

ONIB

TRAVEL



MAGAZINE



TRAVEL ADVENTURES OFF THE BEATEN PATH

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"INTO the COLD" - Marcia DESANCTIS

"FELIZ CUMPLEAÑOS, JOSÉ LUIS" - Lavinia SPALDING



INTO THE COLD

MARCIA DESANCTIS



“This is one of the deepest lakes in Sweden,” says Joachim, indicating to the right—towards me—in the passenger seat. It hardly seems like a body of water, but rather like a boundless prairie blanketed with snow. “Many people have drowned here on snowmobiles and they completely disappear under the ice.” We are driving along the shore of Lake

Malgomai on a February day and the scrape of tire studs beneath our Subaru wagon clashes with the Jennifer Lopez and Pitbull duet thumping on the radio. The horizon is a rainbow of grays—dove to steel to charcoal—like a Benjamin Moore paint strip.

“Do you mind if I turn down the radio?” I ask. The noise level makes it difficult to give the icy gravesite its due. Joachim taps off the power button and silence inflates inside the car. “How deep is it?”

“One hundred seventeen meters,” he says. Several fishermen are planted in cleared-out spaces on the surface. They are bundled under earflaps and bulk and their poles stick out from holes drilled into the ice. “And 45 kilometers long.”

Thirty minutes ago, Joachim collected me at Vilhelmina Airport, a one-room outpost in Southern Lapland. He was the only person in the “arrivals” corner of the enclosure and since he was picking up a stranger, his gaze was cautious. The whole scenario should make me wary: I—a lone woman—pile with bags into a man’s car, whereupon he tells me of frozen bodies that float somewhere under the lake just a guardrail away, and proceed to drive with him 200 miles on a snow-packed road deeper into forest to the hotel he manages. But I know my instincts well enough to trust them and with few exceptions, those I encounter when I travel alone. Besides, I’m elated to be in the opening moments of a brief disappearing act, the kind I’ve come to crave and even require. Joachim has no idea that he’s in collusion with me as I fade into the folds of Lapland’s forlorn geography for a few days, with no plans for anything except to be out of reach.

I’ve come to Sweden to do a roundup on spas for a glossy monthly, and have spent the last four days in Stockholm getting scraped and pummeled, kneaded and oiled with extracts of birch and lingonberry. I can’t lie, it’s a peach of an assignment but while there I still inhabit my own familiar skin—of the artist’s wife, preoccupied mother, the well-shod magazine scribe under constant harassment from a smart phone.

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Until I moved to a wooded corner of New England, I spent my adult life in New York and Paris, or on the road roaming Istanbul's bazaars or Singapore's teeming streets. But as I get older, it's the remote I seek, the far-flung counterpoint to my rural existence, total sequester to erase the static. The more I wander the world's most crowded places, the harder it is to shake the burdens that have become a part of me: of middle age, of ailing parents and growing children, of perpetual financial doom, professional incertitude and – what is perhaps most unbearable – technological overload. It's a time of life that requires contemplation, which I can achieve neither in the context of my home, where I stew and ponder and spin domestic wheels, nor in a nervous urban swarm of bodies all racing to get somewhere. It is a conundrum: I'm seeking to remedy isolation with greater isolation. Some people call it a getaway. I call it salvation.





It bears mentioning, however, that a few hours striking distance from the Arctic Circle would not be my normal, chosen paradise. I loathe the winter, which, in northwest Connecticut, lasts from November to April. At the moment, though, a beach is a hemisphere away, so I plan to stay indoors and wrap myself in reindeer skins for a few blissfully lonesome days. My lackluster enthusiasm for outdoor adventure—or for being outdoors at all—clearly bewilders Joachim and I find myself a touch embarrassed by it.

“You don’t want to ski?” Joachim asks, incredulous.

“I never learned how,” I say.

“What about the snowmobile?” he asks.

“I don’t think so,” I say, meaning, “*Are you fucking kidding me?*”

Joachim tries not to look confused. “We can take you in the Caterpillar up to Mount Klöverfjället, or you can go in the helicopter. That would be very nice, to ride in a helicopter. It’s very beautiful to see the mountain from the top.”

