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Under the Aurora

Samantha M. Strauss
University of San Diego

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Wintertime in Southeast Alaska is a quiet time. It is a time of retreat for all things green, a time of rest for creatures both feathered and furry, a time to feel the heart rate slow and to curl up in a warm bed or musty hole. Wintertimes are also dark times. In the weeks surrounding the solstice, the sun's ecliptic dips below the snowy peaks of the Pacific Coast, and its rays are not seen beyond the salmon beaches. Homes, humans and hermits of all sorts find themselves plunged into a waking twilight, soothed only by the few brief hours of noontime dusk. Not until spring returns is there a true dawn.

David tramped deeper into the frozen forest, weaving past thick stands of Sitka spruce and lodge pole pines. The needle canopy thickened the evening darkness, its gloom pierced only by the headlamp beacon bobbing with his gait. Each step breaking the ground's white crust with a soft crunch. It was a warmer January than most, the light snowpack not enough to warrant taking down the pair of snowshoes hanging from his cabin wall. He marched on, the sound of his own breathing and the breath of the body next to him filling up the empty space.

With each sharp inhalation of the cold air, David felt more aware of the full length of his body, of the eager strength that pulsed through his limbs, of the power latent between his thighs. Panting slightly, his breath fogging the illuminated air before him, the corner of his open mouth pulled up into a wide grin.

It is here, he thought. It is here in the dark and cold and wild that a man can truly feel like a man.

He imagined the men who at that moment were hunched over a steel desk crammed in the corner of a cubicle on some windowless thirteenth floor. Oh, those poor carpal-tunneled, asthmatic, hunchbacked masses, most of them half-working, some of them half-fucking, all of

them feeling like something less than half-man... And each of them living their half-lives hundreds of miles away from the piece of wild earth where David—strong, free, erect (oops), and fully *full*—now stood.

He looked down at the body walking alongside him and felt like a very lucky man indeed.

“*David,*” his companion growled. “Will you stop shining that light right at me? Honest to God, you’re blinding me.” A voice low and husky, its edges humming with delicious femininity. Less like a woman and more like the snarl of a mother wolf.

“Apologies, Chief. Just making sure the bears haven’t gotten you yet.”

Another growl. “I’d like to see them try.”

“What would you do? Bat those pretty eyelashes of yours at ‘em? ”

“Oh, please. I’m not nearly as helpless as you’d like to think.” The woman swung her long black braid over her shoulder and strutted past him without a light of her own into the trees. David followed behind, chuckling and keeping her centered in his corona of light.

Bundled in a puffy thermal jacket and tripping over her snow boots, Annie didn’t look like much to be afraid of. At least not like anything that could take on a grizzly and live to tell the tale. But David was discovering that Annie was more dangerous than she appeared. He’d been stung upon first meeting her, as any man would be. A long-limbed young thing, browned like a bear, all curves and hips and fast-talking lips. Less like a tall drink of water, more like a full shot of whiskey. She had round breasts and an even rounder belly, and when she laughed the belly seemed to expand, to grow with deep-throated delight until it filled the whole room, pressing you up against a wall, making you a part of its joy too.

She carried herself like a mighty river, shaping and smoothing the bumps the days brought her. She was the type of woman who burns a man by her very existence, daring him to deserve her, to unravel her, to equal her. David wanted to share with her one of his favorite places in the world, a clearing hidden in the miles of forest behind his cabin—the perfect spot for hunting the northern lights. But—*of course*—now she was the one leading the way.

David followed her, falling into the rhythm of her stride. As he walked, the scent of decaying humus wafted to his nose. Could a scent even do that through the snow? David inhaled deeply and held onto the breath, tasting its validity.

If they could, the trees would have told him it was just a scent memory, his mind plucking petals from one of his thousand summertime walks among them. They are the memory keepers of the land, recording the year's stories in each ring of their trunk like polaroids in a scrapbook. Unlike the trees, David was not built to remember. Human bones have no calendar rings; only minds that shed memories like skin.

