

The next morning everyone was up early. First thing, Laura, who had the last shift watching Clear Water, informed everyone that he still had not moved. So while Kate and Grandpa Jack got some eggs, toast, and coffee together in the kitchen, the professor helped Laura prepare Clear Water for the journey ahead.

First, they carefully slid a playing card under Clear Water's bearskin robe-- which he was still lying on-- and then they taped Clear Water to the playing card, with small Band-Aids secured with Scotch tape. Then they taped the playing card to the inside bottom of a cigar box. Then they cut vents in the lid of the cigar box, and a hole in the center of the edge of the lid. Finally, they tied some twine to the hole in the lid. In this way, even if they had to walk over rough terrain in bad weather, the elf would be protected from further injuries, and protected from the weather, but still have plenty of air. And they could easily check through the vents and see if he was still unconscious or not.

At about 7:00 a.m., Kate and Grandpa Jack had breakfast ready. So, one by one, everybody got what they wanted and then went into the dining room to eat. The cigar box containing Clear Water was brought into the dining room and set down on the table, and when the professor came into the dining room with his eggs and toast he sat down next to it so he could look at Clear Water.

Although everyone was tired from lack of sleep, there was an unusually quiet atmosphere in the dining room once everyone was there and had begun to eat. Especially silent for a group of people who might be discovering a tribe of little people with wings that day. This quiet atmosphere did not go unnoticed by the professor.

Eventually, he cleared his throat to speak.

"Ahem, uh, everyone, uh... there's something that I'd like to say about what we are thinking about doing today."

"Now," continued the professor, "I don't want you to misunderstand. I have never seen anything like this elf before in my life. He's hurt and surely he needs help as soon as possible. I agree that it would be better to try and return him to his tribe than to seek medical assistance here and risk the elf's freedom. And an extremely unusual coincidence of events has apparently even given us the knowledge of where to look for the tribe. But, I cannot deny that my own personal curiosity-- at possibly talking with the little people, and learning about that dance-- is running far ahead of my... uh, well, common sense. This may be happening to all of us, so I thought I'd better say something."

No one had anything to say yet, so the professor continued.

"What I mean is, the National Park Service puts those gates up and closes down sections of the Parkway during the winter for a reason. Because its dangerous. Of course I don't know how dangerous because I've never been up there in the middle of the winter. Still, even with the warmer temperatures--" and he paused long enough to notice, through the dining room window, that water was now dripping steadily from the roof gutter--"who knows what problems all the melting snow might cause? And it's still going to be cold at night. And there are no phones out there to call for help. One little accident can turn into a real big one when there's no one else within twenty five miles, and you're stranded in the mountains during the winter.... What I mean is, this is serious... and speaking of serious, if we get caught breaking through one of those gates up there, they'll be hard on us.... We're getting in real deep here, and maybe everyone realizes it, and wants to

go ahead anyway, but... I'm beginning to think this is all just a little bit outside my area of...ability.... Sure, we might be able to do it, but why not just let in one or two people who know all the risks? So we don't do anything... that we could have avoided...."

Everyone had been listening closely, and it was clear by that and the silence that followed that the professor had brought up feelings and doubts that had crossed everyone's mind.

Finally Grandpa Jack spoke.

"Alan's right," he said, "this is serious. No one should take another step without knowing they've got a good grip on their common sense. If the weather turns suddenly while we're up there, and someone stays outside too long, they might freeze to death easy. We're talking about being in the mountains.

"But there's something I'd like to say too. We don't even know if there is a tribe of little people up there, much less what their way of life is like. But I feel for them, in a way that I can't explain. I think you all know what I mean. As careful as people were telling the story of 'The Last Map of Root Man Charlie,' there still were a lot of people that found out. Maybe that's a lot of people that can be trusted. I don't know. But that was just a story. This is the real thing.

"Now, we have here eight people-- not counting Dylan or Story-- who can understand what I'm talking about. I believe the people in here could keep the tribe's location to themselves. And we may want to. Because if we find the tribe, we may find a beautiful but fragile way of life that could not survive contact with a lot of big people over a long period of time. A whole tribe of little people may live or die by what we decide.

"And last night I thought this all over, including the risks that Alan mentioned, and I decided that the thought of big people tearing that place in the mountains apart looking for the little people like they were made of gold or something scared me more than the thought of my own death. And so I decided that I'm going to give it a try, even if it's the last thing I do; because if the life of the tribe depends on silence about its location, and I know I won't tell, I figure I ought to at least try before we bring some people in on this who may not stay quiet.

