

The Kit / Jarold Ramsey

In the butt of my father's deer-rifle, a cannon-like 30/40 Krag left over from the Spanish-American and Boer wars, there was a secret tunnel, concealed by the butt-plate of knurled iron. You loosened two screws and removed the plate—and thereby exposed a smooth-bored hole in the wood of the stock, about the diameter of a man's thumb and maybe five inches long. And thrust up tightly there, wrapped in a piece of rotten red flannel, was a Survival Kit! When I was alone in the house with that gun, I used to reach in there and gingerly withdraw the kit and spread it all out on my lap. The contents were: a hank of old fishline; a snarl of leader and a no. 10 hook; ten waxed wooden matches; a pearl-handled penknife with the tip of the blade broken off; three galvanized nails; the stub of a pencil and a blank sheet of paper folded up very small; one extra cartridge for the Krag; and a brittle stick of Wrigley's Doublemint gum. Oh, how I wanted to become a survivor! I'd close my eyes tight, forget my father, and there I was, stranded by an early blizzard at a lake in the High Cascades, my life in my eager hands: hacking branches and bark for my shelter with the pitiful knife, and hammering it together with the three nails; jigging for trout through the frozen lake, and snaring rabbits; tending my fire like a priest, hoarding those waterproof matches until I could learn to strike fire infallibly from stones; writing it all down day by day with the pencil and paper, in code, how I was making it—

Day 27, very cold, snow this morning and again at dusk. Ate the last of the rabbit for dinner, must make a new snare! No planes over for a week now, but so what?

The lone cartridge was in the Krag's chamber, ready for a deer, or a blundering search party, or the Bigfoot Despair; as for the chewing gum, I nibbled a crumb of it every morning to sweeten my smoky tongue, and put the rest by to exercise my willpower. My rescuers could have it. And at night, the wind searching in the treetops high overhead, my banked fire glowing before my shelter, I wrapped up in the red flannel rag and crawled into the tunnel in the gunstock. Oh, you haven't slept tight, you haven't begun to survive, until you've slept inside your father's gun.