

SURVIVALIST FICTION



THE WINDS OF CHANGE: Acorns and Wood Smoke

by Old Bear

The following short stories are for entertainment purposes only. The stories are purposely out of chronological order. You can read any story in any order you would like. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is coincidence. I am not a good enough writer to have planned it.

Acorns and Wood Smoke

Keith Vantine puffed contentedly on his pipe and looked around what he thought of as "his" retreat. After his and Jeremy's return, from a mostly unsuccessful foraging trip, a few good hot meals and a couple of night's sleep in a real bed, instead of hanging from a tree limb in a nylon mesh bag, had worked wonders. Many of the aches and pains that had tormented him were gone. Being able to let his senses somewhat relax also helped. Not that Keith ever completely relaxed these days, but the knowledge that at least one person was in the observation post on watch and armed with a scoped rifle made it easier to relax a little.

Upon returning home Keith was disappointed to learn that "gathering acorns" was still in progress. It was partly because of this that Keith and Jeremy decided that they really "needed" to go on a foraging trip when they did. Gathering acorns and processing them into useful nuts and flour was not arduous, but it was boring. Acorns, when there was a good crop, made up a solid part of their survival diet, as it had for the people who had inhabited this land before the strange white men first stepped ashore. In a good season the ground was littered with the small nuts, but if they laid for more than a few days worms or mold would take most of them. As with many tasks, all of Keith's group turned out to get it done. The children were encouraged to gather the nuts, while the adults did most of the even more tedious shelling and processing to remove the tannic acid, that made the un-processed nuts too bitter to use. Of course the old formula for children working together still held true, if left unsupervised. Hire one child and get one child's worth of work. Hire two children and get one half a child's worth of work. Hire three or more children and get no work at all.

It fell Keith's turn to gather acorns with the children this day, but such was his mood that not even this could spoil it. So midday found Keith down on his knees, surrounded by children, gathering acorns. They would rake a thirty foot or so area, so the acorns would be in a pile, along with leaves and small rocks, and only needed to be picked up and sorted to see that they did not have worms. "Tell us a story while we work Granpa," said Eric. (All older people were called Granpa or Granma by the kids.)

"Yeah. Tell us about the "Old days," the others chimed in.

Keith placed a hand full of nuts in his bucket and looked at the kids. He used this break to refill his pipe. "I hope the tobacco crop is good this year," he thought, hating the idea of giving up yet another "vice" that he enjoyed. "What do you want to hear?" he asked.

"Something about how things were when you were a kid," came the answer. Keith tried to think of something to tell about. "Electricity" always came to mind, but electricity was such an obvious change that it had been talked about almost to death.

"If you will keep picking up the acorns and don't go throwing any wormy ones in, you can see the little hole if you look close, I will tell you about how things used to be with the United States Post Office.". Keith told of how once mail was taken for granted and letters were not too much valued. " Why I have gone to my mail box and found twenty or more letters in there and every dang one of them turned out to be some damned bill or some yahoo advertizing to get me to have more bills. Not one real letter in the whole bunch." Keith said.

Letters now held an almost mystical reverence. The mail still moved, but now it was carried by people and passed from hand to hand, until eventually the letter was worn out, lost, or reached its destination. The letter would be handed to a person who happened to be going in the more or less right direction. This person would pass the letter on to somebody when he reached the furthest point in the right direction, even if that person was not planning on going anywhere. The letter might lie on a shelf for weeks or months, until somebody from that area was traveling in the right direction. It was not uncommon for a traveler to have a packet of several letters in his back pack. People hoped against hope for a letter from missing family and loved ones. Almost everyone had lost track of someone and it was easier to believe that they were alive, somewhere, than that they had

died like so many, in the early days of the collapse. Keith had a sister, who along with her husband and four kids had been living in southern California when things came apart. She had refused to listen to Keith's warnings and pleas. Keith had not heard from her after the collapse. While in his mind Keith knew that she and her family must be dead, his heart kept hoping that some day a letter would arrive telling him that they were ok. With just about everybody hoping for such a letter, the letters of others took on special meaning.

