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Ten Feet

by T. W. Crone

Darren awakes with a jerk when the truck veers off the road and plows into a snow embankment. They are in a remote area of northern Wisconsin on the last day of rifle deer season. He sits on the passenger side of his friend's truck. A hostage after being roused from bed early on a Sunday morning. Although he stopped shooting defenseless animals years ago, his childhood friend insisted on dragging him out into the snow to witness the slaughter.

The two boys are seniors at Appleton West High School. Soon, Darren will no longer accompany his gregarious friend on every one of his stupid endeavors. He also won't be traipsing off to the University of Wisconsin-Madison next fall with the tall, dark and handsome basketball player whose shadow he's lived in since fifth grade. Unlike the girls who flock to his popular friend, Darren wants out of that orbit and enlisting seemed like his best option.

Cal looks over at Darren, shining that cheesy smile he employs right before he asks his shorter, more reserved friend in the Coke-bottle glasses to follow him off on yet another foolish adventure.

“Man, I just saw the biggest frickin’ buck.”

That was how it always started, with some overblown claim meant to ensnare Darren. That ploy no longer worked. But as resistance was futile, Darren plays along.

“How big was it?” Darren says like a wide-eyed child.

“At least fifteen points.”

Now Darren knows why Cal drove into the ditch. Cal never considered how they might get out of said ditch later, say, when they want to go home.

A golden ‘J’ swings from the truck’s rearview mirror, not quite recovered from the abrupt stop, much like Darren, who wonders if Cal’s girlfriend, Julie, has recovered from her boyfriend’s most recent betrayal. She probably doesn’t even know about it yet.

Under several layers of shirts and long underwear, Darren wears a similar necklace with a ‘K’ from *his* girlfriend, Kara. Cal never wears *his* girlfriend’s necklace because he “doesn’t want to lose it,” while Darren feels that loyalty requires him to keep Kara close to his heart.

Cal struggles into his camouflage coveralls, jacket and that silly red-and-white UW knit cap with the floppy tassel. He grabs the rifle off the top of the gun rack on the rear window of the truck Daddy bought him for his sixteenth birthday. An identical rifle sits on the rung just below it.

“C’mon, man. Let’s go,” Cal says.

“Alright, alright.” Darren pulls on his jacket, gloves, and a blaze orange watch cap. He hopes *his* head covering will keep him out of other hunters’ sights.

After sliding into the deep snow drift next to the truck, he maneuvers the door closed, trying to minimize the snow that gets onto his seat. He glances at the other rifle, left behind, then hobbles after his friend.

Nearly two feet of snow has fallen in the last few days, and it is light and fluffy. Diamonds flicker off the ground in the brightness of a November morning. Beyond the truck is a wide span of white punctuated by brown branches and twigs from buried bushes and young trees. A graying barn, missing several boards, squats in the winter landscape.

The buck stands out in the open, easily four hundred yards away.

“Holy, shit!” Cal whispers loudly. “That’s the biggest frickin’ buck I’ve ever seen.”

“As you said.” Darren sees some white steamy water vapor rising into the sky on the horizon. “Where are we?”

Cal shrugs, placing his rifle to his shoulder and, with little ceremony, fires.

Darren fully expects to see the distant creature wander off, nonplussed by an errant shot. Instead, the animal jerks, stumbles, and bounds away with a gait that, even through thick glasses, looks awkward. The dream of returning to the warm cab for another cozy nap disappears.

“Nailed it!”

“No, you winged it.”

Cal gives his friend an annoyed look.

“I’m just saying if you ‘nailed it,’” Darren says using air quotes, “it would have dropped.

Cal shoulders his rifle and scans for his quarry.

Darren says, “There’s no way we’re catching up with it. It’s long gone. Besides, it looks like there’s a nuclear power plant over that way. I doubt these are legal hunting grounds.”

“I guess it’s a good thing I brought my expert tracker with me.” Cal smiles and gives Darren a wink. “My wolf brother.”

Darren is not entirely immune to Cal’s flattery, but he’d much rather put his skills to better use in the Army. He doesn’t want to help mount a trophy over Cal’s bed for the girls to admire. He also hadn’t wanted to betray his parents’ trust by hosting a homecoming party either.

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“Earth to Darren, come in, Darren.” Cal snaps his fingers in Darren’s face. Darren hates this.

