

The Place I Call Home

by Suzette Delmage

L'auteure partage ses premières expériences de vie dans le Nord. Elle parle entre autres de son expérience de meneuse de traîneau à chiens, de la chasse à son premier orignal et de comment elle s'est débrouillée lors de sa première rencontre avec un ours gris.

Women of the North. These are words that conjure up images of a mysterious northern land and the fearless women who live there. Hard pioneering women with large wrists and ruddy complexions who challenge the brutal elements and conquer the harsh land. And here am I, with normal sized wrists and a complexion verging on pale, born a woman of the south (Southern Ontario that is) but six years ago transported to the "land above 60" partly on whim and partly by an urge for new discovery which happened to be shared by my partner.

Across my front yard, beyond the white rush of the river, the golden evening light creeps up the mountainside like an amber flame, torching the spruce tops and fanning

across the sky in streaks of red and gold. Sitting in a log cabin surrounded by wild spruce and scraggy willows, 40 miles from the nearest town, I have time to reflect on the path that I took six years ago. Looking back to the woman who once negotiated eight lanes of frenzied traffic to commute to a high-stress job in the core of the city, perfectly adapted to my urban world, I remember strapping on skis and searching out the nearest park to escape the congestion. The freedom was momentary, a short invigorating glide under snow-laden branches in the closest thing to wilderness which could be found. Sooner or later, the reality of urban life would intrude.

I throw freshly cut pieces of kindling into the wood stove to take the cool edge off the spring evening. The hard crack of the axe biting neatly into the wood had sent it splintering into long dry splices for the fire and I felt a surge of satisfaction. This is a skill acquired since my arrival in the north country. Hauling wood and water have become part of the natural cycle of my life. A running water system now means the river that flows beside the cabin. There are "innovations" in this bush lifestyle—water

pumps and generators and gravity-fed systems — b u t c h o p p i n g wood and hauling water are part of a lifestyle based on self-sufficiency and the capacity for physical work.

My first year here and I am clinging to the back of a narrow wooden sled, bracing

my body as I careen through a twisting trail of snow and spruce. The increasing frenzy in my voice only seems to excite the four huskies who I am sure are dragging me closer to becoming a tangled heap of arms and legs and snarling dogfight. A stern inner voice tells me to stop shaking or risk an untimely end and the strength is suddenly found to hurl the ice-hook out, catching a tree root half-buried in the snow. The impact of stopping knocks my breath away and leaning shakily against the sled bow, four grinning husky faces stare back at me. I have an inkling that this might be an introduction to life as a northern woman.

I can laugh at this now, for I have travelled many more trails and experienced more than a few disasters.

The wooden paddle gleams against the unbroken surface of the river. Green and gold cobblestones are magnified through the looking glass of water, interrupted only by the shimmering silver-blue flashes of grayling as they slalom between the rocks below. It is a perfectly still evening. There is a hint of fall in the warm air and crimson red spires of fireweed salute from the shoreline. My partner and I quietly lay our paddles up and listen intently to the noises of the river. We are hunting game, our ears alert for the rustle of a branch, a twig snapped, or if we are lucky enough, the love-struck lament of a moose may echo across the ripples of water.

Stopping for shore lunch, we have climbed up above the floor of the river valley and are perched on a rocky ridge of wind-swept pines. My eyes trace the shining ribbon of river back through steep sided mountain canyons and grassy green wetlands where earlier in the morning we had spotted a complacent moose cow and her young calf sunning on the river bank. Human and animal instincts sharpened in a moment of recogni-



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tion, slowly fading away as the canoe drifted downstream. Fresh evidence of moose, bear, and wolf tracks crisscrossed over the mud flats of the river. The night before the mournful bay-ing of the wolves had echoed out over the valley reaffirming that we were not alone in this great wild country.

The fifth day of paddling and we are camped on a gravel bar island. The doughy brown lumps in the frying pan are my feeble attempt at bannock without baking powder. Somehow I have left this important item out of our food box and the sad result gloats back at me from the pan. My partner hasn't fared much better, unable to coax the small campfire to burn hot enough to boil potatoes which lie like hard nuggets in the cooking pot. Suddenly his eyes rivet to a point behind my shoulder. Down river, no more than thirty feet away, the glossy brown hump and towering rack of a bull moose push powerfully across the river, oblivious to our presence. At first we stand mesmerized in awe and disbelief but moved to action, my partner picks up his gun, walks quietly forward and fires from the weapon in one deliberate calculated movement.

This is my first hunt and my initial excitement gives way to some dismay as I view the majestic wild creature now lying motionless on the gravel bar. Searching for a thread of meaning, my mind connects with the Na-

tive ritual of paying homage to the spirit of a slain animal and a new sense of understanding overwhelms me. I offer a silent prayer to the spirit of this mighty creature before we begin to maneuver the carcass with block and tackle. I am about to learn what an enormous task it is to gut, skin, and quarter an animal for food and am newly respectful of the Native people who have hunted this wild land for millennia in search of food for their families.