How many more ways can I—politely—say, “No, thanks?” He’s the owner of a winter resort and his new charge is disinterested, a complete dud. I want him to believe that I’m happy, and that my sense of adventure, however paltry to the naked eye, is already satisfied by this excursion north. I don’t need to chase powder on a Catski, courting avalanches and frostbite. No one except a friend in Stockholm knows my whereabouts. I don’t require much more.

“I’ll think about it,” I say. “Does the hotel offer massage?” I’m not sure my muscles can withstand another beating but at least it’s an activity.

Joachim lights up. “Yes, in fact we have a new person starting today,” he says.

“That’s great,” I say.

“You can also go for walks,” he says.

“Really, I’ll be fine.”

It’s mid-week, so, Joachim tells me, the hotel is all but empty. There is a fireplace that I can curl up next to and stoke for the next three days. “You will be very happy in the restaurant,” he says. “We have a nice wine list and we carry a small-batch local gin which is wonderful.”

“Now, you’re talking,” I say.

Joachim fills me in on the region. The indigenous Lapp people, known as Sami, have changed along with the rest of the world. Many still herd reindeer, the cornerstone of their livelihood, but instead of doing so on foot across the wide Arctic expanses, they use trucks and

Joachim fills me in on the region. The indigenous Lapp people, known as Sami, have changed along with the rest of the world. Many still herd reindeer, the cornerstone of their livelihood, but instead of doing so on foot across the wide Arctic expanses, they use trucks and helicopters. You may still find dogs and sleds, but the culture is less nomadic and population much dwindled, and the virgin expanses of Lapland are largely for tourists.

Eventually, Joachim takes the exit ramp towards the town of Borgafjall, a sprawling flash of electric white even more intense than the landscape we've just traversed for the past three hours. He points to two distant peaks that are the town landmarks. "That's Klöverfjället," he says. "Locals call them 'The Tits,' or more often, 'Anita Ekberg.'" Clouds obscure one of them, the right breast perhaps, but they are wispy ones, like linen curtains on a spring day, and the sky otherwise is sapphire blue. It is not yet 11 am and the sun is low on the horizon.

"This is good for tonight," he says. "You can see the Northern Lights only when the sky is clear."

"What are the chances of seeing them?" I ask. It's the middle of February and because the air tends to be less moist than earlier in the winter, it is, in fact, the optimal viewing time. Borgafjall is in Vasterbotten County in Southern Lapland, about 60 miles from the Arctic Circle. When electrically-charged solar particles collide with atmospheric gases as they are drawn to the North Pole, this creates the Aurora Borealis. In fact, I learn, the 11-year cycle of solar activity is predicted to peak in what is dubbed the "Solar Maximum" right now in the winter of 2013—so the auroral activity, according to Joachim, has been in full disco throttle. But he knows better than to promise a guest a show. I look warily at the sky.







Hotel Borgafjall is a low-slung yellow structure built by an English architect, Ralph Erskine. Inside, there is a pleasing mid-century vibe—a bright seating area around a mod white wood stove. Joachim's wife Gertrud leads me to my room and I pass a vitrine where stuffed wildlife from the area is on display: an Arctic fox, a lynx and a snowy owl with its disturbing gaze both cross-eyed and direct.

I had heard there are some clean, modern rooms but I don't get one—perhaps I overstressed my limited budget in my correspondence with Joachim. It will be fine for sleeping but it is awkward in a kind of vertical way—very tall, very narrow and very small. I make my way across the dorm-like upper floor back to the aesthetically fascinating main part of the building. There is a funky, suspended staircase and painted white I-beams bisect the rooms and ceilings, which jut and

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Gertrud, who also works in the kitchen, obviously got the dope from Joachim on their boring new guest.

“You would not like to go to the slopes today?”

She places warm bread and butter made, she says, locally, on the table. The fire sparks invitingly.

“Actually, I have a lot of work to do,” I lie. Another woman approaches the table and introduces herself.

“I’m Johanna,” she says. “We have horses. Would you like to go riding in the forest?”

“That’s so generous of you,” I say with a smile shellacked on my face. By now my apathy has insulted them, their hotel, and in fact the entirety of Lapland if not Sweden. “Actually, I don’t know how to ride horses.”

I’ve been on a horse exactly once—the same number of times I’ve been on skis. I begin to wonder if there is anything I actually do know how to do.

