



Jerry D. Young

www.jerrydyoung.com • jerrydyoung@hotmail.com



I Love You Like A Brother

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I Love You Like A Brother – A Vignette

Constantine ‘Ice’ Mathews was getting worried. Things were going you know where in a hand basket. He put the paper down and thought about things for a few moments, and then smiled slightly. Ice finished up his beer and got up from the couch.

“Time to see how my ol’ buddy Julian is doing.” Grabbing his keys off the hook they were hanging on by the apartment door, Ice went out to start up his truck. “Gee Ma Nee, it is cold out today!” Hurriedly he started up his 1967 K-20 Chevy pickup, turned the heat on and the blower on high and ran back into the apartment to get a coat.

He stood at the apartment door after he got his coat, to make sure no one tried to steal the truck. He didn’t live in one of the best neighborhoods of the city. After a bit he locked up the apartment and went down to the truck.

“Yeah!” he said, holding his hands to the vents after switching the heater control to defrost. Finally Ice put the truck into gear and backed out of his parking slot, then headed for the street entrance nearest his building.

When he pulled up in front of Julian Salazar’s house, he whistled appreciatively. “Ol’ Julian has been doing all right for himself. Ice tooted his horn and got out of the pickup after he turned off the engine.

He was halfway to the house when the front door opened. “Hey, Dude! How’s things?” Ice said when Julian shook his hand.

“Doing okay, Ice. To what do I owe this unannounced visit?” Julian asked, motioning to a chair.

“Oh. Sorry about that. Should have called first. Things are different now, huh?”

“Some things, yes,” Julian replied. Then he grinned. “But you still drink beer, don’t you?”

Ice grinned back. “You betcha’! If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not,” Julian said and disappeared into the kitchen. Ice looked around the living room. Not much had changed since the last time he’d been there, six months or so ago.

Julian handed Ice a bottle of beer and took a swallow from the bottle he kept. “So, what’s up, Ice? You doing okay? How’s the job?”

“Getting by, just like always,” Ice said, after a long draught of the beer. “Something is bothering me, though. I figured you could help.”

“What’s that?” Julian asked, a bit cautiously.

“Well, with things going the way they are... You know... all this war talk and stuff. I... uh... just wanted... Well, I know you think about things like this a lot and probably have a good idea what to do. Like you said that time down at Dewey’s bar. Gotta get prepared for the worst. So, I was figuring, you know... Just wanted to make sure that if something happened I could come here for some help.”

Julian had regretted letting slip that he was preparing for future troubles that night at Dewey’s ever since he had done it. Fortunately Ice was the only one that really was listening. But that was enough, apparently.

“Look, Ice... You know I love you like a brother. We’ve been friends for a long time. But Janey and I are planning a family. I have to take care of them, come what may. To put it bluntly, there ain’t no room in this inn, bro.”

“Oh,” Ice said softly. He really wasn’t surprised at the answer, though he couldn’t say he was actually expecting it. “Maybe I’d better go.” He set

the beer bottle down on the coffee table, careful to use a coaster, and stood up.

“Look, Ice... I’ll help you get things ready for yourself. Give you all the advice I can. But I can’t help financially. I don’t even know if I have enough for my family and myself.”

“Thanks, Julian. I shouldn’t have come here. You’re right. You have a family now and that has to be the most important thing in your life. I’m sorry I asked. We still going to be friends?”

“Of course we’ll still be friends,” Julian said, having the same thought Ice was having. ‘Was it true?’

“I tell you what. I’ll come over Saturday and we can get a plan ready for you to get ready. How’s that?” Julian asked.

“Can’t this Saturday. Got to work the overtime when I can get it. I’ll be in touch, though.” Ice walked over to the door. He turned around and looked at Julian. “And don’t worry, Julian. No one will know from me that you’ve been taking steps to prepare for... whatever.”

Julian held out his hand and Ice shook it firmly. “No hard feelings, Dude. I mean it,” Ice said. Julian nodded. He stood in the door and watched Ice walk to his truck, get in, start it, and drive away.

“You did the right thing, Honey,” said Julian’s wife when he closed the door and went to pick up the beer bottles.

“I know,” he said, taking Janey into his arms for a hug. “But Ice and I go back a long way. He’s a good guy. I hope he really does get ready for whatever is going to happen. I wish I could help him more than just some advice, assuming he actually does ask, but we have our own worries.”

Ice drove around a little bit, thinking. "Shouldn't have gone there," he told himself. "It wasn't fair to Julian. Or me. I'm better than going begging for help."

When he finally got back to the apartment building, he hurried up the stairs to the second floor landing and went into his apartment, determined to do something that Julian would be proud of him doing.

