him in return. "I love you, too."

Sitting together by the fire, they watched the Great Manitou's starry heavens until Helen fell asleep against Frank while cuddling baby Joseph under her clothes. He layed her on the bed of boughs, covered her with furs and after building up the fire

again and saying a prayer, slipped in beside her.

Chapter 3

Waking in the dark cold, Helen held little Joseph inside her clothing, feeling his heated body next to hers. How could he be so hot against the bitter cold? If only he would nurse. Her breasts were swollen, and beginning to hurt.

"Time to go." She looked up to see Frank's tender eyes, watching her, full of concern. But for a few ruby embers, the fire was dead.

Frank looked at his son. So beautiful, he thought.

"I will carry him, Helen said."

Frank nodded, then slipped on the harness used for pulling the sleigh. A full moon rose in the eastern sky against pewter clouds, making the snow glow silver against trees appearing as black silhouettes. Frank trudged onward in the biting cold, thankful there was no wind. Pulling in the harness, he put one foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other, always conscious not to work up a sweat. The slow steady pace became his mantra.

He stopped briefly when they came to the frozen lake. Across it was the Hudson's Bay post and help. There would be a warm fire and a radio to call for a mercy flight to the hospital.

Lifting the blanket flap off her baby's face Helen looked into his eyes, crying out an alarm that caught her husband's attention. Frank came running back to her. She showed him her son, his eyes distant. Holding one of his hands toward Frank, she said, "It is cold."

"That is a good sign?" Frank asked.

"Not with his fever still burning."

"We must go quickly." Slipping on the harness, Frank pulled the sleigh forward and stepped off the snow. Beneath his feet the

ice, swept clear of snow, looked transparent. For a moment he thought he was walking on water. It brought to mind the white man's god who cured people and walked on water. It was not beneath Frank to now pray to him and ask for a cure. He set out across the lake. A sliver of light to the east announced the coming of dawn. Ahead, a yellow light illuminated a single window in the Hudson's Bay post as smoke began its lazy accent in the frozen morning air.

Half a mile. Frank pressed on. The distance shrank to half that, then a hundred yards, and finally, slipping out of the harness, he ran up the stairs and began pounding on the door.

"Hold your horses. I'm coming. I'm coming," a voice inside said.

When the door opened, Helen brushed Frank aside and rushed inside. Laying her precious baby on the store counter, she unwrapped him and felt his forehead, then bowed her head. Frank stood beside her, holding Joseph's little fingers. They were so cold. Turning to her man, Helen buried her face in his chest and wept uncontrollably.

They had reached their goal, but baby Joseph's journey had ended.

Frank held her close, wondering why the Creator had given them such a beautiful baby, only to take him away.

THE END