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## NIGHT BUS

"See anything?" The talker is beside me again. There's one in every tour group, and once they attach, they're hard to dislodge.

We stand on frozen ground wrapped in parkas and hoods, mukluks and mittens. We shift our feet, shake our arms for warmth as the bus idles behind us and we search the night sky, necks craned. Sentries. Supplicants.

My cheeks burn. Fingers throb. "Not yet."

The talker wears a thigh-length parka, cornflower blue, festooned with zippers and pockets. Face shadowed inside a balaclava. "What about that?" His hand points skyward. He wears mittens made of a material I've never seen. "No," he says, redirecting my gaze. "That." We're side by side on the permafrost. He's the guy who got taken advantage of in high school and didn't seem to mind. "Over there," he says.

I'm bothered by his implication that our objective could be something inconclusive. Casual. He's indicated a thin swirl of cloud just above the horizon. "I think this is the kind of thing where if you saw it, you'd know." Beyond that cloud, I see only the familiar: inscrutable stars penetrating dense black. A massive sky.

We're deep into northern Finland. Lapland. Surrounded by a score of fellow travelers – tourists – similarly bundled and of ostensibly similar purpose. We are

breathable. We wick moisture and resist abrasion. Collars and cuffs snug to our skin. It's unclear whether this stop is a sighting opportunity or a smoke break. Beyond a few tourist phrases, I don't speak the language.

The movement of celestial bodies is inherently unpredictable. We knew that going in. And yet we comb the heavens. Hopeful. The brochure promised a transformative experience. *See nature's most mystical sight*, it read. *Gloriously remote. Vast. Unspoiled.*

I keep a log of overheard comments and translate them from my phrasebook with uncertain results. *Näytätte amatööri lintu*: you look like an amateur bird.

And the air. I can't get enough of it. It's so, I don't know what. Cold. More than clean. Something that makes my pores sing Buddy Holly. Björk. Like mountain air poured through a trumpet filled with lake water.

The driver makes his rounds. Cups a cigarette against the wind. "Kaksi minuuttia." *Two minutes.*

The talker studies the stars. Frameless glasses rest on a thin nose. Over time, the chill penetrates even the finest clothing. Fingers and toes. The exposed skin of our faces.

An elderly couple in peach parkas huddles to our right, sharing body heat. They're short and friendly-feeling in a way that suggests Iowa. Behind them, a young woman in arctic white. Coat, boots and mittens fringed in faux fur. Beside her, a sturdy mustached woman who reminds me of my mean grandmother. The peach parka couple radiate warmth. They each sport a single earbud from the same MP3 player, headphone wires emerging under knit hats. I turn to share a smile.

The talker's voice beside me. "You look cold." He is affable: a man who, as an adult, has attained competence and wears it with pride. "I have a complete extreme weather clothing system," he informed me at our last stop. "Headgear, body liner, mitten set."

I've never heard of a mitten set, but I want one. Frost-bitten fingers the result of a college romance – a Finn, no less – one of the first female scholarship athletes in hockey. Games, practices, I sat in the stands with a thermos of hot cocoa. Over time, it took a toll. Apart from the fingers, the usual story: a broken heart, my efforts deemed inadequate.

Inside my mitten, I make and unmake a fist. Dust of snow blows across bare, rocky land spidered with cracks, spotted with stretches of exposed ice.

The reality of the firmament is more formidable than my imagining. At times it feels like an invitation, at times a threat: a darkness deep and dimensional, pierced by pinpricks of light that will lure, then devour.

"Beautiful, right?" The talker says. Within his balaclava, he is a silhouette offered to the night. "And haunting. The layers and textures. The endless depths." A blast of wind. "And yet." His Versatek parka rustles. "And yet."

I shudder; huddle in my coat. Breathe. I lean toward the peach parkas – they don't mind. My fingers tingle and ache. I strain to feel my feet against the frozen ground.

We drift back to the bus, individually and in clusters. The seats have built-in screens that play a promotional video. But no one watches. I mean, why are we out here if not for the real thing.



