

## Ignorance is Bliss

The frozen carcass of an emaciated hare lay partially covered by the drifting snow at the edge of a small wood. Cut down by old age, hunger and freezing temperatures, it hadn't stood a chance. A large crow, wings flapping as it tried to get purchase with its claws, was pecking brutally at one eyeball that stared milkily up through the leafless branches to the leaden sky above. A sudden gust of wind dislodged a shower of snow from the crook of a tree, as a tiger slid stealthily between the black trunks towards its prey.

"Jesus. That looks fuckin' cold." Remarked Lennie, sipping from his beer can as he regarded the television screen.

"Yeah." Chris agreed. "It might be as low as minus forty degrees." He took a drag on his cigarette and reached across to take Lennie's beer. "But it doesn't have to be as cold as that for something to freeze to death."

"Really?" Lennie queried. "What happens then?"

"Well, first of all, if the core body temperature drops below thirty five, the blood starts to drain away from the surface towards the vital organs to try to keep them warm, causing shivering, nausea and a feeling of hunger. Then the brain becomes confused and fatigue sets in. In an animal, like that poor hare, it might then have tried what they call terminal burrowing, where they try to hide and die. There's also a phenomenon where humans in that state suddenly feel overheated and strip off their clothes. Scientists are not sure why the blood vessels should dilate and cause a rush of blood away from the organs back to the skin, but certainly alcohol in the bloodstream could do that. This accelerates the drop in core temperature, the blood begins to thicken, the heart rate slows and the organs begin to fail."

"Christ." Said Lennie retrieving his beer and taking a long swallow. "That's bloody horrible. Where'd you learn all that stuff?"

Chris scratched thoughtfully at the stubble on his chin. "I did science at Uni. I was going to study medicine but I'm afraid I got more interested in the contents of the medicine cabinet."

They both watched as the credits rolled silently up the screen. Without the honeyed tones of David Attenborough or accompanying violins, the images on the screen appeared detached from reality. Lennie pulled a tatty glove out of his pocket and wiped the plate glass window of the department store, where his breath had left a smear of greasy condensation, and with a deep sigh bent to pick up the carrier bags at his feet.

"Come on." Said Chris, clamping the flattened cardboard boxes to his chest and helping Lennie to pull his grubby beanie hat over his ears. "Where do you fancy sleeping tonight?"

"Not the Savoy steps again. I can't take another night of that bloke who cries in his sleep. It'll be too windy under Charing Cross bridge and you know they'll move us on if we try to kip in one of the arches in Villiers Street."

"Ok. How about the Embankment Gardens? No one's going to bother to check before they lock the gates for the night."

"Yeah. That'll do." Lennie said, staggering slightly as they turned away from the brightly lit stores. Chris laid his free hand across Lennie's shoulder as they shuffled off round the corner and down towards the river, carrier bags buffeting their legs as they went. Two lives wrapped in supermarket plastic.

"Getting a bit nippy." Observed Chris as they approached the gardens.

"Not too bad." Lennie said. "The beer has warmed me up. We'll be ok."

As they turned in through the gate into the gathering gloom, a few lazy snow flakes began to drift down and settled on their hunched shoulders.