SEVEN DEGREES LESS THAN ZERO

by Dennis Hiatt

Ed, my groundman, told me a story his wife told him, about a woman she knew in the funny farm that had heard voices in her head. One night the woman went down in the basement, grabbed an electric drill, and let the voices out in eight places. Then, Ed looked me square in the eye, and told me I was careless.

I'm a lineman for the Morrow county PUD. I don't like to hear stories from my groundman that end with me being careless even if the first of the story has nothing to do with me. I know what a hot line can do. I'm no fool, at least not thirty feet in the air, reaching for a Big Dog Line that holds 20,000 volts

Ed is forty one and walks with a limp he picked up in Vietnam. He use to get something like a twelve percent army disability pension but the government took it away from him because he was working. That happened about the time Rowena, Ed's wife, hung herself in the bathroom with the phone cord. So I don't think Ed really noticed it was gone but it struck me as a bum deal. And I wasn't even in 'Nam. I was twelve, I think, when Ed took a VC bullet in the thigh.

A week or so before Rowena left for good (Christmas is hard on everybody), Priscilla, my sweetie, and I went over to Ed and Rowena's trailer for meatloaf and to trim their tree. The meatloaf was excellent but Rowena must have been going light on her meds because she went into this long winded tale about seeing a blue bird when she was a kid just before her grandmother croaked from lung cancer. The upshot was Rowena

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had seen a blue bird in the Munn's bird feeder (two trailers down) that very morning, and that someone was going to die.

When she finished, Rowena looked at us with eyes as wet-cold and dull as Baker's pond after it'd iced over. Priscilla shook her pretty head and said that when she was seventeen she roomed (squatted actually) with these two black street musicians in LA, lived on coffee and Pepsi and did a lot of drugs. (This was news to me.)

Really? Rowena said, the ice in her eyes melting a hair.

Yeah. Priscilla tossed her long, black locks back over her shoulder and said. One night I got totally high and did my Tarot cards. They told me to have this red hour glass, like you know a Black Widow's, tattooed on my belly button. So I did. (I'd never seen it and I've been down there a lot)

Oh Really? The ice in Rowena's eyes was so thin a sparrow-fart elf couldn't have stepped on it without falling in.

Yeah. Pretty Priss was smiling now. So was dumpy pale, old Rowena. And when I came down, like I realized I'd been like into all this mystical-meatloaf-horse-crap because I liked being treated like a dog in bed (this was not news to me but...well) and felt like totally slimy afterwards and the mystic pizza stuff was just juggling balls to protect my ego.

The ice was home again in Rowena's eyes and elephants could have played hockey on it. Ed hung his head and stared at the cracks in his boots. Old Rowena cradled her snow-drift tummy through her red and green mu-mu like she was a doomed sea hog drifting toward the rocks. Harsh...but lame. She stayed in the bedroom the rest of the night.

On the drive home I stared at the old, dirty snow along side the road and tuned into some country song that whined, "You're the reason our kids are ugly, honey". I always make Priscilla listen to horse shit and gunsmoke music when I'm pissed at her. I figured if she didn't apologize for being a dip by the time we got home, I'd break a couple of her

DESTROY ALL BLONDES or SWEATY NIPPLES tapes and maybe smack
her around a bit.

Now I know that sounds kind of rude but Priscilla is a sailor's wet dream, and I'm built like one of those walk in freezers with the face of a monkey on chemotherapy. The night I won her heart, I was drinking in this dive in the Tricities and because I am more than a fistful of ugly and I still hurt like a kid when someone points it out and there isn't a living, breathing bull-rider this side of The Dalles that can put me down, when this black, heavy weight boxer Priscilla was with, pointed a stubby finger at me and said, "Lookee there....some dude done forgot to flush the head!", I hit him square between the running lights. Oh, he hopped right back up and went to kicking my butt but before he got the job done, I broke six of his ribs with my fists and closed his right eye for keeps with a long neck bottle of Bud. I guess Priscilla liked my never-say-die style.

