The Crossing

The unpredictable Alaskan wilderness was at it again. This time the relentless rain had turned into a raging blizzard. I guess it was winter’s last attempt to ward off the precious sun. I was struggling to return home with my two horses after a long packing trip. Roan, my saddle horse was tall, lean, and extremely athletic. His strawberry colored coat barely visible was caked with a fresh blanket of snow. Roan had the boldness and courage of a freight train when it came to wilderness travel. I admired and trusted him with all my heart. Buck, my packhorse spent most of his life roaming the vast Wrangell St. Elias mountains. Nothing rattled old Buck, and he is the only horse I know that would actually fight off grizzly bears. Buck’s heavy packs were gathering snow quickly as he followed diligently behind.

The goal of getting home burned within us all. I could already feel the warmth of my modest cabin as the wood-burning stove popped and hissed. I could already taste the sweetness of my traditional evening tea. We charged on! The storm had shrunk the visibility into nothing, and all that remained was a violently dancing void of snow. The void seemed to stretch forever into the realm of infinite. I became disoriented and lost within an hour. I frantically searched for my back trail in vain. The storm had swallowed all signs of our tracks among thick vales of snow. After hours of searching I gave up trying to guide my horses. I felt as if I had failed them and myself. Roan quietly trudged through the blizzard on a loose rein as I hunched over on his back trying to scrape up the last of my wits. Roan suddenly came to a stop, softly nickered, and pawed at the ground.

I peeked through the tiny opening created by my hat and scarf, and to my amazement Roan led us to the banks of the Toklat River. I finally recognized where we were, and it was only about an hour from home. I normally followed a mountain pass around this river, but the mountains were no place for these tired and hungry souls. I had no choice but to cross the Toklat.

The river reverently pressed forward as if it was ignoring old man winter’s desperate attempt to lock it up in a sheet of ice. I searched up and down the bank looking for a safe place to cross. I finally found a sheet of snow and ice clinging to the bank stretching across to the other side. The fragile bridge was the only thing between what I feared at the time to be life or death for my horses and me. We were desperate to get home safely and in one piece.

I urged Roan cautiously forward, and he bravely stepped out onto the ice. The snow crunched and crackled under his feet. We were almost to the end of the ice sheet when I first heard the ice give with a sharp “snap”! I planted my heels into Roan’s sides in hopes he would jump the remainder of the river. His attempt was strong, but it wasn’t enough. All three of us plunged into the frigid water. Time seemed to freeze in place as the sting of the water pierced through my entire body. I violently thrashed and reached for Roan as I swallowed mouthfuls of water. I managed to grab one of his thin leather reins floating in the water. The horses exploded out of the water and lunged for the other side. I was left dangling on the rein paralyzed, still within the river’s grasp. The next thing I remember was Roan tugging me from the river and patiently nudging me to get up on my feet. I coughed and heaved as I clambered to my feet. The distinct odor of wet horses and saddle leather saturated the air. I was feeling the effects of hypothermia
starting to set in. Barely able to walk, move, or feel my body I removed Roan’s saddle from his back functioning only on half frozen adrenaline. My body trembled, and my skin was stiff and clammy. I tried for what seemed like an eternity to climb onto Roan’s back. I finally succeeded. The body heat from Roan’s back is probably the only thing that kept me from dying of exposure right there on the muddy banks of the Toklat.

I nudged Roan forward, and he began to push his way through the storm. Roan effortlessly found his way back home as I bounced and flopped in and out of consciousness on his warm steaming back. I greeted my worried family with a frozen smile and a pat of Roan’s neck. My family had already sent out search parties to scour the wilderness in search of me. They returned a few hours later with my drenched saddle under the impression that I was dead.

I was dry, warm, and had survived hypothermia all because of a strawberry colored horse I called Roan. Later that evening I made my way out to the horse barn. The spruce log structure was still pungent from the freshly cut logs. It was quiet, and the soft midnight sun trickled in through the spaces between the logs. Roan was in his stall munching away at his extra grain awarded to him for saving the day. He nickered at me as he always did as if nothing had happened. I curled up in the straw pile, and fell asleep.

I will never forget the immeasurable gift that the Roan gave me that summer. He didn’t save my life out of obligation or pity. He saved my life out of friendship and respect. His friendship was by far one of the greatest gifts that I have ever received from anyone. I could never repay Roan for what he did for me that night. I don’t think he would expect it even if he were human. I am sure for him a little extra grain now and then will be repayment enough. Roan was the truest of friends, and he was a friend on unconditional terms. I guess that is one of the things that make the relationships between man and beast so unique and special. I will never forget you old friend!