

Winter Storm Watch

By
Lad Moore



My dad always explained his Ozark Mountain Toddy as being three fingers of light rain and six ounces of fast-moving Artic blast.

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It was the first morning after a severe winter storm. The ice coated everything with a crystal coverlet, strikingly beautiful amidst all the devastation. Across the yard lay cords

of limbs torn from trees, and piles of branches shattered into wooden-cored icicles. Each blade of grass was engorged with glass-like armor, armor so heavy it could not support itself upright. In the rubble also lay the giant left arm of our sycamore, longtime host to my tire swing. I remember having previously worried that the thick rubber truck tire or the steel chain would surely decay before that giant tree would ever so much as bend. Not so. It had come crashing down, violating even the sanctity of the empty doghouse that sat in the tree's comforting shade for the two summers after my dog Angus had died.

It was an ironic thing about Angus. He and my mother both died the same day, and it seemed they had even suffered the same malady; an increasingly hoarse and rasping cough that finally became a last breath.

My daydream was interrupted by a knock on the door, a knock so commanding it firmly defied the idea that no one would be venturing about. My father opened the door to find our neighbor Stanley Doss, face red from the biting wind.

"Hardy, grab your coat and come with me. We've got a small party together to search Porcupine Thicket. Carl Rowe is out there someplace with his son. We think they've been out all night."

Porcupine was a tangled mass of vines, thorns and matted overgrowth that even in good weather was formidable. There were many areas inside the thicket that were completely impassable except by belly crawl. For most people who lived near Summit Ridge, there was nothing in Porcupine that was interesting or curious enough to even consider venturing there. Simply put, there was far more challenge than reward.

"Gimme a minute to wrap up," my dad replied. "What in God's name would Carl be doing in Porcupine?"

"Don't know. He and the boy must have been caught in the storm. It's still hunting season isn't it?"

With a goodbye pat on my head, the two men left abruptly. Each carried a flashlight and my father added a machete and a pistol to his belt. I thought: *Pistol? What for? Snakes are three feet buried by now.*

I parked myself by the front window, rubbing a porthole in the frost so I could watch them as they disappeared down the woods trail. For some distance, I could hear the loud crunch of the icy leaves under their boots. I likened the sound to marching on a bed of sugar-coated corn flakes.

Noon brought enough warmth to begin a bit of melt. First the icicles on the roof began to drip in ever-increasing staccato, and some broke free and began to form a picket fence under the eaves. I put on my heavy coat and boots and wandered out as far as the barbed wire fence. The ice was thawing and breaking away from the wire. Some of the pieces were almost like drinking straws. I sucked on them. They had the taste of iron.

After an hour of exploring the magic and punishment of nature, I went back inside, fearing that a falling icicle might impale me. I turned on the Philco. For some reason, the reception was unusually weak and given to crackling and sputtering. I ran the dial from end to end and settled on a station that waned from loud to mute as if traversing over hills and valleys. It was KWOZ, a station quite far away, but having a transmitting tower atop

Magazine Mountain which boosted its range.

At two in the afternoon I thought of lunch. In the larder my dad kept two dozen cans of his favorite sardines and I opened one. Mostly I wanted the sardines to eat with some crispy soda crackers, but also I liked the process of opening the can with its little key. I had a collection of such keys that I kept in a kitchen match box. They were T-shaped, with an oval loop at the top and a slot at the bottom. I think I cut my finger every time I removed the zip strip in order to free the key. Worth the pain, though, for now I had exactly twenty keys. I might well corner the market someday when I invented a purpose for them.

Five-thirty. I went back to the front window and scrubbed another peek hole. It had turned cold enough again to halt the ice melt. Small drips of water from the icicles were still poised but now unable to fall. The woods trail was empty and the encroaching darkness had obscured the farthest point of it. I lit the kerosene lantern from the fireplace mantle and balanced it on the outside window frame to serve as a beacon for the men to find their way home. Good thinking.

By eight that evening, KWOZ was off the air. I had hoped to catch a weather bulletin or maybe some news of our missing neighbors. I scanned the dial. I heard only distant murmurs of voices, none clear enough to understand. I caught part of a verse of a Bobby Darin song before it drifted away. I sang the remainder of the song a cappella.

My father always enforced a 9:00pm bedtime. Not just for me, but for him as well. But this night I was participating in a calamity and believed I had dispensation to await his return no matter what the hour. To bolster my sense of authority and stem the rise of worry, I retrieved my detective shoe box from under the bed. In it was a pistol my dad had carved from a block of cedar. It fired rubber bands and was quite authentic-looking. He had nicely checkered the grips and had sanded and shellacked the weapon to a glassy shine. In there too was my detective badge, fashioned from a fruit jar lid and safety pin. On it he had painted the words *Nick Carter, G-Man*. I pinned it to the pocket of my pajama top and stuck the pistol in my waistband. Also from the box I revisited my Official Detective Papers, a typewritten letter of certification and introduction. It was also my G-Man License, complete with red wax seal. Oddly, it had been issued and signed by Neptunus Rex who my dad said was the ruler of all the seven seas. This may have been the most official person my dad could recall at the time, given his former US Navy stint.

Armed with weapon and bona-fide credentials, I resumed my watch at the window. At some point I dozed, but was quickly startled awake. My eyes opened to the bobbing of a host of flashlight beams coming up the woods trail. I ran to the door to greet the searchers.

The house was quickly filled with tired men, soiled overcoats and scratched faces and hands. My dad made coffee as a mingled drone of voices began to recount details of the search. In the center of the huddle sat Carl Rowe and his son Bobby, shrouded in a mound of my Granny Stell's old quilts. Bobby's face was ashen. His lips were like grape Jello, vibrating to the rhythm of chattering teeth.

The story soon evolved into a tale of adventure gone bad. Mr Rowe and Bobby were

rabbit hunting that early morning. They lost their way and were unable to get home before the storm arrived. They were not dressed for rain and ice and had become completely disoriented in the wild thicket. Eventually, knowing the terrain better than most, my dad recalled a favorite rabbit hunting ravine at the foot of Summit Ridge. Here he found them huddled under a shallow ledge of granite.

Carl Rowe and Bobby curled up next to our stove for the night rather than heading for home in the dark. The searchers soon left with final gushes of “Thank You! Thank You!” to usher them home. The room was quiet again. I slid into my bunk and looked deep into my dad’s eyes as he tucked me in. Here was a new hero for me, a defining moment in my life.

As I closed my eyes I thought: Tomorrow will be a day with new stature! My dad would be an even bigger legend than Daniel Boone.

Yes, I thought, his actions had been exactly the way old Neptunus Rex would have handled it.

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The author’s three collections of short stories, *Tailwind*, *Odie Dodie*, and *Riders of the Seven Hills* are available at all traditional booksellers. Copies signed by the author may be obtained by contacting him directly via pogo@shreve.net or by accessing his web page at: <http://laddimoore.blogspot.com/>

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