

Every Dog Has His Sleigh
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Ely, Minnesota, is just south of the Canadian border; the northernmost point in a loose net of pinpoint towns and surface roads that fetches up, abruptly, on a great unpopulated swath of forest and lakes known as the Boundary Waters Wilderness. It is not a place a person happens upon by accident. In the summer, perhaps, when the North Woods air is winey and fresh, the long days might lend themselves to serendipitous wandering with a bedroll and a tin coffee cup. But in winter, getting to Ely requires a series of concerted efforts: from Minneapolis, by puddle-jumper, to the low bunker of the Duluth airport, to a rental car in a tiny lot; and finally two hours north on a road patchy with dried salt, on which everyone seems to be heading the other way. The sky is the color of dull aluminum, like the bottom of a rowboat. On the map, the land around Ely is optimistically shaded green and blue, but in February it is frozen to a bitter white, cross-hatched with the bare branches of trees.

Just past the bright knot of lights and blond wood buildings that is the town, the highway becomes a single lane of snow, scraping the bottom of the rental car. It ends in front of a low building in a circle of high pines, in what is more or less the middle of the woods. The snow powders the exposed ankles of a person wearing sneakers. It is impossible to go any farther.

Or so a person might think.

I have come to the Boundary Waters to go dogsledding. The building I have arrived at is part of Wintergreen Lodge, which offers a variety of small-group dogsledding expeditions, including regular trips through the wilderness north of Ely. I have no knowledge of the sport beyond an awareness of the Iditarod and a vague memory of Robert Peary, swaddled in bearskin, staring balefully from the pages of a high-school textbook. Looking for a solo vacation, I had mentioned the idea to my best friend, who once hiked to the base camp at Mount Everest with her boyfriend for fun. It was her opinion that I might actually enjoy such a trip; her enthusiasm implied that venturing into a remote wilderness in the middle of winter could bring rewards unavailable to the timid.

I grew up in the South, but my family is from Detroit, and I always imagined this was something of a cold-weather pedigree; I remember my parents, on the rare occasions when it snowed, standing in the street shouting instructions at our neighbors, who were frantically spinning their wheels in an inch or two of ice. Perhaps, I thought, my friend was right. Perhaps I harbored a natural affinity, a love even, long dormant, for the deep seasonal freeze of my ancestral homeland.

But real winter, of the sort that closes around me when I get out of my rental car, is something new. The air is not so much colder as it is denser, dense with cold, like ice water. With each breath I can feel it taking the shape of my lungs. The surrounding woods are black and depthless, and it is hard to imagine spending much time there, rewards or no. By the time I retrieve my suitcase from the trunk and stumble up the steps to the lodge, my fingertips are numb.

The living room of the cabin is lit, yellowly, by a woodburning stove and an abundance of heart pine. I will be dogsledding with three couples, who have already arrived, and are reclining on couches looking rosy and hale. They all seem to be dressed in variations of an effortless wilderness-casual: wool socks, plaid shirts, fleece pants. The cuffs of my jeans scatter snow on the pine floor. “Cold out there,” I say.

“That’s nothin’,” says a wiry man with his feet up on the coffee table. He turns to the woman next to him. “Remember how cold it was last time we were here? You opened that door, it was like opening a freezer.”

“My glasses steamed up, and then they froze,” says the woman, looking irked by the memory.

“Oh, it was cold,” the man, whose name is Keith, says, sounding sorry he is not that cold right this minute. “My beard was frozen solid.”

A broad-shouldered young guy named Jason appears to take my suitcase. He and another guy, Dave, are our guides; they are both fair-haired and blue-eyed with a jaw-full of reddish-blond, week-old beard, like younger, hipper Grizzly Adams’s. In the flicker of the wood stove, they give us a brief clinic in dogsledding, using a plastic model of an Eskimo sled and six plastic dogs, on the coffee table. We practice slipping a harness on and off of Jason’s lank, maple-colored Labrador retriever, who submits glumly to our manipulations. Sled dogs, Jason tells us, are directed using the same voice commands as draft horses—“gee” for right and “haw” for left—and a sharp “hup! hup!” to go forward. He takes us through a practice round, which we deliver with gusto, like the chorus of an old drinking ballad. At the “hup!” command, his Lab springs to attention, and runs anxiously around the room.

