

When he opened his eyes, the man saw snow.

It covered the ground that he laid upon and found its way into every nook and cranny of his body. Small piles of the snow were lodged in the worst spots—the armpits, the belly, and the crotch. His back was towards the morning sky and the left side of his face was partially covered with a thin layer of slush. The first thing the man noticed was that the snowfall must have stopped long before he awakened. That was the peculiarity about this place; there was always snow to see yet it was a rare sight to see it snowing. Although it was quite odd for the man to be thinking this for his mind seemed to be as blank as the thick frost around him. His life was momentarily unrecognizable and his surroundings blurred.

It was only when he pushed himself up and on his feet, and the pain from sore muscles shot through his body, that everything began to become apparent to him.

He was in the midst of a huge mountain range that went for miles in either direction. Each mountain was blanketed with trees and brushes from pines to cedars that lent a friendly, green touch to the already white, barren wasteland. He stood upon the centermost lands of a mountain that dominated the others with its unnavigable girth and a pinnacle so tall it was excessive. However, the trees and brushes that enveloped this particular mountain had floras that were not green but a sickening brown. Their branches were jagged and bent at weird angles looking like they had clawed their way out of the ground. Despite this, these branches were held close to the mountain as captives.

The snow on the mountain had its own uncanny characteristics. It stretched far beyond the mountain and into the horizon. It didn't drop off the world's end but instead melted into the sky creating a haze of blue and grey. It was hard to differentiate it from the many white clouds aloft in the atmosphere. The snow stuck to the sky as if it was the only thing higher than the mountain itself—going up was the only way to escape.

A tall, grey peak came from the mountain's body and ripped into the blue above. The peak cast a huge shadow over the land that the man felt was the embodiment of anxiety; the color beneath the shade did not lend a darker hue but was instead black.

The other mountains were speckled with lodges, restaurants, ski slopes, and resort centers. The one that the man found himself on had none. Its steep slope and mile stretching body prevented any kind of construction from happening. Looming overhead, though, were hundreds of coaxials that ski lifts and cable cars ran along. These were here to connect the various mountains and attractions. What could be seen of the ski lifts and cable cars far away were just tiny, silver dots.

The man turned his attention away from the landscape and towards himself. He began to feel his body for wounds. It took minutes but a few hand gestures later he felt nothing but bruises, some bloody cuts, and the sodden, cold clothes that stuck to his body. The boots on his feet were resilient to the snow, so, as expected, they were fine. His jacket was the thing that had suffered the most from the snow and in turn was heavy and frigid. He peeled it off with a few crude jolts and one final lurch of the back. Underneath he wore just a tanktop and a pale colored sweater. He wasn't cold. It was the kind of snow that one could frolic in without any consideration of attire, the kind that even paranoid mothers wouldn't worry over before bundling up their precious little ones. He held the jacket in his hands and examined it before throwing it down. It was one of those bright orange, ski resort issued jackets that was required to be worn on the mountain. Each of them had nametags and on his read "Daemon R."

When he realized where he was, Daemon was met with the reality of his tragedy. In front of him laid the ski lift. It was flipped on its side where at least a quarter of it was buried beneath the shallow snow. It was a lover ski lift built for two. It had blue cushioned leather seats and a frame of reflective metal that was probably steel. The seats were ripped at their seams and gave way to hundreds of little cotton fibers that, against their pure delicateness, still made their way into the surrounding snow.

Daemon shifted his view to the top of the ski lift. The titanium latch that it used to hang from on the cables was severed at the bottom. The metal resembled a hunk of children's playdoh that was torn in half with its mutilated tendrils that were frayed and hung in midair. He felt uneasy, having once heard that even the strongest of winds couldn't bend titanium. It reminded him of abstract art, something he hated.

He could hear the words of his Modern American Art professor from college, "Daemon, don't try to label it as if it's a definitive something. All it actually is is a kind of reality seen through a person's eyes. You can either appreciate the art through the artist's eyes, or you can look at it through your own." Grey areas confused him. He always preferred to live in the black and white where explanations were plentiful. Daemon no longer felt uneasy from the sight of the titanium latch, nor the plain being of strandedness. He felt uneasy because he was on a mountain that was nothing but grey.

