

stories

Tomi Farrell

SNOW WOMAN

I was a sixteen-year-old kid who thought he knew just about everything about the world. I thought I had seen everything there was to see in those sixteen years. I'd agree that my seventy-five-year-old grandfather was right when he'd state that he'd forgotten more than I knew — I just thought it was portions of what I knew, over and over again, in various pieces, leaving him with a mixed-up worldview that was half as useful as mine. If we broached the subject of politics over dinner, I'd debate until he was too tired to continue. He called it 'filibustering,' but I looked that up, and it wasn't even a word.

It was winter.

I was staying with my grandfather for a few weeks. In his old cabin in the middle of the woods, to go deep-woods hunting with him. Although my grandfather was the one who'd taught me how to shoot a rifle, not to mention everything I knew about deep-woods hunting, I had by then surpassed the master — I had his knowledge, but my endurance and agility.

It was the last day of my stay. A blizzard was scheduled to howl its way into the area that day — at least, according to my grandfather. According to the weather report I pulled up on my phone, it was scheduled to remain cold and calm — just as it'd been for the past week. An old man's wisdom, honed through 40 years of woods-living vs. modern meteorological technology — he said he could tell just by looking at the sky and feeling the wind. I said I could tell just by tapping an icon.

"We need to stay in today," he said.

At that point, hunting had become almost an addiction for me. I had big plans for my final day. Only seeing the blizzard pelt the windows would make sitting inside — missing out on it — even remotely endurable.

“No way,” I contested. “I don’t see a single cloud.”

“You haven’t seen blizzards here,” he said, not taking his eyes off the sky.

“It’s fine. We can come back when the weather starts to get bad.”

I wasn’t going to compromise.

“It’ll be too late then. You don’t know how quickly it hits. People die in these storms. They don’t happen often. But I’ve seen a few. They feel like this.”

I looked at him as I would have a seven-year-old.

“Grandpa. Stop living in fear. That’s what’s wrong with people nowadays. When you fear, you conquer nothing. You achieve nothing in life.”

My seventy-five-year-old grandfather waited quietly as he received a life lecture from his sixteen-year-old grandson.

“You’re right. Don’t live in fear. Just face the facts. A snowstorm is coming.”

“Sorry, Grandpa. I want to go, and I will go. It’s my last day. You don’t have to come with me.”

I wasn’t planning to yield.

“I promised your mother I’d keep you safe,” he persisted.

I chuckled, “I’m not a child anymore.”

“You need to listen to me,” he said.

He wasn’t going to yield, either. However, if there was a battle, who would win? *Me*, of course. I always won.

“I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

I grabbed my rifle and hopped out of the cabin before he could stop me.

“Stop. Come back, now!”

His voice at my back then sounded different than I remembered it having ever sounded before. It made me almost afraid to turn around. Luckily, I hadn’t for a moment entertained that thought anyway.

I walked through the woods. Occasionally, I'd look up at the calm sky and shake my head.
How can people be so afraid of everything?

Then I'd continue stalking through the forest like a big bad wolf.

Once I situated myself, I renovated a blowdown into a suitable deer blind by plugging a few holes with some pine branches. I set up my shooting sticks, then looked through the scope to make sure the lens was clean. Then I sat down and waited, scanning through my binoculars.

Finally, I spotted a whitetail within range. I quietly dropped my binoculars and aimed my short-barreled rifle. I peered through the scope, ever-anticipating the deer's re-emergence into the open. Quiet. On high alert. Two minutes felt like an hour. Then — it passed back into the open. In the same instant, I pulled the trigger.

BAM!

It fell.

I walked over and stood above the dead deer in triumph. *Sorry, deer — you didn't have a chance.*

It felt too much like a boast, so I tried to reimagine it as confidence. Before I'd succeeded, I felt a snowflake melt on my cheek. As my eyes lifted, I noticed that everything was preternaturally dark. The sky — moments before an impassive white — had become a foreboding deep gray.

From there, it was a matter of minutes before the snowy gale almost knocked me down. I roped the deer as quickly as I could, and hurried my way back. Before I'd made it a hundred yards — still within minutes of the kill — strong gusts blasted my face with painful snowshot.

I kept going. Still not a quarter mile from the hunting site, I found myself in the middle of a full-on blizzard.

Just as Grandpa said...

What time was it? Bringing my watch face almost to my own and shielding it against the weather, I managed to feel confident it said three-thirty. And it looked just past sunset.

I figured I'd hunker down and wait it out. I crouched with my back to the leeward side of the thickest-trunked tree I could find.

A bit later, my crouch slumped to sitting on my heels.

Then I was tired of waiting. I figured I would become accustomed to it. I grabbed the carcass and once again began to lug it.

After much more time and little more distance, I re-abandoned my kill and sought the shelter of a tree — that one even less thick than the last.

I chanced a glance at my watch. Bad move. I'd gone just about nowhere, and it'd taken twenty minutes.

I began to feel helpless. All of a sudden, the young man who not only knew the ways of the world but was smart and strong enough to exploit them was gone. In his place was a lost sixteen-year-old boy. Alone in the deep woods...in a brutal storm...

Another twenty minutes passed. I was freezing. I could see nothing but snow flying by me. Though sometimes it would abruptly switch direction and come straight at me.

When I tried to move, I felt as if I'd been trapped in a meat locker overnight. A tear began to fall down my cheek, then froze.

I should have listened to him...

The sky began getting even darker, meaning real night would be approaching.

Alone, at that point in darkness, I collapsed in the snow. I was too weak to move any further. I lay on my back, not caring about staying warm. I was numb to the cold. And the situation. I saw a bit of moonlight filter through the trees. Then —

I heard my grandfather.

He called my name. My grandfather had come to find me...If he could find me, I could manage to follow him back. I gathered my strength and, as I struggled to get up, answered him.

“Grandpa. I’m here!” I yelled out — or, I tried to.

My voice was so hoarse, it came out just above a whisper. I saw the beam of the flashlight whipping in all directions. I concentrated on my voice and screamed as loudly as I could — as if the shout were juice I was squeezing out of the dried-up lemon that my voice box had become.

“Grandpa!” That time, my voice came out louder.

I didn’t stop.

“Grandpa! Grandpa! I’m here!” I yelled, over and over. Each time, reaching a higher decibel level.

I was even on my feet.

Finally, I could see that he’d heard me. The flashlight’s beam got closer and closer. Finally, he came into view. *He was amazing* — as all-powerful as he’d seemed when teaching me to hunt a decade earlier.

“Grandpa!” I stepped toward him, to fall into him, when blowing snow blocked my visibility.

Then I saw —

I still don’t know how to explain it.

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