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Axel Thorstad was not yet so old that he might at any moment forget where he was or why he still lived on this small island. Whole weeks went by in which seventy-seven was not as ancient as he'd been led to expect. Though he'd been long retired, he saw himself as a man of sound mind and healthy curiosity, a reader still of poetry and novels and, in order to keep himself informed, his monthly *Teacher* magazine.

He was a physically active man as well, taller than everyone else and fiercely unbent, a daily swimmer and frequent rescuer of flotsam off the salty beach where his size 13 soles left water-filled depressions in the sand. Often those footprints were all that anyone might see of him for days on end – which was fine with him. He had chosen to make a solitary figure of himself, but with a decent man's habit of keeping a hermit's wariness in check, masked by a public courtesy.

In the privacy of his cedar-shaded cabin overlooking the beach, Thorstad was a widower still in mourning after seven years, a retired teacher dreaming up lessons he would never teach. He prepared his meals and scrubbed the floor and took the water pump apart for repairs. Sometimes in afternoons he stretched out with his long feet propped on the rusted bedstead to reread a little Joseph Conrad or a few lines from *Troilus and Cressida*. If he dozed off now and then, it was never for long. He wakened to the crash and spray of an incoming tide, the scream of circling gulls in the wind, or a blurred exchange of conversation off a passing fish boat. Until today he had usually wakened with renewed energy for cutting firewood or setting out along the beach in search of treasures washed in from the sea. Until today he had never wakened in a state of panic.

With heart pounding, he leapt to his feet and snatched his shotgun down off the wall. After rushing out through the doorway and around the side of his shack, he steadied the barrel against the building's corner to keep the intruder centred in his sights. The heavysset young woman came thumping down the trail through the woods with her head lowered, her gaze alert for surface roots, apparently unaware of him or his gun until they were fewer than twenty metres apart. She stopped abruptly in mid-stride, with one foot barely touching earth.

“Mr Thorstad? It's only me.” The postmistress threw out her arms as though she

were casting a disguise from her shoulders.

But she'd worn no disguise. It was he who was not himself.

Even so, his arms refused to lower the gun, his mouth failed to find the right words in the confusion that overwhelmed his brain. How was he to explain that he'd dozed off and wakened from a dream of invading barbarians? He hadn't imagined that the footsteps might be the postmistress bringing him the mail he had not picked up in over a month. He'd expected -- he did not know what he'd expected: a cataclysmic assault? Panic still fluttered in his throat.

Lisa Svetic stiffened her broad shoulders and retreated a few cautious steps, placing one large gumboot carefully behind the other. "Is there something wrong?"

There must be, there had to be something wrong, but he could do nothing but stand like an absurd lanky statue incapable of speech, his gun barrel tight to the corner post, its sighting notch a steady V at the toe of the woman's boot. The deep chilled silence of the forest was underlined by the murmurs of the retreating tide at his back.

"It's mostly junk mail," she said, holding out the colourful papers as though to display their innocence, "which may justify shooting *someone*, but it doesn't have to be me!"

"I'm sorry!" he said. "I was asleep. Your heavy footsteps...."

"My footsteps?" she said.

But she did not wait for an explanation. "If my footsteps are too heavy you can damn well remember to collect your stupid mail yourself!" She tossed fliers and envelopes out amongst the Oregon-grape and giant sprays of sword fern, then turned her back on him and strode off.

By the time she had disappeared into the forest shadows, a trembling had travelled up his legs and torso and into his arms. He'd broken out in such a sweat that his shirt was clinging to his back.

He carried the shotgun inside and returned it to its rack of antlers above the window. He should have got rid of it long ago but had allowed it to remain on the wall where the previous owner had left it -- its presence, like the beach-stone fireplace and the floor's oiled planks, giving his cabin a comfortable rustic touch. Now he would have to go after the young woman and explain. Try to explain. Try to prevent her from feeding

the island's appetite for gossip.

