

The Woman on the Mountain

A Christmas Story

By Brad Isaac

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for Kim – Merry Christmas 2007

December was warm that year. The cold of high elevation was replaced with temperatures normally reserved for late spring.

The young newlywed asked her husband to take off the Saturday to go hiking. It would be a shame to waste Mother Nature's gift. The sun was bright, the trails were clear.

Work, however, had different plans for the man.

The woman would have to enjoy the hike alone. So she grabbed her day pack and took off for the mountain.

On arrival, she signed the ledger at the beginning of the trail, looked up toward the peak, smiled and with deliberate footsteps began the half-jog - half hike to the tree line.

In good shape she made easy work of the long 7 mile journey. The world's beauty and magnificence made her debate trying a push for the summit.

Unfortunately, as she passed the tree line, the temperature dropped. What began a warm 70 degree day fell to 27 degrees almost immediately and the wind caused her a chill.

Disappointed she couldn't brag about her December "summit", she wisely decided to head back. The trip back down the mountain was quicker than the upward hike. She could breathe better as she jogged - which only improved as the air thickened with more oxygen.

The roots of the oak tree camouflaged under the leaves made for an insidious snare. A right foot wedged under the hard wood left no room to compensate. She fell forward, snapping her ankle and contorting her knee - the instant wave of pain bringing tears to her eyes.

How could I be so stupid?

Lying at the side of the path, the brown leaves crackled and eerily cushioned her compared to the harsh abuse formerly

provided by the tree. She clenched her ankle to see if it was broken or merely sprained.

Her right leg throbbing so intensely she could feel it in her stomach. However the searing pain was almost immediately eclipsed by a far more terrifying thought.

Although she was dressed warmly enough to handle a day of sub 40 degree temperatures, she would likely not survive a night below freezing.

This occurred to her and she attempted to sit up.

Her hiking experience kicked in and her eyes searched until she noticed a crevice in a nearby rock with an overhang. She crawled, gripping and pulling toward the shelter. All the while keeping pressure off her injured leg, which was impossible to do. She contemplated hopping on one leg might be less painful. But in her current environment, she didn't want to risk losing use of both legs.

As she approached the crevice, she filled both hands and all her pockets with small wood to start a fire. Perhaps once settled with a base, she could venture for logs and timber. Thank God the rain had held the last 3 weeks. A fire would be impossible with wet wood.

When the woman makes it to the rock she peers up into the sky. The beautiful red orange hue of the descending sun does nothing to combat her instinctive fear and dread of the night ahead.

There would be a sudden, almost immediate, drop of 10 degrees. Then there would be a tortuous night of temperatures creeping downward.

She shivered at the thought. But then she decided if she built the fire just outside the rock's crevice, the smoke wouldn't fill the indentation and she wouldn't suffocate from the smoke.

She built the wood into a pile and wedged small twigs and branches below the larger ones. She found some leaves she would

use to ignite the first small branches. She thought about how nice a hot bonfire would heat the rocks around her to radiate heat throughout the night.

She tossed the largest piece onto the top of the wood. She imagined it would be even too hot for awhile. She smiled at the thought of having to "go outside" the cave to cool off.

She reached for her day pack and opened it. Rummaging, through her snacks, bandannas and band-aids she felt what she thought were her matches. A feeling of horror drained the blood from her face and the chill of terror injected adrenaline into her bloodstream.

She had forgotten her matches.

Two hours later, the temperature had already made a leap toward 0 but had stopped at only 18 degrees. The clear sky and twinkling stars did nothing to comfort the woman; her clothing too light for a night like this.

The only advantage being her leg, formerly throbbing in sickening pain, was numbed to tingling by the sub-freezing temperatures.

She soon thought about her death.

Would she be found in time? Would she be found after? What would people say about her? What would her husband say? What would he do? Would he marry his high school sweetheart Julie after all these years? Why wasn't he here now?

