

SURVIVALIST FICTION



THE WINDS OF CHANGE:

Foraging

by Old Bear

(Not for the squeamish, faint hearted or children under 35, even then I am not sure anybody should read it)

"They had been watching the house for what seemed like hours. They were two days away from home, the furthest they had yet foraged, and it made Keith nervous, but then again everything made Keith nervous. "Nervous" was the price for staying alive. Keith's back ached and there was a fly, or something crawling on his neck. There had been no activity in the house in all the time they had watched through their rifle scopes. The front door stood partly open and something was laying on the floor just inside. It looked like a pile of rags. No smoke showed from the chimney, as should have been the case. A newer car, parked in a opened sided shed, showed by the thick layer of dust that it had not moved in months. Keith slowly turned his head and caught Jeremy, his stepson's, attention. He finger-signed for him to advance. While Keith covered the house with his rifle, Jeremy made a series of short dashes until he had achieved suitable cover again. "Now it's my turn" thought Keith as he raised his body from the kneeling position. His body protested too long being immobile by sending sharp pains through his joints. "Damn! I am getting too old for this, " thought Keith. As he made his run from what cover there was to the next safe area, he kept thinking "one of these days one of us is going to get whacked, doing this". Keith reached his goal and dropped down. With another signal passed between them Jeremy made a rush and flattened himself against the house wall. This was the time that anybody in the house would have to open fire, if they were going to. The rush to the house did not bring a hail of bullets and Keith took several deep breaths. He signaled Jeremy to take the back door and prepared to go in the front. After waiting the prescribed amount of time, he switched to his handgun and rushed the front door. He immediatly saw the body laying on the living room floor. He could see by the way the blood had dried that it had been several hours at least. It was the body of a man, middle aged. Moving to a better position, he waited for Jeremy . They then began a room to room check of the house, in case hostiles were still present. Looking in the bed room door Keith felt his stomach churn, despite all that he had seen in the past two years. A woman was tied spread eagle on the bed. She was middle aged and had probably never been particularly pretty. Dried

blood and entrails showed where a poor job of disemboweling had been done to her. She should have been dead, but she wasn't. Her eyes looked straight into his. Keith's eyes swept the room, before he went in. Such training was why he was still alive and others weren't. He pulled his knife and the ropes that bound her seemed to melt away from the Gerber steel. Her mouth formed a soundless word. "Water". Keith pressed his canteens to her lips, raising her head slightly. She drank, choked, then drank some more. As he started to withdraw the canteen she spoke in a hoarse croak, "more". He gave her more water, then rubbed her wrists to bring back circulation, and was pleased when she was able to hold the canteen herself. Keith caught movement out of the corner of his eye and noticed Jeremy standing at the door, outside of the woman's sight. Jeremy drew his four finger across his throat in the old "cut throat" sign. Jeremy was such a kind boy. He hated to see anything suffer. Of course he was right. That would be the kindest thing he could do for the woman, but Keith had grown up and lived in a entirely different time than Jeremy and he felt that he just had to try. Leaving his canteen with the woman Keith went into the hall to talk with his stepson. "See if you can find me some clean water and some clean rags. Oh yeah, And maybe some thread." Jeremy gave him that "are you nuts" look, but went. By the time Keith went back into the bedroom his canteen was empty. He took the canteen and went to look for more water. A hand pump had been installed on the well behind the house and the water was cold and looked clean. These people had been pretty well prepared, it seemed. He had only shortly returned to the woman when Jeremy turned up with a pan of water and a real towel, of all things. Keith wet the towel and began to soak away the dried blood, so he could try to judge the extent of the wound. By the time he had the wound more or less clean, Jeremy was back with a partial spool of thread. Using the needle from his own sewing kit, Keith began to sew rent intestines back together. The wound had not been too deep, so there was a possibility...He sent Jeremy for two refills of water before he felt he had done enough cleaning. While he worked he talked to the woman. mostly to try to distract her from any pain, but she seemed not to feel much. "What happened?" he ask. "Two days ago a young woman came walking up our drive. She was alone and had a baby, that was crying. My husband went to the door. He was always careful not to step outside until he knew it was safe. The woman said her man was killed by some raiders and she and her baby were bad hungry." The woman paused, drank from the canteen, then went on. "If anybody strange came up I was supposed to watch from the kitchen to make sure nobody was sneaking up from that side, but when I heard that baby crying I came to help. I was just coming out of the kitchen, when the woman seemed like she was about to faint and drop that baby. My husband