But what to do? "I should take Julian's help," Ice said aloud, "since he did offer." But he put the thought out of his mind. He'd do it on his own. No pressure of any kind on Julian. They'd been friends too long, and most of the giving had been on Julian's side. "No more!" Ice said, again speaking out loud.

The rest of that Sunday Ice thought about the future, and how to insure he had one.

As soon as he finished work Monday, Ice, a bit reluctantly, went directly to the library. It had been years since he had been there. He managed to do a subject search on the library's internal computer system for survival information, but didn't find much. After getting a bit of help logging into the internet, Ice did a similar subject search and was astounded by the number of hits that came up.

He jumped from site to site for a few minutes and then decided he had to be more organized. Ice was just getting into it when his time ran out on the computer. "Well, nuts!" he said softly. "Just when I was getting into it."

Ice went home and quickly wrote down what he'd learned on the Internet. It only made him want to learn more. Again he debated getting Julian's help. And again decided not to. "Time to come into the Twenty-first Century, dude," he told himself, grabbed his keys and went back out to the truck.

There was a mall with a couple of electronics stores in it not far away and that was where Ice went. He came home two hours later the proud owner of a new laptop computer, set up and ready to use on the Internet. As soon as he got an Internet Service Provider.

That took a couple of days to set up, and Ice went to the library those two days, mostly looking for and writing down the addresses of the sites he wanted to delve into deeper, when he was connected.

When he went grocery shopping that Friday after work, he made his first prep purchase. The canned goods to make one of the large pots of soup that he made occasionally. But the makings for the soup went into a heavy-duty tote for long-term storage, not on the kitchen shelves. Another set did, for use in the next few days, but he had started on the food.

Something else he did, that he considered part of his preps, was to buy only a single six-pack of beer. He was going to save money, lose weight, and get into better physical shape. That meant cutting back on the tobacco, too.

Ice worked another Saturday, and let his boss know he would take any overtime they had, that he could do. Sunday Ice slept in, and then got on the Internet on his new computer and began to study in earnest.

One of the first things Ice learned was that preparing for the worst could be expensive. Very expensive. Ice didn't have the kind of money it took to get prepped all in one fell swoop. It was going to take some time. And a budget. He'd already started that, in a way. Cutting back on beer and cigarettes.

Ice leaned back in his chair. "Where else can I cut back?" He thought for a few moments and then smiled rather reluctantly. "No more hundred dollar solo meals." Ice had a penchant for dropping a hundred or more on fancy meals. Now that money would go into preps.

Getting up from the desk, Ice went into the bedroom of the apartment and opened the closet doors. In the corner stood three long arms. A Ruger 10/22, a no-name 20 gauge single shot shotgun, and a Winchester 1894 .30-30 lever action. He didn't own a handgun.

"Have to do, for a start," Ice said, and then went back to the computer, opened up Word and started his list of things to do. After food was ammunition. Then came skills.

It was a start.

It didn't take long for Ice to realize that his small, one bedroom apartment wasn't going to be able to hold everything he was acquiring. And since much of it was food, shelf-stable, of course, but at normal temperatures, he wanted somewhere to store it where it wouldn't go bad. When Ice went looking for a rental storage room, he paid the extra premium of getting one that was climate controlled.

He thinned down his stock of consumables, keeping a BOB supply for three days, on top of a two-week pantry supply. All the rest of the consumables went into climate controlled storage. Though it was a bit of extra work and time, Ice religiously rotated his perishable consumables, using the oldest, and putting the freshest into the storage room.

Never a particularly good student, Ice went to every training class he could cram into his work schedule. First came CPR and basic first-aid, and then advanced first-aid. He supplemented the information he received in the classes with additional information from the Internet. The additional money he had available when he finally quit smoking for good went into first-aid supplies.

Not just your basic cuts, scrapes, and bruises, but a full trauma kit, including extensive burn treatment items. Thinking about Janie, Julian's

wife, Ice put together a comprehensive birthing kit, based on the lessons learned in the advanced first-aid class.

Six months into the process, Ice came to the realization he'd turned into a prepper. It was both more useful, and rewarding, than his few other hobbies. He opted out of the bowling team for the auto dealership where he worked as a mechanic. That money went into preps. So did the money that would have gone into the renewal subscription of Playboy.

Having learned about e-bay from a co-worker at the dealership, Ice put his extensive collection of Playboys on the market. That amazing amount of money went into one of the side businesses Ice decided to start, for post disaster production of income. Namely a couple of Husqvarna 570 24" bar chainsaws and a Troy-built log splitter with applicable accessories and spare parts to cut and split firewood safely.

Ice had to rent another small storage room, this one not environmentally controlled, in which to store the tools and the firewood he cut up in the National Forest nearby to test out the equipment. Happy with the capability, Ice locked the storage room and put it out of his mind, the payment, like the environmentally controlled storage room, on automatic payment from his bank account.