The boys kneel by a red stain in the snow, presumably where the buck was injured.

“What does *that* mean?” Cal asks.

Darren has studied all the different blood patterns for injured animals. Someday, he hopes this will help him stalk things dangerous to peaceful folk, not innocent Bambis. Things that come in the night to blow up your town or poison the water supply. Darren reads far too many thrillers. But after considering the evidence before him, he is left with more questions than answers. The red markings don’t even look like blood. Rather, it looks like someone spilled red watercolors in the snow. No melting from what should be warm splatter.

He says, “Um...I don’t know.”

Cal gives Darren a squinty look. The look he uses when he suspects his academic friend is holding out on the answers to a homework assignment or test. Darren squirms. He usually relents, as if *he* were the jerk for being reluctant to give away answers *he* actually worked for.

“Seriously...It doesn’t look right.” Darren gets up and changes focus to the hoof prints leading away. He can’t put his finger on it, but he knows deer tracks, and these don’t look right either.

The hoofprints in the snow remind him of that night he watched *Bambi* with Kara. The fawn left comically spaced depressions in the animated snow. He’d pretended to shoot an imaginary rifle at the TV, only to receive a playful smack from his girlfriend. Later, she seemed moved by his tears when Bambi’s mother was killed. Kara snuggled up to him. He’d put his arm around her and thought, *Man, I’m falling for her.*

Cal pats Darren’s ankle and stands to tower over him, placing a heavy hand on his shoulder. “That’s okay, man. I guess you aren’t as good at this tracking stuff as I thought.”

That red tassel bounces around on top of Cal’s head as he crunches off, following the cartoonish tracks.

Darren takes a beat. He knows from experience that letting his anger get the best of him never goes well. Even on the rare occasion when he comes up with a clever response, Cal is unimpressed. “Nice one, man. Did you come up with that all by yourself?” or “You *really* got me, man.” In the end, Darren usually feels worse. It’s better to keep his mouth shut and shove that stuff down deep, and try not to let it boil his insides too much.

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Cal stands where the tracks lead up to a chain link fence, at least ten feet tall. Barbed wire slants outward along the top. A red and white sign says, “WARNING: Restricted Area - Unauthorized Entry Prohibited.” Tall fir trees line the inside of the barrier, obscuring what lies beyond.

Darren has read articles about special naval research facilities in remote areas up north. They siphon water off the Great Lakes and power from nearby power plants. Darren imagines vast subterranean waterways used for clandestine operations. He has heard about at least one credible project for extremely low-frequency communications, designed to send one-way, coded messages to submarines that are deeply submerged. There was even a suggestion that these could target enemy submarines and cause the sailors on board to hallucinate. He's heard rumors about biomodded marine animals being trained to spy, disable underwater mines, or even attack enemy vessels. More thriller novel stuff.

Cal studies the fence.

Darren says, "How did it get past this?"

Cal pulls back a clean, vertical slit in the fence, likely left by an earlier trespasser. He gives Darren a wide-eyed, crazy smile, gesturing toward the opening like a game show girl.

"Am I supposed to believe a buck, with a brushpile-sized rack on its head, somehow shimied through there?"

Cal searches for another answer, then shrugs. "Probably jumped over."

Darren looks up at the wall of chain links again. He's seen deer jump fences before. But ten feet? With barbed wire? "We really shouldn't be messing around here. Let's go find some other Bambis for you to shoot."

"C'mon, man. Don't be a pussy."

Cal starts to climb through. His rifle gets caught on the jagged edges of the opening. He struggles a bit, but eventually manages his way through, disappearing into the greenery.

"Cal?" Darren shivers, teeth chattering, mostly from the cold. "Cal?!"

Darren stands there, alone. He glances at the boot prints heading away from this place. He could easily make his way back to the truck, climb inside, crank up the heater and relax while his friend wanders—trespasses—about. Eventually, Cal, cold and bored, will lose interest and return as well. There is no need for Darren to go on. Hopefully, Cal doesn't get into too much trouble.

Darren starts heading back. He doesn't get far. The red markings are gone. He distinctly remembers a splash of bright red every couple hundred yards. Yes, Cal had trampled some of the tracks and the so-called blood, but not all of them. Darren has made a concerted effort not to disturb them.

