Alaska: A Week in the Backcountry

Tang of wild blueberries, caribou bones scattered through the tundra: I am in Denali National Park, coming down from an unnamed ridge above the confluence of Stony Creek and Boundary Creek, cloud-veiled glimpses of the Alaska range to the south, the rivers below me braiding their way through glacial till, that wide band of rock left behind by the glaciers that shaped this land however many thousands of years ago. When I crested this ridge I saw two caribou, a doe, and a buck with antlers red on the underside where the velvet is shedding. The folds of the ridge on the way up meant that I came upon them sudden and close, but the pair was unfazed by my presence and continued to browse, only slowly making their way away from me along the broad sweep of this hilltop. I will later learn that caribou shed their antlers every year, which makes their impressive size and sweep seem like an even more exuberant display. In the summer, when days are long and browsing is good, a male's antlers can grow up to an inch a day, the fastest tissue growth among any mammal.

Female caribou, unlike other members of the deer family, also have antlers, though not as large as the males.

I am here for six days of solo hiking in the back-country. At the end of these six days, I'll stay with my old college friend Simon, who runs a lodge in Kantishna at the west end of the park road. When I'm done hiking, I know that there is company and a hot shower waiting. But that seems far away yet, and I find myself feeling a mix of excitement and trepidation at the beginning of this extended stretch of solitude. When I first started planning this trip about a year ago, I was still mired in depression after breaking up with my girlfriend. Even though I had been the one to call an end to the relationship a year earlier, I feared I could never love someone else as much, which made the prospect of the years to come seem exceedingly lonely. So I put my bets on Alaska, hoping that a grand adventure would either snap me out of it or that I would be eaten by a bear on some lonely mountaintop as a fittingly romantic end to it all. At the time, either option seemed acceptable. In the course of a year, though, I had been able to leave that dark cloud behind in a series of smaller gestures, which brings me here in a very different mind-set than I had expected.

Life is good: immediately before this trip, I spent three weeks leading a group of twenty-five teen singers on a performing tour. Being surrounded by their easy love and vibrant gusto for life was infectious, and I ended that tour on a high. But I've committed myself to these days of solitude in an unknown wilderness, one with grizzlies and mountains and dropping temperatures at night. It has been quite a few years since

I've attempted such a deep wilderness experience. I am nervous that my skills are rusty, that I'll come face-to-face with a grizzly, that I'll be lonely.

Getting here takes a long time. First, twenty hours of plane travel from Vermont to Anchorage, then an eight-hour train ride from Anchorage to Denali, and finally an overnight stay before waiting for the back-country permitting station to open at 9:00 a.m. Unlike national parks in the lower forty-eight, Denali doesn't have trails or campsites in the back country. Instead, the park is divided into units, each of which has a quota of campers that can't be exceeded on a given night. They don't accept advance reservations, so you have to see what's available when you show up, conferring with the rangers about your route. There was a safety video to be watched, a bear canister to be approved, and then four hours on the park bus to get to the starting point of the hike.

By the time I finally did step off the road, I was pretty anxious to get moving and headed down Little Stony Creek before the dust from the bus pulling away had fully settled. I wanted to write "up the river" but water flows north here, towards the Arctic Ocean. Because of this, I will feel a little turned around the whole time I am here, my instinct for north and south never quite right. The land is mostly tundra, a complex mix of mosses and lichens and small shrubs, including plentiful blueberries, overlaying a patchwork of permafrost. There are trees lower down; willows mostly, which I would come to dread, some black spruce, occasionally aspen. My first afternoon along the Little Stony was easy traveling, and I made camp on a rocky willow flat

just shy of where Little Stony Creek and Stony Creek come together. It started to rain almost immediately after my tent was up, so I holed up and fell asleep early, thankful that the tent had no leaks.

This morning I decided to climb the ridge I'm sitting on now, even though it takes me off-course from my planned route. But I should have enough time to make camp along Boundary Creek tonight, and the detour has been more than worth it. When I crested the ridge the sun came out for the first time since I arrived in Alaska four days ago. Enough of the distant clouds lifted that I could see the snow-covered peaks of the Alaska Range, though not McKinley. The metaphor is powerful, if obvious: the mountains are there, always and impartial, even if we can't see them.

