

HOT OR COLD

By Maile Meloy

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My earliest memory of winter is of being left in a van, in the snow somewhere in Montana, while my parents, out cross-country skiing, were chased by a bear.

It sounds suspect to me, too, like a half-remembered dream. I was four, and my brother was two. The van was my parents' red Volkswagen bus, with flowered curtains and the back converted into a bed. There was a babysitter, a pretty teen-age girl I called Ann Amouski—not her name but my approximation. She was nice, but I was bored. She hid hard candies for me, and then told me if I was hot or cold. Behind the seats? Cold. In the glove compartment? Getting warmer. Near the gas pedal? Burning up. Under the clutch! There it was—a smooth round butterscotch candy in a yellow cellophane wrapper, the kind of thing my parents would never buy except on a trip like this.

We played outside in our snowsuits, and then the sitter turned on the engine and the heat. We sat near the vents, drinking hot chocolate from a thermos lid. The windows were frosted from our breathing.

Out there in the snow, where we couldn't see, my parents glided along, still married to each other. My mother was younger than I am now. They wore wool pants and sweaters and hats, and it was only from a distance that their progress looked effortless and unimpeded. Up close, the gliding through fresh snow made them sweat, and my father's glasses steamed up. Their noses and cheeks were red, and they were laughing at a joke he'd made. The high clear air smelled like Douglas fir and snow.

Then they saw the bear. They had taken it by surprise, startling it up out of a snowbank where it was digging for roots, and it blocked their way back to the road. It stood on its hind legs, nearsighted, and sniffed to see what they were.

The standoff went on for what seemed like minutes, and then the bear dropped back to its forelegs to keep digging. My father, unsure what to do, started on a detour, a wide semicircle around the bear.

When they were safely past, my mother looked back to see the bear following them, in the tracks their skis had made in the snow. She had chicken sandwiches in her backpack, and she called to my father, who turned to look.

“Ski faster,” he said. “But not too fast. And sing.”

They started to sing “The Bear Went Over the Mountain,” but it had no effect on the real bear, which ambled along in their tracks. Like the bear in the song, this one had nowhere pressing to go. It would go wherever they flattened a trail for it, to see what it could see. They were leading it right back to the bus, to where the kids might be playing in the snow, but they couldn’t stop.

“Let’s spread out,” my father said after a while. “So we don’t make such a wide path.”

They did, out of breath now, each breaking a separate trail. The bear paused when it reached the fork, and then followed my mother. It didn’t seem to mind the single set of tracks.

“*Now* what?” she said, starting to panic.

“Keep skiing,” he said.

When the Volkswagen was in sight, they waved, trying to signal that we should stay in the bus. Then they watched, horrified, as we all piled out to greet them, my brother in the babysitter’s arms, a perfect snack.

From the bus, I heard my father shout, “Get back in the car!” Then I saw the bear. The sitter hustled my brother in, and I watched as they all bore down on us, my parents skiing ten feet apart, the bear lumbering inexorably behind.

Finally the bear saw or smelled the Volkswagen, and stopped. I was lifted inside by my armpits. My parents arrived breathless, and struggled out of their skis while the bear watched, deliberating. The doors slammed closed, and we drove away. Being eaten by a bear wasn’t our fate; life had granted us all a reprieve.

I called my father to find out what I’d got right about the story, and he said, “What? You’re dreaming that. There was a mama moose that chased us once, but it was summer.” Summer and a moose—all I’d been sure of was snow and bear.

“Bears hibernate in the winter,” he said, and then he suggested three other run-ins with grizzlies that I might be thinking of. None was my pre-divorce winter scene, but mine still feels right: the bus, the sitter, the snow. My parents separating to avoid the thing that threatened us, the thing bearing down on us anyway, and then the family rescue at the last minute, disaster left outside in the cold.

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