

TEMPEST

A SHORT STORY



DES BRADY

Copyright © Des Brady 2026

Tempest



The phone call had stirred him from a long, fitful sleep populated by Yetis and dark strangers from long buried memories. Although accustomed now to the icy tempest raging outside, the old-style phone jangling in the corner gave Don a start. Uncovering himself and almost tripping over the blanket keeping him snug, he finally picked up the handset.

He was anticipating the call from his publisher, Miriam Black, so was relieved that the blizzard hadn't taken the line with it. This should have just been another routine check on progress with his latest novel.

'Hello, Don, darling, how's the writing going? Just thought I'd check on my favourite author,' she purred, as always.

Don tried to calm himself; his heart was still racing from dream images that had persistently invaded his sleep.

'Oh hi, Miriam, good. Just plodding along in the last few days since we last talked.'

But when Miriam said it had been two weeks since they'd last spoken, Don felt the world tilt sideways. He remembered yesterday. He remembered the day before. But before that? It seemed like just a memory, distant and disconnected.

He rang off, not wanting to mention his memory lapse and looked around the room. The small hut, no larger than a bedsit, had been his home for the last month. Was it a month, though? He shook his head. Moving to the fire, he absentmindedly poked at the embers. When had he last added wood? He couldn't say. That was the most alarming thing.

It was cold, bitterly cold. Not only was he snowbound, isolated, and out of firewood. The only option had been numerous layers and a small electric heater that glowed like dying coals beside his desk.

More frustratingly, he was blocked. Don Hartley might have been an author, a brilliant one some said, but he was stuck. He'd had early success. Then three years marooned in a desert of creativity, that long slow spiral taking hold, ending in what his therapist had called 'recovery time' but what he privately termed his 'hiatus.' Those days held only antiseptic flavoured corridors, Dr Reeves, and his chilling encounters with the form he'd called *The Stranger*. Another major hit had elevated his standing again and now he had Miriam Black as his publisher. It felt like salvation after the first one had abandoned him, quipping he didn't need 'another mad author' on his books.

'It's a good one, Don, I can feel it in my bones,' Miriam had gushed about his most recent work, a collection of personal stories stretching over the seasons of the year. Yet the screen before him told another story — pallid white, indifferent, unmoved by intent. The phone rang again. Same ringtone. Same corner. But hadn't it just...?

'Hi Don, just catching up, how're things going?'

Don gripped the handset tighter. The exact same words. The exact same hopeful tone.

‘Miriam... didn’t we just talk? Just now?’

‘No Don, it’s been weeks,’ she replied, a note of concern in her voice.

Back at his desk, Don stared out at the mountains of snow hemming the cabin. The choice of solitude had been deliberate — renting this remote hut in the Snowy Mountains to avoid distractions, hoping isolation might break through his creative paralysis. Instead, the endless cycle of day and night had created its own temporal fracture, like a windowless casino where time had no meaning. In this fugue state, he wondered if he’d simply traded one prison for another — the isolation of the snow for those antiseptic corridors.

He scoured the place frantically for that missing time, finding evidence of long forgotten meals, empty food containers secreted in the kitchen bin. A puffer jacket hanging by the door, expensive, not his, though the receipt in the pocket bore his name. Another purchase from the lost weeks, when some surviving part of him had prepared for winter even as his mind retreated from everything else. Notes in his journal that looked like his handwriting but... different. Slanted differently. Pressed harder into the paper.

He slumped in his chair, opening his laptop. The document he’d been working on stretched down the screen as he scrolled. Forty pages, fifty, more. Yet it was all gibberish, letters jumbled together like a child who’d just randomly slapped the keyboard.

Except for the last page, where four large, bolded words loomed:

THE STRANGER IS HERE

The blood drained from Don’s face as his hands trembled over the keys. He knew those words. He’d seen them before, scrawled in his own hand on the wall of that white room before they’d sedated him. The Stranger had found him again.

He staggered up from his seat, backing away from the computer as if those words were written by some malevolent beast, flattening himself against the far wall of the hut. Slamming his laptop shut, he fled into the tempest outside — the polar cold tore through his clothes, chilling him to the bone. He stumbled back inside almost at once, numb and drained, and collapsed onto his bed. Dragging the blanket around him, sleep pulled him under.

Waking to the soft sound of ice crystals being crushed outside, like champagne bubbles bursting, he sat up as the sound grew closer. Without warning, the door burst open, bringing a deluge of snow and freezing air. A massive figure stumbled through, ice hanging from his beard, and slumped to the floor. Don scrambled backward in his bed, horrified at the sight. The man’s face was familiar—horribly, impossibly familiar. Those pale blue eyes snapped open and fixed on him with murderous intent. The beast leapt up, hands reaching for Don’s throat before producing a knife and plunging it deep into his chest.

