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We surrender into shelters and wait, warding off his icy fingers with fires, furnaces, and electric baseboards, keeping a barrier between our skin and his touch with layers of fleece, cotton, and wool. Sometimes it's not enough. On the darkest days, Death himself hovers in our frozen breath as we exhale. He's touched us once and always wants more. Once the heat returns, we're reminded of our carelessness; he leaves his mark, burning skin that flares with pain, swells, and oozes.

My great-grandfather, Thomas August DeCelles, told this story to my father and uncles on a moonlit, bitter-cold night, his voice not unlike snaps of split wood and crackling sparks. He spoke in short sentences, always breathless by his last syllable. "Replacing the salt lick and breaking up ice, I happened to look up. I noticed the sky. How it looks before the snow. Way the sky feels so low, like it's standing right next to you. The air, it warmed up a few degrees. Light looked different. Sun filtered through gauze. Land, real quiet. I had to get those horses. Get them to the barn. It's only maybe an eighth of a mile. Up there, where the old bunkhouse sits, huh?"

My father, eight years old, and his younger brothers nodded, knowing where the bunkhouse was. Where the old barn was.

Great Grandpa continued, sure they understood this short distance. "Blizzard come up while I was getting them inside. I started back. I couldn't see. Not where I was going or where I'd come from, nothing. They call it a whiteout. I was snow-blind. I wandered in one direction long enough to know I should've reached the house. Then I went east for a while, thinking I was off, just a bit. Boy, I was getting just scared. I couldn't feel my feet or my fingers. Then, comes this light. I could just make it out. It neared, an old man with a lantern, his breath white, calling me in my mother's language. An old Indin man," Great Grandpa closed his eyes and nodded, "he showed me home. He showed me home, then just disappeared."

At first, it's simply cold skin, then it pricks us, then it's numbness. We may not even realize we're bit until someone points it out. It was my mother who constantly pointed to the lack of sensation and numbness that severely affected my father. Raking and probing all his oozing blisters. Necrosis—the death of tissue—begins in prolonged exposure to damp, unsanitary or cold conditions. In extreme cold, blood vessels constrict. Blood is diverted from extremities. Cells within the dermis and subcutaneous tissue form ice-crystals, bursting and leaking fluid and proteins into tissue, causing blisters. Skin turns from red to white. Pale and hard, it becomes numb to pain until finally, black, leather-hard skin reveals the severe damage of the deep tissue.

Once the feet are frozen, they must stay frozen if one is to continue walking through such environments. Thawed feet are more vulnerable to damage. Sometimes the only treatment is amputation or debridement, a severing of this dead, infected tissue.

After returning from Vietnam, my dad brought my mom home to the reservation. Here they had land, and the agency hospital, where my mom delivered me and my two brothers. We lived in my great-grandparents' cabin, the oldest on the Fort Belknap Reservation, until my dad built a house of our own, three miles up the hill, atop a buffalo jump.

An early snowfall of 1978 dumped day and night. Nobody was prepared. After two days of shoveling out his pickup, Dad knew we needed a snowmobile. The tribe plowed a path to our house from the highway. Dad traded a calf for a '76 John Deere. He had to get hay to the cows and groceries and supplies for the family. My dad was on constant watch for the horses. Ten or twelve head, some still wild, grazed far up in the hills, always returning each fall. My grandpa Gus's Arabian racehorse was the stud for the little palomino foal my father loved. After rigging up an old car hood to the back of the snowmobile, he brought hay to the cattle, then set out looking for the horses. Ice formed on his eyelashes, his facemask stiff, frozen from his breath. Squinting against the bright snow, he tried to find signs of the herd. The snow flew horizontally, heavy and fast, the temperature plummeted, forty below zero, the wind blew fifty miles per hour. His search proved useless. He shivered intensely; his teeth slammed against each other like pistons. Every muscle tensed; his spine screamed. He returned home defeated. Wrapped in piles of blankets, he shook through the night.

A short break in the weather, Dad loaded up the family. Worried we'd be snowed in, he took us to the old cabin near the highway while he went into town. Returning, he parked his pickup, unloaded the groceries along with my brother, mom, and me onto the old rust-red car hood chained to the snowmobile. He towed us home, uphill through roofless tunnels of snow, each wall taller than Dad.

Dad set out again in search of the horses. He followed their tracks down to Joe Springs. Maybe they'd been trapped in the blizzard and finally made it down in search of water. Joe Springs was frozen over. The herd was there. He walked slowly to the foals, every young colt and filly dead, frozen on the ground, his little palomino lifeless. He rounded the rest and brought them to the barn. He gave them water, hay, and blankets, but knew at least two more weren't going to make it. He screamed across the plains. Where was the old man and his lantern now? He'd lost those horses, the daughters and granddaughters of our ancestor's herd. Descendants of French Gus DeCelles' string of racehorses and his famous white colt, Enchant, who'd won so many purses on the circuit at the turn of the century. The grandchildren of the wild mustang that came to my long-ago Gros Ventre grandfather, Black Dog. He'd lost those goddamn horses, he wept. He left us. For days. He got drunk. Long-term numbness persisted. He was never truly warm again.