

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

William Vaudrain
A Long, Dry Season

Rainey never really got a good look at the grizzly that knocked him into the river. It had been standing at the top of the bluff watching him fish, and it had taken a half step forward, curious to get a better look at the salmon that the human had just pulled from the water. This brought it too close to the weather-weakened edge, and the weight of the ursine spectator caused the ground it was standing on to crumble and fall out from beneath it. There was only one direction for the bear to go, and that was down. Applying the brakes was futile; the angle of the embankment was too steep and it made a perfect forty-foot slide with Rainey at the bottom.

He had just started to clean his fish when an unusual sound from behind caused him to stop. He stood and started to turn to see what was causing the commotion. Before he could complete the turn, 700 pounds of tumbling grizzly bear slammed into him and knocked him backwards into the white foamed current of the river. The grizzly made a quick recovery and had pulled itself back up onto the bank, but Rainey found himself partially underwater and twenty feet out in the current. The deep, roiling water quickly carried him away from the bear, which was a good thing considering the unknown state of mind it was in. Unfortunately, the current that carried him away also had him entirely in its power.

Earlier that morning, Rainey had landed his plane and set up camp. He walked down to the edge of the river and noted the rapidly moving current. He puffed slowly on the pipe that he had clenched in his teeth and decided that when he fished, he had better pull the belt on his waders tight. He didn't want to give the glacier-cold water any easy access in the event of a misstep.

That precaution now helped him remain, more or less, on the surface. His chest waders didn't fill with water and drag him to the bottom. The current bore him away, arms flailing in an effort to keep his head above water. The bear's impact had knocked the wind out of him and the shock of plunging into the icy water had robbed him of any sense of direction, but he finally worked his head clear of the water and managed to suck in a deep lungful of air. Through the water streaming down his face he caught a glimpse of the bear. It was standing on the bank, having recovered its dignity as well as Rainey's fish. It was too engrossed in the salmon it now claimed as its own to pay any attention to the human quickly bobbing and splashing its way down river.

Perhaps it was the relief of seeing the bear quickly disappearing upstream, perhaps it was the exhilaration of being alive after such an unusual encounter with *Ursus arctos*, but whatever it was, it was making him think of what had happened, instead of what was happening. He continued to stare back upstream, and it wasn't until a bend in the river removed the bear from his line of vision that he began to turn and face downstream. Again, fate snuck up from behind him. Before he could finish his turn, the current slammed him into the waiting boulder and everything went black...

He was at the salmon bake that took place two summers back at his

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

friend Peter's camp in Cooper Landing down on the Kenai Peninsula. It had been a memorable gathering of long-time friends and their families, all together for the first time in years. Some had come in from as far away as Rhode Island in the Lower 48. It was fortunate that they were all able to get together, to have one more chance to retell stories that had been told dozens of times before yet never grew stale in the retelling. It had been a joyous occasion, but only a few weeks later, Peter's Cessna would inexplicably spiral out of a cloudless Alaskan sky and auger into the waters of lower Cook Inlet, leaving them all with a sad, bittersweet mixture of grief and fond memories.

He could smell the wood smoke of the fire and the aroma of the freshly caught silver salmon as they were baking. He was crouched next to the fire, using a small camp shovel to dig out foil-wrapped baked potatoes from the bed of glowing coals.

"Damn, those are hot!" he said as he heard someone coming up from behind him, "would you hand me the pan that's next to the cooler?"

He held his hand out, expecting the unseen visitor to pass him the pan, but nothing happened. He started to turn around, and out of the corner of his eye he saw a fast moving, dark shape just as it hit him and sent him sprawling. Suddenly he was underwater and struggling for air...

He awoke with a gasp and scrambled to his knees, up from where he had been laying on his back in the shallows. In a panic, he splashed most of the way to shore, fleeing from the memory of the bear. He became aware of his surroundings and realized there was no bear. The adrenaline rush wore off and he sank once again to his knees. He began to remember what had happened: the bear slamming into him, the desperate struggle with the current, and then the blackness. He dimly recalled feeling the rocky shallows grate against his waders, and the gravel bar onto which the river had washed his barely conscious body. He crawled out of the water and up onto the bank.

He slowly rose to his hands and knees, crawled higher up the bar, and collapsed in an exhausted heap. Minutes passed before he stirred again. He sat up, every muscle objecting in stiff protest, sore from the beating he had taken at the hands of the river. Although it was painful, he pulled himself into an upright position and surveyed the damage. There were no broken bones, but there was a nasty gash on his forehead.

That explained why the lights went out so quickly, he thought, wincing as he remembered the half- seen boulder. His matted hair had helped to staunch the flow of blood which was now barely a trickle, which he wiped out of his eyes.

Well, it could've been worse, Rainey ol' boy, he said out loud, as he slowly stood and leaned against a pile of driftwood, pulling off his waders.

Hell, as long as you can walk away from it, it could've been worse, he thought, as he sat wearily down on a sun- bleached log. This philosophy had played itself out in not one, but two plane crashes, and several other near calamities. Life here was precarious, and on occasion, it might be forfeited when a lack of planning would open the door to potential disaster.