Our last activity before bed is a clothing check. Although I am on one of the less rigorous trips Wintergreen offers, and we will be sleeping in lodges at night instead of outside, Jason and Dave spend a long time discussing how to regulate body temperature. At least in this respect, I feel prepared. My friend, who refused to allow me to go inappropriately clothed into the wilderness, had marched me through a camping outfitter’s the week before, studying me as I horsed around self-consciously in the items she had picked: a pair of fuzzy skintight leggings, a neck gaiter, a black Ninja-like balaclava that pursed around my eyes with a drawstring. “Cotton kills,” she admonished me gravely.

Dave rummages around in my suitcase, fingering fabrics and inspecting labels. “This isn’t cotton, is it?” he says, snatching up a pair of long underwear. “Duofold,” he answers himself, raising an eyebrow. He gives me an appraising look, as though he hadn’t figured me for someone with a working knowledge of wicking fabrics. “Nice. Cotton kills, you know.”

We will be harnessing the dogs at 7 am at the dog yard. People begin making their way to their pine-paneled bedrooms. Keith announces that he will be getting up hourly to look for the Northern lights, if anyone wants to join him. Jason flips a switch on the wall, and the fire in the stove goes out.

It is snowing lightly when we make our way down to the dog yard just after dawn, grey flakes sifting out of a grey sky. Keith and his wife, Sandy, who are from North Carolina, are telling us about their house—“it’s down a road, then down a possum trail, which is not as big as a pig trot”—when I hear a noise that sounds like a hundred sirens, in

different stages of the Doppler effect, converging on us from the surrounding woods. Sandy laughs at the look on my face. “That’s the dog yard,” she says. “I forgot you hadn’t been here before.”

Wintergreen’s dogs are Canadian Inuit sled dogs, the dogs used by the Inuit people in the high Arctic and, until 1991, at the research station in the Antarctic. Paul Schurke, the Arctic explorer who founded Wintergreen, calls them “the SUVs of sled dogs,” built for power rather than speed, and happiest when covering great distances, with large loads, in the extreme cold. Wintergreen has more than seventy of these dogs, many of which Schurke has collected on his expeditions, from his friends in Inuit villages. Some are also descendants of the dogs from the Antarctic research station (“children of immigrants,” Schurke says), which were given to Wintergreen when they were retired.

Walking into the dog yard is like being given a hero’s welcome by the small but exuberant denizens of a tidy shantytown. Each dog has its own hut, in which it sleeps and eats, and as we enter the yard they are perched on top of them, in full cry. The dogs that will be pulling my sled, Buster and Prairie, can hardly contain themselves as I struggle to slip their noses through the webbing of the harnesses. They are lean and rough-coated from living outdoors, unrefined and work-hardened, like rowdy longshoremen. They are inordinately pleased to see me. Buster stands on his hind legs and catches me around the waist in a ham-fisted embrace. As soon as the harness falls across their chests, they throw their weight against it, and it is all I can do to drag them over to the sled to be tethered. The lodge’s pet dogs, an assortment of well-fed retrievers, stroll through the chaos with a superior air, like landed gentry.

In the morning light, I can see that beyond the lodge and the dog yard the land slopes down abruptly; through the trees lies the frozen expanse of White Iron Lake, one of the area’s many. By the time we are ready to go, the dogs are leaping in their harnesses. Peering through the mouth of the dark tunnel that is my balaclava, I find my sled. While the couples are piloting large sleds, pulled by five dogs, mine is the dogsledding equivalent of a jitney, slim and lightweight, pulled along by two dogs. I take my post, standing upright at the back of the sled, on a little platform between the runners, and gripping a crossbar about stomach-height. When Jason calls my name, I pull the slipknot that frees the sled from its hitching post, and we catapult down the hill in front of the dog yard. “Hup,” I manage, as an afterthought.