There were stories, always stories. Supposedly, a blood thirsty raider had faced great danger to deliver a packet of several letters his band had found in the pack of one of their victims to a nearby village. It was said that this raider had parents that he hoped to someday hear from. Other stories told of people going many hard miles out of their way to see that a letter got to its destination. One story that was claimed to be true, (almost all good stories were claimed to be true) told of a letter that had crossed the whole country in just under two years. This letter supposedly had "Urgent! Please Rush" written on the envelope. More than once, people had taken the letter a little further than necessary and the final carrier had traveled almost thirty miles, a full day's walk, out of his way, to deliver it, only to learn that the woman and her entire family had recently died from cholera. It was said that a neighbor who had known the woman and family took the letter to the little grave yard and being a sentimental old fool, read the letter over the woman's grave. The letter said the woman's daughter was ok and had just delivered a healthy baby boy. He then left the letter on the grave, thus completing its final delivery.

Dorothy rang the bell lightly, to announce that lunch was ready. Keith got up and dusted off his pants. He had the next four hour watch in the observation post. It was a quiet time, good for thinking, while trying to never get so absorbed in your thoughts that you forgot why you were there. At least he would get out of the shelling of the acorns for a little while longer. The acorns had to immediately be shelled to prevent mold and then they were either diced, if they were going to be used for flour, or left whole, if they were to be used as nuts. Either way, they were placed in hot, almost boiling water on the wood stove and left, with an occasional stirring, until the water began to look like tea. This water was poured out and more added and the process repeated until the water remained clear. Usually three or four changes of water did the trick. A little salt was usually added to the last batch of water. Another way was to put the acorns in a cloth bag, weigh it down, then put it in the fast-moving creek. They were left there for two to three weeks and the water would leach out the tannic acid. The acorns then were

slow roasted until dry and slightly cooked. Ground in a grain mill, they made a light brown flour that when added, one part ground acorn to three parts wheat flour, made a very nutritious flour. It was said that acorns lacked as much oil as most other nuts, but they still had a great nutty flavor. Their resident "Nutritionalist" had "guesstimated" that by adding the acorns they were increasing the nutritional value of their flour by from 50 to 75%. While all this was fine and good, what everybody really liked was the whole roasted acorns after they had been dipped in hot brown sugar glaze. These were what made gathering acorns really worthwhile, at least to Keith. The only problem was that no matter how many of these delicious little treats they made, they seemed to disappear almost over night. The kids were worst than varmints when it came to candied acorns! Keith had started grabbing a double handful and sneaking them to a secret cache that he had, so he could later come back for a snack. This was totally against Keith's own rule of no food hoarding within the retreat, but Keith didn't care. Acorns that had been ran through a grain grinder, with the burrs set fairly loose could be roasted until darker brown, mixed with some roasted dandelion roots to make an almost passable coffee substitute.

Lunch was plenty of garden salad, biscuits left over from breakfast, fried salt pork and goat cheese. Water, still almost ice cold from the well, finished the meal. Until colder weather set in they would continue to eat rather light meals. It seemed to help with the heat of summer to eat lightly and as free from fats as possible. Although they had stored multi vitamins, they now reserved these for the winter months, when fresh fruits and vegetables were hard to come by. "Thank you Ladies." Keith said as he got to his feet. He would now relieve Barton in the observation post, so that Barton could eat.

Keith went to the well house and took down the "Gillie suit" that hung there. It was probably unnecessary to wear one while going to the OP, but they had made it SOP. The "suit", actually a large poncho that would fit over whatever you were wearing, was made entirely out of burlap. The poncho itself was made from a sheet of burlap, with the dyed burlap strips glued on using a substance known as "Shoe Goo." This made a surprisingly nice "Gillie suit" for very little cost, and it was as cool in warm weather as any Gillie suit could be, which was still far too hot.

