SUBLIMATION By Lee MacDougall

The Fahrenheit temperature scale was invented by a German scientist in 1789. He posited that water froze at thirty-two degrees, and boiled at two hundred and twelve degrees. Another scale, developed by a Swede named Celsius, is based on water freezing at zero degrees, and boiling at one hundred. Britain and her colonies used the Fahrenheit scale for centuries, but gradually converted to align themselves with the rest of the Celsius world. These two scales meet, or give the same reading of temperature, at one point: forty below zero.

During the winters in Kirkland Lake in the mid-twentieth century it was often forty below. Forty-five below was not uncommon. With the wind chill, it was often sixty below. Notice that I don't identify the temperature by saying "sixty below zero". For those of us who grew up in northern Canada, where the temperature is often well below freezing, the zero is understood.

When it's forty below or colder, you experience it in different ways. Stepping outside, you catch your breath; the air is so cold it sticks in your throat. It takes a couple of breaths to convince your body to accept the frigid air, to acclimatize. The moisture in your exhaled breath freezes instantly; it looks denser than normal breath mist, more like exhaled smoke. As kids we could pretend we were smoking for about four months of the year. At forty-five below the tears in your eyes are caught by your eyelashes and freeze instantly. If we'd been playing outside, the first thing we'd do when we came in was unstick our eyes. Wet hair would freeze and snap off; wet clothing would solidify on your body. My mother used to hang wet laundry on the clothesline; hours later she would wrestle the dry but frozen sheets into the house. Only when they thawed could she fold them. Frozen water does evaporate. This explains why ice cubes shrink over time. The process is called sublimation, from the Latin "subliminis": to transform into a higher or idealized form. When you grow up in this kind of cold, you take it for granted. You forget how cold it really is.

Mornings at our house, getting ready for school or work was a well-timed ritual. My mother knew exactly what time to wake each person, and what threats to use to get us out of bed. We dressed quickly, then ran to the kitchen to eat. Cereal, toast or porridge; mother knew who

liked what and how much of it they would want. During our rush we listened to the local morning show on the kitchen radio. They would play music, give the ominous weather reports, sometimes there would be phone-in contests, and there was always the eight o'clock news. It was mostly national or world news, and a bit of sports. If there was anything local, we were always surprised. We all froze at the table the morning we heard the name Gordie Cardon.

The Cardons lived a couple of blocks from us in a small ramshackle house at the edge of our subdivision. The area was called Federal, because of the number of federally sponsored houses that had been built there in the years after the war. Beyond the Cardon place was deep northern bush; dark and impenetrable. The summer before, two of the Hong kids and I had been on their street, doing nothing, when we saw the Cardon boys approaching. Gordie, at fourteen, was the oldest; Gary, the middle boy, was my age; and the little guy, Dwayne, about ten. Together they could be trouble, so when we saw them we started to wander away as if we'd just remembered where we were going. They caught up to us, and Gary pushed me from behind. I pretended to trip, then kept walking. If Gordie hadn't been with them we might have said something, but as he was, it would have been crazy to start anything. Gary asked if I was chicken, and announced to all present that I probably couldn't even take Dwayne. I knew what was coming. Dwayne was a runt, and had a couple of things wrong with him, but the Cardon boys wouldn't accept that he was anything less than a cold-blooded killer. They were always goading him to prove his ferocity. I knew I could have knocked Dwayne down, having spent many an hour wrestling with my brother, but I also knew that if I so much as touched him, the rest of the clan would reduce me to pulp. We danced around each other for a while, fists raised, while I tried to figure out which of his eyes was following me. Then I did what any sane boy would do: I ran. The Hongs were right behind me, and the Cardon gang took it as another knock-down for little Dwayne, taunting me as a fag and a chick-chick-chicken from afar.

The radio news was discreet. No details were released. My family sat for a few seconds, listening. When the announcer went on to another item, my mother got up and turned off the radio.

"That poor family," she said.

Everybody at school was subdued. Word spread like wildfire. Apparently he'd been out skidooing with his father. That was all we heard at first.