Dogsledding is a little like waterskiing—holding on to something hurtling along while shouting orders, largely ineffectually, from a distance. The dogs tear furiously down the hills, settling into a brisk jog on the level stretches. The sled stutters onto the rough ice near the shore, and then skims out over the new snow covering the lake, our group in a long, orderly line, strung out over a half-mile or so like a wagon train of pioneers. The sled has a rudimentary brake, made of spikes on the bottom of a lever between my feet; when the dogs are in full stride, it takes my entire weight on the brake to slow us. In the woods, we progress in fits and starts, pinballing around trees, hitching up on drifts and roots and pausing precipitously at the summits of small knolls while the dogs strain at their end of the sled and I push at mine. Despite my best geeing and hawing, there is little steering, though none is really needed: The dogs are unshakably goal-oriented, following the path the sled ahead has carved, and they resent being impeded. Once or twice, when we come across a fallen tree and have to leave the trail,

they fall on each other a teeth-baring skirmish, like a terrible grinding of gears, until we get back on track.

Our top speed, on the open ice, is about as fast as I can run. While I appreciate the fact that I am traveling faster and more easily than I could on foot, if I *were* on foot, where would I be going? The landscape we are moving through is so vast and insensate I can hardly locate myself. I have heard people talk about “pitting themselves against the wilderness,” but the wilderness barely registers my presence at all. It is simply being what it is, foreign and impenetrable. What I have become—a small, perishable spot of warmth—is thrown into high relief.

In the home stretch, across the empty, whistling surface of the lake, my fantasy of sweeping through the grandeur of the winter landscape behind a team of straining animals, like a North Woods Ben Hur, dwindles to an image of me inching perpetually through an unchanging scene, like an Eskimo in a snow globe. Jason, who has been darting from sled to sled on skis, drops back to inquire whether my feet, shod in a cheap pair of winter boots I found on the internet, are getting cold. They are. All of me, in fact, despite my layers, is getting cold, a strange, generalized discomfort that is more like a physical crankiness. Little electric convulsions run up my back. Per Jason’s advice, I jog the last half-mile before lunch behind the sled. The dogs, when we catch sight of the lodge, burst into a sprint, as though showing off.

Our lunch has been prepared by Bernard Herrmann, Wintergreen’s master French chef. In the lodge’s dining room, its windows fogging up as we thaw, he announces the menu with his hands clasped in front of him: tomato soup with olive oil; a potato soufflé, carved into a pattern of scallops; and a ham cloaked in a puff pastry, which Bernard pronounces “poof,” and of which I have three helpings. Food, Jason has told us, keeps you warm.

While we eat, Paul Schurke arrives to welcome us; he has blond hair and blue eyes half-closed against an imaginary glare, and he speaks in whole, literary sentences, with long pauses between. (When I ask how he became interested in dogsledding, he says, “I had a mentor whose unquenchable thirst for exploring the polar regions proved infectious.”) He mentions that the winter has been unseasonably warm; temperatures in St. Paul for the annual winter carnival were above 50 degrees. “So that’s depressing,” he says.

One of our group approaches him afterward; she and her husband had been here four years before, she says, and she just wanted to say hi. “Oh,” Paul says, interested, and then regards her silently, as though trying to place her. After a moment he brightens. “Do you recognize any of the dogs?”

