

NEVER ALONE

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A SOLO ARCTIC SURVIVAL JOURNEY



WONIYA DAWN THIBEAULT





TIMELESS
WAYS

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A Solo Arctic Survival Journey
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Timeless Ways
3495 Lakeside Drive PMB 221
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THE TIPPING POINT

It's a special day, clear and beautiful, with rosy dawn light filtering in from the east. I'm excited about it from the moment I first open my eyes.

Every morning I film myself talking about my plans for the day and reporting anything of note from the night before. Today, I decide to film my morning log outside, so I head to a lovely backdrop of birch trees on the edge of the rock arena, painted pink by the rising sun.

I feel as lit up as the trees as I hit "record" and look into the camera.

"Today," I say, staring directly into the lens, "is a magical day. The day that everything changes."

And it's true. It isn't just the morning light and clear weather I'm excited about. This is the fall equinox. It's the tipping point of the year, the day the dark and the light are equally balanced, right before the Northern Hemisphere plunges decisively toward winter. My Celtic ancestors took note of and honored such seasonal markers—equinoxes, solstices, and the midway points between them—and I try to do the same. Each holds their own special energy, and the equinoxes, as a day of balance, outside of the momentum of growing or fading light, is one of untapped potential. Just as it's the tipping point of the year, I'm confident it's going to be my tipping point as well.

I believe the intentions we carry on these seasonal holidays hold extra weight, fortified by the momentum of the planet and the seasons. I also believe that, though intentions alone are powerful, they are more likely to come true if you really believe them. And for some reason, this morning, I do. Maybe it's that I've learned to make peace with my hunger, pushing past that physical limitation and learning to thrive while living on beauty. Today I have

a deep sense that something else is coming, and now is my time to start not just surviving, but *surthriving*.

I turn my face into the rising sun, gathering up as much of its glow as I can. Then, with conviction, I turn square to the camera and say, “Just like the changing seasons, today is the day when my luck here changes. Today, I start bringing in real food.”

Though this is officially the first day of autumn, and often still tank-top weather where I come from, up here it’s winter I feel in the air, not fall. I can almost taste it, subtle but unmistakable—a metallic tang on my tongue.

Most winged creatures are following a primal urge to rush south toward light, warmth, and steady food before it’s too late. And here I stand, with no fur, feathers, or stores of food, digging my heels in thousands of miles north of the land I call home, as arctic winter draws in.

I head out to fish the peninsula’s furthest point. The recent storm has stripped most of the leaves from the birch branches. Instead of rustling overhead, they now make brilliant golden confetti under my feet, thick as a carpet and deeper still in the crevices between the rocks.

I do my best to hold firm in the belief that my fishing luck will change today. My optimism wanes as I cast, reel in, and cast again, seeing no ripples, splashes, or signs of life.

A breeze picks up, gentle at first, but before long my hair is fluttering against my cheeks.

Finally, the glassy surface has turned into foamy whitecaps and my line is getting driven back to shore as fast as I can throw it out. I’m forced, once again, to pack up, empty-handed.

Trudging home, disappointed but determined to keep faith, I hear chattering from a tree ahead. There’s a squirrel in a low branch yelling at me. By now I have lost enough arrows to be cautious of even the low shots. This branch, though, is backed by solid rock. There’s no way my arrow can disappear.

I’ve missed too many hunting opportunities because setting up the big camera has alerted the game to my presence. This time the GoPro on my head is already running, so I leave the other camera in my pack and hold my breath as I feel around my pack for an arrow with a small point that won’t cut the squirrel in half like a broadhead would. My eyes never leave

the squirrel as I find the right arrow, draw it quietly from the quiver, and fix it in place.

I inhale as I draw the bow in one fluid motion, exhale and hold as I steady it, aim, and release. Time slows as my awareness flies toward the branch with my arrow, and I watch in stunned amazement as the point catches the squirrel in the chest, swipes it off the branch, and pins it to the moss below. *Oh my god! I've done it! I got the squirrel!*

My sense of time and place returns as I rush to it. Flecks of blood—foamy with air bubbles and brilliant red from being freshly oxygenated—dot the green moss and confirm that it's a lung shot. Its chest is warm and vibrates under my hand as I pour gratitude through my fingers; but gratitude isn't a big enough word to express what I feel in this moment. Awe comes closer. This small life will have more of an impact on my own than anything I have ever eaten. My hands shake with emotion as I pick it up, and my eyes sting as tears of relief and gratitude well up.

Then I remember the date. *It happened! It actually happened!* My luck has finally changed, and on the equinox itself, just as I said it would. The tipping point indeed!

I pick up my quiver, stroking the bobcat fur along its edge. The promise of last spring—inviting the huntress into me as I consumed the bobcat's body—has come to fruition. "Thank you, beauty. It worked," I whisper and kiss the spotted fur as I tuck the squirrel into the quiver alongside my arrows. I head back toward the cabin with my head held high and a new sense of vitality in every step, as if I can already feel the energy of the coming meal.