Daemon tried to remember how it happened but to no avail. There wasn't the slightest sign of damage to the ski lift before the accident. There wasn't the slightest of even a shaky wind to presume a storm. He knew that the resort checks every ski lift each morning for anomalies. *At Wolf's Creek Resorts, your safety is our top priority.* In his head he could recall no events between sitting in the ski lift and waking on the ground. Panic slowly engulfed his body and his face became warm. It was the kind of panic that sets in when something awful occurs and there isn't one thing to do about it. The ski lift had broken and had plunged him to the ground. He thought about it until it became clear that he should be dead. How did he survive? How did—?

Then it hit him; Elena.

How did his wife survive? The assumption that she indeed survived made him sick to his stomach. Daemon wasn't a stupid man; he had a Ph.D. in ethics, a Masters in psychology, and a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania that proved as much. To him, it wasn't logical nor was it probable that she was alive. He suppressed the idea only to be caught by a new one. When he woke, she wasn't his first thought. Were his marriage vows that thin? Daemon had only thought of himself and of surviving the fall. It seemed that what the veterans from Iraq said about death was true: "When your friend is shot down five feet away from you, you don't feel sadness. You don't suddenly mourn for them nor do you wish it had been you. You feel relief." His heart was what belonged to her. His mind, the facilitator of safe thoughts and deeds, belonged to him.

His love for his wife came to fruition and he knew he had to find her. Only Daemon's eyes frantically searched the scene for any signs of Elena. He was still too deep in shock to begin moving again. Daemon stopped his search and momentarily glanced at the ski lift. He saw his face in the reflective metal. Looking back at him was a handsome man with a short trimmed, salt and pepper colored beard. The man had a full head of youthful, brown hair that was brushed to the side creating a low wave. Creases and wrinkles were carved into the man's face from years of exaggerated expressions. Disrupting the dull colors of his face were green eyes—twisted spindles of forest shades that were packed tightly together to form a sphere. Starting from the far left corner of his forehead and ending at the bridge of his nose was a long gash. He most likely needed stitches. It made the area near his left eye swollen and black. Daemon

could imagine hitting his head in the fall despite not remembering any of it. He reached up with a shaky hand and touched the gash. A sharp pain ran through his head and he retreated his hand regrettably. When the pain subsided, Daemon looked at the reflection one last time. He saw nothing but himself.

His eyes were pulled away from his reflection. Daemon focused on the ground around him. The snow was undisrupted except for the man-shaped spot where he previously laid. It was so white and flat that it was hard to realize it was snow and not some endless nothing resembling limbo. There were no signs of Elena from what he could see. There were no signs of anything but himself.

He almost gave up his search when a patch of brown caught his eye. It poked out from the edge of the ski lift at an angle he could luckily see. It was something he overlooked in his first look around because of its diminutiveness. As he noticed it was the ground where a body had once laid, heat surged through his body and gave him the ability to move again.

Daemon stumbled to his knees only to quickly get back up. He hustled over to the ski lift and slid around to its other side. As he reached it he saw the brown depression wasn't small, but man-sized. Daemon knew it was where Elena had laid, but it was empty of any body now. He dropped to the ground and studied the patch of dirt. The spot was completely absent of even a strand of hair. When Daemon blinked, his eyes became reflective of the dawn's early rays. Tears began to form in the creases of his eyes. A road blighted with yearning and worry had been paved for him, and he had to travel on it. He was sick to think she had once been here and was gone now.

In his grief, Daemon nearly missed the tracks. He held back his tears, wiped away the remaining ones and then saw; starting at the spot where Elena had laid was a long strip of flat snow that went as far as Daemon could see. It looked as if Elena had been dragged through the snow. Daemon immediately thought of an animal. The people at the resort said there were wolves on these mountains, however, he saw no evidence of any paw tracks. Another person could have come and rescued her, but he soon dismissed that idea. There were no footprints. There was nothing, just that strip of flattened snow. Elena must have been hurt and pulled herself to safety. He did not know why she would not have crawled to him instead of going wherever she did.

