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Ice and Ashes

A young sled driver takes on a moral imperative

Blair Braverman

THE SUMMER I TURNED 18, I LIVED ON A GLACIER. IT WAS A BROAD, slanted finger of snow, a home I shared with 200 huskies and a dozen people. From above, the camp was smudges on the white, pressed against the base of a black mountain: canvas tents, ordered doghouses, trails that stretched into the fields beyond. I was working as a dogsled guide in Alaska, leading tourists through a wilderness nicknamed “the moon”: Juneau’s ice field, which covers an area the size of Connecticut with ice up to a mile deep. Each morning I would pull myself from my sleeping bag, slip on my raincoat and boots, and step from my tent into the pale light of the northern summer, the glacier luminous beneath me in the rising sun.

After chores—feeding the dogs, cleaning trails—a distant purr would echo over the mountains, and a line of helicopters would grow in the sky until they were right above us, the air throbbing with the beat of their rotors. I waited by the sled while the birds landed, the handlebar jerking under my hand as the dogs jumped in excitement, and for one hour I would escort passengers on a tour, skimming across the ice field in gentle silence. Over the summer, I gave almost 700 tours, so that the season’s runs melt into a single memory; of these, one alone stands out.

On that tour, I had a single passenger, an older woman with a southern accent and a creased face. As we left the kennel she told me her story: how she and her husband had always longed to visit Alaska’s glaciers; how they had finally made it up, last year, only to be forced down in a sudden storm; how he had fallen ill—cancer—and passed away that winter. I listened, kicking snow with one foot as we slid along the trail.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

She smiled. “Don’t be. I’m glad to be here today.”

Two miles in, I paused to give my dogs a rest, a chance to bite snow and cool down. When the sled stopped, the woman pulled something from the

folds of her coat: a sandwich bag filled with earthy powder. She pressed it to her heart for a moment, then leaned over the side of the sled basket, scooping at the snow with her free hand. Hurriedly, she emptied the ashes into the hole, patted a handful of snow on top, and returned both hands to her lap like an attentive child. Her papery skin stretched tight across the knuckles of her clasped hands.

“Are the dogs ready yet?” she asked. “Let’s keep going.”

For the rest of the run, neither of us spoke. I doubt I could have. When the tour ended, I touched the woman’s hand, then watched as she climbed into a helicopter and lifted into the sky. I wondered if I wasn’t the only one watching her go.

Throughout the evening, I was troubled. I realized that the next morning, when we cleaned the trails, the ashes would be collected with the other dirt, then packed into a barrel and flown to the Juneau sewage treatment center. This, after the woman had come such a long way. I went to my boss and told him of a plan I was forming, but he only shook his head. “This isn’t your responsibility,” he said. “It would be much too dangerous. One dead body is enough for today—we don’t want you hurt, too.”

That night as I tried to sleep, the day’s events whirled and eddied in my thoughts. He’s right, I told myself. It’s not my responsibility. But the longer I lay awake, the more I was certain of what had to be done. And so in the young hours of the morning, deeply uneasy, I stepped from my tent.

We kept three snowmobiles in camp and I started the smallest, wincing as its engine cut the night’s silence. After a few minutes’ driving, I found the ashes, a gray-brown patch that seemed to pulse against the white trail. What had seemed so simple in the tent—to dig up the ashes and move them—seemed, suddenly, very difficult. And no one was allowed beyond the outermost path, which was where I planned to go; it was the only place where the ashes wouldn’t be disturbed.

I closed my eyes and took a slow breath, feeling my lungs expand and cool with the night air, and as I exhaled, I reached down and dug my naked hands into the snow. The ashes were buried more deeply than I had expected, and I pulled them up in handfuls, gathering a dirty mound. My fingers stiffened with the cold and I breathed on them, trying to ignore the dark crescents jammed under my nails, trying to forget that they were part of a human body.

When I could move my hands again I began packing the pile together, carefully pressing the growing snowball into a perfect sphere, stained gray like frozen smoke. Then, lifting the ball to my chest, I stepped off the trail. Out

here, crevasses waited blue and veiled under the surface, plunging like cracks to the center of the earth, and I walked cautiously, expecting to fall through with every step. When the burn of the snow in my palms forced me to stop, I looked back. I could no longer see the trail or the snowmobile; only my footprints broke the billowing expanse, a dotted line shrinking into the horizon.

I crouched down and placed the ball on the snow, wondering, reflecting. A man lives his life, falls in love and marries and dies, only to be carried by a stranger across a barren glacier in the Alaskan wilderness. His ashes would melt into the ice with the next rainfall, then creep downhill for a decade or more before calving into the sea in great white boulders. It struck me that I had never before felt this alone, here on an empty ice field under dark mountains, with the burden of leaving a man behind. It was as if I were packing part of myself into the snowball, as if I would emerge less than whole.

It seemed disrespectful not to provide some sort of ceremony, and I felt a sudden anger at the man's wife, his nameless loved ones, for leaving me—a stranger!—with the tremendous responsibility of the final goodbye. What could I possibly say that could do justice to an entire life lived, that could show compassion, kindness, understanding? I knew nothing, nothing at all about the man in my hands. I bit my lip until it ached, trying to think clearly. And then, cautiously, I began to speak.

"I never met you," I said, "but I think you were probably a good man. You were probably just like any of us, good sometimes but not always, just trying to be a better person. I bet you did things you were proud of and things you regretted, and you learned from your mistakes. There are people today whose lives are better because you were part of them. If you have kids, I'm sure they love you very much. I know your wife does." I swallowed. "She's in Juneau right now, thinking you're where she left you, and maybe that brings her peace."

I stood long in the clouded moonlight, thinking. I thought about what makes us human, our shared truths, our deepest hopes, the peace that comes from understanding that we are not alone. In the distance, a soft howl rose and fell, trailing off so gradually that I couldn't tell when it ended, and after a moment I turned. As I walked toward the trail I felt the weight of tears on my cheeks, but when I reached up to brush them away, it was only snowflakes.

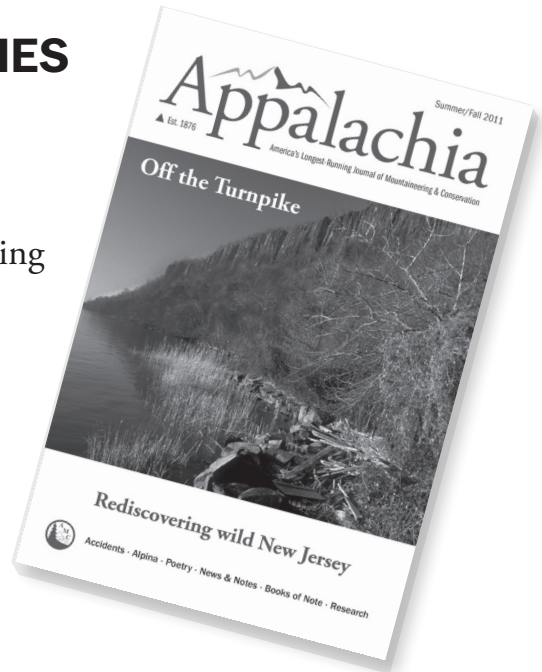
BLAIR BRAVERMAN graduated in May from Colby College.

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