

Musk

His 6'4" frame engulfed me, the scent of sweet sweat mingled with tanned skin and sunscreen, the musk clouded my senses, pulling me in. It evoked memories of home, memories of a childhood spent outside, running amuck. Long afternoons knee deep in streams unsuccessfully building dams with rocks and mud, constructing boats from bark and sticks, then racing them to unfortunate ends. I wanted to swoon in his arms, wanted him to hold me like this for hours, my longing almost overwhelmed me. I released him, I recalling the smooth firmness of his shoulders, shoulders meant for paddling and that is what we were here to do.

A warm spring breeze blew through my freshly washed hair as I stood above the outlet of Kusawa Lake, looking down the steep and sandy embankment that demarked the headwaters of the Takhini River. It was not my first time on the river, but rivers like life tend to change in the long depths of Yukon winter and today it was Easter long weekend, early spring. Kusawa Lake was still frozen solid, while the early spring flow had broken free in the Takhini, tenacious tentacles of ice reached out into the center of the fast-flowing river. From the top of the embankment, the spring breeze blew sand in small cyclones around my feet, they seemed to mimic my anxiety about the first run of the season. As the dry and blowing sand lanced my nostrils, I breathed its sour, slightly acidic tang, a contrast to the rich black earth of my maternal home in southern Canada. Letting out a sigh, I heaved the boat onto my shoulders and portaged it down the long steep embankment. This felt natural, the weight on my shoulders, the calm assurance of a practiced skill. My head in the belly of the boat I could smell the fresh red gloss of the Nova Craft prospector its scent heavy with fiberglass and paint. At the bottom of the embankment, placing my feet gingerly, I crossed the rocks and edged up to open water. I glanced up and saw my fellow paddler making his way confidently, almost gliding down to the shoreline. Leaning over to place the boat on the edge of the candle ice, its cold crisp essence wafted towards me. It held the memory of those deep winter days, when the thermostat registers negative fifty and the cold burns your throat if you breathe too deeply. While at the same time the fresh, clean, and delicate pillars mirrored the coming of a new spring, tinkling as they lost their tenuous grasp to each other, having hung on only by thin ice nails, which were quickly losing their fight against an increasingly persistent sun.

I dropped my boat into the water, launching into the spray, a cool mist on my face. A few droplets from the river landing on my tongue, I breathed them in simultaneously with the start of the new paddling season. Dipping my paddle in deeply I broke the surface with my hand, trailing my fingers in the icy

water's cool caress. Edging the boat into the current, the mist carried a cornucopia of spring scents. Light, fresh, early flowers, mixed with deep forest damp that you really only experience in the Yukon when the spring moisture still holds tight to the forest floor. A forest blanketed by the evergreens and soft spongiform moss with its rich pallet of smells and textures, beckoning the wayfarer to take a rest in its soft embrace, before the hordes of mosquitos drive them out. As the current whisked my boat easily into the flow, I looked around to see if he was still there. Catching glimpses of him laughing or smiling periodically, happy to be on the river, I sensed a lightness in his soul as he moved with familiar ease across the water.

The peaceful day rolled into night and I found an easy eddy to turn the canoe in to. A short three-foot bank off the river made a nice nest for an evening camp. My companion and I stopped early in order to enjoy the long held tradition and luxury of reliving stories by the campfire. Setting up camp quickly, I gathered some wood and lit the flame. Ringing it with chunks of ice lifted from a nearby bog, the bog thick with damp pine and old grass. The ice limited the risk of fire spreading and melted quickly against the hot flames. Smoke drifted through my nostrils and like so many waves of nostalgia before, I was wrapped in the sweet scent of campfire, I felt an overwhelming desire to be enveloped in his arms. The charcoal and popping of evergreen branches sparked playfully in the evening air, dancing like lightning bugs against the growing dusk. I looked for his camp and mournfully noted that it was set far away from mine, on the edge of the bank overlooking the flowing river. My tent was tucked securely towards the forest, nested into the trees. I settled into my camp chair, sipping strong whiskey from a tin cup. Its woody aroma, laced with notes of maple began to intermix with the cool evening air. I would wait and he would come.

As the evening wore on, he did approach and I tried desperately to breath the air that he was breathing. At dawn, I loaded my boat and floated down the rest of the river. Looking back only once to glance his camp on the bank, his boat no longer following mine. His camp shimmered like a mirage in the morning dew before fading into the wilderness. In its place, a lone Caribou stood on the bank, looking stalwartly down the river standing sentinel. His sweet musk a memory as my single blade penetrated the water's still surface, the current carried me home.