Daemon stood up and instinctively reached into his pocket to call for help. He grabbed an empty cloth and remembered he purposely left his cellphone back at the lodge. Elena wanted their vacation to be uninterrupted. Even though he valued his promise to her, he regretted not bringing it with him. He cursed at the air for being foolish. Daemon wasn't angry at her, just annoyed that a cellphone could be both of their saviors now.

Daemon then tried something else. He looked up at the sky, at the ski lifts and the cable cars, and shouted.

"Help—I need help!" his voice crackled through the air.

Daemon didn't realize it was the first time he had spoken since the fall. His throat was so dry that his voice felt like sandpaper. He had tried for a resounding howl but instead ended up with something more along the lines of a squawk. After coughing profoundly, and almost choking air, Daemon looked for ways to moisten his throat. He took one look at the snow around him and decided otherwise. Now wasn't a good time to risk a bacterial infection from eating snow. Rather, Daemon began to build up saliva in his mouth. Once he felt as if he had enough, he swallowed some and it ran down his dry throat. It was a

similar feeling to the washing of one's brittle hands after a long day in the cold. He repeated this a few more times until the back of his gullet was properly moistened.

"I'm stranded down here!" He sounded raspy but his voice was loud enough to start an echo.

His excitement at success was short lived. The echo didn't bounce off the mountain sides to the people snuggled in ski lifts and cable cars on the other mountains. It was caught by surrounding tree branches and soon lost its sound. Daemon looked bewildered. He tried again until his voice couldn't take the screaming anymore. The calls for help started out sensible until they became pleading and begging in nature.

Then fucks and goddammits were thrown into the mix with pleases and get-me-out-of-heres. Daemon was no longer looking for aid but rather rambling for the sake of making noise. He needed to have someone hear him. He needed to have someone hear something.

"I don't wanna fucking be here!—I want to go home." was said with such a bitterness that even the most stony-eyed of people would feel bad for him.

The graceful will to stay and wait was foiled by the blatant reality that no help was coming. It was not coming anytime soon, at least. The ski lift route covered an expanse of many miles for a course of no less than three hours. There were little checkpoints and long gaps between each ski lift. No one would have seen his own ski lift fall. It would take awhile for the resort officials to know something had gone amiss and even longer for them to find him. Meanwhile, the clock could be ticking for Elena.

It was hard not to think about the term *PNR*, something Daemon learned stood for the "point of no return" while attending the mandated resort field meetings. It was when you reached a part of your trip, a ski lift tour or a snowboard exploit, where you could not turn back. Ski lifting had a *PNR* after all of the checkpoints and snowboarding, of course, once someone had begun down the mountain. The helicopter rides that took people to farther resort plazas had a *PNR* half way through the flight when the amount of fuel depleted from a fuel tank made it impossible to go anywhere but forward. Daemon could not help thinking that he was close to the point of no return. He was out here and was out here alone.

Daemon was overwhelmed with frustration. He began to walk in idiotic circles around the ski lift until the ground was unmasked from beneath the disheveled snow. He stopped only to bend down and pick up handfuls of the snow. One by one, Daemon threw them angrily at the sky. Some were launched from the curled, and somewhat athletic, motion of his fingertips. Others were sloppy and forced through the air from the sheer strength that accompanies a grown man's toss. Handfuls were caught by surrounding tree branches. The gnarled twists of brown knew no bounds when it came to keeping things in. Their tightly knitted appendages connected tree to tree and blocked out great portions of the sky. They resembled nothing more than the shrinking window of light seen from within a coffin during the closing of the lid. There was no world beyond them.

Daemon proceeded to let out roars that, despite their intensity, would not reach the ears of anyone. Like him, his voice was trapped on this mountain. Daemon suddenly lost a battle with wrath and became enraged. He wanted a rescue and he needed to find Elena.

A hopeful memory formed in his mind. It washed away the anger, and elevated his spirit. Prompting his revival were the words of the resort's Refuge Advisor. *Safety is always close by, here. Every cable car,*

*ski lift, lodge, and resort facility is outfitted with first aid kits in case of emergencies.* The crunching sound of packed snow underneath his boots followed.

