

ADAM GILES

## **A LONG LINE OF PREVIOUS MEN**

MY SON LOGAN AND I PORTAGED TWENTY KILOMETRES through a scorching December headwind, squeaking in our skin-tight atmosphere suits, sweating in our smog masks, and slogging through a thick layer of ash. As if the crossbows slung over our shoulders and the backpacks crammed with bedding and rations didn't weigh us down enough, we carried the canoe overhead, which I figured would be heavy but not make-you-want-to-cry-and-turn-back heavy. The ash reminded me of snow: it was soft and self-levelling so as to conceal the woodlot's underlying obstacle course of tree roots and mini pits. It was also pristine: during the entire trip we only saw two sets of tracks, which might have belonged to chipmunks or squirrels if we were lucky. Deer and moose were reportedly long gone, so a squirrel pelt was about the best we could hope for. But how were a couple of novices like us, in our fresh-out-of-the-package atmosphere suits, going to bag something as small and nimble as a squirrel? Previous generations had been spoiled by their ability to hunt a variety of animals with large surface areas.

What happened was that after the election—with wildlife, humanity, etc. effectively fast-tracked to the shit can—I had an “episode.” I'm what you might call a brooder. If it wasn't nuclear war or earthquakes, it was antibiotic-immune superbugs or televised mixed martial arts bloodbaths. The thing about the election was how it blindsided me—how hordes of brain-dead, soulless vermin turned out to vote for a leader who shipped environmentalists to detention camps and seriously questioned whether anyone actually missed all those drowned coastal cities. Democracy was supposed to be the mark of an evolved civilization, but with polar ice caps liquefying and species after species retiring from active duty, maybe it was time for a dictatorship—an ethical one without all the power-drunk atrocities.

As a professionally-diagnosed hypersensitive, I obsessed about such things and felt the weight of them—the dread. The way my psychotherapist explained it, my head was like a pail: there was only so much it was able to

take in before it started overflowing and my extremities started tingling. Then I would hear that high-pitched tone and zone out. Sometimes my vision blurred, sometimes I hallucinated, and sometimes my internal monologue went off the rails, jarred into bizarre out-of-body narration. These were apparently defence mechanisms—miniature firefighters hosing down internal flames. “Good for you,” she said. “Good for you for finding a way to fight past overwhelming stimuli. It’s amazing how resilient we can be. It’s pretty unhealthy, though. We’ll straighten you out.”

My neck, shoulders, and triceps quivered under the weight of the canoe. I kept my elbows locked and thought about all the upper-body training I should have done. I imagined the relief of wiggling out of my backpack and my crossbow straps—being free of my literal burdens.

“How you doing back there?” I asked Logan. “Time for a break?”

“Another one?” Logan said, struggling with the canoe but too macho to admit it. He was still peeved that I bought generic-brand atmosphere suits because you get what you pay for and apparently what I paid for was minimal heat shielding and poor breathability. Sweat trickled everywhere inside these restrictive rubber getups, the lower-back-into-butt-crack trickle being the worst.

Logan had been bugging me for months to take him hunting—for the two of us to plunge into the ashy wilderness and kill something like real men. When I came back online after my election-night episode—after I Google-mapped what part of town I was in, found my clothes, and hitchhiked home—I decided fuck it. Not because I believed in hunting—a lot of these people who kill for “sport” are the same making-up-for-something types who have oversized houses, braggy social media accounts, and loud-ened mufflers—but because I believed that kids should have experiences and be able to relate to other kids. Did I let Logan get that neck tattoo to fit in with the other grade-four boys? Sure I did. But did I ever strap on a smog mask and take him out to shoot anything? Did I ever give him the opportunity to be like the other boys and bring a trophy organ/limb/pelt to school? No, and thanks to me he was always the odd one out. He already missed out on Disney World (Orlando being fully submerged as of June) and snow (except when he played in the freezer), so if it was important to him to put an arrow through something and bring a trophy to school, then it was worth trying to put my own belief system, personal integrity, and blood phobia on hold. Feeling uneasy and conflicted was actually a pretty small price to pay

because, from a human lineage perspective, I didn't really matter anymore. I was on the back half of my life—the half where you don't understand what the kids are saying anymore, and no one expects too much out of you. Logan was the future.

"You know, it's okay if we don't find anything," I said through my mask, tightening my sweaty grip on the canoe to stabilize it over my head. "I also brought cards."

"Grandpa would be able to find something," Logan said, grimacing under the weight of the canoe.

My father was a legendary outdoorsman, who built the family cabin with his bare hands in a day, filled the walls with decapitated animal heads, and once even delivered a stranger's baby at the side of the road before changing her flat.

"We'll do our best, bud."

Then my boot plunged into a mini pit and I went down, face first, into the warm ash. Fortunately Logan kept hold of his end of the canoe, so the full weight didn't land on my head (like those previous mini pits)—and thank god because my headache was getting worse. There was a slight tingle, a mild blurring of vision, and a faint hint of that high-pitched tone.

"You alright?" Logan said, suppressing his impatience and projecting empathy for his father—the consensus weak link in the family.

I stood and lifted the canoe back over my head. "No concussion here, bud."

Upon arriving at the cabin, I was the first to spot the barren dirt bowl that used to be Lake Plentiful. Logan and I, sweaty and ruined from portaging all day in inadequate atmosphere suits, looked at each other and shared a moment of unspoken defeat. We dropped the canoe like the dead weight it was, wiggled out of our backpacks and crossbow straps, and chucked our respective tangled messes at some trees. A satisfying plume of ash rose up from the impact. We pulled off our masks (at the risk of developing smog lung) and took long deep breaths of that tainted yet somehow refreshing air. This commotion was what startled the bear. It rose to its feet in the clearing at the foot of the cabin, scraggly looking, possibly malnourished, but nonetheless eight feet tall and terrifying. Logan and I froze, partly out of shock and partly out of awe. This majestic creature was real, alive, and right there before us. It was a privilege to behold. It was a privilege to share a moment with such a beautiful and resilient beast, which had somehow adapted to the

apocalyptic conditions in what used to be its natural habitat.

