third coast

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Caribou

Porter Fox

I've seen fish fly. Up north where the softwood is so thick you can't walk the forest without an axe. I've seen a fourteen-inch brookie glide through the air, its paper tail feathering the breeze, sun glistening in its scales, sailing across the sky and headfirst smack into a snarl of beaks. Gripped in the osprey's talons, it goes like it was meant to go.

I've watched one of those birds dive at the water like a shadow on the highway then come alive with barbed talons, sinking them into the fish and can't let go. Once, Edison saw a twenty-inch brookie drag a bird right under.

Edison's hands are delicate as he packs—or they look delicate the way he wedges his rifle between the tent and duffel bags. Thick nylon straps hold his canoe to a two-by-four frame over the bed of the pickup. There's a cooler lashed to the back of the cab, two plastic containers of camping supplies. Suzanne watches from the plywood steps leading to the kitchen.

There's no roof on the house, she says.

She's right. It's just plywood and tarps. The roof was supposed to have been finished five months ago. But the closer Edison got to completing it, the slower he went. Now the first cold has settled. The snow won't be far behind.

You see the special last night? I ask.

On the boys? Edison says.

Caribou.

He looks at Suzanne, me. We'll be fine, he says.

Just wondered if you saw it.

What'd it say?

They're moving south. It hit ten below on the Gaspé last night.

Sounds about right.

They say it's the earliest migration yet. Scared off half the hunters in the lottery.

I best get moving then.

They say to keep to the roads.

I doubt they're many caribou on the roads.

You know how it gets up there.

A snowflake twirls into the garage and lands on the concrete floor. Edison watches it fall, glances at Suzanne, steps into the cab.

They find those boys? he asks.

Not yet, I say.

Then they won't.

You don't know that.

I've seen incredible things in the North Woods. Like Luke Jenson bend a tire iron over his knee for no reason. I once saw Frank Pelletier eat a light bulb to impress a girl. I've watched the sawyers jump off the roof of the Northland Saloon in the middle of winter, land on their backs in the parking lot, stand up, brush themselves off and walk away. Or Edison. He walks a three-day trap line in the middle of February with nothing but a bag of jerky, an axe, his snowshoes and a blanket.

It's this country that makes them—the lines of mountains framing Three Forks like waves, pine forests reaching to the Atlantic, spruce and fir hemming our yards like they're waiting to reclaim them.

And the cold. The lakes freeze in November and thaw in May. The air burns your lungs in the middle of January. At night, the streetlights shine straight up instead of down. The northern lights throb over the mountains early in the morning. One night when it hit forty below I saw a doe freeze solid in my yard. I walked up to her the next day and pushed her over. She just stared at me, legs sticking straight out to the side.

We were all born here. We'll probably be buried here. We're too far from anything to think about leaving. Seven miles from Canada, three hundred to the Atlantic. But that doesn't mean we belong here. I'm not sure anyone belongs where the ground is frozen ten months of the year.

An orange streetlamp buzzes outside my apartment. I have a suitcase of beer and a half-packed duffel on the living room floor. I wonder what's stopping me. Familiarity, fear, it's not right. Sometimes when a nor'easter rips through the treetops, it sounds like the whiskbroom of God trying to sweep us from the forest.

Family Feud is on. There's no money to be won. Just a couple hundred bucks on the board and a cute brunette on the end. The news breaks in to say something about the boys. They disappeared two weeks ago hunting on the Gaspé. The reporter says they're twenty and twenty-three years old. They won the license lottery on their first try. It took

Edison eight years.

It's never been this cold this early. The newscaster says the boys got caught on the southeast coast of the Gaspé; four feet of snow fell on the road behind them. They didn't have radios, phones, food. It'll be a miracle if they find them. And the weather's not getting any better. There's mares' tails up there, a cold front coming in from the north.

Edison said he'd clear my debt if I finish the roof for him. That's fair. He owns half my truck and I'm going to need it. I've been looking for jobs in Florida. Key Largo. Something on the water. They say there's two feet of beach for every person down there.

Suzanne sets the table for two the night Edison leaves. She lays plastic utensils on squares of paper towel folded in half. The roof tarps ripple as the front moves through. Webs of frost spread across the windows. I see her reflection—auburn hair, hazel eyes, a veiled sex Edison's described but you'd be a fool to miss. She says I'm family, that she's told me most everything about her. But Edison's told me more. Half-dead in a frozen lake when she was four. A mother who drank like a sawyer. A talent for meeting the wrong man at the right time.

