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Opening extract from

The Trap

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Published by

Anderson Press

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The author would like to thank Bard Young, Rod Clark, Pamela Smelcer, Catherine Creger, James Welch, and Laura Godwin for their editorial comments, and the James Jones Literary Society for selecting this novel as the winner of the 2004 James Jones First Novel Fellowship.

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by
ANDERSEN PRESS LIMITED
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

First published in 2006 in the United States of America by
Henry Holt and Company, LLC

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Designed by Meredith Pratt
Excerpts from these chapters have previously appeared in the following: chapter 2 in Talkeetna Good Times; 3 in Rosebud; 4 in Provincetown Arts.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.
ISBN 978 184 270 739 5

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon CR0 4TD

THE FIRST DAY



Back before white men were searching for gold in the hills and streams of this North Country, there was a village much like any other small village nestled along the great river. One fall, several young men went moose hunting. A man asked if he could join them, even though he was very old and slow. Reluctantly, the young men let him come along.

OFF IN THE DISTANCE, in a place far away from anyplace else, a yellow snowmobile pulling a long sled was slowly coming down toward the wide river through a valley of white hills, winding around trees, traversing over knolls and rises, sometimes becoming visible, sometimes moving unseen. The sun was already at its highest point, which was barely above the rim of the blue-edged horizon. That's the way it had been for the past month and the way it would be

for at least another month to come. Winter this far north was a series of short days and long nights, with mostly cold and silence in between—a time when most living things huddled or slept through the intolerable cold and dark.

It had snowed during the night, which, like the prolonged darkness, was nothing new. It always snowed here, more so in the mountains, and the wind swept the whiteness against trees and deadfalls and the steep banks of streams or lakes. To escape the pitiless wind, sled dogs learned to dig down into the snow and to curl up into tight balls with their long, bushy tails covering their noses and eyes like fur quilts. They'd sleep that way all night, cold and dreaming of summer and sunlight warm upon them.

Sometimes the snow buried sleeping moose or cabins, drifted over backcountry trails, and concealed treacherous openings in the great river far below, the river that wound itself through the floodplain to the sea.

They say the People of the North have a hundred names for snow. This may not be completely true, but

anyone who has lived any time on a frozen land knows that snow has more than one name.

There is sleet, and hail so big around that the sound of it falling on a tin roof is deafening. There are dry, soft flakes that fall gently without hurry or anger, like the lazy flakes in a Christmas-card scene. There is wet snow that sticks to the branches of trees, turns to ice, and breaks their limbs when too much has gathered. Some snow falls straight down, some slantwise, and some from everywhere, even from beneath, as if the freezing earth itself is storming. There is powder snow, which, when loosely settled on a field or valley, creates an almost religious experience for those fortunate enough to be the first to break trails, leaving their long, unbroken signatures on the snow-clad landscape.

Sometimes, when conditions are right, there is granulated snow, like sugar, loosely packed and crystalline, which gives teeth to the wind. After a very cold night, when the cold pulls out all moisture from the air, there is dry snow. On a warm winter day, a rare day, the low sun melts only the thinnest layer of

snow closest to the surface and then refreezes it at night. This is crusted snow. After a trail is broken into the backcountry, the next morning there will be packed snow, hard and unyielding—a narrow road through the wilderness used by man and animal alike.

In high winds, when little snow is falling, the wind can sweep up snow from fields, shake it loose from trees, and swirl it about the world like a blender. This is a flurry. Add a great deal of new snow and you have a blizzard—so dense the earth and sky seem to merge into one whiteness.

In late spring, when the sun hangs on the horizon longer and longer each day, there can be slush, more water than ice.

Only the foolish would say there is one word for snow. Anything that lasts so long and buries a world must be many-named.

Rounding the last turn, disappearing for a minute and then coming into view again, the snowmobile dragged itself and its sled up to a stand of trees and stopped. For an instant, the only sound in the hills

was the gentle push of a breeze and the groan of a man rising from the machine.

He stood and looked out across the great land that his ancestors had lived on since the beginning. How long, he did not know. No one knew. But he knew this was his land. Every single place had a name. The names were ancient, and sometimes no one could remember what they meant or why, but that did not matter. The land had always known its place. The names given to it by man only comforted man. They mattered not at all to the hills or the far white mountains, the quiet river below or the large tree in its winter sleep, gently swaying and creaking in the wind.