Wheezing the telltale wheeze of smog lung, the bear staggered toward us.

“He’s right near our packs and crossbows,” Logan said.

“Yeah, I can see that,” I replied, yanking his shoulder and pulling him two steps back, where he was moderately safer.

The bear eyed us and cocked its head before sniffing out the rations in our ash-covered packs.

“I think I can get to my crossbow,” Logan said.

Before I could tell him no, this isn’t one of your video games, he dropped, rolled, snatched the crossbow, reverse rolled, and stood next to me, skin-tight atmosphere suit covered in ash, struggling to pull back the string to cock the pre-loaded arrow.

“The string won’t latch!” he said.

“Forget that,” I said, pulling him back toward the cabin, our atmosphere suits squeaking with every careful step. “He’s going for the food.”

The bear kept at the rations, its ribs visible under taut fur, its eyes underscored by deep bags, and its growly bear noises now more like whimpering, resigned sighs. It was hungry, that was for sure, but its body language suggested that it was also depressed, if that was even possible. One of the packs eventually toppled over, exposing the other crossbow, which the bear nudged with its paw.

“He’s pawing at the other crossbow!” Logan said.

“No shit!”

The bear peered at us, annoyed by our bickering, and then scooped it up in its front paws, holding it almost exactly like the manual recommended. The way that bear stood upright and aimed that crossbow, you could tell it knew how to handle itself.

I stopped my slow backward progress toward the cabin and raised my hands in surrender. I couldn’t believe that this was how it was all going to end—sniped off by a bear with a crossbow. Of course it made sense that an outing led by yours truly would turn out to be a disaster, but maybe there was more to it. Maybe encountering a bear and witnessing its prowess with manmade weaponry was something we were supposed to experience so that whichever one of us survived could return to civilization and tell the world that there were still bears out there—that wildlife was deep into the shit can, but maybe we still had a chance to salvage a species or two. Our story would

certainly be “out there,” but it might hit home harder than those preachy documentaries on Alaskan walrus crammed into tight packs along the shoreline because they were running out of real estate.

“I love you, Logan,” I said, coughing. The smog stung my throat and made me feel a little loopy, like I’d downed a full beer.

“Dad! Do someth—”

In one decisive motion, the bear swung the crossbow around, mouthed the tip of the pre-loaded arrow, and pulled the trigger. With a sharp twang the arrow shot into the bear’s mouth and through the back of its head into a tree, where it stuck, dripping stringy red bear goo into the ash below. Then I heard that high-pitched tone again, and the world stopped.

The next thing I knew, there was a fire crackling in the woodstove. It was unnecessary given the heat outside, but we agreed that wilderness adventuring wouldn’t be the same without a fire in the cabin.

Bear sulked in front of the stove, wringing his paws, watching the flames eat through the fishing rods he’d snapped and jammed in there.

“How was I supposed to know the lake dried up?” I said, coughing.

Bear just sat there in his camo undershorts, his ashy atmosphere suit crumpled in a pile on the barn board floor.

Bear had been like this—withdrawn and self-isolated—since his last birthday. I was well aware that he wished he had a tougher, more outdoorsy dad, like the bear dads of his bear friends—a real man who loved hunting and invited you out to the shed to chew tobacco.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” I asked.

Bear sipped his hot chocolate and pawed at the marshmallows bobbing around in the cup.

“We just watched that kid shoot himself in the face,” I said. “It’s the sort of thing, as your father, that I think we should talk about.”

Bear stared. “What’s wrong with you?”

He looked so cute with his fuzzy little bear face that I reached over and petted him, but he just punched me in the arm. “You’re scaring me,” he said. “Go sit outside.”

Outside, in the haze of the evening smog, I huddled with the carcass of that dead kid, now crumpled in a warm ashy heap on the ground, the arrow pinning him to the tree having snapped. I thought about the kid’s father, who probably came from a long line of strong and resilient men but who was just a blip on that line—a link that didn’t belong, like the frail branch on a

family tree that withers and dies so that the rest of the tree can stay strong. Despite being a blip, though, this father somehow managed to reproduce and advance that line of men with a strong boy of his own, and now that boy was gone—a life squandered because nobody cared about kids anymore. What people really cared about were disposable fast food containers, arctic casino cruise lines, and trophy hunting. What was a person supposed to do? It was enough to drive you nuts.

The kid's body probably weighed 400 pounds, so dragging him into a grave was out of the question, but I was going to make sure that he didn't die for nothing. I had enough strength left in me to lift one of his arms and pluck out that crossbow. Bear was in the cabin, and through the haze I watched that fuzzy little guy pad by the window, paws on a crossbow of his own. I knew he was scheming—that he was going to come for me—but this time I would be ready. If my own father were here, he'd have already put an arrow through his head and started skinning him, fashioning a rug from his pelt and making a chunky soup out of the rest. My old man was a maximizer, who got the most out of everything—except me—but that didn't matter anymore. Despite my cough, my headache, and that incessant goddamned tone, I still had this vague belief in myself—a sense that, for once, I was *toughening* up instead of *giving* up. Instead of being the weak link, I was going to advance the line, undo some of the damage that had been done, and avert a full-blown shit can scenario. I had a crossbow with a latching string, and that was a start.