

Keepsake

By Bill Wolfe

Alvon paused and slowly ran his sweaty fingertips over the smooth wood of his Keepsake. He hadn't felt this hot since winter had come. . . early. Once again he marveled at the simple craftsmanship that some unnamed great-something grandfather had put into it. Married couples were allowed five kilos for their Keepsakes, so he knew for a fact that his weighed-in at 4.215 kilos, exactly. That Marta's family Bible was just shy of 0.8 kilos had seemed like an omen, or perhaps a sign from her God that those two precious objects should be what they brought when they left Earth, forever. Even Alvon—confirmed skeptic of all things irrational—had dared to believe that this happy coincidence was a sign that his worst fears would not bear bitter fruit.

He'd used it; of course, he'd seen the pics. And he certainly remembered his little sister, Katra, using it in her time. So many memories, so much life had been consigned to his Keepsake's protection over the generations. He wondered if, perhaps, this wasn't the first time it had failed to protect its delicate, fragile charge. And now the Colony Council wanted to use it for the Christian part of their insane and fictitious Midwinter Celebration.

Celebration? Celebration for what?

As if they had a mind of their own, his fingers found the only irregularity on the Keepsake, his vision blurred by fresh tears, he didn't need to see it to know what the carving on the bottom corner said:

1844 Montana

No name. And no family history as to how the craftsman was related to him. It had simply passed to the first married child in each successive generation. He'd webbed the date and place, of course, and from what he'd read, those people were colonists, too. They'd made a long journey to an unknown and inhospitable climate looking for a new life. Wasn't that what he and Marta had done? They were cut-off from their version of civilization almost as completely as the Colony was. And when sickness struck them, they too had to simply endure it. They would get no medicine that they couldn't make themselves, no shipments of supplies to combat the hunger when the snows came early. And when the ground thawed enough, only then could they bury their dead.

Alvon felt a strange connection with this ancestor. He imagined him, full black beard and calloused hands, working with leftover wood by the flickering, weak light of a sod fire as the harsh Montana winter howled outside. Burning sod was a smoky business. Did the bearded man pause to wipe his eyes as he worked? Alvon's eyes watered in strange sympathy and he wiped them with his sleeve. He imagined a sod house, continuously cold and leaking air and precious warmth in all directions. What Alvon was doing wouldn't have worked for this man. The

prefabricated living modules were small, but they were airtight. He'd turned the heat up to maximum an hour before. He hoped the fire and the full discharge from the fuel cell would thaw. . .everything. . .before the fuel supply was exhausted. He could still see well enough to tell that the readout on the vid screen showed -45°C outside, and dropping. He ignored the urgent message icon flashing magenta in the corner. It had been doing that for days.

No nails were used on the Keepsake, for they were too precious. Each piece was laboriously shaped and notched, a carved wooden pin to hold it in place. The time, effort and hope that had been put into it was incomprehensible to Alvon. An odd thought struck just as another coughing fit ended. What if it wasn't so much a pervasive hope that allowed this man to spend endless hours shaping this future family keepsake? What if it were faith? He and Marta had often spoken of faith. Just like The Sickness, she had it, he didn't. From what he'd read concerning Montana 1844, his ancestor probably had it, too. Would he be doing this if he too had that kind of faith?

Probably not. Alvon felt an odd pang of gratitude for his inability to embrace the insanity that most people call faith. It was the first good feeling he'd had since he had placed the two bundles—wrapped in the warmest blankets they had—into the cold storage closet. He was also grateful for the thickening smoke, for it blurred the two shapes lying on the bed, waiting for him to join them. Just a few more chores to do. He'd already disabled the ventilation system and the fire suppression program; he'd welded the door shut and preprogrammed a message to the Council. He'd told them he had one last use for his Keepsake.

Abruptly, he tossed the wooden cradle onto the makeshift fire he'd started in the middle of the unit. It caught almost immediately, joining Marta's Bible, every scrap of burnable cloth and paper and some alien tree limbs he'd managed to scrounge through the bitter cold. He hoped it was enough. Soon all three would be warm, and together.

He felt his way to the bed and gently placed the lifeless body of his baby daughter on Marta's still chest. When he was in position, he moved her one last time. Spring would come, soon enough. Somewhere in the smoky haze, his 4.215 kilograms of broken promises for the future sucked the last of the oxygen out of the air.

The End