According to the guidebook, plants here grow low to the ground to withstand the strong winds. Frost dynamics produce life forms that thrive in scree interstices. I like the names; the colors. Arctic willow. Tussock sedge. Caribou moss. Tentative greens, pale yellows. A rare and brilliant splash of magenta. Their biomass concentrated in the roots, safely below ground. They spend much of the year hidden under snow cover. Dormant. I'm familiar with cold. I know something of exposure.

We refuel at gas stations that materialize out of the night and vanish again in our wake. The soft styrofoam squeak of tires on snow. A landscape bereft: the tundra stretches unchanged, forever. We long ago left behind cell phone reception.

The world inside the bus – the arrangement of passengers – shifts with each stop. In the window seat across the aisle, a man knits at a scarf in multihued yarn: deep reds, browns. Close-cropped gray stubble atop a round head. A neat swath of whisker under the lip. Librarian glasses on a silver chain.

We approach the crest of a hill. My heart lifts, as if something new waits on the other side. My damaged fingers will not thaw. They are red and prickly: cold insinuated into bone.

Across two empty seats, the knitter's needles clack and slide. I'm drawn to him, though I've never knitted a stitch. I consult my phrasebook, build words into a sentence on a small notepad. *Huivi on ihana*: The scarf is lovely.

In the glow of his overhead bulb, I read pride in craftsmanship. I see a shared moment, the two of us leaned into the aisle, his work displayed: stitches, rows, subtle gradations of color. Communion in warm light.

I return to the phrasebook. Not lovely. Lovely is wrong. *Komea*: handsome. *Yes*. The scarf is handsome.

From up front, the muted sound of a radio. American pop songs. The driver's eyes flick past the mirror. I wonder if the drivers are the same night after night, three buses in departure from Rovaniemi for points north.

I watch the knitter in my periphery, recite the sentence in my head. *Huivi on komea. Huivi on komea*. What if it's not a scarf? Would my words suggest mockery? The possibility of connection so delicate. So easily misinterpreted. Out the window, the moon filtered. I silently practice pronunciation. Work my fingers.

Footsteps. The now-familiar crisp stride of PermaTherm Conquest boots. The talker takes the seat across the aisle and gives me a jovial nod. He smiles at the knitter. My cheeks flush, thicken. The talker gestures with his hand toward the nexus of needles, the magic place where mere yarn becomes something more.

"Huivi on komea," he says.

I want to protest.

The knitter looks over his librarian glasses. Smooths the scarf on his thighs under the small lamp. "Kiitos."

I work my angry fingers. Take deep, slow breaths. The talker turns to me like a classmate. Says *sotto voce*, "I want to get closer and closer to unadorned yearning."

"To some a symbol of exile and emptiness," read the brochure, "the tundra offers those willing to see an awe-inspiring glimpse of how life has adapted to the extreme conditions of the north."

I know not to trust a fire that burns too easily, too close. The talker with the driver at the front of the bus. Reflected in the windshield, the driver laughs. I see his teeth. I overhear phrases, whole sentences, in English. Something about reindeer, peach-colored parkas. I hear the driver, distinctly: "He has small fingers for a man."

My reflection on the window. Our world is only what the headlights illumine – white on white on white. The road denser – darker – than the surrounding snowscape. A crust that even we – the gross vehicle weight of us – can't pierce.

The bus is equipped. There's a first-aid kit. Water bottles. A rest room. We have what we need. I pull the phone from my pocket, select the compass app. The screen makes its warm glow. At the top, where the time would display, is instead a message: *orientation failed. Move device in a figure-eight motion.* The compass needle spins drunkenly. Makes me dizzy. The woman in white writes a note in a vinyl-covered journal.

I hear the telltale shush of synthetic fiber: ripstop snow pants. I watch for the talker's reflection. Feign sleep. The sound passes. I drift.