When he stepped from the machine, he sank almost to his waist in snow. It was loose, the way snow is in the first hours after it falls, before it has time to change its mind and become something else. With his teeth, he pulled off his sealskin gloves, which fell and hung loosely, one at each hip because they were tied together across the shoulders of his parka.

The sun was so low it reflected off the icy crystals of snow, nearly blinding the man who held a naked hand against his forehead and slowly turned to look

out across the world. Small clouds of breath billowed and faded as cold began to settle in his fingers.

He squinted hard and for a long time watched and listened. The sky was dark blue and contrasted against the blanketed white of the earth. It was a beautiful place, lovely and deadly all at once, a land of great power. Its voice seemed to ring out from its highest mountains, to be carried by the wind off glaciers down toward the sea, and to say that it could kill you in a second. Those who perish here cannot hear the voice to heed its warning.

Most men have become deaf. They can barely hear each other anymore, much less nature's whisperings. Nature is not tailored to man. It exists for itself.

After a few minutes, the man turned toward the trees, pulled off his brown fur hat, and placed it on the black seat of the machine. The seat was cracked in a few places, and the back part was entirely covered in gray duct tape. The machine and the man had covered many miles together. He was old, with fairly long dark hair and only a whisper of a black mustache. A shadow of a rough beard was just beginning to grow, black and gray, salt and pepper, the stubble

from a few days without a razor. His face was weathered, and deep lines ran across it like the ever-changing channels of the river in the valley below. It wasn't a face forged simply by age, but a face that had been exposed too long in a land where time is measured not by the slow ticking hands of clocks, but by the quiet changing of seasons. It was a face weathered by erosion, like canyons or deserts.

The old man looked at something hanging from one of the lowest branches of a tree, a rabbit dangling from a string tied around one leg. It was frozen rigid and swayed slightly in the breeze pouring down from the mountains, across the hills, and out across the flats where villages nestled along the wide river's edge. He could see that it was whole, that no animal had tried to pull it down from the tree.

He had strung it up a few days earlier as bait to trap fox or wolverine, lynx or wolf. At the base of the tree, secured by a rusted chain bolted to it, he had placed a steel trap, its sharp teeth spread apart and open in wait for a paw to step on it, for the furred weight to trigger a latch that would send the metal teeth crushing into flesh and bone.

He had set such traps under trees all along the two branches of his trapline, each some twenty miles long from beginning to end. He would set them a mile apart, hang the rabbit, and return in a few days to see what had been drawn in by the scent. Most of the time, there would be nothing but the rabbit, but sometimes there would be another animal. Sometimes it was still alive and its leg would be bleeding, the snow red all around the trap, and, in some cases much of the paw would be chewed away in the animal's attempt to break free. Sometimes the animal was already dead and frozen stiff, having fallen victim to the cold.

All up and down the valley and the surrounding hills, such traps were set, their springs tight, their teeth sharpened, waiting patiently like winter, with neither memory nor regret.

This is how he had done it all his life. This is how his father had taught him. It was the way of the trapper, part of life and death in these white rolling hills.

Underneath the swaying rabbit, the perfect snow was undisturbed except for an almost imperceptible trail of a shrew, which had run across the snow beneath

the tree, stopped here and there, and then turned back on itself before disappearing into a small hole.

The wind lifted the man's hair and blew it into his eyes. He swiped it away and trudged the few yards to his sled, where he untied a pair of snowshoes and pulled a short flat-head shovel from alongside the runners.

Strapped into the belly of the metal-framed cargo sled were two frozen quarters of a moose, each weighing over a hundred pounds. The man had shot it the day before near one of his trapping cabins. Now it accompanied him on his journey home. The rest of the moose meat was hanging from the rafters inside the cabin so that animals could not get to it. It would stay frozen inside the small log house, and the old man would come back in a few days or a week to haul it home on the same sled. That was one good thing about the long deep freeze of winter.

A strong white cord crisscrossed over the quarters and through the sled's frame to hold them down during the bumpy journey. On top of the meat, held down tight by black rubber cords, was an old army knapsack stuffed with those things important to surviving

winter on this land. There was a hatchet, a dented old pot blackened from years of hanging over small campfires, utensils, a metal cup, a handsaw, extra dry socks, matches, toilet paper, and food—unsalted dry biscuits called pilot crackers, a half-filled container of oatmeal, dry salmon strips, jerky, salt and pepper, and always a can of Spam and a jar of dark instant coffee.

It was the kind of pack anyone who knew this country would carry out into the wilderness. The pack was a common thing, like carrying an extra five gallons of gas on snowmobile or boat trips between the river villages.

