



The Magazine of the Bethlehem Writers Group Winter 2017

In this issue: Our theme for this issue is "Snowbound," and emerging author D.T.Krippene offers a dystopian short story of a young man hiding from authorities in a remote cabin.

Snow Belt Sanctuary

D.T. Krippene

Topped with several inches of lichen roof sod, the ramshackle cabin of splintered, bug-eaten logs belonged in one of Lloyd's antique picture books.

I dropped my pack on a snow-salted boulder. "You got to be kidding me. Millions of deserted homes and you come up with a haven for rats and who knows what else?"

"You want to take your chances with roving gangs who'll turn you in for a few cans of expired cat food – that's if they don't eat you instead," Lloyd replied with a chuckle. "Aren't many of these structures left in the world."

“Gee, I wonder why. What’s holding this thing together, termite carcasses?”

Lloyd un-padlocked the door and scanned a smudged, pregnant sky. “Looks like you’re going to get some practice snowshoeing.”

Decades of dust and mold assaulted the nostrils when I opened the door.

“I’ll leave you the shotgun, Winchester, and plenty of ammo,” Lloyd said. “Let me walk you through the power cells and hydro unit.”

“I’ll stick out like a bonfire on Directorate sat-scans out here.”

Lloyd jerked his thumb skyward. “Won’t get through this shit. Even if it did, you’ll blink red like all the other wildlife in the area. Probably tag you as a hibernating bear.”

“Wildlife? What wildlife?”

“Thought you were seventeen, not a six-year-old sniveler afraid of the dark.” He laughed and patted the stubble of my face. “You need to man up, Ryan.”

A spider web sealed cupboard groaned when I opened it. It took a little finger scrubbing to read the expiration date on a can of SPAM. “This shit is over twenty-years old.”

“Nobody’s been up here since the plague ended. Long as the can isn’t blown; expiration dates aren’t what they used to be.”

It took concentration to focus on Lloyd’s instructions. The clench of anxiety was hard to ignore, a silent voice ached to beg Lloyd to stay. “What if I get hurt? Can I call you if I need too?”

“Don’t get hurt.” Lloyd extracted the battery from my com tablet. “Directorate satellites can track these things, bonehead.” He tried not to laugh when I gaped at him. “If you absolutely need to contact me, use the encrypted R-Sat function I loaded. Keep it under thirty-seconds, and make sure to remove the battery.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ll swing around in a couple weeks.”

Lloyd’s snow-cat disappeared down the trail until distance and snow-fall consumed its chugging rumble. The silence of a winter forest pressed against me with its suffocating mantle.

Loneliness was not a new concept to me, but it was always in a sea of survivors, distraction and noise. Dark took on a new meaning. Wind moaned the melancholy of a first class haunting; its womanish howl practicing scales ranging from a bone-strumming bass to banshee soprano. I swear at times it called my name.

Hoooo – Ryaaaaaan.

It snowed for five days; the fifth a whiteout blizzard that flayed the skin. I muttered curses to the idiots who screwed up the earth’s environment and reestablished the Arctic Circle in what used to be the Adirondacks. Welcome to the new Snow Belt, Lloyd laughed in my head. Belt my goose-pimpled ass. It was a belt, suspenders, flannel shirt, and a hat.

You’ll be safe, Lloyd had said. No one will find you. Life in the wilderness is a freeing experience.

Bastard.

Roused from deep hibernation to full panic alert one night, I sprang-up so fast, the zipper of my sleeping bag ripped. Retinas burned from sudden flashlight glare, my watch read 2:36 AM. I sucked in a breath and held it, despite a rocketing heart that wanted every molecule of oxygen I could send it.

A scream, muted by walls of the cabin.

A design obligation of all zippers was to jam at the most inappropriate time. It budged a few inches, enough for me to worm myself from its trap. Cold air blasted me full awake when I burst outside in long johns and unlaced boots. My neck throbbed with the millisecond delay of my heartbeat.

Growling drifted from somewhere deep in the woods. Sounded like feral dogs. Their populations exploded in years, but I never thought the animals ventured far from the former populated areas that gave birth to them. Many animals sounded human-like when attacked. Rabbits make the most heart-wrenching squeal when hawk talons sweep them from the ground. My heartbeat descended with the presumption of a natural thing.

About to go back inside, my eyes adapted to the dark picked up a ghostly red glow deep in the woods. A campfire? Couldn't be.

Then I heard it. A distant shout muffled by snow-laden branches.

“Ah ... bugger off.” Definitely human.

My heart returned to the panic treadmill. Adrenalin broke safety seals and sent me back to fetch the shotgun. I chambered a round, and shoved spare cartridges in a jacket pocket.

Snowshoes fastened, I sucked in a huge breath. You sure about this? Could be bounty hunters looking to bag the only human born after the plague ended. Nah. I'd hear gun fire by now.

Weaving between trees in the purple glow of starlit snow, I plodded toward a fiery-red glimmer and sounds of snarling. When I cleared a hillock, down in a protected hollow, someone in a hooded white snowsuit fended off a pack of large black-furred dogs with an emergency flare.

Damn, those are big dogs. Wait. Holy shit. Wolves. Five of them.

After the plague removed their only predator, wolf packs swelled with the unexpected bounty of livestock left to fend for themselves. I wasn't aware wolves had migrated east, or were unafraid of humans.

