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Backcountry Unit #12

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BACKCOUNTRY UNIT #12
for Alaska Governor Walter Hickel

Thirty-eight caribou spill over a ridge and run down the mountain, cross a snowfield, drop into the canyon, splash across Sunrise Creek. They bound up the other side, your side.

A golden eagle tilts in the sun, white tail feathers, pterodactyl wings. Body and spirit spiral up and up and up in an updraft, up and out of range of your binoculars into a blueness you can feel on your face, smell in the blue cool mornings through the mosquito-screened tent.

You are sleeping, walking, cooking in grizzly bear country, and you are loving it. Fresh holes gape in the damp tundra where arctic ground squirrel tunnels have been ripped to roots, huge dirt clods thrown back in a frenzy of paws and claws. The grizzly rarely wins this race, but there will be others. She can run forty miles an hour. You rehearse how to stand your ground, how to face her if she charges. You would think of someone you love, or of a beautiful music: how much you would want to live to hear Bach again.

Denali National Park, seventy-five years old. No one has died here by a grizzly. Twenty maulings, but no one has died. These bears have not learned to associate backpackers with food, and you do not intend to teach them. You cook a hundred yards from your tent, stow raisins and toothpaste in a three-pound bear-proof canister a hundred yards from your kitchen, wash the scent of rice from your hands and face before sleeping. You scan every ridge and willow patch for bears, blonde bears, ravaging, ravishing, thick-furred bears.

Piles of hardening brown scat dot a snowfield. Near Sunrise Glacier, a long hole in the tundra gleams white with sheep hairs, fresh earth scattered all around. Is this a wolf cache, robbed by a bear? Yesterday? Today? Footprints, footprints. Dall sheep, caribou, arctic ground squirrel, fox.

You watch a caribou calf through binoculars, marvel at how the herd clatters down the mountain, over snow, through rushing glacial water, sweeping the spindly calf with it. You search the hillside, see no sign of why they spooked.

A single loon floats in a beaver pond, guarding its mate and a nested egg. Thumb-size ptarmigan chicks hop in the grass. This is the day after Solstice. Night never falls. Tiny pink moss campion flowers glow on green cushions, fluorescent pink, fluorescent green.

You will camp in this country for three days, wake every morning to creekwater music; to concerts of snowbirds, robins, Lapland longspurs; to a necklace of white snow gracing green jagged mountains. Cradled in the singing, in a large life-cycle, a deep picture, you will forget that you could fall prey to a startling brown blur more decimating than any accident or disease in a civilized place.

These things will stick, they will go back with you. And leaving little trace, you will take all that you can.