

“The Thing in the Snow”

By: Adam Noyes



I knew a lot about the “The Howard Simpson Incident” from my days in high school. It had a profound impact on me as one of those incidents that left far more questions than answers. Perhaps it was my morbid curiosity that drove me forward that drove me to be so obsessed with this story. Perhaps it was because my friend Charles Clark, though I called him Chuck. He had grown up close to where the incident had occurred. Perhaps it was a mixture of all these.

It shaped me either way. I always liked the woods. Whenever I could go there from my office in New York City, I would jump at the opportunity. I would always go camping with Chuck to spend a week in Northern New Hampshire. He would always make fun of me for my, “city boy” attitude. I didn’t know how to cast a fishing line, load a gun, hold a gun, or make even a simple fire. But Chuck taught me a lot.

The idea of the Howard Simpson Incident happening only miles up to road from Chuck’s house never bothered me. But I never went to Pond of Safety. Nor did I ever go snowmobiling up the winding trails that lead from the town of Jefferson to Berlin. Though I never felt scared, perhaps it was residual, something subconscious.

Chuck was still in New Hampshire renovating an old house while I was in New York. I was trying to find a good story for my “Strange & Unexplained” monthly online magazine. I was just about to pick one when I got a call from Chuck.

“Matthew Crafton!” he roared. “Have I got something for you!”

It turned out Chuck was renovating the house owned by the lone survivor of the Howard Simpson Incident. I asked Chuck if he could land me an interview jokingly. But when Chuck said he pulled a few favors for me and Jack Pierce agreed, I nearly jumped out of my seat in joy. I needed a story, and this could be it - something more than the ghost in the addict stuff. Pierce had flat out refused to speak to anyone pretty much since the time the incident took place.

Trembling with excitement, I got approved by the company to write up a story on the incident, packed my things, and drove eight hours from Long Island to Coos County New Hampshire.

In October of 1956, four friends, all veterans and familiar with the area, went for a long camping trip up Pond of Safety. They were Howard Simpson, the head of the party, Jack and Lewis Pierce, brothers, and finally John Archer. They were all close and had hunted the area many times.

After the first night, it had snowed, and Jack appeared from the woods exhausted and mumbling to himself. Howard, Lewis, and John had all gone missing in the night. After weeks of searching, all three bodies were found. John had drowned in Pond of Safety. Howard was found frozen to death and showing the signs of hypothermia. And Lewis was found starved to death, miles away from any trail and halfway up Boy Mountain. All three showed signs of scavenger damage.

Many thought Jack Peirce was responsible. But the police found no evidence of this or a probable cause. If he did do it, what probable cause could there be? There was no drama between them, no personal disputes nothing to suggest any hostilities at all.

It was ruled that the party grew separated as the freak snow storm blinded them all. Jack happened to live. But this made little sense to anyone. Jack and John had both served in Korea during the battle of the Chosin Reservoir. The weather was far worse there, and all of them had lived in Jefferson their whole lives. Freak snow storms ranging from October to April were commonplace.

How could all four split and then three die in conditions they were familiar with? How did John drown? What made him go into Pond of Safety in the first place? Why would Howard, the most experienced of them all, allow the party to separate? How did Lewis starve to death when it showed he died not long after being reported missing?

Nothing came of this until Jack Pierce spoke with a local reporter about what happened that night. He said, "It wasn't natural. You'd think I'm crazy, and the Fish and Game refused to listen to me. But I think something killed them. I never saw it, or maybe I did but refuse to remember. But I think the thing on the snow did them in."

This started a fire of questions and when the quote was published, Jack Peirce was hounded by reporters from all over New Hampshire to explain. Theories ranged from Jack Pierce doing it himself, to Sasquatch, to Aliens, to Jack Pierce looking to make some money off the tragedy. Jack Peirce was ridiculed heavily for it, and he shut himself away from most other people. He went to work at the saw mill, then go home alone.

I thought he had died, but when Chuck texted me a picture of him, it was clearly the same Jack Pierce I had seen in photographs. Except now he was 84 years old. If I was going to get a story from him, now would be the time. Soon he would be gone forever, the secrets of that night along with him. Peirce was even smoking the wooden pipe seen in most pictures taken of him.

I unpacked at Chuck's and spent the night there. The next day, we both went straight to Jack Pierce' home in Twin Mountain, about 30 minutes south from Pond of Safety. I had not been here in a while, and the trees were all the same as I remembered. The White Mountains were still beautiful, and the skies the bluest I had ever seen.

