

Dude – A Vignette

Douglas ‘Dude’ Ferguson sighted the Remington 700 KS .375 H&H Magnum rifle carefully. The Bushnell Elite 2.5 -10 x 40 mm scope brought the big bull elk up close. Taking a breath and releasing half of it, Dude gently squeezed the trigger of the rifle.

The recoil shoved his shoulder back, and it took just a moment to get the sight picture back. The elk had gone down where it stood, the heavy .375 bullet breaking the shoulder and then ripping through lung and heart tissue easily.

Dude stood up, slung the rifle over his shoulder and began walking the two hundred seventy-five yards to the elk, pulling the Cabela’s Super Mag game cart behind with dual wheels on each side. Dude considered capping out the elk, for future mounting of the head and rack, but though it was a nice elk, it really wasn’t that special.

Instead, he took a couple of hours to dress out the elk, for the meat and hide, using the Big Wyoming field dressing knife and companion saw. Dude loaded the four quarters of the elk, in game bags, onto the game cart and balanced the hide on top. Pulling the cart behind him he headed for his hunting base camp in the mountains of northwest Colorado.

A light snow was falling when he got to the camp. He hoisted the elk quarters and hide high up in two trees, to avoid bears looking for a last meal before hibernating. He unloaded another armful of firewood from the back of his Ford F350 Crew cab 4x4, and started a fire. He cooked the elk steak he’d cut out when he dressed the animal, along with a foil wrapped potato, for his supper.

Dude set up a fresh fire in the tent stove in his Kifaru Tipi. He wouldn’t need it until the morning, but it was better to have it match ready than need to build it in the cold. His Kifaru Regulator Sleeping bag system on top of the Thermarest self-inflating mattress would keep him plenty warm during the night, but the morning would be cold, from the way the temperature was already dropping and the wind blowing.

Sitting in the camp chair by the outside fire, Dude took a couple of sips of Jack Daniels Single Barrel Tennessee sipping whiskey and relaxed. It had been a good time away from the hectic work life he’d fallen in to. No pressures. Just patience, which he had. He was tempted to stay out a few more days, since he’d got the elk early in the time he’d allotted.

When the fire burned down it was full dark. Dude banked the coals and went into the Tipi, fastening the door and liner behind him. Stripping down to his silk long handles he slid into the Regulator. It took only a moment for the chill to be gone and Dude was asleep almost immediately.

Sure enough, it had turned bitter cold during the night. Rolling halfway over, Dude flicked the Brunton Helios butane lighter and put the flame to the tinder. It caught immediately and Dude closed the access door of the stove when the kindling caught. Rolling back over onto the Thermarest mattress, he dozed again while the Tipi warmed up. He was in no hurry.

The water in the coffee pot was hot when he did climb out of the sleeping bag and put on his clothing. He put a tea bag into his insulated cup, poured the hot water in and set the cup down on the warming tray of the stove while he opened the door of the Tipi. Picking up the cup of hot tea, Dude stepped outside into a light snowstorm. There was more wind than snow, but the temperature was below zero, according to his Brunton ADC Pro pocket weather instrument. And the winds were steady at ten miles per hour, with gusts up to thirty miles per hour.

“Well,” Dude said to the blowing snow, “I might as well get loaded and get breakfast on the road.” Cup of tea in hand he walked over to the Ford and opened the driver’s door, pulling his keys from an inside pocket of the Cabela’s heavy parka. Perched on the edge of the seat, Dude reached in and inserted the key. Automatically he checked the transmission, to make sure it was in park. He turned the key, waited for the glow plug light to go out, and turned it the rest of the way. Dude expected to hear the throaty rattle of the big diesel engine. Instead there was the whine of the starter, and a couple of thumps as the engine tried to catch.

Dude released the key. He didn’t want to overheat the starter. He’d never had any trouble with the truck, in even worse conditions than they were now in. He tried the ignition again. It still wouldn’t start. He checked all the gauges. He had plenty of juice and fuel. And, anticipating the probably low temperatures, he’d added winterizer to the fuel before he came up. The engine just wouldn’t run.

Never one to worry too much about things he couldn’t control, Dude went back to the Tipi and brought out the satellite telephone. He dialed the number of his buddy in the nearest town, which was to his southeast.