* * *

There had been a party at the Cardon's house on Saturday night. They didn't have much money, but they had a lot of rowdy friends. Once it got out that there was something happening at Ray's, people started arriving. Everyone brought food, or beer, or whatever half-bottles of liquor they could scrounge. It had started as a regular hockey night get-together, but the Leafs had lost, and by the time the game was over, so many people had crowded into the small house that the party had a life of its own. May Cardon was trying to keep on top of the food and beer bottle clean-up, but eventually she just let it happen. She knew that once the booze ran out, people would go home, or move on to someone else's place.

Ray Cardon was a small wiry man who had spent most of his life working outside, and had a wrinkled, leathery complexion. He had an ice-fishing hut out on Gone Lake, and as he was out of work, he'd been spending most of his days there. He would never have planned a party this big, but when things just happened and everybody chipped in, it was more fun, and didn't cost a thing.

As the evening wore on, Schmitty got Ray into the rye, and the two of them were feeling no pain when the sing-along started. May was up dancing, and so was little Shelly. Someone put on the 45 of "Just call me angel in the morning," and everyone sang out.

"*Just touch my cheek before you leave me, baby!"*

The crowd was yelling, and laughing, and you couldn't hear yourself think.

"Fools! Open the back door!" cried Ray. " I know it's cold, let in some o' that fresh! 'Sgood for ya!"

Eventually word started going around that there were only a couple of beer left. A few of the guys were teasing Ray for having a party without a hidden case, and someone remembered that Reg Tressider had a few left over from his wedding. Ray didn't want people to leave. He

shouted that he had full forty-pounder out at the lake. Everyone knew it was too far to go, especially when it was goddamned forty-five below, but Ray said, “No! No one leave! I’ll be back before you can say Dick Duff!”

May pulled him aside and told him to lay off. “Let them go home.” Ray wouldn’t hear of it, and announced to all and sundry that he was off, would be back in half an hour, and that no one was allowed to leave.

Gordie asked if he could go with him. He’d spent most of the evening following Wendy Tyler around the party. She was dark and petite, with large brown eyes, and a pixie hair cut. They were not officially going out, but had kissed a few times during *The Planet of the Apes* at the Strand Theatre. He had been trying to get her to come up to his bedroom, but she was sticking close to his sister Judy, and slipped away from him, laughing, whenever he got too close. He wanted her to see him driving his Dad’s machine, or with luck, his Uncle Brian’s new Bobcat.

Ray said “Brian! Give the young lad your sled.” May said no way. It was past midnight, and he knew how cold it was.

Uncle Brian tossed Gordie his keys The boy looked at his mother, pleading, and she made him promise not to stop anywhere, or let his father stop, and pushed them out into the mud room. The fire in the wood stove was starting to fade, so Ray threw in a couple of big logs.

The two of them dressed quickly. Gordie was growing fast these days, and was almost as tall as his father. His worn skidoo suit barely fit him. He had been hoping for a new one this Christmas, but with money tight, and him not finished growing, it hadn’t happened. Boots on, they were outside, heading toward the sleds. Gordie was scanning the windows of the house, praying that Wendy would look out and see him driving the sleek, black machine. The windows of the house were steamed. No one came to see them off.

In a few minutes they were flying down the trail, Ray in front on his old beater, and Gordie trying to keep up on Brian’s. The liquor was starting to take its toll, and Ray was all over the path, snapping off tree branches and ducking under others as he drove, pushing his skidoo to make the trip in as little time as possible. They rode like this in the clear darkness, the only sound the whining of the engines. Gordie was starting to feel the hour. He hoped that Ray wouldn’t want to hang around the hut once they got there.

It was close to one a.m. when the trail joined the power line that would lead them to Gone Lake. Up ahead, Ray killed his headlight. It was an old game they used to play when Gordie was little, the kids screaming as their father drove at break-neck speed through the terrifying dark. Gordie could still see the silhouette of his father's machine, so he turned his lights off as well. He laughed as they sailed along in the blackness, the moon reflected in glistening diamonds on the untouched snow on either side of them.