He could imagine some of the residents up at the Store and down around the pier and the Free Exchange claiming to have seen warning signs: tall old Axel Thorstad, a figure descended from gaunt Norwegian giants, muttering to himself as he examined the shelves in Lisa Svetic's store, or carrying home the door off an abandoned Ford for his root cellar entrance, or becoming so lost in a book that he almost missed the ferry for a visit to the dentist across the strait. No doubt these local experts on human nature would see today's behaviour as a sign that he was cracking up, just as they'd expected of an old man living alone for years.

Well, he had never cared much for what they thought. And he certainly wasn't ready yet to apologize. What he needed now was time to collect himself, to allow his racing heart to calm and this chill to drain from his bones -- time to think how he might go about handling this calamity.

To begin with, he needed a mug of good strong coffee. While standing over the sink to spoon the fragrant grains of Kicking Horse into his dented percolator, he avoided the little shaving mirror for fear of what it might tell him. While he waited for the coffee to perk and its smell to improve the world, he stripped off his grey wool socks -- bristly now with fir needles, moss, and tiny twigs -- then brought his cello over to the wooden chair in the centre of the room, planted his bare feet apart, cradled the instrument between his long thighs, and then instructed his hands to stop trembling so he could soothe his nerves with music -- the one thing he could do on late-winter days when dark clouds rested their bellies on the tips of the Douglas firs. He drew the bow out long and slow across a deep rich lower D, inviting the Sinfonica to a gentle awakening. And now, E flat, with a tremor for the morning's disaster. And, after a pause, the opening phrase to the saddest movement of Dvorak's Cello Concerto in B minor, Opus 104.

Faces observed from every side. Over the years he'd found these knee-high stumps and log ends washed in to shore and painted red circle eyes and a variety of mouths according to the shapes of knot-holes and the peculiarities of the grain. With levers, wedges, and a make-shift block-and-tackle, he'd wrestled each of these up the slope and inside to set it on end amongst the others, where they might have been an audience listening to the homesick anguish of Antonin Dvorak. Of course they might also

have been a class awaiting instruction or a silent army of children standing guard. In any case they added the clean salty smell of sand and beach stones to the crowded room.

The black-and-white photos on the shiplap wall were as indifferent to the sounds from his cello as they were to everything else. In a framed lobby card for the movie *Desperate Trails*, the great Cliff Lyons, doubling for Johnny Mack Brown, rode beside the driver of a US Mail coach, no doubt expecting to be ambushed any moment. In the second, Lyons appeared with John Wayne and Susan Hayward, both on horseback for a scene in *Genghis Khan*. And in the third -- a blown-up reproduction from a single frame of a 35-millimetre movie film -- a man in a police uniform chased a shadowy figure across the flat rooftop of a square brick building. These long-dead Hollywood figures were too intent on their duties to be irritated by Axel Thorstad's recital.

He knew that Elena would have been surprised to see how little he'd needed for life without her in their holiday shack -- its mismatched windows, rough walls, and driftwood corner posts making it look as old as the forest itself, an ancient playhouse beneath the towering firs. Inside, it could all be seen at once: his fireplace wall of books, his high plank desk at the window, the wooden chairs she'd painted red, the sharply-angled rafters above the ceiling joists, and their bed in the lean-to with his poster of Chaucer's pilgrims on the wall above it, faded from its years in his classroom.

Ordinarily, he made an effort to limit the number of times he played the one brief melody his cello would still agree to, so sad that sometimes even he could barely stand to hear it. Last fall, a hunter in a red mackinaw had stepped out of the woods to accuse him of driving the deer population into hiding. "You're jeopardizing my winter supply of venison!" she'd shouted. "Play something else for a change!"

But it was too late to play something else. The instrument that had often accompanied Elena's piano had, since her death, gone into an extended mourning period of its own, refusing every piece of music but his one. Elena had claimed that music was a way god had of speaking to us, but if this was the case it seemed He'd had little to say to her widower for some time.

Lisa Svetic was bound to see his behaviour this morning as a form of betrayal -- confronting her with his shotgun like some crazed hillbilly guarding his moonshine still. She was easily offended at the best of times, often complaining that the number of