

You've just experienced a chain of butt-crushing plane rides from SeaTac to San Francisco to Fairbanks to Anchorage. You've just finished the delivery of the last of a weeklong lecture series, stepped down from the podium and step into the audience to take questions from the attendees. A woman in a navy-blue blazer, about half your age asks what you would like to drink. You order ice water. Then you mingle, smiling, nodding, making small talk with a few other docs, slowly working your way towards the exit. You're dead tired. It's been a long week of travel and here you are at the end of the trail, so even alcohol-free, you feel a little punchy.

He steps up to you and, in a voice that is a little too loud, says "Welcome to the AK! So they tell me you're a mountaineer." He reaches his hand out to shake yours, and you notice all those nicks and cuts, feel the calloused fingers, and the smell of Bourbon. His handshake is a little too firm, and he holds your steady gaze just a little too long. When he introduces himself to you as Wild Bill Campbell, you know there is room for doubt.

"It's just a social ski called the Arctic to Indian Traverse. The best ski mountaineering in the world, or so I'm told." He explains. It is predicted to be perfect weather, clear, cold, and no wind. He'd just pulled together a party of five, and you'd will make number six.

"Twenty-nine miles and all downhill." He adds. You hedge and tell him you are not in shape for a thirty-mile one-day ski across the Chugach Range in the dead of winter, and ill-equipped at that.

"Anyone with any modicum of fitness can do this ski, and I can outfit you with everything you need." He replies evenly. The ice in his glass tinkles. You notice he is missing the third finger of his right hand, just a soft pink stump remaining. The other guests are leaving. The place is nearly empty.

That night you sleep in Wild Bill's basement surrounded by the silent gazers of over twenty pairs of glass eyes hanging along all four walls. Of course, he is a hunter, you think to yourself. Before closing your eyes, you realize that you can go a week without sex but can't get through a single damn day without at least one good rationalization. You think about your mate of two dozen years also sleeping alone in Tacoma. In forty-two hours you will be with her.

Only a mile up the Arctic Valley and you are blowing like a whale and sweating profusely inside your borrowed parka, moving so slow that the rest of the skiers are waiting for you at the top of the rise already a half mile distant. It seems for every stride forward you are sliding backwards a half a stride. As the distant figures await your arrival, you see that one of them has turned around and is skiing back down the trail, probably, to check on you. The figure closes the gap quickly. It's Trond Sorenson, whom you later learn is a former US Nordic Ski Team member. Skiing up, he speaks to you for the first and only time in the entire journey. "You will wear yourself out before long skiing like that."

He drops his rucksack, and unzips it, laying out a multi-pocketed canvas buffet of waxes, scrapers, screwdrivers, and other odds and ends. From the rainbow of waxes, of every imaginable color, he chooses silver. In the span of two minutes and in a flurry of sure, swift

movements, he waxes your skis, returns items to their pockets, zips it all back up, shoulders his pack and is again kicking effortlessly up the valley. You step into your skis to follow.

By noon, the sun is only one hand's breadth above the horizon. You are skiing alone through the lengthening shadows of trees. Bands of warm and cool air pass over you as you kick along. You read signs in the new fallen snow, of moose, ermine, and rabbit. And of the wolf. You notice that something doesn't look right, but you are already so flooded with self-doubt that you push the intuition down. A few miles further, you realize that you can no longer deny or explain away what you are seeing.

The tracks of your buddies, now a mile or more ahead of you, are overlain by the fresh sign of the wolf, perhaps a half-dozen of them, all headed single file up the trail. You notice that the wolf tracks turn on themselves at the tops of embankments, natural vantage points where they can survey the country below them. The signs are clear that the wolves are not only following your buddies but are also turning around to watch you. You, a lone traveler, lagging behind the rest of the herd, moving for all intents and purposes like an injured animal. In the late winter, lean and hungry, the wolves are probably thinking their canid thoughts. You consider this, and you take fierce inventory of everything you have read on wolf behavior, and to your recollection, all accounts state that wolves typically avoid humans.

You open your parka and lengthen your stride with newfound energy and purpose. Miraculously, you are moving faster. You note the sun riding down the horizon as you ascend well above timberline. After a few more hours, you reach the top of the mountain ridge, and still following the tracks of your buddies, you turn west following the ridgeline, skirting cliffs and escarpments. Suddenly you round a corner and there are the others, who are, apparently, waiting for you, though they don't say as much. You join their tight circle, all of you stomping and moving in place and chattering to keep warm. You casually you let on the news of the wolf sign.

"Oh, I meant to tell you those wolves are as thick as thieves on the north slope of the Chugach," Wild Bill replies.

The others laugh nervously, casting little darting glances at each other. Reunited and rested, you all begin the long descent down into the Indian Valley.

You tear down the pitch on steep powdery terrain through chutes, ravines, and boulder-strewn creek beds. You whip past half-buried stands of alder and willows, launching off scarps covered with pillows of freshly fallen snow. Your feelings of liberation and release are strong you become a dark-winged bird flying free in the evening arctic sky. You travel under the broad belly of the rising moon, so clear and close you can almost lasso it.

On you ski in semidarkness, roaring down to the forest service roads, passing thick stands of firs, into the smoke-filled valleys in semidarkness. Your skis are chattering noisily over frozen snowmobile tracks. You are being followed by a half dozen Huskies and mongrels, bark, bark, barking. The din is loud and lights go on and figures peer out of the windows of nearby single-wide trailers hugging the forest service roads.

Finally, your ski tips bump into the trail's end, the clapboard siding of a local brewpub. Chilled to the bone and bone tired, you kick off your skis and open the door with frozen fingers. Before you is a grinning face, framed by a watch cap and a full beard. It's the brewpub owner and he is holding out for you a platter of sausage and a beer. "Welcome to the Turnagain Inn! We've been waiting for you!" He says.

A line of men, backs to you, are perched on a line of bar stools like birds on a wire. Now they all turn around to take you in, a stranger. Smiling and nodding, they raise their glasses in unison, saluting you. There is a lump in your throat and rising tears. You cover by laughing uproariously and smiling through exhaustion. You give the owner a bear hug, slopping beer on the wooden floor. "The others are right behind me," you announce.

That night, just before sleep, you realize that if an invitation to journey is in pursuit of what you love, you always say "yes", hazards be damned. In the dream you will have that night, you will be made to understand that the next invitation to journey will, by turns, terrify and inspire you. An invitation that is just around the corner. Poised. Waiting for your arrival back in the lower forty-eight.