A Margin of Error

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From a distance they were hardly noticeable — small dark specks upon a sea of all-encompassing white. They moved rapidly, in sharp contradiction to the normal pace which long trips over the icy wilderness required. Only the dim twilight of the Yukon winter sun lit their hurried passage across the vast, snow-covered terrain.

As they drew nearer, the specks took on form and became a sled team of ten dogs and a solitary driver. The raspy sound of labored breathing trailed off from the group like a dying ripple upon a still pond. Underlying this sound was the constant hiss of the sled’s steel runners as they cut into the ragged juts of ice and snow.

The sled’s driver was a large man, with his body wrapped in layers of thick and bulky clothing. His presence on the sled seemed to urge the dogs on wordlessly. He cast an aura with his size that demanded obedience.

The man maintained the sled’s balance expertly as the runners bumped along the scattered outcroppings of broken ice floes. His body reacted to each tilting movement with graceful precision. It was as though he were a part of the sled, feeling the ground beneath him swell and dip, anticipating every obstacle with uncanny accuracy, and moving further forward with each beat of his heart.

The sled dogs were all thick-furred, strong-willed huskies — with one notable exception. At the lead position of the pack, setting the tempo for the team, was an animal fully twice as large as any of the other dogs.

It was darker than the huskies, almost a shadow within their midst. It had a long easy gait which hid the immense power that its body commanded. There was intelligence in its face that originated deep in the fiery yellow of its eyes: eyes that were wild, and alive, and filled with savage delight. Not just a dog, but a wolf-dog: a cross breed of exceptional lineage.

The man looked down upon the dogs as they pulled against their worn leather harnesses. They were tiring from the extreme pace that he was demanding of them. Their breathing had become more labored, and their reactions were definitely slower. He did not dare let them rest, however. He scraped some frozen condensation from his goggles and looked for the hundreth time toward the approaching storm.

Dogs . . . storm . . . dogs . . . storm . . . his eyes flicked back and forth between the two, judging the potential of each. He frowned beneath the heavy wool which masked his face. He had been careless; the storm would be upon them long before they reached camp. Despite his heavy clothing he shivered. The somber words of his grandfather echoed in his head.
You’ve got to allow for mistakes, they can cost you your life if you don’t. Give yourself a little leeway—that margin of error that might save you. Out here you don’t often get a second chance . . .

The man controlled his frustration as he recalled the events that had led him into his present situation. He had been waiting out an earlier storm — worried about his traps and sick of being cooped up in the cabin’s confines. When the storm had finally broken, he had been too anxious to leave the camp. He hadn’t thought to bring any emergency supplies, not even a flare for insurance. He had allowed the trap lines to distract him from the shift in the winds which had signaled the storm’s reformation. By the time he had realized what was happening they had been too far from camp.

Now the storm rushed relentlessly toward them. The dogs pulled hard, but they were at too much of a disadvantage. They could only await the inevitable as they struggled to make the safety of the camp. He had left them with no other options.

. . . course you could hole up somewhere, try and find an animal den maybe and wait it out, but your best bet is just to keep on going because without shelter you’re as good as dead anyhow.

The storm caught them a little over a mile from camp. Gale force winds that tore at every crevice and crack on the landscape blasted down upon them, buffetting and slowing the team. Millions of tiny ice crystals swirled about in maddening disarray, cutting visibility to the length of the sled. In the face of the storm’s fury, the man was tempted to stop the team and try to ride the worst of it out. Stopping, however, would only compound the cold and weariness that they all felt. They continued on, feeling the power of the storm building against them.

The day-glo trail markers, tall steel shafts coated with a high visibility orange paint, could no longer be seen. The whirling snow drifted and obliterated all traces of prior travel along the trail the group had been following. The man hunched himself against the blasts of superchilled air, and trusted that the keener senses of the dogs would keep them on track; senses that were numbed by cold and fatigue, and, like his own, were virtually shut down by the blinding snow.

. . . can’t let yourself start freezing up. Keep blood circulatin’ or there’s the danger of frostbite or worse. Cold is a fearsome enemy, and death rides high winds . . .

Cold. It permeated his entire being. It cut through to his body and shrugged off his feeble efforts to resist it as it quickly numbed his arms and legs. He shivered constantly as his muscles fought to warm him — it was a losing proposition. Even the dogs, acclimated as they were to the constant cold, limped upon frozen paws and shied from the fierce relentless wind.