Dogsledding as a form of transportation has been around thousands of years, a necessary technology for the often nomadic residents of the higher latitudes, native Mongolians and Siberians, and in North America, the Inuit and the Ojibwe, some of whom settled in northern Minnesota. Polar explorers adopted it for their purposes over the last couple of centuries, and although it fell from popularity with the advent of the snowmobile, it is still, Schurke says, the best way to traverse what he calls the “chaotic texture” of polar landscapes: a shifting layer of “rubble piles” and ice blocks the size of houses, and yawning seams of open ocean. “No wheeled or tracked vehicle has yet been designed that can negotiate that tortured terrain,” he says, nor are dogs affected by the severe cold and

salt water that can wreak havoc on mechanical parts. “Dogs will start every morning,” he says. “Machines won’t, necessarily.” In the Boundary Waters, where no motorized vehicles are allowed, dogsledding has become a favorite winter pastime.

As with every animal that humans have pressed into service, the art of dogsledding mostly consists of divining and encouraging the animal’s natural tendencies. Sled dogs are born (that is, bred) to pull—a team of six or so Inuit dogs will happily haul a loaded sled for twenty or thirty miles in subzero temperatures—but they are also pack animals, with, Paul says, “their own universe, that we can only look into sort of darkly.” Before the pulling season, Schurke turns his pack loose in an open space, and within a week the dogs have established their ranking hierarchy; lead dogs; “wheel” dogs, which take up the rear; and “incompatible pairs,” dogs that cannot be persuaded to get along.

But there is more to working with dogs than that. The dogs are not pets—they sleep outside, they pull a sled almost every day—and caring for them is, by any definition, work (Jason’s first task at Wintergreen, he told me, was to salvage pieces of a harness from the vomit of a dog who had ingested it). But they are voraciously and indiscriminately social, as though the building block of the pack mentality were a gruff kind of love, and they inspire a similar, reciprocal love from people. They also, it seems, in the ease and enthusiasm with which they navigate the winter woods, provide an entry into an inhospitable world, and some insulation against the bleakness.

In the lodge, there is a photo album of generations of dogs, each labeled with their lineage, characteristics, and dates of birth and death. A pen down by the dog yard holds frosty-muzzled dogs, too old to pull, who are fed and watered with the rest. Paul, Dave told me, reputedly has a sled-dog cemetery on his land, though none of the guides has ever seen it. During Paul’s expeditions in the high Arctic, he found it easy to make friends in the Inuit villages, where people warmed to their visitor upon seeing his team. “Everyone,” he says, “loves to talk dogs.”

The second night, we stay in a cabin a half-day’s trip from the original lodge. In the kitchen the next morning, where Dave is making blueberry pancakes, the sun falls in medallions on the wood floor. A radio propped in the window is tuned to WELY, which serves as sort of a central intelligence for the remote corners of the Boundary Waters area, and which is allowed to broadcast personal and emergency messages in addition to its standard programming. There is a women’s red down jacket for sale, the dj announces, and a used snow-blower. He moves on to the news: Someone has caught a three-foot, one-inch rabbit.

Outside, the sunlight needles off the snow. Jason has found me a spare pair of boots with wool liners to replace the ones I have brought. They are almost twice as big as my feet, bald and patched like old tires, and as warm as Dutch ovens. On the snowy surface of the lake, Dave is circling on skis and a rig Paul invented, called the Push-Pull, which allows him to be pushed, or more accurately, chased, by two dogs hooked to the end of a long pole, the other end of which is planted on Dave’s rear end. The arrangement gives him a lot of speed but not much control. We watch him careen around the ice. “The first time Paul got someone to try this, the dogs ran the guy right into the outhouse,” Jason says.

Maybe it’s the sunshine, but our outing today seems far more manageable; the trail smooth, the dogs convivial. We coast along the serrated shore of the lake. For a solo

rider, it is not the most social form of transportation, but I take the opportunity to work on my relationship with the dogs, as Dave has suggested, and keep up a patter of nonsense commentary to which they occasionally prick up their ears. Little details begin to emerge from the blur of the scenery. A bird's nest, with a long beard of lichen, hangs in a shaggy pine. During a break, Keith points out a wolf paw print, as big as a piece of toast, in the snow next to our trail. In the woods, Jason takes us to a beaver house, parked like a giant igloo above a frozen stream. He shows us the ventilation hole at the top, and the prints of interested predators around it.

