

The winter snows had lasted well into the new year. It was only by mid-March had the spring thaw begun to dismantle the frost in the urban centres and housing estates. On the outskirts of Northbrook, however, ice still clung to the mountains (known only locally as such, for they were not true mountains). Only after a barrage of complaints and letters did the city officials see to it to get the roads cleared off to better facilitate access to and from the more isolated houses that dotted the hillsides. I was part of a volunteer group organized and outfitted by the local law enforcement, in tandem with the city's other workforces, to clear the snow from outlying regions. Our work took us across the eastern slope of Kippure, the largest hill facing a sprawling suburban district, and closest to where most of us workers lived. It has a patchwork look with its segregated farmland, it has long smears of deep green forest and small white dots that are houses which glow like little stars some evenings, forming at times a constellation I am not now wholly convinced is coincidental. I can see that from my own home even now, as I recover from the long stay in hospital. I shudder to think, in the encroaching dark of this year's winter that what we found just over six months ago is still out there in the wilds of the country, and I wonder sometimes when I look upon the old hill, if it is not looking back.

Our team of fifteen volunteers, with spades and aided by heavy machinery, had worked most of the main roads leading up into the hills and had made a good pace. We began our work back in late March, rising early, gathering for breakfast before heading out most days, spending about three or four hours working the roads. The ensuing chaos of the snow, which Northbrook has never been able to handle, left many businesses shut so that a lot of us were found with free time, and the city officials were willing to recompense certain efforts on our part. We were happy enough to volunteer at the time, and often met the people who farmed the land on the side of Kippure. Many of them in fact took to helping us when they weren't clearing off their own land. Over the ensuing days, we dug our way into smaller side roads, many of which led to smaller houses that had found themselves

almost totally isolated from the outside world. The worst of these had been got to by the local government, and it those who hadn't been reached and were of a lesser priority, we were entrusted to deal with. We knew that there was a certain grim prospect to face as we cleared the roads, long winters like this have in the past left death in their wake, and a frozen body was, sadly to say, more than a likely possibility. It happened in the cities, too, but out here, on the exposed sides or deeply forested glades, it was almost guaranteed. In that case, an ambulance was on call to care of the victim, and though we kept a jovial enough spirit, the thought was in the back everyone's minds that each new day and each new cleared road would reveal something dreadful.

It was about the first week in that something noticeable started to happen. A few isolated incidents had occurred of finding the odd animal, a few rabbits, a fox, even once a deer was found which had succumbed to the harsh cold. Collapsed warrens encased in hard frost were more common and it was terrible to consider the fate of the creatures within. These poor things were taken care of and disposed of by wildlife and forestry experts on hand from the city council. They did slow our work, though, and every time a shovel bit into something that wasn't the compacted snow or dirt, or a cast aside shovel-full of ice disclosed a victim, a groan and curse was heard and chatter subsided.

We were clearing out a wider section of road that day, surrounded on each side by a wide stretch of trees. In summer it would be almost black dark amidst the dense overhead foliage, but now it seemed the steel sky was veined black with leafless limbs. The ice-encrusted tree trunks grouped together to block much sight up and down the gradual mountainside, and it got dark on the mountain much quicker than it did in the city. Night seemed to linger on Kippure sometimes. This length of road wound gradually upwards with a fork leading to a smaller road with a small cottage a little under thirty minutes walk down it. It was along here that we began to encounter a frankly

startling number of dead animals. Rabbits, several foxes, two more deer, now badgers, mice, rats and one unfortunate dog were all found in a chaos under the snow, which at points reached to a full half-meter. They were spread in great confusion along the length of the road. The sheer volume of the creatures stumped even our wildlife specialist, so all we could do was move them and try to continue. It certainly cast a shadow over us that day.

The fork leading from the main road wasn't so bad off, so much so that a few of us, including myself, decided to start initially clearing it while the main force did the other road. The path, as we uncovered portions of it, was unpaved and looked like it didn't get much use, as the long line of dead grass in the middle showed us. Still, the dirt and gravel either side held faint tracks of tires. We took our time clearing worse off sections, but it became evident that the daylight was nearing its end and we had the rest of the way to walk back. So we shouldered our equipment after a small breather and made for the cottage to check on whoever lived there. After a long trudge, we beheld it in the slowly fading light. The small road opened up into a wide circular clearing. Within were low tree stumps barely poking out of the snow, a few lone thin trees, all black. The snow seemed oddly depressed in a few places, not the uniform blanket you are wont to get with an untouched, heavy snowfall. There was of course, too, the cottage. It was a small, two-storey edifice of unpainted and weathered wood. It had two small, square-paned windows of thick glass, one on either side of the front door which had a porch with a little roof above it that looked ready to collapse under the weight of the snow. We saw then, a minute white glow that came from the left window. We approached the front door, calling out to see if anyone was in there, making our crunching boots as loud as possible. That little fear in the back of each our minds began creeping forward with every step.