Tempest

‘Shit!’ Don jolted awake in complete darkness, heart hammering, body drenched in cold sweat. Another dream. But when he looked toward the kitchen table, his blood froze. The Stranger sat there calmly, very much awake, very real. Those same pale blue eyes from the dream, now watching him across the dark room.

‘Hello, Don,’ he said quietly. ‘We should talk.’

Don steadied his breathing. He knew this ritual. Had sat across from this presence before—in the dead of night when the ward fell quiet. The Stranger always came when he was weakest. The difference now was that Don had learned, slowly, painfully, not to run.

The Stranger was quiet for a long moment, staring into the fire.

‘You know why I came back, don’t you?’

‘Tell me,’ Don said, his voice steady, careful.

‘You remember, don’t you? That noise. No — a sound. Low. A murmur.’

Don felt his body tense, eyes widening despite himself.

‘What do you mean by murmur?’

He remembered the feeling. Exactly. It wasn’t a sound; it was a state. The voices, soft at first, then building to a crescendo of whispers that would drown everything out. Something he’d never forgotten, not really, despite years of therapy.

Suddenly, he felt that murmur stir, and his chest tightened. Then the voices began, faint but persistent. But he knew how to control them these days. He wasn’t going to fall victim to The Stranger’s band of malicious impostors. Don shut his eyes, closing off his mind as Dr. Reeves had taught.

The Stranger leaned forward, confused.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Banishing them.’ Don opened his eyes, holding his tormentor’s pale blue eyes with determined ferocity.

‘That’s what you never understood. The murmur is just a warning, not an invitation. Something to recognize and choose to heed or ignore.’

‘They are your voices, our voices,’ The Stranger intoned.

‘No, they’re not mine. You made me think they were.’

‘But they are your thoughts, Don. Your deepest fears.’

‘Yes, they are in a way,’ Don’s voice was firm now, ‘but I choose not to listen anymore.’

The Stranger drew back, hissing as he passed close to Don’s ear.

‘This isn’t over, Don. I’m waiting for when you are weak. Like all the times before, you will be delivered.’

‘Yes,’ Don said quietly. ‘You probably will come again. But so will this.’

He closed his eyes and began the meditation. Not to eviscerate The Stranger — he knew better than that now — but to hold his ground. To remain. The darkness acknowledged, not surrendered to.

The Stranger's voice came once more, quieter now. 'You thought you'd beaten me before.'

'I know,' Don said. 'And I'll think it again. That's how it works.'

The words dissolved into the sound of the fire.

When he opened his eyes again, he was alone. All that remained was the sound of the wind and the steady crackle of the fire.



Don approached his laptop with firm resolve, hands steady, the calmness from the meditation coursing through his body like a current. Scrolling past that ominous warning and deleting it, he found the gibberish replaced by something coherent. His chest tightened as he read. Although the sentiments felt eerily familiar, he had no recollection of writing them. No memories of dredging up these truths buried so deep he'd forgotten they existed. This wasn't his usual polished prose; this was raw truth bleeding directly onto the page.

Our house on Maple Street had turned into a silent cave, the smell of the mould and moss suffocating every breath. Sue had almost become a ghost, without form, without feeling while Josh's bedroom door had remained impenetrable to the sounds of his parent's fights, his own rage cloistered in darkened isolation.

I hadn't meant to become a stranger in this home, the gradual, insidious spiral obvious to all but me. Damage wrought that felt irreversible. Sue's attempts at connection met with my passive aggressive responses. Josh became, then remained, a stranger.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps The Stranger was the embodiment of the negative energy that had built within until the seams burst, leaving only that chimera as company.

The worst part was looking up from the centre of that vortex, knowing the light above would save me but allowing myself to submit to the darkness of the abyss below. I knew my family tried as best they could, but they were pitted against a foe that would not relent, would not let go. Not until the last of my mind had been wrung from my very soul.

And I recalled the end, the rapid bullet train journey into the void, where darkness became my friend, blotting out every bad memory, making bad choices disappear in the ether.

Dr. Reeves had asked a simple question during my first session: 'Who are you protecting by staying sick?' The answer had shattered something inside me that needed breaking.

Don leaned back in his chair, the words settling into him like a key finding a lock. While his conscious mind had been frozen in denial, his subconscious had been working, preparing him for something his waking self hadn't dared to hope. He scrolled to the final paragraphs:

Tempest

But now the question had become clear. Beyond the treatments that left my mind foggy and tattered, did I have the resolve, the internal force, to drive this thing from me, like some mediaeval sorcerer performing an exorcism?

The answer wasn't a resounding 'yes' since such metamorphoses are not easily achieved. Yet 'maybe' became 'possibly' and, ultimately, 'yes.'

Sue's email sat unanswered in my inbox for three weeks. Just a simple message: 'Josh has been accepted into the medical degree course. He asked if you were proud of him. I told him you were.' No accusation, no demand for response. Just information, an open door if I was ready to enter.



