Engine 6 stopped in front of a small, white, neatly kept house where no one stood out front pointing or shouting or screaming. No smoke was showing from the door or the windows. Without a word, the lieutenant walked up to the side door and let himself in as if he lived there. G____ and the driver followed, and inside they found a fat man in his late 60s flat on his back on the kitchen floor, eyes wide with desperation and mouth wide from trying to get one more breath, refusing as he died to admit that the pressure and pain in his chest were caused by a failed heart. His ashen complexion indicated cyanosis had already set in; he never had a chance of surviving because his wife had come unglued and paralyzed at the same time. The round little woman screamed nonstop. Nobody knew how she managed to make the phone call, and she was still screaming when they arrived. No CPR for her husband; just panic and an endless shriek while he died—and after.

Thirst jerked him back to the present. The nice thing about skiing was that sooner or later immediate survival ended any wallow in the past. G____ guided the sled he hauled onto the right shoulder of the north entrance road and stopped. An occasional snowmobile buzzed by, so he needed to get out of the track while he sipped from a water bottle and enjoyed the view. No matter how many times he traveled into Crater Lake National Park, he couldn’t help but gawk at the sky like a tourist. No smog or haze like they had in the Willamette Valley—just the cobalt blue and quiet. No sirens, no traffic, no
radio, no television, no phones, no email, no human voices--only the wind and the bark of a crow every once in a while.

That evening, two miles west of the road across the pumice desert that morphed into arctic tundra each winter, G____ stood next to his tent after a good meal and watched his shadow stretch longer and longer to the northeast as the sun set. He’d anchored the tent away from the trees in the open where the snow was compacted and he could saunter around without sinking. Smiling one of those quiet smiles that happen in the rare moments he knew he was where he belonged, G_____ looked to the south at the broad open slope above timberline leading to the rim, another twelve hundred feet higher and his destination the next day.

It was one o’clock in the morning, and two drunks--one man, one woman--left a bar and challenged each other to a race home. The man wrapped his car around the utility pole right next to the firehouse, whacking his skull against the pole in the crash. The lieutenant ordered Engine 6 pulled out of the station and parked on the ramp. G____ grabbed the best tool they had at the time, a reciprocating saw, and tried to cut the lock post holding the jammed driver’s door shut. The lieutenant climbed into the car on the passenger side to hold the unconscious drunk’s head in a stable position until the ambulance arrived with a spine board. To keep things interesting, the drunk groaned, the drunken woman screamed at everyone to do something, the blade on the saw broke, and an old guy, a sidewalk supervisor, sneered, “I’m glad that’s not me in that car.”

They finally drove the pickup truck with the front-mount winch out of the back of the station so they could hook the cable to the rear axle of the car and pull it away from
the pole, and then use a pry bar to pop the driver’s side door open to extricate the drunk
who wasn’t going to live anyway.

G____ never felt safer in the world than he did when he zipped himself into a
sleeping bag on the Pumice Desert. If he had to die, let it be there rather than in the chaos
and desperation of an emergency room. In the mountains, you could live into death, die
without sirens. As the sky blackened and brightened with stars, he dozed off hearing
only the white noise of mountain wind.

The next morning was as blue as the day before. G____ rose for a leisurely
breakfast of an orange, oatmeal, bagel, and tea. After breakfast he packed away the tent
and other gear and he skied for six miles without care or concern, his pace slowing to a
crawl only as the road steepened to the angle where gravity cancelled friction. He
stopped to take his skis off and strap on crampons, then hiked the final mile over hard
packed snow and ice away from the protection of trees and into an incessant wind. The
timberline in the southern Cascade Mountains lies at about 6500 feet elevation where
trees are stunted by the six-week growing season into what seem to be isolated and half
dead clumps of shrubbery, but really a survival strategy in the Krumholtz zone.

At the top of the north road, G____ found a level place to anchor the sled in line
of sight from the rim, pulled on his heavy parka, and then slogged unfettered up the
remaining distance over the snowfield to look down on Crater Lake. The wind had
scoured the snow from one spot on the rim, so he stood on solid dirt for ten minutes and
watched the wind push waves across the water before he turned and looked off to the
west to see ridge after ridge of the Old Cascades and the Coast Range roll off toward the
Pacific. He backed down not because he wanted to but because of that primordial urge to
survive. His fingertips were losing feeling, which meant his core temperature was dropping. He had to set the tent up and cook something warm to eat before sundown drove temperatures low enough to assure that he could die in the mountains with a grin frozen to his face.