Warping and shaping the past like a craftsman blowing glass, David had to stitch together his narrative, pulling forgotten details from the world around him. For David, that world began and ended in the sixteen million acres of temperate rainforest in the Tongass National Forest. A third-generation logger with sawdust in his blood, Alaska's moss-carpeted pines and backwoods camps had always been the landscape to his story. Digging a fingernail into spruce needles, he recalled the sweet scent of his mother's perfume. In the thick hide of cottonwood bark, he felt the calloused palms of his old man. The familiar became family, rooting David to the land.

“David?” Annie had come to a stop in front of him. He peered ahead and understood why.

They stood at a sudden break in the thick copse of trees. An open field of snow lay before them, a faint blue glow rising up from its surface like a whisper. A narrow set of cloven tracks cut across the field and disappeared back into the trees. *Sitka deer*, David thought. *Passing through her summer haunts in search of a midnight munch of green.*

“We’re here.” He clicked off his headlamp and clasped Annie’s mittened hand. Slowly, conscious of the crunch of each step, the two walked out into the clearing. A dense wall of trees peered back at them from its edges, their bark browned and wrinkled like the worn faces of village elders. Old-growth western hemlocks, the silent sentinels of the north. Branches twining two hundred feet up into the darkness and parting to reveal a moonless night. Across this window, the Milky Way shone violent. Annie had once told him it was Raven, the creator spirit, who tore his talons into the heavens and created this river of stars. *Our galaxy is an ancient wound*, she’d said. *Bleeding white into the darkness, staining the fabric of the night.*

“Mmmmm.... This place—it feels magical. Sacred, even. Like I just stepped into a church.”

“This is my church,” David replied. *Where Man meets Maker face to face.*

He looked down at the woman beside him, her eyes wide and reflecting the stars. They were the almond eyes of her mother—the eyes of the people who were a part of this land long before his own ancestors crossed an ocean to conquer it. Annie wasn’t born in this forest, wasn’t raised by it like David was—and yet these trees were her family in a way he’d never know. Everything from the shape of her eyes to the length of her bones had evolved alongside this land, a land stolen by people with skin the same color as his. She was a reminder to David that no matter how much he felt he belonged to this land, it would never really belong to him. A guilt for

sins that were not his own dripped down the generations and wedged itself in a place that should have just felt like home.

Annie threw her arms out and twirled, letting loose one of her full belly laughs upon the stars. “Can you believe some people never get to experience something like this? That they go their whole lives thinking the Big Dipper is all there is to the night sky?” She shook her head. “Man, *fuck* the Big Dipper!”

“Fuck it?” He smiled. There was something lovely even in how she swore, the way her teeth held onto her bottom lip for a prolonged moment, emphasizing the *ffffuuuu*.

“Yeah, that’s right. Fuck it! It’s a city man’s constellation.”

“Harsh words coming from a city girl.”

She pulled her gaze from the sky and glared. “Growing up in Juneau does *not* make me a city girl.”

David grinned. “Biggest city I ever seen.”

“Excuse me for not being born in a bear den, playing tag with wolves and using pinecones to wipe my ass. Not everyone’s lucky enough to be a Sasquatch like you.”

“Hey now, that’s a derogatory term.” He paused, slipping a hand into his long underwear to adjust himself and then hanging that arm across her shoulders. “You see, Sasquatch is a Canadian term. We prefer the name Big Foot on this side of the border.”

She batted him away. “I’d bet even Big Foot has better manners than you. I just can’t figure how my people got pegged as the savages with all you white cavemen running around.”

“Well then, missy,” David said, mustering up his best backwoods twang. “Ain’t you glad that them teachers union of yers sent you to our wee liddle town, to ed-ju-cate our cubs, to civilize an’ seduce our menfolk?”