I'm just reaching the boulder field near the cabin when I hear an unfamiliar sound. A flutter of wings draws my eyes to a large, round shape close to the trunk of the spruce tree up ahead.

It's a grouse!

You are kidding me! Wow, equinox, you aren't messing around!

I had expected the approach of winter would mean birds leaving but hadn't realized some would also be arriving. Thus far there's been no sign of grouse whatsoever, and I had come to believe the peninsula was devoid of game birds—just as it was devoid of fishable waters, large game, and most other food prospects. Yet here it is, another equinox gift.

Once again, I slowly lower the pack to the ground.

Please, I ask the universe. Please, please, please!

I can tell by its muted colors and markings that it's a female, and she seems contentedly roosted, so I take the time to quietly set up the camera and tripod and aim them at the branch.

I've still got the same arrow I shot the squirrel with on the bow string, so I take aim and release. My arrow goes high, just over her head, and disappears into a thick cluster of trees. She fidgets but doesn't take off.

I shift position so I'm shooting toward rocks, not a spruce grove.

I draw out another arrow, raise the bow again, and release. *Aaargh! Low!* She cranes her neck down and looks at her feet, curious about what happened, and I hear my arrow clatter on the rocks.

I'm overexcited—too much adrenaline. I need to slow down. I'm down to the last arrow I've got with me, a broadhead. I've been saving them for moose, but it's better to use it for a grouse that's here than a moose that might never come.

I hold the arrow to my heart, breathe deeply to calm myself, and draw again. I hold my breath until I know I'm still, and release. The arrow flies straight toward the center of her chest. As it hits she explodes into flight in a spray of feathers, and swiftly disappears behind the trees of the spruce grove.

What? She took off? How could she take off?

There's no way I could have missed. I watched the arrow pass right through her, but she's gone.

I find the second and third arrows on the rocks behind the tree. The shaft of the last one is tacky with blood and countless small, downy feathers cling to it.

I scan the ground for sign, but there's no blood trail, nothing to follow. Bird skin is elastic and closes around small wounds. Beating wings would vaporize blood that managed to fall into a fine spray, impossible to see against the speckled rocks and moss.

I take stock. She's perfectly camouflaged, and airborne. *If I was a grouse, mortally wounded and feeling in danger, what would I do?* I would head to where I felt safest—the thicker trees between here and the lake.

I leave my gear where it lies and head that way. No camera, no distractions. The idea of taking a life and letting it go to waste would be repulsive to me

even if I wasn't starving, but I *need* this grouse. I'm deeply appreciative of the squirrel, but I'm not kidding myself about how many calories are in an animal roughly the size of my fist. Less than I've spent this morning. The hunger that I had learned to live happily with has shifted at the sight of that bloody arrow and is now rising up in me. I can feel it inside like a tense hand gripping my belly, pulling me forward toward wherever the wounded bird may be.

The feathers on her chest match the gray blotches of lichen on the granite. She could be anywhere on these rocks; I could almost step on her before I see her. My heart is beating hard against my ribcage. My whole system is flooded with adrenaline, and I'm hot and sweaty even though it can't be above forty degrees. Tunnel vision is one of the side effects of an activated nervous system. I can feel it happening; my visual field is closing in. I push myself to shift my focus from what is right in front of me to the broader vision we call "Owl Eyes" in tracking and nature awareness. With Owl Eyes, one can take in the greater patterns of the landscape and more easily spot anything that looks out of place.

I circle the grove, walking the rocky ledges, but see no form breaking up the angular lines of the rocks, no cloudy pile of fluff and feathers.

I elbow my way into the grove, where the spruces grow so thick their branches touch one another. The ground is scattered with blocky boulders carpeted with sphagnum moss five inches deep, and underbrush that grabs at my legs and boots. In every ten square feet of forest there are probably fifty places a grouse could disappear. I'm methodical, looking into the branches of every tree, underneath every fallen limb, and behind every boulder. I keep my eyes open for the bright pink fletching of the lost arrow as I look, but I see no more sign of it than I do of her.

I reach the far side, come back around, then continue spiraling inward until I have searched the whole thing twice. Nothing.

I can't give up, but the squirrel has been sitting for a while now, and I need to tend to it.

Back at the cabin I skin it carefully, then lay each tiny, precious organ into the cook pot. I tuck the rest of the carcass in, place the skin next to it, and lock the lid down tight. For the first time, I actually have something I need to protect from mice and scavengers.

When I'm done, my panic about the grouse has passed. I'll find her. I'm supposed to find her, but maybe the universe requires that I share this moment with the world in order to receive its gift. I start up the big camera and hold it out at arm's length, pointed at my face as I search. I let myself see the land as she would—having burst from the tree, full of adrenaline.

How far would panic drive her?

I've thoroughly searched the rocks and the trees. Now I walk the edge between them, peering between birch trunks into the thick forest.

I muse out loud as I search, "I just don't know how far a grouse can go wounded. I know a bear can run thirty yards after it's been shot in the heart."

Then, I see a rounded shape against the green ground cover and gasp—*are those feathers?*