one story

The Pole of Cold

Erika Krouse

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I live in the coldest town on earth.

You may have heard some debate about it. Our village, Oymyakon, reached minus 71.2° Celsius in 1924, but they had to guess at the temperature because the thermometer froze. Another town in the Russian Far East tried to claim the title, but then Oymyakon erected a sign in Russian that said The Pole of Cold, and it was settled. Signs can do that. The sign also brought the weather scientists and what they did, so when I look at it, I see something different.

The mountains surrounding the Oymyakon Valley create a natural inversion; chilled air suspends in place while heat escapes to the sky. Birds freeze to death in midflight. Hair adheres to the bed, and eyeglasses stick to the face. You can hammer a nail with a banana. You can hear a voice for four miles. To find a person, you follow the trail of his breath as it hovers behind. Boiling water thrown from my kettle becomes powder before it hits the ground. Vodka freezes, salt water hardens, plastic shatters. You can't touch a doorknob with your bare hand. You can't turn off your car. Everything breaks. Even sap sometimes turns to ice, and trees explode.

Two million gulag prisoners froze to death building the road across Siberia to our town. Their bodies became part of the road itself, Stalin's Road of Bones, and you have to drive over them the whole way here.

Like our neighbors across the Bering Strait, we worship the same bears who try to eat us every spring. There are 472 people in my village, most of them native Sakha, like me. I'm twenty-two years old and the mayor of Oymyakon. I've always imagined I would leave at the first opportunity and never look back.

This winter, the weather scientists didn't come until early February. For money, my Aunt Lyuda and I host one or two of them during the time they stay here. We have Papa's empty room, I speak English, and the money helps.

We need the scientists, but I don't like them in my home. They talk and flirt. Once, trying to impress me, one of the visiting scientists told me he had helped with the Alpine excavation of Ötzi the mummy, also known as "The Iceman." Ötzi was a prehistoric herder who left his village. Outside his territory, between two peaks in the Alps, four men ambushed and killed him. Ötzi lay facedown inside a glacier for five thousand years, perfectly preserved, never to return home. It's a terrible story. But at least the Iceman, like my mother, had the courage to leave.

"The American will be here soon. His name is An-der-son," Lyuda now said. "This one isn't a scientist, just a tourist. Go meet him; my feet hurt."

Out the window, I saw Aytal's truck separate from the convoy

and head our way, so I put on my coat and went outside. It was almost minus 60° Celsius, and I had to cover my mouth to breathe. Aytal pulled the truck up, rolled down his window, and smiled shyly, the frostbite marks jumping on his cheeks. "Vera," he said, like my name was made of sugar, but I just nodded and wiped my nose.

The truck door opened. A lanky man stumbled out, wrapped in bright orange nylon.

"Mr. Anderson?" I asked in English.

"Urrgrrth," the man said.

"Welcome to the Pole of Cold." I picked up his enormous bag and tugged on his arm. "Come. Please." The man walked like a robot. I had to pull him and his belongings from the road to our house.

Once inside, he stood beside the door, a mute orange mass. He was as tall as a Norwegian. His bag was bigger than our table. "Sit, sit," Lyuda said, and I pushed him into a chair.

"You need to take off your coat so the warm air can get in." I peeled off layers until a human body emerged. I pinched the ice from his eyelashes. His eyes were green, and his face was covered in a reddish-gold beard. His cheeks were pink, like he'd been slapped.

"It's cold," he finally stammered in English.

"You'll get used to it."

Lyuda handed him a cup of tea. He cowered over it. I took off my own coat, muffler, and hat, and the man gasped when I turned back around.

I forgot to mention that I am beautiful.

I have heard all the words for *beauty* in Sakha and Russian, and the village boys and men used to look up words in French and Italian, trying to outdo each other. Every year since I was fifteen, the Miss Sakha Republic pageant asks me to compete, but I throw their letters away. I always imagined that if I lived in a place where I wasn't covered in skins all day, my beauty might have purpose.

When the man went to Papa's room to change, Aunt Lyuda wiggled her eyebrows. "He's your age. Handsome too," she said in Sakha.

