

INTROSPECTION

Introspection helped me recognize that fear had hijacked a big part of my life, but it also helped me figure out a way to take back control.

FRESH BLOOD SPURTED from the dog's neck, spraying chaotic arcs across the snow. One of the lead dogs in my sled team had turned on the other in a vicious, surprise attack, and now the whole team—six dogs in total—was tangled in a panicked mess. The dogs closest to me (and farthest away from the attacker) waited patiently for me to fix things, but the two middle dogs, in close enough proximity to the aggressor to fear her wrath, cowered on the snow, whining.

This is great, just great. I had no idea what I was doing. The other sled teams were well ahead and wouldn't come back until someone thought to glance over their shoulder and notice us missing. The injured dog could well be dead by then. I realized I didn't even know his name.

All of the dogs on my team were marginally domesticated. They respected their trainers, but were merely tolerant and sometimes disdainful of “guests.” The guide had warned me about interacting with them during a high-stress situation. *Their stress or my stress*, I wondered as I searched my pockets for something that could double as a tourniquet. To apply it, I’d have to step off the sled; with nothing to serve as an anchor, the dogs could run away and I’d be stranded in the middle of the white, cold, northern Minnesota wilderness.

It occurred to me that since the team was tangled in their lines and one of the lead dogs was bleeding profusely, it wasn’t likely that the team would be going anywhere. Gingerly, I stepped off the back of the sled, and, at hearing my first crunching footstep, the attacker growled. *Don’t show fear*, I told myself, walking purposefully through the ankle-deep snow and over to the injured dog.

It was only because the attacker was harnessed that I didn’t end up needing emergency first aid, too. As soon as I reached out to apply pressure to her teammate’s neck, she flung her body at me, barking and snapping. When she came at me like that, all I could see was the glistening white of her blood-streaked fangs and the pink insides of her mouth. The harness and lines stopped her in mid-thrust.

“*Bad dog!*” I barked, but it was too late. When she’d lunged at me, I fell on my rear in the snow.

She had me right where she wanted, but my attempted interference incited a whole new attack on her teammate. She pounced on him, biting into his shoulder. Panting, the defeated dog lay there while the blood no longer spurted but seeped into the snow beneath him.

I had no choice but to watch him die.

THERE HAD BEEN so many dark premonitions hovering like ravens around this dogsledding trip, not least that I’d found out less than a month before that I would be losing my job. Plus, I hate cold weather, and 13 years of living in Buffalo, New York, earlier in my career had smothered me with enough snow to last the rest of my life. To top it all off, Minnesota was having a bout of bad storms, with flights being canceled every minute. I felt sure I would be stranded somewhere hellish, in the dead of the midwestern winter, alone, in the middle of some epic and historic power outage. But despite delays, tight transfers, missed shuttles, and lost paperwork, I made it to Duluth unscathed. Grateful that the roads were plowed and the day was clear, I could start letting go. Some of the dark omens ruffled their feathers and took wing.

Duluth to Ely was an easy drive, which gave me plenty of time to feel sorry for myself. Bitterness, I realized, was souring my taste for everything, but I couldn’t help it. I was not losing my job because of poor performance but because of an impending merger. An ill-advised merger, in my opinion. I would join the jobless the year I turned 50. *Well*, I thought sarcastically, *that’s one way to celebrate a milestone*.

I could feel resentment building into something formidable. Why hadn’t I booked a winter trip on a beach somewhere, or a tropical island? What in the world had possessed me to pay hard-earned vacation money to hang out in the snow for a week?

With daylight to spare, I arrived at the lodge, where my “luxury” room awaited. After checking in, I trudged around in the snow to find my sanctuary and realized immediately that “luxury” meant a roof and that was it. Like many small vacation lodges that were formerly tourist meccas and are now holding on for dear life,

the place was old, incoherent, and quirkily appointed. My “lodge suite” was really just a dingy motel room with a lovely deck and a spectacular view of a lake, yet there was nowhere to put my clothes. Theoretically, there was a functional kitchen, but inside the cabinets were cut-crystal pickle jars, no dinner plates. A television would have been an anachronism in a place like this. The lemon yellow, wall-mounted, rotary-dial telephone was straight from the eighties, and so was the phone book. I guessed I was lucky. Most of the units had no phones, though some had two-person hot tubs. I didn’t need a two-person hot tub. I needed a way to call for an emergency evacuation to take me back to civilization.