A slight “Hum,” passed Dude’s lips when there was no signal. The battery indicator showed plenty of power. He tried his regular cellular phone. No service signal, which was what he expected.

Wanting to think for a moment, Dude stirred the camp fire and added kindling to the coals. The fire brightened right up and he added a couple of pieces of wood. Going back into the Tipi, Dude added hot water to his cup and went back outside. After opening the camp chair up he sat down and thought things through.

Something was wrong. Even if the truck wouldn’t start, the satellite telephone should have worked. Still thinking, Dude went over to the truck again and turned the key to accessory. He tried the regular radio. Nothing. Nothing on the satellite radio either.

Thinking of one more thing, Dude went back to the Tipi once again, opened up the big Kifaru EMR pack and took out a small radio. It was a Yaesu VR-500 multi-band handheld receiver. He took off the rubber duck antenna and added the Miracle Whip antenna to it, stepping outside. He extended the whip of the antenna and adjusted the tuning knob for the bottom end of the Amateur Radio Service High Frequency Bands.

He changed frequencies time and time again, fine tuning the antenna each time. He tried several other radio bands, all to the same end. All he was getting was static. The truck radios

hadn't come on. The Yaesu was on. It was showing signal strength on several frequencies, but the signals were all just static.

Dude put the radio away, switching back to the rubber antenna. "Might as well have breakfast," he said to no one, and went about preparing it, using the stove in the Tipi rather than the open campfire. He pulled the wood off the open fire and banked the coals in the ashes. He might need the wood, later.

As he prepared the breakfast and ate it in the Tipi, he continued to think. The conclusion he came to didn't sit well on top of the breakfast. Something had happened that had affected exposed electronics. At least electronics connected to any significant length of wire or antenna. The small, short antennaed equipment hadn't suffered.

There was only one thing Dude knew of that could cause that. An electromagnetic pulse. Naturally occurring, or created by a special weapon. A large solar flare or CME might have done it. But Dude was willing to put money on the fact that the US had been attacked with an EMP device, at the very least.

He checked his key ring. He had a RadDetect PRD 1250 radiation alarm on it as a fob. It hadn't made a sound or lighted up. There was no radiation where he was, but that didn't mean much. He was a long way from a major target.

"What to do? What to do? What to do?" he sing-songed for a moment. Reaching a decision he set about carrying it out.

There were only three options he could see. Wait where he was. Don knew where he camped when he hunted elk. If Dude didn't show by the end of the week, he would start looking for him immediately. That was if he could. Dude had a feeling he wouldn't be able to do so.

The second choice Dude considered was to just throw on his pack and hike down to the road, and turn toward the town. Someone should pick him up. Even if no one did, he could still make it to town in less than a week, traveling light and fast.

Dude decided on the third choice. It would take him longer to get to town, but if things had gone south the way he suspected they had, he wanted all of his gear he could possibly carry with him.

He took two hours to unpack everything and lay it out in the Tipi, and then bone out the elk for the maximum amount of meat with the minimum bulk. He repacked everything, with his journey in mind. With the Kifaru EMR pack on his back, and the rest of his gear and supplies that he was taking with him loaded securely on the game cart, Dude headed toward the town, shortly before noon, wondering if he was walking into a world recently changed by nuclear war.

A short break for a lunch of jerky and gorp, with a long drink of water, and Dude was on the trail again. He'd considered going cross country, but decided to stay on the track to the road, and then on the road. He might run into someone else out hunting that way.

There was snow off and on all day. Dude, having hunted and camped in the worst weather, knew the risks and how to minimize them. He stopped early and set up his camp. He worried a bit about cutting wood for his stove. It wasn't allowed normally. That's why he'd hauled in his firewood.

There was no way he could have brought any significant amount of wood with him from the base camp on the game cart. He already had it loaded to the dual wheel capacity of seven hundred pounds. He had taken the time to split out a large quantity of kindling to make fire starting easier, without taking up time when he set up camp.

As much as he would like to have an open fire at his camps, Dude limited himself to using the tent stove for heat and cooking, being conservative with the wood he did collect. He had a Sven camp saw, a hand chainsaw, as well as a Cold Steel Tomahawk, so it wasn't difficult to get the wood he needed.