However, Pretty Priss sneered that she was sorry, just before I turned the pickup into the driveway. She said everybody knew that Rowena was boinking a stupid, studly boxboy from the Hermiston Safeway.

"I didn't." I said.

She shook her head as if to say 'men'. "The kid drives a red Camaro with a Mystic Pizza bumper sticker."

"Oh yeah." I nodded. I'd see the car around and if I remember right, I'd seen it parked at the Dodge City motel in Boardman a time or fourteen.

"But," said Priscilla, showing me her teeth and all of her pink gums, grinned, her usual, hot, fusion of sugar and scheiss and even Shetland ponies are nice, "I HAVE been bad. Very Bad!"

"Yup!" I said switching stations, just before I killed the engine. That night we went at it like a pair of coyotes in a feeding frenzy and at dawn Wednesday morning Rowena was

hanging dead in the tiny bathroom of Ed's trailer.

Last night, at 2:52 AM, I got a call that a Big Dog Mainline was down up on Willow Creek. I kissed Priscilla in her moist, messy sleep and was dressed and out the door by 3:10. Ed met me at the truck barn. We were getting double time and a half but neither of us were smiling. Trouble calls, that time of night, are called blood money.

Let me tell you about Willow Creek. Last winter, about this time of year, the county sent a snow plow out to clear the road. It got stuck in a drift eight miles up Willow Creek Highway. So they sent a second plow out to get the first one. When the third snow plow got stuck, all three crews walked back. Up on Willow Creek, men are men and lone sheep send ravenous coyotes into feeding frenzies. Driving out of Heppner, the temperature sign on the Morrow County Saving and Loan said the Dow Jones was down 16 and it was seven degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Forty feet up on a power pole that's around eighty years old, with the wind blowing hard off the Canadian Rockies, it's a lot colder than seven below. It's as cold as the icy mouth of Hell.

At three-thirty in the midnight of morning, I can't help but think of my foreman Sam French. Sam was a was a lineman before he grabbed a hot one. He fell thirty-five feet, broke both legs and his collar bone. Every place his tools were touching him Sam was seared. I'd never seen Sam's hands. He wore black leather gloves. The gloves looked like they sheath skeletons.

When I was hitched up and had my spikes firm in the pole, I turned to Ed. "Do you really think I'm careless?"

From under his parka, Ed frowned and worried about that for a second, but it was too cold for him to give the question a good chewing in his mind, so he said. "No. Gullible."

I nodded and climbed the pole while Ed limped over to

kill the power.

"Is the line cold?" I yelled. There was six inches of ice on the sucker. I unslung a four pound spike sledge and started whacking on the ice.

"Yeah!" Ed hollered and then, like maybe he'd had time to think my question over right, screamed above the damn wind. "You believe everything....(The wind ate the word but it sounded like she or sheiss) tells you and your friends are afraid of you." The line shivered and jumped as big ice fell it's length.

"What?" I wanted to climb down and see just what was on Ed's weak mind but there were eighty families that needed heat. "Ed, that is jive! You know I've never put the hurt on anybody that...well that wasn't hunting it bad." That was true and he knew it, by God. The last of the ice dropped hard near Ed.

"No one can tell you a thing!" Ed screamed.

"Then I am not gullible am I?" I was down to the wire.

Ed shook his head. "It's cold! Do it!"

Weirdo, I thought, shrugged and reached for the line.

Sam let me take off a couple hours early. On the way home I saw a red Camaro with a Mystic Pizza bumper sticker heading out of town and laughed out loud. The kid must have wondered what happened to his sweetie and came looking for her. When I got home the house was cool and the gas heater was running full blast. That meant Priscilla had been out and just beaten me home. I plopped on the sofa and worked off my boots. Priss was in the kitchen thawing some steaks. "Hi Honey!" she said, eyes wet-bright-happy, lips full and flushed. Her long, slim fingers fumbled open the first button on her blouse. "I've been real bad, Baby!"

"Yup," I laughed and unbuckled my belt. "I'll bet you have."