"So... I'm going. And I've got to ask you all right now for a straight answer: I'd rather find out how it is with the little people before we risk telling anyone else. And that means no letter of explanation for Mary's parents, or for anyone if we don't get back in time. I'm not usually a hard man, but it's time to see where we all stand here. I hope everyone will not hesitate to speak freely. In my book no one is less liked for being true to their feelings...."

Everyone was stunned into silence by the change in Grandpa Jack. Everyone was so used to the lighthearted side of his nature; and now, Grandpa Jack was dead serious... dead serious.

"I believe," said the professor finally, "that Grandpa Jack has spoken his true feelings on the subject." Then he looked at Jack and smiled.

There was a short silence.

"Well then," said the professor, "anyone want to be first?"

Clear Water, lying taped into his cigar box traveling compartment, silently awaited the decisions. He was still unconscious.

"Well " said Stanley finally, "the weather report says clear and unseasonably warm for the next three days. But... weather reports have been wrong before.... Still, I'm with Jack. I'm going, and no letters of explanation."

Silence.

Then Tom. "My folks are spending a lot of money for me to be at college learning something. But if I have the chance to save someone's life, and I don't do it, I haven't learned anything. And I think Jack's right, we need to think about this guy's tribe.... We'll make it. If those early prospector's can do it, so can we. I'm going, and no letters of explanation."

"Well," said Laura. "I'm not going to hear about this one second hand. Besides, you all might need someone along to knock some sense into you. I'm going, and no letters of explanation."

"And I'm going along to help Laura," said Kate.

Mary was silent for a moment, then she said, "They'll just have to understand."

Then Jennifer said, "You're not going to tell me that I'm too young... the Indians had kids and they lived through the winter all right...."

"Well," said the professor with a sigh, "So much for common sense." And then, "Well, we better get moving here... let's have Kate make a list of all we need and then check them off when they go on to the-- whatever we get. And, before we get started here, does anyone know where we can get a gun, or a rifle?"

"I have a rifle," said Grandpa Jack.

"I'll be damned...." said the professor.

There were many things to do, but everyone moved quickly. While clothes, sleeping bags, and food were getting collected together, Kate made some calls, and discovered an emergency

number she could call to rent four wheel drive vehicles. And yes, Freedom Rent-a-Car in Boone had two Toyota Tercel Wagons at \$18.95 a day plus 16¢ a mile. But no, chains did not come with them.... So Kate added four sets of chains to the growing list of things needed at the store. Besides food that they needed to buy then, were: four sets of tire chains, three pairs of rubber boots, an emergency flare, 200 feet of rope, extra rifle bullets, an extra small portable backpacker stove, 2 gallons of kerosene, an extra hatchet, a portable bow saw, an extra hack saw blade, chain cutters, an emergency first aid kit, 8 whistles, 8 lighters, an extra flashlight, and 3 sets of batteries. When all this was added to Tom's backpack tent, backpacker stove, lantern, and hatchet, and Grandpa Jack's .22, Kate felt they would be ready for the worst. Everyone had agreed.

Once the list was complete, the professor, Tom, and Stanley got into the professor's old Dodge Dart, and drove off to get the Toyota Wagons and the things on the list. Stanley was put in charge of the elf, and so he carried out the cigar box containing Clear Water when he left. By 9:00 a.m., when they left, the main roads were clear, and even the snow left on the roads was beginning to melt, but only where the sun was shining on it. While they were out, Stanley was going to go by St. Sinner's Cafe, and tell them he would be going out of town because of a family emergency, and that he could be gone as long as a week.

Meanwhile, Laura made her call to the Hospitality House, where she worked, and said the same thing. Mary decided she'd wait until the last minute to make her call. Then, while Mary went home to say hi and tell her parents she'd be out all afternoon with Tom, Grandpa Jack fired up his Valiant-- which was running better after Kate discovered ~~that~~ that the plugs were gapped wrong-- and Jack, Kate, Laura, and Jennifer took Dylan and Story over to Laura's friend Irene's. Irene accepted Dylan and Story with no questions asked. All she said was, "You just

let me know when you want them back." Then Jack, Kate, Laura and Jennifer went off to the store for food.

All the errands were done by 11:00 a.m., and the two four wheel drive vehicles were packed and ready by 12:00 noon. By then, the sun was shining bright and warm, and the sky was clear with just small scattered clouds.