Sometime later: we've stopped. I raise my hood against the chill and claim my place on the frozen ground. My fingers ache even before I'm outside. I listen for animated murmurings or exclamations. Nothing but muted phrases: *himmeä tähti*;

*appelsiini mehu*. It's time to turn our gaze skyward, but my eyes follow my fellow passengers. My familiars. Breath vapor coming out my mouth; their particular, like-nobody-else breaths coming out their like-nobody-else mouths. Bib pants and balaclavas. Multi-mittened. I feel an affection as vast as the sky. The couple in peach parkas interlocked, smiling – his arm in hers. We are children, bundled and innocent. Trusting. We are at odd distances – more than arm's reach, further than casual conversation could carry, yet close enough to be a unit, heads angled uniformly upward. Our light source a haloed half moon.

I don't see the talker. I wonder selfishly if he left us. But where could he go?

A woman makes her way among us carrying small cups on a cafeteria tray. She reminds me of the way East German athletes were said to look, only kinder. She is missing a front tooth. Fire-colored sport performance sunglasses perch atop cropped hair the color of campfire ash. She distributes a white plastic cup to each passenger. The liquid inside steams.

The peach parka pair smile. I try to see what they see. I can make out more than I have in the past, constellations previously unknown to me: perseus, auriga, fornax. If I tip my head back far enough, I can feel the no-nonsense Finnish air tickling the hairs on my neck, and intuit not just a multitude of stars – outrageous, abundant, lavish – but layers: textures: the relationship between objects in space.

The talker – there he is – weaves among us with a recycle bin and his usual ease. And then the kindly East German athlete's voice. We're an informal queue before her, two women and then me. “Lämmintä mehua?” A cup exchanged. Another with the woman in front of me. I smell sweetness rich as honey butter, childhood

summers. The nectar of communion. I step forward. The tray is empty. I try to mask the hurt. The East German reaches into a pouch, pulls out a thermos. And from a pocket, a cup. With a universe of stars above us, I want to say more than thank you. My vocabulary is inadequate; my gratitude out of proportion. She inverts the thermos. We wait. A gust of wind rocks us both. Nothing. She offers the empty cup; a shrug. I tell myself I don't need the liquid. The gesture is enough.

Laughter to my left. The talker and the peach parka couple share a moment. My extremities burn and sting. My eyes tear. Inside my mitten, I make a fist, then release it. Fist, release.

Overheard: *Harjoittelen porotalous*. I practice reindeer husbandry.

**From the guidebook:**

HOW TO PROTECT AGAINST EXPOSURE IN EXTREME CONDITIONS

Exposure can lead to serious injury, so it is important to know how to protect yourself against the cold. Wind, humidity and moisture remove body heat. Warm beverages help increase body temperature, but do not drink alcohol, and do not give beverages to an unconscious person. Take simple, common-sense precautions.

For years, I did. Added layers. Took cover. But that has its own price.

I want to share this experience. I want it to be something worthy of sharing.

At 39, I still struggle with distances. Angles of approach. My last situation an actress of sorts. I was always on thin ice. She saw me as someone to be kind to. Told



me, toward the end, I was a rest stop 'til she caught her break: a public service TV spot that took her to New York.

It occurs to me that since we left Rovaniemi, I have not seen a single road sign. Another vehicle. I try to orient myself by the moon, the sky outside my window. Are we traveling north? Does the moon – like the sun – follow a single, predictable trajectory? Are we even on a road?

I approach the driver. Show him my ticket.

"Olenko oikealla bussilla?" *Am I on the right bus?*

He has chiseled features. An outdoor face. Mirrored sunglasses, though there is no sign of daylight.

"Oikeaan bussiin," he echoes. A facial tic that might be a smile. He moves me aside with his arm to check the mirror.