Daemon made his way to the ski lift and looked inside. Its seats were bare except for fallen ice crystals. He circumvented the lift for the sake of searching, looking in possible places two and then three times each. He would have considered what he was looking for to be lost if, in his scurrying, he had not stirred up piles of snow.

The faded brown backpack, which donned a small red cross symbol, was half crushed, and now half sticking out from beneath the ski lift's side. When he pulled it out, Daemon was careful not to rip it. The action took quite a few tries; a combination of brute strength and gentle maneuvering that was needed to not destroy the pack entirely. There was only one compartment of the bag, firmly closed shut by two zippers.

He hoped to find the solution to all of his problems within: to being stranded part, needing to call for help, and the pressing matter of finding Elena. More, Daemon wanted the bag to hold the key to recovering what was left of his failing marriage. He wanted the bag to hold something that would take the pieces of his broken past and put them back together. Or at least hold something that would wipe his mind of the memories. He wanted the bag to clean the blood from his hands, a sort of cleaning that would make it possible for him to reach true redemption for what he did. The bag held none of these things.

Many things in the bag did not survive the fall. The water bottles had puncture holes in them and they were empty. The heating blanket's battery was beaten. The funnel to a rain water purifier was bent inwards forming two flat sheets of metal. Sadly, the one thing that Daemon had immediately searched for was snapped in half; a plastic, orange flare gun.

Daemon fell into a rage of despair once again. Everything was lost for him and he knew it. Daemon was truly afraid. The most awful things that could now happen were starvation, dehydration, illness, and the possibility of being attacked by an animal. There was nothing left to do but be a pawn to a relentless wilderness. The idea of being stranded here forever weighed him down; he almost felt himself sinking into the surrounding snow.

He stared at the trail of flattened snow. Daemon knew it was created by Elena but there was something about it that unnerved him. He stared, hoping for something to come from wherever it ended. He was thinking that this was punishment. This punishment. His fear, his damnation, it was all punishment.

Doing the only thing he could, Daemon dumped the marred contents of the bag onto the snow. He sorted the things rendered useless from everything else. In solid conclusion were four flares, a few mini packages of saline water, one roll of gauze, three bundles of sixty meter, elastic cords, and a sharp, gutter's knife.

Daemon stuck the packages of saline water and the gauze into his front pockets. The three bundles of elastic cords were thrown over his shoulders. Each flare went into its own belt loop on his pants, the belt holding them snug to his waist. The gutter's knife was double serrated, made from stainless steel, and about six inches long with an appropriately palm sized handle of leather on wood. It was placed carefully in his back pocket.

Glancing at the flattened snow strip, Daemon thought of Elena. At its end he would surely find her. He

stopped concerning himself with getting supplies and keeping alive. If his last moments were to be on an unsettling mountain then so be it—but so be it with her.

The path was engulfed by trees in the distance. He took one step, and then another until his pace quickened the further he followed the trail. He left behind the bag, the broken supplies, the ski lift, and the spot he where he awoke.

Following the low line of snow took Daemon far away from the wreckage. As he walked onwards he played with the saline water packages in his pockets or fingered the grip of the gutter's knife. There was a warmth at the spots where the padded gauzes were which made what little cold the mountain contained not seem so bad. He thought he had gone a couple of miles from where he had once laid though it felt like only minutes had passed. What was even stranger were the weird features he noticed on the way. The rest of the mountains of the resort had whistling winds constantly blowing up snowstorms and making whistle like noises. There was no wind on this mountain. There was no blowing about of snow crystals or the shaking of brushes and tree branches. Everything was still and quiet. There were also no animals seen or any heard. Other mountains were infected by large packs of deer, gophers, wolves, squirrels, and owls, but this mountain was uninhabited.

The more distance he covered, the more pieces of sky were blotted out by the branches. With every step, one more tree branch would block out the light. Branches of different trees grappled with each other until there was something of a natural ceiling made completely of lively wood. In what he thought to be only an hour, Daemon was soon walking through shadow. Only a few cracks of light came down from above to guide his way.