“The horses are very nice and gentle,” Johanna says.



The afternoon passes slowly so I venture outside for a quick walk. Johanna tells me it is very cold, so I depart in mittens, a hat and the boots I carried overseas for Stockholm's snowy sidewalks. Still, the air deals me a body slam when I open the entrance door, as if it's something tactile and in need of wrangling. I speed up to generate warmth. There is daylight, dim and crystalline. I pass by a small church designed by the same architect as the hotel and peer inside. The drifts are higher than I am and under my footsteps, the road makes a sound like creaking floorboards. At first, the air is so pure I burst into loud hacks when I inhale, the city expunging itself from my lungs. My face grows numb while the brief stroll turns into two hours, then three. My body is moving, heated, propelling me forward, further from the hotel. My head is uncluttered and I don't pass a soul on the road.

There is little to see but a bleached landscape embellished in parts by a green-black treeline. Though the vista is uniform, every new angle from every corner I turn startles me just the same. Sweat prickles my stomach and back and pools in the waistband of my jeans when I veer towards foreign territory: the ski area.

It was strange to grow up in New England and never learn to schuss down a snowy mountain. My father is an Italian from Tucson who worked every weekend of my childhood. While my friends hauled off for Vermont on Friday afternoons, I stayed home and baked Toll House cookies, waiting for our annual getaway to St. Croix or Barbados come February. Skiing wasn't in his, or subsequently our—vernacular. So when we moved to the country, I was determined that my kids should tackle what I had not. For a few years, I dragged them on Wednesdays and Sundays to the mountain near our house and had them kitted out for lessons. At one time, I thought I'd join them, but instead, opted to toast my bones in the lodge by an ancient fireplace at tables encrusted with ketchup and grease. I always worried until I saw their little bodies at the bottom of the run.



Risk för
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istappar



Inside the ski shop, the surroundings are familiar from when my children were small. Skis line up wall to wall, kids with pink faces trudge in boots. I even recognize the worn carpet underfoot. Behind this equipment rental room is a snack bar, with antler chandeliers poised airily above the tables full of skiers exuding the hale flush of exhaustion. I wished for a fraction of their spent physicality. My lips unfreeze to sip hot tea and nibble on a slice of chocolate cake, and passing back through the store, I turn back and head for the counter where a man is bent over a metal contraption waxing skis.

“Do you offer lessons for cross country?” I ask.

“Yes, but our teacher is away for the week,” he says.

“Is it hard?” I ask, “I mean, to do?”

“Once you get used to it, it’s like walking but you’ll need to practice,” he says. “You’ve never done it?”

“No,” I say. “Can I reserve a pair of skis for tomorrow?”

I fill out a form, leaving my name and a deposit of SEK 100, and depart the lodge with a written commitment to teach myself to cross-country ski the next day. I’m no longer brooding when I get back to the hotel, where I plunk in the lounge and never crack open my book. There are only a few of us at dinner, including the new massage guy whom I had booked for the following day. The meal is magnificent—even the sliced reindeer. I’m ashamed to tell these nice people that I don’t eat meat, either, so I swallow all of it, as well as Arctic Char from Malgomai and my wine, happily. It’s been an entire day since I’ve checked my emails or my dwindling bank balance. No texts from the kids far away at school. Nor have I pondered old heartbreak or recent loss. Exhausted, I drift off to my room to get ready for bed.

Just before switching off the light above my bed, I remember the Northern Lights and Joachim’s prediction that afternoon that the conditions were ideal. I’m warm, buzzed, deliciously at peace but I force myself into boots anyway, as well as my coat, mittens and hat. The hotel bar is hopping, and I pray no one glances outside to see the

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I walk around, filling myself with freezing air, seduced by the thought of the warm bed I just abandoned, tempted by sleep. I jog to the road to fight off my apathy, to promise myself a deep slumber if I can be patient for once, to persist in this bitter cold a few more minutes. Instead I go inside and slide into bed. It's 10:00. I can't fall asleep.

