

The background of the cover is a painting of a coastal scene. It features a dark, craggy rock formation on the left side, with white foam from waves crashing against its base. The sea is a deep, textured blue, and the sky above is a lighter, hazy blue. The overall style is that of a classical or impressionistic painting.

# VOLKOV

Marshall Bolin

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At eleven thirty p.m., as the sunset bled its last drop into the Bering Sea, I wandered into a dive bar in Nome, Alaska, called “The Iditarodd Couple”. A boombox on top of the register blared warbly country songs from a cassette. White scuff-marked walls, mostly bare except for two banners advertising Michelob and Budweiser, colluded with the fluorescent ceiling lights to create an ambience in which everyone looked their worst, like in photographs taken with a bright flash. A man and woman slouched over a low-top, staring into their drinks. A pack of underage kids poked around with straws in their second round of long islands and leaned on their elbows to keep from tipping over. A dude in a safety vest who could’ve kicked all our asses if he wanted to (and probably did want to) scrolled on his phone with a pitcher of beer all to himself.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“What craft beers you got?” I replied, taking a stool.

“We used to have one, but it didn’t sell.”

“Ok, I’ll have a Bud.”

He slapped his palm on the laminate counter.

Bottle in hand, I took a sip and leaned over the bar, slowly rolling my hanging head. I was stiff and tired from a week of sleeping in the car. From my right, a Russian accent.

“You are from big city?”

I turned to face a man with a trimmed black beard. His pressed shirt was unbuttoned to the tip of a black iceberg of chest hair.

“What gave me away? Asking for a craft beer?”

“Yes, and you look curious when you come in. Only someone used to big city bars would think this place is interesting.”

“That’s nice,” the bartender snorted.

The Russian downed a shot of clear spirits and turned to me, wiping his mouth. “I’m Matvey. He is Bartender Bill. Sharing name with strangers is dumb. Are you dumb? You look dumb.”

“I sure am. Dumb as they come. The name’s Charlie.” I shook his hand.

Matvey smirked. “So, I am right, Charlie? You are not from Nome? Or do you have brain injury and now shithole bar is fun adventure.”

Bartender Bill looked up from polishing a glass. “What if he did have a brain injury, ya asshole?”

“Then I could take him in fight if he is offended.”

I laughed. “Actually,” I said, “You are right, Matvey. Not about the brain injury, but I am from out of town. I live in Minneapolis ... Minnesota.”

“Ah. I have heard of. I don’t remember what I’ve heard. Sorry. Is nice place?”

“My answer to that is complicated.”

“Please answer another time then. How far away is Minneapolis from here?”

“It’s ... not nearby. More than 2,000 miles away.”

“Yes, not nearby. Now guess where *I’m* from.”

I cast my eyes up and to the left, trying to gauge which of my assumptions could be offensive.

“Stop with P.C.” He rolled his eyes. “Where. Guess.”

“Hmm.... Here?”

“Ha. Wrong. Why would I have this accent?”

“OK. Russia.”

“Obviously.”

“Moscow?”

“Wrong city.”

“Um,” I ran my fingers through my hat-matted hair. “The only other place I know in Russia is Siberia—and, yeah, I know that’s not a city.”

“What, you never hear of St. Petersburg?”

“Oh sure. Yep, I have. That’s where you’re from?”

“No. Just proving Moscow isn’t only city in Russia. You were right about Siberia, actually. My city is Yakutsk.” He ordered another shot. “Second coldest city on earth. Norilsk is colder. But they are also most polluted. So fuck them.”

I pictured Yakutsk as a brutal place. I pictured him picturing me having lived a life of privilege.

“I live in coldest *decent* city on earth,” he concluded. “What brings you to Nome in May?”

“I’m on a road trip.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I flew into Nome and rented a car and have been driving around these three highways that basically make up the city.”

Bill the Bartender stared at me as he put another shot of spirits on the counter in front of Matvey.

“OK, you say a road trip,” Matvey said, “but *everyone* rents car when they fly somewhere. If I fly to Tokyo and rent car, that’s not a road trip.”

“Hmm. You’ve got a point there.” I took a swig. “I guess what makes this a road trip is that the whole point of the trip is the driving. I take a road trip every summer. I’ve been doing it since I was eighteen—I’m 40 now—and I wanted to up the ante a bit, see if I could find something interesting that I’ve never experienced before. If I could’ve I would’ve driven all the way here from Minnesota: that would have been an adventure in itself. But you can’t drive from Minnesota to here. This area is a closed circuit.”

“Is Nome an adventure you hoped for?”

“I can’t say that it is.” I glanced at Bill. “The landscape is too sparse for my taste. If I looked intrigued or whatever when I came in, that’s because I was just happy to see some goddamn *walls*. It’s pretty damn barren out there—I felt too exposed. When I’m on a road trip, it’s the feeling of mystery I like. I like to wonder what’s just past those trees. Or what’s around that bend—and then drive over and find out. See what’s over those mountains. Sometimes I find something interesting, but even if I don’t, I like to know there’s the *potential*. The potential that something life-changing might be just around the corner.”

Matvey gazed into his shot glass and nodded his head.

“But out here, it’s so flat and featureless I could pretty much see everything the landscape had to offer right off the bat. Which amounted to not so much. I mean, visiting a tundra is novel and everything, but driving aimlessly by myself for six days has been ... ” I sighed. “I don’t think I even have any stories to take back home.”

“Ah, so you want to impress the ladies with interesting stories.”

“Whatever, dude.”

“You’re offended?”

“That reductionist stuff gets on my nerves. People always say—and act as if—human behavior is all just in service of sex—or status. Which itself is in service of sex. I remember those guys in high school playing guitar or playing football because they wanted to get chicks. But aren’t music and sports enjoyable in themselves? Aside from getting you laid. I mean, how about you: Aren’t there things that you enjoy because you enjoy them, whether or not it makes you appear attractive to women?”

“Yes. Sex.”

I took a long drink of beer. “Anyway. Having new experiences on the road is ... I like it because I like it.”

“Unusual. You’ve been wandering alone with no plan for a week?”

“Yes I have. But that’s not that unusual for me.”

“You are not normal. Is today last day of your trip?”

I blushed. “I have eight more days left before my return flight.”

Matvey cocked his head. “Enjoy your trip. May you find interesting things to tell stories about. And may they not get you laid, so you can be sure you are man of integrity.” He clinked his glass against mine and swiveled back to face the bar.

I studied some of the other people in the room. One guy hunching over the end of the bar had a plumber’s crack billowing out from a pair of navy blue snow pants. Between the waistband of the pants and the bottom of his winter jacket a significant quantity of bare gut spilled into his lap. It was too warm for snow pants inside the bar, and it was too cold for exposed belly. Maybe the sum total added up to the desired average skin temperature. The idea of that pissed me off like those bathroom sinks where you’re supposed to wash your hands with two separate faucets: one with scalding hot water and one with ice cold.

I turned back to Matvey, “What brings *you* here, Matvey?”

“Coast Guard business,” he said.

“You’re in the Russian Coast Guard?”

“Yes. Ship captain.” He removed a red cigarette pack from the pocket of a jacket draped across his lap. He waved the pack at me.

“Want one?”

“I’d love one.”

Matvey put on the short camo jacket with black fur collar, leaving it unzipped. Looking at the bartender and downing the shot, he said in an accent that was either his own or possibly an attempt at Arnold Schwarzenegger's, "We'll be back."

Lanes of smoke from our cigarettes swirled upwards, losing definition as they traveled to the bar's sole exterior light. The midnight temperature was not so cold—somewhere in the 30s—but the arctic wind howling in from the Bering pinched my ears and chilled my fingers right through the leather gloves I wore.

"So what's wrong with you?" Matvey asked. "Why do you think it was good idea to drive around here for two weeks with no plan? Alone."

"That's the kind of stuff I like to do."

"But you were wrong. You're bored and lonely!"

"You're right." I took a puff. "Lesson learned. I'll go somewhere different next year."

"Ah. So this experience does not discourage you."

"Nah."

"What is your favorite road trip?"

"My favorite road trip I've been on?"

"Yeah."

