

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

Dennis Vanwick  
SISKIWIT BAY

Mark had been stroking the underside of Otis' white-whiskered snout when the Labrador unexpectedly wheezed out his last breath. By the next morning, Mark admitted to himself that he was missing the dog nearly as much as Dorothy, who had passed away last year.

He sat on the sofa and gazed blankly out the bay window overlooking Lake Superior.

"*Nobody left to walk to the mailbox with,*" he murmured to the empty room.

As he talked, he threaded Otis' empty chain collar through his thick fingers like a shiny, heavy-duty rosary.

He smiled, recalling all the silly nicknames Dorothy had for the dog, like *Baby*, or *Sweetie*. Neither Mark nor Dorothy had ever talked about the affection they had for the dog, not even to each other.

Fog lingered over the ice, black as he had seen it in the fifty years he and Dorothy had owned the spacious cedar-sided home. Just the two of them and Otis. No kids, something decided so long ago that he had forgotten the logic behind the decision.

He returned to his lament, "*Nobody left to brighten up a miserable day like this.*"

The bleak scene framed by the window was unpainted - early spring was not making any colorful promises. No Trillium, no green shoots, not even a bud on a branch. Dark water was dripping off the eaves, making little splat noises on the deck.

A lone tear spilled from an eye and ran down a cheek. He wiped it away roughly and stood abruptly to walk into the kitchen where he began to empty the pockets of his cargo pants onto the counter top.

The contents of the largest pockets served as a forensic map of yesterday's activities: Otis' collar, leash, and favorite ball and the receipt from the vet for the cremation.

The smaller pockets held the more mundane items like keys, wallet, stick matches, a Swiss army knife, and a fishing bobber Mark had just retrieved from the sofa.

The spare change drawer, under the counter, yielded enough coins to refill all of the pockets he had emptied. Like many other couples, they had their peculiar division of labor. It had been one of Dorothy's tasks to cash in the coins at the bank. They had been accumulating since her death; coins from Friday night drinks at the Village Inn, coins from dinners out, coins left over from paying for groceries at the Safeway, and coins from Paulson's gas station.

The fog was beginning a sluggish ascent from the bay by the time Mark grabbed his down parka. The parka and the coins added over twenty pounds. The weight of Otis' plastic urn was negligible.

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Ten minutes later he was stepping out on the blackness of the ice, Otis' urn cupped in one hand. Near shore, shallow puddles of water lay on top of the ice. He muttered as he trudged through them and out onto the bay.

*"Dorothy wouldn't like this. . . She bought those plots at Calvary Cemetery."*

The ice covering Siskiwit Bay groaned and rumbled like a hungry stomach.

The sun had begun burning through the fog by the time he arrived at the middle of the bay. It was accompanied by a light breeze, coming out from the south - from the land and the tiny town of Cornucopia at the end of the bay. The sun felt warm on his face for the first time since October.

Mark unzipped the parka. Up ahead he could see open water. A bit farther and he would break through.

A few minutes later, his right foot broke through. Otis' urn skittered across the ice into the open water in front of him, top breaking off, ashes spilling. No problem, that was the plan anyway. Water filled his boot, giving him a rude sampling of death by hypothermia and a specter of drifting down to the bottom, lungs filling up with frigid water.

The sound of a car horn rode the wind out from Cornucopia.

Foot still stuck in the ice, he glanced to the small town far away at the end of the bay. He could see the high, peaked roof of the Village Inn sitting on the shore, the only restaurant in the tiny town. He thought of his friend, Sam Black Bear, the big Ojibwa who owned the place.

Sam would undoubtedly give him thick wool socks, some mukluks, maybe a blanket. He thought of Sam brewing coffee and Indian fry bread for the lunch crowd. He thought of chatting with Sam, about The Packers and Steelhead fishing in the Brule. The little things. There was still a good life to live.

Coffee. He thought he could smell it. Thought he smelled the fry bread, too.

He yanked his numb foot out of the snowmobile boot, letting it drift to the bottom of Siskiwit Bay. At the Village Inn, he and Sam could drink an Irish coffee toast to Otis and Dorothy, though she frowned on morning drinking - her only character flaw that he could recall.

