

It was late when I arrived. The village was deep in snow. The mountain was hidden in misty darkness, without a glimmer of light to show that the Sanctuary was there. But I knew from their website what it was like: a sprawling, rugged, stone and wood lodge built a hundred years ago as a ski resort. In one small photo, my favorite, a flagpole in the front yard had a dark square banner with the Sanctuary's logo: an outline in white of a lightly spotted dog. The drawing was roughly done, and the dog was tilted upward, head high, front paw lifted, like he was walking around in just air.

The inn at the foot of the mountain was beaming out lights. It had the frame of a chalet, two stories high and dark-brown wooden. Stacks of firewood ran along the front, and to the side I saw a chain link enclosure, icy and brushed with snow, about five feet high. The space inside was large enough for a toddlers' playground--that's what I thought it was.

I went inside. Welcoming me was a woodstove, huge and black, churning out heat I could almost see in waves.

"Hi, I'm a new trainee in the dog training school," I said at the lobby desk. "I start up there tomorrow."

The first thing I had to do was find out the schedule for getting to the top. I'd read about the old gondola, still running after all these years, although no one had skied here for ages. I was excited about the ride, being up in the air. For the last ten hours I'd been stuck on things that kept moving too slowly: a taxi in city traffic, an Amtrak that was not an

express, a bus to the village, another bus to the end of the lane where the inn was, then my own two feet making sinkholes in deep, thick snow, which felt heavier than it was, because my backpack, brand new, an enormous one, a real trekker's, was driving me crazy.

It felt light when I put it on my shoulders that morning. I'd sent most of my clothes ahead, care of the Sanctuary, so I'd have room for all my new books, which I needed to keep secret. They were paperbacks, but still, I had to drag the pack the last few yards in the lane, drag it up the steps of the inn, drag it inside, trailing snow. Now it was sitting at my feet, maybe as a dog would, silent and well-behaved, indifferent to the snow that was melting and sliding off to an old, worn carpet. Absurdly, I'd imagined some service. Getting off the bus, I had worried my hands would be too stiff with cold to finger out a tip for whoever relieved me of that weight.

"There hasn't been a gondola for years. It collapsed. They'll come get you."

"But on the web..."

The sleepy desk clerk interrupted me with a tight little shake of her head. She was a solid-looking woman of late middle age, as pale as if she hadn't been outdoors her whole life. But she was sturdy and fit, and I had the impression she was stern with all arriviers, and even sterner with herself. Her thick hair was exactly the color of broom straw, with a mix of gray. She wore it pulled back very tightly, and her broad face had a pinch

to it, like the knot at the back of her neck caused her pain, but she didn't plan to do anything about it. No one else was in the lobby. The silence all around was another kind of foggy darkness.

"Your room," said the clerk, "is at top of the stairs."

She wasn't presenting a key, and shook her head again when I asked for one. "Lock yourself in, if you want to. But it won't be necessary. You're the only one I've got."

She looked at me as if to let me know we'd come to the end of what we needed to say to each other.

I said, "Which room is mine?"

"You'll see it."

"Okay," I said. "I'd like a wake-up call. What time..."

"When they're coming for you, you'll hear them."

"Like with a snowmobile, do you mean?"

"You'll know it when you hear it," the woman said.

"Well, good night then."

This went unacknowledged. I lugged the pack up a narrow flight of steps that led to an open door, and entered a vestibule for outdoor things, where the shelves, wall hooks, and rubber floor mats were empty. Then I felt like Goldilocks, except that the bedroom I entered had eight beds, four on each side. They were single futons on top of pine chests of drawers. Each had an overhead wall shelf and a footlocker-type storage box made of pine boards, unpainted, about the size of half a coffin. For

light there were no lamps, just ceiling globes. Everything was extremely clean, even the heat vents. No pictures on the walls. No curtains on the windows, just wooden shutters, closed. The floor was pine too, but smooth as a bowling alley, newly oiled.

They made you sleep in a bunkroom on a bureau?

Only one bed was made, in the corner near the doorway. The dark quilt that covered it was goose-feather thick. I cheered up at the thought of my books and emptied my pack. All the titles or subtitles contained the word “training,” along with some form of “dog.”

I’d planned to look at a few of them on my trip, but they were wedged at the bottom. I’d made the mistake of packing them first. But I’d kept out, in my shoulder bag, a handbook on groups and breeds, which I’d forgotten on the train. I wasn’t mad at myself. I’m good with memorization. I’d done a great job of filling my head with types, descriptions, images.

I was too tired for bedtime reading. I found my phone and sat still, looking at it. I’d been out of contact all day. At first I had switched myself off from being too nervous about traveling; then I’d started to like being all alone, moving through the world.

Sleep was coming at me as naturally as dusk or an incoming tide. I had the sense, in this moment, of all things, strange as it was, I actually felt happy.

Report: Oh my God, I might really be all right.

Should I call someone? Who would be glad to hear this news, just be glad? An invisible owl was starting to hoot in my ears, who, who who? I knew I had to contact the world I'd left behind, but all I could manage was a general text. *Got here fine. Here goes the rest of my life and I'm completely sure it's the best decision I ever made, even though I'm the only one who thinks so!*

I stayed calm. I reminded myself I had wanted *to be new*. I reminded myself I was supposed to be learning to be out in the world on my own like a grownup, as if I'd just hatched out of a big, gooey egg. As soon as I was under the quilt, I imagined myself back on the train, reading the breed book. To sort the information I had started with sizes, working up from Chihuahua. I loved what it was like to drift along through this world of new words, my head full of details and dogs, dogs, dogs.

Chihuahua, pug, dachshund, poodle, beagle, schnauzer, collie, shepherd, mastiff.

Boxer, pointer, retriever, setter.

Black and Tan, Bluetick, Redbone.

Clumber, cocker, pinscher, Plott, whippet.

Chow-chow, Shar-pei, Shih-tzu.

Jack Russell, King Charles, Parson Russell, St. Bernard.

Short hair, long, straight, curly, hairless. Ears that were floppy, ears sticking up in triangles, ears like a ball of fluff, a circle that was almost

round, a flap on a very small envelope. Back-leg fur feathers, manes, whiskers, beards, webbed paws or not. Stumpy tails, curlicues, bushy pom poms, ropey whips. Gray coats, brindle, brown, black, white, yellow, tawny, bronze, rusty, spotted, striped, blotchy.

Bull dog, cattle dog, elk hound, fox hound, otter hound, rat terrier, sheep dog, wolf hound.

Afghan, Australian, Belgian, Black Russian, Boston, English, French, German, Greater Swiss, Irish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Rhodesian, Scottish, Tibetan, Welsh.

I had sorted them by the elements too, as in earth, water, air, fire: field dogs, swimming dogs, dogs that run like wind, dogs with bright eyes like sparks from a flame, and I was telling myself, in my last thought of that day, I had done my homework and I was *ready*.

Seven hours later, I woke sharply, cleanly, and instantly alert, to the sound of dogs on the mountain. They were racing toward the inn with a racket that split the air, the morning, the world, louder than thunder because it sounded so alive.