He sat down again and tended to his head wound. The pocket first aid

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

kit he always carried had gauze and tape, which he put to good use. He conducted a further quick inventory of what was in the various pockets of his pants and fishing vest. The results of his search were his pipe and tobacco; waterproof matches he had cached in various pockets; his first aid kit; a folding knife, pack of gum, and an extra spool of fishing line with assorted tackle. These items would undoubtedly come in handy until he was able to follow the river back upstream to his camp. He was unsure as to the exact distance he had been carried downstream. The fact that by some pure dumb luck had managed to keep his head above water and he hadn't drowned made him conclude that it was only a matter of a few miles at most. However, a hike of even a few miles through this pathless wild land wasn't something he was up for at that moment. He was soaked to the bone and thoroughly chilled, so a fire was a priority.

He gathered dry grass and kindling, struck a match, and touched it gently to the pile, smiling as it readily ignited and grew into an expanding flame. He added larger bits of wood and watched as it began to turn into a respectable blaze. The smoke from the fire helped disperse the late-summer mosquitoes that had started to gather around his head, and the flames' warmth soaked into his bones.

After a while, he began to feel better. The crystal of his wristwatch had gotten smashed, rendering it useless. Looking up, he tried to gauge the time of day by the position of the sun, but he knew that at this time of year, in these latitudes, it would be a very rough guess. All he was sure of was that it had been a long time since breakfast that morning.

He stretched and walked to the water's edge. The bear had interrupted his cleaning the salmon that would have been dinner, and the salmon bake had been only a dream, but the emptiness of his stomach was real. He hungrily surved the water. He could read the signs on most any lake or river and predict where the fish should be, and the stretch of still water within tossing distance was a good bet. Its depths were sure to contain something tasty for dinner. He tied a lure to the monofilament on the extra spool he had luckily carried in a pocket in his vest and tossed the line out into the river. The sunlight that penetrated into the depths reflected off the lure and he watched as it fluttered downward to settle on the bottom before carefully retrieving the line hand over hand. On his second toss, the line tightened and vibrated with life as the fish that hit the spinner moved out into the current in a futile effort to escape the hook in its lower jaw.

An hour later he sat back and licked his fingers, enjoying the last bit of the two, fat grayling he had caught and cooked on a flat rock in the middle of his fire. He hadn't underestimated his hunger. With a little ginger and soy sauce, it would've been a meal even Sharon would have enjoyed. The location, however, was one that she definitely wouldn't have picked. She had left him, and maybe she was right. Hell, it's not like Ketchikan was a terrible place. Maybe he just needed to rethink his priorities - get back into teaching. That's what had brought him here in the first place.

Spending a few years after college working in restaurants, he had realized *that* wasn't going to be his chosen profession, so he returned to school and got his teaching certification. It had been his dream to live in Alaska, and teaching was the skill that would allow him to do that. With the remains of a student loan, and the money he had squirreled away from his

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

last job stuffed in his wallet, he was on his way to Alaska. He had planned on taking the ferry from Seattle when he met Sharon. She taught elementary school in Ketchikan and was returning from a visit to her parents over summer break. There was an instant attraction and they spent almost the entire trip enjoying each other's company and talking. In a short period of time, they discovered that they had much in common.

He found that Ketchikan was as "Alaskan" as she really wanted to get. The winters weren't bitter, the scenery was beautiful, and it wasn't all that far removed from Seattle, which she still considered to be home. He had intended to take the ferry as far as Haines, and then travel to Fairbanks on the Alaska Highway, but a day and a half after he had boarded the ferry, he found himself helping to carry Sharon's luggage, as well as his own, onto the dock in Ketchikan.

Initially, he took a job cooking in a café, and then when the season came, he got lucky and landed a spot crewing on a salmon seiner. He spent his spare time sending applications to school districts. He talked to Sharon of maybe going farther north. Rainey made teaching there sound like a great adventure they could share, and she finally gave in to his sales pitch. When an opportunity for two teaching positions opened in a village on the Yukon River, just below the Arctic Circle, they applied together and were hired. They packed their belongings and headed over a thousand miles north, into the interior of Alaska. They were caught up in the excitement of moving to a new place and beginning a new life and it carried them along as if their feet weren't touching the ground.

The interior of Alaska was far different than coastal southeast Ketchikan; this was deep Alaska, the land that was the setting of Jack London novels and poems by Robert Service. A land of extremes, it set its own rules and expected you to comply. It could be a harsh existence, but to Rainey, it was his dream come true. He had finally realized his desire to live and teach in Alaska, but after a few years the classroom started to feel too confining. Everything he wanted was out there, waiting for him: the adventure, the trapping and hunting, the prospecting, the freedom. He'd use both hands to grab it all. He was blind to the fact that as one world opened up to him another was slipping away.

He became more interested in running trap lines than in teaching. Writing flight plans became more important than good lesson plans. When the word in the village was that the caribou had begun their seasonal migration, he couldn't wait for the final bell of the day to ring. Then he and some of his older students would grab their rifles in anticipation of helping to lay in a supply of meat for the winter.