She felt a warm pressure in her chest. Then, she could clearly see her husband smile as he turned to say bye before he boarded the plane. As he walked the down ramp his head slowly disappearing

behind a corner. Ashes and flickering coals were lingering in the warm fireplace at the terminal gates.

Silent, subtle, sleep startled her with the realization she had drifted. Instantly, waves of panic cleared the fog of her dream.

A quick mental realization and she was back awake and in pain. Her lungs were rattling with each breath. Her body shaking so hard she believed her muscles would tear her body apart. Could her now brittle body withstand the autonomous spasms of what went beyond shivers?

Why must the body manufacture pain?
She thought.

She slowly and deliberately grabbed a granola bar from her pack. Knowing that food, although undesirable, would give her body a small break from the fight she forced herself to bite down on the crunchy bar. As she ate, she contemplated how when she dozed again, she would not

awaken. This was it. This was her last meal. It was her last feeling of life.

Logically, she knew the extent of her pain, but felt oddly warmer than she had for hours.

The tingle at her ankle was replaced with numbness. It reminded her that she was far too cold and would breath her last breath within the hour. She blinked quickly to avoid the impending dreams. One blink lingered too long and the fuzziness in the back of her head signaled to her it would be over soon.

What a waste, she thought. She felt guiltily that selfishness had brought her to this place. The plan of a family forever squandered due to pure stupidity.

As subtly as the first, she felt another dream. This time, it was a glow she noticed in the distance, at the bottom of the foothill.

Blurry for one moment, then sharpening the next, it appeared as a candle flame

nearing its end, flickering and fading. Half asleep, she thought it might be a lantern in the distance - but how was it moving? Perhaps it was only blowing in the wind.

It eventually disappeared, only to reappear brighter a few seconds later.

She instantly felt hopeful. Another dose of adrenalin hit her bloodstream. She slowly sat up and looked toward the light. It bounced with more assertiveness now. She realized it must be a hiker and he or she was following the winding path toward where she had fallen.

When the light made it within 30 or 40 yards of her, she began to call out to the person.

The light stopped moving briefly.

Then she called again.

The hiker slowly walked up the steep hill leading to the crevice in the rock.

When the hiker came close, she could see his old face above the warm glow of the lantern. His grey beard and maroon-brown cloak made her think of wizards. The mere fact his lantern was an oil lamp suspended within a glass and bronze lantern made the sorcerer image all the more real.

The woman lost hope. Dreams of wizards would not help her now. Part of her still awake, she knew the extent of her reality.

He immediately noticed the small pile of unlit wood in front of her. His frown conveyed he questioned why she hadn't lit it.

Without speaking, he knelt and opened the small window of his lantern and dangled a twig above the flame. It ignited immediately.

Almost motionless, he slowly withdrew the twig from the lantern to prevent it from extinguishing. He held the burning twig below the leaves and timber to start the fire.

For a long time they sat and watched the flames grow outward to the edges of the pile.

He set down his lantern and walked away from the fire, only to return a few minutes later with an armful of substantial logs. These he placed one on the fire and the rest to the side once the fire was large enough to handle them.

Finally, the man spoke.

His voice was deeper than she anticipated with grit in his throat that made her think he had smoked most of his life. Wrinkles spidered out from his two dark and haunting eyes - The flicker of the flames making his appearance more foreboding.

He asked to see her bag.

Knowing there was nothing of use in it on a night like tonight; she stretched towards it on her left side. Maybe he was just homeless, looking for a bite to eat. She

moaned as the sharp pain reminded her she twisted her ankle.

She gently tossed the bag to him. She explained away his quizzical look by telling him how she hurt herself.

He nodded and unzipped the front of the pack. He looked emotionless as he gazed into the bag.

Before he handed it back to her, she thought she saw a flash of him putting something into the bag before he zipped it closed.

Too tired to unzip it to check, she simply lied on her side relieved somewhat by the warm crackling fire. He might kill her, she thought, but it would be far less painful than freezing to death.

Her blinking increased and she felt the familiar warm pressure in her chest, she was so tired...