I was also reminded of the isolation this place produced. Houses were few and far between. The nearest stores were miles away. Trees were the barriers between homes here, not other buildings or fences. It made property far more individualized. It felt comfy, like you had your privacy and room to breathe. It was something people from New York City would never understand.

There were also miles upon miles of land with no signs of civilization at all. It was all untapped, the same as it was hundreds of years ago. There were trees as far as the eye could see, mountains rising on all fours sides of you like the walls of a fortress. There were farms here as well, mostly for cows, with acres of land for growing and cutting hay. It was good land here, fueled by many rivers and streams that all seemed to interconnect and intertwine.

And green.

Everything was so beautifully green.

The campgrounds were also full. The summer months brought thousands of tourists from all over the country here to escape the monotony of urban America. They would partake in the local water parks, moose tours, or a simple hike up one of the large and sharp Presidential Mountains.

Once we had reached Twin Mountain, a sense of foreboding quickly washed over me. The area was still beautiful and green, and the weather was sunny and inviting. But the idea of seeing Jack Pierce in person suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks.

I could be speaking with a murderer...

...or a madman.

My mind was a mixture of dread and pure excitement. I made sure not to draw any conclusions right off the bat. Perhaps Jack Peirce did kill his friends by Pond of Safety. Perhaps he would admit it all here because of a guilty conscious. That would make one hell of a story.

We drove down a long dirt road I had passed many times with Chuck years before. Neither of us could have known Jack Pierce lived on the house at the other end. But when we saw the house, it surprised me just how normal it appeared. The house was two stories, square, and white, while beside it was a much larger garage of the same color. The river ran right past it, and the grass was vibrantly green and freshly mowed. There was about an acre of clear land here before it immediately cut off by a wall of woods. At one end was an old tractor, red in color though heavily rusted. Around the left side of the small white house was a series of scaffolding, no doubt where Chuck was working. In the driveway stood an older blue truck. I gathered it was from the 1980's by the model, but it looked in pristine condition.

Chuck threw his truck into park, and we both walked towards the house. Chuck was more familiar with the place, and while he strode around to his tools for a bit, I took my steps very carefully. I examined the blue truck, looked at the passenger seat, saw it was rather neat inside. On the dashboard were a few tools for cutting branches and trees, but that was it. Nothing littered the cabin's floor.

And then I heard a loud barking from within the house, and I turned, startled by the sudden explosion of noise. Chuck said something about the dog knowing it was him, and I walked up to the front door. Behind it was a large german shepherd who barked and jumped all at the same time. I could see its tail wagging wildly excitement, the dog joyous to see Chuck, and before I could say something, my friend was knocking on the door.

We waited for only a moment before an old, hunched over man opened the door. He wore navy blue overalls, a plaid button shirt, and had a smoking pipe sticking out of the right side of his mouth. He greeted us with neither disdain nor welcome, but invited us inside.

This was Jack Pierce.

Once we were inside, I took note of how neat everything was. There was no dust, no litter, and he told us to even take off our shoes at the door. Both Chuck and I complied before we were lead into the kitchen. It was just as clean as the entrance way. The table was circular. A radio was stuck by the window, and it blared music, but Jack Pierce was quick to turn it off.

He asked me if I was the reporter. Pierce' eyes were brown and fixed on mine, and his voice demanded respect. It was not a harsh tone, but one that I knew I had to pay attention to.

I told him who I was and shook his hand. For such an old man his shake was firm, and then he motioned towards the table and he sat down. I followed and pulled out my audio recorder, told him what was going to happen, and all Jack Piece did was nod and puff away on his pipe. He was slouched over in his chair, and he was patting his dog on its forehead. I complimented the dog, and Jack Pierce paid little attention, called her Lady.

Chuck had gone outside to continue work on the roof, leaving Jack Pierce and me alone for the interview. I laid out the groundwork for Jack Pierce, and he simply nodded and listened to my instructions. It was unnerving how quiet the man was, one hand planted in his lap, the other still patting the german shepherd. I began to wonder if he would speak at all, but apparently he read my mind.

“Don’t worry, I’ll talk,” he spoke, voice grrough.

I nervously laughed, placed the audio recorder on the table and hit record.

“Jack Pierce,” I said firmly. “Could you tell me what happened the night of October 22nd, 1956?”

(^__^)

We had always wanted to go moose hunting. They were about as thin then as they are today, but not because of the ticks. They had yet to move south from Canada in the large numbers you’re used to. Growing up, we rarely saw a moose at all, but knew some lucky folk would find one, and some luckier folk would get the chance to shoot one. It was something of a prize to us hunters to shoot a bull moose around the rut season. Their horns would be full by then.