"Everything is loaded and checked off," said Kate.

Everyone was outside standing by the cars, except Mary, who was in calling the restaurant where she worked, and the professor, who had put an open bag of dry cat food in the laundry room with Muffin, and then gone out to wait on the front porch so he could lock the front door.

"What do you think, Jack?" asked Stanley.

"Are you bringing the deer hide map along, just in case....?" asked Grandpa Jack.

"Yep. It's in there," said Stanley.

"Then we're ready," said Grandpa Jack.

Mary and the professor joined everyone.

"We're all set then?" the professor asked, looking around.

"Yep," said Kate.

"Yep," said Grandpa Jack.

"And we know how to get there?" asked the professor.

"Both Tom and I know," said Stanley. He and Tom were going to be the drivers.

"Do we have a map, in case we get lost?" asked the professor.

"Well..." said Kate, "I didn't check for that...."

"There isn't one in the glove compartment," said Tom.

"Jack, could you get one out of your car?" asked the professor.

"Get one from our car, too," said Kate.

Finally, at a little after 12:00 noon, two four wheel drive Toyota Tersel Wagons-- loaded down with 8 people, extra clothes, sleeping bags, food, camping gear, emergency equipment, and an

unconscious elf taped into a cigar box-- backed out of the professor's driveway, and began their journey towards Sam's Knob. In one Toyota: Tom, Mary, Kate, and Grandpa Jack, with Tom driving. In the other Toyota: Stanley, Laura, the professor, and Jennifer, with Stanley driving. Their plan: Take 105 southeast until they hit 194 past Crossnore. Then take 194 over and connect with 19E, and ride that through Burnsville to 19,23. Then take 19,23 south to Asheville, and connect with Rt. 26 south. From there they would follow Rt. 26 south to 191 south, and 191 south to the parkway, about ten miles east of Mt. Pisgah. Once on the parkway, they hoped they wouldn't see any park rangers. But if they did, the professor had a camera with him, and he was going to be a nature photographer looking for snow pictures. As for breaking through any gates across the parkway, they had chain cutters and a hack saw, and a lotta hope that they wouldn't be seen.

Although the sun was continually melting snow as it shined through the afternoon, the driving went slow. Even the major roads still had snow that was packed down or hadn't melted in places, so traveling speed in general was much slower than usual. Still, all felt they were doing well when, at 4:30 p.m. in the afternoon, they stopped for gas at an Exxon station on Rt 191, heading south.

"Well, this is it," said the professor, "Another half an hour at the most, and we'll be at the parkway. And if the gate's closed, well then, we're going to saw it open and keep going. Anyone got any last words?"

"I've got the saw all ready to go," said Stanley.

"If there's any other cars, or an ranger, we just pull into the French Broad overlook, right?" asked Laura.

"Right," said Tom.

"We'll make it," said Grandpa Jack.

"Is that little guy still unconscious?" asked the professor.
Yep. The little guy was still unconscious.

The two Toyotas resumed their journey. Finally they got to the parkway turnoff. A sign on the right just before the turnoff indicated trouble ahead. It said: "Parkway Closed." The two Toyotas kept going. They turned onto the beginning of the parkway allright, but then they saw closed gates. And another sign, this one much bigger than the first one. This sign said: "PARKWAY CLOSED FOR TUNNEL CONSTRUCTION UNTIL APRIL." The two Toyotas pulled over into the French Broad River overlook for a conference.

"Tom says there's another way," said Grandpa Jack, as they all grouped together. "He's checking it on the map."

"Look at the snow," said Kate.

The wind was beginning to pick up, and the air was no longer warm. Those who were not already wearing their coats or hats put them on.

"We're not going to get there before dark, will we?" asked Laura.

"Don't worry," said Grandpa Jack, "we won't go any farther than we can safely go."

Tom was showing Stanley the new plan. "See here we've got to get 19,23 off of 40, and take it to Canton. Then south on 110 and left on 276. You got it?"

"Got it," said Stanley.

Meanwhile, the professor had inconspicuously examined the locking system on the parkway gates. A hack saw would be sufficient.

They all piled back into the Toyotas, and Tom and Stanley

turned them around to head back up 191. By the time they got to the intersection of 110 and 276 it was 7:00 p.m., and it was dark.

