

Ice Storm

By Nick Holland

Picture of a winter's day in Ohio. It is a quiet and unambitious farmscape, a field spreading outwards from a series of decaying fenceposts, at each of which the snow divides into neat little divots, like the seams at the edges of a long quilted blanket. A few scattered trees dot the field, and at its far end a great leafless forest rises up in silent rebellion, fibrous and country-dark against the hills and muted dips of a far-off golf course.

Past the fenceline a man stands in a broad-brimmed hat and a pea-green coat. His beard is still long and wild and his coat is not yet tattered with wear; this picture is an old one. He stands in the field with his two arms outstretched, but he is too far back for any details of his face to be seen. He stands proud and confident, looking at the camera. Just look, he says. Just look at this place that I have found for us. Just look how far we can spread our roots, at the chance we've got. To pick up our bags and settle back into the cold wild wood. Just look at it. Maybe he is smiling.

Overhead, the sky is clothed in heavy winter clouds, ruffled by the wind and streaked with dark fissures. Keep this image in mind.

1.

By the eighth year of my life, my father's law firm had expanded from a small two-man affair into a prosperous little business, and we had moved out from the mean and mold-haunted A-frame on Bath Road and into a respectable farmhouse on a large plot of land, about six miles to the south of where we had started out. This, as my mother constantly reminded me, was a sign of great progress.

The property was sold to us by a crass and unkind man named Peterson who called it Frog Hollow, which remains its name to this day. While it was certainly a *farmhouse*, it is unfair to characterize the surrounding property as a farm in the strictest sense. It could more precisely be described as the memory of a farm, with its patchwork of half-planned pastures in various states of abandonment and regrowth, its long stretches of once-flat muddy acreage grown scooped and hollow with rain and woodchucks and time. Parts of the north field had already begun to return to its old habits, thick grass and wiry green saplings springing up tall and impenetrable to give it

the unmistakable personality of a young forest. There were two man-made ponds on either side of the property: at the north end sat Campfire Lake (demarcated by an old handwritten sign found in a prickerbush nearby), while at the south by the overgrown foot of our front yard was Crawdad Lake, which was fed by a small stream. The rest of the property was swallowed up whole by a forest that was largely maple and pine and criss-crossed with a spider's tangle of game trails.

During the winter of my eleventh year, an ice storm came down from Lake Erie. My brother and I awoke in the dark hours of the morning to a sound of violence outside our window, and looked out to see the night painted with a glaze of ice, shattered pieces of wood and treebark littering the ground as a black rain pelted us from above, freezing as it touched the land around it and congealing in frozen mounds and pools. The woods were alive with the dry sound of splintering tree-branches. We padded nervously into the kitchen and found our father waiting for us there, wrapped tightly in padded winter gear and carefully tipping fresh oil into his chainsaw, which sat on the table like a terrible silver-red beast, teeth glistening. We stood there for a moment in our pajamas, clinging on to one another uncertainly. My father looked up.

Let's go, he said to me.

Picture of a camping trip. Trees are green and alive, the air hot and buggy: Flybitten Summer in the Midwest. A small orange tent has been hastily erected in a clearing in front of the trees. Nearby, a dense tuft of cattails hints at the presence of the adjacent man-made pond. My father is beardless now, and kneeling intently at the side of a scrawny, shirtless young boy, teaching him how to properly hold a fishing pole. His face youthful, serious, instructive. A mess of tousled hair and blue T-shirt are all that can be seen of a second child, the two-year-old behind him. The sun shines brightly on the child's hair, giving it a hot metallic sheen.

2.

When we left the house, it was still dark. My father wore the heavy, full-body warmsuit that he reserved for the coldest days of winter, a thick, camouflage-print skin that lent him the appearance of a leaf-clothed hunter, or of some dark and earthy guardian of the arbor. For my part, I wore my thick down jacket, pudgy and

segmented at the arms, that made me look a bit like a green and waterfat marshmallow. Each of us carried our tools: my father his chainsaw and twin canisters of gasoline and bar oil, and I a pair of hand-operated limb trimmers and my Boy Scout pocket knife. The rain had by this time slowed to a thin spit of ice, and the land around us shone frosting-like as the dim morning light reflected over the frozen wood. It was mostly dark still, and perilously slippery. The gravel path underneath our feet choked by the hardening ice. It was a matter of great concentration to avoid appearing unsteady whenever he looked back to mark my progress behind him, as I dreaded nothing more than betraying my struggle to him in case he should find it necessary to offer me a concerned and steadying hand.

