Katherine Keith

Dr. Farmer

English 377

6 February 2020

**The Camp**

 **Winter.** At the camp on Kobuk Lake, a ten-foot-long woolly mammoth tusk had lain on top of the frozen tundra, curved up in a smile. Found within a putrid bank of mud and ice, the tusk was still part of the land on which its owner roamed over 20,000 years ago. This tusk belonged to an herbivore that once stomped over cold, dry steppe-tundra in what is now called eastern Beringia and had crossed back and forth over the Bering Land Bridge with Eurasia. The tusk witnessed the ending of the Ice Age and now entered the dawn of another period of warming as one by one, it and others had fallen from their place of rest; their fall from grace a sign of unpredictable weather called climate change.

At the camp on Kobuk Lake, the lake was massive, leading out to the ocean.  It was a white sea, leading out to the horizon on its way to meet the sun and set slightly west of south.  Crystal air highlighting crystal snow hanging on crystal spruce, taking your breath away with its brief intensity.

When the winter sun went down below the frozen horizon, and the temperature dropped, the nearly full moon rose in the east.  The bright orange fireball turned the white land to an inferno; ice turned to molten lava as the moon steadily crept away from the edge of its refuge. The crescent phase of Venus approached its eastern elongation, and the rings of Saturn were still visible. Jupiter and Saturn stately shone upon the camp, indifferent to its existence, indifferent to the sun or moon, indifferent to the comings and goings and problems of the inhabitants, and indifferent to whether or not we saw them.  The planets just floated as they slowly marched their way gradually through the zodiac and circled our galaxy.  One by one the stars added their light to the symphonic silence playing in the heavens.  A song which had sung out, not to our ears, but directly to our soul. The night sky was always perfect.

At the camp on Kobuk Lake, there had never been a more exhilarating atmosphere, breathing alone provided an unnatural high, the sense of intrigue from mystery and thrill of discovery of ancient ice age mammals, and the smell of wide-open tundra with an infinite horizon to explore, and the endless opportunities to run sled dogs and snowmachines and boats and horses and hikes to explore for days on end, and the dream of having a family to grow old with and build a camp with, their smiling faces free to enjoy a life outside the constraints of the city on natures’ terms. Although some might think this harsh cold world devoid of life, a place to stay away from or a place to stay inside by a fire.

And at the camp on Kobuk Lake, sixty miles above the Arctic Circle in Northwest Alaska, the massive smiles of all the people matched the curvature in the large Mastodon tusk considered a lucky charm for the everyone present.

**Break-up.** The camp at Kobuk Lake had never been what you call a typical home. We didn’t have running water inside the house, and it was in the middle of the tundra; almost entirely devoid of trees, except for a few tiny spruce along the shores of Kobuk Lake. There were neighboring tents owned by families down the way, and, like us, they would fish along the shore and make a fire to cook by. Although it wasn’t a standard house, it was a practical and sturdy building and the surrounding land, to a city girl at least, seemed infinitely vast and free.

It seemed to me, as I consider those years, that the long days of Spring had been infinitely precious and over too soon. There had been laughter and hard work and fulfillment. The arriving (at the beginning of breakup when ocean ice floated away) had been such a pivotal event itself, at the first cracking of ice, the first smell of grass on the tundra, the first glimpse of geese flying along the shore, and the great comfort of my husband’s safe arms free from a snowsuit, and the feel of the boat under us for the long 18-mile haul, and at the top of the hill at camp catching the first wide view of waves on Kobuk Lake after eight months of it being covered by ice. The welcome and greeting of those at camp when they saw us, and the sleds to be unloaded, to stock up the pantry. (Arriving was never taken for granted, when we roared up in our snow machine and parked behind the camp, fuss or no fuss, it was always a happy occasion).

**Summer.** To us, we held the keys to the kingdom, with endless days of sunshine to build our dreams upon. There had been adventure and discovery and beauty. The summer mornings (a technicality given the 24 hours of daylight) had been the cornerstone event, at the first crackle of firewood being stoked in the woodstove, the first taste of peanut butter toast made on its cast iron surface; the first smell of aromatic dark coffee being poured through the filter, and the quiet intimate conversations shared as we plan out the day, and looking out at Kobuk Lake in awe of the natural world around us, and knowing that in 24 hours we will be sitting here again in this exact same place. The weeks and months of summer flew by us, and we continued to build, to achieve our dream. (Working toward a dream didn’t prevent us from living a dream and there were always projects at the camp, work or no work, we always enjoyed our mornings).

**Freeze-up.** At the camp at Kobuk Lake, when the others went back to town, fearful of ice building up on their boats, my husband said he was going to stay. To him, he needed to keep everyone safe, with selfless concern for himself he stayed. He pulled out his float coat from the storage tote where all the boat gear was kept and put it on. Pensively, and with no idea why, I observed him, his muscular hard body, serious and calm, saw him wince slightly as he pulled around his neck the cold, wet, tight neoprene collar. As he secured this suit around his throat, suddenly my heart felt the fear of loss.

**Winter.** Carrying my second and only surviving child to her bed, I feel utter relief that the guests all decide to drive back to Kotzebue for the night. The house rarely, if ever, sees so many people inside. Finally, alone in the house, I take out a bottle of Wild Turkey with two mugs and sit by the windowsill in the characteristic boat captain chair to watch the moon. Perhaps she might offer solace.  I pour a little whisky for my husband and a lot for me. I toast his empty glass, half in tears, and half wanting to throw my glass at him.