Day two, evening.

Made camp on a small ridge above Boundary Creek in a mossy clearing of blueberries. I will have blueberry stains on everything I own at the end of this trip, but I will also have fresh blueberries in my hot cereal tomorrow morning. After dinner, I sat and watched the horizon, singing whatever songs came to mind and getting excited about some composing and arranging projects that I'll start after this trip, many of which have been on hold through a busy summer. As I sat and sang, there was a caribou on the ridge opposite, antlers silhouetted against the fading sky. So far I've seen more caribou than any other wildlife. On the ridge above Stony Creek earlier today, I saw a caribou skeleton scattered about: two vertebrae, half of a jawbone, part

of a rib, in addition to the shed antlers that are everywhere. I thought about how we are walking, always, on the bones of the past, how this soil is made of the bones of animals and decomposed plants and how this land—all land, but this land so much more obviously—is the bones of the glaciers and rivers and oceans that were here before.

Day three, mid afternoon.

It is humbling to discover that the terrain and my mood are so closely linked. This morning, struggling through a stretch of willow thickets and blueberry tussocks, the tundra grabbing at my trekking poles and the willow branches clutching at my head and pack and legs, I was grumpy and frustrated. But then I gained the ridge and made good time, with dry feet and the sun shining, and my mood turned every bit as sunny as the sky. Back down into the willows in a failed attempt to swim in a big kettle pond (the pond was too well guarded by sedges and muck). More willows, more frustration. And now I am atop another windy ridge, looking out over the land I've traveled today and the land I'll travel tomorrow, again feeling content and satisfied. It would appear that my mental state is purely a response to external stimuli. Dry feet and a beautiful view and I am happy. But put my feet in a swamp and my head in the willows and I quickly turn frustrated. I hear tell of people who can rise above their circumstances and hold on to their equanimity no matter what. I, apparently, am not one of them.

Day three, evening.

Camped by the North Fork of Moose Creek, off the shoulder of Mt. Galen. I made camp early, both because I was tired from the harder terrain today, and because you're not allowed to camp in sight of the road. The road is still two miles off, but I can see it from any of these ridges, so I picked a comfortable-looking spot down by the creek. Tomorrow I hope to get an early start so I can cross the Thorofare River and head up along the Muldrow Glacier into the foothills of the Alaska Range. From the topo maps, it looks like the best place to get down to the river will be at the Eielson Visitor Center, where I'll have a chance to clean three days of food trash out of my pack and consolidate things a bit. The south side of the road, where I'm headed for the next two nights, is more mountainous country and possibly more demanding. Judging by the map, the Thorofare looks to be a more daunting crossing than the Stony.

Settled in at camp, my mood continues to fluctuate, even though there are no longer any willow thickets to hold accountable. Lonely. It's been two full days since I've talked to anyone at all, and six since I've talked with a friend. At the same time, I'm reflecting on what an immensely satisfying year it's been: two new albums, a fantastic tour in New Zealand, tours in England and Ireland and some great gigs closer to home. It's a lifestyle—traveling around the world singing—that rightly makes many people envious.

Even with these many satisfactions, I'm hopeful that this trip will hit the reset button on the parts of my life that are frustrating and inauthentic. I'd like to be

less distracted by the computer, to waste less time being sucked into the vapid and endless swirl of information and media and Facebook and e-mail. I'd like, when I'm home, to not snack as much or drink as many cocktails—all of the things that fill what my friend Sarah so aptly called "the tedium of single life." I'd like to imagine that I could create a structure of meaningful living through pure resolve—an hour of composing and an hour of practicing, minimum, daily; limits on computer time; more focus and intention in life. But I've wished all this before, and I know how easy it will be to get pulled back into lazier patterns. Resolve and mindfulness are a demanding path: not so much out here, with only the sound of wind and water to distract me, but certainly back home where distractions come easy.

Day four, afternoon.

On the Copper Mountain Bar, where several creeks join the Thorofare River in a braided glacial bed a mile wide and three miles long. The sun is shining and the snow-capped peaks of smaller mountains show through the clouds. Crossing the Thorofare was much easier than I had anticipated—the Stony was deeper than anything I've seen here, due to the width of this braided section where the river is broken into at least fifteen different channels, none of them very deep. The water is milky with sediment and cold, but I've been able to hike the whole stretch in my sandals, which has made the crossings easy.

