

First Aid for Drowning

The tree in the morning, there's only one, and only one string of lonely, pale lights bites into the needly branches. There are no ornaments nor any star on top. Below it, covered in green and browning leavings, is the one box left—*To Cass*.

All around, everyone is rosy-cheeked and cheerful, bright and bundled-up. Every evening, every eave comes alive with the winking and blinking of many-colored lights, swooping and drooping into smiles. It's the season of joy, the season of giving, the season of peace and togetherness—and it's freezing.

Cass is all wet, all warmth. Family and friends have been calling, texting, and messaging all day, and they all have the best things to say. Morning Cass spends with one pair of grandparents, afternoon with the other. At Cass's mother's-side grandparents' house, Noodle, their springer spaniel, lays across Cass's lap for two hours solid, despite the dog's usual manic energy around company. All are in an observant mood. Through the day, Cass drinks—tea, coffee, eggnog, cider.

In the Arctic, there's so much ice it's hard to tell if you're on land or sea. Everything seems the solid same. Ice can swell, shrink, flow, leave and return, all without a hint that anything is happening. For polar bears, ice—when it's enough stand atop the ocean—is absolutely vital.

Under a soft snowfall, Cass wanders home from a hearty, hand-carved dinner, remembering one summer spent as a camp counselor. Camp Amber Days, up in the mountains, provided free summer camp to children of families who could not otherwise afford such experiences. At sixteen, the pay had been just \$250 for the whole summer, but Cass knew that some colleges offered credit to high school graduates who'd been counselors at Amber Days. Plus, having been assigned to the waterfront, Cass would get free first-aid training, as well as CPR and lifeguard certifications.

The experience had ended up being richer compensation than the money, by far. Cass had helped kids do things many of them had never done before, such as face the deep end and tread water—things that are simple, though not always easy. The groups of kids, aged six to fourteen, swapped out each week, and Cass couldn't help forming fleeting but unforgettable bonds with them. Cass believes that if age is kind but luck is not, that summer full of memories will form a sanctuary in the fog of senility.

Approaching home, Cass spots that lone tree in the window, with its single strand of pale lights, and keeps driving, deciding instead to search for a drive-through. Hot cocoa sounds useful.

The closest McDonald's is all closed down dark, its employees undoubtedly home with loved ones. A dull prickling underneath Cass's scarf accompanies the thought that maybe everything is closed tonight. But, buzzing with hope, Cass surmises that there has to be a gas station open somewhere. Most places that sell coffee do hot cocoa, too, at least in the winter. All over town, McDonald's, Tim Horton's, Dunkin Donuts, Burger King, Wendy's, Starbucks, 7-Eleven, AM/PM, Kum & Go, E-Z Mart, Flying J, Racetrac, Delta Sonic, Speedway, Mobil, Fastrac...every one is shut up tight.

The search carries Cass away from the knot of the city, toward roads even less likely to have any open convenience stores or restaurants. Through the blur of driving, one road sign stands out: a brown one that reads, "Sundial Ponds Park."

With no other streets to turn down, the road winds and twists right into a wooded area where a seasonal lack of foliage is palpable. Here, there are no lights on strings of any kind; just dark green, dark white, and the hollow space-blue of sunless wintertime. The snowflakes falling—like stars, like missed wishes, like the lonely, pale lights on the tree at home—make Cass's world seem less vibrant. Ahead, the headlights catch a depression in the land. The road widens into a parking area enclosed by a split rail fence of raw wood. Beyond the fence, though it's covered with a scant layer of glimmering snow, Cass can smell freshwater.

After high school, Cass had approached college intent on cashing in the promised credits from counseling. It only amounted to twelve credit hours, but it would save just a bit of money and time. Midchester City College, a few hours from Cass's hometown,

was happy to accept the credits toward their EMT program. Unlike everyone else, Cass never even considered changing majors.

These days, Cass finds EMT work exhilarating. When a sea of rush-hour traffic parts for the ambulance, Cass's heart swells at the power to be helpful to somebody right when they need it most—even if it's only an old lady who can't get up out of her bathtub.

Cass is disdainful of some of the other EMTs—the ones who get frustrated at people who call for help over and over again. Those coworkers sneer at second and third overdose victims. They chastise the elderly who have a history of falling. They get pumped up and bellow instructions like George Clooney when responding to major traumas. After their shifts, they hit the bars and revel in shocking people with their stories. Cass thinks those EMTs have a “hero complex”—that they're only in it for hero pussy. But Cass's heart is in the right place.