And if that isn't strange enough, the only remaining tracks are the booted ones left by the boys. Once again, Darren remembers seeing some of those abnormal deer prints in the snow, and, like the blood, he avoided them. They should still be there.

Something tickles the back of Darren's brain. He shakes his head. He still can't put that odd feeling aside. He hurries back to the opening in the fence, sighs that sigh he reserves for these occasions with Cal, and says, "Here we go...again," before dropping to all fours and crawling.

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After emerging from a wall of sharp green needles, Darren remembers their first Christmas as friends. He and Cal were sledding on that popular hill at the edge of the town that went right up to a river. Partway down the hill, Cal gave Darren a "boost" as they often did for each other by jumping off the back of the toboggan and kicking away. That extra push was enough to send Darren sliding onto the frozen crust of the waterway. He got up, a smile on his

face, waved back to his friend, then the world gave way beneath him. He remembers the sudden shock of frigid waters covering him. Little else remains from that experience except for the hand that grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the light. From then on, he and Cal were best friends.

Darren finds a forest of leafless trees. Long, thin brown fingers reach into the pale, sunless sky. His watch says it's already after noon, and he can see that Cal has made considerable progress ahead of him.

"Cal!" A hollow breeze picks up just as he raises his voice, drowning his words. He inhales a deep breath, and the cold air hurts his lungs. "Callahan!"

If his friend hears him, he doesn't acknowledge it. Darren starts jogging through deep snow. It feels like running in quicksand. Then something catches his eye, flapping in the nearby tree. A tattered orange vest. A sign that other hunters have passed this way. Curiously enough, a little further along, higher up in the naked canopy, he sees a ripped camouflage jacket, speared by sharp branches. It's hard to tell, but it appears to have a military-style design, not one for hunters.

Another feeling creeps up from his stomach. The eggs and bacon he scarfed before being dragged out the door this morning aren't settling. But that's not the cause for this creeping feeling.

When they were younger, riding bikes around the neighborhood was a favorite pastime. On one such occasion, Darren had fallen behind, much like he has now. He rode his bike through an intersection without looking. A car appeared out of nowhere and slammed on the brakes, nearly hitting Darren. Cal had laughed it off, but Darren had never forgotten his brush with

death. That painful surge of adrenaline. Pin pricks on the arms. The feeling that his head might explode. Darren senses another car is heading toward the intersection, only this time, Cal is the one who isn't paying attention.

Darren hops through the snow, desperate to catch up to his clueless friend. His lungs hurt more and more with each inhale of the frigid air. He is about to stop and lean against a tree to catch his breath when he trips on something just beneath the surface of the thick powder. He rolls on his side, brushing snow from his face with an icy glove.

He tries to steady his breathing, desperate to get Cal's attention with another yell and notices partially exposed tatters of green and brown near his feet. His glasses have fogged up again, making the scene harder to discern. He crawls over to the exposed material that sent him to the ground. More torn clothing in military-style green and brown patterns. Probably left behind by soldiers assigned to walk the perimeter, looking for wayward hunters like Cal. But he tripped over something hard, like branches. He reaches into the pile and pulls into view what he expects will be a rough brown stick. Instead, it is smooth and white.

It takes him a few seconds to realize what he's holding. He drops it back into the pile and stumbles away. He starts heaving, spilling what's left of his breakfast. He continues until his convulsing is a dry roll of his stomach. A steaming pile of undigested yellows intermingled with meaty brown bits melts the snow at his feet.

"CAL!"

Cal has stopped. He is staring down at something on the ground himself, but he still doesn't respond to Darren. At least he's stopped moving. Then, to Darren's relief, Cal turns and

looks in his direction. Cal yells something, but the distance and wind make it hard to hear. All Darren makes out is “weird” and “buck.” Cal waves Darren forward with a “check this out” vibe.

The tree Cal is standing under is bigger than the others around it. Not in height, but it has more limbs. A ways up the trunk, there is a bulge, like a tumor. The tingle at the base of Darren’s brain works its way forward. He cups his gloved hands around his mouth. He needs to make his friend understand they should leave. He isn’t being paranoid. Something is wrong.

Cal waits, waves again.

The tree moves. A branch curls. Then another one. They drop through the air toward Cal, who stands there motionless, waiting for his friend’s words. Darren squawks something nonsensical, points and waves. Cal cocks his head. The red tassel floats above his friend’s head, just as the branches, which seem to have greyed, no longer part of the tree, drop around Cal.