"Huh. Wow." I closed my eyes and barraged myself with a montage of terrains and smells and conversations. "Man. When I was 20, I drove to the West Coast by myself and took the coastal highway all the way down. From Seattle to San Diego. There was so much I'd never seen before. Now that was exciting: being in all those different settings with different types of people. And that was back when people *were* different from place to place. You used to be able to go to a place and get a feel for what the people were like there. Now, people are like whatever their online echo chambers are like. Their friends online are more of an influence on them than the people in their locale. But back on that first West Coast trip I got a feel for what Portland people were like, what San Francisco people were like—the people in every place had their own character. And the small towns especially so. God, that was interesting to be like, 'Ah, so this is what people are like when they live their whole life in Crescent City and talk mostly to people from Crescent

City'. In a way, all my road trips since then have been an attempt to recapture the excitement of that first trip down the coastal highway."

He nodded, "I've seen it. I've never been, but I've seen in car commercials."

"That's the one. Good old Highway 1."

He stared me right in the eyes for a long while. "We have coastal highway in Siberia too."

"Really? On the Pacific coast, then?"

"Arctic."

"Whoa, shit. I've never looked at a map of Siberia that close I guess."

"You wouldn't see it even if you did." He grinned. "Not on Google Maps either. Americans think: Just go online and now I see everything. But Russia does not want Americans to see everything."

I thought about it for a minute. "You're full of shit, dude. Yeah.... With all the shipping and satellites and spying that goes on? Somehow a coastal highway is just ... kept secret?"

"Not just highway, but whole town not on American Google Maps." Wide grin.

"Sure, whatever." I laughed it off.

"*Whatever* whatever. Let's compare phones. Go to Google Maps."

"Alright ...." I pulled out my phone.

"Search Vankarem—city on Arctic Coast. Now search driving directions to Billings, northwest on Arctic shore."

"Google Maps has informed me that driving directions between these two cities could not be calculated and that only an idiot would search for such a thing."

Matvey laughed and passed me a smartphone in a heavy-duty military-green case. "Now try mine."

I repeated the steps on his phone and, sure as shit, there it was: a blue line snaking its way along the Arctic coast between the two cities. And something else was there that hadn't shown on my map. Sitting along the line was an additional city name in grey Cyrillic. Goosebumps prickled my neck as I noticed his map was peppered with *lots* of grey Cyrillic names where there had been just empty Siberian wilderness on mine.

“Holy fuck”, I said, “You weren’t joking. How long has this existed?”

“Road has been there like ten years, town maybe seven. Very cool place. Restaurant, nightlife. Hipster.”

“How do you say the name of the town?”

He paused. “Volkov.”

“Volkov. Yeah. This is hard for me to believe.”

Matvey’s jaw tightened.

“You don’t seem like you’re lying. But ... the fucking *mystique* of a secret town? All it would take is one visitor from *anywhere* posting in a forum. Telling even one friend. This would be *all* over the internet. Within hours. There would be clickbait headlines about this on my news app: ‘Exotic Siberian Getaway Russia Doesn’t Want You To Know About’.”

“Amazing, right?”

“Come on, dude! And what about the U.S. government? You can’t just hide a whole city from a hypervigilant world power whose first priority is finding out all your secrets. Believe me, I know how much they’re spending on that shit—it’s perfectly clear when I pay my taxes.”

“Oh, intelligence agencies know. Obviously. Just nobody has leaked it yet. Maybe U.S wants Russia to think they aren’t spying.”

I scrunched up my face and stared at him.

“I know. It’s crazy. I never thought secret would keep for so long. Think, though. How many foreigners are interested in cities like Vankarem and Billings, small arctic towns with population less than 200? Of those, how many actually know someone there or visit in person? They’re isolated from rest of the world. Scientists come to study environment, climate change, sea level, but if locals don’t tell them, how are they going to find out? Maybe they see road leading out of town—they don’t know it’s *secret* road. They just see road, so what? Russians want to have things Americans don’t have. Places you aren’t allowed. I thought by now someone would come to study Chukchi—indigenous people in Siberia—and would have found out. But somehow ... secret is still secret.”

As Matvey spoke, I scrutinized his face for any tell or deficiency in acting skills that might indicate this guy was pulling one over on me, but he seemed sincere, even hurt by my skepticism.

“Alright. Fair enough. Why then are *you* telling *me*, an American you just met in a bar an hour ago?”

“You haven’t asked what I’m doing in Nome yet.”

“Tell me.”

“This week was debriefing conference for Russian and American Coast Guard on expanding trade routes in the Arctic Ocean. Beginning in two weeks there will be much more maritime activity in this area. Soon, this secret won’t be possible to keep anymore. You will see clickbait by next month.”

We puffed in silence for a moment, and then he raised an eyebrow at me.

“Want to be first American to go there?”

Matvey was to head back to Siberia the next morning. He told me that starting tomorrow he had a week of leave during which he had nothing planned. If I wanted to take a road trip with him to Volkov, he’d get me a travel visa and we could take his car up the purported secret highway. My second-grade teacher who told me never to go with strangers clawed at the walls of her coffin. I prayed to her and said I’d drink on it. But I’d already made the decision to go. It wasn’t in my nature to pass up an opportunity like this. Besides, the thought of eight more days dicking around by myself in Nome made my eye twitch.

Back inside the bar, Matvey and I took turns buying each other shots until closing time, startling Bill the Bartender every 30 seconds or so with raucous uproars of laughter and the pounding of our fists on the bartop. After each outburst we apologized and placed cash tips before him in atonement, which I think just pissed him off all the more.

After Bill ushered us outside and thanked us, locking the door behind us before we could reply, Matvey insisted on showing me his ship. I told him I didn’t want to drive to the dock because I’d had more drinks than I could count on his chest hair and I didn’t want to get a DWI. Before I could react, his gloved hand shot out and clutched my face, squashing the insides of my cheeks against my molars. As I grappled with both hands, trying to pry his rigid talon off me, he snatched the car keys out of my coat pocket with his other hand. Then he pushed my head back, causing me to lose my balance and fall to the ground. Throwing the keys high into the air and catching them behind his back,

he walked to my rental Chrysler and sat behind the wheel. I threw my head back and cackled at the sky, crawling on all fours towards the car.

Matvey piloted us to the coast, at one point passing a cop car parked and running with only its fog lights on. I wondered what kind of trouble a Russian coast guard captain could get in for driving drunk in the U.S. Could be a lot, or none, for all I knew. I half-hoped he would get pulled over so that the cop could check out his story.

In the near pitch dark, the vague outline of a boat bobbed in the headlights of the car. Looked sea-faring to my drunk ass.

“Volkov,” I declared.

We went back to Matvey’s hotel where he invited me to crash on the extra bed. There was a six-pack in his fridge which we polished off in quick order. We took turns playing classic rock songs from our smartphones until we both passed out fully clothed on top of our respective bed covers.

A shrill blast of trebly dance music detonated in my vicinity. The noise became a headache trapped in my skull like a cicada in a mailbox. Coaxing an eye open, I watched Matvey grapple in bewilderment on the bed for his phone. With a vengeful stab of the finger he put the alarm to death. Red-eyed, the captain thudded to the bathroom, slamming the door open as he entered. Some kind of firehose was directed at the toilet for more than 60 seconds.

I realized I’d been sweaty and hot for a long while, a result of the early-rising sun gleaming into my face through the open blinds. I pulled my hood over my head and rolled over, facing away from the window. My twisted t-shirt strangled my arms underneath my unzipped and tangled hoodie, and my leg hair was matted and staticky in my jeans. My parched tongue stank like a ham left out overnight.

Matvey came out of the bathroom squinting.

“Are we ... going to a secret town in Siberia today?” I croaked.

“Yeah.”

“Um, OK. How would I get back?”

“There are regular flights. If there is problem, I can bring you back by boat.”

“I am so hungover right now. I think I’m still drunk. I can’t tell if eating breakfast is a good or bad idea.”

“Hangover and long boat ride? Think how much barfing you’ll be doing today.”

The mention of it sent me lurching to the bathroom.