I take my seat. Across the aisle, the woman in white. I make a stab at conversation. *Icebreakers: small talk*, from the phrasebook. She looks young and blonde in the glow of her reading light. Overwarm in her arctic coat. *Where are you from? I like your shoes*. In retrospect, I will recognize this as a poor choice. She balances a contact lens case on her knee. Removes a lens, holds it to her eye. I practice the words in my head. I imagine she is a figure skater, a near-Olympian who fell a degree short of the requisite dedication, who has worked with only moderate success to fill the resulting void. I want to say to her, *we all suffer disappointment*. I want to say, *under the right circumstances I too can blossom*. The phrasebook encourages easy familiarity. I wait until she looks my way. Behind me, I hear an

expensively laminated polyurethane zipper and I blurt out: "Näytät kuuma siinä takki." *You look hot in that coat.* Her face flushes – stiffens. She stares at the seat in front of her. This is a difficult language. Pronunciation matters – a subtle inflection and you say something quite different than what you mean. For days, I thought I was saying *good morning* when I was saying *suitcase*. I backpedal. "Nautin jäätelöä – oletteko?" *I like ice cream – do you?* Her eyes move past me: around me. I watch her face consider whether this will pass. I want to say, *I pose no danger. All I want is to share a moment of simple beauty.* But the flush stains her face, and my words dissipate in the cabin's stale air.

**From the guidebook:** Wintertime also includes the twilight period, or polar night. This season – when the sun doesn't rise above the horizon – can last for up to 51 days.

A man walks the aisle distributing snacks. He wears a white shirt and black suspenders. A radio on a cord around his neck. The radio looks like an old drive-in movie speaker and plays an R&B tune from the '50s or '60s. Wilson Pickett, maybe. Otis Redding. The man's face is long, rectangular, pocked. He wears large square glasses with black frames. I study his features, suspicious.

The man hands out snacks from a canvas tray. I glance out the window so as not to appear overly eager. Beyond my reflection, endless dark: I'm unable to gauge the degree of it, any difference between night and day. I have no idea when I – any of us – last ate.

A different R&B song, a woman. I want to say Carla Thomas. I say it: "Carla Thomas." Across the aisle, the woman in white makes a note in her journal.

The snack man has reached my row. He wears a smile manufactured by the same people that made his glasses. He hands me a thin biscuit in a cellophane package, a container that appears to be some kind of yogurt or custard, and a wooden spoon. "Kiitos," I tell him.

The lenses in his glasses are so thick they could comprise their own biosphere. The radio is smaller – lighter – than a drive-in speaker. I want to touch it, but I fear the request would translate badly.

I eat the biscuit. It's arrowroot. My sense of anticipation deflated, I buck up and turn to the yogurt or custard. The container seems stingy. I check the nutrition information grid. Discern servings per container: 1.3. I want to dispute this. The flavor is subtle, vanilla-ish. I'm unsatisfied. I don't want to feel this way. Don't want disappointment to define my experience. My damaged fingers groan. I flex them.

From behind me, the talker: "What is enough? This question haunts us. Do we have enough? Are we enough?"

At times, the sky is a painting made on glass: the stars vibrant, background crisp. I want to break through that surface, beyond. I want to experience what we came out here for.

The yogurt or custard seems to have brought out a degree of giddiness in the Finns. I see smiles of childlike joy – sheer satisfaction – that scrape against the inside

of my stomach. I want to complain to the management. A few rows ahead, a young couple stand in their seats, dancing to ABBA's "Take a Chance on Me." The woman wears a fringed buckskin coat and performs flawlessly the moves to the Swim. Inspired, the peach parka couple stand and perform their version of the Twist. Graceful movements in 3/4 time.

I turn to my phrase book. When the snack distributor comes back up the aisle, I raise my empty container. "Saisinko lisää?" *May I have more?*

The man stares down at me through enormous glasses. It's clear he understands English, just chooses not to engage it. The Finns are a stiff-necked people.

A cell phone rings to the tune of Barry Manilow's "Mandy." The snack man surveys my body with his magnified eyes. He takes a device from his belt that looks like a barcode scanner gun. Points it at my chest. My face gets hot; my cheeks swell. He pulls the trigger. I flinch. Red light strikes my sternum, bounces off the window in time to the music. Breath catches in my throat – is it so wrong to want more? I flex my fingers. The man glances at the LED readout. A pink reflection on his white shirt. Behind me, a woman's voice sings along with ABBA. The snack man watches the display. I shiver. Finally, with the stern face of a disapproving schoolteacher, he hands me a second biscuit. I infer that asking for a third is out of the question. I want to express my displeasure. I want to say, *This snack is inadequate. – Tämä välipala on riittämätön.* I want to say, *Why are you wearing a drive-in movie speaker around your neck and shooting at people? – Miksi olet pukeutunut [untranslatable] kaulassa?*

I want to invite him to sit with me, the yogurt or custard container held between us, and discuss the nature and importance of satisfaction.