Though he conserved wood, he ate heartily of the elk meat. There was plenty of it, and it supplied him with the protein calories he needed for the cold weather.

His carbohydrate intake was mostly potatoes, of which he also had a good quantity. He'd picked them up on his way out and the only size bag the store had in stock was a twenty pounder.

He had hard cheese, and a large container of butter that kept his fat intake up. There was also pemmican in his emergency kit, if he needed it.

Since he was actually heading back earlier than planned for, Dude didn't worry about food, especially with the elk. He wanted to stay in good shape, not knowing what he might run into. Having the best in equipment helped him stay in that shape. One advantage of the snow was he was able to melt plenty to keep his water containers filled, and himself well hydrated.

Dude checked the sky often as he walked, pulling the game cart. He was looking for contrails of commercial jets. He didn't see any. There was no traffic when he hit the road, either. It was only when he got to town did he see anyone. It was where he learned the truth.

He was walking into a post apocalyptic world. On a whim Dude had cached his game cart just outside of town before he walked in, headed for his friend's place. He found a police officer first. Or the officer found him. As soon as the officer saw Dude, he pulled his gun and shouted, "Hands up!"

Dude did so, and stood quietly when the officer walked up to him. "Who are you? What are you doing here with that rifle?"

"Douglas Ferguson, Officer. I'm from Missouri. I've been up in the mountains hunting elk. Truck wouldn't start and I walked down. I know Don Waters..."

"Okay, put your hands down." The Officer holstered his gun. "I suggest you just keep on walking. We got nothing to offer outsiders, friends or not. Hasn't been a delivery of food or fuel since the lights went out."

“Was it just the EMP or was there a general attack?” asked Dude.

“Not sure. Denver got it, we know that,” the Officer replied. “Like I said, keep on walking.” He put his hand on his gun again.

Dude raised his hands chest high. “Okay, okay! I’m walking.” He turned back the way he’d come.

“Missouri is that way,” said the Officer, pointing southeast.

“Oh. Of course.” Dude turned around and headed the direction the Officer had pointed. He followed Dude until Dude left the outskirts of the town. As soon as he was clear of town, Dude turned and circled around to pick up the game cart.

He hated to waste the time, but the Officer had looked nervous and likely to take it personally if Dude didn’t leave in the direction he said he was heading. The town was obviously pulling together to protect itself and what supplies it still had. Strangers weren’t welcome.

Dude got to the game cart and began to retrace his steps around the town. He’d decided to stay north with Denver hit, and then drop south and travel east, keeping south of I-70. There was a good chance several of the major cities on I-70 would have been hit.

And there was Whiteman AFB southeast of Kansas City. It would almost certainly have been hit, multiple times, to take out the bombers based there, and the missile silos the base controlled. They were supposed to be empty, but the enemy, whomever it was, might not believe that.

With the plan in mind, Dude settled down into a steady pace, pulling the easy rolling, but heavy game cart behind him. The load lightened just a bit every day, as he consumed his provisions. But it was slow going uphill. And he had to brace himself carefully going down hill. And there were a lot of hills in Colorado.

Dude stayed mostly on the main roads. He had brought the atlas he kept in the truck, but it didn’t have the minor road details he wished he had. He avoided the towns for the most part, going around them. Only when his supplies of potatoes and cheese were almost gone, did he decide to enter the next town to see if he could re-supply.

This time he went around the town, cached the game cart, and most of the items from his pack, and went into town from the east, carrying the pack and his rifle. The Para-Ordinance .45 ACP he always carried when hunting was under the parka, but he opened the parka up some to give easy access, if needed.

There were people about, though not many. They weren’t hostile, but they weren’t welcoming, either. He asked directions to a grocery store. He got them, with the added comment, “Good luck. Store shelves are bare.”

Dude tried anyway. The doors were unlocked and there was one person in the store. At least one that Dude saw. It was the owner. The first thing the man said was, "Careful with that rifle." The man held up a short double barrel shotgun, not quite pointing it at Dude.

Dude raised his hands slightly, keeping them in sight. He had the Remington riding in the Kifaru gun bearer, under his right arm. It looked a bit awkward, but was actually quite comfortable. And the gun was very quick into action, despite looking very slow.