What we wanted was a picture. It also didn’t hurt that the meat was delicious. But I would leave that to Simpson.

Howard Simpson was like that older brother I never had. I was so busy looking after Lewis, especially after he returned from Korea, that I never had time to look after myself. Simpson was about 10 years older than me, and he would be the one to see if I was okay.

Because of Korea, I had lost two of my left fingers to frostbite. Lewis was lucky he was not quite old enough to go to Korea in 1950. He escaped the horrible cold that nearly killed me and Archer. I admit that Archer had it worse. He'd lost most of his right toes. All except the big one had to be amputated. It left him with quite a limp. But out of all of us, Archer remained the stubborn one, and admittedly the leader. He only ever truly listened to Simpson. He also fought in the Chosin Reservoir, though he escaped the frostbite by some piece of dumb luck.

Lewis managed to avoid most of the combat. It still changed him. He was always the bright eyed one. He was the last to come back and that brightness was gone. Funny how he said the same of me and John. He didn't know Simpson that much other than when he and I would go drinking. I thought taking my younger brother out hunting with us would revive something in him. He always liked hunting. We all did.

This was something for all of us. We loved Pond of Safety. I took my first girlfriend there. Simpson had joined the Fish and Game when he left the Marines. He was the one that got us permission to hunt the elusive moose. We heard some hikers had sighted a white one near one of the off trails. They were just north of the pond.

Truth be told, I didn't care what we got. It was Archer who wanted his moose. Simpson just egged him on. They were like that. They would both jab and curse each other out. I knew it was just playful and colorful banter left over from the marines.

We heard it could snow from the Mount Washington observatory. But it wouldn't be much. I let Simpson make the final call. He said enthusiastically that we should go, and there was no ignoring him. We were going.

SIMPSON called me "Pack Mule". I carried the tent, most of the tin cups. The heavy stuff. I was always the one to carry the heavy stuff, even in the marines. Lewis thought it was degrading, but I knew Simpson better than he did. If Simpson gave you a nickname, it meant he liked you. And he gave us all different nicknames. Lewis was "Chicken Shit," I was "Pack Mule," and usually Archer was simply "Stubborn Ass." I liked that one the most.

We moved into the woods around noon. Moose were usually more dormant during the day, so we could hike inwards. By 4:00 we would start hunting. Archer was full of piss and vinegar, he could barely stand still. Simpson would knock him down a peg, but it was all in good fun. Lewis stuck close to me like he always did.

We had all dressed in layers. A large coat for the snow. Most of us had it away in our packs. Then we had a lighter jacket, usually red and plaid. Then a t-shirt. Then long johns. Our hats varied. I can't remember what Simpson wore, but the rest of us had bomber caps made of rabbit fur.

We followed Simpson because he knew which trail we were going on best. According to him, it was close to where the hikers saw the moose. I was the first to begin setting up the tent. It was robust and heavy. It was good for handling snow. While I put up the frame and readied the tarps, Lewis looked for wood.

The leaves were all sorts of different colors. Though most were on the ground due to late fall winds, we could still see Boy Mountain awash in different shades of orange and yellows. I could see Pond of Safety's water clearly. I could also hear the occasional loon wail away, and the geese migrating south for the winter.

It took me no longer than an hour to set up our camp. This gave me about two hours of daylight left. I had plenty of time go out and look for any signs of moose. Lewis stayed back and readied our meal of pork and beans. Simpson went to the right, Archer to the center, and I to the left.

We had packed enough to stay out here for three days. My mission tonight was to simply find any sign, not to actually get something. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't hesitate to shoot a bull if it crossed my path. But tonight was for scouting on my end. If anything, I was worried about the black bears. They would smell Lewis cooking and become curious. I was not worried for Lewis, who knew full well how to defend his dinner, but more for the campsite itself. An angry black bear could do considerable damage. Though they were mostly afraid of us more than we were of them.

I had traveled about two miles in and didn't see no sign of moose. I did see a deer. It was yellow and looked no older than a yearling, but that was it.

I remember it being extremely quiet and peaceful there. Snow clouds had begun to settle in, but the wind was just crisp enough where I didn't sweat when I moved. But as it began to get too dark for me, I decided it was best to head back to Lewis. I decided to take the south trail the next morning.

I returned to find Lewis still cooking and maintaining a small fire. He was alone and greeted me almost like a puppy. He was always like this with me, especially after Korea.

