

The Red String

by Ben Brown, age 17, Gorham

You still recall the day the horizon vanished.

The snowy mist descended slowly, like a mother's blanket over the cold world, like an endless fog that stretched from your head to the end of a stretched foot. It was like wading through murky water with goggles slipping from your wincing eyes. Every step is a rough trudge through dense winter spiderwebs, sketching fear in the deep frozen snow. Vipers of cold bite your palms as you reach towards the tent door, stripping off your large whale blubber cover coat and blinking the frost off your eyelids.

"Daddy! You're back," your daughter says, wrapping her bare, cold arms around your fragile waist as you zip the Scott tent shut tight.

"Tara, what have I said about wearing your warm clothes?"

"But, daddy, I get so hot in them!"

You chuckle and pat her on the head. Reaching back, your son shyly smiles from across the room.

"Theo," you say. "We'll go hunting in the morning."

Theo nods and clasps his pale hands together.

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While the sun can often give solace from the frigid, whipping winds, the cold night sky only grows colder in the darkness. The wind whips against your tent walls. It felt like, at any moment, you could just lift off into the silent sky, even though the braces had held strong for so many years. A ground sheet was laid across the floor of the tent, where, nightly, you unrolled your down-filled sleeping bags close to your children's to conserve body heat. You tuck close together, the three of you, and try to cry quietly enough that you won't hear each other.

Your food is stored in plywood crates just outside of your tent. Bears aren't a worry here anymore, as the temperatures grew too frigid for even their hibernation, and their food died off quickly. Every meal was fish, snagged from the frozen waters around your camp, or deep in a bored hole in the thick ice. Every few mornings, you take Theo on a hunt for fish, if leopard seals haven't gotten to them already. Walking through the white landscape was silent and slow. You led a vibrant red steel cable from your tent to where you were walking.

You trudge forward silently, with the taut line under your watchful eye. It slipped between your fingers slowly and sharply against the outside of your rubber gloves. The rope was hard to see through the lingering cold mist, even so close to your face. You give it a tug to make sure it's still attached to your tent. It strains. The spool of string is held by Theo, who walks a few yards ahead of you, letting the colored string drip behind him and across his indistinct footsteps, and his other arm drags the wagon that you use to carry food.

"Here," you say over the sharp breeze.

Theo nods and drops the cable's spool before stepping on the line to keep it in place.

You take the ice chisel from where it's pinned against your cushioned back. It's a little over five feet tall, with a steel side and a flat side, and a ring for holding it from the top. You stab it into the ground.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

The ice around the tip of the blade shatters, sending cracks that echo closely through the thick air. Shrapnels of ice fly into your face and cake your boots in white.

“The ice is thin today,” you say.

Theo, barely visible through the mist, looks up at you, worried.

“It’ll be fine,” you say. “It’s thick enough to hold us both. Just be careful.”

You continue to chip away at the ice slowly, boring a small hole into the frigid ground.

The dark water swirls beneath your chisel as you bore slowly, making sure not to strike too hard. Soon, the hole is large enough for you to just barely fit your arm through, and then you know it’s wide enough. You pull a makeshift fishing rod from the wagon Theo was dragging and stick it out to him.

“You first,” you say.

Before Theo can place the hook into the black water, you hear a distant sound, like a roar of thunder, echoing from across the lake. It is barely audible at first, but soon grows into a vicious scream. The ground beneath you starts to shake, and you watch as a ravine in the ice forms, ripping through the lake surface and spraying frost into the invisible sky. Theo opens his mouth in a silent scream as the icy ground beneath him gapes open, the dark water swallowing your son. You scream and lunge towards the cracks in the ice. The ground beneath you rumbles more aggressively, mocking you. Your heart beats through your chest. You can hear yourself shouting, but the rumble has grown so loud that you’re not quite sure what you’re shouting

about. Throwing off your goggles and hat, you take a deep breath of the crisp air and close your eyes before slipping head-first into the chasm.

A minute feels like forever. It's only been a few seconds, yet it feels like for an hour you've been scrambling in the frigid water. It presses against you like a cold hug. You flail your arms in the thick water, searching for any part of Theo you can hold onto. You stretch your fingers wide and feel something move between them. You grab at it, praying it's Theo, but you immediately recognize the shape of an empty glove. You feel yourself shouting, to no avail, into the silent water. Your throat is fiercely clasped shut by the rush of water, barely keeping it from filling your lungs and killing you quickly. You feel your head begin to float towards the top of the water, your body going limp and motionless. You can barely feel the water move between your gloveless fingers. You can't tell if you've gone numb or if you're imagining moving your hand at all. You stare upwards, your eyes squinting through the murk, and see a light growing above your head. It covers you like a warm and hopeful blanket, and your body is suddenly rushed with a feeling of extreme warmth and comfort. You smile slowly and open your mouth to embrace the light. At that moment, you feel freezing water rush from your mouth.

"Theo?" you mutter, vomiting red water from your opening throat. You feel the air expand around you. A soft voice is heard over the ringing in your ears.

"Daddy? I heard thunder and followed the red string."