stepped out to sort of catch her like and somebody shot him from the woods." "Ed, that's my husband, he was real strong like and even though they shot him, he turned around and tried to get to his gun, by the door. That's when that woman grabbed a pistol out of the baby's blankets and shot him in the back. She shot him three times. May she burn in hell for it!". She shivered and he covered her chest and legs with a sheet that he saw on the floor. " Such an old trick." thought Keith. He would have seen through it in a instant. Jeremy would have been even less likely to fall for something like that, and yet this man, who was obviously very capable, had allowed his instincts to take over for just a moment and now he was dead. It was an all too common situation. Slowly neighbors had left to join with other family, or perhaps some had died from Typhoid or Cholera. These people had eventually found themselves isolated, with no close neighbors for support and had become perfect targets for raiders. Perhaps they did not know anyone they could join with, or maybe they stayed, hoping that loved ones would some day arrive. He was almost finished sewing. " I didn't figure I could get to Ed's gun with that tramp standing there with her pistol, so I ran back towards the kitchen for my gun. Before I could get there, the kitchen door burst in and three men rushed in and grabbed me." She seemed to have a glazed look to her eyes, but her voice was clear. Keith ask the question that was most on his mind. " How many were there and when did they leave ?". There was a long pause before she said " There was six of them. Five guys and that girl. They stayed here all that day and night and left real early this morning. They loaded our food and whatever they wanted in our old pick up. We had maybe ten gallons of gas left, maybe a bit less. I don't know if the men were just going to leave me, or if they forgot about me, but they all left and then that woman came back with a knife and cut me. She is the one that done this ! I could see in her face that she liked doing it. She was a daughter of Satan! Damn her forever! May she die by fire and burn in hell!". He left her and went to find Jeremy. If it was only this morning, then those raiders could still be close by. After explaining, they separated to search for usable or tradable items. Of course the house had been ransacked and almost everything of real value taken. Light nylon clothing, considered useless, had been dumped on the floor, while others still hung in closets. Woman's shoes, once considered fashionable, but now useless in a world turned upside down, had been left. The heavier and winter clothing, blankets, the food, useful tools, etc. had all been taken. Jeremy went to search the out buildings and Keith checked out the book case. Most of the books had been dumped on the floor, but he checked each title to be sure that no valuable "How to" information was left behind. While almost every book was of some value now, their weight made it impossible to carry every book back to the

retreat. Finding nothing he considered worth taking, Keith went straight to the kitchen draws. Most people, except maybe women, never realized what good stuff could often be found in a kitchen drawer, he thought. Sure enough, he found a partial roll of tape, several cork stoppers, one with 4 sewing needles stuck in it, a old ice pick that would be perfect for leather work, and a tarnished .30-06 round. While it might not fire, somebody would still trade for it. If it did fire, you could just about bet that it would put deer meat on somebody's table. Keith mentally kicked himself again for not including a 30-06 in the rifles he got for the retreat. 30-06 rounds had a way of turning up in the strangest places, sometimes even in houses where the people swore they had never owned a 30-06. Just when Keith was sure that he would beat Jeremy's haul this time, Jeremy showed up with a hand file, a two blade pocket knife with only one blade broken, a small role of "bailing wire", several fish hooks, a rat trap and a perfectly good metal bucket, to carry it all in. After examining each others finds, Jeremy spoke, " that woman isn't in any condition to walk, or even be moved. More likely than not she will get all infected and die anyway. Even if we could get her home, what would Ma and Dorothy say about you dragging home another mouth to feed, and a wounded woman at that ?". Keith just shrugged. He knew it was silly to try to save her, but something in the way he had been raised and his own nature would not let him give up. It was this nature that had kept him and his small band alive when others, larger and better prepared, had perished. "We will give it a little while son." Keith said. "I doubt the raiders will come back here. They took about everything they thought was of any value already.". Jeremy rolled his eyes heavenward, a habit the he knew irritated his step father and walked away to keep watch. Keith went back to talk to the woman some more, hoping to get a description of the raiders and to possibly learn how well they were armed. He had seen enough death to know that it was in this bedroom, even before he felt for a pulse. The canteen has slipped from her hands and added it's liquid to the sticky mass. She had started bleeding again while he was gone. Keith reflected that he had never even learned what her name was. This thought, perhaps more than her death, filled him with a deep depression. Taking his canteen, Keith left the bed room, now tomb, and closed the door behind him. He drug the dead man's legs out of the way, so that the front door would close and called softly for Jeremy. Times were harsh. The living looked after the living and the dead would have to take care of the dead. They would not take the time to dig graves. These people's house would be their tomb and marker. Keith and Jeremy made another search of the house and out buildings for hidden treasures, but found little more that was worth carrying. A search by Keith for an attic proved fruitless. This had been their least successful foraging trip so far. Times were getting tougher all

