

Deep Freeze

By Eugene S. Strout MD

1.

June 14. Somewhere in Northern Wisconsin.

The six year old Toyota Camry came to a screeching halt at the unmarked crossroad of two deeply rutted dirt roads. Robin Eames pounded a gloved fist on the steering wheel in frustration. She brushed stringy ash blond hair from her forehead with the other hand. Flipped the heater on. "June in Wisconsin? Brr. Must be in the forties."

Robin shielded her eyes from an anemic sun, did a 360 degree scan of her surroundings.

Thinning forest. No landmarks. "Damn."

She punched a saved number on her cell phone.

"Disclosure Magazine. Editor Joe DeLong here."

"Joe, I Need some help here. I'm lost. Frost Valley's not in my Thomas Guide, and my old junk heap doesn't have GPS."

"Oh, hi Robin. Hang on a sec."

She flipped the windshield defroster on, buttoned her jacket to the top, shivered, unleashed a string of expletives. "Most junior reporter gets the crap assignment," she muttered. "Why did that geeky Neil have to go missing? Him and that B.S. story about some old glacier and ghosts."

Riffling of paper. "Okay, Robin. Here's Neil's last call. He drove west from State Route 26 in Bayfield County on Old Mill Road, ran out of pavement, came to an unmarked, unpaved crossroad. He described deep forest with intermittent clearing. He turned North. Said he'd have a feature article for us. That's all I've got . . ."

Static.

Robin punched the number again. NO SERVICE showed on the cell's screen. "No cell towers in this god-forsaken wilderness," she complained. "Damn Neil and his obsession with spooks." She took a deep breath, did a slow exhale, nodded. "Okay, I'll go North."

2.

Four bone-rattling unpaved miles later. She almost missed the faded sign. Had to get out of the car, scrub off untold eons of grit, pull away an overgrowth of weeds. “Hah,” she exulted. “Eat your heart out, Sherlock Holmes.” Frost Valley appeared in something approximating Old English script. Robin tried her cell again. “No service. That figures.”

Another two miles of rutted, dried mud road. The village was small, composed of dilapidated two-story dwellings, single homes, a post office and library. No other vehicles in sight. She pulled up in front of an ancient hotel, loaded a chip into her hand-held digital recorder, went in.

“June fourteen, 4:30 P.M. Robin Eames reporting. Took me since noon to find the place, Joe. Single road leading in, almost missed it. There’s a little hotel. It’s from an earlier time. Gambrel roof, stained glass panels in the front door. I took some pics. Clerk as old and withered as the hotel. No plastic, had to pay cash. Single room. I’m their only guest. Clerk cautious. When I mentioned Neil Johnson he showed me the register. No Neil. Dinner was my cold burger and fries from the last truck stop. Yuck.”

“Took a walk around town. Checked out the library. It’s like a museum. Newspapers from early 1800’s on. Ages-old, wrinkled librarian with glasses on a chain around her neck. She told me a glacier from the last ice age melted here eight thousand years ago. Pleistocene era, whatever that was. When I asked about missing persons she gave me this strange look. ‘The Cold remains,’ she said.”

“No police station. Guy at the hardware store told me a county sheriff drives through every couple of weeks. Said there was a phone at the library.”

“Called Bayfield cops, spoke to a Sergeant Emerson. Neil’s name didn’t ring a bell. No reports of missing persons. I asked him about the town.”

“Frost Valley is a very old village, since before Wisconsin became a state, he told me. Their valley was carved out by a glacier. Folks stay pretty much to themselves. Some sort of cultists. I thanked him for the history lesson.”

“Librarian gave me a half smile, charged me \$2.50 for the call”

Robin sacked out early, worn out from the drive and walk. Some abdominal cramping, her cold burger didn’t sit well. The mattress was thin but there was a warm comforter. She had the window raised a litle, despite the cold. Restless tossing, muttering a few obscenities before she dozed off . . .

3.

Early evening. A narrow street. Cobblestones. Early 1850's two-story homes crowding a brick sidewalk. Ancient paint streaked with grime gives a sickly gray pallor to their clapboard exteriors. Dusty cobwebbed windows appear vacant. Pavement laced with lengthening somber shadows. A solitary streetlamp flickers to life.

A distant rumble of thunder fractures the haunting stillness. Palpable gloom descends as gathering storm clouds blot out the setting sun. Sky turns eerie purple-black, like a bruise. Furious gray clouds churn past. Dark overwhelms the street lamp's feeble luminosity. Peeling paint chips flicker in the fresh breeze. Odd shadows pulsate and fade as lightning slashes the stifling blackness like a cosmic scalpel. Cannonade of thunder, closer than before. Windows of the houses facing the avenue dark, deserted, concealing their secrets behind dust-shrouded panes. Bloated raindrops begin to tattoo the pavement.

The storm breaks with demonic fury. Silvery spikes of lightning, jagged reflections dance across the blank windowpanes. Pavement vibrates with thunderclaps. Rain writhing in impenetrable sheets at the mercy of the insistent wind. An ornate metallic shade over the vintage street lamp oscillates, producing sinister stroboscopic flashes of light and shadow across the faces of the ancient homes. Grotesque forms flicker as saber blades of lightning dissect the lowering sky and the street lamp vibrates in the deluge . . .

4.

A half-seen motion at the periphery of her vision. Ephemeral, transitory. She looks up, a dark second-story window stares back. Something stirring behind the filthy glass. Gray clots of mist swirling and coiling behind the dirt-streaked pane. A formless, membraneous mass begins to push its way through the glass without breaking it. Growing, swelling, dilating like some satanic carnival balloon. Opaque. Blacker than interstellar space. Absorbing light like the core of a black hole. Casting no shadow. Changing, mutating, a Rorschach inkblot imbued with malignant life force. Cold, as if touched by absolute zero. Raindrops tinkling on the pavement as they freeze. A thin strand of inky, threadlike material attach it through the window glass. Frost ferns blossom and branch, glazing the pane. It turns toward her, attracted, following. Watching . . .