"Just looking for some food, guy," Dude said.

"You and every other human and animal on the planet, I think," said the man. "Don't have much. And I got to tell you, it's going to be expensive."

"Don't suppose you take credit cards, do you?" asked Dude.

The man's laugh was like a bark. "Don't tempt me, buddy. Cash. On the barrelhead."

"Let's see what you have before we talk money," Dude said.

The man motioned Dude to precede him down one of the aisle. The man that had given Dude directions had been right. The food shelves of the store were bare. They passed them by and then went through the door into the back of the store.

"What I got is right there," said the man, moving over to one side of Dude to watch him as Dude looked over the selection of food. There wasn't much.

Dude shook his head. He'd probably take a few things, but on the off chance that the man was holding out a private stash and was as greedy as he seemed, Dude said, "I was hoping for some fresh stuff. Potatoes and carrots particularly. Onions. And cheese. I'd pay premium for cheese and butter."

The guy reached up and tugged one ear for a moment. "Most people are wanting things that will keep. Canned goods mostly."

Dude just waited. Finally the man said, "Well, since you want them, yeah, I do have some potatoes. Carrots and onions, too. Over here." He led Dude to another pallet, over in a dark corner. "Figured to use them in the compost pile when I got a chance. I'm going to need a garden, come spring, to feed myself. Got lots of seeds, but my little garden is poorly."

There were three five pound bags and one ten pound bag of potatoes, and several bunches of carrots. The onions weren't bagged, but there was a variety.

"How much for the all the potatoes, all the carrots, and the sweet onions?"

The man had the answer ready. "Hundred bucks. Take it or leave it."

Dude didn't comment on the price. Instead, he asked, "The cheese and butter. Oh. Bacon, too."

Going over to a large ice chest the man opened it and let Dude take a look, holding the shotgun ready if Dude tried anything. There was no ice in it, only a few items of food. "Hundred for three pounds of cheese and two pounds of butter. Another hundred for the two packages of bacon. I was kind of saving it for myself."

"The cheese is getting moldy," Dude said. It didn't bother him. He could trim it off and still have plenty of cheese.

"Oh." The man hesitated. "Okay. Fifty for the butter."

"I'll go ahead and give you another fifty for all the cheese," Dude said.

"Really? Even if it's moldy? I shouldn't sell it like that. You might sue me if you got sick!" Again that barking laugh.

Dude began to reach inside his parka for his wallet. "Easy there, fellow," said the store owner.

"Just getting my wallet," Dude said. He continued the motion, slowly, and brought out the billfold. "Three hundred," he said, counting out the three one-hundred dollar bills.

The man's eyes widened. He could see there was more money in Dude's wallet. "Anything else you need?" he asked greedily.

"I don't suppose you have any .375 H&H Magnum shells? Or .45 Automatic?"

The man shook his head. But he wanted more money. "You'll barely be able to carry what you bought already. For another hundred you can have anything left in the store, that you can carry, except food."

"Any toilet paper?" asked Dude.

The man's face fell. "Well... Got some laid back for myself... Everyone was wanting toilet paper."

"Hundred bucks for a four pack of good stuff," Dude offered. And quickly added, "Plus whatever else I see in the store I can carry out."

"Done!" said the man. Eager for the money, he scurried off, deeper into the shadows, as Dude took out another one-hundred dollar bill.

Dude thumbed through the rest of the money in his wallet. He had another five hundred in one-hundreds, and five hundred in twenties. And there was still the money in both of his stashes.

He wasn't too upset by the outrageous prices the man was charging. Dude had a feeling those hundreds might not be worth much. Better to spend it with someone that would take it.

Paper money might not have any value soon. Toilet paper might be worth more than the money. Even the gold coins in the money belt that held up his pants under the insulated bibs.

The man came walking back, carrying a four-pack of Charmin under one arm. "I ought to charge you more. It's the Big rolls."

Dude didn't acknowledge the implied request. He began putting the food he'd bought into the big Kifaru pack he'd taken off as the man watched carefully. He set the toilet paper on the top and snugged the pack hood down over it.

With a grunt Dude swung the pack up and settled it on his back. He picked up the Remington and remounted it in the gun bearer. "Let's see what else I can find for that last hundred," Dude said, turning back toward the door to the main part of the store.