At lunchtime, we eat with another group, who have built a fire in a clearing scalloped with drifts of snow. Their guide, Chris, a young man with a little metal barbell in one ear and a knife in a scabbard in his belt, is squatting over the fire frying quesadillas, a brick-sized stick of butter end-down in the pan. Jason arranges our hot drink options in a snowbank—powdered chai tea, powdered hot cocoa, instant cappuccino, and even Tang—and pulls some spears of frozen cheese out of his bag. “Cheese sticks, mmm,” he says encouragingly.

I am beginning to understand why our guides place so much emphasis on food; the body, in this weather, is little more than a simple furnace, and although I have no appetite for frozen cheese, it does give me a warm glow. While we eat, Dave tells us about the time he and Paul picked up lunch at a convenience store, and Paul bought an apple, a bag of pork rinds, and a carton of half-and-half. “Half-and-half,” Dave remembers Paul saying. “Where else can you get 2000 calories for 75 cents?”

We spend the afternoon ducking in and out of a string of little forested glades and frozen ponds sugared with snow. Perhaps because of my ongoing monologue, Buster and Prairie and I reach a tentative détente; when the sled hitches up on a root or stump, they look over their shoulders, tails wagging, and wait until I give the sled a little shove before digging in again. Their personalities emerge: Buster is bigger, more of a goon; Prairie is little and quick, and in charge. She bares her teeth at Buster if our pace slows.

The afternoon goes quickly. By the time we emerge from the woods and begin the long stretch home across the lake, the sun has slid obliquely to rest at the horizon, where it flickers through a dense scrim of trees. The sidelong light, under the vault of the sky, is yellow and violet, and the air is sharp. We scrape across the middle of the lake, where the ice, as hard under the runners as iron, is cloudy and lumpy, like congealed wax. The landscape is silent, but no longer empty; I recognize the silhouette of the far shore. In the distance, a low buzz swells into the tenor hum of a two-stroke engine. A snowmobiler materializes and sprays past us with a wave, leaving in his wake a sour plume of exhaust and the musty smell of a cigar.

At dinner, we are flushed from the sun, the wind, and a bottle of port that someone has brought, and spirits are high. Jason's girlfriend Karla, a pretty woman with a cloud of blond curls, has come in for the weekend from her office job in Minneapolis. She will be going on a trip above the Arctic Circle that Paul is leading in May. On her last visit to Wintergreen, Jason tells us, she chose to participate in some of the preparations for another group's polar expedition, including jumping into the lake through a hole in the ice, fully clothed, with a backpack on. This story prompts one of our group, a Brit named Mike who is here with his wife, Nancy, to tell us about the coldest he

has ever been, which was when he was in the British army, and he spent the night sleeping in a snow pit in Norway during a white-out.

I had been feeling pretty proud of myself—we did, after all, go almost twenty miles today—but I am beginning to think that rising to the occasion in a pair of borrowed boots and then coming in to drink wine over a gourmet chicken dish is not, really, outdoorsiness, certainly not the kind the rest of my group can claim. True outdoorsiness, it seems, is not just a tolerance for the cold climate, although that is part of it. It is more an *intolerance* for the unchanging climate of the indoors, the static landscape of a manmade life.

“The guys I work with don’t understand,” says Keith. “They say, man, why don’t you just get a six-pack and go to Myrtle Beach?”

“I wanted to cut down a beech tree and stand it in our living room,” he says, “put a creek running through, put some rocks, make it like a campsite, but Sandy wouldn’t have it.”

At the other end of the table, Charlie, who is here with his wife from Illinois, says, “When I was a kid in Chicago, I had a pet crow. He would step around in the laundry when the lady two doors down was hanging out her sheets. He would come and land on my arm.”

