

The Stranger in the Woods

The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit

by Michael Finkel

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1.

The trees are mostly skinny where the hermit lives, but they're tangled over giant boulders with deadfall everywhere like pick-up sticks. There are no trails. Navigation, for nearly everyone, is a thrashing, branch-snapping ordeal, and at dark the place seems impenetrable.

This is when the hermit moves. He waits until midnight, shoulders his backpack and his bag of break-in tools, and sets out from camp. A penlight is clipped to a chain around his neck, but he doesn't need it yet. Every step is memorized.

He threads through the forest with precision and grace, twisting, striding, hardly a twig broken. On the ground there are still mounds of snow, sun-cupped and dirty, and slicks of mud—springtime, central Maine—but he avoids all of it. He bounds from rock to root to rock without a footprint left behind.

One print, the hermit fears, might be enough to give him away. Secrecy is a fragile state, a single time undone and forever finished. A footprint, if you're truly

committed, is therefore not allowed, not once. Too risky. So he glides like a ghost between the hemlocks and maples and white birches and elms until he emerges at the rocky shoreline of a frozen pond.

It has a name, Little Pond, often called Little North Pond, though the hermit doesn't know it. He's stripped the world to his essentials, and proper names are not essential. He knows the season, intimately, its every gradation. He knows the moon, a sliver less than half tonight, waning. Typically, he'd await the new moon—darker is better—but his hunger had become critical. He knows the hour and minute. He's wearing an old windup watch to ensure that he budgets enough time to return before daybreak. He doesn't know, at least not without calculating, the year or the decade.

His intention is to cross the frozen water, but this plan is fast abandoned. The day had been relatively warm, a couple of ticks above freezing—the temperature he knows—and while he'd hunkered in his camp, the weather had worked against him. Solid ice is a gift to trackless stealth, but this touch of softness will emboss every footfall.

So the long way it is, back in the trees with the roots and the rocks. He knows the whole hopscotch for miles, all around Little North Pond and then to the farthest reaches of North Pond itself. He passes a dozen cabins, modest wood-sided vacation homes, unpainted, shut tight for the off-season. He's been inside most of them, but now is not the time. For nearly an hour he continues, still attempting to avoid footprints or broken branches. Some roots he's stepped on so many times that they're worn smooth from repetition. Even knowing that, no tracker could ever find him.

He stops just before reaching his destination, the Pine Tree summer camp. The camp isn't open, but maintenance has been around, and they've probably left some food in the kitchen, and there's likely nonperishable leftovers from last season. From

the shadow of the forest he observes the Pine Tree property, scanning the bunkhouses, the tool shop, the rec center, the dining hall. No one. A couple of cars are in the lot, as usual. Still, he waits. You can never be too cautious.

Eventually he's ready. Motion-detecting floodlights and cameras are scattered around the Pine Tree grounds, installed chiefly because of him, but these are a joke. Their boundaries are fixed—learn where they are and keep away. The hermit zigzags across the camp and stops at a specific rock, turns it over, grabs the key hidden beneath, and pockets it for later use. Then he climbs a slope to the parking lot and tests each vehicle's doors. A Ford pickup opens. He clicks on his penlight and peeks inside.

Candy! Always good. Ten rolls of Smarties, tossed in the cup holders. He stuffs them in another pocket. He also takes a rain poncho, unopened in its packaging, and a silver-colored Armitron analog watch. It's not an expensive watch—if it looks valuable, the hermit will not steal it. He has a moral code. But extra watches are important; when you live outside with rain and snow, breakage is inevitable.

He vectors past a few more motion cameras to a back door of the dining hall. Here he sets down his canvas gym bag of break-in tools and unzips it. Inside is a pair of putty knives, a paint scraper, a Leatherman multi-tool, several long-necked flathead screwdrivers, and three backup flashlights, among other items. He knows this door—it's already slightly scraped and dented from his work—and he selects a screwdriver and slots it into the gap between the door and frame, near the knob. One expert twist and the door pops open, and he slips inside.