"He'll hear you."

"He doesn't speak anything."

The American emerged from Papa's room. He had taken off his hat. His hair was wavy and a glinty shade of orange and gold, a little lighter than his beard. It looked soft.

Lyuda clunked bowls onto the table. "Stop staring and eat," she told him in Sakha, and lit a cigarette while we sat.

"*Zdrastvootie, spasibo*," he said in Russian so bad, it was nearly gibberish. His nose twitched. "What's in the bowls?" he asked me.

"*Taba*. Raw reindeer with brain on top. And that one is spleen and eye. *Haan*—congealed horse blood. Salad here," I said.

"Salad?" He frowned. "It looks like frozen meat."

"Frozen fish. We call it *stroganina*. Salad."

"I'm a vegan," he said. "I don't eat meat."

I translated this for Lyuda.

"How can he live if he doesn't eat?" She poked me. "Ask him."

"Meat," he specified. "I don't eat animal products."

"That's our food," I said. "Reindeer meat. Blood. Yogurt. Horse." He wrinkled his nose again, as if I had said something disgusting. I pushed the *stroganina* so it rocked his plate. "Here, this is just fish."

"Fish is still meat."

"Fish is not meat."

"You don't eat any vegetables? Local plants? Grains?"

I pointed out the window. "You want some lichen?"

At four o'clock, the sun was already down, and fog covered the rising moon. "I guess I'm eating meat then," the American said. He took a bite of brains and smiled, food in his teeth. Lyuda poured him a glass of *kumis*, fermented mare's milk, which he glugged, choked on, and then sipped. "Please tell your mother it's delicious."

"She's my aunt."

"Oh," he said. "Where are your parents?"

"I don't know, where are yours?" I snapped. The American squinted out the window.

My mother, Tuyaara Ivanovna Kulika, left with one of the weather scientists when I was a baby. She crawled into the truck with him, and Aytal's father drove it away. That was his job. He last saw her in Yakutsk, boarding a plane to Moscow with the rest of the scientists. But maybe she went farther than that, maybe even New York. Those scientists were from New York. I don't know who gave her the money for her ticket. Regardless, my mother was still married to my father. I thought she should know her husband was dead, and her daughter was alive, waiting for her.

"Your English is amazing," the American said. "I hadn't expected someone so fluent."

"My papa taught me."

"How did he learn?"

"He went to college in Yakutsk. He made me read the whole English dictionary and books by Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville."

"You're absolutely beautiful," he told me. "Do you know that?"

My aunt nodded at her plate, uncomprehending, while this American flirted in English in front of her. It made me furious. "You never properly introduced yourself." I leaned back in my chair. "That's rude in our culture."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend. I'm Theodore Anderson. Most people call me Theo."

Green eyes, red hair, Theodore, *Thiodor*. I recognized this name. I recognized this man.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I pushed away from the table and hurried to my room. I grabbed the wooden box from under my bed. The door to my room didn't shut all the way since last winter, so I leaned my back against it.

"Verochka," my aunt called sharply and tried to push the door open. Then she returned to the kitchen and said to the man who couldn't understand, "I'm sorry about her. Eat. You're not hungry?"

I lifted the gold locket from my box. The metal stung where it touched my skin. I opened it, pulled out the slip of paper I had tucked into the center, and read what I had written seven years ago: *Thiodor*. The picture in the locket was faded, but I could just make out two flecks of green in the teenage boy's eyes, and that reddish-gold hair. I stared at the tiny photograph, memorizing it all over again, the door against my back. That boy was in our kitchen right now, grown into a man.

"Get him out of here," I yelled to Lyuda in Sakha. "He can stay with Anton Federovitch."

"No way," she yelled back. "He's paying us double." I heard

murmuring, and Lyuda again yelling to me, "Take him to the store tomorrow. He keeps saying something called 'vegetables.'"