“I suppose I am. But then, there’s only one mancub I’ve ever been interested in seducing around here.” She slipped her mitten into his and pulled his arm back around her, nestling up under his shoulder. “And as for civilizing him, I’m calling it a lost cause.”

Behind them a pine yawned, its fibers stretching with a long *creeeeeeeaaaak*. They fell silent. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted quick and low, a warning to other birds of prey to mind their own space. David and Annie felt the wildness of the forest about them and huddled close, their bodies shivering against each other. In that moment of starlight the two became quiet, feeling their hearts beating and lungs slowly expanding into the hushed darkness about them. Not separate, but a part of this enormous and indifferent wilderness.

For a time, any words that came to mind melted on their tongues. They just stood, caught in the most human of all poses: man holding woman and woman holding man, necks craned back and eyes wide, sending wordless messages of wonder upwards to the starry skies.

Annie broke the moment with a gasp. “There! Did you see it?”

“See what?”

“The northern lights! It flickered green for a moment, right up there.” She pointed up at a patch of sky. David squinted, seeing nothing but stars and space. “I saw them, I swear! Just wait, it’ll probably really start flaring up any minute now.”

They gazed at the northern sky and waited, watching for a flash of color to spark against the night. After a while, David became aware of a chill sneaking through his wool socks. He shivered and glanced back at their tracks in the snow. Back at the cabin, a jug of fireweed gin was waiting for him, calling him home. A more primal call was motivating him too—the thought of stripping layers of fabric, one by one, off the body next to him until his hands met soft curves and sage-scented skin. Floridians and Californians could keep their bikini-clad girls for their

lacking imaginations—David liked his women under a few layers of downfeather and long underwear, at least at the start of the night.

Feeling the fresh energy rush to his loins, he clapped his mitts together. “Well better luck next time, Chief. It’s a long hike back. Thinking of calling it a night?”

Annie hesitated. “Just a little bit longer? I know they’re coming out again, I can feel it.”

“Alright, alright.” He began to whistle, looking down at his numb toes. As he stomped them on the ground to get the blood flowing, someone slapped a mitten across his lips.

“Shhhh!” Annie scolded. “Are you crazy?”

David shoved her mitt away. “Pretty sure I’m not the crazy one here.”

A gust of warm wind blew through the clearing. Even in the darkness, David could see Annie’s eyes flashing dangerously. “Haven’t I warned you about whistling when the northern lights are around?”

He shook his head.

“Really? It’s something my grandpa used to tell me whenever I’d visit him on the res. I remember me and him staying out late on the porch, him smoking his tobacco pipe and letting me sip on cans of PBR when mom wasn’t around, both of us watching out for the northern lights. Our people used to say the lights were spirits who had passed on to the next world. Whenever they came out, me and gramps would guess at their old lives. I remember the greens darting across the sky like deer, with purple stalking behind just like a wolf. Sometimes pinks leaping across the stars like sockeye salmon—all of a sudden disappearing into nothing, swallowed by a hungry black bear! All of their spirits coming back to dance for us in the winter night, reminding our dark and sleeping world that life goes on. *But—*” she raised her eyebrows, throwing David a look.

“But what?”

“*But* you’re not supposed to whistle at them. If you do, you might distract them from their dance. And then they’ll come down to sweep you away!”

“Ahhh, I see....” David had heard stories like this before. Hell, everyone who grew up in the Tongass had. Myths were as abundant as oil in Alaska, just another part of the land. He used to like the Indian legends as a kid, thinking they explained the world better than a science or history class. But then he learned about the fates of the old storytellers, about how all the painted warriors and medicine men were gone, killed off by smallpox or by diseases found at the bottom of a bottle. Sometimes a group from one of the state reservations came to the logging camp for a summertime gig, their brown hands wielding chainsaws in the day and clutching paper-bagged Jim Beam in the empty lot outside the liquor store at night. David didn’t mind them the way some people in town did. A few years back, he’d even taken a liking to a few and followed them back to their reservation for a visit. Whatever he’d thought to expect of it, he’d been left with a bitter taste in his mouth. Doritos bags and empty Camel packs strewn on dirt lawns. Shiny satellite disks hoisted up on roofs, the wood rotting underneath. Fumbling tongues and unfocused eyes that paid no attention to the hoards of kiddos running barefoot and wild. Drunken dregs of a once noble people.