Penlight on, clamped in his mouth. He's in the large camp kitchen, light flashing over stainless steel, a ceiling rack of sleeping ladles. Right turn, five paces, and to the pantry. He removes his backpack and scans the metal shelves. He grabs two

tubs of coffee and drops them into his pack. Also some tortellini, a bag of marshmallows, a breakfast bar, and a pack of Humpty Dumpty potato chips.

What he really desires is at the other end of the kitchen, and he heads there now, takes out the key he'd collected from beneath the rock, and inserts it into the handle of the walk-in freezer. The key is attached to a plastic four-leaf-clover key chain with one of the leaves partially broken off. A three-and-a-half-leaf clover, perhaps still lucky yet. The handle turns and he enters the freezer, and the evening's entire mission, all the meticulous effort, feels immediately rewarded.

He is deeply, almost dangerously hungry. Back at his tent, his edible supplies are a couple of crackers, some ground coffee, and a few packets of artificial sweetener. That's it. If he'd waited much longer, he would have risked becoming tent-bound from weakness. He shines his light on boxes of hamburger patties and blocks of cheese, bags of sausage and packs of bacon. His heart leaps and his stomach calls and he sets upon the food, loading it into his backpack; smorgasbord.

2.

Terry Hughes's wife nudges him awake and he hears the beeps and he's out of bed like a spring uncoiled, game on. Quick check of the monitor then a dash down the stairs, where everything's in place: gun, flashlight, cell phone, handcuffs, sneakers. Duty belt. Duty belt? No time, forget the belt, now jump in the truck and head off.

A right onto Oak Ridge, then left in a half-mile, accelerating down the long driveway to the Pine Tree Camp. Headlights are off but the truck's still noisy, so he throws it in park and vaults out of the cab. He continues on foot, fast as he can though less agile than usual. The lack of a belt means his hands are encumbered with gear.

Even so, it's full speed toward the dining hall, hurdling boulders, dodging trees, then a crouching scuttle to an exterior window. Heart pulsing like a hummingbird's; from his bed to the window in four minutes flat.

Hughes takes a breath. Then he cautiously lifts his head and steals a peek through the window, straining his eyes against the dimness of the Pine Tree kitchen. And he sees it: a person carrying a flashlight, the pale beam emanating from the open door of the walk-in freezer. Could this really, after all these years, be him? It must be. Hughes is still in his pajama pants, and he pats the clip-on holster on his waistband to make sure—yes, his weapon's there, a little Glock .357 Sig. Loaded. No safety switch.

The beam brightens and Hughes tenses and out of the freezer steps a man, hauling a backpack. He's not quite what Hughes expected. The man is bigger, for one thing, and cleaner, his face freshly shaved. He's wearing large nerdy eyeglasses and a

wool ski cap; he roams the kitchen, seemingly unconcerned, selecting items as if in a grocery store.

Hughes permits himself a flicker of satisfaction. There are rare perfect moments in law enforcement, as Sergeant Hughes well knows. He's been a Maine game warden for eighteen years, and before that, for nearly a decade, he was a U.S. marine. You might as well award him a PhD in grunt work, dead ends, and paper filing. But once in a beautiful while, wisdom gained through frustration pays dividends.

A few weeks previous, Hughes had resolved to end the reign of the hermit. He knew that none of the usual police methods were likely to work. After a quarter century of intermittent investigations, including foot searches, flyovers, and fingerprint dusting, conducted by four separate law enforcement agencies—two county sheriff's departments, the state police, and the game warden service—no one had even figured out the hermit's name. So Hughes questioned experts in high-tech surveillance, he brainstormed with private detectives, he spitballed ideas with friends from the military. Nothing they came up with felt right.