I lost my father in the plane crash here, seven years ago. I was fifteen. Maybe you read about it. He was out with the reindeer. I was feeding the horses. The temperature was fifty-five below. I couldn't feel my face, and I liked that feeling; it was safe and cozy and reminded me of how warm my arms were in my reindeer coat. I was just emptying my bucket when my favorite horse, Dmitri, looked up.

A plane going down is a memorable sound. It's a powerful drone, so loud it hurts. There's the screech of metal against itself. Shrieks snuffed out. Then silence and snow, which has its own sound.

I was screaming for my father. That has its own sound too. Before the plane hit him, he was running in the middle of the field, waving at me, waving me back. Over the noise, he shouted, "Stay where you are." The reindeer had already fled from him. He didn't even look back at the plane, which grew so big, so fast upon his small body. It aimed straight for him, as if trying to find the one person in the vast taiga to kill.

After the plane crashed, I ran through the smoke to the fire, my bucket clanging against my legs until I remembered to drop it. The fumes were suffocating, congealing in the air, and the metal groaned. I pulled on the door, and people fell out.

A woman caught me by the ankle as she hit the snow. Her face was half burned off. She grabbed for my hand and pressed something into my mitten, something metal. It was a necklace, a locket. Then she said, "Theodore," and fell still.

Later, I learned that the plane was carrying scientists from

America, including a married couple. They were on one of those scientific trips to check out our weather instruments and feel the temperatures for themselves. But they didn't drive from Yakutsk for three days on the Road of Bones like the other scientists, the poor ones from universities. These ones were famous and rich, and they bribed a Yakutsk pilot two thousand dollars to fly them here.

Airplanes are not supposed to fly over this valley in winter. The plane that killed my father dug deep into the permafrost, burned, and then iced over. It took chainsaws to detach what bodies they could from the plane and ship them home to America.

The locket that lady gave me was gold and heavy, the only piece of metal jewelry I have ever owned. Days later, I discovered that it opened, with a picture of a boy inside. I wrote down the word the lady said, as I had heard it—*Thiodor*—and tucked that scrap of paper into the locket. I didn't know the name, and the word meant nothing in any of our dictionaries.

They are a burden, our dead. In old times, our people used to have sky burials. We would wrap the body in canvas and hang it high in a tree. After the Russians came to Sakha, they made us bury the bodies in the ground, even in winter. So we make a bonfire. It melts a few centimeters of permafrost, and we dig it up. Then we make another bonfire, and then dig under that fire, and so on for three days, until we have a hole deep enough for the corpse. Even then, the permafrost rejects the bodies. It pushes them up over time, so sometimes we have to do it all over again. This is how we care for the souls of the lost—with a fire and digging.

But my papa. He's still under the plane.

At the general store, my neighbor Yuri clapped my shoulder and said, "Vera, nice foreigner you've got. Amerikanetz?" The

American was circling the store, rubbing his mittens together and inspecting the snapshots tacked to the wooden paneling.

"From New York." I said in Sakha, "He won't eat our food."

"I'm out of food," Yuri said. He is Oymyakon's heating engineer and hasn't been paid by the Russian government in over a year. Without him, we would all be dead within five hours.

I gave Yuri part of the money we got from the American and told him, "We've got some reindeer fat. And I'll contact the government again, but you know."

"That would be much appreciated," Yuri said, his face exploding in wrinkles. Yuri came here from the Ukraine to escape the authorities. Whatever he did, he doesn't do it here. Most people in town once escaped from something—their pasts, the law, famine, the Great Terror. Oymyakon was founded on escape, when Mongol horsemen ran from Genghis Khan. It's safe to hide where nobody will follow you.

The American touched items: cranberries, milk, vodka. Finally, he paid for a sack of flour, another of spaghetti, and a long can of foreign potato chips left over from the Christmas wares. He walked in a stiff-legged waddle.

"I discovered the hard way that I can't digest meat anymore," he said. "Maybe I should have prepared more for this trip." That morning he had put on seven layers—a parka over a jacket over a vest over a sweater over a shirt over a T-shirt over a silk undershirt. He looked like a stuffed bear. "At least the store carries these twelve-dollar potato chips." He pulled off the top and offered me the can.