“What the—?” Cal says, raising his rifle defensively.

One grey branch snakes around his legs.

“Hey!”

His rifle goes off. The other one wraps around his chest. The rifle falls to the ground. Cal pushes against the thick grey coils sliding around him like two large pythons.

“Darren! Help!”

Darren reaches for the ghost of his rifle. All he can do is watch.

The howling winds pick up and turn into loud static from a TV, stuck in between channels, volume turned up to max. The grey snakes drag Cal up into the tree. Other limbs have begun to move and grey, bracing themselves in the tree while the two pull Cal up towards the

lump that has disconnected from the tree's trunk. A central hub to all the writhing tentacles splits open, revealing jagged white curves.

Darren stumbles backwards.

Cal screams as he nears the maw. His flailing arms are all that is visible when the tentacles shove him into a wide mouth lined with teeth. The crunch of wet branches echoes through the trees as the grey thing's middle section expands and contracts. It's a deranged octopus, hanging in the trees with two extra tentacles. Round, milky-white eyes, set just above the rolling mouth, stare blindly at Darren.

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The homecoming party has gotten out of control, and as usual, Cal is nowhere to be found. Drunk high school students cavort in Darren's family room and kitchen. No doubt some have snuck into his parents' bedroom upstairs. He should never have let Cal talk him into this.

"Hey," Julie says to Darren, pulling him close. Her breath is a hundred proof. "Have you seen Cal?" She punctuates her question with a burp. Good thing she's cute.

"He and Kara were talking in the kitchen earlier. But I haven't seen them for a bit."

"Okay, tell him I'm looking for him." She flares her eyebrows at Darren and is off to join another group of students in a dance circle. He doesn't recognize several of the students dancing to a boombox playing "Kiss" by Prince, blowing each other kisses. One of the guys tries to connect with Julie, but she pushes him away. "I'm taken." She burps in the guy's face. He rears away. They continue dancing.

Darren decides to slip into his room to escape the alcohol-fueled chaos. He's mostly resisted the pull to get drunk on the regular, unlike most of his friends. On one occasion, Cal talked him into drinking a few coolers. It turned into a wild evening. The next morning, he awoke with the worst headache. He had to apologize to Kara for the lewd suggestions he didn't remember making. She is a good girl. She and Darren are waiting until they get married, though that day feels like forever away. But she's worth it.

Darren grabs the doorknob to his room and hears Cal's familiar laugh. He considers leaving well enough alone, glancing back at Julie still fending off the other guy's advances. Instead, he opens the door quietly and slides in like he does when he comes home late.

His room is dim, but he can see them rolling around on his bed. They giggle. He just stands there while his life falls apart ten feet away.

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Peering through the windshield in Cal's truck, Darren doesn't know what to do. He ran all the way back without stopping. Once inside, engine on, the heater did its job, forcing away the numbing cold. He dozed off briefly. His hands hurt as the feeling returns. His face stings. He's always given Cal a hard time about leaving his truck keys under the driver's seat. This has likely saved Darren's life.

The golden 'J' dances to the rhythm of the engine. It would be easy to stay in the cab's safety for the rest of the day. With some effort, Darren feels certain he can get the truck out of the ditch and head home. He would arrive before dinner. There would be questions not easily answered, but benign compared to other options running through Darren's head.

He glances at the other rifle still sitting on the gun rack behind him. It does not matter what Cal did at the homecoming party. His friend was flawed, yes, but still his friend. He doesn't know if he can just drive away. It would be futile to go back out in the cold to confront that thing. The thing that ate his friend. The thing that would most likely do the same to Darren. Even considering going back out there is foolish. Stupid. He isn't even sure what Cal would do if things were reversed.

Not true.

Darren knows.

The sun sits low in the sky. By his estimation, he has only a few hours before darkness turns a dangerous situation into a hopeless one.

He pulls his rifle off the second rung of the gun rack and sets it in his lap. His thawing fingers caress the two wolves carved into the lacquered stock, same as the ones on Cal's.

Darren turns off the engine. The vehicle sputters and dies with a final clunk. The cold starts to creep in once again, but a new, unnatural heat builds somewhere deep in Darren's chest.