Interior Alaska had been Rainey's dream, not Sharon's. The long, dark winters began to pile one on top of the other. Too far from old friends and family, the extremes of life in the interior had started her thinking about the life she had known in Ketchikan. One night, after weeks of threatening that she would, she finally announced that she was leaving. She would be happier if Rainey came too, but her interest in village life had, like the tree line above the Arctic Circle, reached its end.

Her resignation was accepted without protest; she wasn't the first teacher to decide that the realities of village teaching were too much to

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

take, and the rest of that school year had included packing and tying up loose ends. On the Saturday of the first week of June, Rainey borrowed a friend's pick-up truck, loaded Sharon's belongings into it and drove her out to the airstrip where the chartered plane waited for them. It was a tearful goodbye, and as he watched her plane take off, the vastness of the land seemed to shrink in comparison with the emptiness he felt growing in his heart.

Time passed and his spirits were buoyed by his surroundings. He kept busy, leaving him no time to dwell on the loneliness he felt, although it was never very far removed. Since "coming into the country", he had earned his pilot's license, become handy with tools, and had picked up an old Helio Courier in pretty good shape. Its fuselage had a number of dents and patches, but it was mechanically sound. A sturdy aircraft, it got him on and off of gravel bars and forest clearings that looked incredibly short in length. This ability provided him with financial opportunities; he got the mail contract for the region and was responsible for delivering incoming and outgoing letters, packages and supplies to the scattered mining camps, lodges, and geological stations in the region between Tanana and Fort Yukon. It also allowed him to go farther in-country. It was into this territory that he went prospecting during the summer. He would set the plane down near an unnamed stream, toss out his gear, and work the gravel of the streambed. The prospecting was usually good enough for him to meet expenses and put some aside, but it was a hard, lonely life, except for the supply runs back to the village and the fulfilling of his scheduled mail and supply deliveries. The season would pass quickly, and in the end he was financially satisfied. Yet he was nagged by an unnamed emptiness.

So it was when the fireweed was just starting to top out, signaling the waning days of summer, that he decided that he had enough prospecting. He felt that a week or two fishing was just what he needed to shake the feeling of discontent. He stowed his gear, climbed into the plane and took off.



The night had been spent in relative comfort, and the morning found him rested and ready to start back up river. He had a bit of a limp, but he felt pretty good otherwise. He had been walking for a few hours now, following the river as much as he could and bushwhacking through tussock-filled muskeg when he had to. The walk gave him time to think. He had come to the realization that this was a damned strange life to lead. It was exciting but seemingly just a few steps ahead of disaster. He concluded that lately he wasn't deriving much satisfaction from it.

The journey back towards camp was nice enough. The day was sunny with the temperature not too warm for a walk. He had no heavy pack on his back, and there was always time for a break when he came across a particularly rich patch of late summer blueberries. The possibility of suddenly coming upon a bear kept him singing or talking out loud. If he found the berries appealing, so, too, would a bear. One close encounter of the furry kind had been enough.

He stood looking out at a far curve in the river and took a minute to fill

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

his pipe. The tobacco had dried and was quite smoke-able. He lit a match and puffed. It was a habit he picked up several years back, and he enjoyed it, but it had annoyed Sharon to no end. It was the way in which the smell of the burning tobacco would permeate everything: the furniture, the curtains, his hair, his clothes . . . her clothes. His compromise was not smoking indoors. He would stand on the porch and enjoy his pipe, even in the deepest winter. He found a quiet peace in standing in the dark, drawing on his favorite briar while the northern lights danced overhead. Of course, it would be a quick pipe when the thermometer plunged to 30 or 40 below zero. Sharon, sitting close to the wood stove, always said that she could feel the temperature in the cabin drop after he walked back in from a winter smoke. He could feel it too, but the chill he felt was sitting in the room waiting for him.

The harsh “kawk” of a raven caused him to look up. The ravens were riding the thermal currents high above, then falling out at the top, spiraling back down towards the ground and then riding them up again, as if in play. This gave him pause for thought. The life he was living suddenly seemed as pointless as the ravens’ silly game with the thermals. His existence was like a mountain stream, turbulent but shallow. A dry season might turn a single stream into a trickle and cause it to fall silent, but two small streams, joined together and running as one, might still sing and course its way to the larger river. His life was a single stream that had become a trickle, the whisper of a song with no words.

This thought was on his mind as he crested a familiar-looking ridge. He found himself looking down at his plane and tent, sitting just as he had left them. They were probably the only things in his life that were just as he had left them. He had made up his mind as he started down the slope towards his campsite. He finally knew what it was that was missing from his life. As he broke camp and loaded the plane, he roughly calculated how long it would take to get back to the village, pack some clothes, and fly to Haines. He’d check the latest weather forecast, file a flight plan, and call Sharon let her know he was coming for a visit. He should be able to start out in two days. Once in Haines he’d take the ferry to Ketchikan. The flight to Haines and the ferry trip would give him time to think. He didn’t know exactly what he was going to say to Sharon once he saw her, or what she would say to him. But he knew that the words would come, like the lyrics to the song sung by two, small mountain streams when they ran together and found that they had survived a long, dry season.