As he thought about it later, Ice realized that gasoline might get hard to find. He added several one-man and two-man felling and bucking saws, and several axes to the storage room, along with a pair of double jacks and several felling and splitting wedges. Even without fuel, Ice would be able to cut wood. Hopefully with a helper. Or two.

The woodcutting would be an income producer. But what was he going to do for heat, cooking, and hot water, in a worst-case scenario? Ice put the thought on the back burner.

With six months worth of food and other consumables in storage, Ice took his vacation that fall, to go hunting, as he usually did. But this time,

besides the hunting, he would be scouting out a couple of likely areas where he could go to get out of the city and live for a while, if the need ever arose. Since he would be camping out, it would be a good learning experience for him to see if his current gear was adequate for the task, or if he needed to make some changes, for a longer-term stay.

He decided his camping equipment could use some up-grades, and wrote down a list of things to change while he sat silently in a ground level hide, not far from a game path. He also made a note to get a quality knife sharpening set. Not just for his knives, which did need sharpening, but as another way to generate income in the aftermath of a major disaster.

With the firewood capability, knife sharpening capability, and his auto mechanic skills and tools, he should be able to find something that would pay him. Surely, he thought, between those three skills, he could find enough to do to make ends meet.

One very positive aspect of the trip was the location of an out of the way spot, off the normal fire trails and hunting areas in the National Forest, where he would bug-out to if necessary to leave the city. Though he usually just hunted the area he knew, this year he'd bought a topo map of the region and checked for the small streams and creeks identified on the map.

One of them was near a small clearing at the base of a south facing, overhanging bluff. It was in the middle of section of the forest with only one faint trail through it. He would be able to get his truck to it, using a very round-about route. It was far enough from the spring not be noticed by someone that knew about the spring, but close enough to get water from it on a regular basis.

For future use, Ice gathered up deadfall in the area and stacked it under the protection of the overhang.

He got his deer, took it home, and made jerky out of most of it, cutting it into thin strips and drying it in his oven, on its lowest setting, the door propped open an inch. He added the jerked venison to his emergency stores.

Researching possibilities on the internet, Ice slowly added to, and replaced, his camping gear to provide for a much better extended stay in the National Forest if he ever needed to.

Ice began paying more attention to the news. And didn't like what he was seeing and reading. It became obvious, to him, that based on other things he saw on the internet, the Main Stream Media was being something less than totally accurate in its presentation of 'news'. He began to understand some of the things he'd read early on in various forums and blogs about such things.

One of those 'things' was the weather. More specifically, the climate. There were many independent articles on the Internet about the possibility of a sudden, 'Little' Ice age similar to the one occurring from approximately 1650 to approximately 1850, including the year 1816, the 'Year without a Summer'. They were more or less diametrically opposed to the proponents of 'Global Warming'.

Ice was beginning to doubt the global warming scenario. That is, until the majority of the US had the hottest summer on record. The auto dealership trained Ice in automotive HVAC systems and put him on maintaining and repairing air conditioning systems on customers' cars. Four solid months of over ninety degree heat, with a month and a half of that with temperatures over one hundred in most of the country put a strain on both home and automotive air conditioners. Europe was in the same shape. The heat wave finally broke in late September.

Three other things occurred at nearly the same time. A whole string of volcanic eruptions, all over the world, took place starting two days after the heat wave broke. Trillions of tons of ash ejected into the atmosphere

over a period of nineteen days, blackening the skies around the world.

A week into the string of eruptions, the Gulf Stream sank off Norfolk, Virginia. A week after that, NASA announced that the number of sunspots was not increasing at all, after the sunspot cycle minimum had been reached, and the number of sunspots was expected to begin to rise.

It started snowing, with a little ash mixed in, all over the northern hemisphere, north of 39° North Latitude, with only a few exceptions. At the southern limit of the snowfall, it melted almost as fast as it fell. At first.

Ice switched from fixing automotive air conditioners to fixing automotive heaters as the temperatures dropped to near freezing during the day, and below freezing at night. And the snow continued to accumulate.

The doomers and gloomers said it was a new ice age upon us. Main Stream Media and the White House said it was simply a severe winter, just as we'd had a severe summer. Ice was inclined to believe the doomers and gloomers, tempered with a bit of common sense. It wasn't the end of mankind. Or the end of the world. It was definitely the end of a relatively easy life for Ice.

The first chance he had, Ice went down to the parts store and bought a snow plow for the Chevy. Glad he hadn't waited any longer, since he got the last one in stock, Ice got plenty of work when he wasn't working at the auto dealership.

When a week passed and the snow continued intermittently, without melting away any, Ice decided that, while the money he was making seemed pretty good, it sure didn't seem to be buying him as much as it should. He started asking for canned goods instead of cash.