Edison tells me everything. I've known him since I could walk. I've never seen him back down from anything. I've never seen him give something up for free either. He keeps his tabs. To him, love is being on hand when he needs you.

I've seen Suzanne at the Northland with Sam Fuller. I don't know what that means, but I know Edison doesn't know anything about it. Or maybe he does. People can live two lives up here and the town will only talk about one. Like Mr. Peterson who steals from the general store. Or Ms. Doyle whose cats keep disappearing. I've got a different life with Suzanne. I know it and I think she does too. Sometimes I wonder if it's all right, or if it's just me making something out of nothing. It doesn't matter. It's all just talk.

Suzanne's asleep when I start tacking down the plywood sheathing the next morning. I rig a block and tackle system to lift the sheets to the roof. The trusses and rafters are secure. All I have to do is nail down the plywood, roll out the ice-and-water shield, run the flashing, then shingle. It shouldn't take more than a week, but it's supposed to drop below zero on Friday so I might not have a week. On the way to Edison's that morning I noticed skim ice creeping across the lake.

The plywood is frozen and heavy. I hang from the rig, loop the nylon rope once around my wrist, yank each piece to the roofline. Once I get a sheet up, I tie off the rope, slide the plywood into place and tack it down.

You get right to it, Suzanne says an hour into the job. She's standing in the living room, wearing sweatpants and an ORLAND STATE FAIR t-shirt.

I've never seen the lake freeze so fast, I say.

Or a house.

She disappears into the kitchen. I tack down the last piece in the row and by the time I get a new sheet rigged up, Suzanne returns with a mug of coffee.

Don't say I didn't warn you, she says.

That night Suzanne cooks trout. She puts two lit candles on the table. I can smell the fish broiling as I finish tacking the first half of the roof under a tar-black sky.

Edison ought to put a statue of you in the yard, she says when we sit down.

If he wanted to keep people out.

You're saving his marriage.

Least I could do.

Two brook trout sit on a platter between us. They're browned with the head still on. Suzanne smiles, raises her glass.

To my husband's hunting vacation, she says.

I nod and she sips her wine.

When's he coming back? I ask.

When he gets a bull, or divorce papers.

He'll get one.

Which?

A bull.

Suzanne slides one of the fish onto my plate. I wonder if it's one Edison and I caught on the lake, but it's too charred to tell.

What's this I hear about moving south? she asks.

Spring, I say. Florida.

Edison's going to miss you.

I'm not going to miss this.

Suzanne strips the meat off her fish and lifts a forkful to her mouth. A Johnny Cash song plays on the radio. She taps her fork to the rhythm.

I think it's time *I* got a vacation, she says.

Where?

Zanzibar.

What the hell's that?

White beaches and blue lagoons.

She slides her hands across the table and I see emerald water and alabaster sand spread across the checkered tablecloth.

Fruit trees, she says.

Margaritas.

Bathtub water.

A moth flutters into a candle and drops onto the table.

I've heard lagoons down south can be a thousand feet deep, I say.

After dinner we watch the late news. The boys are still lost. The temperature is dropping and the Quebec government has issued a warning. The local consensus is that there's no way the boys could still be alive. The reporter interviews a group of hunters who're headed home. One of them lost a toe to frostbite. Another group got lost yesterday but found their way out. The camera cuts to the boys' parents at the Search and Rescue Center. It's housed in a construction trailer. There are radios and bright orange jackets along the wall and two coffeemakers in the corner.

The boys' parents look tired, furrowed brows, graying hair. One of the mothers is crying. The reporter asks her what viewers can do to help.

Pray, she says.

I wash the dishes while Suzanne watches TV. The moon is rising. It makes the snow look blue. I can see the corner of the garage through the window, the rows of split cordwood behind it. They're straight and neat with half logs on the ends. Each stack stands five-feet high.

A buck lopes across the lawn. It pauses near the corner of the garage, gazes into the living room. It's got a twelve-point rack and a white chest. Its eyes look green. I turn to tell Suzanne and it bounds into the woods.