He places his glasses on the dashboard.

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Undaunted, Darren returns along the well-traveled path in the snow. Adrenaline courses through his body like never before. The day is fading, and without his glasses, he can't see very well, but a tree with extra limbs and a cancerous growth is easy for him to find. The thing has switched trees, closer along the path than before. Darren lies down in the snow, toes pointed outward, like his father showed him when he first started hunting, before shooting animals for sport felt wrong.

With the rifle's scope, he locates the creature, hanging there, waiting. He begins pulling the slack out of the trigger. The rifle's report will surprise him, and it should.

"What are you doing, man?"

The voice is familiar, but it sounds like it is on the other side of a glass wall. Muddled. Darren opens his non-shooting eye and sees long legs in camo coveralls ten feet away. He raises his other eye off the scope. Even in the descending darkness of winter's night, he recognizes the form. However, it has a quality that doesn't fit. The thing standing there looks like Cal, but is made from woven shadows.

"C'mon, man, let me show you this buck."

Darren can almost quote the next thing it says.

"It's the biggest frickin' buck I've ever seen."

The cold ground radiates up into his chest. He knows he has to address the image. Even if it is a gross facsimile of his dead friend. His glasses would surely tell him this as well.

The voice says, "I thought you were going to leave me out here."

Tree limbs crack in the distance, like a fire working its way through young wood.

"I'm sorry, Cal."

"It's okay, man. Put your rifle away. The buck is already dead. I just need help carrying it out."

"You're gone."

Cal's shadow wavers. The wind picks up. There is movement in Darren's peripheral vision. More dry branches fall with muted impacts. Closer.

Darren brings the rifle up to his eye and points it at the shadow's face.

“C’mon, man,” the voice says.

The mouth moves, but is out of sync with the words. It has no tongue, and its teeth...too many of them. Sharp.

Crunching closer.

Darren turns the rifle from the shadow to the thing swinging in the trees. Two ropy arms grasp limbs overhead, pulling them closer and closer. Tree to tree. The remaining tentacles reach forward like hungry snakes, seeking flesh.

Darren aims toward the middle, where two eyes remain affixed on him, unblinking.

“No, Darren!” The voice distorts.

The rifle goes off. Screams of a watery terror from nightmares echo through the twilight. The thing falls out of Darren’s field of vision. An audible thump, then the winds calm.

Darren works himself up from the prone position. The shadow is gone. A dark cloud of snow settles fifty yards away. He walks with measured steps toward the newly formed drift. Up closer, he can see bluish drops of a thick liquid spilling from a hole in the pulsating mound of snow-colored tentacles. The smell reminds Darren of art class in school, where Cal got in trouble for his “inappropriate” paintings.

A singular tentacle reaches out and pats Darren’s ankle.

“Please don’t kill us,” it says in a voice like Cal’s, but choking on bubbles. “We are sorry.”

Darren raises his rifle.

Silence rules the night by the time Darren finds his way back to the truck. Snow has blown up on the vehicle's hood, and the driver's side door is partially blocked, so he climbs in through the passenger-side door. He places Cal's rifle back on the top rung of the gun rack, his own rifle just below it. The gunpowder smell takes him back to that Fourth of July when he first met Cal. They were in first grade, just six years old. Darren was scared of lighting the fireworks, but the taller boy who had just moved in down the street was fearless. The new boy with the big smile stood beside Darren.

"You can do it, man. Light it up!"

That was when it all began.

A smile creeps onto Darren's face.

The impossibly full moon sits high in the sky, giving the world a bluish tint. The diamonds from the morning have transformed into sapphires.

No one will understand the truth of what has happened. That much is certain. Darren especially doesn't look forward to returning the truck to Cal's father.

He slides over to the driver's seat and digs the keys out from under the seat. With some effort, he manages to start the truck, yet again. Cold air blows out of the vents. Darren is numb to it all and sits in the low hum of the engine.

He puts the truck into reverse and, surprisingly, backs out of the snow drift, first try, up onto the desolate snow-packed country road.

The truck idles.

The air warms.

The 'J' dances.

Darren reaches under layers of sweat-dried clothing and unhooks the golden chain from around his neck. The 'K' sways back and forth in front of him. He fixes it to the rearview mirror. It spins briefly before nestling up to the 'J.'

Darren shifts into drive and heads south.