This morning was tough. My goal was to cross the park road to get to the Thorofare, but I chose a bad route and had to live with the consequences. Instead of

going up and over a couple of ridges, I took the more direct path to the road across Moose Creek and over a low area that turned out to be choked with willow and standing water. A contradiction of this landscape is that it is both arid and soggy. Annual precipitation here is about fifteen inches, the same as in Arizona. But the permafrost and extremely low evaporation rate mean that there is a lot of standing water and wet ground. Which is what I spent three hours slogging through this morning, bulling through willow thicket and fen and feet soaked and pants soaked and shirt soaked and no small number of profanities. When I finally made it to the road, I was dispirited and dearly wishing for a ride to the Eielson Visitor Center, where I hoped I might find food and some lip balm. Forgetting lip balm has proved to be a major oversight. My lips are now so chapped that they are bleeding and are a constant source of painful distraction.

No dice on any of those three hopes. I hoofed it the four miles to the visitor center, happy just to be spared the willow thickets and guessing correctly that it would be the easiest place to descend this hillside to the Thorofare. No food or balm in the center, but I was able to spread out some wet things in the sunshine and empty out the trash. It was odd to be among the tourists, clean and dry and with their expensive cameras. No private traffic is allowed on the one road that transects the park. Visitors instead take tour buses operated by Aramark. These tours stop to look at wildlife, point out various features of the park: it's estimated that 85 to 90 percent of the people who come to Denali never get off the bus. At Eielson earlier today, I felt like a different

creature among them, quickly aware of how dirty I was after three days in the backcountry but also feeling that mine was the better way to experience the park.

But that sense of smug superiority aside, I have to admit that if a bed and a hot shower had been in any way possible then, I might have thrown in the towel then and there. I was wet and discouraged and lonely. Given that I was no longer stuck in the depression that had inspired the trip, I wasn't sure why I was doing this. And even if I had still been depressed, I didn't see how slogging through wet willow thickets would help. At the very least, I would have easily thrown down $20 for a beer at the visitor center, but the best they could offer was a water fountain.

But now I have sunshine and easy traveling on the gravel bar, mountains on the horizon, and I'm using the honey I packed in my food kit for lip balm. Crisis averted.

Day four, evening.

Glorious. I'm camped beside Glacier Creek, the sun is shining, snowy peaks between five thousand and seven thousand feet are visible, and the shoulders of bigger mountains are wreathed in clouds. Had I given up this morning, I would have missed this spot—by far the best of this trip and the kind of wilderness I imagined. I'll camp here tomorrow as well, which means I'll be able to explore during the day and not have to carry as much weight. On Friday, I'll have until 6:00 p.m. to meet the Camp Denali bus at the Eielson Visitor Center. It was about a four-hour hike to get here, so that could leave four hours of exploring on Friday morning. Al-

ternately, I could hike out earlier in the day and hope to catch a park bus headed towards Kantishna. If the weather is bad, that will be the more appealing option.

Lots of time by water: Little Stony Creek, Stony Creek, Boundary Creek, Moose Creek, the Thorofare River, Glacier Creek. Lots of time listening, watching the wind move through aspen leaves, willow scrub. Mostly only doing one other thing: boiling water and watching; drinking tea and watching; setting up the tent; eating and watching. As often, just watching, sitting. Walking about nine hours a day, some of it hard. Muscles are sore. Always the water is moving, sometimes a roar, sometimes, like now, a murmur.

Very little sign of bear. I saw scat on the first day, prints in the mud today. Caribou, mostly one or two at a time, but yesterday a group of six on the ridge above Boundary Creek. Northern harriers, a golden eagle. Ptarmigans, silly little birds. A porcupine earlier today on Glacier Creek.

So thankful for this sunny evening. Dark clouds gathering on the western horizon.

Day five, late morning.