The mattress, at least, was inviting, and I lay down to take a nap. Not long after, there was a knock at my door. It was Randi, the guide, advising that dinner plans had changed. It was hard to tell what Randi really looked like, bundled up as she was from stem to stern. She was short, that I could see, but was she heavysset or just well insulated with protective clothing? Her cheeks and the very tip of her nose were a bright and healthy pink. Her eyes were the color of a blue summer sky, and, although she was younger than I by at least five years, the blue was framed by the crinkles that come from a lifetime of squinting against the glare of sun and snow. Was she a little bit mannish? I couldn’t tell under all that thermal gear. She seemed pleasant enough, but there was the slightest hint of forced friendliness. I was a customer, after all, and it was her job to make me happy (poor thing). In retrospect I realize it took me a rather long time to invite her in. When I did, she stomped her feet, three times each side, to dislodge the snow from her boots. There were two other people on this trip, she reported, and they had a cabin below me on the lake. Dinner

was supposed to be there, in the supposedly more posh environment, but they didn’t have an oven (add that to the list of quirks), so Randi asked if I could host the meals in my room.

“No problem,” I answered, although I was secretly thinking, *What kind of operation is this?* Just as quickly, I told myself to stop being so reactive and to welcome the unexpected. *You’re too closed off. If there was ever a place to chill, this is it.*

Randi left and I was drifting off to sleep again when another knock pulled me out of my attempted coma. It was Denise, the chef. I watched as she whipped together an asparagus, ham, and sun-dried tomato lasagna and slid it into the Flintstone-era oven to bake. She also left me with salad, garlic bread, and a cheesecake drizzled with fresh raspberry sauce.

“You expect all this still to be here when the others arrive?” I asked. She touched my arm gently, laughed, and left me all alone to return to my nap, enveloped by the warmth and smells of dinner coalescing in the oven.

I got a head start on the wine before anyone else arrived, set the table (yes, I had a dining room table but no bathroom towel racks), straightened up the mess I had already made, and waited for the next knock, which was Randi’s.

“The others should be here any minute,” she said, stomping her way in. I asked for the lowdown on the other two guests, but she couldn’t give me much. A couple. Man and woman. They arrived shortly after my 20 questions. I assumed they knew the drill—they were coming into my room for dinner, but they didn’t say hello, or thank you, or even look at me, for that matter. After removing their snow-covered boots, they walked over to the table and sat there, expressionless. I made a ruse of helping

Randi with the garlic bread and cast her a sideways glance with some eyebrow action. She shrugged. *Maybe they're uncomfortable*, I thought, *maybe they're feeling like they're imposing*. So I offered them wine.

"We don't drink wine," the Woman announced, annoyed, as if I should know.

"Beer, then?" I asked.

"Beer, yes," she answered and I served two. No thanks or gratitude was forthcoming, nor any eye contact. The Man looked like he was getting ready to endure a prostate exam.

While Randi was stirring and tossing and getting the lasagna ready, I tried to ascertain the details of my travel partners, but getting information out of them was like trying to drag a freight train with a spaghetti noodle. So I abandoned my efforts and focused my questions on Randi, who told us all about herself, her love for the dogs, for dogsledding, and for nature. She also explained why, as she'd neared 40, she'd chosen to forgo a decent income in favor of doing the thing she's most passionate about. As she spoke, Randi's face radiated a joy I rarely saw in people anymore. It was as if light emanated from her smile and eyes. I wanted to reach out and grab her hand, so that some of her aura would seep into me. But instead I thought about how I would soon be unemployed. *You need to figure out what will make you happy the way Randi is happy*, I told myself. *You need to do it soon*.

Dinner, despite the odd company, was really excellent. After everyone left, I took a pad of paper and pencil, thought about phase two of my life, and waited for ideas to come. It didn't take long for me to crash headlong into my pillow and sleep like the dead until the next knock on my door.

I had little trouble waking for Denise at 7 a.m. when she came to cook breakfast. I pulled myself out of the toasty bed and opened the door to an excruciating blast of frigid air that knocked me backward.

"Good God!" I hollered. "Get in here!" Denise laughed, stomped her feet, and shook her hat free of snow.