Matvey and I sat in the only two seats inside the wheelhouse of a patrol boat. A machine gun was mounted on the bow between us and the water. In the darkness and drunken optimism last night the boat had looked much bigger than it actually was. In the sober light of dawn it didn’t seem a whole lot bigger than a speedboat.

Matvey flipped some switches and with a squint said, “Last chance to change your mind.”

“Fuck it,” I said. “Let’s go to Volkov.”

Matvey gave me a slow, solemn nod. He spoke in Russian into the two-way radio on his console. A distorted voice replied in a serious tone. I watched behind us as the boat separated from the dock. When the gap had widened to a distance farther than I could jump, a current of adrenaline jolted through my body. I considered how little I actually knew about the man driving the boat, and the thought filled my mouth with metallic saliva. Pretending to be sea-sick, I staggered out of the wheelhouse and retched into the frigid navy water.

Back in the wheelhouse I stared at Matvey with wide eyes.

“You wanted to up the ante.”

“This is fucking crazy. This little boat’s gonna get us to Siberia? How far is it to Siberia from here?”

“Once we pass Wales, Alaska, it’s about 80 kilometers to Siberian mainland.”

“That’s it? Wait, so can you see Russia from Wales?”

“Ha. No. How far do you think we can see right now? How many miles to the horizon?”

“I would think, like, a hundred miles or something.”

Matvey shook his head. “Three.”

“Seriously? Just three miles on flat—well, ‘flat’—ocean?”

“Yeah, just three miles. Five kilometers.”

I tilted my head back in the ergonomic chair and rested my bloodshot eyes. “So what else can you tell me about Volkov?”

“Other than meaning ‘wolf’ in Russian, there’s nothing more I can tell you about my last name. What does *your* last name mean?”

Confused by the oblique response, I opened my eyes and looked over. Matvey was glaring at me, tight-lipped and eyebrows raised to maximum height. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the two-way radio and cupped a hand around his ear. He waved his finger back and forth between us and did the puppet-style “people talking” pantomime with both his hands.

“Oh. You know ... I’ve never thought to wonder what Franklin means,” I said and mouthed the word “sorry” to him.

Matvey was still for a long moment, thinking, like a camper who has just heard a large animal outside his tent. He said, “I think Franklin means ‘animal eaten by wolf’.” He shot a look at me which said *You don’t even know what trouble is.*

I looked at the name patch on the breast of his uniform and swallowed hard. It was the same Cyrillic name as the one I’d seen on Matvey’s map the night before. It looked like “BONKOB”. So Volkov was Matvey’s last name. The question of whether this was just a coincidence was not one I enjoyed pondering as I watched the Nome coast disappearing behind us. I wondered if last night he’d just shown me a map of where various captains were stationed. I swivelled my chair toward the window and watched the choppy Arctic waves whiz past.

For something like an hour we said nothing to each other until a hazy bump appeared on the horizon to the right of us. Matvey pointed to it and said, “That’s Wales.” I came very close to saying *Hey, man, I’m really sorry, but I’m just not feeling this trip. Could you cruise over to Wales and let me off?* But my fear of where our relationship would be if he said no prompted me to keep my mouth shut. If his intentions were nefarious it was to my advantage for Matvey to believe I trusted him.

Wales diminished to nothing as we bounced ahead. We cruised with nothing but ice water in every direction for twenty minutes until another astigmatic hump came into view in front of us. Matvey explained this was Little Diomed Island, the last outpost of America before our journey across the Bering Strait would take us over the International Date Line, past the Russia-owned Big Diomed Island, and finally to the Siberian mainland.

The patrol boat hummed and splashed. As we rounded the north side of the 1,600 foot flank that is Little Diomed Island, I saw, nestled into the only slope of the island not prohibitively vertical, about 50 homes

that looked like trailers on stilts, all huddled together as if to keep warm, and all facing Russia as if to keep an eye on her. Standing by the water next to two giant heaps of twisted, rusted metal, four men in different colored jackets followed us with stares until we were out of view.

When the community on Little Diomedede had shrunk from view and the snow-filled crags of Big Diomedede loomed before us, Matvey killed the engine and turned to me.

“We are entering Russian territory now. Here Bering Sea turns into Chukchi Sea. Things will be different from America from now on. Watch your back and don’t trust anyone but me. I have paperwork for you to fill out, then I can give you temporary visa. Once we dock at Coast Guard base, we’ll take my Jeep and I’ll show you around Siberia. We go sight-seeing, drink vodka, have good time. Fill this out.”

Matvey handed me a clipboard with some forms. Clipped on top of the stack was a handwritten note. It read:

*Sorry I forget to say don't talk about secret highway & town in boat. Don't say anything about them until we are alone in my Jeep. I could be discharged. You could be imprisoned or killed. Now you are on a real adventure. Have cigarette.*

I looked up to see Matvey holding out an open pack of smokes. I took in a sharp breath, let it out slowly, and pulled a cigarette from the red box. Matvey took a cigarette for himself and tugged the handwritten note out from under the metal clamp on the clipboard. He held a lighter to the end of my cigarette while I cradled the flame with great difficulty in the salty Arctic breeze fluttering through the two cracked windows. Matvey lit his own cigarette, rolled up the note like a joint, and lit that too. As the flame grew he opened the door at the rear of the cabin, held the burning note over the tossing waves, and released it into the ocean breeze. The wind wrenched the paper in disparate directions like a tiger shaking its prey to snap the neck.

I wanted to get to know Matvey as much as I could before we arrived at the coast guard station. If I got any indication that he had unsavory plans for me, my plan would be to wait until we were in the presence of others at the base and then tell him I wanted to take the next flight back to the United States. Big Diomedede vanished behind us.

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve had to do as a Coast Guard?” I asked.

“Murder whole boat of pirates.”

“Jesus fuck. What happened?”

“They were heading for cruise ship. We try to stop them for inspection. They try to get away, we chased them. We warn them to stop or we shoot. Idiots keep going right for cruise ship. I shoot and sink their boat. None survived. I murdered probably ten pirates. Ten or fifteen.”

“That’s ... I .... ”

“Is sad.”

“What would happen if we ran into pirates right now?”

“Not impossible. We would have to arrest them. Maybe hold them at gunpoint until assistance comes.”

“What are the chances of that happening?”

“Small. But could happen.”

“Pass me another cigarette.”

“You getting scared? Regret coming with me?”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“I can’t believe also. You crazy fuck.” He laughed. “Think you will come back feeling more brave? Or afraid to leave your house?”

“Fuck.”

Smooth green billows of tundra popped into view in the distance. As the Siberian mainland rose before us, the mossy billows revealed themselves to be resting atop formidable cliffs of wrinkled stone. Nested high in the middle of a towering slope, a lighthouse stood watch over the skeletal remains of an abandoned village. Bleached and bone-like wooden planks that once belonged to an ancient roof now lay scattered about the top of the cliff. Large white birds darted from one plank to the next.

We traced along the side of the cape until the cliffs faded into swampy lowlands crowded with countless twisting channels and irregular ponds. As the wetlands conceded to pale beach, a smattering of boxy grey buildings came into view.

“Here’s the Coast Guard station. You made it.” Matvey shook my shoulder with his hand.

Past the first row of buildings, Matvey steered us into a harbor where docks were lined with other patrol boats like ours. There were also other, much larger, vessels that looked like they could handle some

serious action. Matvey jumped out of the boat and tied it to the dock. I strapped on my backpack and climbed out next to him.

Matvey led us toward a concrete bunker where a man in uniform stood guard at the entrance with a machine gun. As we approached, he kept darting his eyes back and forth from Matvey to me. I didn't know what the man was thinking, but I knew I didn't like it. Since Matvey kept one step ahead of me, I couldn't see what, if any, nonverbal communication he was returning to the guard. I tried my best to look stoic and unsuspecting. Matvey opened the door of the bunker without saying a word to the guard, and we went inside. The guard followed me with his eyes.

We walked down a brightly lit hall with many doors on either side. The doors were open to most of the rooms, and although the lights were off inside them, I could see that each was small and contained a table and four chairs. Matvey switched on the lights in one of the rooms and said, "Wait here."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He shoved me into the room and slammed the door closed.