Only the cross-breed seemed undaunted by the storm. It continued its diligent tracking despite the driving wind and snow. It seemed somehow impervious to the pains of its lesser mates. The man marvelled as another day-glo marker materialized before the sled — a symbol of hope emerging from the enveloping whiteness.
When the dogs give up, that's when your pack leader earns its meat. You might never get them started again but it can — and will — if you've picked it right.

The sled lay still on the side of a large drift. Without any feeling in his hands, the task of lifting the sled over these frequent obstacles had become more and more difficult for the man. The dogs, near their limit of endurance, were growing sluggish and insolent and offered him little help. The breed quelled their increasing lack of obedience by virtue of its large sharp teeth. With the dogs pulling, and the man half lifting — half pushing, they slowly topped the drift.

The exertion brought some temporary warmth back to the man, but wore down his already depleted reserves even further. The storm's unending assault was fast bringing their progress to a halt; their sense of movement becoming lost in its violent flow. It had been a while since they had passed a trail marker, and the man felt the first twinges of fear begin to seize him in its cold, contracting grip.

The thought of losing the trail sent a wave of desperation through the man. He stopped the team and stumbled forward into the driving wind — having to inch along the sled to avoid losing his way in the ever worsening conditions. Finally, he made it to the front of the sled and the cross-breed. The animal would have a better chance of finding the trail without the drag of the sled to slow it down. The clasp that held the breed, however, was iced shut and beyond the working of the man's frozen hands. He fell to his knees and leaned in toward the clasp.

With his mask removed and his face exposed to the raw cold, he grabbed the clasp in his mouth and attempted to spring its release, using his teeth. Ragged chunks of flesh ripped loose from his mouth as it contacted the icy metal. The agony was short-lived but intense. Slowly the warmth of the man's mouth loosened the clasp and after several pain-filled minutes he felt it give. He let the bloody metal fall from his mouth.

The cross-breed, once released, bolted off into the storm and quickly disappeared. The man rose unsteadily to his feet and tottered in an icy gust. He slipped on the grainy, new fallen snow, his frozen legs refusing to balance him. He fought to his feet again and reeled back to the sled. He collapsed onto it just as the team began to pull forward in pursuit of their vanished leader.

...they say that freezing to death isn't the worst way to die, once you get past all of the initial pain, that is. Of course pain is kind of irrelevant when it's your death, now isn't it?

The sled was still once again. As the man lay prone and unprotected upon it he could no longer feel movement in any part of his body. The dogs had lost the breed, and with it, their last chance of finding the camp. Vaguely the man wondered how close they had come. Heanguished at the thought that just a few minutes more could have made all the difference.
The margin between life and death had been lost in those few minutes he had so carelessly thrown away. He lay still, feeling only the entombment of his soul within the frozen confines of his body. He knew that he was near death and that soon the dogs would begin to die also.

He was beginning to drift off, only the shrieking of the wind lending a sense of reality to his growing delirium. He waited, anticipating the end — unable to hold it off any longer.

*When a man's time is done — it's done. The trick is knowing when to hold on and knowing when to let go.*

It was back. A shadowy figure emerged before him, and his fogging mind recognized the breed in a moment of wavering clarity. He was slipping away quickly, with barely a spark of life to cling to. Every breath seemed an effort, each passing moment an eternity.

He fought to retain consciousness. He imagined the sound of dogs snarling and the creak of sled runners lurching rebelliously forward. He drifted off again into a dream-like awareness.

The dogs were exhausted beyond reason. Two of the smaller ones were simply being dragged along as they succumbed to the cold. The rest followed the bold stride of the breed, never noticing or appreciating the significance of a twisted orange marker which they passed on the edge of the camp complex.

Up ahead the cabins beckoned warm and safe. The man would soon feel the warmth, then the pain, and eventually the life that they offered. The dogs would soon huddle outside the cabins, out of the wind's path, and lick their wounds, and dream of summer's thaw that would warm the frigid air.

The whole ordeal would all be just a bad memory. He had allowed enough of a margin after all. He let himself relax — it was all right now, no need to fight it any longer.

The breed gave a loud defiant howl which was swept away into the far reaches of the receding storm. It shook off the icy crust which clung to its tufted fur. As it trotted into the camp, its eyes caught the dim yellow glow of the lights which hung above the entrances to all the cabins. The animal paused for a moment with the strange flickering reflections held in its gaze.

Out in the distance, its runners frozen solidly to a ridge of wind-swept ice, a dog sled lay still and lifeless in the storm's wake. The breed had waited by the sled until the man's wild ramblings had ended before making its own way back to camp. Another howl rumbled from the wolf-dog's throat as it continued on into the complex, alone.

by Scott C. Tracy