I had just sat down when a loud crack roared through the air. A gunshot! I stood and tried to figure out which direction it had come from, and decided it came from the north center trail. It meant John Archer. Lewis distinctly wanted to go in that direction, but I told him to stay back. I knew Archer well. If he got his moose, he would want to drag it himself. Even with his missing toes, it would wound his pride if he had to ask for help.

Silence followed and I took out one of my tin plates and dug into our dinner. Lewis tried, but was too distracted. He kept looking to the north for a sign of Archer. Simpson had yet to return, but I was not worried for him. Simpson was just as good of a tracker at night as he was in the day. He always seemed to find the path no matter what, even without a compass. He said he learned it from his father who was half Apache. Or so he said.

Simpson came back first. I wasn't surprised. He was pissed he hadn't found nothing, but soon shut up when he dug into his meal.

It was full dark when we all witnessed Archer stumble out from one of the trails. His limp was great, and his arms were covered in a dark liquid. I shined my steel flashlight on him. I saw blood. I wasn't alarmed though. If he had indeed shot a moose, he would have to gut it. In order to do that, he would need to cut around the anus, then slice about midway up the stomach. Once that was done, he could start pulling out the intestines without much of a problem. It was always a bloody affair.

He was clearly excited. He told us he got a bull, which made Simpson proudly slap Archer on the back. But it wasn't just some random moose, it was the white one seen by the hikers. Archer then said he needed help dragging it back to camp. I could tell his pride had been wounded, but he got his moose.

We had decided before hiking that if we were to get a moose, we would cut it up right there. I had lugged a small cooler which I stored in a stream close by to keep cold. We could keep it like that for a couple of days if need be without the meat going bad.

We hiked about three miles in. Archer led the way with Simpson close behind. Then came me. Then came Lewis who always tended to travel last. He was just like that, I think. Archer's limp was heavy, but he was too stubborn to sit down for a moment. He needed to get to his moose, and he would not shut up about it. He ranted and told us no doubt an exaggerated story of how he had shot it at an impossible angle left handed. Lewis ate it up, and Simpson seemed to play along. I said nothing.

Archer suddenly stopped. I walked up beside Simpson and could see my friend pacing wildly, checking under brush. He asked me for the flashlight, and I obliged. He shined it all about, cursing the entire time in a panic. He told us it was here. He told us he gutted the moose right here. Simpson helped him look around while I took Lewis a little further north. It was possible Archer had confused the location in the night. I had done it many times deer hunting before.

But Lewis and I both traveled in vast circles. I could still hear Archer cursing up a storm. What struck me was that if this was the area Archer had gutted his moose, there would be some signs of blood, a beaten down path, or even a pile of guts. Also, I smelled nothing. Moose, from what I've been told, stink almost as bad as a bear. I smelled nothing here but mud and decaying leaves. The direction of the wind made sure I would have smelled it.

The only explanation I could muster is that in the heat of the moment, Archer got mixed up in his tracking.

I returned with Lewis to discover Archer infuriated. Simpson was trying to calm him and not doing a very good job of it. Archer was screaming. He was so sure he had gutted his moose right here. Yet there was no blood, there was no trail, and there was no moose.

I remember Archer saying he punctured its gut by accident with the bullet. That meant it would not only be bloody from the gutting, but also the moose would have been bleeding out before it finally dropped. Clearly Archer had shot it. Clearly Archer had gutted something. He still had the drying blood on his arms to prove it. A gutted Moose would not get up and walk away. It was dead.

It had begun to snow, and Archer's rage had not subsided. I wanted to head back to camp and try again in the morning. But Archer was so adamant on finding his moose. I didn't blame him. Scavengers would find it in no time at all, especially this time of year. But it was Lewis who seemed to be scared by the situation. He practically clung to me, and he kept saying he felt like there was something watching them. I felt nothing and told him to calm down.

As the snow got worse and the wind picked up, even Simpson knew it was time to head back to camp. We had been searching for three hours to no avail. Archer finally caved and we returned to the camp. The fire was out now. Luckily, Lewis was smart enough to put away the food.

We packed inside the tent and hunkered down to get some shut eye. Simpson was the first to crash. He could sleep anywhere no matter what. Lewis wouldn't admit it, but he was quick to fall asleep too. It left me and Archer together in silence. We listened to the wind howl from up on Boy Mountain. It had also gotten tremendously colder than the previous hours, and I had pulled out the winter jacket. Archer did nothing and just sat in his bag like a child. I thought he was just pouting. But apparently he was listening to something I could not hear.

