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## A Frozen Memory

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# A Frozen Memory

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It was cold. This was more than the bone-numbing cold experienced on winter days, this was true cold. I looked out over the barren wasteland of tundra before me and thought that this is what hell should look and feel like. Hell would not be warm, it would be cold. The cold seeped through eight layers of clothes and made me sick from its numbness."

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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JEFF MARSH

## A Frozen Memory

It was cold. This was more than the bone-numbing cold experienced on winter days, this was true cold. I looked out over the barren wasteland of tundra before me and thought that this is what hell should look and feel like. Hell would not be warm, it would be cold. The cold seeped through eight layers of clothes and made me sick from its numbness.

Only miles away from me was a village; a ramshackle array of huts huddled around a plot of land that was no different from the thousands of miles that surrounded it. It survived only through the fierce will of its inhabitants, and would survive for many years to come. Set amid the horrid plane of barren ice and snow, this village had become safe haven for those fleeing persecution or punishment. Daily life was a constant struggle for survival, but it was this struggle that kept the inhabitants strong.

I drove closer to the nameless village, and stopped on its outskirts. Amid the snow where I had parked, was the remnants of a plot of plowed land, although I could not know that at the time. It was in the dead of winter, the waning days where winter refused to relinquish its hold to warm, life-giving spring, and the land would not be farmable for another three or more months. After that time, the sun would show its face and melt the waves of snow that were packed upon the frozen ground like rock. Then weak carrots and potatoes would grow to supplement the diets of the pilgrims who lived in this place. They would eat and revitalize their bodies with the nutrients that they need but couldn't receive during the harsh winter. For now, however, they struggled to survive, eating roots and dried herbs from the year before. Many died each month: another body for the mass burial ground on the opposite outskirts of the village. The dead, however many died each harsh, unending month

could not outnumber the living, however, as more people came each year to find a place where they could be accepted in an equally harsh society.

Now I entered the village, looking for the single inn at the edge of town. The inn was really another hut, barely big enough for the three rooms that it housed. There were only two rooms for visitors, and these were usually used only for the occasional person who still possessed money when they came to this solace. The building was empty now, not another single soul had entered the village for six months, and the supplement of reserved food would not last the surviving residents through the winter. Such were the harsh realities that these people were forced to endure.

I trudged through the drifts of snow piled to my waist, forcing my body to make each next step. It had just snowed, and it appeared by the sky that it would soon be snowing again. They did not bother to clear paths through the snow, there was no need. Few left their homes during the long winter days for other needs than to satisfy bodily functions and to trudge to the building where the stores were held. The single-room huts that housed entire families, and single pioneers, were relatively warm with smoking fires and thick blankets. No amount of encouragement could force these people to leave what had become their homes in the fiercest of cold other than total necessity.

Just before I reached the ramshackle inn, I heard a scream. It was the first sound I heard in this seemingly dead town besides the howling of the wind over the unbroken plains, and its stark resonance startled me from the deep retrospect that the bleakness brought about. I turned and ran toward the source of the scream, thrusting my way through snow drifts and over ice in an attempt to reach the hut from where the

scream had sounded.

At last, my own weariness and numbing cold forgotten, I reached the hut and threw myself through the snow to its rear. There, before me on the ground, was a small hole cut through a depression in the snow and through the ice beneath into what must have been a spring or stream of running water. A woman, dressed in fur parkas and boots that reached her thighs, was on her stomach over the hole, her face and arms submerged in the water. Before I could run to her rescue, she emerged from the hole holding the form of a small body bundled in frozen blankets and blue with cold. She stood up and screamed again, her face away from me, as she began shaking her child up and down, up and down, up and down.

She screamed again, before her voice was choked off with a gagging cough. In shock, staring at the bobbing body of the frozen child, I mumbled "dead", almost to myself. Now the woman turned toward me, and I lost all semblance of control. I was forced to stand, rooted in my spot like another frozen form, as I stared at this woman. Forced to leave her home in another far-away country with her child and her husband, the woman survived almost two years of ice and storm. Her survival instinct had kept her and her family alive, and she always carried the kernel of hope that the situation would not be permanent. Now, she had attained her

hope.

Her face, frozen with a sheer, transparent film of ice, stared at me in panic and fear. Her child, her joy and most precious accomplishment, was dead and frozen in her arms. In an attempt to save the child, she had brought about her own death in the frozen ice and water. Now, her face permanently frozen in a hideous expression of fear, loathing, and desperation, she had only moments to live. Her body rapidly losing the precious heat it had retained for over two years, in her eyes she still held only love for the child she had killed trying to protect. That part of her that held hope was shadowed by another part of her heart in which she knew that she would give her life in this manner. The desperation and hopelessness were present forever in her face, but gone in her eyes, replaced by a sadness and love. That impression was frozen forever in my mind like block of the hard, impenetrable ice, and I would often look back at the harsh contrast between terror and love that marked this woman's terrible conception of life. I barely noticed when she fell to the ground, dead with her eyes open and her mouth frozen in a silent scream for mercy and forgiveness. I simply turned away, content to remember her face, and would not watch while she was taken away to become yet another nameless, forgotten member of a great mass grave that was a monument to life and its harsh realities. ❧