"Hey!" I yelled and tried to open the door, but it was locked. I hyperventilated and ran once around the perimeter of the tiny room, governed by my flight response. "Gah! What?!" I asked the empty room. I looked around. A single light hung from the ceiling over the table. There were scuff marks all over the walls and the door. More scuff marks were on the floor. The table and chairs seemed to have seen their fair share of action too. Woozy and nauseous, I sat down in one of the chairs. I set my backpack on my lap, put my arms around it in a hug, and rested my chin on the top. The pack was suddenly all I had left of a familiar world and life I'd left behind. I clutched it the way a deep sea diver clutches their umbilical cable. Remembering my smartphone, I whipped it out of my pocket only to find it dead. Right: Matvey and I had stayed up all night playing music from our phones, and I'd passed out without plugging it in to recharge.

After ten minutes the door creaked open, and a man came in wearing a dark blue uniform and white peaked cap decorated with a silver and gold insignia of a bird of prey. Shutting the door, he stood before me across the table. From out of his pocket he produced a pack of cigarettes and held it out to me.

“Um ... no thanks. I’m good.” I said. “Hey, what’s going on here?”

He stared me in the eye and continued holding out the pack of cigarettes at me. I raised my eyebrows and took one from the pack. I pulled a lighter out from my pocket, and the man snatched it out of my hand, all the while not breaking his stare. After a long pause, he offered the lighter to me as if it had been his all along. I lit the cigarette in my mouth and raised my eyebrows again. Unsure of what to do, I held the lighter out towards him. He didn’t take it, so I just set it down on the table. The man took one of the cigarettes for himself, lit it with another lighter which he brought out from his pocket, and blew puffs of smoke as he sat staring at me and not saying a word.

After a long and very uncomfortable few minutes of silence and being stared at, I asked, “Are you waiting for me to say something?”

He just kept on staring.

“Okay. Um. I’m in Russia because I met Matvey Volkov in a bar last night and he invited me to come take a road trip around Siberia with him while he’s on leave. I don’t really know anything about him. And he doesn’t know much about me. He said he could get me a travel visa. Is that ... true? Is that how it works? Am I in trouble?”

No response. Just staring.

“What do you need from me? Do you have questions you want to ask me? I don’t have anything to hide. Who *is* Matvey anyway? Is he really a captain? Is this an interrogation?”

After another long, awful while of staring and puffing on his cigarette, the man pulled a knife out of his pocket. I jerked back in my chair. The knife looked like a steak knife. He set the knife in front of me on the table with the blade facing toward him and stared at me some more.

“What is this?” I asked. “I’ve never seen this knife before. Is this something? What can you tell me about this knife? ‘Cause I don’t know anything about it. What’s going on here?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fork, setting it next to the knife. Again he reached into his pocket, this time bringing out a napkin, which he also set before me. I stared at him and blinked.

“Do you want sausage, or beef, for lunch?” The man asked.

I let out a long sigh. “Sausage?” I replied.

The man got up from the table and left the room, leaving the door open. After the sound of his footsteps diminished, I stepped into the hallway and looked around in both directions. If I wanted to take the opportunity to flee, my options were either to leave through the door we came in, past the guard who stared me down, or to see what was around the corner down the hall, where the other guy who'd stared me down went. I heard footsteps coming around the corner down the hall, so I went and sat back down at the table. The man in uniform returned with two trays. On each tray was a plate containing two halves of a dark red sausage on a bed of pale yellow stewed cabbage. Next to the plates a few slices of white bread were stacked on paper napkins. Water sloshed out of aluminum mugs as he set the trays on the table, one in front of me and one across from me. He left without saying a word or looking at me.

As his footsteps clapped away, another set of footsteps came towards my room from the same direction. They both stopped and exchanged a few words in Russian followed by chuckling. The footsteps resumed in both directions, and Matvey stepped into the room, seating himself across from me.

“What the FUCK, man?” I burst out at him.

He smirked and tossed me a little book that looked like a passport with a sheet of yellow carbon copy paper folded up inside its pages. “Your visa.”

“Jeeeesus, dude,” I said with a long sigh and started cutting into the sausage with my fork. I laughed and looked at him.

“After we eat, we get my Jeep and start heading to coast. You can drive little bit? I need nap.”

“You need much, much more than nap. I'm gonna have some questions for you. I don't think you'll be getting a lot of sleep.”

Under his breath he gave me three rapid shushes and did not look me in the eye.

Matvey ate his victuals with military efficiency. I chose to keep pace with him even though my hungover gut was dubious of any gifts from the gullet. It was quite weird, scarfing down food in the intimacy of an interrogation room with a person I hardly knew. Also weird was having come all the way to Siberia together before sharing our first meal. Kind of like having oral sex with someone and then introducing yourself.

As far as I could tell, Matvey didn't seem to find this situation particularly uncomfortable. He didn't talk or ask me any questions, and so I just played along. After two experiences with him where it seemed like he was going to bring harm to me but was only fucking around (the interrogation room and grabbing my face while stealing my car keys), my intuition was leaning towards trusting him. I was beginning to enjoy having stepped so thoroughly and abruptly into someone else's world. If in Matvey's world you just ate without conversing and listened to the sounds of chewing and scraping and slurping echoing off the barren walls, then that's what I would do. When in Rome. The room smelled of stale sweat and dried blood, by the way.

Downing his last sip of water, Matvey said, "Come on." I crammed my last piece of bread into my mouth and followed him out of the room with my tray. We wound through a couple of hallways and entered through an open set of double doors into a cafeteria. Maybe 20 or 30 men in uniform were wolfing down their meals. No one was talking. After sliding our trays onto the racks of a metal cart and placing our cups and silverware into tubs of water, we exited the building through another set of double doors on the other side of the cafeteria. The two of us marched over a vast area of concrete which lacked any markings for vehicles or pedestrians, though we crossed paths with a few of each. I wanted to ask Matvey questions, but I wasn't clear on what our official story was or what topics were acceptable to discuss on the base. Matvey made eye contact with me every once in a while, sometimes stone-faced, sometimes wearing his smirk. At last we came to a parking ramp. We approached the window of a guard shack, and Matvey spoke in Russian with a young, pock-marked Coast Guard with a machine gun in his lap.

"Let me see your visa," the attendant said to me.

"Show him your visa while I get my Jeep," Matvey instructed me. I passed the booklet through the window as Matvey ran inside the ramp.

"What is your business in Siberia?" asked the kid.

"Captain Volkov is going to take me out for some drinks and show me around the area."

"Are you journalist?"

"No. I'm just a ... adventure seeker."

“Be forewarned. Taking pictures of government buildings, military craft, or police is grounds for revocation of your visa, deportation, or imprisonment.”

“Understood.”

“Things are different here.”

I stared at the kid.

“You are here for something different from America. You will find. But you might not like.”

“Yeah? What should I watch out for?”

“Don’t trust anyone.”

The way this young guy who couldn’t have been older than 19 was looking at me caused a memory to pop into my mind. I was 13 years old and had ridden my bike across town to a friend’s house to see if she was around. Her dad answered the door, saw my bike, and furrowed his brow in thought. I watched images of barred windows, idling cars with tinted glass, and eyelids fluttering behind dumpsters occur to him in succession as it dawned on him the parts of town I would have passed through to get to his house. The look he gave me was the same as the one I was getting from the young Siberian checking out my visa.

“Can I trust Captain Volkov?” I asked.

“Is Captain Volkov anyone?”

“So I’ll be on my guard for those who might want to extort, abduct, rape, rob.” His fingers slid around the grip of the machine gun in his lap. “I’m wary of these things in any part of the world. What else should I watch out for? What dangers does Siberia have that other places don’t? Can you be more specific about what is different here?”

“What you ask about is secret. Secret even from me. Especially secret from you, American.”

A black Jeep Patriot rolled up next to me with Matvey at the wheel. I stuck my visa in the inside pocket of my jacket and looked up at the kid. His eyes were fixed downward at the gun in his lap. He didn’t look up to return my gaze. I trotted around to the passenger door and hopped in.

“That guy was awesome,” I said.

The security gate went up and we drove through.

“He is my son. Don’t insult him.”

“Insult him? I wanna make love to him.”

"I should turn around then?"