Every once in awhile, I could see him look in the direction of Boy Mountain. It would be a sudden jolt, not like someone just casually looking around while they tried to sleep. And as the night continued, it became clear that Archer was not trying to sleep at all. He was not pouting or wallowing in his own misery.

Archer was afraid of something.

He would startle at any little creek or thump in the woods. I just watched him for a while, and it reminded me so much of how he was after that first attack in Korea. It wasn't until he actually almost yelled in fright that I gave him any true attention. His scream was muffled. It was as if he was trying not to wake either Lewis or Simpson. But I was there as he was for me in Korea.

We were brothers that way, I guess. We had seen worse things together.

But as I sat beside him, I could see Archer shaking. He wouldn't speak to me. He would frantically look about the tent as if seeing spirits. I tried to tell him it was okay, but the words didn't seem to comfort him. He would move with the wind, I discovered. When a gust blew by, he would hide and cower inside his bag.

He did this for about a half hour until he finally said something to me. He kept telling me that something was calling him in the wind. He kept saying that whenever the wind hollered, something would call his name.

It was his imagination getting the best of him, but seeing a man like Archer cowering like a small child...

I'm not going to deny that I was doped up on my adrenalyn. I wasn't scared yet. I was just concerned for Archer, and the longer he stayed sitting there, the more it seemed his mental state left him. His shaking got worse. He would mumble to himself. He was even for his mother.

By now, both Simpson and Lewis were up. Lewis came over beside him and Simpson remained silent. Good thing too. I thought his usual jibes would only make it worse.

Little did I know that nothing would have stopped Archer at this point.

In the middle of a violent gust, Archer shot up, ripping off his sleeping bag. He held a knife and he screamed so loud. It was like he was not in control of his body. Simpson was the first to act. He leaped for Archer. I couldn't see what happened, but I heard Simpson grunt, then Archer just lost it. Then came a distinctive slicing sound through the tent and I could see the silhouette of Archer cutting his way outside.

I then felt snow hit my face as I frantically reached from my flashlight. Lewis then moved over to Simpson.

Through the snow outside was not heavy, it cut like knives in the wind. I could hear Simpson calling Archer's name, then Lewis was doing the same. But there were no answers. The way the wind was blowing made it almost impossible to see in front of your own face, and it made the flashlight almost useless. It reflected on the bits of snow.

I was afraid now. Not for me, but for Archer. He had gone mad, and he could easily get lost in these woods. But a hand grabbed my shoulder, and I screamed. I was so thrown into the moment I didn't see Simpson right behind me. He was screaming for me to follow him and I noticed Lewis was right behind me.

Simpson had found Archer's trail quick. The footprints were being covered over and blown away, so we moved fast, calling his name as much as we could. Only once did I think I heard the echoes of Archer's screaming far in the distance towards the lake. And I could have sworn I heard him call my name... my... name... only faintly against the wind's howls.

My instincts were telling me to run. I could see the tracks and the slower we moved, the more likely they were to disappear. But Simpson slowed me down. He was right, of course. With visibility nearly gone, we had to move as one. It was our best chance of not getting lost ourselves.

Lewis was the first to say something other than hollering Archer's name. His grip tightened on my shoulder, and I looked back at him. He was pointing to the ground. I shined my light to it and found what looked like a hoof print not only through the fresh snow, but into the muddy ground. I then stopped Simpson for a moment, and we all examined the marking. We could see many more up ahead.

However, Simpson seemed taken aback. He looked... confused. I asked what was up, and he simply replied that they were from a moose, but they shouldn't be. He

said they were too big. Much too big in fact. I bet I could fit both my feet in them and still have leftover room.

And they were just as fresh as Archer's prints. I didn't think of it at the time, but we would have heard something that big crashing through the woods. It wouldn't matter how much the wind blew. We would have heard it.

What mattered was finding Archer in this horrible storm. But as we moved, we found that the prints seemed to parallel Archer's. One print would appear every 15 feet or so, and I could tell it frightened Simpson. He remained silent, which I thought was for the best. I needed to find Archer. Nothing else mattered to me.

But even I could notice how the prints seemed to be stalking Archer, even moving in like a predator. And the further we went along, still calling for Archer until our voices were hoarse, I could see the hoof prints swallowing up those of Archer's. The distinct prints of winter boots morphing into the hoof prints not like one on top of the other, but like they were pressed at the same time.

Like they were becoming... one... thing.

And then we reached Pond of Safety, and the tracks disappeared into the water. I nearly fell to my knees in exhaustion and horror. I could feel my mind screaming to jump into the pond and swim after Archer. But the rational side of me won. Archer was in the water. It was freezing. He would not last long. Neither would I.