Ray pulled over at the edge of the lake and killed his engine. Gordie pulled up beside him. The old guy jumped from his sled, popped open his seat, and pulled a half-empty bottle of Canadian Club from the mess of jumper cables and old gloves.

"I just remembered! My other emergency stash."

He took a long gulping swig, and offered the bottle to his son. Gordie wasn't big on rye, but at this hour, when you could feel the cold so clearly, he'd take it. The liquor burned his throat, and he coughed into his dirty sleeve.

"Here - don't be wasting it," Ray gasped, and grabbed the bottle back.

"Why did you stop?" asked Gordie. " We're almost there."

"To show you the lights," said Ray, and he gestured up past the trees.

Gordie leaned his head back and lifted his toque from his eyes. The stars were dense and bright this far from town, but his father meant the waves of luminescent greens and blues filling the sky. Gordie had seen northern lights a few times in his life, but tonight they started away off beyond the grey horizon, and soared up to the centre of the jet-black sky. One second there would be nothing; then a band of light would appear, then two, three, and in a heartbeat the whole sky would be filled with waving, rippling colour. He and Ray sat watching in the clear silent night, marveling together.

"See? If we hadn't come, you'd've missed 'em."

When they got to the hut, Ray leapt from his machine and fumbled with the lock. It was a tiny six by eight room with a roof. Some had wood stoves, but Ray's was just a wooden shell over a hole in the ice, with a few chairs and some rye. He was inside and back out in a few seconds, holding his trophy bottle on high. It turned out not to be full, but two-thirds of a forty

was better than none at all. The boys back at the house would still be pleased.

"Enough for a few good stiff ones anyway," offered Ray.

He cracked the bottle open and leaned back for a swig. The amber liquid was thick, but not frozen. Gordie called from his machine, "Come on Dad! Party's waiting."

"Oh ya, ya, Jesus, I told them to wait."

He stuffed the rye inside his snowsuit, and jumped back on his machine. Gordie turned his key, but the Bobcat didn't start. It strained to turn over, chugging and whining, but didn't connect. Ray paused before he started his.

"Did ya flood 'er?"

"No. I just turned it." Gordie flipped the key to the off position, and let the machine rest for a few seconds. Their breath came in thick bursts of vapour.

"Try 'er again. Easy." Gordie turned the key; same thing. She was trying to kick in, but all they got was a churn, churn, churn, and no connection.

"Shit." Ray got off his sled, and flipped open the hood. He had a flashlight high in one hand, trying to steady it on the spark plugs and other parts of the engine. What he could focus on looked fine. Gordie grabbed the light from his father and pointed it at the gas gauge. The needle was stuck on empty.

"Jesus! No gas!"

Ray looked at his son in disbelief. He tapped the glass on the gauge with the tip of the light. It didn't move. "That bugger Brian. Lending us his flashy sled, with nothin' in it!" Ray was back in the hut in a second, then he stepped out waving a gerry can of gas.

"Anything in that?" asked Gordie.

Ray stopped and shook it. Empty. He spit and tossed the can into the snow. "To hell with it. Come back with me." Ray killed the flashlight, and put his gloves back on quickly. His hands had started to go numb that fast.

"What about Uncle Brian's sled?" asked Gordie.

"He can get it tomorrow."

"I don't know. What if someone lifts it?"

"Who's out in the middle of the night?"

"We are. Decaire's truck got stolen last week. And Morris's ice auger?"

Ray looked at Gordie; his breath snorting out of him. He opened his sled seat again, and took another swig from his stash bottle. The boy was right.

"He'll kill me if anything happens to it," Gordie said, "I'll stay here. You go home, and get the gas."

"You be all right?"

"I'll be here."

Ray looked out across the lake. He could be back in minutes. And the folks would be waiting for the rye.

"Stay in the shack. Turn on the little stove. Don't fall asleep."

"I won't."

Ray offered his boy the remains of his bottle, but Gordie pushed it away. He slammed his seat down, yanked on the starter cord, waved once at the northern lights, and took off. Gordie watched his father weaving across the lake, listening to the high wail of the skidoo as it slowly faded to nothing.