"Yeah, turn around. I wanna make love to the whole fuckin' base."

"This can be arranged."

I went silent for a moment, sobered out of my joking as I remembered the stories of more than one friend who'd been raped while in the military.

"Matvey?"

"You can ask questions now."

"Is Volkov a real city?"

"Yeah."

"And your last name just happens to be the same as the name of this city?"

"Yeah."

"Why is that?"

"Why does anyone have their name? Your name is Franklin. Is there city named Franklin in U.S.?"

I scrunched up my mouth and squinted at him. There's a town called Franklin in like every state.

"Are you done asking questions now?"

"Hmm ... let's see. Fuck you. What's the population of Volkov?"  
Matvey thought for a minute. "Around 25,000."

"What is the industry there? Why does this town exist? Why build a new city right on the Arctic Circle?"

"A lot of climate science is conducted there."

"But I thought you said the researchers came to the other city."

"—Vankarem."

"And that they had no reason to be interested in the road to Volkov."

"Yeah."

"Well now you're saying research goes on in Volkov too."

"Maybe one or two foreigners come to Vankarem each year to study climate, but they don't know that right down highway Russians are doing their own climate research. Not international effort. Just Russian."

"This is giving me the chills. Aren't I going to be unwelcome there."

"Yeah."

"Why are you bringing me there!?"

“Just don’t get too curious around scientists if you meet them. I’m giving you peek at something no American has seen. Don’t be greedy. You will have many questions that you’ll never get answered. Frustrating—sorry. But better than nothing, right?”

I nodded my head and looked out the window at the flurry of snowflakes that were beginning to parachute down from the overcast sky. Wind coming in off the Arctic rocked the SUV. “So climate science is the industry there?”

“Yes, and real estate. When ice caps melt and climate gets hotter, it will be desirable place to live. Now it’s more Bohemian and young people and artists live there. Is cheap. Is something new. But expensive flats will be coming soon.”

“Yeah, artists are the harbingers of gentrification. Sucks that they always get priced out of the cool places they help create. But then again, they usually displace other people when they move in. The low-income people who live in the town get priced out first. Is that what happened here? Were there Chukchi living in Volkov before it blew up?”

“In this case, no. No one was living there before.”

“Wait. You say it will be a desirable place to live once climate change warms the ice caps, but won’t the town be vulnerable to rising sea levels if it’s right on the coast?”

“They are prepared for that.”

“How?”

“You will see for yourself tonight.”

My excitement grew. I still wondered if Matvey was actually just going to sell me to someone. We bounced along on a rocky stretch of tundra that I guess was a road because it was lined with reflective traffic markers. Melting piles of snow were scattered about here and there. The Arctic Ocean came into view once again ahead of us.

“Are you enjoying this?” asked Matvey.

“Yeah. This is pretty wild. I can’t believe I’m doing this. I was still basically drunk when we got on the boat earlier.”

“Me too.”

“If I’d had all my faculties I might not have come.”

“But you kind of like the danger and uncertainty. I can tell. You don’t want to just see Big Ben and the Great Wall of China when you travel.”

“You’re right. I’ve still never really been burned by danger, though. I’ve noticed my enjoyment of danger starts to subside as harm starts to seem like more of a real possibility.”

“Would be funny if your first time getting burned is in cold Siberia.”

“Wouldn’t it, though?”

The road veered right, placing the ocean to the left of us.

“I thought Volkov was to the west,” I said.

“First we fuel up in Vankarem.”

Some houses and buildings popped into view. A few of them were painted in bold colors of red, yellow, or green. The town was built on a peninsula, so as we drove inside its limits there was ocean on the horizon in every direction except behind us. We pulled into a gas station that looked like it was built out of rusted automobile scraps.

Matvey parked the Patriot next to a pair of snow-dusted gas pumps and hopped out into the whining wind to fill the tank. I watched him in the side-view mirror. He didn’t hop in place to keep warm or hunch over rubbing his arms like people in Minnesota. He just squinted at the nozzle until the automatic shut-off valve announced with a clunk that the tank was full. Matvey glanced up and caught me staring at him in the mirror. He smirked and snorted and opened the passenger door, tossing me the keys.

“Do you want me to get you something from store?” he asked.

I opened my mouth to answer him, but right away he closed the door in my face and walked away with a playful smile. He entered the station store through a grimy glass door next to a grimy glass window through which I could see shelves of Siberian sundries. I felt the urge to repay him for his generous offer to buy me something. I opened the glove compartment and saw a small package of condoms, a candy bar and a box of instant tea. I tore open the three-pack of condoms and switched them with three of the individually wrapped tea bags from the other box. I chuckled, wanting to see his face when he discovered the tea bags in the heat of passion. Wait, no. I hoped to God that at no point on this trip would I find myself in a situation where Matvey was opening a box of condoms in my presence. I helped myself to the candy bar.

It was early afternoon, and I was fatigued from the long night of hard drinking, the early rise, and the anxiety of traveling with a stranger

in a small boat toward a dubious destination. I turned the key in the ignition and closed my eyes for a few minutes, savoring the heat as it rushed out of the vents to swaddle me. After several slow, deep breaths I opened my eyes and spied Matvey standing in the station store window talking with a woman and man. I couldn't tell their ages or see much of what they looked like through the filth on the window. And whether the three of them had any prior acquaintance I could not tell from their body language. Matvey appeared to be regaling them with a story. The woman gazed up at him, head tilted downward. The man leaned with his elbow on one of the shelves' top row of canned goods. They both wore large, bell-shaped, animal-skin coats trimmed with fur. Matvey held his hands apart like a vice and pantomimed crushing something between them until it popped. The woman threw her head back in laughter and clutched Matvey's forearm. Quaking, she buried her face in his chest. With a twirling kind of dance, she positioned herself behind him and massaged his shoulders. He rolled his head back in pleasure. Next, the man stepped forward and extended his hand to Matvey's crotch, keeping it there. Matvey let out a long sigh and drooped his head, nodding in surrender. He held up a finger at them and exited the store. He and I locked gazes as he walked back to the SUV. I rolled down the window.

"Um. Wait here," he said, "I'll be back in thirty minutes."

I grinned at him. He flexed both biceps.

"Take your time — I'm gonna take a nap," I said, "Would you throw this away for me?" I handed him the candy wrapper. He bit his lip and crammed the wrapper down my coat collar. Opening the glove compartment, I passed him the condom box with a wink. He yanked my head toward him, kissed me on the cheek, and hustled back to the store. The three of them disappeared somewhere inside.

I locked the car doors and reclined my seat to a horizontal position. Pulling my beanie over my eyes, I inhaled deeply and drifted off.

I woke with the feeling that something was amiss. At first my nap had been glorious in the Patriot's wide, ergonomic seat. Lost in slumber as thick as cake batter, my mind indulged me in all manner of distracting dreamscapes, relieving me from any memory of the wakeful world. Several times I'd stirred to the brink of consciousness to adjust my

position, always with a faint fear it was time to stop napping and remember where I was, but the warm ocean of sleep kept pulling me back with its rich, chocolatey undertow. After a certain point, though, an increasing suspicion finally nagged me awake.

I realized it had been quiet for a long time. Before my nap, there had been various sounds about: people, traffic, activity in the distance (albeit on the scale of an Arctic fishing community), but now the only sound was the occasional yawn of the wind. Also, I felt suspiciously well rested. I sat up and saw long shadows reclining across the blanket of frost on the pavement. The sun was low in the sky and glared off the store windows. My brow leapt as I noticed the dash clock read 22:20. I'd been sleeping in the car for something like nine hours.

I fumbled with the car seat until it snapped into its most upright position. Swiveling my head in both directions, I scanned for other people or cars. I killed the engine and listened for sounds of activity. None. My trembling hands slipped off the door handle as I tried to open it, forgetting it was locked. Wide-eyed, I barked, "God DAMN it!" and groped for the unlock button.

Leaving the vehicle, I scampered to the station store. As I passed into the shadow of the building, the glare on the windows vanished, revealing the store to be dark and closed. I yanked at the locked door, banging and shouting. I yelled for Matvey. In the back of the building I found a second door, also locked. Smooth, newly-sculpted snowdrifts shrouded any footprints which might have trailed from there earlier. I ran back to the SUV to get out of the wind.

