



I sat in the converted camp ten kilometres outside a small northern town. It was snowing heavily on the third day of our trip and, except for the occasional foray for firewood, we remained inside. The wind pushed past the poor insulation and whistled through gaps in the wood, and in the corners of the cabin our breath was as visible as grey smoke. I was the physician of the group; the remaining six men were friends from town. We knew one another through hockey; we play in a local league together. One was an RCMP officer; two worked for the township; another owned the local grocery store; the other two were seasonal guides.

One of the town employees, John, was the good-natured butt of most of our jokes. He laughed along, often making self-deprecating cracks to lighten the mood. He was a pleasure to be around, especially on this day when the weather had forced us together. After a particularly long silence, about half an hour of quiet in which no one spoke, he got up and put his parka on.

“C’mon, Doc,” he said. “Help me get some wood.”

I dressed and followed in John’s tracks to the woodpile. He was kicking at pre-cut sticks that had frozen together the night before.

“Ursus, I want to ask you something.”

“Go ahead,” I said.

“As a doctor, I mean.”

“Alright.”

“I forgot some of my pills back home. Missed three days’ worth now. Do you think that’s dangerous?”

“What kind of pills?”

“I only take one, at night-time. An antidepressant. I’ve noticed that, since this mornin’, my thoughts have gotten more dark, you know? But don’t tell anybody.”

I told him I was on medication for depression. “You too?” he said.

But we weren’t on the same drug. I thought for a time as we freed the wood from the ice and piled it outside the cabin door. Then I got an idea, and convinced John it would work fine.

We went back inside. Some men were asleep; one of the guides was frying a trout from yesterday’s icefishing. There was a blackboard on the wall beside the stove; on it the chore list was written, with a name beside each task. I waited a few hours until I washed off the list, replacing it with a bulletin:

*Someone has forgotten his pills at home. Does anyone take medication for depression? If you have some, please see me in private.*

Later that day the storm cleared. We were able to get outdoors to fish and ride snowmobiles. There was opportunity for privacy; it was easy to break off individually and in pairs.

By evening, every man other than John had approached me and told me he was on pills for depression. *Every one*. Each seemed slightly embarrassed; each seemed relieved when I mentioned I was a fellow sufferer. Two were on the same drug as John. I told one of them I needed a few days’ worth of pills; did he have any to spare? He did.

I gave the pills to John without saying who the donor was.

Seven men in the wilderness, all of them competent in the outdoors, all of them comfortable discussing sports but distinctly uncomfortable talking about feelings. And all of us on antidepressants. After I wrote on the blackboard that the medical problem had been solved, everyone seemed a little closer.

The weather held. No one inquired as to who had forgotten their pills.

— Dr. Ursus