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Through Black Spruce

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Extract

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GILL NETS

When there was no Pepsi left for my rye whisky, nieces, there was always ginger ale. No ginger ale? Then I had river water. River water's light like something between those two. And brown Moose River water's cold. Cold like living between two colours. Like living in this town. When the whisky was Crown Royal, then brown Moose River water was a fine, fine mix.

You know I was a bush pilot. The best. But the best have to crash. And I've crashed a plane, me. Three times. I need to explain this all to you. I was a young man when I crashed the first time. The world was wide open. I was scared of nothing. Just before Helen and I had our oldest boy. The first time I crashed I was drunk, but that wasn't the reason I crashed. I used to fly a bush plane better with a few drinks in me. I actually believe my eyesight improved with whisky goggles on. But sight had nothing to do with my first crash. Wait. It had everything to do with it. Snowstorm. Zero visibility. As snow blinded my takeoff from the slick runway, I got the go-ahead with a warning from the Moosonee flight tower: harder snow coming.

An hour later and I'd made it a hundred miles north of Moose River on my way to pick up trappers not wanting but needing to come in from their lines. A rush to find them with night coming. I had a feeling where they'd be. Me, I was a natural in a plane. But in snow? One minute I'm humming

along, the next, my fuel line's gummed and I'm skidding and banging against a frozen creek. The crazy thing? Had I come in a few feet to the left or right, blind like I did, I would have wrapped my plane around black spruce lining the banks. Head a mush on the steering. Broken legs burning on a red-hot motor. The grandparents sometimes watch out. *Chi meegwetch, omoshomimawak!*

My plane wasn't too damaged, but this was a crash nonetheless. And I emerged from the first true brush with *it*. The long darkness. No need to speak its name out loud.

Soon as I forced the door open, the snow, it stopped falling. Like that. Like in a movie. And when the cloud cover left on a winter afternoon a hundred plus miles north of Moosonee in January, the cold came, presented itself in such a forceful way that I had two choices.

The first was to assume that the cold was a living thing that chased me and wanted to suck the life from me. I could get angry at it, desperate for some sense of fairness in the world, and then begin to panic.

Or my second option was to make up my mind that the cold, that nature, was just an unfortunate clash of weather systems. If I made my mind up this second way, that the physical world no longer held vengeance and evil just beyond the black shadow of spruce, then I'd try and make do with what I had. And when I realized what an idiot I was for ending up here all alone without the proper gear—just a jean jacket with a sweater under it and running shoes on my feet—I'd get angry, desperate for some sense of fairness in the world, and begin to panic.

Me, I preferred the first option, that Mother Nature was one angry slut. She'd try and kill you first chance she got. You'd screwed with her for so long that she was happy to eliminate you. But more than that, the first option allowed me to get angry right away, to blame some other force for all my troubles. The panic came much quicker this way, but it was going to come anyways, right?

And so me, I climbed out of my cockpit and onto the wing on that frigid afternoon in my jean jacket and running shoes, walked along the wing, fearful of the bush and the cold and a shitty death all around me.

I decided to make my way to the bank to collect some firewood and jumped onto the frozen creek.

I sank to my chest in that snow, and immediately realized I was a drunken fool. The shock of fast-flowing ice water made my breath seize, tugging at my legs, pulling at my unlaced running shoes so that the last thing my feet felt was those shoes tumbling away with the current.

By the time I flopped back onto the wing, my stomach to my feet had so little feeling that I had to pull my way back to the cockpit with wet fingers, tearing the skin from them when they froze to the aluminum. My breath came in hitches. When I tried my radio, and my wife finally picked it up, she couldn't understand me. She thought I was a kid fooling around on his father's CB and hung up on me.

Like I said, panic came quick. I could waste more time and the last of my energy calling back, hoping to get Helen to understand it was me and that I needed help now, but how to tell her exactly where I was? They might be able to find me tomorrow in daylight, but not now with the night closing in. And so I did what I knew I had to do. I crawled out of the cockpit again, onto my other wing, and threw myself off it, hoping not to find more water under the snow.

I hit hard ice this time, and it knocked the little breath left out of me. My jeans and jacket were already frozen worse than a straitjacket, and the shivers came so bad my teeth felt like they were about to shatter. I knew my Zippo was in my coat pocket but probably wet to uselessness.

Push bad thoughts away. One thing at a time. First things first. I crawled quick as I could, trying to stand and walk, and I frankensteined my way to the trees and began snapping dry twigs from a dead spruce.

After I made a pile, I reached into my chest pocket, breaking the ice from the material that felt hard as iron now. My fingers had lost all feel. I reached for my cigarettes, struggled to pull one from my pack, and clinked open the lighter. I'd decided that if the lighter worked, I'd enjoy a cigarette as I started a fire. If the lighter didn't work, I'd freeze to death and searchers would find me with an unlit smoke in my mouth, looking cool as the Marlboro Man. On the fifteenth thumb roll I got the lighter going.

I was saved for the first time. I reached for my flask in my ass pocket and struggled to open it. Within five minutes I had a fire going. Within fifteen I'd siphoned fuel from my tank and had one of the greatest fires of my life burning, so hot I had to stand away from it, slowly rotating my body like a sausage.

The darkness of a James Bay night in January is something you two girls know well. Annie, you're old enough to remember your grandfather. Suzanne, I don't know. I hope so. Your *moshum,* he liked nothing more than taking you girls out, bundled up like mummies, to look at the stars and especially the northern lights that flickered over the bay. He'd tell you two that they danced just for you, showed you how to rub your fists together to make them burn brighter. Do you remember?

My first crash ended good. My old friend Chief Joe flew out to me the next morning, found me by the smoky fire I'd kept burning all night. We got my plane unstuck and had a couple of good drinks and he gave me a spare pair of boots. Then Joe went to find those trappers and I got my gas lines unfrozen and flew home to Helen.

Joe quit flying soon after that. He was ready for something else. Me, I kept going. I had no other choice. A wife who wanted children, the idea of a family to feed coming to us like a good sunrise on the horizon. I made my choices. I was young still, young enough to believe you can put out your gill net and pull in options like fish.

The snow's deep here, nieces. I'm tired, but I have to keep walking. I'm so tired, but I've got to get up or I'll freeze to death. Talking to you, it keeps me warm.