Alright, so maybe Matvey abandoned me. For all I knew he was the kind of guy who'd do such a thing. But abandon his vehicle too? Was this retaliation for the tea bags in our little prank war? I laughed at the stupidity of pulling a mean prank on someone with whom you've just left the keys to your vehicle. My laughter turned to a chill as I considered the possibility of him reporting his Jeep stolen in order to get me in a world of shit with the Russian authorities. Or had his newfound lovers from the convenience store turned out not to be completely wholesome? Since we'd left the shore of Alaska I'd been worrying about something bad happening to me, but I hadn't thought to worry about what would happen to me if something bad happened to Matvey. Should I drive around looking for him? Go knocking on doors? There couldn't be more than a

hundred houses in this Chukchi village. It wouldn't take long to visit every one of them. The thought of the smallness of this village compared with the vast distance that stood between me and anywhere more populated pierced me like an ice pick in the gut. Matvey said he'd be back in a half hour. That was nine hours ago. What were the odds this was just a joke or miscommunication? A lump formed in my throat.

As dusk set in, the glare of the sun slinked off the store's front door, unmasking a few lines of white text. Maybe the hours of business were posted there. Leaving the Patriot running, I walked up to examine the writing on the door. Not knowing any Russian, I could only read the numerals. "06:00--20:00". Alright, in less than seven hours someone would be here to open the store, hopefully the same person who closed today. If the clerk had seen Matvey arrive with me and then leave me waiting in the car, they would at least be able to communicate my story for me to someone who might be able to help. Staying put was the best option I could think of. A loud metallic crash to my right sent a white-hot bolt of adrenaline through my body.

I leapt away from the sound while simultaneously whipping my head toward the source. A rusted steel drum which before had stood against the wall around the corner of the building now lay tipped over, garbage tumbling out. Behind the barrel I saw a living being which did not register as one I knew from this world.

Staring at me from small, black eyes was a creature about five feet tall, without, it seemed, any torso—just two broad and furry legs (or arms maybe) growing directly out of a rounded head, like cream-colored tassels hanging from a drawer pull. Below its eyes was a large black oval, and from the top of its oblong head protruded two little black half-circles. The vase-shaped thing and I stood locked in a motionless stare—I frozen with fear, and it with motivations unreadable to me. I felt woozy as my flight and freeze instincts volleyed for dominance. Then one of the being's legs took a gingerly step in my direction, revealing another leg hidden behind it, as well as a furry white horizontal torso. A gaping mouth with upper and lower fangs snapped open under the black oval revealing the oval to be a snout. The beast charged me with a baritone growl, and in my fully autonomic dash back to the car I put the pieces together and understood I was about to feed a polar bear.

“Hey! Fuck! Don’t!” came slobbering out of my mouth. The thud of paws and husky panting gaining behind me, I flung the SUV door open and felt it strike the animal’s head. I pulled in my feet and slammed the door shut with all my strength, catching the muzzle of the bear just as it lunged toward me. With a wheeze the bear retracted, giving me time to close the door completely. I shifted into reverse and slammed my foot on the gas. The Patriot screamed away from the creature. I made a screeching U-turn out of the parking lot and onto the road. In the rearview mirror the polar bear swayed its head in pain. In the blue-grey dusk, I saw (which caused me to hyperventilate) the shape of a second bear trundling out from behind the station store. Farther down the road behind me, yet another bear sniffed around the back of someone’s house. On the bluff to my left a similar white beast was waddling its way down the snowy slope. I flipped on the high beams and raced down the only road out of town, the road not shown on U.S. Google Maps.

I followed the road into darkness with my head and neck outstretched in front of me in hypervigilance. My sharp, heavy breaths crashed against the silence like the frigid whitecaps I knew were off to my right somewhere. The light from the Patriot’s headlamps didn’t carry far in the direction of the shore, but I sensed that the churning black maw of the Arctic was close. If not on the horizon then just over it. A light flurry of snowflakes flitted and darted across the windshield.

Matvey had implied the town was less than a day’s drive from Vankarem and thus we would be whooping it up there tonight. Trying to make it to the town with its purported nightlife appealed more than hanging around Vankarem with the polar bears. As for how far exactly I had to go, that was one of many things I could have asked Matvey about but didn’t. I kept having epiphanies about how my smartphone could help in this situation, if only I could charge it. On so many road trips I’d pined for the days before smartphones when doubt and mystery and reliance on strangers was part of the fun. But now without my phone charged I felt like an astronaut without a safety tether.

Forty-five minutes I drove in silence. The Jeep kicked up a stone which clanked against the suspension, causing me to jump in my seat and bang my knee hard on the steering column. I got mad as if someone had startled me as a joke, but there was no one to express my anger to.

“Quite an adventure,” I snapped. My words slapped back off the windshield and side windows, the sound decaying immediately. I questioned whether I had actually said anything out loud. The more I tried to know for sure whether I’d spoken the words or just thought them, the more unsure I became. “Quite an adventure,” I said out loud again. No sooner had the brief echo faded than I again felt uncertain about whether I’d actually employed my vocal cords. I wished anyone at all was with me in the car—someone to give a response of any kind when I spoke. My eyes got watery as I considered how many steps removed I was from a situation of comfort and familiarity with another person. There was a feeling of weightlessness in my stomach as I pictured a map of the earth with all those miles between Minnesota and Alaska—and all those miles between Alaska and here.

I thought about that word: *adventure*. Before I left for Alaska, I’d given my two weeks notice at the restaurant where I worked. The GM seemed put out and exasperated that she’d have only two weeks to hire another server to replace me. She asked me why I was quitting, and I told her it was springtime and I’d explode if I didn’t have an adventure ASAP. I’d emphasized the word *adventure* when I said it, and it stirred up feelings of Tolkien and Star Trek and detective novels, and every peak experience on the road since my first solo road trip at age 18, and every exciting story I’d brought back with me, and how powerful and cool and fully myself I felt when I told those stories in a bar or on a date. I always pictured myself having a good time on an adventure. But in reality, adventures weren’t always a good time when I was actually on one. I’d felt bored and lonely and drained driving aimlessly around Nome for a week. It’s like I sold myself a fantasy all year, every year, about who I was, only to wind up with some amount of buyer’s remorse when I actually got out on the road.

I recalled having a similar identity crisis in my thirties traveling alone in Tibet and doing a week-long meditation retreat at a Buddhist monastery. I couldn’t have felt cooler giving my two-weeks at the post office that spring and explaining it was because I was headed to Tibet to meditate—and after that, who knew where life would take me? But I was blind-sided on the retreat by feelings of uprootedness and overwhelm and purposelessness. One of the elder monks there had, in a sermon, told a story about a kid whose favorite thing in the world was collecting

toy dragons. He went around telling everyone how much he loved dragons. One day, though, a real dragon showed up at his house and tried to force his way in to eat the kid, and the kid just barely managed to escape alive. From that day forward the kid had a more sober attitude about dragons. I didn't connect the story to my own life at the time, but now, fleeing from polar bears, alone in a (stolen?) car, somewhere near the Arctic Circle in Siberia, towards a destination that might not even exist, I understood the meaning of the story. This was as real a dragon as I'd ever faced. I made a promise to myself that if I escaped this adventure alive, I would from now on take both the good and the bad into account when fantasizing about, talking about, or planning, an adventure.

For another hour I drove along what I guessed was the road I'd risked my life to see. And there wasn't much to see, since it was a moonless night and what little light might otherwise have dispersed outside the headlight beams was suppressed by the falling snow. I'd come more than a hundred kilometers without any detectable variation in my surroundings until two things changed. First, the snow picked up and covered the road so it was no longer distinguishable from the not-road; the only way I knew I was still on it was by the rough bouncing of the Jeep's wheels when I'd stray too far to either side. It was like bowling with bumpers, and about as helpful for my self-esteem. The other thing that changed was the road started to take me up a hill.

The angle of incline was about to increase more severely a few yards ahead, and I felt wary about the potential of sliding backwards on the snow which was increasing by the minute. I looked around for a 4WD switch and discovered that it was already engaged. Alright, good. Then I stopped the car and dropped my jaw: I'd been driving in 4WD this whole time. My eyes whipped to the fuel gauge. There was only a quarter tank left.