Lying in the sheltered cavern of our tent, the gurgling noises of the river flow in and out of my consciousness mimicking human voices. It is as though the river itself is speaking through the mist of my half-sleep. From somewhere nearby the reality of a different voice intrudes: deep panting grunts. A twinge of apprehension nudges me awake and a sharp elbow to my partner brings him to full consciousness.

The head lamp beam flashes outside the tent but reveals nothing. The moose is still intact. I slip back into an uneasy sleep and consciousness fades away as my mind once again tries to decipher the murmurings of the river. A resounding splash brings me crashing back into reality. My partner and I sit suspended in our sleeping bags whispering frantic suggestions to each other, abruptly silenced by the deafening growl which erupts beside the tent. Stories of people being eaten

alive come to mind, tents ripped to shreds, people being tossed and mauled like rag dolls. I try to calculate where those fearsome paws might rip through the nylon walls.

Five seconds of terror feels like fifty until my partner has the gumption to fire the gun out the tent door. We are

in wide awake fear now and I feel the adrenaline flow through my arteries, pumping hard against my chest. From within the tent a high-pitched voice squeals out a string of campfire songs. It is my voice and I am singing as though possessed by the ghost of girl guides past. My partner stares in amazement at my delirious outbreak but soon joins in. It is at least an hour to daylight and the thought of a bear padding around our tent motivates us to sing and bang pots like two small children. It is an infinity till the first hints of daylight filter through the tent. The river spirits must be with us for the bear has disappeared from sight. An enormous paw print is freshly visible in the sand near our tent and the claw marks stand out sharply. We conclude it was a "griz," *Ursus arctos*, Grizzly, the Big One. The feeling surfaces again that I have passed through another initiation into northern life.

It is late and I am tired, having travelled across the city to visit a friend. I get off at Bloor Street station, moving like a robot to the next platform. It is three stops before I realize that I've gone south instead of north and I move with a sigh of resignation to the door. A victim of fatigue and damp tunnel air, starved for oxygen, I just want to get to the surface again. Memories of the subway rumbling under the city floor like a giant tunneling ant give way to more recent memories; the exhilarating rush of skimming out over frozen lakes under a vast black northern sky pulsing with stars and the green quiver of northern lights; the only sounds the swoosh of the sled runners on the crusted snow and the steady huffing of my canine companions.

The sharp edge of -30° sears my sinuses as I breathe in the night air. The cold inspires the dogs to fly across the white expanse of lake before I give the command to turn up the bush trail. As the sled runners bounce off a snow hump, my head lamp wires wrap around my arm and the light blinks out. Momentarily panicked at the thought of the trail without light I realize with a smile



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that I have no worries. My lead dog has travelled this trail many times and the team runs on in the rhythmical motion of canine teamwork. The pearlescent rays of a rising moon begin to filter through the black canopy of the spruce forest and patches of the trail are illuminated before me. The sled floats over an open pond which has been transformed into a luminous sea glittering with blue and white ice crystals and is just as quickly swallowed back into the dark bush. I close my eyes and sense the trail beneath my feet, anticipating each hill and curve, leaning into the turns and braking gently around the sharpest corners.

Soon I am sitting in front of a crackling wood stove fire, sipping hot tea and warming fingers and toes. Outside the dogs begin to howl in unison, rising to a haunting crescendo which dies as suddenly as it starts. Perhaps they are howling at the great globe of the moon which hangs suspended over the northern landscape or perhaps it is an affirmation of something wild and primeval. Listening to their song with a deep sense of appreciation and wonder, I know why the north has become home.

Suzette Delmage graduated from York University in 1979 with a Bachelor of Arts in Physical Education. She and her partner moved to the Yukon in 1987 and now operate a wilderness tourism business offering guided dog sled tours.

BERNADETTE R. NORWEGIAN

The Orphans, The Hooded and the Robed

These days are not for the hooded and the robed
 There is no more innocence
 No one can plead ignorance anymore
 The orphans have become wayfarers
 They walk along old pathways
 They point out wrongs committed along the way
 There is confusion and accusations
 The brothers and sisters are interrogated
 A plague is upon them
 There is bewilderment
 They long for the securities that served them well
 Prayers, solitude, the quiet, and detachment
 These days there is shame
 Who can explain it

They would rather the sombre and the still
 They are as a night without stars
 There is so much tribulation
 They live alone by not speaking
 When there is laughter they ask who laughs
 When there is talk they ask who speaks
 They want each a single bed, water and a cross
 They never lift their faces from their chests
 There is illness

The years are finished
 They must answer to the orphans grown
 Their church safeguarded the ugly things
 Their confessionals were protected
 The joy of God was made sorrowful
 The light of God made dim
 The reverence of God scorned
 And his children made to feel shamed
 Who can explain it
 The hooded and the robed
 They are being examined
 The orphans are in counsel.

Bernadette R. Norwegian, a Dene from the NWT, lives and works in Ottawa, Ontario. She left the North in 1989 to pursue a career in circumpolar research and now works for the Canadian Polar Commission.