He was surprised by the quiet. And the cold. The only sound his own breathing. His face was starting to sting. He stepped into the ice hut, and looked around for the propane stove. There it was, under the little table. He lifted it up and tried the starter a few times, but as he suspected, there wasn't any gas. They were batting a thousand for fuel. Oh well, he'd just have to wait it out. His dad wouldn't be long. If he kept walking, he wouldn't feel the cold.

When Ray arrived home, the place seemed pretty quiet. Most of the trucks and machines had disappeared. "The buggers," he thought, "Couldn't wait half an hour." He let himself into the mud room, and the heat from the wood stove hit him hard. It felt good, so he peeled off his hat and opened his suit to let it surround his body. He could hear the television in the house, but the record player must have been turned off.

"May! I'm home!" he called, but heard no response. Maybe she was putting the kids to bed.

The stove was glowing with the roaring fire, and Ray's hands felt frozen from his damn

gloves. Lady gloves he called them, not like the work gloves he used to get. He sat down on the boot chair, and pulled off his Kodiaks. Felt good to let his feet warm up. His hands were hurting a bit as they thawed, so he placed them on the chimney. He could feel the warmth charging his old knuckle joints. He remembered the forty pounder of rye in his suit, and took it out. "Gotta get this baby in there," he mumbled to himself, and looked for a place to put it down. He leaned back in the chair, and rested his head on the paneled wall behind him. The room was spinning, just a bit, nothing he couldn't stop by closing one eye. He closed both, just for a second, and breathed in the heat. He was glad he'd put those few extra logs in before he'd left. He was no fool.

Gordie was outside the ice hut, pacing a thin trail around it in the snow. It was the twentieth time he'd gone round. He had decided to count. When it was this cold the snow was dry, and barely made a sound when you stepped on it. Some days it really crunched, and sometimes there was an icy layer on top, and you could walk forever without breaking through. The wind was starting to come up now, and Gordie could feel the front of his thighs starting to tingle. This damn suit is too tight, he thought, no room for air. He was starting to get drowsy, and he wondered if it was possible to fall asleep while you were moving. He thought if he did go to sleep, he'd fall in the snow, and the cold on his face would wake him up fast. He started to walk with his back to the wind as he came around the hut. Twenty-one. Dad will be back in half an hour, forty minutes. Just keep going. One more time around and he'll be back. He hoped Wendy was waiting up for him. He remembered how tight her jeans fit her thighs; how warm they felt .

He stumbled on his path. He was beyond tired now; he figured it must be about two o'clock. He'd only stayed up this late once before. In the summer, the night of the falling stars, at Uncle Brian's cottage; everybody was up, burning marshmallows at the bonfire, and singing. Now he was sweating inside his suit. He had to stop, just for a minute. He knew his dad would be there any second. He headed back inside.

It felt better out of the wind. He tried stepping back and forth in the hut, but it was too small and crowded, and his legs were starting to cramp. He looked for matches, or candles, but in the dark it was hard to see anything. He plopped down in his dad's old lawn chair, and exhaled. This was hard work. He felt comfortable in the worn chair.

He snapped awake. It scared him how fast he had nodded off. He felt like he might cry. He stood up, and kicked the chair away. Kicked other stuff too. Cleared a path. Two steps this way, three steps that. Someone will notice me gone, and come lookin'.

Gordie was in the chair again. Taking the pressure off his feet. Boots are too small anyway. Feet numb. He leaned the chair back a bit and curled up. That felt better. Just rest for a minute. Breathe easy. Use less energy. Conserve it. When I get back, Wendy and I can find somewhere quiet. Doesn't feel as cold in here. Must be my breath warming up the place.

The door of the hut opened, and it was Wendy. Wearing just her sweater and jeans.

"Get in here girl! You'll freeze."

No, that was a dream. Just stay awake. Just a few minutes until dad comes. Then I'll give him shit, you can count on that.

