

Death of a Snow Machine

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Skeptoe had followed the same ritual for forty years. As soon as the first good snow had fallen, he began loading his sleigh with winter supplies and made sure his snow machine had a full tank of gas and was in good working order. Just like him, the machine had seen better days. He had traded his dogs for the machine in 1968, but most of the time he wished that he hadn't. The machine needed to be repaired more often, and he hated to spend his hard-earned money on the repairs. If it were a dog he would have shot it by now and replaced it with a new, stronger one, but snow machines were too expensive now.

He double-checked his trapping gear on the sleigh, then went back to the machine and tried to start it. He pulled the starting cord and the machine quickly roared to life—*putta, putta, putta*—and then it stalled just as quickly. Skeptoe shook his head and went back into his cabin. There was still a fire in the stove, so he put on a kettle of water and waited for it to boil. He would have a

cup of tea, then he would try and start the machine again. He sat and surveyed the cabin, gazing at the mementoes from his past; his eyes rested on a picture of his son, who had left the reserve a long time ago to rejoin civilization. He only returned to visit for two weeks each summer.

The kettle started to boil, and Skeptoe watched the lid pop up and down. It reminded him of the summers when he used to dance at the powwows, but that was when he was a young man. A ray of sunlight shone through the cabin window and touched his cheek, dispersing his thoughts. He got up from the old bench he was sitting on and proceeded to make a cup of tea. He put in five spoons of sugar and a half a can of Carnation cream. He stirred the tea and tasted it. He smiled. Just the way I like it, he thought.

He finished his tea and left the cabin. He would try and start the machine again. He pulled out the choke and yanked on the starting cord. *Putta, putta, putta*. Skeptoe kept his hand on the throttle for a few minutes just to make sure that the machine wouldn't stop. When he thought that the machine was finally warm enough he let go of the throttle. *Putta, putta, putta*. The machine died again. Well, time for another cup of tea, he thought as he went back into the cabin. He made his tea in the same fashion as before.

Skeptoe sat down at his table. He looked at the vinyl red and white tablecloth and began to count the squares. He lost count and became immersed in his thoughts. Maybe it was good that his son had left the reserve. Trapping was hard now. There was not enough beaver, and the payment for a good pelt was low. It was not like this when he first started trapping. There were too many rules and regulations now. "Not financially feasible," he said out loud. He had heard the prime

minister say that on the radio once. A knock on the door brought Skeptoe back to his senses.

“Come!” he shouted. The door creaked open and old Goocho stepped in.

“Still here?” asked Goocho.

“Ya, machine won’t start,” Skeptoe replied.

“Dogs was always better. Least them could be put out of their misery when they got too old,” Goocho said, laughing.

“Yep. I miss the old days too,” Skeptoe replied.

“Come, let me try and start the machine,” Goocho said.

Skeptoe finished his tea and followed Goocho out of the cabin. Goocho proceeded to check the machine, shaking his head as he checked the engine. Skeptoe stood back smiling; he knew that Goocho didn’t know anything about the machine. Goocho looked around at Skeptoe and asked how to start the machine. After a short explanation, Goocho pulled out the choke and pulled on the starting cord. The machine whined into action. Goocho looked at Skeptoe with a self-satisfied look on his face, as if to say, look, I got it going. Just as soon as Goocho let go of the throttle the infernal machine stopped again.

“May as well get some dogs, lots of stay dogs on the reserve. You just got to catch ‘em. Bet they would be good workin’ dogs,” said Goocho as he left.

Skeptoe went back into the cabin and sat down by the window. What Goocho said was true, but the question was how to catch the dogs. Skeptoe sat and looked about his cabin. The big old white freezer caught his eye, and he got an idea. He went to the freezer and opened it. Best invention civilization ever came up with, he thought, winter in a box. He reached into the freezer and took out some moose meat and some trout that he had caught last summer. Then he went out to the old shed where the snow machine was kept in the summer and threw in the meat and fish. He turned and looked at the snow machine, shook his head and then turned and then went back into the cabin. He moved his bench close to the window so he could watch and see what would happen.