It insulted a couple of people, but there were plenty of other people

willing to have him work for the canned goods. It wasn't until the third week of the ordeal that other people realized that food was becoming rather scarce. It was about the same time that people began dying in droves in the more northern latitudes.

A distraught looking President went on the air and announced that the country was in a state of emergency and declared martial law. He asked that people with, help people without. He didn't say with what or without what, but it didn't make much difference. Only a few people heeded his impassioned words. Mostly those south of 39° North Latitude, where the National Guards of those states were activated and put on martial law duty.

New broadcasts were suddenly short and infrequent, with news of successful rescues of people and successful episodes of one person helping another. Up until the point the Internet went down, it was only one of two sources of information of what was actually going on. The millions that were dying, and the fights between those with and those without, and the National Guard taking by force from those with to give to those without. Most of the time, initially. Later on, the taking was for them.

Up north, now buried under twenty feet of snow or more, small pockets of those that had acquired food prior to the event, or early on during the event, survived. The overwhelming majority of people died, from cold, dehydration, and starvation. And in many cases, violence done unto them by others to avoid a similar fate. Were it not for Amateur Radio Operators, the other source of information, those facts would probably not have become known.

An Amateur Radio transceiver, or at least a receiver, was on Ice's list of things to get, but the time had run out. Fortunately one of his co-workers at the auto dealership was an Amateur Radio Operator and was keeping Ice informed of what he was hearing.

When the power went out, and there was no word as to when it might come back on, Ice started checking his options. The apartment building where he lived used natural gas for heat, but the heating system required electrical power to operate. So did the city's water and sewer systems. And the telephone and cablevision companies' equipment, after their battery backups ran down. Even natural gas quit flowing when the pumping stations lost power up the line.

The airport closed and even the major roads became impassable as city and county maintenance crews ran out of fuel for their equipment.

After three days of no heat, the temperature in the apartment was twenty-nine degrees at night, and only thirty-three during the day. Though he had a Coleman BlackCat propane fired catalytic heater, Ice decided not to use up his stock of propane canisters to try to warm the apartment.

Instead, he moved all the living room furniture to the edges of the room and set up his tent. He only used the heater in the mornings when he got up and got dressed. As soon as the temperature had dropped below freezing, Ice had started using up his pantry foods subject to freezing problems, including those in the once climate controlled storage room, leaving packaged goods that freezing wouldn't hurt for later. He thawed his frozen water bottles in front of the heater for water and used his bucket toilet for sanitation.

Even at the southern edge of the snow accumulation, as winter tightened its grip on the city, people died by the hundreds. The auto dealership shut down. Ice could no longer plow driveways and parking lots. There was simply no place to put the snow. There were huge mounds of it everywhere.

Ice debated for one more day, and then made the decision to load up and bug out. He was up at five the next morning. It only took a couple of hours to load what he wanted from the apartment. He thought he might

have trouble from a couple of people when they saw him carrying out a box of food, but the people didn't start anything. Ice quickly finished up and got in the truck.

The two people watched as he drove away, the snowplow lifted above the pavement about a foot, turned hard to one side to make a useable path the Chevy K-20 could handle. He drove to the environment controlled storage facility and loaded his supplies stored there into the pickup.

He thought about trying to take the log splitter when he went to the other storage room, but decided to leave it where it was for the moment. He did load up the chainsaws, manual saws, and other woodcutting implements, and all the filled gasoline cans he had stored there.

He was ready to head for the National Forest but suddenly hesitated. His thoughts turned to Julian and his family. He hadn't spoken to Julian since their conversation about Ice going to Julian's in case of a disaster. Well, the disaster was here. Julian should be prepared. He always was. But Ice decided to check on him anyway. There might have been just a little bit of pride in the fact that he'd made his own preps factored into the decision.

Ice turned around and headed for Julian's. He wasn't surprised to see wisps of smoke coming from the stainless steel chimney of the Franklin stove in the family room. What he was surprised to see where half a dozen people standing around near the front door of the house, yelling. Julian was standing in the front door, cradling a shotgun, trying to talk to the group.

Ice didn't like what he saw and pulled the Winchester '94 from behind the seat of the truck when he parked and got out. He walked up slowly behind the group. Ice saw the uncertainty in Julian's face when Julian spotted him. But Ice nodded and winked, and Julian relaxed ever so slightly.

All six of the people spun around and looked at Ice in surprise when he asked, loudly, "Problem here, Julian?" With all of them looking at him, Ice deliberately worked the lever of the Winchester, chambering one of the .30-30 cartridges in the tubular magazine of the rifle.

"I think you should all go back to your homes, before you freeze out here," Ice said, his tone matching the weather and his name.