I'm looking out over the Muldrow Glacier, a desolate and strangely moving landscape. The Muldrow is a stagnant glacier, not having moved for over fifty years. Consequently, the terminal moraine of the glacier, which I am sitting on now, is covered with rocks and vegetation, and looks just like rounded hills. From here, I am looking out over the next stage of the glacier, a mix of rock and ice, as much black as white. The silt and stone are mixed into the ice, cracked and folded in

sharp ridges and deep crevices. I am glad that crossing it isn't part of my hiking route.

Lonely again this morning, perhaps because the way is so easy. The walking is fine and the sun is shining and I am carrying what feels like very little weight, having left my tent and food canister behind at the campsite. There is no struggle to distract me from my solitude. Thinking of the teen singers on my recent tour and how easy they are with their love for each other: I have a lot to learn from their example.

Three grizzly bears this morning as I was breaking camp, still in my long underwear and sandals. All three were about the same size, so I am guessing it was a mother and her two-year-old cubs. They were on the other side of the creek, browsing, unperturbed by my presence. They surprised me from my morning reverie, when I looked up from my tea and saw them already there, so large. The worst thing would have been for me to surprise them too. Bears have notoriously terrible vision but a great sense of smell, so they can get surprised if you are downwind. The protocol is to make noise—sing, yell, chatter—as you hike, especially if you're going through thick brush. I called out to the three bears—"Hey, bear. Hey, bear." After some repetition one did raise her head, only to calmly return to the blueberries. The unanswered question is what I would have done if they had gotten surprised and agitated. I didn't have a lot of great options. Going to either side would have meant fording the river, which is slow, and behind me was a steep, gravelly hillside. Lacking anything better, I had decided that if they got too close or too aggressive I would get into my tent and zip everything up in the

hopes that a green nylon bag would be confusing.

Thankfully, they were concerned only with their browsing. This is the time of year when the bears are putting on their winter weight, so feeding is a priority. They eat almost constantly, scooping up berries and branches and leaves in their big jaws. Judging from the scat I've been seeing, which contains a large proportion of perfectly intact berries, they only digest a small portion of what they consume. Amazing to think that a bear can put on 150 pounds of winter fat just from eating blueberries. Seeing them, I was excited, a little scared, awestruck. So calm and placid, yet so obviously powerful. These interior grizzlies are smaller than the coastal Kodiaks (brown bears, grizzlies, and Kodiaks are different names for the same species of bear, by the way), most likely because of diet. The theory is that the coastal diet of fat salmon allows the Kodiak bears to grow bigger than the Denali grizzlies that feed mostly on vegetation. It's a theory that makes sense to me, given that we always ascribed my father's small stature (5'3") to the fact that he grew up in Ireland during World War II, when their food was rationed.

Having a base camp makes me feel a bit aimless. With no destination I have to make by nightfall, I can just wander and explore. Which is also the benefit of a base camp. One concern today: judging by the sputters as I cooked dinner last night, I think my gas canister only has one meal left in it. If I shepherd my dry food supply carefully today, I should be okay. I can hike out to Eielson tomorrow on an empty belly, but next time I should clearly bring an extra canister. This trip did end up being a night longer than I had initially planned, so

the canister was properly sized until I extended the trip. All the same, an extra canister would never go amiss. Also, I should leave the big camera behind—there was no time to get it out for the grizzlies anyway—and bring an extra flask of whiskey. Mine was empty by night three, which was a shame.

I have gotten to know and use my gear a lot better, especially the new lightweight stuff that I got for this trip. Last night's tent set up was my best yet, staking out the ground cloth first so that it could dry off in the sun. This extended time in the tent has streamlined my use of the various tie-backs and gear pouches. I do need to replace the two stakes I lost the morning the wind grabbed my tent just after I had taken the rain fly off and I had to chase after the tent as it bounced in the tundra, a video of which would not have done anything for my claims to grace. For future trips, I need a better organizing system for medical supplies and toiletries, possibly a compression sack for the tent. I could keep the poles separate, and everything else should cinch down to the same size as my sleeping bag.

Day five, afternoon.

The last full day of deep solitude. Lots of time to think and lots of time to not-think, which may be the more valuable thing.