I reached the door first and, for some reason, hesitated before I let out a loud knock and a

call to anyone inside. I said we were volunteers with the city council, clearing out the mountain roads. I began to speak again when all of a sudden, I heard from within something like a stifled gasp and great amount of shuffling about. My first instinct was that someone was in trouble and maybe was rushing to try and get to us. I went to ask if the door was open and if we could get in, but before the words were barely out of my mouth, a long lock was slid undone and the door creaked open barely a hair's breadth. Even from that small opening, a stench was exhaled that rushed past us into the clean, crisp air. The face that met us was inquiring, sharp, and belonged an old man of considerably advanced years. A completely bald, domed head with small features that seemed to all curve inwards, half sunken into the skull, but not so much that he seemed disfigured in any way. His chin was small and pointed and his mouth lengthened into a frown as he studied me with a slight quiver of his lips. I explained who we were, stepping back, giving each of our names and showing the shovels we had with us. He sort of turned his head for a moment before simply staring at us as he spoke. He thanked us kindly for our efforts but that, no, he was actually quite fine here, the snow wasn't much of a bother for him. His words were rather quickened, in a creaking tone, with eyes thrown to each one of us nearly every different word. I got the feeling he meant to be rid of us. Hermits there are in both the city and immediate countryside, I knew, but it was our duty to see to him, so we left with him an address, phone number and email, whatever he may have access to, as well as our names, on a card, telling him we would send a community care worker around to him later on or tomorrow. He very quickly assured that was fine and hoped we had a pleasant day.

The snow was melting fast as it got further into April, though it still remained piled up in certain areas of Kippure. As it was most of our work was done with, and we had only a trip to the top of the mountain now left. We had attacked the mountain from both accessible sides, the council having called back most of their employees. We worked in a rotating shift which gave some of us a well needed rest and by mid-April we were just about done and looking forward to the thank you

dinner the council was setting up for us. A smaller group of us left that morning, with low, dreary clouds far off in the distance threatening rain. Our tools were gathered and we surveyed the main road near the blunted summit of Kippure. The area offered a striking vista of the entire city and its suburbs below, its organic sprawl plainly visible. In the chill air of the open mountainside we began clearing a decent path through the snow, doing what we had been doing for weeks now, but the coldness of the air slowed us regardless. It was only when we saw that great bank of heavy cloud having crept across the city, we decided the day was done. No one wanted to get caught on the mountainside in the storm those clouds promised. Unfortunately for us, the chugging of the truck's engine on the way up proved to be just exactly what one concerned voice had suspected. We were left that evening with a grim prospect until I remembered the cottage and its hermit.

Three of us made a hasty descent down the wet slopes and into the forest of the mountain. Piles of snow still remained in some places, either naturally or the remains of ones made by us. But the roads were fairly clear now, save for the masses of forest detritus. Rotting leaves, woods and soil covered the roads in some places. The air was a curious mixture of cold, clamminess and heaviness, the trapped air of a dense forest. Breaks in the trees afforded us views of the sky beyond, and we noticed with growing weariness that great storm bank encroaching further and further to Kippure. It brought with it a dimming of the light in the already cramped, shadowy space of the woods. We had come to know the area well enough, and had brought two torches with us on the off-chance we were caught in the dark, but that didn't stop us from feeling uneasy. It was well into spring by this stage, but the winter silence had persisted and the calls of animals were few and far between, and when they sounded, they cut themselves short.

At last we came to the main road which led off towards the cottage. It was some further ways down the mountainside, but luckily we hadn't lost our way. Much to my surprise, there was

still a pretty thick blanket of snow, lessened though seemingly untouched, leading all the way up to the clearing where the cottage dwelt. No new snow had fallen, but none of us could offer an explanation right there and then. The old man must have had a phone or some method of communication, for power lines wound their way across the mountain and through here, and if not, he may have tools or something to help us. We hoped he would remember our faces. But then we gained the clearing.

I had remembered some weeks back first encountering the old man, and the odd way the snow had fallen around his home. In the evening twilight, exaggerated by the now lowly hovering grey veil above, we switched on our two great torches, casting wide yellowish beams across the glade. There were the same blackened stumps and saplings as before, but now there was something else. A light was on in that same left window. I did not carry a torch, but our colleague did, he had said that he saw something strange poking out of the snow. He had gone over to investigate while my friend and I approached the dark little house. The light was somewhere deeper inside and didn't bleed into the land outside its window. We called out for the old man, spoke our names, that we were the volunteers from before. I knocked on the front door, but there was no answer. It was then our colleague let out a cry. He jumped back, cursing. He was kicking the snow away from the other small darkish lumps poking out. To this day I genuinely couldn't give a proper description of them. They looked, in a way, like insects, or in another way, like slugs. Those were the closest things they resembled, but looked, and were the size, of no insect or gastropod that could have possibly lived in this part of the world. Or any part of the world. Generally they were long, thick, rugose, with odd numbers of jointed limbs or feelers, things that looked like bones but felt soft to the touch. Fleshy all over, with no carapace. Nothing that looked like eyes or mouths. Each one at least as big as a man's head, or a cat. If they were alive, they didn't show it. They were stiff, but gave slightly when pushed with a foot. The dark and silence of the forest, at that moment, seemed to deafen and blind

us, and we felt so horribly caught in the open.

I grabbed the torch from my friend and strode to the cottage door and went to bang on it, but my fist immediately caused the thin wooden door to swing inwards. I called for the old man. What I saw next is the reason I fled with the others and spent a panicked night lost in a silent primeval woodland and admitted the next day in Northbrook hospital with pneumonia. From a room to the left of the open door there pooled a cold white light. I saw within, the old man, naked, sitting at a wooden table, and crawling across and through his body, from head to toe, were writhing, verminous shapes pulsing with awful life, the living versions of the things found frozen in the clearing outside. I looked up to see them trickling down from a darkness where a ceiling should be, a darkness infested with countless shapes all reaching down with desperate limbs to the barely human shape before me. Its face turned to me as it cried out, but the eyes which met me were not those of a human being.