I comb my memories for a worthy anecdote, but the only thing I can come up with is our family’s sole camping trip, when I was nine or ten, during which it poured rain and most of our group spent the night in the car. Earlier in the day, Jason had mentioned that he had camping equipment, if anyone wanted to sleep the last night outside. I lean over and ask him under my breath if the opportunity is still available. “You want to sleep outside?” he says, in clarion tones. The effect of this announcement on our group is electric, as though I have announced my candidacy for the presidency. Karla, across the table, slaps her knees in a gesture of decisiveness. “Let’s get you into a Wiggy!”—the brand name of the insulated “sleep systems” that make it possible for the human body to conserve enough heat over the course of a very cold night to survive, effectively if not comfortably.

On the floor of the cabin living room, after dinner, Jason puts me through a dry run of my sleep system: a mat; a black sleeping bag, like a pillowy sarcophagus; and a tarp to go on top. Inside the bag, I yank on the cords until the aperture around my head contracts and the ceiling narrows to a spot. The bag is extremely efficient; I am already beginning to sweat. Jason’s face appears in my field of vision. “And we’ll fill a bottle of boiling water for you to take inside the bag,” he says cheerfully.

The spot I have chosen is a few yards from the lake in front of our cabin. I crawl into the bag with my hot-water bottle and my cheese sticks and batten down the hatch. I am wearing three pairs of pants, four long-underwear shirts, a sweater, and my 600-fill down jacket. I am also wearing my glasses, because it is a clear night and I want to see the stars, which I can, but only until my glasses steam up, and then freeze.

To say that I *sleep* outside would be a misnomer; I drift through the night in a stupor, woken at intervals by stiffness, or by chills, or by the wide, echoing reverberations of the lake ice contracting and expanding, a sound like someone tapping a gigantic microphone, or as Keith had described it, “like someone rolling a 55-gallon drum.” Despite my layers, I am not warm. Nor am I visited by revelations about the

purity of the wilderness or my place in it. But I am not spooked, as I thought I might be. Rather, it feels as though I am sleeping snugly in the center of a very large room. Once, I hear a solitary howl to the north, a ridiculously stereotypical high-lonesome yodel that nonetheless gives me gooseflesh. The answering chorus from the south, where our dogs are tied for the night, puts me back in the civilized world.

As soon as the patch of night above me pales with the dawn, I extricate myself from the bag and make my way to the cabin for a cup of coffee. But it feels insufferably hot and stuffy inside, and I go back out for a walk, cutting across the lake to where the dogs are tethered, in the blue shadows on the shore. They are in fine fettle for having slept, Wiggy-less, on the bank of the lake. They yip and howl and leap joyfully at the ends of their chains when they see me. Their coats are furred with a fine layer of frost, each individual hair, like the antennae of moths. Jason, who is shoveling food into bowls, raises his eyebrows. "They say it went down to ten below last night," he says. He thuds one of the dogs ruminatively over the ribcage, with a sound like a bongo drum. Jason's beard is frosted, too. "So?" he says. "Were you too hot?"

Ely, as I drive through it on my way out of town the next morning, is bustling with its winter festival. The central plaza is filled with snow sculptures: a giant pair of dice, three bears in a barrel, two mammoth hands that cast a shadow in the shape of a wolf's head, a chunky, reclining abstraction like a gelid Henry Moore. People stroll with their children in the morning sunshine. It is a pity, I think, that I am leaving just as I mastered the art of layering. In a pair of fleece leggings and a couple of Duofold shirts, I am a perfectly regulated system. Although it is still around zero outside—cold enough to numb my hands as I search for my keys—I keep the car window cracked. The town smells like bacon and eggs.

On WELY, the dj is playing anti-war songs. I drive through the cluster of shops and diners and onto the highway south toward Duluth. The woods stretch, featureless, for miles on either side. The long empty road and the occasional house only make the surrounding countryside seem lonelier, somehow, than it did from the helm of a sled in the middle of a frozen lake. On the radio, a song by Steve Earle wraps up the set, and then it is time for personal and emergency messages. There is only one. "Lost dog," the dj reads. "Basset hound-beagle mix. Mostly black. Please call."