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In November the freezing began. It started first in hollows and alcoves in high rocks, where structures of frost appeared on the lichen, and whatever soil had gathered there darkened and hardened to the touch, as if the land was contracting, stiffening, like armor plates drawing together on the back of some titanic animal. The mosquitoes vanished altogether, and the birch and alder gave up their leaves all at once, leaching them into the wind as if desperate to be rid of them. Soon the outhouse hole froze over, as did the fringes of the creek, the unfrozen center flowing in a gluey sludge, midstream boulders wearing caps of ice. Each morning they'd find dead insects, bees and flies mostly, arched on the windowsill.

By the middle of that month the sounds of the Yukon freezing—deep, metallic reverberations, as though a Goliath beyond the next hill repeatedly flexed an enormous sheet of tin—sounded everywhere, echoing off hills and seeming to lodge in unseen hollows, only to come spiraling out minutes later, so that the air was filled, always, with the eerie, anchorless sound of water going to ice.

Naaliyah chopped plates of it from small bogs in the woods and turned them over. Beneath were water striders, squirming larvae, macroinvertebrates. "Astounding," she'd tell Winkler, and show him her plunder: a slushy mug livid with tiny swimmers: iceworms; the large-jawed larva of an antlion.

Pockets of life amid all that freezing. It was as if the cold was forcing all of them closer, into tighter and tighter communities, hurrying to find the creases and chinks in the great contracting armor of winter.

After dark, out of reach of the orange, leaking light of the cabin, Winkler would tramp to the edge of the creek and listen: its sound had grown thicker and harsher. It had frozen over now and already successive overflows were lacquering the surface. He could hear ice rolling along the bottom, grinding itself against stones, a sound like dozens of glass tumblers being crushed inside a towel. And above it the sound of the liquid water had deepened, lost some of its animation, the molecules reluctant to give up their bonds. Animals would come down tentative and shy to slurp at the overflows, deer, skunks, chipmunks, even lynxes in the night like big, sleek ghosts (he wouldn't see them but would find their prints frozen in the banks).

Still the snow marched down the mountainsides, mantling summits, filling the high trees. Stones began rising from the ground, thrown up by frost heaves, budding from the earth like strange, monolithic cabbages, and creeping down exposed slopes.

Naaliyah worked harder than ever, almost entirely abandoning her research in favor of gathering wood. She stacked wood everywhere—the shed was filled to the roof, and logs stood around the cabin's perimeter two-deep, and still she was out there, wrestling a big half keg of pinewood onto the block, dropping the maul, cleaving it to its dark, grainy heart.

Sleet, like grains of rice against the windowpane; then the tiny snowballs of graupel, wads of rime skittering across Naaliyah's field desk. Then rain again, and Winkler was disappointed to see it. Winter, he was remembering, was a balky, slow thing—it did not arrive smoothly.

One Sunday, near the back half of the month, he woke to a strange and sad concert, a creaking and yawping that drew him out into the meadow, beneath the impossible spread of stars. The face of the pond had overflowed and the new, upwelling water began to ice over the already frozen surface, and as it froze it ticked, scales of floating ice reaching across, stitching themselves into an unbroken plate, the plate thickening, trillions of water molecules ranging out and lacing. From beneath the new sheet came a sad and eerie moaning, as though the ice had trapped women beneath it.

All month the ice muttered and howled and whistled. The trees echoed back and forth among themselves. Taken collectively, the sound was of deep wounding, of winter inexorably taking the life out of things. That night Winkler stood in the meadow listening as if in a trance—the cold, the answering sounds of grief—until he couldn't bear it. He hurried toward the shed, to bury himself under his furs, to sleep among Naaliyah's thousand slumbering insects.

The night outside, the night within. This was a place where dreams and reality could intersect; where night would be the dominant feature of the landscape.

He could feel snow coming. He could taste it. The mountains were already covered with a half meter.

His right foot had healed as much as it was going to. Probably he would always limp. When he walked it would be as if one foot was permanently a step behind, as if that part of him remained in Boise, Idaho, stepping into a stranger's house, pawing at her photographs. Why couldn't he see the path in front of him? Why couldn't he dream of something to come, some reunion, or at least an answer, some glimpse of who Grace might have been?

There was the Datsun at the bottom of its canyon; the ocean sucking and sucking at Nanton's glass floor; the quiet breathing—in, out, in, out, in, out—of Naaliyah sleeping on her cot. He thought: I should have given Brent Royster all my money. I should have tucked a hundred-dollar bill into every one of his records.

On the twenty-third of November snow finally reached the camp. It battered the cabin window all day. Naaliyah came in and stoked the stove and stood at the glass beside him looking out. "You know," she eventually said, "I see what you meant. How each crystal can be a prism. How it's full of light."

Winkler did not turn away for several hours. All day—indeed, ever since he'd arrived at Camp Nowhere—a sensitivity had been building within him: the slightest shift in light or air touched the backs of his eyes, reached membranes inside his nose. It was as if, like a human divining rod, he had been attuning to vapor as it gathered in the atmosphere, sensing it—water rising in the xylem of trees, leaching out of stones, even the last unfrozen volumes, gargling deep beneath the forest in tangled, rocky aquifers—all these waters rising through the air, accumulating in the clouds, stretching and binding, condensing and precipitating—falling.