Instead, the snack man has moved on and it is the talker who sits beside me.

"Our lives are small in so many ways," he says. "Who doesn't want more? A sense that we're part of something beautiful, vast, complete." His voice has a staticky crackle, as if coming through a speaker. I make my face blank to show I'm taking this in stride. "I want you to do something," he says. His gaze direct. "Say: Olen hävinnyt tänä iltana ennen." I do not say it. I look it up in my phrase book once he leaves:

*I have been lost in this night before.*

I struggle for breath.

A waft of diesel fumes triggers a ripple of nausea. I wonder about the tour operators. What they really have in mind for us. The engine strains, eases into a higher gear. The snack man is nowhere to be seen. The land stretches flat. Endless. I remember learning this is where reindeer live. I can't remember if reindeer are real. I need air. I reach to open the vent in the overhead panel. Tremble from the cold.

From across the aisle, smells of face powder and age. The mean grandmother. The kindly East German. I lean across to speak to her. To let her know there are no hard feelings. The mean grandmother inserts herself into the space between us. Dark eyes; pinched mouth. A single chin hair wiggles as she speaks. I fail to catch her words, but her eyes say: *You are weak*. They say: *I endured war. Famine*. I want only a warm smile. A small brightening at the horizon. The kindly athlete watches out her window: peaceful: unaware.

The driver's radio plays a syrupy ballad. Dan Fogelberg, Christopher Cross. I find the lyrics, the maudlin tune, affecting me. A swelling of emotion.

The talker is back beside me. He holds a drink: bubbles and ice in a clear plastic cup. I want to say *where are we. When will it stop. I want to say promises were made*. Instead, the talker: "We ask ourselves why we are out here in the deep night." He swirls ice in his cup. "We stick our noses into the dark, and pull them back at the slightest chill."

**From the guidebook:** A body temperature that drops too low affects the brain, making the victim unable to think clearly. Hypothermia is particularly dangerous because a person may not know what is happening and will not be able to do anything about it. Warning signs can include shivering, confusion, shortness of breath and a puffy face. Do not leave areas of skin exposed – *suojatton*. Avoid perspiring or becoming overtired. Do not use alcohol or other mind-altering substances. Huddle with others for warmth.

Moonlight, the scrape of brakes. What looks at first like a parking lot turns out to be bare ground, a dusting of wind-blown snow. We exit the bus single file down steep, narrow stairs. I follow the buckskin woman; the East German athlete. My feet hit ground and find it is not earth at all. We walk on water: a frozen lake.

We turn at polite angles from each other and tilt our heads skyward. The Finns stand in clusters. They say little. I understand you have to be patient. The way the longer you look, the more stars you see. More vibrance. But even out here, the

inverse is also true: once you look past the brightest and most obvious, many are muted. Dim. They could have died light years ago; we would never know.

I smell face powder and move away. The ice beneath my feet, nearly two meters thick, creaks and groans. An unfamiliar man moves among the passengers wearing a barn coat and a turtleneck. No special protection. Black hair combed back off a high forehead. He huddles with the knitter, speaks something close in his ear. Then the woman in white. She makes a note in her journal. *Where did he come from.* He moves toward me, edges past, smelling of cologne. Speaks in the ear of the mean grandmother. He has a logo – the tour company crest – on his coat. Again, he works his way behind, around me. I feel dizzy. The pain in my fingers blossoms. Fist, release. The driver approaches the man, takes his elbow. Speaks. It seems to me they look in my direction and, when they see me watching, look away. My face swells. The man disappears behind the bus.

My mother's friend runs a store in St. Paul called "I Like You!!" Everything she sells is Minnesota-shaped and aggressively friendly. A false promise of easy interaction. I prefer – trust – the coast. Layers of encumbrance.