“We buried you today beneath six feet of permafrost. The generator kept stalling out because of the load the jackhammer put on it; we had to stop. Nobody besides you can ever dial that thing in. Your grave is marked by a cross made by Chuck, engraved with, ‘our big angel’. You’ll be wanting to watch over our little baby in her tiny coffin next to you.  Remember Chuck engraved hers with, ‘our little angel’? So, she started it.” Realizing that I am talking to the camp, I laugh and cry, trying to choke down the pain. A gulp of wild turkey helps with that.

“All you had to do was get on the airplane that day. Chose us over your airboat project. We know that fall freeze up isn’t the time to take chances.” While not wanting to wake up my six-month-old, I still raise my voice in frustration because we argued about this so many times while he was alive. Had I won that argument; he would not have lost his life.

It is increasingly difficult to predict weather patterns during late fall, as the ice settles across the ocean overnight like a blanket; massive winds carry sheets of ice over six inches thick up onto the beaches, wreaking destruction along the shores. Climate change isn’t improving travel safety.

Standing up, I pace by my favorite wall. He milled half inch spruce planks that were ten feet long; I stained them with linseed oil. Side-by side we worked on this as we did with everything. Vertical spruce trim gave the wall a unique stepped look. The remaining interior was to be built off of this modal wall; had he lived.

“You decided to take Diane through such a nightmare storm, on a lightweight plastic hulled airboat, to town for a medical emergency? Knowing full well that the violent winds, sharp ice, and ice-cold saltwater could tear you apart? The power of Kobuk Lake flipped you, tore your boat apart, tore you apart, and threw you so far I couldn’t find you until spring threw you up on a pile of ice.”

His body was missing for seven months. I thought his homecoming would welcome, but my shattered heart is just barricaded and apparently pissed. A child with one parent needs a stable one at that, not this lunatic mom, which means I can’t let myself be hurt.  I can’t see his favorite hoody on the peg by the door frame, hear his favorite BB Song play on the record player, drink out of his cherished cracked coffee mug, yet alone dare to picture his crooked smile, know how he made everyone around him better when he left the room, or remember the way he made feel around him. Camp can’t contain my anguish, so I dare not feel it.

The power to take away life, love, years, and memories resides in one gust of wind. Freeze up in this land is unpredictable; so is life.

“You are at camp again, with this red-headed girl and I, and I want to let you rest for a bit surrounded by the land you worked so hard with to build a home for your family. So you can enjoy the birch trees, black spruces, bright pink fireweed; look out at our favorite lake which sinks forever into the arctic horizon and see every iteration of the sunrise and sunset.” With that I take the last gulp of my Wild Turkey and I open the window to pour my husbands into the dirt for him.  In a gesture I have not seen before, all three of the propane lights flicker as if their mantles have something to say on the matter. Too much Wild Turkey…

**Many summers later.** Quiet and stillness and waiting. The nothing that remains here, truly, is the absence of the people, a desperate hungry vacuum of the laughing sounds. That was the sound that pained, the one piece that could pull me away from my deep trance of the arctic and start the wishing again. In those alive years, as a camp I was magnificent; and when I was full of my people, the comfort they felt was a blessing, the security they felt a gift. I was a newly built camp but made with ancient logs, and they were all stood upright with large windows, so the people could look out at the lake. The two wood stoves keep me warm inside, and on a cold night they had to be fed and fed, and that made me feel so loved. Now the people had gone. But in the summer, on the calm days, the girls found their way back, a miracle gift: inside my camp, before the generator is turned on when I could hear them best, they spoke to me about their life since last we’d last met. The mom told me that she missed sitting on my captain’s chair, and looking out my window towards the sunrise, and dreaming, and she missed feeling so connected to me and her family, and being hugged without arms being around her, and then she cried. The daughter told me that she missed playing my board games on a table that had been milled from a 300-year-old spruce (obtained by her dad far up in the woodlot and hauled with a snow machine to my camp), and spending that one-on-one special time with her mom that she did not get elsewhere. But there was a way to support them, if they would stay with me for the weekend, if I worked my magic, by making fresh blueberry pancakes and listening to the special B.B. King record on the same the record-player from years ago. Keeping a circle of strength around my entire camp, it was important to connect with the spirits of those who had been lost and buried here, and if a man and daughter felt they had to provide support to these two girls, it was my job to keep this circle strong here at camp and beyond as far as possible hoping to keep them safe. I was a happy camp, because with all the comings and the goings I was full of laughter and moving, and when the people were gone and the girls came back, needing to care for them became my calling too.

At the camp on Kobuk Lake, we follow our cut path leading down a massive hill, with tall willows on all sides, which lead us to the beach where our boat is parked. My brilliant, comical, and capable daughter and I laugh as we stumble with our large packs over the uneven tundra. Behind us the big cross of my husband and the little cross of my baby daughter, slant a bit with age and wind as if waving so long. Mosquitos surround us, our hands fly furiously around our head hoping to scare them away; a hopeless effort considering they number in the thousands. Berry season is in full swing, and we stoop over, packs and all, to grab handfuls of blueberries and aqpiks. Our golden retriever, Jupiter, bounces through the tundra puddles splashing water all over both of us.

Taking the Olympic Cabin Cruiser boat into town, we look back at the camp on Kobuk Lake, our only home. Now 16-years-old, she is going back to school in New Hampshire; this is her last trip to camp for quite some time. I want to turn back because with every mile away from this treasured place that is ours and ours alone, my heart breaks. She is leaving and what else remains? Life itself is so unpredictable; I can’t know if we both will make it home in one piece to laugh again with each other.

I take the camp from Kobuk Lake and place it in my soul; I place those left behind deeper in my soul; I cherish every moment I have left with my living daughter; then I drive the boat forward towards the midnight sun of the Arctic summer knowing, wherever I go, I take a bit of camp with me.