"Good morning!" She smiled, closing the door behind her. Denise had such a graceful way of intruding that I actually enjoyed being woken up by her.

Having given up my living area for the public good, I had only the tiny bathroom for privacy. I squeezed in there to change out of my pajamas and into clothes suitable for company. When I emerged, two extra pairs of boots stood neatly in a corner by the door, pooling melted snow water on the floor. The Man and the Woman had arrived, and Randi soon after. We ate breakfast quickly, but as we were preparing to leave for the day's adventure, Randi explained that the drive to the dog yard would take over an hour, over difficult terrain, and we'd be using our own vehicles.

"Do I need a four-wheel drive?" I asked.

"Not unless it snows," she answered.

"Uh-oh," I said. "Well, if I don't get there on time, send a search party."

I swear it took 15 minutes before the enigmatic couple offered to let me ride along with them. I had to choose: Risk being stranded in the snow or risk wishing I were.

OK, I thought, *these trips are about growing, getting closer to things. Abandon your rigid ways. Go with the buttoned-down, closed-off people. Maybe something wonderful will happen!*

An hour and a half of absolutely no conversation later, we arrived at the dog yard.

What an interesting place.

A hundred small, mixed-breed dogs lay in the snow, chained in front of wooden doghouses that sat at odd angles on short stilts above the snow. When the dogs saw us, they barely lifted an ear or opened an eye. It seemed a very laid-back place. Based on this apparent calmness, there was simply no way I could anticipate what was about to happen next.

Randi began our tutorial with a briefing on the mechanics of the sled. Knowing nothing about dogsledding, I paid close attention, but I was irritated that Randi was not showing us the reins. I ride horses. I wanted some reins to hold onto.

“Here is how you slow down,” Randi explained. She showed us the piece of rubber tractor tire tread, about double the length and width of a shoe box, that dangles off the back of the sled and skitters over the snow unless you’re standing on it.

“Step on this and it will make it harder for the dogs to pull. Now *this*,” she said, showing us what looked like the business end of a leg-hold trap, “stand on this and your sled will come to a dead halt.” *That’s all well and good, I thought, but why can’t I just pull on the reins? Where are the damn reins?*

“You will each have five or six dogs per team,” she continued, “consisting of lead, point, and wheel. Harness your lead dogs first and give them the command ‘Up tight.’ They’ll pull the harness mechanism forward so it makes it easier for you to harness your next four dogs. To go right, call out ‘Gee’ and to turn left, ‘Haw.’ ”

“Haw, haw,” I joked. “Randi, where are the reins?”

“No reins,” she continued. “To start from a stop you say, ‘All right.’ Now,” she said, her face changing from pleasant to stern,

“it will be very difficult for you to get these dogs from their pens to the sled. I need you to listen carefully.” Despite being completely distracted by the concept of not having reins to hold on to, I leaned in.

“These dogs are athletes. Very fit. They’re not pets, and though they may look small, they can drag you like a dead squirrel. When I hand you a dog, grab it by the collar, lift it up, and walk it on its hind legs. Do not, and I mean *do not*, let its front paws touch the ground until you are ready to harness it.”

I stood there and blinked into the snow. I just *knew* I would be the first one to screw up. I could feel it.

“Let me demonstrate how to harness your dogs,” she said. Then all hell broke loose. As soon as Randi liberated the first dog from its chain, every dog on the lot sprang to life and began barking and circling in an unmitigated frenzy. I actually put my hands over my ears, but then realized I couldn’t hear what Randi was saying.

“Hold the flanks of the dogs between your knees,” she shouted, “while you slip on the harness. . . .” She showed us what we were supposed to do, harnessing her two lead dogs and then giving them the command, “Up tight!” The two dogs dutifully obeyed, walking forward until the lines became taut.

Randi smiled at me. “Ready?” she yelled. *Shit*, I thought, *I bet they love watching the numbskulls slip and slide through this part.*

My team that first day consisted of Bolt and Garmin (lead), Lance (point), and the two wheel dogs, whose names I never learned. They were terribly hard to lead, but once harnessed, they seemed to become rather aloof. Leading and harnessing the dogs was difficult work, and in the 20°F weather, I found myself shedding at least three layers of clothing and *still* sweating like it was