He ate his dinner standing up, forehead at the window.

The flurries didn't stop until well into the night. He tried lying in bed, but his blood was surging, and the pale light of the snow was pouring through the shed walls, touching a place very near the center of him. He pulled on his snowsuit and boots and mittens and went out. Maybe six inches had fallen. His feet passed soundlessly through it—the ice skeleton, one of his professors had called it, that loose scaffolding of new-fallen snow, individual crystals re-forming into lattice; with a vise the professor had compressed a loaf of Wonder Bread into a two-inch cube to demonstrate how much air was trapped within.

Winkler's breath plumed up onto his glasses. The entire valley was enveloped in a huge, illuminated stillness. Above him the clouds had pulled away and the sky burned with stars. The meadow smoldered with light, and the spruce had become illuminated kingdoms, snow sifting from branch to branch. He thought: This has been here every winter all my life.

He tramped along the creek until nearly dawn, his hands and feet stinging with cold, his heart high in his throat. The sky was going a dim olive in the east, and Naaliyah was still asleep in the cot when he returned to the cabin and kicked the ice from his boots. On back shelves, where Naaliyah kept her instruments, he knew, there was a microscope: an inclined Bausch & Lomb Stratalab, probably forty years old, monocular, with a brass arm and revolving nosepiece.

He brought it outside to Naaliyah's desk. He swept snow from the tabletop, switched on the microscope's light source (a battery-powered six-volt bulb beneath the stage) and, trembling, pressed one lens of his eyeglasses to the eyepiece.

It worked. There was a disc of white light, a few specks of debris in it like tiny black commas.

He started with a spruce needle, something big, something easy. He closed the aperture on the light source, turned the focus knob. And there it was: long and green, diamond-shaped, paler on the bottom two planes.

He could not contain himself: he extracted the glass slide, wiped it, and sifted the clumped aggregates of a few snowflakes onto it. Then he slid them onto the stage.

It was like stepping back in time. A thousand frozen bonds, stunted ice structures, even the severed branch of an individual dendrite, all leapt large and backlit to his eye like a memory, like a smell—crushed mint, or his mother's skin lotion. It was as if time was pliable and he was able, for a moment, to become a graduate student once more, standing in the cafeteria freezer, all the succeeding years fallen off him like an old coat. As if the snow had been waiting all this time for him to come back.

It took Winkler the rest of the remaining daylight—only four and a half hours, by then—to locate an individual snow crystal. The snow was already aging, settling in, and he was cold, clumsy with his fingers and breath, and his eyes quickly tired. But he managed to find one, sifting down from a tree—star-shaped, the classic six-branched sectored plate—and spear it with the spruce needle and transfer it, mostly undamaged, onto the glass slide.

When he focused it in the viewfinder, the crystal wavering, then sharpening, he felt the old spark flare: six dendrites jutting off a central hexagonal core, scored with ridges. Adrenaline fired down the length of his body. His breath melted it; he stooped and began searching for another. When Naaliyah finally came out, tramping toward him with a steaming tin can, he was shivering so much he sloshed the tea onto his sleeves.

She persuaded him to go inside. Beneath his furs he saw snow crystals on the undersides of his eyelids. Like birds stirred from a rookery, memories flew into his consciousness: the sound of the fan in the cafeteria freezer, rattling as if ice were caught in its blades; Sandy's frozen bootprint that he'd excavated and preserved in his freezer; the cool, washed-cotton smell of his mother. He saw Sandy's thin form fold itself into a theater seat; he saw his mother take her nurse's uniform from a hanger and spread it across the ironing board, heard her steam iron suck and sigh as she brought it across the fabric.

He thought of Wilson Bentley, whose book of snowflakes his mother used to keep beneath the coffee table, an old farmer peering through the bellows of his camera, and the sound of Bentley's pages turning in her hands.

Thirty-six hours after the first snow, a second arrived, falling like stars, filling the trees. He stood in the clearing and caught flakes in a black plastic tub Naaliyah used to sort ants. When he snared a flake he thought might be an undamaged crystal, he coaxed it onto the glass slide with another of Naaliyah's tools: tiny forceps, intended for a watchmaker.

Hollow bullets, sectored plates, prismatic columns, dozens of elaborate stellar dendrites—soon he was seeing all the patterns of his youth, all melting fast beneath his attention and the heat of the microscope's lamp.

With each shift in temperature or humidity, the crystals' shapes varied slightly, like finely tuned thermometers. He imagined them growing in the clouds, the initial molecules precipitating, the wind blowing them through slight gradations in temperature, each prismatic arm growing—the invisible made visible. He could not, it seemed, grow tired of them—watching light travel their arms, whole spectrums of blues and greens and whites, the edges softening already, wilting toward water.

After dark he went into the cabin and sat with Naaliyah over a bowl of noodles. "You know," she said, "that microscope has a photomicrography kit somewhere in here. I haven't used it, but I'd bet you could get it to work. All you'd need is film."

Winkler stopped chewing. "To take photos?"

"Of course."

He stood. "Can I do that? Do you know how to operate it? Will you order the film? Next time you're in town?"

"Of course." She laughed. "Of course."