At Camp Amber Days, the waterfront would open each day at 6:00 AM for the traditional Polar Bear Swim. In the mountains, the shallow Amber Lake could drop several degrees overnight, enough to seem cold by comparison to the noonday sun. Campers who came to Polar Bear Swim four days in a row got a little certificate stating that they were an official Amber Days Polar Bear. Every day, the kids played the same, ultra-simple game, the object of which was to bounce a ball up in the air and keep it away from the water. Each Friday, Cass handed out dozens of certificates.

To do anything at the waterfront, everyone had to have a buddy. Throughout the day, Cass and the other lifeguards blew whistles for “buddy check,” and the kids scrambled to find their buddies as fast as they could. Once reunited, they’d hold each other’s hands up in the air while the lifeguards took a count. For Polar Bear Swim, the kids had to bring their own buddies. On the rare occasion when a camper wanted to go but couldn’t convince a friend to take the 6:00-AM dip, Cass might volunteer.

It isn’t uncommon for Cass to run into one of the kids from Amber Days. They’d come from all over the state, and the experience had left a lasting impression on most of them. It was at Midchester City College that Cass ran into one such person: Blair.

Like everyone else who didn’t yet know what he or she wanted out of life, Blair was a Liberal Arts major, starting freshman year while Cass was a junior. By perfect coincidence, both had picked German 101 as an elective, and on the first day, the professor had asked the students to share their names and one city outside the U.S. they hoped to visit one day. Blair had said “anywhere,” and, with a grin of recognition, Cass said the same thing. The older student explained to the younger why they looked familiar to each other, and they hit it off immediately.

Blair was fascinated by Cass’s passion to be an EMT. “What would you do if my shoulder was dislocated?” the freshman would quiz the junior. “What’s the fastest way to heal a bruise? If Riley, my S.O., twists an ankle in soccer, how can I tell if it’s a sprain or a strain or whatever?”

They became close friends.

Cass is just nostalgic enough to get out of the car at Sundial Ponds Park. The snow is not deep, and the past few days have been warm for December. It isn't hard to find the waterline, because Cass's boot falls right through a thin skin of new ice. Cass removes a scarf, baring flushed neck flesh to the flurry. Heart pumping liquid ardor, the gloves are next to go, then hat, jacket, shirt, boots, socks, pants, and finally underwear. Stepping into the water, there is no cold, only memory.

Cass thrashes and smashes bodily against the flaky ice to make more open water in the pond, the better to stretch out and fully submerge. With no birds or crickets this time of year, the frantic space-making is the only noise for miles. Once enough room is clear, Cass switches to absolute stillness, floating like a fragment of floe.

For most of the year, survival is a solitary endeavor for polar bears. Since meals can be days and miles between, they simply don't have the resources to congregate. Only when well-fed and waiting out the iceless lean times of summer, might polar bears socialize. If the winter has been bounteous, they'll play and mate. If hunting has been paltry, the males might go so far as to kill and eat one another's cubs to survive.

Out over the ice, the bears do their best to avoid fighting, and the weaker simply move on to look for new hunting grounds. But, trapped on land, mother bears must uphold their fierce reputation to defend their young against the larger males.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, after German 101, Cass and Blair would hang out for a few hours, studying. When they inevitably got bored of books, they would muse about the possibilities of going backpacking abroad to try out various definitions for *anywhere*.

Cass inevitably ended up hearing about the various quarrels that always seemed to be bubbling with Riley, Blair's significant other. The two had been dating since halfway through high school. It hurt that Riley always seemed to be bothered by something Blair was doing wrong.

"What pisses me off most is that Riley keeps saying I'm just acting like my mom. It makes me wanna— It used to be we were always together, and whenever life felt like drowning, Riley would keep my head up above the water. Now it's just me again."

"Do you ever think you'd be happier, you know, moving on?"

"I don't know. Sorry I'm always bitching to you about it."

"It's...what friends are for," said Cass, conjuring a smile.

The next semester, they both signed up for Hindi 101.

Cass doesn't remember which week of the summer Blair came to Camp Amber Days, only that it was the hottest one. Blair couldn't swim—had never been in water more challenging than a bathtub—and was shamelessly aquaphobic. On the Monday of that week, Blair's first words to Cass were, "If I'm drowning, *you're* going to save me?"

Though the question was naive, the answer was even more so: “You bet!” Cass said, puffed up with all the confidence of a sixteen-year-old left in charge of fourteen-year-olds. “I’m your counselor. It’s what I’m here for!”

“I thought you were a lifeguard,” Blair said.

“I’m both!”

Cass was encouraging and positive, both of which flustered Blair.

“Just wade out a little further, you can do it!” The counselor coaxed.

“I’m going to! Gimme a second!” Blair insisted, staring a few feet ahead toward water that might as well have been the lair of what parents call the boogeymonster.