He had an idea of what he wanted and checked the aisle signs to find it. "Can you get me a couple of your plastic bags for this stuff?" Dude asked when he stopped in front of what he'd been looking for. "Doubled up. This stuff will punch through easy."

The owner frowned, but hurried off and came back a few moments later with a handful of plastic grocery bags. Dude took them, doubled up a set and loaded in several boxes of aluminum foil. He moved down the aisle and took all the matches on the shelf. "Now the check out stand," Dude said and headed that way, followed by a suddenly unhappy store owner.

Dude cleaned him out of butane lighters, checking every checkout lane. Dude decided to call it good. The store owner was looking like he was having second thoughts. Perhaps not for more money. Or, at least, not more money for the goods. Quite possibly for all the goods back and all of Dudes money.

Without another word, Dude strode out of the store, not quite staggering under the weight of the pack and the bags in his hands. He moved quickly, however, turning at the first corner to get out of the man's sight before his civilized veneer wore off and he attacked Dude.

Dude didn't travel too far after he transferred the contents of the bags and the pack to the game cart and reloaded the pack with his normal carry load. But he wanted some distance between him and any repercussions that might be thought up by the man and his friends as time passed. They would eventually realize the mistake they'd made in taking paper money for food.

He traveled steadily, for another week, cutting back his rations just a bit as he became hardened to the trail. There was still plenty of elk, but he'd eventually be out of the mountains and getting game was going to be much harder. He was already seeing signs of people out hunting, here in the mountains.

Dude found a good camp spot one day, after having run across some deer spoor. He set up camp and then went on the hunt, with the now empty game cart. Dude was an experienced

hunter and seldom failed to take his limit when he went out. This time was no difference. It was nearly dark when he sighted the mule deer doe. She was nervous, and Dude wondered if someone else was on her trail.

Deciding that if there was, he'd offer to share the kill, or just let the other party have it, if there was a confrontation. He could get another deer relatively easily. Dude set up for the shot, as the doe went to the small stream she was near, for an evening drink. He fired and the doe dropped in place.

Sure enough, his instincts had been right. There were cries of protest coming from along the doe's back trail. Three men charged into sight, looking around, rifles held ready. One of them went up to the doe, looked toward where Dude was and shouted, "We've been tracking this deer for miles. Ain't no way we're giving it up!"

Some might have considered just shooting the three men. It would be easy from where Dude was. The thought never crossed his mind. He'd made the decision before he'd fired. If there was a confrontation, he'd just leave. Which is what he did.

It was just as well. He stayed in the area the next day and managed to get a good sized elk cow. Dude considered staying a few days and jerking the meat to preserve it, but the weather was cold and winter was coming on. It would keep just fine as he traveled in the cold.

So he left the next day, with enough food to get him most of the way home, if he was careful and things went well. The only thing he was lacking was sweets, when his gorp ran out. He had a sweet tooth and the lack of sugar really wore on him.

Despite ducking out of sight when he heard someone approaching him on the road, Dude was caught out in the open one day as he neared I-25 between Ft. Collins and what was left of Denver.

There were four men on horse back, and four more in an old Jeep, pulling a trailer. Dude suspected the trailer was empty, the way it bounced around behind the Jeep on the snowy, icy road.

Dude moved to one side of the two lane road and watched carefully as the men approached. The Remington was in the gun bearer, as usual. He made no move toward it. He did, unobtrusively, open his parka enough to get to the Para-Ordinance, if it was needed.

"Howdy," he said as the group pulled up to him and stopped.

"What are you doing out here, alone?" asked the one that was obviously in charge. He was a big man astride a big black horse.

"Heading for Missouri. Got caught up in the mountain elk hunting west of Craig."

"You'll never make it," said another of the men. "Why don't you just give us your stuff, lay down, and die?" one of the men in the Jeep said with a laugh.

“Shut up, Jesse,” said the big man. “Those kinds of jokes are going to get us in a fight if you don’t knock it off.” Turning back to Dude he continued. “You are an ambitious one. You should hole up in the nearest place that will take you in.”

“Not too many places like that,” Dude replied, truthfully.