To see the Northern Lights requires commitment I don't feel obligated to muster up during this, my time to clear the head and shun responsibility. But I lurch out of bed anyway, begrudgingly, and pile on the layers, slip on my boots and leave without a hat. The wine has leached from my system and now I'm colder and emptier. I stroll briskly to the road. I spin around and observe the waif of a new moon and the stars, chrome studs shimmering against a deep violet sky. The chill lodges in my joints and my ears tingle from the sharp, windless air. I wave my arms to keep the blood flowing.

I know, the Aurora Borealis is a crapshoot, like spotting a pod of whales in a boat off Cabo. I cannot fight my fatigue anymore so I wander back to the front door, buying a little time with my slow, deliberate steps. My neck aches from craning it skyward. The air crackles so softly it almost hisses, and I turn to the source of the noise. To the north, above the hotel apartments, I see a corner of the heavens illuminated with a swoosh of green light, ghostly and ethereal. The colors seem to brush against my frozen face and undulate against the pitch-black stretch of horizon. I hear a bustle of people and voices, including Johanna, the staff closing out the kitchen, who emerge to watch the spectacle. We all stand silently as it flares to reveal a rolling

including Johanna, the staff closing out the kitchen, who emerge to watch the spectacle. We all stand silently as it flares to reveal a rolling arc, watery flashes of neon green and pale blue still isolated to one fragment of the sky. The lights contract from a brush stroke to a thin yellow-green ribbon and when it disappears, I dare to breathe again.



The next morning, Johanna insists on taking me for a horseback ride. I try to refuse her but there is a softness about her insistence and frankly, I'm somewhat worn down. The lethargy I desire looks like a problem to them, a petulance that needs rectifying with bucking up and more suggestions. As she drives me to the stables, Johanna confirms it's been a banner season for Northern Lights. "It was a small one last night," she says, "but I never get tired of seeing it," she says.

The wind blows in icy intermittent puffs, yesterday's sun has vanished, and I'm about to mount a horse for the second time ever (the first being behind a resort in Tignes with a snow leopard). It smells of

The wind blows in icy intermittent puffs, yesterday's sun has vanished, and I'm about to mount a horse for the second time ever (the first being behind a resort in Tucson, rattlesnakes and all). It smells of hay and the cold, and the animals, of the Northern Swedish breed, are enormous. She introduces me to my ride and I love him immediately, despite the fact that he's a giant and seems hearty and not at all dead. I don't reveal to Johanna my next piece of bad news: that I'm allergic to cats, dogs, hamsters and yes, horses, the latter of which have always rather scared me. I did have an urge to ride, once, when my daughter started taking lessons, but I suppose I chickened out and bagged that, too.

"See how kind he is?" she says. "His name is Besten, which means Beast."

"Not encouraging," I say. Did I mention? He's massive.

"It's also means 'the best,'" she says.

Johanna strokes him and whispers both to me and to him. "You'll be fine, I promise." She hands me a brush and shows me how to groom his fur, where to scratch him. I catch him squarely in the eyes.

"Friends, okay?"

Johanna mounts her horse with ease and rides bareback. She drapes a saddle over Besten, I don a helmet that is too small over my wool cap, and we ride into the woods. I am terrified and exhilarated. The horse trots too quickly over deep snow but soon I settle into his pace and even urge him on faster, over rocks and brooks, past thickets of birch and rows of giant spruce that seem to close in on us. We go up and down a few steep hills, and when my body lurches perpendicular to the ground I love Besten even more for not letting me tumble off. We have ridden a few miles when Johanna leads us into a pine glade for lunch, where we tie up the horses. She reveals sandwiches and a thermos of coffee and we settle into a snowbank. The jagged treeline is rimmed by a blackish sky. I think of nothing but as I am: far, far away.



I envy Johanna's ease with the horses and the forbidding terrain. I envy her competence and knowledge and clarity of purpose. She has bought a house in Borgafjall with her husband who runs the ski area and simply loves this magnificent place. "So why did you decide to come here?" she asks.

"You mean, and not ski?" I ask. We laugh.

"Just for a break," I say.

"Life is very complex," she says as we fix our eyes on the frozen horizon and prepare for the hour's ride back to the stables.

Back at the hotel, I'm restless. I reluctantly eat elk sausage for lunch and feel my stomach churning in the aftermath. I wander outside in my usual cold weather get-up in the direction of the ski trails. My acquaintance in the shop welcomes me with my equipment, unfortunately freshly waxed, that I cart over my shoulder back to the hotel. I dial my husband.