By the end of the week, I have all the plywood up and the soffits installed. It's twenty below at night, but Suzanne keeps the stove full and the house is warm enough. She cooks fish or steak for dinner every night and I start sleeping in the La-Z-Boy so I don't have to drive home. In the morning, I wear a ski hat and gloves to roll the ice-and-water shield. By Sunday I've got the roof covered and Monday afternoon I start running the flashing. The long strips of metal flicker in the sun. The sky is deep blue and the mare's tails have blown out. The lake is completely covered in ice now. Someone's already dragged an ice-fishing shack to the landing.

Suzanne climbs the ladder Tuesday afternoon to see how I'm doing. She's carrying two Bloody Marys.

You know I don't drink on the job, I say.

You won't have a job if you don't follow orders.

Yes ma'am.

I help her onto the roof and take one of the plastic glasses.

It's nice up here, she says.

I could use another set of hands.

I'm not touching this roof.

He would've done it if he had time, I say.

Time was never the issue.

He's not good at finishing things.

Don't tell me.

You hear anything from him?

What do you think?

You knew what you were getting into the first night you met him.

You could've reminded me.

I pick at a staple sticking out of the roof and sip my drink. Suzanne finishes hers. The air smells like sawdust and tar. The sun is an orange globe just over the trees.

What do you think about fate? she asks.

What do you mean?

Do you believe in it?

I don't know.

I could have just as easily walked up to you that night.

You didn't, I say.

This could've been your house.

It's not.

Could've been.

Anything could've been.

That's all I'm saying.

We don't talk through dinner. I turn on the TV and watch the second half of a special on Egypt. Suzanne brings the bottle of vodka to the living room and tops off her drink. I hand her mine and she pours a shot. Then she kicks off her shoes and lies down on the couch. I recline in the La-Z-Boy and drift off after a few minutes. I dream about the lake, caribou, the sun setting over the ocean. When I wake, Suzanne's standing over me.

Is it true? she asks.

What?

About the lagoons.

Who?

They can be a thousand feet deep?

How would I know?

She puts her finger to her lips, walks to the kitchen. She comes back with a glass of water and leaves it next to the chair. Then she leans to kiss me on the cheek, but my head turns and she kisses my eye. She steps back and smiles. Then she walks upstairs. I pull an afghan over me and listen to a maple branch click against the kitchen window. Blue moonlight pushes through the trees. I wonder if Edison got a bull yet then I fall asleep.

It doesn't take much to get lost up here. Take ten steps into the woods and turn yourself around a dozen times. The only landmarks are the fire tower on McEwen Hill and the highway—if you can see them. When you're deep in the softwood, about all you can make out are your feet below you and your axe in your hand.

I got lost once. It was in the draw behind Crocker Lake. I'd been looking after Edison's trap line while he was away and got turned around. I thought I'd walked up one side of a saddle and down the other, when I'd actually walked back down the same side. All the trees looked the same. The brook was running in the right direction. Two days later I walked across the Union Pacific tracks twenty miles east of town.

I start shingling Tuesday afternoon and am done by Friday. I use fiberglass asphalt shingles and lay a clean drip edge with a twelve-inch overlap. It's overkill, but I don't want to leave yet. Suzanne has been going out in the morning, returning after I'm gone. I'm not sure if there's something awkward between us or if she's just worried about Edison. Friday night I start sleeping at home to give her space. When I finish the last row Sunday, I pack up my tools and drive home.

The Red Sox are playing the Orioles in the division series that night. The Sox have a new kid, Wilanski, who's supposed to be the next Yaz. He's nineteen and grew up in Rhode Island. He's like a prince in New England. He strikes out in the first and third innings, hits a monstrous three-run homer in the fourth. The crowd stands, the ball clears the upper deck. The boy runs the bases, his square shoulders and big arms swinging as he strides. He tips his helmet at home.

After the game, the news comes on. The anchor says the boys have been found. They were in the cab of their truck, huddled together. They'd frozen to death, he said. At the end of the report he adds another party to

the missing list. A picture of Edison's face flashes on the screen.

I call Suzanne and get no answer. Then I turn off the TV and sit back on the couch. The streetlamp buzzes outside. There isn't any wind. Just the moon and the blue light. I look out the window and see someone has dragged three fishing shacks to the middle of the lake.

The next day I go to Edison's to clean up the work site. Suzanne hasn't called and she isn't at the house when I arrive. I pile the extra plywood behind the garage, throw the flashing, tarpaper and shingles in the back of my truck. As I'm walking out the front door, she pulls into the driveway. She smiles and rolls down her window.