I drift. The difference between wake and sleep obscured. My head against the glass: a light in the distance: through trees, the warm glow of fire or electric bulb. Later: ghosted reindeer, distant figures with antlers, moonshadowed on the snow. Later: something colorful growing, golden, close to the ground. Later: the talker

behind me: his voice close, like he is speaking into the gap between seats. "Death waits inside us for a door to open," he whispers. "When we are finally, fully alone."

The elderly couple in peach parkas have been replaced, sloppily, by a couple thirty years their juniors. The new couple is gaunt; joyless: the parkas hang loose on their bodies. I am disturbed enough to approach the driver. In the aisle, I stagger as the bus rounds a curve. The headlights cast a spectral glow. The driver gives me the briefest of glances in the rearview; he is not the same driver. The vanished snack man's glasses cover half this man's face. The half not covered by glasses is nose.

I want answers: *What have you done with the real peach parkas? Where has the snack man gone? What is happening here?* But this driver has no context for my questions. I withdraw to my seat. Across the aisle, the East German athlete sleeps, the knitter's glasses low on her nose.

The Four Tops sing from an invisible radio. *Sugar pie honey bunch. You know that I love you.* The driver adjusts his mirror.

Overheard: *Haluan vain herpes kaupallinen.* All I want is a herpes commercial.

I wake standing. We are bundled, frozen feet on tundra. The new driver calls out what sound like instructions. Each passenger holds binoculars, experiments with them as the driver speaks. "Älä ravista kiikarit." I feel panic, then realize I too have a set around my neck. They are black, larger than others I have held, but I am no expert on vision-enhancing instruments. I am light-headed. Breathless. I listen to



the driver, strain to recognize a familiar word, a sound. I watch my fellows, try to mimic their movements so I might learn whatever it is they are learning. My fingers have gone numb. An absence of feeling so complete it has substance. I look in vain for the East German.

"Excuse me," I say to a woman next to me. I speak toward a telescoped hood lined in fur. In all that bundling, you can't see who people are. "Do you understand what he's saying?" *Ymmärrätkö, mitä hän sanoo?*

"Kyllä," she says – yes – and returns her attention to the driver.

Above, I see only stars: indiscriminate, chaotic, unreachable. They're all in motion. No two on exactly the same plane, or with the same orbit.

The new peach parka couple share the knitter's scarf. It binds them as a single, fraudulent unit. Behind them, the knitter himself works with impossibly large needles at what looks like the woolen version of a drive-in movie speaker.

Now all the Finns have binoculars to their eyes, turned skyward. The talker is enclustered with a group of them, laughing, at home in his extreme weather system.

I raise my binoculars. Hear murmurs that might be wonder. I turn the center knob frantically, but I can't bring anything into focus.

"How do these work?" I ask. "What are we supposed to see?"

– *Miten nämä toimivat? Mitä minun pitäisi nähdä?*

The numb in my fingers grows like something ancient. I feel blood deserting the area. A drunken compass needle spins inside my head. I fear I will be stuck out here forever. I remove a mitten. The fingers bloodless – bone white. The skin rubbery. Stiff. I remitten, tuck my hand under my arm pit. My legs wobble. From the

knitted drive-in speaker, the talker's woolen voice whispers: "We are dynamic. We are adaptive. We are life forms which thrive in interstices." My vision flutters. I close my eyes. Open them.

I see a pair of fire-colored sunglasses perched on an ash-colored head. I breathe relief. She wears the knitter's scarf. I approach. She is not the East German. Her face not kind. A weight in my chest. I have no choice. I gesture at the binoculars, the sky. I ask her, "Ymmärrättekö?" *Do you understand?*

She is missing a bottom front tooth. She gives a chin nod, like we are in on some shared secret. "Katsoa läpi pikku reikiä," she says.

I wait a respectable interval and turn away. Comb through my phrase book and piece together a translation:

*Look through the little holes*

We are deep in the polar night. Hints of false dawn: a tease of pink at the edge of the world. It's all I can do not to cry.