Few sights compare to the sun rising above the horizon as witnessed from a mountaintop. The colors of the sky blended with trailing patterns of clouds. As if by design, the earth's song of birds and eager chipmunks and squirrels lend auditory bliss to the panorama.

The smells of fresh pine needles as long as broom straw and oak leaves permeate the air giving the nose a feast of purity never found within sprawling suburbs and metropolis. Like a meal for the nostril, the scent of mountain air is complete in its perfection.

The woman may not have witnessed the splendor if the fire hadn't fizzled and the chill air cut into her cheeks. Her awakening, aside from a slight crick in her neck from not having a pillow, was more pleasant than she expected. She stretched and smiled feeling satisfied that she had made it through the night.

She immediately remembered and peered over the hissing coals wanting to see the man who had saved her. She sat up quickly, as if she were startled - blue eyes darting left and right; searching the landscape with anticipation. Yet, only the brown trail and woodland lay below. Above, jagged rocks and the smooth face of the mountain carved a grey silhouette into the blue sky.

For a moment she felt sadness. She couldn't thank him for his good deed. She would have died without the fire.

In the distance below, she saw two people on foot. Judging by their olive brown outfits and orange reflector vests, they were probably rangers; out making early morning check of the trail.

When the two got closer, she could see the shorter pointing in her direction. Maybe they saw the smoke from the campfire and were up here to check it out.

As they approached, she noticed the taller of the two looked familiar. But he also

seemed out of place. When they made it a few more yards, he began to shout, but he was still too far away to make out what he was saying.

The shouting continued, his hands cupped his mouth to amplify his voice. That time, she distinctly heard her name. They were looking for her.

The old man must have gone back for help.

A second later, she recognized the voice and the hunched walk. It was her husband; calling for her.

She yelled his name in return and they both acknowledged with a wave.

They quickly jogged up to her.

I am hurt. She said immediately. My foot got caught in a root and I think I broke my leg.

Let me see, honey. Her husband said.

The ranger cautioned not to move too quickly as to make it worse. They might want to consider an airlift. But there was nowhere South of the treeline to land a helicopter.

It's okay. She said. It's still numb from the cold. I can't feel any pain.

She slowly pulled up a pant leg at the same time as gripping the top of her wool sock to pull it downward. She turned away to avoid seeing the inevitable bruise and possible exposed bone.

Her husband raised his eyebrows and slightly smiled look before he spoke. He was sure it wasn't broken.

It's not even bruised. He said. You probably only twisted it.

No, she said, looking at her ankle. She clawed at the sock to reveal 360 degrees of her ankle. But, it snapped. It hurt so bad. I couldn't walk.

That's ok honey, I bet it hurts. It's just not broken that I can see.

She needed to test it. She leaned back and lifted her right foot off the ground. Then she rotated her foot in 3 quick pain free spins.

Excitement overtook her and she leapt to her feet before her conscious mind could stop her.

I can't believe it. I feel fine. I can even walk back.

The ranger frowned. As if he was pulled away from a warm breakfast to search for someone who is fine. His expression revealed his anger.

She stared thoughtfully at her husband and remembered.

Wait. There was this man...

He was an old man with a lantern. I was about to freeze to death and he lit the fire. I forgot my matches.

The ranger looked down and saw the burned wood and steaming embers. What did this man look like? He asked.

Both the man and his wife turned suddenly, startled by the ranger's loud voice.

The woman described the old bearded man in his cloak and how he carried an old oil lantern.

The ranger sat down on the ground and took off his hat revealing thinning brown hair. The wanderer... He said quietly. The inflection of his voice revealed his mind was reaching – almost in another place than here.

His eyes appeared distant as he stared into the ash as if he were looking into a bottomless cavern.

Is this someone you know? She asked? I want to thank him.

Nobody knows him. The ranger said. He picked up a stick and poked it into the orange embers as he continued peering into the steam. It's a story mountain folk tell.

No, no. She said. He was here. He saved me. I couldn't start a fire. I couldn't walk; I was freezing and gasping for air before he came. There are no matches. Look in my pack.