I picked out a chip and put it into my mouth. "It tastes like nothing and salt."

He read the label. "I think those are the first two ingredients."

We ate the chips together in the store, our teeth crunching the cardboard food. Neighbors touched Theo's arm in passing, welcoming him, and he made friendly noises.

"Listen," he said, turning to me. "I know you don't like me. I'm sorry for whatever I did. I'm not used to the culture here."

It was hard to stay angry at this man for what his parents did to my life. He was orphaned too. But I couldn't think of any other way to act, so I escaped outdoors. The air cooled my face and calmed me.

Theo followed me outside and gulped. "Yup. Still nippy."

"We're getting near the record, I think. It's at least sixty below. Listen." I exhaled, and the vapor turned to ice crystals, followed by the tinkling sound as they collided and fell. "We call that *shepot zvezd* in Russian, 'the whisper of the stars.'"

Theo breathed out himself and listened, grinning. Then he said, "You know, I could tell you things too. Things that don't revolve around temperature. I could teach you how to hail a cab or make a real salad or use a computer. There's more to life than subsistence." He was interrupted by a crunching sound, the potato chip sound, but nothing was in his mouth. We stared at each other and then at his coat. It was shriveling. Before our eyes, it cracked into long, orange strips. Feathers dumped out and drifted to the ground.

Fear struck Theo's face. "This thing is Gore-Tex and 800-fill goose down. It's made for Mt. Everest."

"Come." I pulled his sleeve, and part of it came off in my hand.

There was another hissing sound, and his plastic boots split their tops like two smiles. "My feet," he said. We ran home, his broken boots squeaking. It took only a few minutes, but in conditions like these, sometimes that's enough. Once inside, I pushed him into a chair in front of the woodstove and pulled off the remains of his boots. He was pale and rubbed his arms and chest with shaking hands. "I don't have any other gear." He glanced around our house, at our fireplace, our little television. "I'll have to stay here until summer. Cut off from the world."

"This is the world too." I lit the burner under the kettle.

"I'm the Iceman." His voice was flat. "Oh my god. The Iceman stayeth." Feathers leaked out of his parka. He looked like a shattered tropical bird. "I'm going to lose my feet and my cheeks and die here."

"Calm down. You just need some fur," I said.

When Papa was buried under the plane, he was wearing his brand-new fur coat, still under mortgage. But the one that was now hanging in his closet, that was the old reindeer coat I remember him in. It was so worn, the stiff hide was almost soft. The fur lining was bald in the seams and under the arms. It had a stain on it from where I once spilled a bowl of blood gravy. It still smelled like my father—sweat and food and milk and hair.

I pulled it off its hanger and handed it to Theo, along with my grandfather's decorated reindeer boots, a family heirloom. "This is what we wear here," I said.

"I'm opposed to fur," he said. But he didn't say anything when I pushed his hand through the armholes of the coat. The coat fit, and so did the boots after I removed the wool from the toes. I wedged Papa's old Arctic fox hat onto Theo's head, and it puffed out ten centimeters on all sides. "I feel ridiculous," he said. But his cheeks grew pink, and he smiled. "I'll bet my head looks pretty big now."

"It looked big when you stepped out of the truck." I brushed off the coat, and he blushed.

I didn't know how I felt about giving my father's coat to the son of his killers. But if I'd let Theo die in his plastic clothing, I would have been a murderer. I tugged on the sleeves of my father's coat and said, "This isn't a gift."

I was sleepless all night and didn't stumble into the kitchen until almost lunch, after the winter sun had already risen. When there are only six hours of daylight, we hoard that time, and Lyuda was mad. "I fed the animals," she reproached. "The American helped." Theo blushed at the sight of me again. Lyuda handed me tea, and I drank it slowly to let Theo get used to me again.

He cleared his throat. "Please show me the airplane. The one that crashed here seven years ago."

"Too far," I said. "You'll freeze."

"They told me it was right there, in that field next to yours." He pointed out the window to our pasture. "That's why I'm staying with you."

"What does he want?" Lyuda asked. "Does he want to try ice fishing?"