“Suppose not. Tell you what, we’re headed for the Interstate, to see what we might find. You’re welcome to ride the trailer until we get there.”

“Really?” Dude asked, surprised at the offer.

“Sure. Load up. Nice rig, by the way. Never would have thought of a game cart for refugee travel.”

Dude found himself bristling slightly at being labeled as a refugee. He wasn’t running from something. He was just on his way home. But he held his tongue and accepted the help of getting the heavy game cart into the trailer behind the Jeep. He stepped in the trailer, feeling himself tense up. Now would be the time to shoot him and leave him on the side of the road, his goods already in the trailer. But no shot came and Dude made himself comfortable beside the game cart and his pack, rifle propped where he could get to it if needed.

When they arrived that evening at I-25, the men helped Dude unload his gear from the trailer and as much as sent him on his way. “Don’t want to be unsociable, but we’re looking to pick up a few things abandoned on the Interstate. Just as soon there weren’t any witnesses to what we’re doing,” said the leader. “Just move on along to the east, and don’t look back.”

Dude didn’t much like it, but it wasn’t worth a fight. He moved well away from I-25 and set up his camp. A little put out at being run off, Dude decided to go south along I-25 to see what he might find. The other group was working its way north, it appeared.

More out of spite than wanting to find something, since he was at the upper limit of what he could transport, anyway, Dude didn’t put much effort into searching for anything particular. He was almost ready to just go get his gear and head on east. It was depressing on the highway.

Most of the vehicles were empty, but there were some that had been in accidents, with the dead still in them. And many of the north bound vehicles were off the road, again with dead people in them, but from the radiation from the Denver attack they’d been trying to get away from.

Something about one of the large vans headed south caught his eye. He went a bit closer and his eyes widened. It was a vending company van. “Please don’t be empty!” he whispered. Dude checked the cab of the van first. It was empty. Going to the rear of the van Dude discovered that the doors were unlocked.

Upon opening them he let out a heartfelt “Yes!” The van was still well stocked with vending machine goodies. It didn’t look like it had been disturbed at all. Dude stayed away from

all the chips, pretzels, and such, and loaded his pack with his favorites. He started to leave and close up the van, but it occurred to him that, like the matches and lighters, candy might be good to trade for other things. He added more candy to the pack.

Leaving the van, he closed it up to protect the contents for whomever else might run across it, and headed back to his camp as quickly as he could travel with the over loaded pack, munching on one, then a second Hershey bar. After he recovered the cached game cart he transferred the candy to it and put back in his regular carry items. His sweet tooth should be happy for some time.

Dude turned southeastward when he crossed I-76. But as he got almost due east of Denver his RadDetect PRD 1250 signaled low levels of radiation. He turned northeastward and traveled until the radiation alarm fell silent.

He tried again a few days later and kept going southeast when the alarm stayed silent. It was Thanksgiving Day when Dude crossed the state line of Kansas. The traveling was easier, as he left the mountains for the foothills. There was a lot more down hill than up hill, though there were both.

He ran across a few more people. They were, at best, standoffish, at worst, downright antagonistic. Dude kept his head and avoided the latter, while trading the occasional box of matches, lighter, or package of candy for information, mostly, but also a few supplies to supplement his basic food stocks.

Running low on potatoes again, Dude began checking the isolated farms he could see from high spots on the roads. Several were still occupied and ran him off before he could approach.

He did find one abandoned farm, the garden still intact. The potatoes he dug with his Cold Steel e-tool weren't the best, but they were better than nothing. He loaded up again. It was shortly after leaving that farm that he ran into his first real trouble.

It wasn't actually his trouble. It was someone else's. But he involved himself. He was going up a long road grade, and heard faint screams from ahead. Leaving the game cart where it was, Dude ran the rest of the way to the top of the ridge and looked down the road. There were four individual horses standing around, along with a four-up pulling an old style farm wagon.

Dude raised the Remington, dialed the scope up to ten power and took a closer look. Two men were mercilessly beating another. Two other men were holding the woman that was doing the screaming. They weren't just holding her. They were in the process of disrobing her.

Throwing the legs of the Remington's bipod out, Dude went to the ground, into his favored prone shooting position. The man on the ground was his immediate concern. The two working him over were now kicking him. One was almost directly in front of the other, from Dude's vantage point and Dude softly said, "Just a little to the left... Just a little..." Then he squeezed the trigger.

