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*As time went by, I also realized that the particular place I’d chosen was less important than the fact that I’d chosen a place and focused my life around it. Although the island had taken on great significance for me, it’s no more inherently beautiful or meaningful than any other place on earth. What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it’s flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received.*

-Richard Nelson, *The Island Within*.

The Window Seat

It was late May, 2009, when I found myself on an old, repurposed school bus on a bumpy dirt road leading into 6 million acres of wildness called Denali National Park. I had just flown from Belgium to Alaska and had been shuttled directly from the airport in Anchorage to some cabins in the ‘glitter gulch’ between Cantwell and Healy, the park’s touristy and flashy entrance area. Up to this point my impressions of Alaska had been limited to a Walmart parking lot, brown, slushy snowmelt on the sides of the highways, and this boarded up tourist town slowly awakening from its winter hibernation. Disheartened and tired, I questioned my decision to travel all this way to spend the next four months in a remote lodge where I knew no one. Different scenarios of an early return to my community and well-known Ardennes hills unfolded and repeatedly played on the screen of my mind. Where were those magnificent glaciers and rugged mountains and wild bears and moose and wolves I had read so much about? But I was getting on an old school bus designed for Elementary school children and my life was about to change.

I spent the first 15 or 20 miles of our bus ride looking at spruce trees and imagined that I might as well be anywhere ‘north’ – Norway, Finland, Russia, Canada. A scraggly black spruce is a scraggly black spruce is a scraggly black spruce, anywhere on the planet. As we gained altitude though, the tree density faded and gave way to views that forever engrained themselves into my memory like glacial run-off water that over thousands of years carved braided riverbeds into the wide open tundra. The Teklanika River and the Toklat River were two such rivers with their silty and cold water gushing down the channels of least resistance from the Alaska Range into the mighty Yukon, just to empty their loads into the Bering Sea. Unlike our domesticated and caged European rivers, these rivers here are wild, and independent, and free to create their own paths. They flood at will and rage as they please. They are not controlled by dams or walls and answer only to the forces that created them. And not unlike our vascular system, they transport life-sustaining nutrients from the oceans back into the most remote corners of this interior part of Alaska. Salmon and trout have found their ways up these glacial veins and made this area their homes for the last summers of their lives.

Rivers are ‘carvers extraordinaire’! As we ambled down the road towards Polychrome Pass, the surrounding mountains of the Alaska Range became more distinct and distinctly shaped. With the rising altitude of the mountains, water channels deepened and imprinted themselves into the natural landscape. Over millions of years, meltwater has rushed down these peaks and exposed their various geological layers. ‘Poly-chrome’ means many-colored and perfectly describes the array of colorful rocks that forms this area and the wildflowers that add patches of intense pink, yellow, blue, and purple during the summer. The pass is a high-point along the road that was carved into this steep mountainside. Mountains ascended on the road’s north side and a cliff descended 2000 foot on its south side right outside my window. The winding road here narrowed to the width of just about our disheveled bus, which added a dramatic effect to the already spectacular views of this desolate, mountainous landscape with very few signs of human impact. Here, time could have stopped 500 years ago, or 5000 years ago, or 5million years ago! The only change would have been our winding road into this natural exhibit along with its rest areas where we were greeted by friendly park rangers, various displays of natural and human history, automated water dispensers, and dispatchers calling out departing bus numbers.

I so desperately wanted to step off the bus and into the wide, open wilderness that surrounded me. I wanted to let my feet sink into the soft and crunchy tundra consisting of squishy mosses and lichens and tiny berry bushes. I watched the tundra lift itself up again as I lifted my foot to place it further into this vastness. The tundra lifted itself effortlessly, just as it lifted my heart with the desire to explore and loose myself in it. The sight of these mountains lifted my spirit and instilled a thirst for connection and knowledge. They drew in my heart and left it throbbing for more, for a full immersion beyond the confines of my window seat. I didn’t just want to look out into greatness, I wanted to submerge myself in it, merge with it and disappear in it. I soon realized that with every cell of my body, I was completely absorbed in and overwhelmed by what I saw. I experienced the kind of ‘love at first sight’ that makes your heart sink to the bottom of the sea and at the same time elevates it beyond heights you knew existed. The kind of ‘love at first sight’ that makes you want to empty yourself of all else and leaves you starving for anything that helps you get to know this place, remember each detail of it, every sound and scent. The kind of ‘love at first sight’ that makes you ingest the contents of textbooks and natural history guide books like they are popcorn during your favorite movie.

How do we receive the bounty of a place? My many interactions with visitors during this first summer here I noticed that there were generally two types of responses to the park’s bounty: conquer or be conquered. We usually had a group of guests who wanted to hike up all of the various peaks in the nearby area, who spent hours in the tundra trying to get that perfect photograph, planned their next expedition or bragged about prior hunting or climbing exploits. And then there were those of us who wanted to feel overwhelmed and small and reassured that we are part of a larger world and a larger plan and learned to integrate, to adapt. We learned that as much as we tried to control our external environment, we ultimately have very limited control. Nature is beautiful yet frightful, wild yet perfectly balanced, raw yet predictable, and majestic yet intimate. It was a perfect selection of opposites, reconcilable through the underlying heartbeat that kept everything here alive and that directed every life’s destiny. One beginning was another’s closure. One closure was another’s beginning.

As we drove on we were awed by watching two wolves dismember a caribou in a nearby snowfield. It was early in the summer, so I imagined that the young pups were still at their den site waiting for a nourishing meal that would help them grow into strong adults and eventually take on their parent’s lives, lives they have no idea were waiting for them. That caribou may have been an older male who had guided and directed his herd and was slowing down after spending one too many winters traversing deep snow fields in search for exposed lichen. Or it may have been a mother sustaining injuries while defending her calf and thus making her an easy target for these wolves. My initial response was sadness for the caribou, but I also felt hypocritical because I wanted the wolf population to thrive. Predator-prey dynamics can be difficult and we often sympathize with either side based on our own biases and intentions. And as I learnt later, those dynamics have sparked intensive political battles here in Alaska. But on that bus, all this was unknown to me.

After about seven emotionally charged hours on that school bus, we arrived at the end of the road, our home for the next four months. After finishing up some formalities and moving into my wall tent, I was out on the trails looking at everything. Growing up in Europe I learnt to navigate cities with busy roads and tall concrete buildings. Here I needed to learn a completely new means of wayfinding that consisted of new signposts, new paths, and new environmental markers. I felt disoriented and joyfully delirious and was prepared to give this new home all of myself – my attention, my time, and whatever brain cells would make themselves available to this new adventure.