From the house, we made our way windingly into the dark and tree-girded East Path (the only trail towards town large enough for a car to pass through, which served as our *de facto* driveway), our early-morning conversation pressed into silence by the nervous flitting of cardinals overhead and the occasional splintering woodsong of the icebound inner forest. Under the trees, there were sections of snow that had been sheltered from the worst of the rain's erosion, gathering only the token mistings rejected by the canopy overhead, collecting a thin crusted shelf on its surface. This gave my father's footsteps a firm, regular crunch as he broke the snow's surface with each deliberate step. Each of these left a smooth-edged crater exposing the unfrozen powder layer beneath... my feet, by contrast, left only a series of staggered and half-broken dents in the white lunar landscape, and I found myself grateful every time I made my way to one of his larger and more widely-spaced prints to steady myself.

It was not far to the first obstacle: a young downed beech tree neatly intersecting the trail at right angles. We stopped, and he turned to face me:

Before we can begin, (he spoke with a slow, instructive deliberacy) it is important that you recognize that this is not a toy.

I do--

You don't. Listen to me.

Ok.

This is a highly efficient instrument designed to simplify a difficult task. It is a dangerous machine, and it is equally a dangerous collection of fragile parts; if you take its function for granted, try to treat it as a simply-functioning unit, its pieces may come apart, may catch and fail and overheat, and it will fail you. When in doubt, turn it

off.

I nodded dumbly as he lowered the saw to the ground and demonstrated how to start it: three linear, deliberate pulls, a firm rumble of activity, and a quiet hum as he shut it off. He stepped back and motioned me forward, handed me the red plastic jug of gasoline mixture. A dizzy smell of fumes as the liquid poured gurgling into the belly of the machine, my father standing over me impassively. A thin haze of translucent vapor rippling slightly above the point of transfer like woodsmoke, like water. The handle firm in my clumsy mittened hands, the first pull left me off-balanced and embarrassed; second, third, fourth pulls awkward and arrhythmic until I stepped back and watched my father wordlessly start the saw in a single pull. Silver teeth came to life against the snow with a robotic fury, and he began to cut away at the tree.

I watched uselessly as he removed the offending structure in a series of surgical, geometric strokes. Angry humming of machinery, specks of wooddust-- cream-white, stripling bark flecked with olive-brown sheared away like butter, and the tree was gone in a matter of minutes. As I heaved the last sectioned hunk into the woods, he caught my eye with a patient grin, and we continued to move up the path in silence.

Picture of a newspaper. The page: "Best of Cleveland 2005". My father is pictured in a suit and tie, kneeling in front of a group of five other men and one young woman. All are smiling. At his feet is a young lion cub, tethered to a leash held by the young woman in the back. Above: "Career Highlight for Area Lawman: Lion Breeding Ring Exposed". The caption: "Dr. Dolittle with a law degree". The lion cub's eyes are pearly black, and they stare into the camera with a deep and impenetrable curiosity.

3.

By the time we reached the end of the West Path, the gleaming and broken new world the storm left behind should have been fully revealed by the light of day, but a thick and persistent covering of ill-humored cumulus kept the forest locked in a pall of early-morning twilight. How many shattered maples, oaks, sassafras had we already cleared away as we rounded the trailhead towards Campfire Lake-- seven? nine? more? There is a timelessness to this kind of morning labor; the persisting moment of freeing a section of the path's frozen

plane from obstruction became mesmerizing to me. I don't think it had occurred to either of us as we rounded the turn that the lake was to be our final destination. We simply stopped for a moment, and I followed him as he turned and began walking into the field at the end of the path, towards the reed-bearded water and the looming obstacle protruding from its center.

The tree was a great two-hundred-year-old maple, a giant of the first order. Unlike the others on the West Path, this was no product of that night's storm. The previous August it had been caught in the teeth of a furious summer windstorm, and terminated its multicenturian vigil half-submerged in the middle of the lake, where it had remained undisturbed until now. It was in fact so uncommon in its size that the possibility of its simply decaying harmlessly out of sight into the water was out of the question; each of the more central branches were so massive as to fasten deep into the muck at the lake's bottom, half-suspending the rest of its great corpse from the water in a spectacular crown of leafless digits that dominated the entire scene and threatened to smother the pond's sole tributary stream. To think of carving it up earlier in the year would have been laughable. The trunk itself was situated at such an angle that any safely executed cut would set the entire mass loose from its earthly moorings entirely, and submerge the still-lifted crown the rest of the way into the water, most likely resulting in the overflow and destruction of the little tarn. But here we stood, triumphant in our faithful stewardship of the West Path. Before us sat the great crown in the middle of a thick apron of ice, accessible and inviting. At that moment, in that twilight-colored rimeworld that seems so alien through the veil of later memory, the challenge of it was irresistible.