There was a blinking yellow light at the intersection, and a few buildings that were dark. Tom, who was driving the lead Toyota, pulled into a clearing in front of one of the buildings. Stanley pulled in behind him. The conference was short. Everyone agreed that they ought to wait until daylight to drive what would surely be the two worst stretches of road on their path.

Twice that night, once while they ate dinner, and once right before they arranged themselves for sleep, another four wheel drive vehicle drove up and stopped, its driver checking to see if they were all right. And each time, when they asked the driver how 276 would be going towards Brevard, they got the same answer. "It'll be rough and slick, but if you got chains you can still drive it." On that note, the eight big people in the two Toyotas arranged themselves among the food and equipment in their small quarters, and then, either were fortunate and slept, or were left awake to contemplate their fate.

At 7:00 a.m. the next morning, all of the eight people in the two Toyotas had eaten breakfast. Although few of the big people had gotten much sleep, all had stayed warm. And now the sun was out, and the outside air was beginning to warm up again. So Tom and Stanley got out and put the chains on, all the way around. Then they warmed up the engines of the Toyotas. Soon all was ready. They pulled out and began driving 276.

Not long after they began, they saw an ominous large orange sign on the right side of the road. It said: BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY CLOSED TO THROUGH TRAFFIC AT DEVIL'S COURTHOUSE TUNNEL." They stopped for a conference. Tom said, "We don't need but a few

miles on the parkway to reach Sam's Knob from this entrance. That may not affect us." So they kept going.

Most of 276 was all right, especially with the chains. A plow had been over it once, and in some places the snow had melted down to the road. But soon the two Toyotas began climbing not so gradual curves that switched back and forth, and Tom and Stanley drove very slow. But, even though heavy water runoff from all the precipitation caused ice patches on the road, the four wheel drive and the chains together made passage possible. After nearly two hours, they arrived near the entrance to the parkway. Again, this time right before they drove under the overpass and got on the entrance ramp, there was a small sign: "Parkway Closed." The two Toyotas kept going. They did not see any other vehicles.

The two Toyotas crawled at a slow pace up the unplowed entrance ramp. And then turned left on to the parkway. And then, right in front of them, standing like a frozen sentry in between the blue sky bare tree mountain sunshine, and the all white unplowed windswept road, was a flashy orange closed gate. The two Toyotas stopped.

Stanley got out and walked over to the other Toyota. "No one's around. I'll have the lock off in less than five minutes. We drive through. I push the gates back together so that it looks like nothing ever happened. We drive off. I'm going to start now. Keep a good lookout, and yell if you see anything."

Then Stanley went to work. Grandpa Jack helped. In about five minutes they had the gates open. Tom and Stanley drove the Toyotas through. Stanley went back and put the gates back like they were. Then the two Toyotas drove on, slowly but surely. Before they had driven off though, all had noticed the large orange sign that was on the side of the road near the gate. It said: PARKWAY CLOSED TO THROUGH TRAFFIC AT DEVILS COURTHOUSE TUNNEL 10 MILES AHEAD NO PARKWAY EXITS BEHOND THIS POINT."

Tom said that the turnoff to the parking area for Sam's Knob was right around milepost 420. From the sign they knew they could drive 10 miles before they reached a closed off tunnel. The question was: how many miles to milepost 420? The Toyotas drove on. Soon they all saw a milepost marker on the right. As they got close, the information they were looking for revealed itself. That milepost was milepost 412. They would make it. 10 miles to until the parkway was closed off by tunnel construction. 8 miles to the turnoff to Sam's Knob. So far, so good.

The remaining 8 miles were traveled at an average of 10 m.p.h., but only once was there any doubt that they would make it. Near milepost 418, ice buildup on a tall massive rock face at the edge of the left side of the road had caused numerous rock face fractures, and ice and rock had fallen and scattered all over the left side of the road. But only small insignificant pieces lay on the right side of the road, and passage, although somewhat risky, was possible. The two Toyotas kept going.

Not long after milepost 420, they came to another closed gate across the parkway. On the other side of the gate was the turnoff to the parking area for Sam's Knob. The Toyotas stopped. Stanley and Grandpa Jack got out and Stanley sawed through a second lock. The professor began calculating which possessions at home he would have to sell to help pay the fines they were accumulating. Then the Toyotas were through the gate, and Stanley again put the two halves of the gate back like they had been. Then the two Toyotas drove on..

Finally, at about 11:00 a.m. on January 2, 1986, the two Toyotas arrived at the parking area for Sam's Knob. Clear Water had been gone from the tribe for eight days. He had been unconscious for about 36 hours.