Two wolves snapped at the torchbearer, never getting close enough to get swiped by the flare. The other three circled. The flare sputtered. Soon, light-blinded retinas would fail for both of us. Wolves didn't need to see. The nose would guide them like a programmed missile in a flesh-ripping frenzy. I gripped the halogen flashlight along the barrel, and switched it on.

"Hoooooo," I yelled to distract them.

Five sets of animal eyes and the hooded man turned toward my light at the same time. The wolves formed an offensive line. My hands shaking, I inched forward, swaying the gun from one to another. My adrenaline pump injected its magic as if to say be scared later.

Two wolves spread out in a flanking maneuver. Yellow eyes glared into the flashlight, driven by a stronger sense that could taste the warm blood in my veins. I took a knee to steady my aim. Can't believe I'm actually doing this.

The wolf closest to me, turned to look at the torch person behind it when the flare spit and fizzled. Seconds from blindness, I had to force a move.

“Hey dog, you going to stand there all night?”

I absolutely excel at spouting lame lines under stress, but it worked. The wolf turned its attention to me with bared fangs. Rumbled growls thrummed the air. I inhaled and held my breath. Got you. Didn't like being called a dog, did you. The alpha wolf charged me at a full run atop packed snow. Another two followed a second later. I exhaled and squeezed the trigger when the lead wolf got within twenty-feet.

The shot slammed the beast full in the snout and flipped it backward in a high-pitched screaming yelp. The other two stopped in their tracks to register what happened. I had precious seconds to load another cartridge, or I'd be a meat Popsicle.

I needed a game closer to ensure one of the beta wolves didn't become the new alpha and chose the one with the most deadly I-want-to-kill-you stare. My aim went wide of the wolf's torso and blasted its tail clean off. The injured wolf limp-sprinted toward the woods, followed by fellow betas with tails tucked between their legs.

I quickly chambered another round, and did a lighthouse sweep with the flashlight. Satisfied, I flicked the safety on and stared at the dead wolf a few moments to calm the shakes. A cough behind me broke through the storm drain of dwindling adrenaline.

Head concealed inside a fur-collared arctic hood, the guy looked like a coal-mining snowman, minus the carrot nose and button eyes. He dropped the flare stub and sat on a rock with hooded head in hands.

“Our friends probably won’t be back tonight, but I don’t want to take any chances.” I swept the light in a circle. Snow skis leaned against a pine tree near a mountain tent and wilderness pack. “How’d you get out here?”

The white polyester blob rocked back and forth, and didn’t answer.

“Um, look, I have a cabin nearby. Isn’t real big, but it has a stove, a roof and a door that locks.”

The rocking motion stopped.

“Unless you have a better idea, you shouldn’t stay out here.”

Snowman hesitated a moment, then grabbed his pack to follow me.

My new camping friend stood in the doorway, probably still sorting out if I was a werewolf in disguise. I removed my jacket, and worked on the potbelly stove.

“Are you hungry?” I rifled through cupboards for dried noodles. “When was the last time you ate?”

It was like trying to friend a stray cat. He eventually shuffled toward the stove and sat on a stool. I took apart the shotgun to clean it while the water heated. It had saved my butt this day and it deserved a little loving care.

I retried to initiate conversation. “Wow, that was scary. Good thing I heard you.”

When I turned around, hood, scarf and the top part of the snowsuit had been removed. I had to blink a few times to be sure I wasn’t experiencing a post traumatic hallucination.

Bedraggled chestnut hair matted to the oval, pale face of a young woman. She couldn’t be much older than me, which would have made her a child when over ninety-eight percent of the global population perished. According to Lloyd, as if the plague preferentially selected the young and elderly for extinction, people over fifty died off completely, number of survivors under the age of ten was infinitesimal. I imagined her worth to rover gangs must be priceless.

“If you’re – on the run, that’s fine,” I said. “Oh, I’m Ryan, by the way. Kind of a refugee myself.”

Water boiled over and hissed on the stove. I dumped a package of chicken-flavored noodles in the pot and stirred.

“Jenny,” the girl said. “Name’s Jenny.”

Strange accent. I handed her the soup. “Go slow, it’s hot.”

She took the pot and sniffed it.

“Noodles are a little dated, but then isn’t everything these days,” I laughed. “The accent, heard a recording once – sounds British. Is that where you’re from – before the plague?”

“Why is it you Yanks think it’s always British?” Jenny slurped her soup. “Australia.”

“Australia?” I didn’t mean to bark it. “You mean, like recently?”

The intensity of her green eyes sparkled like candle-lit emeralds. “Hitched a ride with a bunch of drongos on a sailboat. Hit the west coast few months ago. Been on your outback since.”

A girl sails from the other side of the planet without drowning, actually makes it across the unprotected expanse without getting caught, and nearly ends up as wolf scat a stone’s throw from my front door.

A gazillion other places she could have headed, how the hell did she end up in the middle of Five Ponds Wilderness in the dead of winter? More importantly, where is she going?



A native of Wisconsin and Connecticut, **DT Krippene** deserted aspirations of being a biologist to live the corporate dream and raise a family. After six homes, a ten-year stint working in Asia, and an imagination that never slept, his muse refused to be hobbled as a mere dream. DT writes science fiction, dystopian, and alternate-world fantasy. His current project is set in a near future dystopia where over 95% of the human population has been wiped out by a virus, and survivors unable to procreate ... until a small number of women give birth on the same day.

You can find DT on [his website](#) and his social media links, [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Pinterest](#).