I don't remember if there was ever any spoken acknowledgement of our newfound goal; the white-brown treeless field was taut with a subtle electricity as we approached the frozen lake. The air around us was cold and strangely dry, made thick and almost tangible by the clouding of our breath and the song of a cardinal, perching somewhere-- *there*, small and Christmasberry-red on the deep frosted green of a blue spruce. A sense of a rising camaraderie as we crossed the field with a sense of shared purpose, me indifferent to my own chilly fatigue, to the cold air burning in my throat with a prickling insistency. He stopped at the water's edge, shaggy clumps of brown and ice-laced wintergrass lumped cautiously around the darker, deeper ice.

Stay very close to me. There's hardly any danger of falling through this kind of ice, but we always have to be careful.

Ok.

Pay attention to your surroundings. No false moves here.

Ok.

I mean it.

I will.

We crossed the threshold between field and pondwater without incident; the frozen surface was hardly any more slippery than the icier sections of the paths we'd been on all morning. It sat firm and unyielding under my feet, and together we cautiously slithered out to the trunk of the great maple.

The trunk loomed out from the ice with the strange unnatural dignity of a sinking ship. Its base was thick and scaly with a thick peeling bark that parted into curls of rot with every knot and bole in its curvature, and it was no great difficulty for us both to pull ourselves up it and onto one of the larger extending branches. The tree was too big to remove, obviously; our mission was to clear its top section of major branches and then cut back the upper trunk, rolling the cut pieces into the woods as we went and freeing the lake of at least the most visible half of its unwelcome guest. I positioned myself on a stable lower branch as my father sawed from higher up, and hurled each section to shore as he severed it. During this process I remember making some small observation that made him laugh aloud, and it must have been this token show of approval that compelled me to accept his offer for another chance at cutting.

The chainsaw was hot in my hands as he reminded me of the basics of its operation. I watched with nervous impatience as he painstakingly tightened the chain, checked the oil and gas mixture, gave the primer a token squeeze. I chose as my target a small but respectable limb directly below and to the right of my current position; he would hold onto the branch from below to prevent an accident, while I would make the first half of the cut from above before passing the saw down to him.

I looked down for a moment at the ice beneath me. It glinted white and grey in the winter sunlight, an unspoken threat of rotten blue beneath its surface. My grip on the branch, I ensured, was quite secure. The saw, warmed and ready from recent use, started up with no problems, and my shoulders shook tightly with the noisy vibration of the thing as it bit into the branch below me. My father, I knew, was

watching closely for any mistake... it seemed at the time unspeakably embarrassing for the tool to be cutting at such a slow rate during my big moment; I pressed harder, but to little effect. I remember over the din of the motor that I heard my father call out something to me, but my focus was elsewhere, and I began sawing back and forth in an arc in an effort to make the cut more quickly. Forward, and back-- *back*, and I felt the chain catch with a sharp grinding into the grain of the wood, caught fast in the grain as I jerked the saw backwards, my right leg splaying slightly as the chainsaw lurched free, my body thrust back to avoid the angry drone of the toothed blade, sound of my father screaming something...

When I felt the impact of my shoulder against the shattering ice I felt a stab of panic in the nape of my spine, and I remember thinking foolishly at the time that this was a feeling shared in all the world only by myself and the lake itself as its icy surface splintered open, but all thoughts were dashed from my mind as I felt the frozen blackness of the water engulf me completely. I was plunged instantly into darkness, endless fathoms of frozen ink crushing silently at me from all sides while my ears felt deafened by the roar of the running saw. I'd somehow lost it, when had I let go but I *had* hadn't I, and it sinking greedily towards me invisible in the endless black-black of this place and the animal cold boring into my shoulders and crawling through my skull, through the bones of my neck like plague like rats like burning ice--

I have no memory whatsoever of my father's powerful arms gripping underneath mine, of the struggle up and through choppy chunks of surface-ice and the look of shocked concern on his face as he worked desperately to warm my weak and mindlessly panicked body with his coat and hands. I do not remember vomiting out mouthfuls of murky pondwater onto the frozen grass, or the moment I realized that the chainsaw had remained stuck harmlessly in the branch throughout the whole ordeal. I remember only a great and penetrating numbness as I realized that I was lying dripping wet over my father's shoulder as he carried me across the field and back towards home, and the burning silence in my chest as I watched a cardinal burst brilliantly into flight as we passed it by.

Picture of a winter's day in Ohio. A child stands alone in the tall snowy grass of a young forest, the land around spreading outwards boundlessly, punctuated only by a few rusted and overgrown fenceposts.

The child is standing at an odd angle to the camera, at too great a distance for any meaningful expression to be interpreted from his face. He appears distracted, removed from his surroundings, his orange-gloved hand holding tightly to a snow-dusted stick and his gaze fixed resolutely on the taker of the picture. Here I am, he seems to say, here I am, in the cold wild wood. Here I am, and now what? Overhead, the sky is clothed in winter clouds, rough and scattered and shifting fluidly in the wind. Keep this image in mind.