My heart thudded in double-time and I ground my teeth. I shut down the SUV, switched off the headlights, and sat in the darkness, thinking. I had no idea how much more fuel was spent by using four-wheel drive. If it burned through twice as much as front-wheel drive, would that mean I now had exactly enough gas to make it back to Vankarem in 2WD? I didn't even know how to do the math. My options were either to turn back toward Vankarem and its polar bears and risk

getting marooned with no fuel along the way, or to press on with just a quarter tank toward a town that might be a bullshit fantasy fed to me by the guy who abandoned me in Siberia, and risk getting stranded even farther from the only town whose existence I was certain of.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I noticed a familiar sight which I had seen on countless night drives throughout my life. There was a bright patch of sky in the distance. It was the unmistakable glow of city lights reflected on the cloud cover. Holy shit. Volkov might actually be real.

I ascended to the top of the hill and disengaged the 4-wheel-drive as quick as someone lost in the desert snatching up an open canteen he's just dropped on the ground. To my right and below, I glimpsed the crests of reckless Arctic waves twinkling faintly in the light pollution from the city over the horizon. Before me I was faced with a choice of two directions in which to continue. One choice was to keep going straight. Because of the two inches of snow on the ground, I wasn't certain that the straight-ahead route was even a road. If it was a road, it looked like it was going to start winding up some switchbacks in about fifty yards. The other choice was to go down a slope to the right toward the ocean. There was a sign nailed to a wooden post at the top of the slope. I read the Cyrillic words over and over, sounding them out and listening for cognates, but I could decipher none of their meaning.

I was lured to Siberia by the promise of a coastal highway and a secret town, so I guessed my destiny lay down the slope toward the water and the lights in the sky. I rode the brakes down the long snow-covered slope, hoping the braking wouldn't cause me to skid but also trying not to pick up too much speed, until I was on level ground again, about 30 feet below the precipice of the cliff I'd come from.

I now found myself on a beach. At first I thought it was a dead end because there were boulders to my right and left all the way up to the water. But then the snow died down a little, unveiling a sight more nightmarish than anything I'd seen yet. Before me a road shot straight out into the ocean, all the way to the horizon. It couldn't have been more than six feet above sea level. There were no railings. Waves broke against the banks on both sides. Another sign written in Cyrillic was posted by the road on the shore, with only a few words on it. Words I did not understand. Far off in the distance, where the road met the

horizon—and apparently extended past it—the yellow glow of city lights hovered directly above.

I sat and watched the road in silence for 20 minutes. I pondered what Matvey had said about the horizon being only three miles away. Hopefully that was true; I didn't know how many miles I could go on the fuel I had left. About two thirds of the way to the horizon the road became just a line, too far away to observe much about it, but I kept vigil over all of the road that I could see. Breakers shot walls of foam straight upward along the sides of the road, but I never saw any waves wash over the road itself. I checked the gas gauge. The needle hovered just above empty. Shifting into gear, I rolled out onto the road.

I cruised at 24 kilometers per hour, marking distance on the odometer as I went. It would be about five kilometers to the horizon from where I started, if Matvey's geometry was correct. Every thirty seconds or so I was startled by a juicy breaker smacking into the bank next to me and tossing a mass of cold saltwater droplets onto the windshield. It didn't take long for the shore to vanish from sight behind me with only the dim red of the Patriot's taillights to try to see it. I bit the insides of my cheeks and squeezed the steering wheel with both hands. As I traversed the fourth kilometer from shore, the road continued extending to the horizon in the distance. And as I began my fifth kilometer I felt queasy knowing that if there were more visibility I'd see nothing but road and ocean behind me as well.

A few dark shapes lay strewn across the road up ahead. When I got close enough to see what they were I stopped the car. Strands of seaweed crisscrossed the road ahead of me as far as I could see. My heartbeat played jungle rhythms on my eardrums as I squinted, watching for road-crossing waves. The low fuel indicator flashed on with a loud ding, and in my startled adrenaline rush some animal part of me took control, thrusting my foot down on the gas pedal. With my arms straight and locked at the elbows and my head and back mashed against the car seat, I rocketed towards the horizon, releasing a death cry. Knots of seaweed kicked up in the torque of my speeding wheels and thudded against the bottom of the SUV. The road rose up in elevation for a brief stretch, and as I crested the rise I slammed on the brakes with the full weight of my body, hot bile flooding my esophagus.

The road simply slanted down into the ocean 15 feet beyond the rise. Nothing but water ahead of me to the horizon. End of the road. The nose of the SUV dipped into the water, submerging the front wheels halfway.

Suspended in the mental weightlessness of extreme astonishment, my eyes turned up to the lights in the sky. Greens and oranges and yellows played on the clouds, dancing here and there like searchlights. The colors twirled and danced and commingled, as if the sky were a puddle of gasoline roiled by a swarm of lightning bugs. I gaped, transfixed and slack-jawed. Volkov appeared to be a place of much activity and revelry. And then all the lights just flickered out.

The Jeep's headlights skipped across the waves, the only light source on a dark ocean under a now-dark sky. I clenched my teeth as the reality sunk in that what I'd thought was the reflection of city lights in the sky had been the Aurora Borealis all along. I backed the front end of the car out of the water just as a tall black wave pounced on the hood and nearly flooded the engine compartment. I felt like a prey animal. The road was a long, boney finger dangling me over a vast, cold mouth, about to drop me in. I reversed into a three-point turn, slow and quiet, trying to evade the notice of the ocean, the sky, the cold wind. I rolled back up the rise, heading back the way I'd come. But waves now crashed and coalesced across the road leading back to shore. Within seconds the rising tide washed away every trace of the road, except for the short hump of elevated land underneath me.

I was surrounded by the frigid depths of the Arctic Ocean, all the way to the horizon, in every direction. The waves thundered against the sides of the SUV, splattering heavy droplets across the windshield like some vengeful car wash. The bigger waves would hoist the car up from beneath causing it to float an inch or two to the side. I convulsed with panic. I kept my left hand on the power window controls, ready to roll them down in a split second if I felt the car getting swept into the sea. I knew I'd be doused with freezing water and in danger of hypothermia if I opened the windows now, but I needed to be ready to escape through them if the car got overtaken and submerged. Another massive wave muscled the SUV to the very edge of the rise. One more wave like that from the same direction and I'd be swept into the drink.

No wave had yet flooded the engine or shorted the Patriot's electrical system, but such a wave was due any minute. I switched the headlights to high beam and then toggled them on and off in a pattern of three short flashes, followed by three long, and then three more short. I passed a threshold within myself where I knew that repeating the S.O.S. signal with the headlights was the last survival idea I had left in me. I was satisfied with the effort I'd put into staying alive, and it was time to get ready to die. I felt compassion for myself for getting into this fatal fix. Many creatures throughout the eons had died as the result of some mistake, by taking a risk that didn't pay off, or by investigating some lead that concealed a lethal surprise. I was one of those many creatures, and now that I was at the end, I didn't blame any of us, didn't see our terminal curiosity and clumsiness as a moral failing. I thought of the people in the bar in Nome, where I'd met Matvey. I'd looked down on them, thinking of them as uninteresting and unintelligent. My eyes now filled with tears as I saw us all for the amazing and tragic creatures we were. I felt my shared humanity with those people in the bar. I wanted to shower them with affection and reverence and dance with them in celebration that any of us came into being at all. I saw them all as they were as little kids, ready to play and be silly. I saw their faces harden as they met the coldness and cruelty of other people and became cold and cruel themselves, just as I had been cold and cruel in how I judged them. I wished I could make amends with them and give them all a handshake.