Considering how hard it had been to get Blair into the water at all, Cass was astonished when the camper showed up at Polar Bear Swim. Blair was alone, and caught the counselor’s eye, saying only, “I don’t have a buddy.”

“No problem, kiddo. If nobody else shows up who needs one, I’ll be happy to be your buddy.”

So it was, each day of the week after that. On Thursday, Cass asked why Blair kept coming back, since just being at the waterfront seemed to make the camper so apprehensive.

“You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Bet I don’t. Try me.”

“It’s what my mom used to call me. Polar Bear. ‘Cause my hair was so blonde it was almost white.”

Cass fixed eyes on Blair’s chocolate locks as if trying to X-ray them. “Really?”

Though distant, the pain of the freezing pond cannot be ignored for long, and Cass knows it. Regretfully, like climbing out of a Jacuzzi, Cass retreats to the car. With no inclination to re-dress just yet, the clothing Cass tosses onto the passenger seat.

Flinching a violent double-take, Cass remembers the still-wrapped gift box, and pulls it out from underneath the mound of garments. Cass adjusts the now-crumpled bow with a cough of a sob, turning over the tag: *From Blair*.

Cass reaches for the bottle of *Nuestra Soledad*, now almost gone. There's no hot cocoa, nor, for the first time today, is there any tea, coffee, eggnog, or cider in which to cut and conceal it, so Cass takes a long, burning sip straight from the bottle. Turning the key, Cass thinks about switching on the heat, as ice crystals have begun to creep up the windshield.

A few months after they got married, Cass could only watch as Blair began to flounder in depression. Blair stayed in bed when Cass got up for work, and would still be there, having barely moved, when Cass returned from a twelve-hour shift. Whenever they were together, Cass would fill Blair's ear with reassurances and the words for *I love you* in half a dozen languages. By the time Cass crawled into bed each night, Blair might be near smiling. Despite the sentiments, however, Blair ate almost nothing, and spent every waking moment binging on Netflix shows: *Obsessed*, *Hoarders*, *My Strange Addiction*, *Don't Call Me Crazy*.

Cass talked about going backpacking anywhere and everywhere to try to raise Blair's spirits. "Imagine what it's like in hostels in Cape Town or Sao Paulo, kooky strangers to meet all around us." Blair remained silent. "The waters of the Ganges have healing properties—even though it's highly polluted, and tons of people have their ashes spread there," or "In Vietnam, there's a delicacy called *hột vịt lộn*. It's made from a fertilized egg that's partly developed."

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you," croaked Blair one night, eyes unable to find Cass's face. "I didn't break up with Riley. Riley broke up with me. Because I'm too clingy and negative."

"Oh," Cass let out a sigh like a glacier calving, and reached over to hook Blair into a hug, glancing over to the far wall where their wedding picture hung. "Whatever you need, love, I'm here."

Even when the ice isn't melting right out from under their heavy paws, polar bears don't have permanent homes. They trek, and must always continue on. Though they can glean a modicum of nutrition from plants and smaller animals, their metabolisms require fat-rich seals to survive the summer fast. Seals have the entire ocean in which to hide.

Despite being adept swimmers, polar bears have trouble catching all but the most sluggish of animals in any straight pursuit. They use their swimming acumen predominantly to travel. For days—and dozens of restless miles—they swim in search of stable ice from which to hunt. Cubs are lucky if they can keep up.

If young polar bears live to roughly thirty months—and less than half do—they are either abandoned or chased away by their mothers. Now sub-adults, they're big enough to have become rivals for sustenance. They're not yet strong or skilled enough to land the staple of their diet, seals, on their own, so if they survive this period, it's primarily by scavenging.

The next destination is unquestionable: the hospital. Shivering, Cass meanders along the road in the direction of Hearthaven Medical Center.

The helipad atop its roof is just becoming visible above the treetops when blue and red lights fill Cass's swerving car with headrest silhouettes.

"Whoa!" exclaims the cop, shining a flashlight through the window. "You have any clothes you can put on?"

Apathy wins out over shame. Without bothering to hide the bottle, Cass reaches over and grabs the pile of clothes, fishing and fumbling through the pants pockets until a wallet falls out. The cop takes it, as well as the car keys. While the officer returns to the patrol car to run the ID and license plates, Cass awkwardly dresses.

When the cop returns, Cass gets the wallet back but not the keys.

"Why don't you step out of the car?"

Cass obliges the officer.

"Goddammit, Cass, it *is* you! You trying to get yourself killed and make all your coworkers come clean up the mess? Your lips are blue! What the hell's going on?!"

"I'm on my way to the hospital right now, Dana. You know...don't you?"