I wonder what a bear thinks. What triggers its decision-making process? Why browse on one hillside and not another? Why ignore that human across the stream? I'm happy to have been ignored, but it seems like eating me would have been a more effective way to put on the winter weight they need to survive. Just

before leaving home for this trip, I rode past a red-tail hawk perched one-legged on a ledge by the road. He didn't fly off when I rode past on my bike, and didn't fly off after I dismounted and approached slowly, not until I was within twenty feet. But he did fix me with a cold eye the entire time, watching me, his take on the situation entirely unknowable. It was impossible not to wonder what was happening behind that unblinking stare, which I suppose is why transformation tales, those folk tales and songs in which a human turns by will or by spell into another creature, are so enduringly popular. They allow us to pretend, at least in story, that we could see the world through a bear's eyes. But as many stories as we might tell with that plot, it remains as out of reach as flying or breathing water. Being out here with the bears and the caribou and the eagles and the pika underlines how small we are as humans, how little we can actually know.

There are always more mountains. After contemplating the Muldrow earlier, I climbed the ridge to the east of Glacier Creek, cresting beneath Red Mountain, somewhere around 5500 feet. This was the highest point I had been able to see from the creek, but once I reached it I was able to see peak upon peak, the ridges progressively steeper and snowier, the wind already howling where I stood. And I realized that were I to gain any of those summits, and were the clouds to lift, I would only see mountains beyond what I had just gained. On and on until one was finally standing atop McKinley, something beyond my present capacity. Hiking alone means,

ideally, not taking unnecessary risks, so I headed down the other side of the ridge to Wolverine Creek, which flows into Glacier Creek, which will take me home.

Day five, evening.

Tomorrow I'll hike out in the morning and hope to catch a bus headed toward Kantishna. I'm ready for a shower and some lip balm. The honey has helped, but my lips started to bleed earlier when I smiled. I'm foregoing dinner tonight in hopes of the gas canister holding out for a hot breakfast tomorrow morning, so I'm sure I'll be ready for some food when I get to the lodge. If the stove doesn't produce, I'm down to a summer sausage, one zip-lock bag of trail mix, and a granola bar. Not exactly the breakfast of champions, but it will have to do.

I'll head out for those reasons, but also because I feel like I've done what I needed to do with this trip. More precisely, what needed to happen has happened, because part of the lesson of the backcountry is how much bigger the world is than me, how much of it is beyond my control and ken.

One important gift of this time has been the realization that I am mostly the same person I was twenty years ago, the last time I spent extended solo time in the wilderness. Sometimes I fear that I have changed, that I have lost that youthful idealism and charm and openness. But I suspect the difference is not as pronounced as I fear. At heart I am still much the same kid: excited by beauty, a little too easily hurt by the world, still needing to be cared for, still searching for the poetry in daily life.

Day six, morning.

Thankful:

- for good weather
- that willows don't have thorns
- that there was enough fuel, just, for a hot breakfast
- for good health and no injuries
- that my grizzly encounter was so mellow
- for mountains and for rivers
- for pushing through that doubt in the middle leg
- for beauty, mile upon mile

My last morning, and my second in this sweet little spot by Glacier Creek. A caribou crossed the creek this morning twenty yards from my tent, coming down slowly from the hills to the east before the sun crested the ridge. I'm wistful to be leaving, but ready for some human company.

Day seven, afternoon.

Comfortable at Camp Denali now. I arrived yesterday, took a hot shower and even found some lip balm. This afternoon I walked down to Wonder Lake, a four-mile-long jewel of a thing, and paddled out in a canoe. If you've seen Ansel Adams's totemic shot of Mt. McKinley reflected in water, this is that water. The sun wasn't exactly shining, but it was warm, and the muted colors of autumn on the hillside—the purplish red of blueberry leaves, the bright red of bearberry, the yellow of willows, the dark green of spruce—were a pleasure. I had thought to bring an mbira with me, so I sat in

the middle of the lake and played some music and thought how days like this could heal any soul, however fractured. There are clearly people out there far more deserving and far more in need of a trip like this than me, and I wish that they could have this opportunity. Hopefully coming here from a good place means that I can soak in as much of this beauty as possible. I am still thinking of the list I made yesterday of all the things I am thankful for and I can only hope to carry that gratitude and stillness with me for some time to come, another gift of the wilderness.