So this was what a complete life story looked like, when you got to see the whole thing. I saw the whole thing for all of us: death, birth, love, weddings, funerals, atoms, cells, bullshitting with strangers in bars. Somehow I and every other thing in existence fit into that whole unfathomable story. I thought about what might be next for me, after the sea had its fill of me. I wondered if I'd find myself floating up through a tunnel of light like so many near-death experiencers had come back to report. Maybe, like the skeptics say, the tunnel of light is just a natural process of the brain dying, which we erroneously interpret as a real tunnel to a real place. What a letdown, to go through a whole life, to discover what is and isn't important, to learn from mistakes, to gain self-knowledge and put a name to those aspects of life and fellowship which deserved to continue beyond this life, to find myself dead and floating in an ocean of light with a sense of where I hoped to be

going—and then to have the light at the end of the tunnel just fade out, as the lights of Volkov had faded out. What a seismic fuck-bomb of a disappointment that would be. But the thing is: if my brain just died and there was nothing more, there would be no me to reflect on that experience and feel disappointed. My last moment of consciousness would not be something I would ever experience as a memory or have an opinion on. One thing a human being could never feel was the disappointment of knowing for sure there is no afterlife. These kinds of existential creepy-crawlies had caused me many nights of panic and attendant shame on my long, lonely, aimless drives, but as I readied myself for death on this night in the middle of the ocean, the awareness of my own love was more pressing than my fear of annihilation. I didn't know if there was more beyond this life, but I knew that if there was more, I was game for it. Either way, I forgave reality for being the way it is.

From my left, a long bridge of ghostly light emerged from somewhere out in the ocean and extended to the horizon in front of me. The beam pivoted and flooded the Jeep with light, forcing my eyes shut. I swung up my hands to cover my eyes because it was too bright even with them closed. I heard the hum of a boat in the distance. Flinging the car door open, I jumped out onto the thin patch of road between the vehicle and the water and did frantic jumping jacks in front of the light. The light flashed off and on twice, acknowledging me. No sooner had I gasped with relief than I was brick-walled from behind by a lofty wave and tossed into the water in front of me.

The impact of the wave itself didn't hurt, but the coldness of the water was like the feeling of stubbing a toe except for in every bone of my body. My limbs were too cold to move. I sucked in the biggest gulp of air I possibly could, leaving not a single ounce of room in my lungs, and held my breath. I couldn't cajole my frozen limbs to swim, but the air in my lungs would keep me from sinking. Just the top of my head protruded from the water, and I felt something cushiony whack me there and bounce away. Through my closed eyelids I detected the light beam pivot just to the side of me, and I snapped out of the belief that the cold was preventing me from swimming. I found, to my surprise, that my winter jacket and hiking boots didn't weigh me down or make swimming that much more difficult. Treading water, I poked my head above the surface,

expelled the old air out of my lungs and sucked in another desperate gulp. Since the light beam was blinding and the rest of the world around me was pitch dark, I couldn't see anything but the beacon itself. I paddled toward where the light was brightest and groped around with my numb hands. At last they plunked down on the life preserver. My fingers didn't have much left in the way of gripping strength, so I weaved both my arms through the center hole of the cushion. I hugged the preserver as I felt it being pulled in toward the boat.

"Charlie! Hold on!" a voice called in my direction. Further Russian shouts surfed on the roar of the Arctic waves and bobbed in and out of the rumble of the rescue ship. As I drew closer, the ledge of the boat eclipsed the blinding beacon, and I saw Matvey waving me in with both his arms. "Charlie! I'm sorry!" he yelled, "I fell asleep!"

I swung one of my arms at the ladder on the side of the ship, but now my limbs really were too numb to do much. I couldn't move my hands or fingers at all. I became irritated at the ladder and irritated at my hands and arms that wouldn't do what I told them, and irritated at all the shouting. Irritated at the squirrely waves that just wouldn't settle the fuck down. All-encompassing irritation. I was gearing up to scold the waves—really give them a good dressing down—when my irritation about-faced. I felt as if I were floating in a beautiful work of art. The smooth contour of the illuminated ship against the black sky was both alien and cozy all at once; it gave me an awe that hearkened to my earliest memories, of setting eyes on things for the first time. The wind swaddled me with a song of whispers. Matvey and two other uniformed silhouettes hovered above me like parents and grandparents singing a lullaby to me as I lay in my crib. Looking back, it wasn't so much an experience of beauty—because beauty is an evaluation. It was more like a serenity. The serenity of not evaluating things at all. I found myself without any sense of responsibility, pressure, or expectation. The bow of the ship transmogrified into the muzzle of a wolf, and I had no opinion on this. The wolf's maw came down on me, fangs pressing down into each of my shoulders, and slurped me up like a treat.

What happened immediately after that, I can't recall. I know it involved being stripped of my wet clothing, wrapped in a warm blanket, and undergoing some sort of procedure administered by the three guardsmen to counteract my hypothermia. My memories pick up—at first

impressionistically, like after having been anesthetized—with me sitting on a cushioned bench in the bridge of a patrol boat, wrapped in the blanket, blessedly warm, with Matvey sitting on the bench across from me, his hands folded and elbows resting on his knees.

“Charlie? You there, man?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“I’m so sorry, man.”

Still halfway dazed, I looked around at the interior of the boat. It was similar to the patrol boat I’d come to Siberia in but larger by half. The two other coast guardsmen sat in the front seats, looking ahead and piloting us over the dark waters.

“Charlie, man. Why did you drive way out onto that spit?”

Clarity came back to me with a white-hot bolt of indignation. “I was trying to find fucking V—”

Matvey looked down at the floor.

“I was trying to find fucking Volkov!” I said the name of the town with especial volume and clarity. I looked over at the other guardsmen. They were still looking out the front windshield and didn’t seem to find my utterance of the name Volkov particularly noteworthy. I was about to scream, *IS VOLKOV A REAL CITY?* But when I saw the shame in Matvey’s eyes as he raised them to meet mine, I had the answer to my question.

“I’m so sorry, Charlie.” He released a heavy sigh and shook his head. “I wanted to give you interesting experience in Siberia, so I made up story to draw you out here.”

A torrent of angry responses flooded my brain. I withheld saying anything while I sorted through them all. I looked out the window towards shore and saw faint traces of definition emerging in the untimely Arctic dawn. I opted not to say anything, nor to look Matvey in the eye. I rested my elbows on my knees, mirroring Matvey’s posture, hung my head, and closed my eyes. For a long while I listened to the hum of the boat and basked in the relief of having survived. I heard something small slide across the floor and stop against one of the thick woolen socks I now wore, courtesy of the Russian Coast Guard. I opened my eyes and saw laying at my feet an individually wrapped tea bag. I smirked and looked up at Matvey. He smirked and shook his head. He held my gaze for a

moment until a look of weary sheepishness overtook his face. He motioned with his head, indicating I should look out towards the shore.

By now pale light was divulging the features of the cliffs I'd driven along hours earlier. Clustered near the top of a cliff (but far enough underneath to be hidden from anyone above who drove past) were 20-30 shack-like structures and one larger single-story building. A few of the shacks' interiors were lit up. Through three large windows on the single-story building I could make out the interior of a tavern. The walls looked to be made of warm-colored wood. A rack of colored stage-lights flashed in various patterns. Two women with long dark pigtail braids danced in front of the lights and appeared to be singing along to a song. Another woman sat on top of the wooden bar counter watching the dancers, her legs dangling and swinging to a rhythm. She grabbed two steins from behind her, leaned back, and filled them each individually from a tap. She walked over and put the steins in the hands of the ladies on the dance floor, performing dance moves at them as she walked backwards back to the bar. Two young-looking guys with glasses and beards sat at a table in the back corner conversing and gesturing with steins beside them.

I ground my teeth in rage as I sized up the tiny colony of buildings. *This* was what I'd faced all the perils and brushes with eradication for? Matvey dragged me into bumfuck Siberia believing I'd be visiting a secret city of 25,000 people for *this*? But as I watched another man and woman step onto the dance floor and make silly, angular moves with their arms and legs, it sunk in how remote a location this was for a pub. It looked like exactly the kind of place I was always hoping to discover on my road trips. I would love to hang out in that place. It was so far off the beaten path it didn't even register. Those people dancing and gabbing were from a walk of life much different from any I'd experienced before, and I would have had a friend to translate and bridge the gaps for me. Matvey had understood me and what I was searching for perfectly. I wouldn't have been disappointed. It would have been worth it. And the way he tricked me into going there would have made for one of the best stories of my life. I guess it still has.