The sky was clear, and the air had warmed up to nearly 50 degrees where they were. The snow was melting, and was squishy under the big people's feet. The wind, which had been a steady breeze as Stanley and Grandpa Jack sawed the lock on the first gate, was now just an occasional light breeze.

Everyone had reviewed what they would need and everyone knew what to do. Food, rope, extra socks, containers of kerosene, the emergency first aid kit, the emergency flare, two flashlights, and the extra batteries were in Tom's backpack. Those who didn't have waterproof hiking boots put on rubber boots over their shoes. The weather was warm enough so that heavy coats were not needed, but they were carried along. Tom had the backpack on. Grandpa Jack carried the lantern in its box. The professor carried the bow saw. Stanley carried the cigar box with Clear Water inside. Their plan; go to the clearing where Root Man Charlie had seen the dance, and then yell for the little people with wings to come and help this injured member of their tribe. If, after an hour they saw nothing and heard nothing, they would scatter and yell. It would take them an hour to walk to the clearing. They would try for contact with the little people for four hours. Then they would have to re-group, and head back up from the clearing to the protection of the Toyotas. Everyone had a shistle and a lighter.

On the afternoon of January 2, 1986, Gliding Hawk flew into the cave where the little people of Yopitlaag lived and spread the news. "There are big people down in the clearing, and they are calling out: 'Little people with wings! We have an injured little person with wings! Please help!'" Soon everyone in the tribe knew the news. And then everyone in the tribe silently, in their own minds, thought the same

thought: "Let the big people come then, and bring the injured little person inside the mountain to the tribe." And then, suddenly, where once there were eight big people, standing together and holding an open cigar box in a clearing near the base of Sam's Knob, there now was nothing.

The eight big people, still standing together, suddenly found themselves in a dark place, that was lit by small torches, that lined the edges of their field of vision like streetlights.

"Something happened," said Stanley.

As their eyes got used to the different light, they saw that they all now had a set of wings; and the little elf was no longer in the cigar box, but was lying on a woodcrafted cot in front of them. The little elf still appeared to be unconscious, but now either the elf had gotten bigger, or... they had....

They looked around. They were in front of a house, a wooden frame covered with animal skins, in the center of a large village. Many other little people with wings were walking from the other houses into a large flat area in front of them. Three little people with wings were flying down towards them, from up and to the right.

Kate nudged her husband. "Should we do anything?"

"I believe we've been invited in somewhere...." said the professor. "I suppose we could thank them. Let's wait and see...."

Dancing Bird, Dried Up Creek, and Old Crow flew down from the spirit healer's lodge and landed in front of where Clear Water was lying. Then they just stood there, waiting for the rest of the tribe to gather into the large flat area in front of the tribal center lodge. Finally, everyone was there.

Dancing Bird walked up to the cot that Clear Water was lying on. She looked at Clear Water. Then she looked at the

people who had brought Clear Water back to the tribe. She gave them warmth from her fire with the look of love in her eyes, and they all understood. Then she slowly but surely knelt down next to the cot. She leaned over Clear Water and looked at his face. Then she kissed him. Then she leaned back, and just looked.

Everyone just looked.

Then Clear Water woke up. He opened his eyes and saw Dancing Bird. She was smiling. He smiled. He moved his right arm slowly, but enough to beckon her to lean down to hear. He told her the answer to his quest. She nodded her head yes. She looked again to the people who had brought Clear Water back to the tribe. Then she looked over at Dried Up Creek. Dried Up Creek then let loose an untranslatable exclamation that roughly meant "He got it right!" and the whole tribe echoed his yell with yells of their own. The Dance of a Child's Heart Playing would soon follow. All the tribe but Dancing Bird, Clear Water, Dried Up Creek, and Old Crow then went to locate their spirit totems and prepare for the Dance.

"I wonder what he said to her," whispered the professor.

"Maybe we can ask the old guy," said Stanley.

Meanwhile, Dancing Bird remained with Clear Water, caressing his forehead gently, but doing nothing more. Old Crow took a quick look at where the dried blood on Clear Water's head was, and then flew off to a nearby lodge to get the necessary healing supplies. Then Dried Up Creek walked up to the big people that were now little people.

He looked at all of them as he spoke: "You have all given something to someone who needed. You can see the happiness that you have made. We wish to bring you happiness. If there is something you need, tell me, and if we have it to give, we will