Don stared at the screen, his hands trembling slightly as the words sank in. He could picture Sue typing those words at the kitchen table—she'd always been careful with words, choosing them like a surgeon making careful, precise incisions. And Josh. The son he'd nurtured as a young boy, then abandoned, yet who remained fiercely loyal to him. Don had missed his graduation from high school, lost in the fog of that hiatus. But Josh had saved his graduation letter anyway, Sue had told him later, kept it on his desk 'in case Dad wanted to see it when he got better.'

The weight of that neglect pressed heavily on him, but this time it didn't crush him. Instead, it settled into resolve.

He reached for his phone, then stopped. Not yet. First, he needed to understand what secrets his subconscious had been whispering. And he knew winter wasn't forever, that even the longest night eventually surrendered.

Don opened a new document and began to type:

The winter story begins not with snow, but with silence. The kind of silence that grows between people who love each other but have forgotten how to reach across the space that fear has created...a silence that cannot be excused but can be driven into retreat.

The words came easily now, flowing like water finding its level. This was where it should have begun — honest truth rather than abstract meditation, something authentic about the slow thaw of relationships frozen by illness.

He wrote about his family's patience, about the guilt that had eviscerated his self-worth, but mostly about choice. About the realisation that his egocentric bent had hurt the people he most loved. About the powerlessness of not being able to stop.

But also, about acceptance. The moment when Dr. Reeves had asked that crucial question. When his world had shifted. Recovery wasn't about conquering the darkness; it was about learning to carry it without letting it carry you.

A shadow moved in his peripheral vision. Don looked up to find The Stranger standing by the window, but this time he appeared different. Smaller somehow, less imposing, more ghostly.

‘You think you’ve won?’ The Stranger said, his voice firm but lacking any menace. ‘They’re better off without you. You know it.’

Don paused. He understood now. The Stranger was never his adversary. He was Don’s own fear, given form. He smiled.

‘I know.’ Don stopped writing, looking directly at his shadow self. ‘But so will this.’ He gestured at the words on his screen, at the phone beside him, at the world beyond the cabin walls.

The Stranger began to fade, not disappearing but becoming translucent, malleable. ‘The murmur...’

‘Will come again,’ Don finished. ‘Yes, it will. But I’ll know what to do.’ He saved his document, opened his email, and began a long message to his wife, ending with the following words.

I’m sorry it took me so long to answer. I’m sorry for so many things. But I’m writing again, really writing, and I think I’m ready to come home. If you’ll have me. If there’s still a place at the table. Love, Don.

He hit send before he could second-guess himself.

The sun, luminous through the windows, flooded his small hut, offering hope. Outside, the storm was also spent, the warmth of the sun softening the white-laced landscape. Icicles hung from the eaves of the verandah, pyramidal and transparent, glinting like diamonds. Droplets of sparkling water fell from its icy stalactites, keeping time with the creaking sound of the hut as its timbers expanded in the warmth. Steam rose in pillars of mist, bathing the scene in an eerie haze. Beauty in simplicity.

Standing on the verandah, gazing at this frozen landscape, cup of coffee in hand, he smiled. The Stranger was still there, somewhere at the edge of things. Don could feel it. But for now, the morning was quiet and the coffee was warm and that was enough.

The phone jangled and he smiled, walking inside to answer.

‘Hello, Don, my darling. My God, you have got your mojo back. This is the most beautiful story.’

‘It’s the truth, Miriam.’

‘Yes, I know, darling. And your devoted readers will love it.’

He smiled as the sun warmed him. The nightmares had quietened, for now. The Stranger had not been defeated — Don knew better than to believe that — but he had been faced, and that was a different thing entirely.

The writing had done what he’d been told it might. Not cured him. Not saved him. Just given him a place to put the weight down for a while. That long dark winter had not broken him. It had simply shown him, again, how to carry himself forward.

One day at a time.

One word at a time.

AUTHORS NOTE

This concept developed from a short story competition and it has changed a bit. The inspiration came from a true wilderness story in Russia called the Dyatlov mystery. It occurred in 1959 and involved nine experienced Soviet student hikers who died under bizarre circumstances on Kholat Syakhl ('Dead Mountain') in the Ural Mountains. Driven from their slashed tent into sub-zero temperatures, the group suffered severe hypothermia and inexplicable traumatic injuries. Look it up – it is truly bizarre.

So the place was the important inspiration for me. A wilderness, a remote place where a snowstorm occurs. What not is there to like about that? Just put it in Australia and WHAM !

Tempest grew from that fascination especially the duality of the title – internal discord and external threat. The story is fictional and there is no mass loss of life, simply a troubled writer struggling to find meaning again in his life. It might have potential as a longer piece—maybe a novella or even a novel hiding inside it.

You can email me at **des9999@live.com.au**. I'd love to hear where you think the story should go.