

## The Stranger

It was a quiet night. There were only about four or five people in the bar. A man walked in, brushed the snow off his coat, and came over to my table. Without saying anything he sat down beside me and motioned for the bartender.

“Rye,” he said. “Straight.”

I looked down and pretended not to notice him, although I could see him through the corner of my eye. The bartender brought his rye. He finished it off in a gulp and ordered another.

“You might as well bring the bottle,” the man said to the bartender. “It’s gonna be a long night.”

Why had he sat down next to me? There were lots of empty chairs in the place. I finished my drink and decided to leave. When the bartender came over with the bottle of rye, I stood up and asked him for my tab.

“You have to be running off so soon?” the stranger said to me. “Why don’t you sit back down for a spell and let’s have a chat.”

“I really have to be going,” I replied.

“Aw, come on. It’s cold out there. Trust me! Here, I’ll give you some of my rye.”

He poured some of the liquid from the bottle into my empty glass.

“You see,” the man began. “I don’t get to talk to people much. You might say I’m a loner. I like it that way. But sometimes a fella’s got to loosen up a bit. He can’t keep it all inside himself. He’s gotta get it off his chest.”

I sat back down and took a sip of the rye he’d poured me. It was good. More expensive than the brand I usually drank. The stranger smiled.

“Yeah, I been all around,” he said. “Seen a lot of places. I just got back from up north in fact. A lot colder there than it is here, believe me. I was staying in this little shack way out in the middle of nowhere. Six months I was all by myself. Didn’t hear the sound of a human voice once in all that time. Well, maybe once. There was this time when I’d wandered a little farther away from the cabin than usual. It was close to dusk. The sun was glistening on the snow and all of a sudden I saw footprints, human footprints. I didn’t know anyone else was around. I thought I was the only one up there.

“I started to follow the footprints. They went up and down the mountains, around the boulders and trees. I didn’t know who they belonged to. Whoever’s they were, though, knew how to get around. An experienced climber. It was getting dark and I figured there was no point in tracking the footprints any further. I needed to be getting back to the shack. A bloke doesn’t want to be lost in the mountains at night, that’s for sure. But something made me go on. I kept thinking that just up around the next bend I’d find out whose boots were making those footprints.

“The moon came out. It was a clear night. I could still follow the footprints in the moonlight. To hell with it, I thought. There’s already one fool out here walking around in the night. I’ll make it two.

“Suddenly up ahead there was a glow. As I got nearer I saw that it was a fire. There was a man sitting by the fire. He had some game on one end of a stick and was holding it over the fire. He hadn’t heard me coming, at least I don’t think so. I hid in the bushes for a while and watched him eat the meat after he’d finished cooking it.

“How do,’ I finally called out, walking over to him. He looked up. He didn’t seem surprised to see me.

“Pull yourself up a log,’ the man said. He had a grizzled beard, looking just like some old-time mountain man. ‘You want a chunk of this venison?’

“After all that walking I sure was hungry. ‘Yeah,’ I said.

“Well, here,’ he said, handing me the stick and a raw slice of flesh. ‘You can cook it yourself.’

“I put the meat on the stick.

“I was wondering when you were going to catch up with me,’ the old-timer said. ‘I knew it wouldn’t be till I’d stopped!’

“Now, how the old-timer knew I’d been following him I’ll never know. He got a pot out of his rucksack and filled it with snow.

“Some coffee sure would taste good right now, wouldn’t it?’ he said.

“Yeah, it would,’ I said. ‘It’s terrible cold.’

“Aw, you get used to it. Trouble with folks these days is they’re too civilized. Sitting around in

those warm houses of theirs all day getting fat. No, I've had enough of that. Oh sure, me and the boys used to get together sometimes and sit around the stove. There was this friend of mine had a tavern in town. We'd all go there after work and drink beer and sing songs way into the night. But that was a long time ago.

“The owner of the tavern died and all the guys—I don't know—all the guys just went this way and that. I never seen any of them again. The tavern owner, he was something. Used to be a sailor. He took me down to the port one time and showed me the ship he used to sail with.

“So, how'd you ever settle here?” I asked him.

“Long story,” he said.

“I got all the time in the world.”

“OK, if you'd like. Back when I was still with the ship, we used to make the run down the coast. It was a safe route, we were never out of sight of land. There was this young kid, he'd just signed on, didn't know squat about sailing. Couldn't hardly even walk upright across the deck. Well, you know how seamen are. The guys got to picking on him. Usually after a couple of weeks a man gets his sea legs and can hold his own. But this young kid just wasn't cut out for it.

“Why did you ever sign up on this ship?” I asked him once.

“I need the work,” he said.

“You got a family?”

“Yeah, a wife.”

“Any children?”

“One on the way. Might be born any day now.”

“How do you manage?”

“Well, like my wife says, ‘Just do the best you can. That's all that can be expected of a person.’”

“Lord,” I told him, ‘you oughta be back there with your wife, not off sailing the seven seas.’ Me, I never married. I was the old type, rum-drinking sailor, with a girl in every port—well, almost every port.

“One night the wind gets up and we got orders to tie her down. So there we all were, out there on the deck in our raincoats, the rain coming down. There were waves splashing up over the deck. Then came the big one, one of the biggest I'd ever seen. A couple of stories tall. Well, that may be an exaggeration. But I hung on to the railing and weathered it. After that we all got our work done real quick and hurried back down the hatch. When we were safe inside I looked around for the young kid. He wasn't there.

“Where's the kid?” I shouted to the others.

“How the hell should we know?” they shouted back.

“I went back up on deck and struggled over to where the boy had been working. He was gone, just disappeared. We were close to shore, but they never did find the body. After we got back to port, I waited a couple of weeks and then got his address from the union. A few days later I looked up his wife. She met me at the door, a baby in her arms.

“I'm real sorry about your husband,” I said.

“Don't worry about us,” she said with a forced smile. ‘We'll manage.’

“After that I never had a hankering to go back to the sea. I just settled here in town and opened the tavern.””

The bottle was almost empty. “I've always wondered whatever became of that little baby boy and his mother,” the stranger said, pouring himself the last glass of rye.

“They managed,” I said.

“I suppose so,” he replied.

The stranger looked at me with drunken blood-shot eyes and smiled wearily.