It was over a four-hundred yard shot, with not a breath of wind. Dude had aimed slightly high, fearful of hitting the man on the ground by accident. Intending to hit the first man in front in the chest, the bullet took him in the throat.

It barely slowed down as it went through, hitting the second man squarely in the chest. Both men fell, life fading a bit slower in the first as blood pumped from his torn jugular. The second man died instantly, the heavy bullet tearing a large chunk off his heart and holing a lung.

Dude worked the bolt of the rifle and picked up the sight picture again through the scope. The other two men turned loose the woman and ran for their horses. Dude could see the abject fear on both men's faces. With another squeeze of the trigger, the third man went down, a .375 caliber bullet breaking his left femur, which cut the femoral artery. He lasted perhaps two minutes.

The fourth man was on a horse. Dude worked the bolt again, chambering the third and last round in the gun. He hesitated. He didn't want to hit the horse. It was way too valuable in these times. And the man was now a moving target.

Acting quickly, Dude adjusted his aim and fired again. He couldn't tell if he hit the man or not. He seemed to have lurched, but he was still upright in the saddle, moving away at a gallop now.

Dude reloaded the rifle from the pouch of shells in his parka pocket and hurried back to get the game cart. He then headed for the wagon as fast as he could go with the load. The woman was tending to the man on the ground when Dude got to them.

"Please don't hurt us any more!" the woman begged, shrinking back from Dude when he brought the game cart to a halt, left it, and stepped forward to see if he could help. She looked to be in her forties.

"I'm not. I'm the one that ran the guys off. I'm really hoping I was right and they are the bad guys, and you two are innocent victims."

"They've been terrorizing the area ever since the attack," the woman said, pulling her coat tight around her torn blouse. "Who are you? Can you help my husband?"

Dude went to one knee and checked the man's breathing and pulse. He was breathing, rather raggedly, and the pulse was weak. "He's in bad shape. Is there a doctor nearby?"

The woman shook her head.

"How far is your place?"

"We were going into town to try and trade for some supplies." She turned and pointed off to the south. Our ranch is that way, about a mile, cross country. Town is another three miles down the road."

“We’d better get him in the wagon and back home, then,” Dude said. “Can you help me load him?”

The woman nodded and hurried to the back of the wagon, making a spot for the injured man amidst the sacks of grain. She helped Dude the best she could, but he did most of the lifting. It hurt the man, despite the care Dude tried to take.

She was able to help him load his gear, after he partially unloaded the game cart. Dude quickly searched the three dead men then, taking everything of value, and tossed it into the wagon. He gathered up the ground hitched horses and tied them off to the back of the wagon.

“You better drive, if you can. You know these horses,” Dude told the woman as they took their seats on the wagon.

She picked up the reins and flicked them. The horses began pulling and the woman turned them off the road. “My name is Dude Ferguson. Who are you?” he asked as she expertly drove the team.

“Candy Trace. That’s my husband, Elmer, in the back.”

“Who were those guys that attacked you?”

“A bunch of bully boys that have been running wild since the war. Both the people in town and out here in the rural area have been trying to corral them and string them up for the murders and all they’ve done.” The woman, despite her husband’s condition, and her own, seemed to be getting it together quiet well.

“What are you doing out on foot out here?” she asked, giving Dude a glance.

“Heading home to southern Missouri, from northwest Colorado,” replied Dude.

“You’ve come all that way, on foot?” Candy asked, her doubt evident in her voice.

“Sure have. Been a pretty uneventful trip. Until now.”

Both fell silent the rest of the way to the Trace ranch. It was a small ranch for the area, but it looked well kept up and tended. A windmill was turning very slowly, pumping water into a stock tank for the horses and cattle the pasture contained.

Dude finished unloading the game cart, and he and Candy used it to move Elmer from the wagon to the house. Candy had Dude help her put him in the spare bedroom of the house. Dude checked his vitals again. He was dead.

“I’m sorry,” Dude said, turning around to face Candy. “He’s dead.”

Her head dropped and Candy fell back into the chair beside the bed. Dude flipped the coverlet up and over the body and left the room. He found the kitchen, and not knowing quite what else to do, filled a glass of water from the tap and took it in to Candy.