There was some hesitation, but when Ice shifted the rifle a bit more toward one of them, and Julian, on the porch, racked the action of his pump shotgun, the group broke up and left in various directions.

"Ice... Thanks... I don't know what to say..." Julian said, motioning Ice up onto the porch.

"No need to say anything," Ice said. "And don't worry about me being here for help. I'm in the process of bugging out, but I wanted to check to make sure you were okay."

"Oh," Julian said, his surprise obvious. "You're bugging out?"

"Got a place located in the National Forest with a spring nearby. There's an overhanging bluff... almost a shallow cave, facing south."

"I see..." Julian looked embarrassed. "We were getting ready to go, ourselves, but our planned bug-out location is north quite a ways. No way to get there now, even in the Suburban."

"If you want," Ice found himself saying, "You can come with me. I don't have facilities for you, but I'd bet you have the gear you need."

"Ice... about what I said the last time we talked..."

"Don't worry about it, Julian. You were right. Then I would have been a

burden you didn't need and couldn't support. It's different now. I think I can be a benefit."

"It'll take us about two hours to get loaded," Julian said, taking Ice at his word that the past was the past and of no importance now.

"You want me to help, or keep an eye out for your neighbors?"

"I think Janey and I can probably load faster doing it ourselves. We've practiced. And to be honest, I don't trust the neighbors any more. Be careful you don't get sniped."

"I will. Just don't take any longer than you need to, and don't forget anything."

It was just under two hours later that Julian left the driveway of his house in the heavily loaded Suburban, with its matching trailer hitched on behind, just as heavily loaded. Ice took the lead, again not trying to plow the road down to pavement, but clearing enough snow to one side to make travel possible.

Had they looked back, they would have seen a free-for-all fight break out over possession of Julian's abandoned house. They didn't look back.

Ice wasn't sure they were going to make it. He had to stop and clear some pretty deep drifts off the road before he could get through. But when he could go, Julian's Suburban, even with the trailer, could go.

It was already getting dark when Ice came to a stop near the bluff. Julian stopped behind him and both of them exited their vehicles to confer. There was no snow under the overhang, but the area outside was covered in deep snow. After a few minutes of walking the area they came to agreement about what Ice needed to do to clear it of snow.

Using the snowplow, Ice cleared the area in front of the bluff, piling the

snow up high in an arch to make a windbreak. He left a couple of openings so they could get in and out of the cleared area. It was full dark when Julian and Janey set up their tent, and Ice set up his, both of the tents, and a privacy shelter, well back under the overhang.

Exhausted from the difficult trip, not to mention the tension of the hours before they left, all three turned in and went to sleep as soon as the tents were ready.

When Julian and Janey woke up the next morning, there was a small fire going near the tents, and Ice was nowhere to be found. It had snowed during the night, leaving an inch or so of snow inside the snow bermed area. Julian suddenly cocked his head to one side, hearing something in the quiet forest. He finally identified it as a chain saw.

Julian thought about going looking for Ice, but thought better of the idea. He turned around and went to the Suburban trailer to get a shovel. He cleaned the accumulation of snow between the berm and the bluff, while Janey prepared a breakfast over the campfire, using the grate, tripod, and cast iron cookware that was part of the family's camping gear.

"What about Ice?" Janey asked, when she called Julian over to eat.

"Just put a portion on the side of the fire to keep warm," Julian replied.
"No telling how long he'll be."

"Do you think you should go look for him and help?" Janey asked her husband.

"I thought about it, but I think I'm better off staying here and getting the camp set up. If Ice needs or wants help, I think he'll ask for it."

"I just don't like the idea of him out there alone with a chainsaw. What if he makes a misstep and hurts himself?"

"It's a risk, I know," Julian replied. "But he's a grown man. He'll make his own decisions." Julian shook his head. "Can you believe what he's done since the last time we saw him? That time I told him he shouldn't come to us for help in a disaster. I feel bad about that, now."

"He said not to worry about it, Julian. I think he understood. I think it's why he's done what he has. Because he knew you were right."

"I suppose." Julian suddenly cocked his head again. There had been no sound for several seconds. "I bet he's on his way back."

"Good. He needs a good breakfast, getting up and working like that this early."

"He's always been a hard worker. Got to give him that," Julian said standing and watching in the direction from which the sounds had been coming.

It was several minutes before Ice showed up. He was pulling a child's plastic snow toboggan, loaded down with freshly cut firewood, with a chainsaw sitting on top of it.

"Do I smell breakfast?" Ice asked releasing the toboggan at the edge of the area cleared of snow.

"I'll unload while you eat," Julian said, walking over to the sled. He began to transfer the wood from the toboggan to the pile that Ice had laid in on his first trip to the place.