"He wants to see the airplane."

"Then show him the airplane."

I made an annoyed sound, but that didn't sway the American. He laid one hand on my arm. "Please," he said. "Take me there, or take me to someone who will. I'll pay."

There was no way this man was going to my papa's grave without me there. So after I finished the remaining chores, we left together.

Trudging toward the field, the American looked up at the milky sky. "What do people do here? What do you do?"

"I help teach school. English, Russian, and Sakha. School

closes when it's fifty-two degrees below or more, like now." I shrugged. "I'm also the mayor."

"Aren't you a little young for that job?"

"It's not a big deal. My great-great-grandfather was the first mayor of Oymyakon. Then great-grandfather, grandfather, father. After Papa died, I took over. I was fifteen."

"Impressive legacy."

"Just tradition. Mostly I nag the government for salaries and run the town meetings."

I didn't mention that I also hand out certificates to tourists to celebrate their bravery for spending a few days in the place where we live all the time. Or that since I've been mayor, we've built the new school with indoor plumbing. We're making plans for a post office and more festivals for the scientists. We're not drowning at the bottom of a collective vodka bottle, like the other towns in Sakha. We're living.

I stopped walking, and Theo did too. The airplane was no more than a snowy mound. The actual plane is visible only in summer. I used to spend hours there after the thaw, mosquitoes feasting on me while I waited against hope for movement.

After the plane crashed, the town tried to retrieve my father's body. But the plane was too big and the ground too hard, and they didn't know where he was exactly. In summer, they lit fires to dig a tunnel through the permafrost but soon realized they would never be able to find him without potentially cooking him first. So there he stayed, under everything.

Theo wiped his nose against the sleeve of my papa's old coat and stared at the plane with wet eyes. A child's love has its own vastness, bigger than its container. Like the ice inside our exploding trees, it must have somewhere to go.

It was time to turn back, but Theo didn't seem cold anymore.

"My parents died here," he finally said.

"I know." Then I said, "My father too."

Theo followed my gaze to the snowy hill. My grandfather's boots creaked on his feet. He squinted, and then his eyes cleared. The crescent of his exposed face turned pale. "The herder," he said, his voice deadening. "That was your father."

The scant sun was already beginning its descent under the fog.

"I don't want to talk to you anymore," I said.

Theo caught me with one mitten. He pulled me toward him and kissed me. His lips were freezing, coated with particles of ice. Something started to melt, and solidify, and melt again. This is how we die, I thought. This is how body parts stick to metal, how dogs lose their tongues. But we didn't die. We stayed there, and I kissed him with all the heat I had stored inside myself for twenty-two years.

Theo went with me that evening to our town meeting. "Go," Lyuda said, waving him off. "Meet the village." We gather at the school twice a month. We pool our resources. We arrange to fix broken pipes, talk about government back-pay, schedule supply trucks, trade goods, plan events, order vehicle parts for repairs, and decide punishments for crimes. I have a wooden gavel to keep order, and I always have to use it.

Everyone welcomed Theo with pats, and I called the meeting to order in Russian. Theo watched while I heard a dispute between two brothers over a cow. We watched dancers compete to perform in the festival. We examined the design for a post office and discussed permafrost sinkage and ideas for reinforcement.

A town elder said, "But who will do all this work? All our young people are leaving for the mines. That's the real problem."

"They'll come back," I said.

"Nobody ever comes back."

People had brought food to the meeting, and Yuri went home with a full sled: white salmon, half a gunnysack of flour, horse meat, vodka, our reindeer fat, a sack of cranberries, and a block of frozen mare's milk. Aytal gave him a carton of cigarettes.

On the way home, Theo walked close beside me, and I was glad for the barrier of cold and coats. He asked, "What were you talking about?"

"Food, trucks, things like that."

"It seemed pretty important."

"It is."

"Someone else could arrange all that, though, right? If you weren't here."

"But I am here."

"But if you weren't."

"I don't know."