Mark began the trek towards Sam's bar. His fate was up to *Gitchee Gumee*, now. He recalled a line from a song, "Superior it's said, never gives up her dead."

He started murmuring again, *"Always wanted a proper burial. . . cozied up next to Dorothy in the cemetery. . . not floating around alone in thirty-eight degree water, like a big old dead Lake Trout. . . Probably have a couple of Lamprey Eels hanging from my neck, sucking blood. . . maybe garnished Captain Ahab fashion, with some lake weed or an old anchor rope tangled around me."*

The coins swinging against his legs reminded him of the now unwanted weight. He dipped a hand into one of the laden pockets and withdrew a handful, sprinkling a glittering arc as he walked. The ice continued groaning as if it didn't appreciate bribes of lucre and old men applying pressure.

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Mark's left foot broke through in a rush. This time he reacted quickly, pulling his foot out of the boot and rolling away from the hole – another boot on its way to the bottom of Siskiwit Bay.

*"Damn."*

He was afraid to stay, more afraid to move. The ice soon provided impetus, noisily heaving up and settling back down again. He stood uncertainly and turned in a circle, realizing that this large and spongy chunk of ice was now completely surrounded by water.

The narrowest part of the water – his best hope – was between the ice and the town beach. His only choice was to continue walking towards the Village Inn and hope that the water between shore and his island of ice was shallow enough for wading. He and Dorothy and Otis swam there a few years ago and Mark remembered it as a shallow beach, one of the reasons the small town named after the horn of plenty had never become one – had never had the financial benefit of a sailboat marina.

The insignificant breeze had quickly turned into a appreciable wind, and clouds had formed and drifted in to block the sun. With freezing bootless feet the day had lost some of its earlier allure. He zipped his jacket and resumed scattering the coins as he walked gingerly toward the shore.

*"I'm not going to start praying for mercy,"* Mark whispered to himself. *"God must be swamped anyway, what with wars, genocide, famine, and the like. Damned if I'm going to beg or pray or make promises about the way I live."*

The ice moaned again.

*"Course, there's always room for improvement in any life . . . start being more truthful. . . stop my exaggerating and telling tall tales. . . probably could come up with some other weaknesses if I had a warm place to think. . ."*

Gitchee Gumee's angry creaking didn't cease. He sprinkled more coins.

*"Plus, I hate to leave Sam saddled with the unfinished woodshed, and raking the leaves that I didn't finish last fall, and all the paperwork that the dead leave the living. Should've taken care of all that."*

Now he was very close to the edge of the ice. It looked to be about two hundred yards to shore. In this frigid water it was too far to swim for an old man. He threw out the last few coins, took off the heavy jacket, dropped it, and jogged toward the edge of the ice. As it started to give way under him, he dove and immediately started to swim as he splashed into the water. A mob of crows fluttered up cackling from a tree on shore.

By the midway point – arms heavy and numb – his thrashing stroke slowed to a crawl and Mark knew it was over. He took one last futile look at the Village Inn – hoping Sam would happen to be looking out the window – and then lowered his face into the water, eyes open. He could see the wavy sand bottom. It looked close – very close. He fought to stand up.

The frigid water reached to the bottom of his rib cage. In a few struggling, stumbling minutes, he was opening the heavy door to the Village Inn. He took in the rich pungent smells of coffee, stale beer, fry bread, and a fire smoldering in the stone fireplace covering the north wall. Perfect, except for the explaining he had to do. . .

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Sam was cleaning the bar top, "What the hell?" he boomed out.

"You didn't come across on that black ice, I hope?"

It was a rhetorical question.

"Damn fool. Drag your sorry self over to the fireplace and get your clothes off. I'll grab you a blanket and some mukluks."

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The scuttlebutt during the Friday night fish fry centered on the anonymous fool who had been spotted on the black ice just a few hours before the ice went out. Sam participated minimally in the discussion, claiming somewhat truthfully that he hadn't seen anyone on the ice and didn't know a thing about it.

Unnoticed and feeling a bit smug at the other end of the bar, Mark squirmed his toes around inside his dry wool socks and celebrated the little things like a mug of beer and warm feet.