Ice took the plate Janey handed him, with a 'Thank you', and then told Julian. "It's mostly standing deadwood. Should burn good."

There was a silence as Ice ate and the other two worked, Julian moving the wood, and Janey cleaning up the breakfast things. Ice handed her his plate when he was finished and then disappeared into the privacy tent for

a few minutes.

When he came out Julian and Janey were both finished with their tasks. “I guess we need to discuss the situation,” Ice said, going back to the small fire and warming his hands over the flames.

“I think so. But first, I want to thank you for being there for Janey and me yesterday. That could have been a bad scene if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”

Ice shrugged. “Just in the right place at the right time.” Then, a bit shyly, Ice asked, “What do you think of this place? Do you think it will be okay for a while?”

“I can’t think of a better place,” Julian said, “unless it was a full cave. I think we can do a lot to improve it, but it is a very good place to start with.”

“I thought so, too,” Ice said. “If you want, I’ll take you to the spring. I checked it and it’s still flowing. I do think we need to dig it out a bit so we can fill containers easier, but there should be no problem with the water supply.”

Janey set the container she’d emptied on the toboggan and picked up the pull rope, against both Julian’s and Ice’s objections. “Come on guys! It’s just a few pounds. I can handle it, you know.”

With that, Ice led the way toward the spring. It was a good fifteen minutes away. And just as he’d said, it was flowing, the water turning to ice within a few hundred feet of its discharge. Julian had brought a round point shovel and a pick-mattock from the trailer and handed Ice the shovel. Julian used the pick a bit and then Ice shoveled out the debris.

The two alternated for a while, until both were satisfied that the

container filling pool was of sufficient size and depth. They waited for the water to clear from the work, and then Janey kneeled down and began to fill the water container.

"You think we should treat it or filter it?" Ice asked.

"I do," Julian said, taking the filled container from his wife. He set it down on the toboggan and picked up the pull rope. "Even out here, there is danger of contamination. There is no way I want to risk some type of bug from the water, with everything else going on. Our Katadyn Camp Drip filter will take care of it nicely. I think it will filter through before it freezes, unless it gets a lot colder."

"We can always set it up right by the fire," Janey said, "Just to make sure."

For three days they arranged and rearranged the camp to suit them, with what they had, and came up with a list of improvements they wanted to do, and how to do them.

Ice and Julian, taking both Ice's K-20 and Julian's Suburban and trailer, went back to the city, looking for lumber to enclose the front of the opening below the overhanging bluff. There'd only been light additional snow falls, but the winds were high much of the time and Ice had to plow his way through the snow almost the entire trip.

They went to the chain lumberyard that Julian used for his occasional home project. They stopped side by side. At first they thought the place was closed, but Julian's sharp eyes saw movement inside and told Ice, "Better let me go in alone and you cover me," Julian told Ice.

Ice picked up his Winchester when he got out of the truck. Julian was wearing a pistol on a belt he wore over his heavy parka. He went up to the regular entrance door and knocked loudly as Ice kept watch.

Ice's nerves were on edge once Julian was let inside. He debated going to the door to try and watch inside the store, but resolutely held his position. Ice breathed a bit easier when Julian came back out and waved for Ice to bring the truck to the drive through lumber shed. Again Ice had to use the snowplow to make a path through the drifted snow so he could get to the building.

The roll-up door slowly opened and Ice pulled into the building. Going back outside, he pulled Julian's Suburban and the trailer inside behind his truck. The door went down behind him and Ice got nervous again.

He flipped his headlights of both vehicles on to light up the area, and then joined Julian, over by the checkout stand that served the lumber section of the super store.

"Let me talk to my buddy for a minute," Julian told the man he was standing beside. The man moved away and Ice stepped up to Julian.

Julian's voice was low as he spoke to Ice. "I think there's something hinky going on here. The guys willing to let us load up for three hundred bucks."

"Three hundred for what?" Ice asked.

"That's just it. Anything we want that we can fit into the rigs."

Ice's eyes widened in surprise. "I see what you mean. Well... If we're going to do it, let's get it done and get out of here."

"I agree." Julian pulled out his wallet. "I'll pay the guy and..."

Ice was pulling out his wallet as well. "No. I'll pay half."

"But," Julian protested.

Ice cut him off. "We're in this together now, aren't we? I'll pay what I can. I don't have much, but I do have half of the three hundred right now."

Reluctantly Julian nodded. It was a matter of pride for Ice. He took the proffered one hundred fifty dollars, pulled a hundred and fifty from his wallet, and went over to the man.

Julian conferred with Ice again and they quickly decided what to take in addition to what they'd come to get. The man made no move to help, and didn't object when Ice fired up the propane powered forklift to move lumber from the racks to the K-20 and trailer.