Sometimes I imagine the town as a giant, tangled ball of string and myself as the empty center. I couldn't explain this to Theo, who said, "I thought being a mayor was mostly public relations."

"It's listening. My father was good at that. People need a lot of listening."

"Well," he said. "Anyone can do that." But he wasn't listening.

When we got home, I gave Theo the locket. I told him how his mother pressed the piece of metal into my mitten. How quickly she died, how his name was the last thing she said. How his father's arm had frozen to her torso within minutes.

When I finished, he sat at our table, opening and closing the locket with his thumb. I sat with him. Time passed. Lyuda yawned and quietly played her mouth harp. She knows things without knowing them.

Theo finally spoke. "Tell your aunt that I wish to marry you."

"Marry? You've been here two days." Still, I blushed.

"Don't pretend you want to stay here."

"What did he say?" Lyuda asked.

"He wants a different towel. He doesn't like yellow," I told her.

"All our towels are yellow. Tell him," Lyuda told me.

"She said you can't marry me," I told Theo.

"She did not."

"You don't speak Sakha. You don't even speak Russian."

Theo leaned over and pounded the table with a pink fist. Lyuda's eyes flared. "*I*"—he stabbed a finger at his chest—"want to marry *Vera*." He mimed sliding a ring onto a finger. English, Sakha, or Russian, the meaning couldn't be mistaken.

Lyuda's chin rose slowly. "*Da*," she said.

"*Da*? Yes?" Theo asked.

"Yes means no in my culture," I said.

"No, it doesn't."

"You're upsetting her." My lips were trembling. I wanted him to stop, and I was also terrified he would.

Theo sighed, exasperated. "You're so smart and beautiful." When I rolled my eyes, he said, "You must want more than this. In America, you can—see great art. You can walk around outside."

"I walk around outside."

"Yeah, but I mean without dying within twenty minutes. You can, I don't know, go dancing or wear a short skirt or think about something besides survival. You can live somewhere temperate, like New York."

"Temperate."

I imagined a new city, made of metal. Buildings scraping the sky. People shooting each other with guns, people living in the same place who don't know each other and never will. I even imagined my mother—you?—in a fur hat, walking on the pavement, clinging to the arm of a scientist.

Theo pressed a hand to his chest. "There's this ice inside my chest all the time here. It's like I can't breathe. Doesn't it get to you?"

"It costs a hundred thousand rubles to go to America. And they wouldn't let me stay."

"I have lots of rubles. You'd get a green card if I married you."

I was used to proposals, but still I blushed again. "You love me?"

He said, "I don't think there's a word for what I feel about you."

"*Da*," Lyuda said. She had already begun to cry.

I knelt before her and held her hands. "But Lyuda. What would you do? What would happen to the town?"

"What will happen to you, Verochka?" Tears wet her face, and she rocked back and forth. "You don't live. You only wait, watch, listen. Once I'm gone, you'll die alone."

"I won't die alone," I said. "We have men here."

She shook her head. She was right—they'd all proposed to me, even the married ones, and I'd said no, no, no. There was nobody left.

"Don't die alone, Verochka," she said.

That night when everyone was finally asleep, I got out of my bed and dressed in the dark. I slipped outside, quiet as a fox. I didn't know what time it was, but the frigid air staggered even me. There was a hint of a moon under the fog. I trudged in darkness to Papa's plane.

I watched the mound in the scant moonlight. I waited. I didn't know how to say good-bye to a man under a plane under the snow. The hill seemed to breathe back at me. Then I realized something was actually breathing, and grunting. "Papa?" I stepped closer.

A brown bear walked out from behind the plane.

He was skinny. Hunger had woken him up. The bear winter-walked toward me, his empty belly swaying. He was made of two things—sleep and hunger. I'd brought no gun.

I realized I had now lived my whole life. I would die right there, beside my father. When the bear charged, I would run, he would catch me, and I would be eaten alive, entrails first.

The bear's big head rose to sniff the air.

"Stay where you are," my father's voice said in my ear.

I froze in place. The bear sniffed again, his head bobbing up with each breath. With one mighty paw, he scratched at the mound, the plane.