I wanted to scream, but found I could not, my voice nearly gone from calling to my friend. It was Simpson who suggested our next move, to make our way to Ingerson Road about 10 miles away. We needed to report this or else Archer would be dead. I remember saying nothing and only following them, mindlessly.

Archer was dead. There was no hope for him.

Simpson lead the way and he tied a rope to each of us. I was in the middle, but we moved like one. The wind only seemed to get worse as the night continued, and the snow did as well. We moved at a snail's pace. We had not expected such a storm to strike. The weather reports only said snow.

Those lying bastards.

But I was gone at this point. I was angry? Depressed? I don't know. But Archer was dead. That fucking hurt.

I don't know how long we traveled, but suddenly Simpson came to a halt. I can remember him pacing back and forth, then examining a white birch tree. He said we had been there before, and he grew angry. He kept screaming that we had been there before. He kept screaming that we had traveled in a circle. I thought he was going to punch something, or me, or Lewis he was so angry.

But then he stopped.

He calmed almost instantly and put his pack on the ground. He then pulled out a piece of sheet and took out his gutting knife. He kneeled and began to slice it. I could tell what he was doing, but Lewis was too naive. Simpson was going to put up markers. It was a smart idea.

Every hundred feet, we would stop and put up a bit of cloth on some tree. It would mark our way forward. We were still moving excruciatingly slow, and I could tell Lewis was growing colder and colder. In the excitement, he did not have time to throw on his undershirt beneath his winter jacket, while Simpson and I had on our full layers. I felt as if I was now failing as the protective older brother. I had nothing to give Lewis. If I gave him my jacket, I would be no better off than he. Same with Simpson, and I think Lewis understood this.

I asked if it was best to turn back around for the camp for Lewis' sake, but Simpson said we'd moved too far now. It was best to keep moving. Lewis didn't argue. He was trying to be strong when I could see it in his eyes that he was beyond terrified. He was cold. He was tired. He was scared. So was I. And so was Simpson.

But then came that stupid white birch tree again, and I could see Simpson just fall apart. He ran forward, pulled us along with him, then slammed his fists into the tree. I looked down at my watch and saw we had been traveling for nearly two hours in the snow, and yet here we were. That damn white birch tree.

We had traveled in another circle. But how? Simpson and I were so careful at putting up the rags. There was no way the wind tore them down. Not all of them. And to make bad matters worse, I had no idea where this tree was located on the trail. I don't think Simpson did either, and when he turned to face me, I could see it in his eyes.

We were lost.

I knew from training it was better to admit you were lost than to aimlessly search around in denial. And Simpson was still in control. He undid our ropes and gave us orders like a commander.

We were to stay here until the morning, which was only a few hours away now. Simpson said he would make a small bit of shelter and told Lewis and I to look for dry pieces of wood in order to make a fire. That was key. A fire was needed. Even Lewis knew as much.

I took Lewis with me but made sure to stay close enough that Simpson was in sight at all times. I wasn't about to lose another friend, nor my damned brother.

Lewis stayed so close to me, and he kept moving around like a frightened rabbit. His movements were sharp, and he would look around with utter terror behind his eyes. I had seen him afraid. But not like this. He was truly scared for his life, and that was dangerous.

I tried to calm him by the way I knew best worked with him. I made him hold the wood. I made him work and focus on not dropping anything. Simpson had done the same to me in the Chosin Reservoir. It had worked. It worked for Lewis too whenever he became overwhelmed.

But nothing prepared me for what he said.

The others had not heard Archer speak to me. They had been asleep. It couldn't have been paranoia.

Lewis kept saying to me that something was calling our names. Something in the wind.

Our names for Christ's sake!

I didn't help things. I stopped everything that I was doing. I was too scared. I was even shaking. I never shook from fright. But now I felt as if I haven't been able to stop. Lewis called my name so weakly, and he dropped all the wood he had bundled up. He was crying like a baby. He was crying for mom. I wanted to do the same. But I couldn't. Something was keeping me from having a meltdown like Lewis.

Then it was Simpson. He screamed! I could hear it echoing! Simpson screaming our names! He was right there! I had just seen him!

I dragged Lewis along, and we found the birch tree. Simpson wasn't there! I could hear him screaming in the woods, being dragged away! I could see a trail where he had been! I could still hear him screaming. His voice was fading! I couldn't do anything!

And then I saw it.

That hoof print.

The same as before.