She covered her mouth when she remembered the pack. Before she could say he had put something in it, the ranger interrupted.

They say he is a spirit. Some say the spirit of Christmas because he's only been seen in December. Other hikers say they've seen him too, but I don't think so. The mountain air is thin up here. It can play tricks on your head.

Why would the spirit only come out in December and not help out when the six other people died on this mountain last year? It just makes no sense.

His eyes looked up at her.

I will say this. He continued. You are very lucky to be alive. Why would you risk camping here without a tent and sleeping bag? Everybody knows it gets well below freezing at night.

She wasn't camping. Her husband said. It was a day trip. Believe me, if she could have made it down this mountain last night, she would have. I don't know how she got healed. Maybe this man wasn't her imagination, but a real man who helped her. Did you think of that? Maybe he gave her some remedy for her leg and she just doesn't remember.

The ranger nodded, scrunching his lower lip into a frown as if suddenly convinced. Yeah, I guess that could be an answer. I don't know what some old man is doing up on the mountain in the middle of the night though. This little lady was lucky the man came around and was a good. He could have just as easy cut her up.

At that, the ranger scraped some dirt over what was left of the fire. Then the three started their careful descent down the mountain.

Hours passed. Without much talk except for an offering of water from a canteen or the passing of a peanut butter cracker for nourishment, the group made it safely to the trail's head.

The couple thanked the ranger for his help. The husband apologized for taking him away from his family for most of the day.

Are you okay to drive? Her husband said. If I could have got here any other way I would have so I could drive you home.

Yes, I am okay.

They both stared briefly at their cars sitting side by side. She unlocked her driver's side and he gently helped her to her seat. She thanked him and tossed her pack on the passenger's side.

Okay honey, drive safe. I am so glad we found you. I couldn't have made it without you. You know that.

She nodded and smiled a sad smile up at him as she placed the keys in the ignition. He closed the door and walked to his car.

Before she started the car, she thought again about the old man. What had he put in her pack? She was almost afraid to look. But she grabbed the bag and quickly unzipped the front pocket.

When she saw what he did, her emotion surprised her. There was a small white envelope the size florists put on delivery bouquets. Her name was carefully scripted on the front.

She opened the envelope to reveal a single white note card. As beautifully as the scripting on the envelope, there was but written a single word.

As she read it, a wave of memories swept over her and suddenly she understood.

She was a child of selfish parents. Life was sad and cruel except one time each year.

It was only that time when she felt hope and happiness.

The duration of November she bubbled with excitement in the anticipation of what the Christmas month would bring.

Unlike the others, the Christmas month gave the girl happiness and wonder. Her

aunt and uncle would bring her to visit for magical weeks of love, warm family memories and presents. They had no children of their own, but for one month she was their daughter.

And they were the parents she never had.

Lying in bed she would muffle the sound of fighting in other parts of the small apartment. Her mind danced wildly with imaginations of what joys were in store – The yearly trip to the tree lot with her aunt and uncle to choose the right Christmas tree – The warm hugs of grandma who cared so much.

She remembered thinking. Hold the Christmas thoughts, don't let go.

It was difficult sometimes when the violent sounds were so great and the fear so deep. Like wild dogs defending territory sometimes one turned on its young. This unavoidable battery clawed at her soul even when quiet surrounded her and she was left alone.

Sometimes, while lying on her side, in the dark and colorless room the girl would shake as violently as the woman on the mountain.

How could a child of ten ever think life would be better if only it stopped?

The woman stared at the word written on the small card. At the realization of what it meant, she felt the tears begin to gently drift down her cheeks. A strong woman, she did not like to cry but the feeling was uncontrollable and overwhelming. She put her face in her hands and cried softly.

He knew. She said out loud as she cried. He knew me and came anyway.

It did not take him a book to write what he knew or how he needed to help her. He summed it up in a single word.

Saving her was not something he felt a duty to do. It was something he had to do. He did not have a choice.

Such is true of all of us both blessed and
burdened by this word.

About the author

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