The roots of the trees mimicked the branches. They came above ground and gave the snowy landscape a pattern of coiling black and brown. It was all Daemon could do to step over the roots while still keeping an eye on the path. This was made all the more challenging since the roots varied in size and length.

Although he sensed neither animals nor people, Daemon had the strange feeling that he was being watched. Occasionally, he would stop and look around to make sure that he was indeed alone. These moments countered cliché scenes from horror movies. The feeling did not pass when he stopped to search for his onlooker; instead, it persisted even when he stood still. Whomever or whatever was watching him had the gall to continue staring even when Daemon stopped moving. With little he could do about it Daemon dismissed the idea that he was being stalked and continued forward. He was a helpless victim of his own anxiety. The only one stalking him, he decided was himself.

The most unnerving was the path itself. It was shaped perfectly in a straight line through the ever thickening forest. Whenever foliage or a boulder blocked the trail, the impression on the ground did not go around it; it curiously stopped where the obstacle started only to reappear on the other side. Daemon had many questions to ask Elena when he found her. What happened when she woke up? Why did she not come to him? How did she possibly do this thing with her trail? Something told him that he did not want to get to the point where he could ask these questions. It would surely mean his demise, but why?

Following the path for so long, it came as a shock to Daemon when he reached its end. He stopped suddenly in surprise and nearly lost comprehension of what was laid before him. The trees that had once shielded the sky with their branches had opened into a clearing. The field, football field in size and oval in shape was much like the rest of the landscape, completely covered in snow. Tiny mountain flowers, with

pastel colored petals and the tips curled brown, dotted the clearing, turning it into a meadow. In the middle of it all, disrupting the simple scene, was a lone, den-like cave.

Its body came up from the ground composed of a few yards of leveled rock before ending. Its mouth, at least twenty five feet high and almost thirty feet wide, was a gaping black hole and offset the minuteness of everything around it. It had to be. Unlike the rest of the land, the cave was completely bare of plant life. Its cold, smooth surface of stone made it impossible for something to grow on or near it. Consequently, the mountain flowers captive to the cave's shadow were dead from lack of sunlight. They were not brown from winter's touch, they were black from death's great embrace. What made up for a lack of green decoration were huge spiked boulders that protruded from the cave's walls. None blocked the entrance, a sign that things lurked inside.

It was darkness coming from the cave that made Daemon more afraid than he had been all day. Its black mouth was thick and smothering; even the brightest of lights could not penetrate its depth. From the minute he woke, the things that had scared Daemon were of the known, things like being defenseless against wolves or being unable to call the resort. But looking at the cave's entrance, looking at the path winding inside, planted a new kind of fear into Daemon. It was fear of the unknown and it was the scariest thing out there. He had no idea what the cave held nor what the darkness itself concealed in its shadowy veil. The cave could be desolate only housing Elena—whether she was grasping for life, dead, or perfectly fine. Then again, amplifying fear told Daemon to expect unfavorable alternatives.

He wanted to turn around and never come back. He wanted to leave this place forever, to rid his mind of the memory itself. He wanted to forget his feelings, to forget the miles he walked to get here, to forget Elena herself. But he couldn't forget her. There was no forgetting how he felt about her. There was no walking away from experiencing everything that was her. His next step took him closer to the cave's entrance.

His body screamed to stop walking. His bones, which were once a strong structure for his physical motives, were now resisting his muscles' every movement of going forward. His toes curled in his boots, his skin prickled with each step. Shivers ran up and down his back to the beat of his heart, which was progressively making its way out of his chest with each thumping sound.

Daemon had no idea how long it took him to reach the cave. Fifty yards or so went right over his head and into the snow around him. He used the strong pulsing of his neck arteries to guide his steps.

*Drub, drub.*

Daemon entered the clearing.

*Drub, drub.*

He was halfway there—plenty of the small mountain flowers had already been crushed under his boots.

*Drub, drub.*

Nearly at the opening, the cave had thrown its shadow upon him.

*Drub, drub.*

Daemon took his first steps into the dark mouth, crossing the point of no return.