“Everyone’s heard about Blair. But for chrissakes, Cass, I can smell you. Why are you driving around in the middle of the night, frozen, naked, and sloshed?”

“If it really matters, I was playing Polar Bear.”

“This isn’t like you, Cass.”

“Like I said, I’m going to the hospital.”

“I gotta keep your keys, my friend. You know I can’t let you back behind the wheel. We’ll arrange for a tow. I’ll take you to the ER.” The officer’s shoulders sag with sympathy. “Look. Because of...circumstances, I’m not going to breathalyze you. But I need you to promise never to do anything this stupid again.”

Cass rides the last half mile to the hospital in the passenger seat of the cruiser, head hanging, both hands on the paper-wrapped present.

To Cass’s surprise and delight, by Friday of camp week, Blair could not only get into the deeper water but could doggy-paddle with abandon.

“I wish I didn’t have to go back home,” the camper said after receiving the Polar Bear Certificate.

“I’m sure your parents will be very proud of you for learning to swim.”

“It’s just my mom,” Blair said, turning away at the admission.

“Oh...well, now that you can swim, maybe she’ll take you to a pool or the beach sometime,” the counselor said, trying to make a smile transfer.

“We never go anywhere anymore. We’re not near anything. She’s always working.” Cass heard a splutter from the camper, and then a gulp. Blair whipped back around blinkingly to ask, “where do you live?”

“Greenville.”

“Is that anywhere near Midchester?”

“A couple hours away. You’re from Midchester?”

“Yeah. I was hoping— I thought maybe you lived nearby,” Blair said to the ground between their feet.

“You know,” ventured the counselor, “you’ve improved more than anyone else I’ve seen this summer. It’s made *me* proud, anyway.” And like nobody else that summer, Blair received a tentative caress of Cass’s hand. “Traveling’s fun. Maybe...I could come visit some time. We could find a place to go swimming together.”

The camper looked up. Though smiling, there was something unclear still keeping Blair’s forehead crimped up in the middle.

The most important weapon in the polar bear arsenal is patience. From up to a mile away, they can smell a seal surfacing at a breathing hole in the ice. They’ll wait there for hours, senses tuned to that necessary exhale.

After being dropped off at the ER, Cass slinks past the check-in desk and ducks into a bathroom to drink hot water from the faucet and breathe in the warm air from the hand

dryer to raise core temperature. Then Cass takes the red elevator up to the second floor corridor that leads to R-wing.

Cass knows about R-wing, but has rarely been there in the course of EMT work. It's not the wing for strokes, broken legs, or pneumonia. Some people in R-wing are, in fact, perfectly healthy—at least in body. R-wing is for trauma that's hard to see and doesn't usually call for an ambulance. Cass's EMT training covered little related to R-wing.

In Room 238, Blair is asleep. Cass startles the muscular nurse on watch like a bucket of ice water.

"Cass, you know it's nowhere near visiting hours," says the nurse, standing to shake hands.

"Is it OK?"

With a slow inhale and a slower exhale, the nurse glances back at the prone patient. "Well, I wouldn't mind a little break. This gets weirdly tiring. Can't even have my phone. You know not to leave without calling someone back, right?"

"Yeah, Angel, I know the protocol."

After the nurse drifts out the door, Cass absorbs the somber space. This room isn't like most hospital rooms. There are no heavy, beeping monitors or lengths of tubing snaking everywhere. There's no TV, and the small, shatterproof window doesn't open. This room's wall has no red biohazard box for used sharps. The only furniture other than the bed is the nurse's chair, which Cass pulls closer to Blair, still clutching the gift-wrapped box.

Before even pulling at the ribbon, Cass has a guess at the package's contents. It's a thin box, flat, and incredibly light. Too small to contain clothing, when shaken, there's a fine, airy tapping against the cardboard sides.

The more sub-adults grow, the clearer it becomes how fragile their hunting platform is.

Blair wakes up well after midnight to the gasp of tearing paper.

Their plane tickets. Their getaway, finally as real as possible.

"Why? I thought you wanted to go everywhere," whispers Blair.

Cass looks over, sopping with anguish. "We haven't kept up our Romanian. Or our Swahili. Nothing." Cass seizes Blair's hand and squeezes, desperately ignoring the thick wrist bandages.

"You're cold," remarks Blair.

"Yeah," says Cass with a dry bit of chuckle. "I've been thinking I'm a polar bear."

"That's supposed to be me."

"You know, you never seemed that much like a polar bear to me."

"Maybe I'm not..." Blair murmurs. "I've been thinking, too. I'm still not sure if you're a lifeguard or a counselor."

"Love...neither."