David didn’t talk much to Annie about his visit, mostly because he figured a white guy like himself didn’t have much of a right to steal the complaining away from those who deserved to do it. So after she finished, he scratched his beard and nodded thoughtfully at the story, trying not to think of the way the world had turned out for those who originally told it. “Well, the spirits and the dancing sound great. But why no whistling in particular? Why not yelling, or yodeling? Wouldn’t that distract them too?”

“Well shit, David, I don’t know. That’s just the way it is. Don’t question the ways of the spirit world.”

“Got it, Chief. But just to be clear, it’s whistling they don’t like? As in, I shouldn’t do anything like this—?” He blew a shrill note, piercing the still night air.

“Yes, like that! Now quiet!”

“Hmmm...or could you possibly mean like this?” Annie tried to muffle him with a mitt again, but he caught her wrists and pulled them behind his back as he continued to whistle. Another gust of wind blew through the clearing, catching his tune and carrying it off over the trees. Annie struggled to free herself, protesting through fits of laughter. “David! You’re making the spirits angry!” He pulled her closer against him, feeling her body quake against his. He leaned down close to her ear. “Come on, Chief. What’s so bad about this?” As he began to whistle again, she turned her head and pressed her lips against his. Cold and wet like a melting cube of ice. Her lips parted, letting out a warm breath against his own. He loosened his grip and leaned in, feeling a deep hunger for her touch, for her breath, her bones—a hunger to taste that ancient femininity, that mysterious force blooming within her that made her smell so good....

Quick as a fox, she pulled her hands free, jumping back as David stumbled forward. She stood back and grinned triumphantly. “Ha! Figured out how to make you stop!”

“Very tricky. Seems you’ve figured out my weakness after all.” He shook his head and let out a wolf whistle, long and low.

She shrieked and backed away, laughing. “Oh, just like the white man to ignore the wisdom of wiser people! Well, I don’t want to be anywhere near you when the spirits come to have their revenge!” Annie scurried away toward the other side of the clearing, David’s whistle following her laughter as she ran.

The wind was really roaring now, blowing its own high whistle over David's as it gusted through the treetops, shaking their silhouettes.

Far across the field, Annie twirled around and cupped her hands around her mouth to yell something to David. "What?" He called back, but the gale swallowed both their voices. She mouthed again and he strained to hear her, but all he picked up on was an angry whine hissing under the wind. The whine felt out of place but somehow familiar, making the hair under his sleeves stand on end. He realized what the whine meant, just as the tree trunk finally snapped.

The sound tore across the clearing, ripping apart the air like gunfire, like an ice sheet rupturing into the sea, a lightning bolt cracking open the atmosphere. It happened quickly—dead roots thicker than an elephant femur ripping from the frozen ground, bark splintering and ancient wood fibers snapping like rubber bands. David spotted a dark figure at the edge of the forest falling out of line, its tall shadow breaking free from the darkness. It leaned out over Annie, blacking out a section of stars. He saw her hesitate, then move to take a step toward him—but in the flicker of a moment, the beast thundered down, a great crumpling of space, its branches swallowing her whole.

David was running before he felt the ground shake under his boots. He shone his light into the great morass of branches and tried calling her name, but what came from his lips was the cry of something wounded and wild. And then there she was, lying half-sunken in the snow. Still and silent.

David glanced out at the trees and into the miles of darkness beyond the trunks. Their ancient faces stared back, silent and uncaring. Far above their branches the solar winds flared up like a great torch, flooding the sky with painted lights. Pulsing and dancing against the black night. Wild and alive.