I ran. I was screaming. Lewis was too. I could hear him right behind me. I could feel the tears pouring down my face. I could feel the snot turning to ice under my nose! I could feel my heart pounding like it was ready to explode!

I just ran! I didn't know what to do!

And suddenly I was on the ground. I could feel a warm liquid dripping down my face, and Lewis was suddenly right there. I blinked. I looked around. I had hit a tree branch. It had cut right across my temple. It hurt, but it wasn't bad. It snapped me out of my panic.

Lewis ripped a bit of my under coat and made me hold it to my wound. I was still on the ground, and he hunkered down beside him. It was so dark. I could barely see anything. But I could feel Lewis curling up beside me like a puppy. I could feel him shaking.

By now I had calmed, and I unzipped my heavy jacket and somehow wrapped it around both of us. Lewis was cold. Much worse than me. The shared body warmth would be enough. And we just sat there. I didn't know exactly where we were, but if we had each other... I thought we'd be alright. I wasn't leaving Lewis. I wasn't going to go out and find firewood. I was staying right here with him.

He was crying again. So was I.

What the hell was that thing? The print had appeared. Why didn't I hear it?

Then Lewis spoke between chattering teeth. It was barely audible. I don't know if it was for me, or to himself in a fit of madness. He kept saying he could hear Simpson and Archer screaming for us. Like it was an echo. And he began to rock back and forth. I tried to stop him, but I couldn't.

He could see something. He said he could see it staring at him. He kept saying the thing in the snow was staring at him. Those red eyes were boring into him. But I couldn't see anything. I looked around and saw nothing, but Lewis did. Had he finally snapped? Had I snapped?

And then he was screaming! He couldn't take the sounds of Archer and Simpson. He covered his ears and closed his eyes. I could physically feel him being lifted off the ground. He shot up and I wrapped my arms around his waist to keep him still. I had never heard him scream like this. It was almost inhuman, like multiple voices were morphing into one. It put me in a trance. I squeezed and suddenly I was screaming and crying and hanging on for dear life and then he was gone.

He was screaming my name. My little brother was screaming for me to help him and I could do nothing. I could hear him crashing through the woods. I could hear his voice fading just like Simpson. I couldn't do anything.

I tried to follow him. I tried to find him. I tried to follow his voice but it was like he was all around me still calling for his big brother.

I don't know how long I ran. But morning came. I was exhausted and I didn't know where I was. There were no trails anymore. But the birds had begun to sing again. It was like the horror that happened last night had never occurred. Like it didn't matter that three of my best friends had vanished.

I just walked. I don't know how I got there, or for how long it had taken me, but I hit a road. Turned out to be one near Berlin. I didn't think I walked that far, but I guess I did. Someone found me, and they called in the police.

I slept for nearly two days straight, and all I could see was Archer, Simpson, and Lewis terrified. I could hear their screams every time things grew too quiet. And though I didn't see them that night, those red eyes come to me. They would bore into me like they were trying to rip into my soul.

And I would wake in a panic.

It took every ounce of strength I had, but I took the police to where we had set up camp. The stuff was still there, though blown over. We searched around for days, but found nothing. Neither did the dogs.

On the fourth day of looking, I happened along one of the small stream that lead into Pond of Safety. I didn't say anything. It wouldn't have mattered. But in what remained of the snow was that hoof print.

The thing in the snow was still out there somewhere, just watching and waiting. And I knew if I stayed there past dark, it would be after me again. And on the way back, on the pond itself, I swore I saw something. If it was a hallucination, it was the most vivid one I can remember.

Standing on the opposite end of the pond was a gargantuan white moose. It just stood there broadside staring at me. And I knew Lewis wasn't mad anymore because its eyes were red. And it just watched me until I looked away for a brief moment as the police came back from their search. And the thing was gone. Like it was never there.

I will never go to Pond of Safety again because I know the thing is still there, and it is still waiting for me. I don't know why. But it is. And I won't ever go back to see it.

(^__^)

Jack Pierce seemed to be feeling remorse. I was at a loss of words. This was such a ridiculous story I found it believable. Perhaps not a giant white moose, but something did indeed take Lewis, John, and Simpson away. But the way Jack Pierce sat there, his pipe still in his mouth yet without a flame, and Lady faithfully by his side as he stroked the back of her ears. The old man was clearly reflecting upon something.

He continued to sit still, and I decided it was best for me to put away the audio recorder. Jack Pierce had clearly said enough. What he had told me was enough for a small novel, whether it really happened or not. I was extremely excited that I had landed gold. The first person to ever hear Jack Pierce' full story was me! I wanted to dance. I wanted to scream in utter euphoria. But then I noticed how Jack Pierce remained motionless. It silenced all feelings of joy within me.