Marmot makes a great little tube tent designed so a fool like G____ can set it up alone in a hurricane, so raising the tent was no problem, and G____ made it bomb proof by pounding four additional stakes into the snow (every experienced snow camper carries a hammer to deal with Cascade cement). But the stove was a different story; he could not get it started outside in the evening gale rising over the mountain unless he dug a cook hole, and the snow was too compacted to chop and dig into before dark, even with an ice axe, and he sure as hell wasn’t dumb enough or desperate enough to light the stove inside the tent.

G____ stuffed all his gear inside the tent, turned the sled over and anchored it for the night, then crawled in and zipped the door shut. He rolled out the insulation pad, the sleeping bag, took off his ski boots and wool pants, pulled on polypro long johns and dry socks, attached chemical heating pads to the bottom of his socks, pulled his wool pants back on and shoved his feet into thickly insulated, lightweight booties. Then he pulled off his parka, his sweaty T-shirt, dried himself thoroughly with a bandana, wrestled into a polypro long-sleeve top, a down vest, a wool sweater, a pile jacket, and topped the ensemble with a wool balaclava. He stuffed wool gloves into his jacket pockets for use later, zipped the bag up to his chest, and in the waning light, chewed on a bagel and a granola bar. He left an orange and the last bagel on the floor of the tent for breakfast and
brought a chocolate bar into the sleeping bag to nosh on because he knew he’d need even
more calories for the work he’d do that night just staying warm.

The sun dropped and the wind continued to howl up over the Cascade crest,
making chill not a factor but a very cold hard fact. __G____ felt the snow through the tent
floor, the insulation pad, the down sleeping bag, and his layers of clothing. He slipped all
the way into the bag after one last drink of water, zipped the bag up completely, and then
cinched the hood so tight around his head that no air could enter anywhere but through
the nose hole.

And he did sleep until, at around one in the morning, his bladder got the best of
him. __G____ quickly loosened the hood, zipped the bag down to his knees, slid out of it,
unzipped the door of the tent, and, in what seemed like one motion, knelt in the door,
opened his fly, and pissed.

Man, it was cold. His face hurt and his fingers quickly numbed, but still he
hesitated after his bladder was empty and his fly was safely buttoned up again, hesitated
long enough to look up into the moonless sky to see the comet Hayakutake big enough to
touch. Ice on the ground, ice in the sky, a universe as cold and hard and attractive as
diamonds.

The middle-aged woman dressed in slacks and a sweater was doing nothing more
than sitting in her home on a sunny and warm Sunday morning watching the television
when it blew up. The fire was not extensive. The scorch mark went up the wall behind
the television and out across the ceiling for ten feet. Nothing else in the living room was
burned, nor was the woman’s clothing burned. Only her face. They found her in the tub in the downstairs bathroom after the neighbors called and reported the smoke. She had the usual expression. Her eyes and mouth were wide open in a desperate attempt to get one more breath after her trachea, broiled by the superheated air she’d inhaled as she screamed in panic, had swollen shut. They got her out of the house, onto a stretcher, forced an airway, bagged her, and did CPR all the way to the hospital, but she died, luckily perhaps. Her face would have been horridly disfigured.

Sunday, March 24, 1996 on the rim of the Crater Lake arrived with bright sunshine, blue sky, and a brisk breeze that carried a bit of a chill in it. Long after sunrise, G___ woke, loosened the hood of his sleeping bag and had his face washed by the hoarfrost that had formed inside the tent from his breathing and fell when he moved. Frost also coated the outside of his sleeping bag. His water bottle was a brick, and the orange he’d left out was a ball of ice. He pulled the bottle and orange into the sleeping bag to thaw enough to eat and drink, and he managed to chew on an ever-dependable granola bar before the slow job of packing began--slow because he was in no hurry to go back down.

Two hours later, he reluctantly guided the sled down the hard-packed, icy upper slope on foot, wearing crampons the first mile before stepping into skis to enjoy a long glide down to the Pumice Desert where he let the wind do the work. It blew out of the south against his back and blew hard enough for G___ to glide across the tundra without effort by spreading his arms to set sail away from home.