The man carried the snowshoes and the shovel over to the still-hot snowmobile and jabbed them into the snow so that they stood almost straight up, casting long shadows down the trail. He sat on the seat and pulled a piece of jerky out from somewhere inside his fur-trimmed parka. As he tugged with his teeth at the dried meat, he looked around and smiled. His teeth were white and strong, perhaps wider than most, but there were few cavities for such a broad smile. He smiled because he was home. He was always home in this country. This place was where he

had lived out the many years of his life and where he would one day die and be buried in the small cemetery on the hill overlooking his village and the great river.

They say it is enough for animals to know existence. But for Indians, they must also marvel at it. Perhaps that is the difference between them.

Albert Least-Weasel sat eating his jerky and watching the white world for a long time, smiling and squinting at the bright landscape. When he finished eating, he grabbed the short wooden-handled shovel and tossed it toward the tree and the trap. It landed close to the tree, but not too close, and stuck upright, its worn and faded handle looking like a thin grayish tree with no limbs. He would use the shovel to remove snow from around the base of the tree so that the trap would be exposed, free to show its teeth and shine in the sunlight.

The old man trudged through the deep snow until he was almost under the dead rabbit swinging stiffly in the breeze. He looked at it closely. Its white fur was ragged and full of holes where camprobbers—small, intelligent light-gray birds of the north, had pecked

at it. Perhaps a raven may have been at it as well. It was hard to tell the difference. The old man cut the string tied to the rabbit's hind leg with his single-blade pocketknife and tossed the carcass far away. He would set fresh bait above the trap, a long piece of moose meat laced with brown hair and sinew. But first he would clear the area beneath the tree and check to see if the trap was still set.

The old man always placed his traps directly under the bait, so he was careful not to stand too close to where the trap lay beneath the soft new snow.

He studied the snow. It wasn't all that deep. The great boughs of the tree protected the base so that only a portion of snow had filtered down to the ground beneath. The snow was not even up to his knees, while out on the field a dozen yards away it was almost waist-deep. He wouldn't need the shovel. Instead, standing close to the tree with one hand firmly set against its trunk, he kicked away the snow using the flat side of his boot and leg, the way an ice fisherman clears snow above the lid of a frozen lake. Before long, he had cleared away much of the snow,

except for the area directly under where the frozen bait had hung.

It wasn't really hard work, but he grew tired quickly and stopped to catch his breath. He was hot from the labor and unzipped his parka until the metal teeth let go of each other and the parka swung open like a tent door. Albert stood beneath the tree for a few minutes until his heart slowed down and he felt cool.

He was almost eighty. The years had been catching up with him, not slowly like the ticking second hands of his old wind-up wristwatch, but in great leaps like spawning salmon jumping waterfalls.

When he was ready, he turned back to the task of removing snow with his boots. Again, he placed one hand on the tree to steady himself and kicked until he could see the frozen moss and grass underneath the snow. He was working his way out from the base of the tree when it happened. There was a soft click as the teeth of steel closed on his leg. The foot or so of snow covering the trap may have slowed its speed. The snow must have muffled the sound too, because he didn't recall hearing it when it clamped down on

his leg. This was a sensation he had never felt before. He had always wondered about a moment like this. A moment he had assigned to the suffering of others but never to himself. The steel of his own trap now gripped his right leg—but not as quickly or as sharply as he would have imagined. In fact, it didn't really hurt all that much. It was more a tightness, like when the doctor who flew into his village took his blood pressure. The way his arm felt when the doctor pumped up the black band.

For the first time in his life, Albert understood what an animal must feel, what every animal he had ever trapped must have felt.

The old man raised his foot to see with his eye what he saw in his mind. When he did, the chain pulled itself out of the snow and drew a straight line from the man to the tree trunk only a few feet away. With his foot off the ground, he could see how the steel teeth had closed only an inch or so above the knob of his ankle. There was no blood. The sharp teeth had penetrated the thin brown leather of his boot but not the thick lining or his wool socks that kept his feet warm even to thirty or forty below.

With the low sun so near light's last breaking, skimming on the bulging edge of the world, Albert Least-Weasel put his foot down and laughed. His situation wasn't really a funny thing, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been, more irritating than dangerous. He would simply remove the trap, reset it, and be on his way home, where by late evening he would sit beside a crackling woodstove with his wife, sipping hot black tea and eating moose-nose soup with hardtack for his supper.

From the far side of the wide field came the soft hoot of an owl.