

## Reflections Lake

On the third floor of RLB 1, a re-locatable billet similar in appearance to a tall Conex, I could see the yellow of the sun's rays wash away the moody blue of nighttime through my cracked window, a cobweb of plexiglass made from the blast of a vehicle bomber two weeks ago. I sat on my stiff twin mattress, the metal frame pushed against the short wall opposite of the door in my rectangular dorm. I woke up early to call my husband and children in Alaska before they started their Sunday night routine of dinner, bath, and bed. My Monday 6 am in Bagram was their 5:30 pm in Eagle River the night before. After hearing about their weekend trip to the reindeer farm and my telling of the upcoming Christmas celebration we planned in the office, we said our goodbyes and I ended the video call. I needed to shower and dress before stopping by the dining facility to pick-up breakfast on my way to the office. I was an Executive Officer for the Air Expeditionary Group at Bagram Air Base, responsible for the daily administrative work and scheduling for nine squadrons: F-16s, C-130Js, EC-130s, maintenance, rescue, base support, aeromedical evacuation, and two areas of air support.

Resisting the start to my day, I popped a new Wawa K-cup into the mini Keurig on my nightstand and let the coffee aroma overtake the small space as I scrolled through pictures on my phone. I paused on one of my favorites, a snapshot from five months ago of our dogs and kids in the back of Jeff's Tacoma. It was the 4th of July weekend in 2019. Summertime temperatures in Alaska rarely reach higher than the low 80s and the sun shines for eighteen hours each day in the Anchorage bowl. We had only been in the state for two and a half weeks and had spent most of that time trying to organize our new home. Unaware of any local holiday festivities, we packed the truck and found a nearby lake with an easy, 1-mile hiking path around its perimeter. We dressed our three-year-old daughter and not yet two-year old son in bathing suits, packed snacks and water and towels, and loaded all animals and humans into the vehicle. The Reflections Lake trailhead is thirty miles north of Anchorage, just off Alaska Highway 1 after the Knik River crossing. We parked next to the trailhead, fifty feet in front of an opening to the lake. Jeff and the kids ran ahead while I leashed our two dogs and bundled towels under my arm. Neither of our kids could swim, but my daughter knew her limits and waded in slowly, her shoulders tensing at the shock of the cold water. Our son wrapped his hands around Jeff's thumbs and moved gingerly towards the water, his baby ribs visible under pale skin as he sucked in his breath to brace for the cold. I removed the leashes and our dogs

ran up and down the shoreline, chasing sticks and following scents. After about fifteen minutes, we towed off and loaded our son into the hiking pack to begin our loop around the lake.

I didn't take the picture in the truck bed until after our hike. The dogs are on the right side of the frame. Sasha, our beagle mix, is in a sitting position and looking at the camera with her tongue halfway out. Dani, our border collie, lies next to Sasha and her face is turned towards the side, though her eyes are looking up, probably at a fly or mosquito whose flight pattern she's calculating for a chomp. Our daughter is sitting on an old couch cushion at the very back of the bed in a Nemo two-piece bathing suit. Her eyes are crinkled and she's sticking her tongue out at the camera. Our son is sitting on the left and on top of the wheel well, facing towards the camera but looking past it, his eyes blue and vibrant from the sunshine pouring in through the windows. The scene is chaotic happiness, a promising start in this new place.

The deafening rumble of an F-16 jet engine readying for takeoff in the near distance broke me from my reverie. The Keurig gurgled and clicked off, the white ceramic cup with black skulls and crossbones I found in the office storage closet, probably from a Halloween care package, now full of steaming black coffee. I set my phone on the nightstand and pulled a clean uniform from my locker closet, laying it across the gray comforter. I gathered my dog tags, hat, and M-9 from the bookshelf and laid them on top of my OCP blouse before grabbing my shower caddy and heading to the bathroom.

The longest I have been away from my family was for an unexpected, seven-month deployment to Afghanistan in 2019 and 2020. As an active duty servicemember, absences from my family are frequent. I have been separated from my spouse and children for trainings and deployment, and the pace at which we move every three years takes us far away from extended family, like our parents and siblings. Although the lifestyle is challenging, the uniqueness of our story bonds us. We do not yet have roots anywhere, but we find love and connection in our memories from visiting our favorite barbeque in Texas, hiking Eagle's Peak in Colorado, chasing the Aurora Borealis in Alaska, and cheering for the Brewers on Sunday afternoons in Wisconsin. We find strength in our love by knowing that wherever we go, we will navigate the newness and find adventures together and when we are inevitably separated for periods of time, we will always find our way back together.