Julian went inside the other part of the store and began hauling cart load after cart load of items to the Suburban and loaded them inside. It took an hour and a half to load everything they wanted and could fit into and on the vehicles.

The guy had stayed nearby the entire time, but had not said a word. When Julian and Ice were obviously finished loading and approaching him, the man went to the exit door and began raising it with the manual chain lift.

Julian and Ice looked at one another, shrugged, and went to their respective vehicles. When they pulled out the door went down again. Ice didn't lose any time getting out of the parking lot and back in the track to go to their campground.

It took them a week, sometimes working out in the snow, to build an insulated lean-to against the face of the bluff, creating a roomy enclosure larger than many small cabins. It was divided into three small rooms and a large open area.

There was a bedroom for Julian and Janey, one for Ice, and an enclosed

space for the chemical toilet. Plenty of material was left over to build a couple of covered woodsheds, to protect their supply of firewood.

One of the things they had not planned on purchasing on their trip in was the small wood stove that Julian had seen and loaded up into the Suburban, along with flue pipe and the parts needed to go through the wooden roof and cap the flue.

It made heating the enclosure easier, not to mention cooking. The three had agreed not to try to keep the area warm enough to go around in shirtsleeves, but just warm enough to keep their food and water from freezing.

Ice and Julian went hunting when they were finished with the initial improvements of the camp. They had to tramp through some deep snow in places, and were wondering if there was any chance of all of there being game out in this snow. "I'm not an experienced enough hunter to say," Ice told Julian when Julian asked.

"I usually get my deer each season, but we're not where I usually hunt. We may just have to try to cut a game trail and see if we can't find a bedding ground."

They saw nothing the first or second day they went out, but on the third, trying a different section of forest, they were able to locate and kill two deer. One was a small buck, and the other a large doe. "Notice how thin they look?" Ice asked.

"I know," replied Julian. "You can see their ribs through the skin. They haven't been eating well. That is not good. There is going to be a lot of game die of starvation in this area. I think we'd better harvest as much as we can, as quickly as we can, before there isn't any to be had."

Ice agreed. The two began dressing out the two deer. Ice finished up both of them while Julian went to get the toboggan so they could get the

meat back to the camp. They took the time to build a drying rack so they could preserve as much of the meat as possible. Two days later they went out again. Ice got another deer, and Julian picked off four squirrels and two rabbits on that trip.

A week later Ice shot yet another deer, but this one, when they came up to it, didn't look right. "I think this one is sick," Ice said. "Look at the eyes and nose. Mucus. Skinny as it is, I'd say it caught something and couldn't fight it off."

"Yeah," Julian said. "Not worth the risk." They left the deer behind and continued the hunt. They sighted no more deer, but were able to harvest several more squirrels and rabbits. They ran into the signs of predators having taken down deer, probably too weak to fight or escape. "Probably coyotes or wild dogs," Julian said. "I think our deer hunting day are over. For now, anyway."

"I agree. There's a river about five miles from here. You think we should switch to trying to get some fish, maybe in addition to a few more squirrels and rabbits?"

"Not a bad idea. I hate to leave Janey alone for the time we'd need to spend on the river to get enough fish to make it worthwhile."

Ice shook his head. "I think I should just go alone. Plan on spending a few days and catch as many as I can, let them freeze, and then bring them back for processing."

Julian looked reluctant. "I don't know, Ice. That's a big risk, separating now. What if you fall in, or something?"

"If I do, I do. I'd be on guard to prevent that, of course, but you know, anything can happen. Even if we were to go together."

"I suppose," Julian suddenly said, "Janey and I could go. Let you take

care of the camp.”

Ice shook his head. “It’s an alternative, I suppose, but I’d rather go do it. Leave Janey to keep the dryer going, while you make the improvements to the camp we were talking about. Better distribution of resources, I think.”

Julian sighed. “I suppose you’re right. Come on. Let’s get back to the camp. It’s getting late.”

Ice packed up the next day and headed for the river, five miles away. He had a map and compass and had planned with Julian the route he would take. That way, if something did happen, and Ice didn’t come back by the appointed day, Julian could come looking for him, with a good chance of finding him.

Though the fishing trip wasn’t as successful as hoped, Ice did bring back thirty pounds of frozen fish. A little bit at a time was brought into the shelter and allowed to thaw, and then it was cleaned, filleted, and dried.

The winter passed slowly. There was no more game to be found, and Ice made several more trips to the river to fish. But winter did finally pass, and spring came. The snow began to melt, slowly. By June 15 the snow was gone.

Julian had been monitoring the shortwave and Amateur Radio frequencies all during the winter. The world situation was not good. Though there were a few enclaves of survivors north of 39° North Latitude, most of the people that didn’t move south ahead of the building snow pack died.