When he heard the skidoo, it sounded like a mosquito. He waved his hand near his ear, the way you do when you're sleeping, and you hear that one bug circling closer and closer. "Jesus," he moaned. He heard the engine getting louder as the sled sailed across the lake. He stretched his legs, and tried to get up. By the time he was standing, he heard his father pull up and kill the machine. Gordie would wait inside. Make Ray come in and get him. He heard his father stumble up to the door; felt the cold rush of wind as it swung open.

"What took ya? My feet are killing me."

"Come on boy, let's get goin'." Before they left, they each had a swig of Ray's special stash. Then they filled up Brian's sled with gas. "I'll be givin' him a piece o' my mind, don't you worry. Missed half my party!" cursed Ray. They took off across the lake like two bullets, flying home.

When Gordie burst into the house, there were tons of people still there. A cheer rose from the crowd, and everyone was slapping him on the back, saying he'd saved the night. His Mom was singing her favourite, "All the chapel bells were ringing..." When she saw him, she said "You get to bed now!" without missing a word of her song. Gordie searched the crowd, but didn't see Wendy. He fought his way into the kitchen, but the girls must have gone home. Feeling dead tired, he decided to pack it in. He slowly made his way up the small stairs to his

bedroom, and without turning on the light, peeled off his damp t-shirt, and jeans. His legs still felt cold to the touch. He hoped he'd be asleep before they started to thaw. He sat on his bed, then decided to leave his socks on. When it was really cold, he could use the extra layer. He lay down, and felt someone in his bed. This had happened before at parties, usually an old drunk friend of his dad's, looking for a place to pass out. He sat up, and reached for the light. "We don't need that," he heard someone say. It was Wendy. "I thought you'd never get home." How had she managed to sneak in here without anyone seeing her? Luckily Gary was still downstairs, drinking the dregs of leftover beers, and not in his bed across the room. Gordie lay down again, and snuggled under the covers. She felt so warm. "Oh. Your hands are cold," she whispered. She didn't seem to be wearing anything. He kissed her forehead softly, then again, as he worked his way down to her mouth. When their lips touched, he exhaled, and laughed gently, and pushed himself closer to her. Downstairs he could just make out his mother singing, softly. Gordie melted into Wendy, and felt himself drifting, floating, falling down to a deep, restful sleep. Finally.

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The next morning, May found the house a worse mess than she imagined was possible. Beer bottles everywhere, ashtrays overflowing, bits of food ground into the rug. Gary and Dwayne asleep on the couch, with the t.v. still on. The girls must have made it to bed. No sign of Ray. That arse of a man, never could pass a party. She took an empty beer case, and started filling it as she made her way into the kitchen. When it was full, she opened the door to the mud room, and there was Ray: boots off, suit opened, head back against the wall, snoring to beat the band. May dropped the beer case with a crash. Ray jumped awake.

"I thought you ended up at Reg's." said May. "The whole lot o' them headed over there right after you left."

Ray rubbed his sore head, thought for a bit, then he said, "Well I came back to get some gas. Brian's machine ran out."

May looked at him. "Gordie go to Reg's?" she asked.

"Gordie's waitin'..." Ray tried to piece it together.

He looked up into May's eyes when he remembered.

"Oh Jesus Mother," he cried.

Time of death: four a.m.

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Our family had an old snowmobile that my father bought second-hand. My brother named it the Tank. It was a Snowcruiser by make, and was good in deep snow, but the engine sounded like an old, beaten-down thing from a long-ago war. When we started it, the entire neighbourhood knew. We also had an old wooden sleigh; it looked like an ornate dog-sled, but was built to be pulled by a skidoo. It had a low seat, with bent wooden handles on each side, and a spot at the back where you could stand upright if you felt daring.

Late one night my brother was driving the Tank, pulling me behind him on the sleigh. I was curled up on the seat, but I thought I was going to freeze in the wind. I pulled my wrap-around scarf over my face, and buried my head down inside my coat. I started to sing. I sang everything I knew: musical theatre songs, Beatles' songs, anything I could remember from the radio. I thought of Gordie Cardon in the ice hut. I wondered if Gordie had sung.