over. After they both topped off their canteens from the hand pump, they scanned the tree line for several minutes before leaving at a brisk pace. The trip home would take longer, because they would have to be even more careful than usual, with the knowledge of raiders in the area. Keith longed for home, his chair, the wood stove, the sounds of activity, familiar voices and the chance to let his senses somewhat relax. Keith thought of his pipe and tobacco pouch with longing. He did not allow himself this luxury while foraging or on patrol around the retreat, because the smell of the smoke could give his position away. With what had become old habit, Keith put all thoughts of the dead from his mind and the depression lifted with every step away from the doomed homestead. Keith liked talking to people and was looking forward to spreading the news. The next trade day would set people buzzing. People would carry the news to neighbors, who would in turn pass it on. When the raiders struck again, many people would be warned. Eventually the raiders would choose the wrong victims. "Those who live by the sword, shall die by the sword.". Eventually family, neighbors or friends of the slain would go out to hunt them down. Rumors and stories abounded, mostly untrue, but good telling none the less. One story, almost a legend, told of how a man came home to find his family killed by a large group of raiders. After burying his loved ones, this man, totally alone, had gone after the killers and one by one executed them. At first the raiders tried to ambush him, but he eluded their traps and continued to hunt them. Finally the raiders had panicked and tried to get away, but he still pursued them. They left nothing behind, destroying everything edible as they passed. Still the man followed. The story claimed that he had began to eat his victims, even drying some of the meat to carry with him. According to the story all of the raiders were killed, with the last one dying over a year after they had killed his family. His work done, the man simply disappeared. He was said to still be living alone, somewhere in the forest, always hunting for other raiders. Keith did not doubt that there may have once been a grain of truth to the story. Checking his compass, Keith decided to follow the power line right of way, instead of the road or heading cross country. While the right of ways had become more brushy, they still offered pretty good walking. Their light back packs riding easily, they set a steady pace. Talking was kept to a minimum and hand signs were used most of the time. Few sounds would register in the brain as quickly as the sound of a human voice. When they did need to talk, it was in whispers, with their heads close together. It was not that they really expected trouble, but it was standard operating procedure. By the time they came to a small creek, they had each drank about half of the water in one of their canteens. Jeremy poured what was left in his canteen into Keith's and drank the little that would not fit. He then filled his now empty canteen from the stream and added

purification tablets. While it might have been safe to drink the creek water, it was not worth taking the chance. They did not know what filth might be laying in some pool upstream. Boiling would have been better, but when foraging they made it a practice to seldom light a fire. They once had filters for purifying water, but had squandered them early on and now had to use other ways. Keith chewed some dried meat as he walked. Probably dog he thought, judging from the taste. With the salt and spice it had on it, it was pretty good, actually. Keith never had developed a real taste for dog. They walked steadily, occasionally pausing to check their compass. At intervals they took sit down breaks, but never for too long. Too long a break caused muscles to stiffen. Using the position of the sun for their time piece, they began to look for a good spot to stop for the night, while there was still about an hour of daylight left. Eventually Jeremy spotted the right tree and unpacked his set of light weight climbing spikes. Leaving his pack and rifle with Keith, Jeremy took the mesh nylon bags, that would serve as their beds up the tree with him. Soon he had his own and Keith's tied to strong branches and lowered a rope for all their gear. The last thing Keith sent up was the two rifles, which Jeremy secured to a branch. Armed with only his handgun and fighting knife, Keith felt almost naked. Jeremy lowered the climbing spikes to Keith, who was soon up the tree. Carefully easing himself into his "bed", after checking that it was secure, Keith tried to find the most comfortable position. The nylon sleeping gear were a idea that Barton had come up with. Sort of a short hammock, they could be tied to a branch and formed a bag like sleeping place. Sleeping was done in an upright position, which was far from comfortable, but due to the nylon mesh, fairly secure and safe from falling. Keith hated them. By morning Keith would find his body stiff from lack of movement, only to be forced to carefully make his way out of his support and down the tree. At least they could both more or less sleep, without the fear of being wakened by the fangs feral dogs. Before they had the short hammocks, which Barton named "Tree Beds" and Keith named "torture racks", they had to take turns standing watch all night, something that built up fatigue very quickly. Always trying to look on the bright side, Keith thought that at least it was not raining this time. As the sky was beginning to lighten, Jeremy poked Keith awake. Keith had squirmed and fidgeted for a long time and never realized he had fallen asleep. Almost losing his grip on the tree limb, with his body screaming in protest, Keith made his way out of the tree. While Jeremy got the rifles ready to send down, Keith worked out as much of the pain and stiffness as possible. " I am too damn old for this," he thought. Soon Jeremy would be going out with Michael, and Keith could stay at home and worry all the time they were gone. Soon they were again on their way and as the sun warmed the world Keith's body stopped tormenting him. Jerked

meat made a breakfast while on the move, washed down with cold water from their canteens. The world was good. By pushing hard they were close to the retreat before dark. As they neared, they became more careful. Tied to a tree limb on the trail they were using was a faded white rag. If this rag had been missing it would have meant that something bad had happened and for them to by pass the retreat and go to a prearranged spot. Of course it might not have been possible for anyone to get to this signal, so they approached with caution. Keith waited with Jeremy's pack, while Jeremy went carefully forward, crawling the last 50 yards, to observe the retreat. The American flag was still flying. If it had not been, this would have been a trouble signal. Time seemed to drag for Keith as he waited. "What is he doing?" "Gone home and eating lunch?" Keith muttered. Jeremy was thorough. He waited until he saw Dorothy come out of the house with some laundry. If hostiles had been in control of the retreat she would have signaled in a prearranged manner. When she did not, Jeremy waved a white rag on a stick, in case who ever was in the observation post had not already seen him, only when he was sure that he had been seen and recognized did he go back for Keith. They were home.