A scream.

It hesitates, then withdraws through the glass. Rain and wind abate, canceled by some galactic on-off switch. Melting ice cascades into the street, rattling down storm drains. Hanging limp, the street lamp casts benign shadows. The house is only old and dilapidated, its upstairs window dusty, rain-streaked and unlit. Nothing stirs behind the pane.

5.

Robin awakened with a start. 1:55 A.M., her watch read. What had wakened her? Had she screamed? Her heart pounded in adrenaline-propelled tachycardia. She padded barefoot to the window. Drying raindrops dotted the sill and pane. A faraway crescendo of thunder followed a blink of cloud-filtered lightning. An acrid whiff of ozone lingered. Droplets on the lawn sparkled in the glow of a lonely street lamp. Stars peeked between dissipating rain clouds. The bright first-quarter moon cast eerie, mosaic shadows as spidery tree branches clawed at the brilliance.

She rubbed her arms as a chill breeze raised serious goosebumps. Trembling, she brushed damp strands of hair from her face and rubbed her hands together for warmth, wrapped the comforter around her shoulders. She tried her cell phone again. No service. Flipped the small bedside lamp on, grabbed her digital recorder.

“June fifteen. 2:05 A.M. Cold as hell, Joe. Teeth won’t quit chattering. I can see my breath. This is June? Damndest dream, like virtual reality. Oh God, I’ll have nightmares the rest of my life. This really freaked me out. I couldn’t get back to sleep. Neil would have loved it.”

Robin clicked the digital recorder off. Got a drink of water from a bathroom tap.

“Had to get some water, Joe. Mouth is like cotton.”

She recalled the dream in explicit detail. “Got it all on the digital chip. Pretty freaky, huh? Must have been that damn cold burger.”

“More later. I’ll try to find an area in range of a cell tower in the morning.”

6.

June 15. 9:30 A.M.

Robin recharged her digital recorder on the cigarette lighter socket in her car. She found a coffee shop, loaded up on five strong cups, ate a danish and half a grapefruit. Drove fifteen miles, couldn’t find a viable cell reception area. Returned to her room to relieve a coffee-distended bladder. Walked to the library.

The library lady remembered her. “How did you sleep, dear?” she asked. “Okay, except for and the cold and the nightmare.

“You could be the chosen,” she said. Odd toothless grin.

Robin smiled. “To win the PowerBall lottery, I hope.”

The lady stacked books, pounded a date stamper, ignored her.

“Yeah right,” Robin told the recorder when she got outside. “Broad’s certifiable. Creepy as hell. Wish Neil was here.”

“Nice day here, Joe. Must be in the seventies. The cold is gone. Nothing like last night.”

7.

Robin took a self-guided tour of Frost Valley filling in her recorder as she walked.

“Twelve noon. Not many folks out and about, Joe. Too nice a day to be indoors. Spoke to one or two locals. Cautious. Afraid? None recognized Neil’s name. Most of the shops were closed. Got a stale danish at a bakery. Didn’t charge me. How odd.”

She returned to her room, made some written notes in a small notebook, stuffed them in her purse.

“June fifteen. 5:00 P.M.,” she said to the digital recorder. “I found this old street. Looks familiar. Gimme a sec. Putting in fresh chip.”

“Okay, I’m back. There was one older guy. Scared. ‘The Cold,’ he said. ‘Older than time. From the glacier. You shouldn’t have come here. ‘We obey the Cold,’ he said as he ran off. Another one of Neil’s nutcases.”

“Getting dark as hell now. Joe. I think it’s gonna rain . . .”

8.

Daylight succumbs to evening and the breaking thunderstorm. Unrelenting sheets of rain slash the facades of the antiquated dwellings, driven by the shrieking wind.

Robin’s umbrella turns inside out. She tosses it in the gutter.

“I’m soaked, Joe. It’s getting colder. That window. Good God. It’s just like the one in my nightmare.”

Shifting shadows are punctuated by blinding needles of lightning. Amorphous, swirling mist gathers behind the pane. Icicles proliferate below the sill. Rain turns to sleet. Robin's breath comes in frigid gasps.

She holds the ice-slicked digital recorder in a shivering hand. "Hope you're getting this, Joe. I'm soaked. Raincoat's useless. Wait a minute. The pane is bulging. The glass didn't break, like in the dream. I don't believe this."

Robin clicks the digital photo feature of her cell phone. "Gotta get some photos, Joe. Pulitzer for Robin Eames, age twenty-two, for sure. Wish I could share it with Neil."

Her lips stretch in a thin grimace. A step forward. Wind form-fits the saturated raincoat tight to her body. She sashes through an ice-crusting puddle. Another step. Slips on the icy sidewalk, arms windmill to regain balance. Strands of frosted hair snap against her cheeks.

It hovers. Closer.

"There's no surface features. Just solid, nonreflective black. No sensory organs, but it knows I'm here. Trying to get photos. Fingers numb. Good. It still works".

"Get away from me . . ."

"I see Neil. There's a glacier. How can this be? So cold . . ."

9.

"County Sheriff found this, Joe," the private investigator said as he handed over Robin's cell phone. "It was found a mile from the hotel. No record of Miss Eames checking in. Register confirms. No belongings. Nobody in town remembers her or Mr. Johnson."

Joe pressed PLAY. Static. He pulled the digital chip, placed it in his own cellular device.

More static.

"Damn. Robin said she had something good for the magazine."

"Maybe her chip froze."

"In June?"

"Locals say ice storms are common there."

The End