He came closer. His paws crunched on the snow, covering my tracks. His breath hung next to mine and entered my own lungs. He smelled like deep musk and fat and the land beneath the snow. For a second he paused, wagging his head from side to side, sweeping so close I felt the draft on my cheek.

Then he walked blindly past me, as if I were already a ghost. I didn't move until the bear had retreated far into the distance, a dark exception to the endless white.

We have a saying: *Aiyy sire aaas kunsire kendei.* Everywhere fits inside the under-the-sun country. My home is so boundless, it includes every other—even Theo's, even yours. A place so absolute demands a sign, forged in metal that adheres to flesh: OYMYAKON, THE POLE OF COLD.

My father loved the sign that brought the plane that killed him. I think he would have preferred that kind of death. He never would have let himself become Ötzi, dying in some strange territory. Alone or together, here is where my people die. We claim a vast, tough land, so cold it breaks our instruments to measure it, but it rules us all the same. Rules me, I realized.

And finally, I was honest about my life.

When the trucks arrived, the sun hadn't yet risen. Aytal nodded at me from the driver's seat. I nodded back. He is not a bad man. He said my name again, and it didn't irritate me as much this time.

So when Theo held out a hand to load my bag into Aytal's truck, I dropped it in the snow. "I don't think I'm temperate," I said.

His eyes were unsurprised. "You haven't had practice yet. Just try it for a little while." But there could be no "little while." New York was eight thousand kilometers away.

"You should get in the truck. Get warm." I glanced at Lyuda's face, worried at the window.

"Please. Vera. Are you scared to go? Or is it me?"

"I need to stay where I am."

"Here?" Theo shouted, flailing. The fog ate his words. "This is the edge of existence!"

The scientists were waiting inside the trucks, but Theo didn't notice. I was trying not to cry so my eyes wouldn't freeze.

"I'm not scared," I said.

Theo was silent for so long, my fingers went numb.

"This is dangerous," I said. "Go."

He kicked some snow. "I'm not giving up, you know. I'll come back for you."

"Keep the coat," I said in Sakha.

He squinted in a way that told me he was memorizing the words to look up later. In the truck, he would etch their outline onto a slip of paper with a frozen pen. He would try to translate them in New York, but there are no Sakha dictionaries.

Theo pulled down his scarf and gently kissed me. He removed a mitten to wipe my lips dry with his thumb, already freezing. He looked older, the truck's reflected light sinking into the soft lines beginning in his face. He walked backward to Aytal's truck. Aytal rolled down the window and called out, "*Nokhoo*," then in harsh English, "Go now."

Theo got into the truck.

The convoy belched smoke and drove away, the last truck with Theo inside. His face was gray against the glass. I watched until my legs turned to ice beneath me, until the taillights disappeared from view and he was gone.

Sometimes I imagine this story moving like money from pocket to pocket, until it finally rests in my mother's. If enough people read it, every message finds its target sooner or later. So if you are finally holding this, Tuyaara Ivanovna Kulika: your husband is dead, your daughter is alive, and I am done waiting for you. I have grown up, and I'm nothing like you.

A winter in Oymyakon can change a person forever. You learn that you can survive anything, just by standing in a deadly place and saying, "I live here."

I live here.

The Icewoman stayeth. Why? Because when a tree explodes in the forest, someone has to be there to hear it. I am the one who can stand in the taiga and listen. This is what I hear from the edge of existence: snow crystallizing in the fog, my father sleeping under the plane, Theo riding on the Road of Bones. My town beating back cold death. You. I hear you breathing on the other side of this page.

Erika Krouse's short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *Story*, and other magazines. Her collection of short stories, *Come Up and See Me Sometime*, won the Paterson Fiction Award and has been translated into six languages. She teaches fiction at the Lighthouse Writers Workshop and works part-time as a private investigator for Title IX and sexual assault cases. Erika's new novel, *Contenders*, was published in March of this year. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, and is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.

To read an interview with Erika Krouse about "The Pole of Cold," visit the stories section of one-story.com. To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit one-story.com/blog.

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