"Hi, I'm in Lapland," I say.

"You're what?"

"In Lapland and I just rented cross country skis." He skis almost every morning on the trails near our house. "Can you give me some pointers?"

"Wow," he says. He's never once convinced me to join him, despite asking me daily. "I'm amazed."

"Yeah, me too. It's cold but for some reason, it doesn't bother me," I say. "So I figured, why not?"

"Way to go," he says. "Lift the heel of the back foot as you push forward on the front leg. The poles are key."

"Here goes nothing," I say.

Gertrud directs me to the trails right behind the hotel. Shortly, I'm winded, dripping perspiration, crawling reluctantly then sliding, struggling to keep my legs parallel and loose and gradually picking up speed. Strapping Swedes with gaunt cheeks and high-tech outdoor gear whiz past me. The route slopes downward and I accelerate for

my breath but I don't feel the cold.

The sky is dark enough to hide Anita Ekberg and at the hotel, I meet up with Johanna, who reminds me of my massage. "You are okay?" she asks.

At dinner, four snowmobilers on a guy's getaway invite me to their table and offer to share their fine Bordeaux.

"You have never been on a snowmobile?" One of them, an executive for a mountaineering equipment firm, asks me.

"You have to come with us tomorrow, we are going 25 miles to Saxnos," another says. We debate it after dinner by the fireplace, over cognac and the local gin. Too dangerous, I maintain. Nonsense, say they. It's the Nordic way of life!

"Even the Sami people use snowmobiles now," one of them exclaims.

At breakfast, they're all there, my drinking buddies, in swell outdoor attire—orange, green, Gore-tex, microfiber efficiency. "You can still change your mind," one of them says.

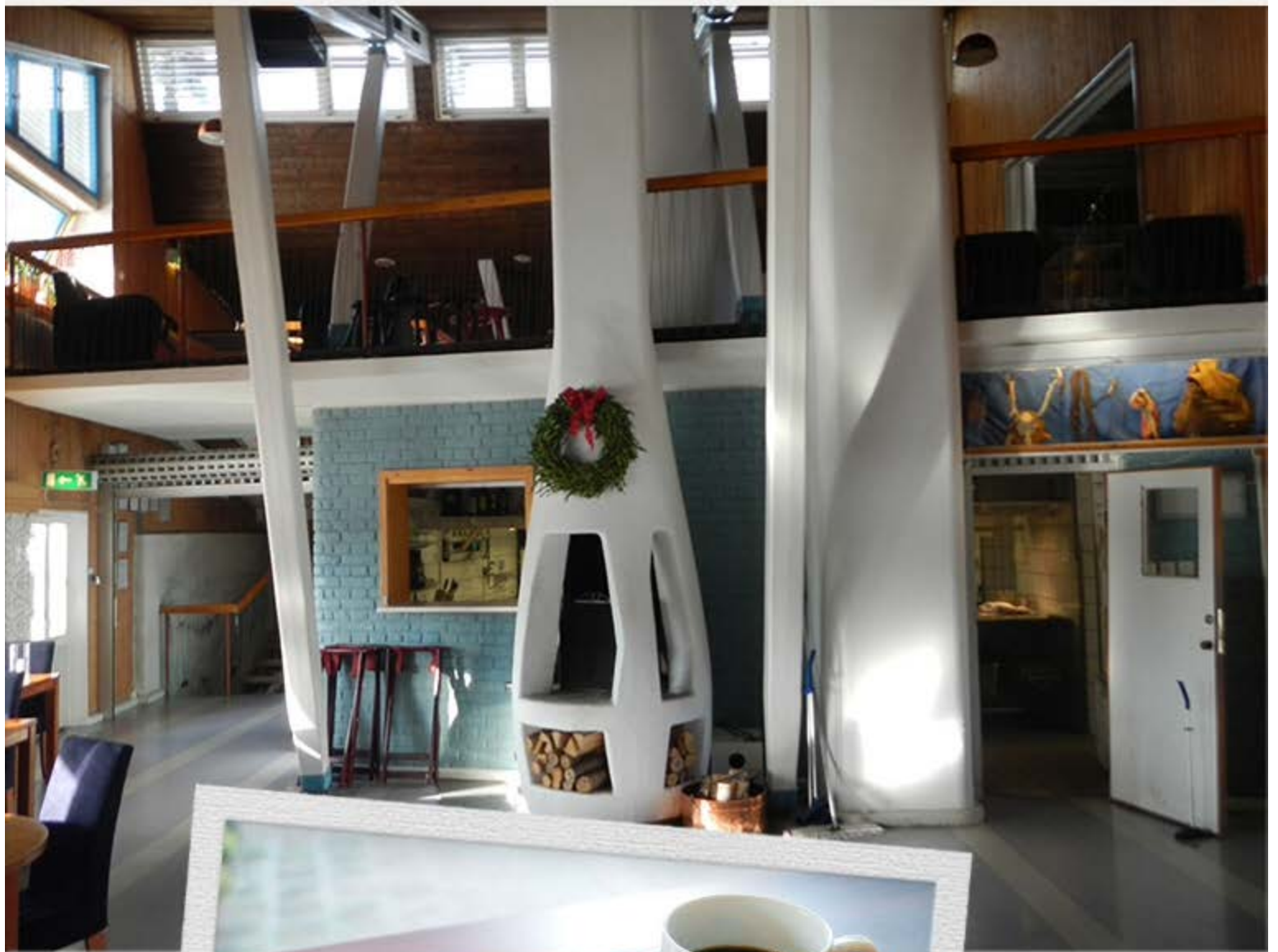
I laugh. "Thanks anyway."