It was getting late when the first dog showed up. Skeptoe, being a patient man, waited until there were seven or eight strong-looking dogs in the shed, then quietly slipped out of the cabin to the shed and closed the shed door, trapping the dogs inside. On his way back to the cabin, he picked up the dog harnesses that he had hung on the outside of his cabin when he had gotten rid of the dogs. These should be okay, he thought.

Inside the cabin he tested the harnesses by pulling on the straps; they seemed fine. He made some tea and sat down by the window and watched the sun go down. Too late to go today, he thought as he continued to stare out the window, watching the dusk turn into darkness.

“Might as well unpack the sleigh,” he said aloud, then proceeded to do so. He tried to start the machine with each trip to the sleigh, and just when he thought that it was going to start it would falter and stop.

When he finished unpacking the sleigh, he opened a can of pork and beans and ate them cold from the can. He sat down near the window again and watched the shadow of the machine taunting him every time the full moon peeked through the scattering of clouds. The dogs would howl in unison every once in a while. Hope those dogs can pull the sleigh, he thought. Don't want to have to shoot them all. He finished what was left of his tea and crawled into his bed, clothes and all.

Putta, putta, putta. The sound of the snow machine woke him from his sleep. He got up and went to the window and looked out. "Damn thing is even haunting me in my dreams," he said aloud as he watched the haunting shadow of the machine sitting there in the snow, as quiet as a mouse. He turned and went back to bed and listened to the dogs howling in the shed. The sound lulled him back to sleep.

Putta, putta, putta. The machine was running again, but this time it was chasing him. The headlight had turned into a big red evil-looking eye, and the skis had become giant talons reaching out trying to grab Skeptoe. It was chasing him through the snow. *Putta, putta, cough, chug.* When Skeptoe woke up the cabin was cold, but he was covered in sweat. He got up, started a fire in the stove and put the kettle on. Can't sleep. May as well have some tea, he thought. When the water in the kettle was boiled he made his tea, following the same ritual as before.

He sat near the window in the darkness and watched the machine sitting eerily in the shadows of the sporadic moonlight. It made him angry, the damn machine just sitting there not wanting to start but haunting him in his sleep. He turned from the window and searched for the light switch. There was only one switch, so it wasn't hard

to find. He pushed the button up and the room filled with light. Sunshine in a glass, he thought.

He sat down at the table just to be away from the window and began to contemplate his life. What things would he leave behind, and to whom would he leave them upon his death? Goocho, being his best friend, would get most of his stuff. His son had no need for rifles, shotguns or traps anyway. Skeptoe got up and grabbed the twelve-gauge shotgun he had bought last summer. He did so admire the newness of the gun. The barrel was still blue and the stock still had the fine shine all new guns had. He smiled, looked around and picked up two slugs that were sitting on the table.

He stepped out of the cabin into the cold night air carrying the shotgun. He walked over to the machine and, leaning the gun up against it, he straddled the seat. He pulled out the choke and the starting cord; the machine sputtered and then whined as the engine picked up speed. Skeptoe let the throttle go; the machine continued to run on its own. He sat there feeling the vibration of the machine under him. He smiled slyly, then got off the machine and picked up the gun.

He loaded a slug into the chamber of the gun and aimed the gun at the machine. He pulled the trigger. The recoil of the big gun almost took him off his feet. He looked at the machine. There was a gigantic hole where the slug had hit, but the machine just kept on running. *Putta, putta, putta.* He reloaded the shotgun, and this time he steadied himself and took true aim. He pulled the trigger and the gun roared. Skeptoe's eyes grew wider and wider as the burning machine began to move towards him, and then he felt a hand pull him out of the path of the machine. It was Goocho. He had been awakened by the first shotgun blast.

“Shot it, eh?” Goocho said.

“Yep,” replied Skeptoe, smiling as he and Goocho stood and watched the burning machine chug and sputter and finally come to a dead stop.

“Tea?” Skeptoe asked Goocho as they turned away from the burning machine and disappeared into Skeptoe’s cabin.