Candy was holding her head in her hands, crying softly. She took the glass of water and took a few sips and then set it aside. "Poor Elmer. He always tried so hard," she said, and then stood up. Candy went over to the window and looked out at the fields, fallow now, for the winter.

"I don't suppose you could help me bury him and then get to town. I don't want to stay out here alone. I have a sister I can stay with."

"Of course I will," Dude said. "Tell me where a shovel is and I'll get started." He found the shovel after Candy told him where it was in the barn, and where to dig the grave. He had to shed his heavy parka and opened up the side zippers of the insulated bibs as he used both a pick and a shovel to dig the partially frozen ground.

When he went back inside, Candy had cleaned up Elmer, and was in the process of wrapping him up in what appeared to be an old sheet. Silently she helped Dude get Elmer's body on the game cart. They took him out to the grave. Candy helped Dude get the body on the ground beside the grave, but Dude did the work to get him into it, asking Candy to turn away. There was no other choice but to essentially drag and drop the body to the bottom of the hole.

"You want to say a few words?" Dude asked.

Candy shook her head. "Elmer and I are atheists. Don't believe in all that church mumbo jumbo." She walked toward the house. Dude, unwilling to chance a man's soul, said a few words to send it on its way, wherever that might be. Dude began filling the grave.

When he'd finished and put away the tools, Dude went back into the house. Candy was carrying out a pair of large suitcases to the wagon. She'd unsaddled and put the horses in the pasture. Dude put the game cart in, too, and Candy climbed up on the wagon seat. "We need to go," she said. "We'll just have time to make it before it gets dark."

There were no thanks, and certainly no offer to bring along one or two of the horses for him to use on his journey. Dude said nothing about it.

When they reached Candy's sister's house, Dude helped take the suitcases in the house and went back out to take the game cart out of the wagon and get it loaded up again. Candy never came back out of the house and after a couple of minutes of waiting, Dude headed for the edge of town in the darkness, hoping Candy or her sister would care for the horses, remembering the old adage that no good deed goes unpunished..

It took him another month to finish crossing Kansas. But he was able to trade for some more vegetables, cheese, and butter, at what was now a regular event in many locations. A place set up for traders to use to buy and sell goods. The things he picked up would go with his slowly declining meat supply. He began to use the fishing tackle in his emergency kit to add a few fish to his diet.

He avoided all the major cities and had no more problems with radiation, other than the one time east of Denver. When he bypassed Wichita, Kansas he turned due east, headed directly toward his place in the Missouri Ozarks.

Dude started carrying the Para-Ordinance outside the parka, as he ran into more people. He also planned to take a few rabbits and squirrels, but the forests he was traveling through seemed to be totally devoid of game. But the elk meat was holding out. It would see him home.

Though the urge to hurry was on him, as he got closer to home, Dude made himself continue traveling the way he had. He couldn't afford to make a mistake and get hurt, or expose himself to violence, this close to home.

He made the turn onto the driveway up to his farm on January fifteenth of the new year, one day before his forty-first birthday. Dude didn't release the game cart until he reached the driveway apron in front of the garage and swept up both his children in tight hugs as they ran toward him, from the front door of the house. His wife, a large smile on her face was walking more slowly behind them.

"Hi, Sweetie," she said as Dude stood up and took her in a tight hug, too. It was perhaps a bit harder than usual. "How was your trip?"

"Good. Good. How are things here?"

"We're just fine. Everything worked just as we planned. Had to kill a couple of lowlifes trying to steal fuel. Sheriff took care of the remains." They were walking back to the door of the house.

"Yeah. Actually, kind of had to do the same thing, once. It's not important," Dude said. "Did have a good hunt. Got a big bull, and then a cow."

Life was still good in a well laid out, well stocked, working farm of an Ozark Retreat, with family and friends all around, looking out for one another. Even after a nuclear war. Dude was home for the duration.

It would be thirty years before he took a set of tires, a good battery, and fresh bio-diesel back to Colorado to get his truck. Started right up. Did have a few rub marks from the elk and deer. But that was okay. One of them paid the price for it before Dude headed home again. That trip back home went a little faster.

End *****

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