He suddenly asked if I believed him, and I told him the truth. "I don't know."

"Me neither, kid," he told me.

I thanked him profusely, but he said nothing, simply shook my hand. He then lead me back outside where I helped Chuck finish cleaning up. We then drove back to Chuck's house in Jefferson. I had a strange feeling washing over me. It was like something was calling me to hike up to Pond of Safety. I could see the beginning of the driving trail from Chuck's three story house. Perhaps it was just the lingering horror of Jack Pierce' story. Yet something in the back of my mind told me to trek those trails.

I spoke to Chuck about this and he readily agreed to hike with me the next day. It would be nice for us to do this again, and we had never been to Pond of Safety itself. He poked fun at my uneasiness, but when he saw I was serious, he told me we could go to Cherry Pond or even hike Mount Addams. I told him I'd be fine and used the excuse I needed to take some pictures with my DSLR.

I did not sleep that night, and I made sure to shut my window shades. There was no real reason for it. It was nothing but the residual spooks from Jack Pierce. To pass the time, I transcribed the story, then jot down the exact location The Howard Simpson Incident took place by looking it up on an online map. According the the New Hampshire Fish and Game, the trails were all still there. So I took note where we should go.

I did not want to stay there past dark.

We left by 6:00am and trekked up the winding trails that lead us to Pond of Safety. I could tell it would be a gorgeous day. We moved up the main trail taking in the scenery. It was mostly trees with Boy Mountain prominently rolling upwards in the background. I could also hear the streams close by. It mixed with the smells of nature. Sometimes it was mud, and Chuck explained it had rained horribly the week before, delaying his work on Jack Pierce' home.

Jack Pierce.

I had almost forgotten him as we got closer to Pond of Safety. Just hearing his name brought back the sense of fear. I think Chuck noticed, but pretended he didn't. After all, this was the first hike we'd had with each other in over four years.

We came to one of the trails I had marked. It would lead us to Howard Simpson's camp. I quickly snapped a photograph. "City slicker," Chuck said. I laughed, though it was because I was afraid. Chuck had not heard what Jack Pierce had said yesterday. I not only heard it, but listened to it twice. The images Jack Pierce produced with his words only became more vivid and more haunting.

After trudging uphill for five miles, we came to Pond of Safety. It was bigger than I thought, and I could see a small place where kayaks and small boats could launch. However this was not where Simpson had set up camp. It would be another mile around the other side.

We could smell mud, heard loons just off the shoreline. Trees were down along the edge of the pond, making it difficult to navigate. But it was nothing Chuck and I didn't expect. The Fish and Game had also placed orange tape on certain trees along the winding path that circled Pond of Safety.

By 10:00am, we were tired, but had finally reached the location of Simpson's camp. It was overgrown, bushes and small trees now covering what Jack Pierce had described as a small opening. Chuck sat down and drank some water as I snapped a series of pictures. In the distance, I could barely make out Pond of Safety.

A sudden and visceral feeling of paranoia washed over me, and I looked around frantically. Chuck blamed it on my nerves and that I shouldn't read horror stories before hiking. I laughed, told him I was fine, but secretly still felt like something was now watching us, the hairs on the back of my neck now standing.

By noon, we agreed to start heading back. I was content with the pictures I had taken. I found it much easier going back down, but much hotter than this morning. We soon reached the small land dock and I stopped to take a swig of water. I no longer felt that paranoia and I chalked it up to my nerves, a residual scare.

I leaned against a small tree and looked out over the pond one last time when I swore I saw something on the other side. It was hidden within the tree line, but I could distinctly see patches of white. I instantly shook with fright, my heart jumping out of my chest, and I could feel something watching me again. It had to have been my eyes, so I scrubbed them, squinted, even threw some water from my canteen onto my sweat soaked face.

Yet the thing was still there.

I instinctively grabbed my camera and tried to take a picture, but before I could find a focus, the thing was gone. The white was no longer there, and the feeling of being watched slowly dissipated. Chuck took noticed and patted me on the shoulder, jumping me. I apologized profusely and Chuck just continued to make fun of me for the rest of the hike.

When we returned to Chuck's house, I tried to catch a nap but failed miserably. I know I saw something staring at me, not at Chuck, but at me. It was so unnerving, so unlike any kind of fear I had experienced before.

And I could not help but think that Jack Pierce was not lying, or crazy.

Jack Pierce might just have been telling the truth.

That the thing in the snow was still out there waiting for something.