Keith picked up the SKS that lived in the well house/generator room and headed uphill. He took a roundabout route to the OP, always watching the forest for anything that looked the least bit out of the ordinary. Before approaching the observation post Keith took cover and observed the area well. He then whistled twice and was answered by two whistles followed by three more. Keith now knew

for sure that Barton was still in the OP, was alive and well and nobody was there with a gun on him. Soon Barton popped out of the underground shelter and Keith gave him the sweltering gillie suit and the SKS rifle. Barton would replace them both in the well house, for the next person to use on their way to the OP. Just standard operating procedure.

Keith entered the shelter and felt the coolness of the earth surround him. The plywood and ferro cement roof kept the rain off and with the door closed the place was bearable in the coldest weather. But during the heat they kept the door propped open to allow air to draft through the door and out the observation ports. By digging into the steep hillside, they had been able to make the observation post mostly underground, but have room for a man to stand up and look out the openings. This also made the OP almost invisible. The view from the observation post took in the whole retreat compound, the fallout shelter, the main garden and animal pens. It also covered both roads to the compound and two out of the three small stock ponds. All things considered, it was in the best place possible. This was no accident. Keith had spent many hours walking the hill behind the retreat looking for the right place to build the OP. The number of trees that had to be cut down to make a clear field of view and of fire had been staggering. These trees had not been wasted. Either cut into lengths for fire wood or saw milled into lumber with their "Alaskan saw mill" every foot had been used. While not really a saw mill, the Alaskan saw mill still did a great job. It was a tool that clamped to a chainsaw bar, so the chainsaw would then cut whatever size lumber you needed, the only limit being the length of the chainsaw bar. Theirs had been a Christmas present from his wife Barb, almost two years before things went bad. The saw mill had sat in the well house until the collapse, then it suddenly seemed to take on great value. Keith wondered how much longer they could keep a chain saw running and dreaded the chore that getting fire wood would be without one. He settled himself into a comfortable position and took up the binoculars, patted his shirt pocket to make sure he had his pipe and begin carefully watching the woods line. He watched for mostly movement, but also for any shape or color that seemed the least bit out of place. He also watched the birds and squirrels to see if they showed signs of alarm or avoided any particular area. Mostly he just watched.

Keith had been there for a little more than two hours when he caught sight of movement on the south road to the retreat. A quick scan showed two figures walking slowly along the road. Keith quickly scanned the other road, before coming back to look at the two people. Try as he might, Keith could not see any

other people, on the road or in the woods around it. He lifted the receiver and cranked the handle on the field phone. Nothing! He cranked some more. "Come on, you lazybones. Answer the phone," he muttered.

"Hello. Compound here," said a clear voice. "OP here. I have two. I repeat. Two on foot coming along south road, approximately 700 yards from the compound." The alert would be quickly spread. Children would be called inside the fortress-like rock barn. People would take their positions. And then they would wait. Now Keith had the scoped rifle in position, but continued to watch through the binoculars, because they gave him a larger field of view. The two people stopped at the fence line and one brought out a small white rag that he attached to a stick and waved over his head. Where their road left the woods, they had placed signs in plain sight. These read "You are being watched. Stop here and wave something white if you are friendly. If you don't have something white, shout really loud. You will be told if you can continue. If you are hostile get under cover and at least make this more interesting for our snipers!". Keith liked signs. Keith got back on the field phone. "They are signaling from the fence. I think it is Thomas and his wife."

From the compound Keith heard someone yell for the people to come on along the road. Now Keith no longer watched the two people. They would be watched and covered from the compound, while others in the compound would be scanning other areas. Keith's job now was to watch the roads and wood line, in case these people were decoys to distract the group's attention. All SOP, but Keith wondered how many other people had died before they began to take things seriously enough to set up such procedures. This time it was just the closest neighbor, but the next time it might be life and death. Keith felt a deep pride in his little group and the retreat in general. They would be ready for the next time.