Julian, Janey, and Ice discussed their options. Julian and Janey had another six months of food, but Ice had just shy of two months left. Hunting was problematical in the area. Ice’s plan to provide firewood, mechanic services, and knife and tool sharpening in the area was not

practical. There were too few people to support the work. And very few would have any excess food they could trade away.

They made the decision to travel south and see what they could find in the way of re-supply. They loaded up their equipment and all the supplies they had left, and headed south, mindful of their limited fuel supply. Ice was in slightly better shape than Julian and Janey were.

He still had half his nineteen-gallon behind-the-seat factory tank, and both aftermarket twenty-gallon frame saddle tanks were full. Plus he had another fifty gallons in jerry cans.

The Suburban was equipped with a factory forty-gallon diesel and an aftermarket fifteen-gallon reserve tank. And, like Ice, there was another fifty gallons in jerry cans. Unless they could find additional fuel, the distance south they could go would be limited to one half their fuel supply, as they fully intended to come back to the camp.

Things were desolate in their local area. The further south they went, the better things looked. It wasn't until they reached Memphis that they saw much activity. They were able to get fuel, filling all the tanks on both rigs, but it was expensive.

Food was available, but it was just as expensive as the fuel. But crops were just going in and all three of the group were able to get work. Ice as a mechanic, Janey as a cook, and Julian as a farm hand driving an equipment support truck, all for the same farm. Pay was a few dollars a week, room, board. The farm had a large commercial dehydrator and smoker, so all three took the rest of their pay in food prepared for long-term storage.

They almost stayed too long. Fall came early, but the crops weren't quite ready for harvest and the farmer asked them to stay until they were, for a nice bonus. Janey, Julian, and Ice talked it over and decided the risk was worth it.

They made it back to the camp during a blinding snowstorm. Not quite a blizzard, but close. Having intended to be back before snowfall, Ice hadn't taken the snowplow. But he was able to bull the Chevy through the snow, even with the log splitter they had stopped and picked up on the way from the abandoned storage place. It was easier once they made it into the forest. The trees were holding much of the initial snow and it was less than a foot deep on the ground, but coming down hard.

They approached the camp slowly, not just because of the snow. There was some worry that someone could have discovered the place and moved in. But there were no external signs of habitation and Ice pulled the truck up to his normal parking spot and got out. The wood pile looked the same.

He had the Winchester in hand as he approached and then entered the shelter. He came out a minute later and waved to Julian and Janey to come ahead. The place was still secure. There were only a few signs of small animals having found a way in.

A few minutes later there was a fire going in the stove and all three were carrying in their winter stock of food and other supplies. Though their water containers were all full, Ice decided to go check on the spring. They would need to know as early as possible if there was a problem with it. Though it was a year-round spring under normal circumstances, Ice was worried that the changes in climate might eventually affect the spring.

But, like the camp, the spring was fine. It was flowing as much as it always did, still clear and cold. Satisfied, Ice went back to the camp and into the shelter. The three quickly fell back into their regular winter routine, except for one thing. Ice and Julian cut and split wood every day the weather allowed.

They didn't cut the trees close to them. Instead, they traveled through

the forest some distance and then began to cut diseased and damaged trees, always leaving a few trees to reseed the areas they cut.

They weren't cutting for their own use, at least not much. They set aside some of the wood for their own use, but the overwhelming majority was for trading the next summer. Ice had made a deal to pick up a few things they couldn't make themselves.

Several trucks would arrive the next spring to pick up the firewood they cut and split during the winter. Not the best arrangement, but better than nothing. If things worked out, they would stay the summer to cut additional firewood, and just trade for the goods they needed, rather than traveling to work in the southern latitudes.

It turned into a workable arrangement. As the years passed and the snow pack accumulated north of 39° North Latitude, turning into glaciers further north, Ice and Julian became the major firewood suppliers for the area south of them.

The second year of working both summer and winter, they commissioned a pair of specially equipped small mobile homes built with thick insulation and wood fired heat, cooking, and hot water. There were arrays of PV panels to charge a battery bank to provide a limited amount of electricity.

In the process Ice met, courted, and married the builder's daughter, assuring a close working relationship with a well established family in their primary firewood sales area. Though life was hard, it was good for the two couples. They lived out their lives on the edge of the snow pack.

The short ice age lasted just over three hundred years. The seas became more salty as they evaporated and the fresh water was captured on land as snow. The Gulf Stream finally re-emerged, once again bringing warm subtropical water to the North Atlantic.

The ash from the volcano eruptions finally all fell to earth, and the skies were crystal clear once again.

The sunspot cycle returned to average numbers, still on its eleven and twenty-two year cycles.

The snow and ice retreated northward, followed closely by the exploding population of the central latitudes. Humans had survived yet another ‘Little’ ice age.

End *****

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