They leave and I finish my coffee alone. Just how I wanted it, right? But the northern air is clearing my head, making me dare experience something I've never braved before: the outdoors. The cold. Air so clean it makes my head feels weightless. "Joachim and are going out on the snowmobile to put some restaurant flyers on the trail," says Gertrud, who sits at the next table. My stomach grips tightly because I know what's coming next. "Why don't you come?"

I'm not getting any thinking done, nor have I been able to submerge myself in a pool of isolation. But I'm healthier than I was when I arrived two days ago and it's easy to see why.

"As long as it's safe," I say, thinking of Lake Malgamai and the reckless adventurers. "Please, go slow."





I hold onto Gertrud while Joachim speeds up ahead. The acrid odor of exhaust wafts around us, and I worry about befouling the virginal air, but not as much as I fear calamity. "Slow" for her is too fast for me, and I squeeze her. When she takes a sharp corner we dip towards the ground like a listing ship and I imagine the motor slicing into my

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We park the snowmobiles and climb to a cluster of round wooden Sami huts which are buried under a cap of snow. The blackened remains of fires darken the interiors. They are long abandoned. We climb from one to the other and peer behind the disintegrating doors and soon resume our trek.

Gertrud zooms, allowing me to firm my grasp as we rise higher on the mountain. Joachim hammers flyers, advertising specials for the upcoming weekend, into stakes. They are expecting a full house and, he tells me, these same trails will be packed. Today, they are empty.

When we stop, the cold, which has already lodged into the creases of my cheeks, nose and lips, wends its way under my coat, even under ski pants Johanna lent me, even beneath the layer of thermal fabric closest to my skin. The couple has stopped for *fika*—the Swedish ritual of drinking coffee. We are in a clearing, in full view of blinding white Anita Ekberg, under a sky so blue and so packed with atmospheric gases that this night, we may see the whole horizon transform again into a halo of liquid light.

Gertrud splashes a drop of milk into my cup. The hot drink relieves the prickly Arctic air that surrounds us in every direction. The cookies, too, warm me, the sensation of sugar against tongue, the comfort of sustenance. None of us rushes to finish our coffee but soon I clamber back onto the snowmobile and clutch onto Gertrud. The elements are relentless, just as they are under a Caribbean sun from which eventually you need to seek shade.

As we ride back, the sky clouds over quickly. There will be no Northern Lights tonight, but I am certain there will be something else

As we ride back, the sky clouds over quickly. There will be no Northern Lights tonight, but I am certain there will be something else to stumble upon and surprise me. I don't quite recognize the person these people have turned me into over the last days but I'm getting fond of her. In fact, I might like to spend a little time with her—walking, riding, gazing—engaged in anything, actually, but contemplation.



ONB Contributors

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