Hello stranger, she says.

You all right?

I've been better.

She turns off the car, looks down at her lap, taps her fingers on the wheel.

Any word? I ask.

I've been at the warden's all morning.

Nothing?

It's been thirty-five below since Thursday.

Is it going to break?

There's another storm rolling in tonight.

That man never did anything half-ass.

Suzanne doesn't answer. She opens her door, steps out and reaches for a grocery bag in the passenger's seat.

Looks like you're cooking for two.

See you 'round, she says and walks inside.

The last game of the series is on tonight. Wilanski triples and comes home on a sacrifice fly. The Sox have been on the road for two weeks and he looks tired. The announcers comment on it. One of them used to be a major league pitcher. Same thing night after night, he says. It wears you down.

I can't concentrate after the third inning and turn off the TV. The streetlamp outside my window is buzzing. I look for a beer in the fridge, stare at the lake. There's twelve ice sheds now, a little path between them. Last year someone put a stop sign on one end of it. On New Year's, Luke Jensen dressed up in a Santa Claus suit and directed traffic.

I pack the rest of my things into the duffel. There's not much—some underwear, T-shirts, a few pair of jeans. I put my shoes and some

knickknacks from the bedroom in a trash bag and pile it all in the cab of the truck. Then I drive to the Northland to say goodbye.

Five sawyers lean against the vertical pine panels lining the far wall. Suzanne and Sam Fuller are huddled together at the end of the pool table. They're playing as a team. The lights aren't very bright so the bartender hangs a green Coleman lantern over the table. It hisses and casts a sharp, white light.

Sam lines up a shot and sinks it. Suzanne grabs him and kisses him on the cheek. Sam blushes then knocks another solid into the corner pocket. When Suzanne sees me she runs over and wraps her arms around my waist.

What are you doing? I ask.

I made three!

I look around the bar again and Sam turns to talk to the sawyers.

Let's go, I say.

Lemme finish my game.

I pay for Suzanne's drinks and walk her to my truck. I drive slow mostly because of the black ice on the road, but also because I'm not sure what's happening.

They found him, Suzanne says.

What?

They found him. This afternoon. I got a call.

Where?

Right where they stopped. They're fine.

All of them.

The warden called me.

Suzanne rests her head in my lap. I try to focus on the road and follow a loop past the dump and back to town. I make the turn the next time around and when I stop, Suzanne is motionless. I whisper to her, then carry her inside and up to her bedroom. I take off her shoes and pull the covers over her. Then I walk downstairs and load the stove.

The ladder I used is still leaning in the corner. I take it outside and climb up on the roof. The shingles sparkle in the moonlight. They're straight and alternate well. The drip edge is a little long, but it'll do.

I climb down and walk inside to the La-Z-Boy. Then I go upstairs. Suzanne's asleep and snoring quietly. Edison's shoes sit beside his dresser. The dim red numbers on his digital clock flip to two thirty-three. I strip down and slide in beside her.

It's cold when I wake. The fire's gone out. A foot of snow has fallen.

It's not dawn yet. I get out of bed and Suzanne rolls onto her side. Downstairs I put on Edison's boots and overalls and jacket. Then I stomp a path to the woodpile.

I take a couple half logs off the end and balance one on a rotting stump. Edison's axe feels light in my hands, and I come awake as the oiled handle slips through my fingers. The sound of the blade hitting the wood echoes through the forest.

After I load the fire, I change into my own clothes and get into the truck. The duffel and garbage bag are on the floor. I drive past the Northland toward the lake and stop at the landing. An ice fishermen shuffles between two shacks. The wind lifts a swirl of snow around one of them.

I drive onto the lake and the snow squeaks under the tires. I ease down on the gas and pass the shacks. Snow billows from the wheel wells and in a minute I'm going forty. There are three-foot drifts every hundred yards and when I hit one it explodes over the hood and up onto the windshield.

I roll down my window and let the snow and cold in. It's freezing but the sun is warm. I close my eyes. This is how it used to be around here. Nothing to hit. Just the trees and water and the caribou before the hunters pushed them north. The old timers say the big herds gathered in the valley in the fall. The cows would stay as long as they could, feeding on the tall grass and lichen around the lake. When it got too cold, they'd start south with the calves. Then the bulls would follow, two weeks behind, all of them in a long line just a few days before the first snow.