He phoned some acquaintances working border patrol up at Rangeley, near the Maine-Quebec crossing. It turned out that one of the guys had just returned from a training camp in which new Homeland Security equipment had been introduced—devices that offered a better method of tracking people who tried to sneak across borders. This was closely guarded technology, Hughes was told, far too sophisticated for anything a game warden might need. It sounded ideal. Hughes vowed to keep quiet about the specifics, and soon three border patrol agents were tromping around the Pine Tree kitchen.

They hid one sensor behind the ice machine, another on the juice dispenser. The data-receiving unit was installed in Hughes's home, at the top of the stairs, so that the alarm beeps would be audible in every room. Hughes devoted himself to learning the system until operating the device felt intuitive.

This was not enough. To trap the hermit, he could afford little margin for sloppiness. An errant noise while Hughes approached, an inadvertent glint from his flashlight, and his plan would probably fail. He memorized the motion lights, located the best spot to ditch his truck, and rehearsed every move from his house to the camp, shaving off seconds with each practice run. He made it a nightly habit to set out all his gear; the duty-belt oversight only proved he was human. Then he waited. It took two weeks. The beeps—first heard by his wife, Kim—came shortly after one o'clock in the morning.

All that, plus luck, for this perfect law enforcement moment. Hughes spies through the window as the burglar methodically fills his pack. No gray areas here; no circumstantial evidence. He has him dead to rights. And at the Pine Tree Camp, no less. Pine Tree caters to children and adults with physical and developmental disabilities—it's a nonprofit organization, run off donations. Hughes is a longtime volunteer. He sometimes fishes with the campers on North Pond, catching bass and white perch. What kind of a guy breaks into a summer camp for disabled people, over and over?

Hughes eases away from the building, keeping his head low, and quietly makes a cell-phone call. Game wardens don't typically work burglary cases—usually it's more illegal hunters or lost hikers—and this effort has been chiefly a spare-time obsession. He asks the dispatch office of the Maine State Police to alert Trooper Diane Vance, who has also been chasing the hermit. They've been colleagues forever,

Hughes and Vance, both graduating from their respective academies the same year, then working together on and off for nearly two decades. His idea is to let Vance handle the arrest. And the paperwork. He returns to the window to keep guard.

As Hughes watches, the man cinches his pack and heaves it to his shoulders. He departs the kitchen and disappears from Hughes's view, into the vast empty dining room. He's moving toward an exit, Hughes surmises, a different one from the door he'd pried open. Instinctively, Hughes maneuvers around the building to the spot where the man seems to be headed. This exterior door, like all the ones to the Pine Tree dining hall, is painted cherry red, trimmed with a green wooden frame. Hughes is without help, deep in the night, seconds away from a potentially violent encounter. It's a complicated instant, a fraught decision.

He is as prepared as possible for whatever might happen, fistfight to shoot-out. Hughes is forty-four years old but still as strong as a rookie, with a jarhead haircut and a paper-crease jawline. He teaches hand-to-hand defensive tactics at the Maine Criminal Justice Academy. No way he's going to step aside and let the intruder go. The opportunity to disrupt a felony in progress overrides all concerns.

The burglar, Hughes thinks, is probably a military vet, and therefore likely armed. Maybe this guy's combat ability is as good as his forest skills. Hughes holds his position by the cherry-red door, Glock in his right hand, flashlight in his left, his back against the building's wall. He waits, running the contingencies through his mind, until he hears a small *clink* and sees the door handle turning.

The burglar steps out of the dining hall and Hughes flips on his Maglite, blazing it directly in the man's eyes, and trains the .357 square in the center of his nose, steadying his gun hand atop his flashlight hand, both arms extended. The two men are maybe a body's length apart, so Hughes hops back a few feet—he doesn't

want the guy lunging at him—while ferociously bellowing a single phrase: “Get on the ground! Get on the ground! Get on the ground!”

Michael Finkel is also the author of *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa*, which was adapted into a 2015 major motion picture. Finkel has reported from more than 50 nations and written for *National Geographic*, *GQ*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

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