

Aurora Chasers (Nonfiction)

"If I freeze to death, that'll show her," I thought. The savagery warmed me a little. I heard once that shivering actually makes you colder; if you stay still, you get warmer. I shifted deeper into the passenger seat and pulled my beanie down over my ears.

I named the car Aurelius because it was helping us chase the Aurora. And because it was the name of a Roman emperor, and that made me think the mini SUV was tough enough to survive the sudden blizzards.

"If you go, I don't have a daughter. If you go, I wasted 18 years of my life on you."

I tried to stay still – I wanted to be warm – but I shivered again, thinking of her words. My boyfriend was sleeping in the driver's seat, hunkered down into his maroon hoodie. Only his black eyebrows and black hair were visible. I blew out a breath to see it fog. I tried to blow smoke circles, but I couldn't. I was no Gandalf.

We were parked on top of a hill outside of Akureyri, Iceland. We wanted to be away from the city lights. We were Aurora chasers. Rather than taking a tour bus, we had rented a car – Aurelius – and driven around the Ring Road, the circular highway in Iceland that takes you along the coast of the island. We would research where the Northern Lights were visible that night, where they were burning brightest, doing our best to predict the unpredictable. So far, we had seen a hazy mist of green light on our first night, stretching like a mossy road toward the horizon. We weren't satisfied. We knew from postcards and movies that the Northern Lights could be a symphony of lavender, sky blue, deep red. As if in punishment for demanding more, we hadn't seen anything in the week since, despite clear, dark nights.

There was nothing but silence around us. I stared at the inky black sky. It was so dark, it seemed solid. I wondered what it would taste like, if I took a bite of it. Snow banks were pushed to the side of the road around us. We had parked in a clearing and decided we didn't want to risk driving further, in case the snow started again. There were no street lights.

I glanced across to Avery's side. Still sleeping. From his window, I could see the road winding down back into town. The hills rolled gently, black mounds in the night, and at the bottom, the faint glow from the pizza restaurant at the edge of the city.

My watch told me we had been sitting in the car for 2 hours. There was no hint of the Northern Lights, not even a hazy green. We were supposed to drive on to Akureyri that night, the 2nd largest city in Iceland. We were still 3 hours away and it was already 10 p.m. We wouldn't get there until past midnight, and we hadn't told our hostel we would be this late. We would have to give up the search for tonight.

Serves you right, she snickered in my head.

Serves me right, I silently agreed. I ask for too much.

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A lot of Iceland in winter made me think of the moon. There were long stretches of flat land to either side of the Ring Road, covered in gray and white snow, umbrellaed by a gray sky. We would jump out of the car on pit stops and skip in slow motion, pretending we were astronauts untethered by gravity. I fluttered my scarf for a flag and declared this Moon Delta. The wind seared my cheeks.

Ahead of us, mountains pushed up, jagged cobalt crags. They dominated the horizon, kings overseeing their land. But it seemed that no matter how long we drove toward them, they never came any closer.

While moon mountains are caused by asteroids, these were caused by volcanoes still active on the island. Any coastline we passed was covered in thick black sand made from dried lava particles. The land of fire and ice.

There were no trees for miles in any direction – the result of generations of Viking deforestation to build homes and ships, as well as centuries of glaciation – and so no birdsong, no rustling leaves, no paws breaking branches underfoot; and nothing to shield skin from the wind. Towns were sporadically placed with sometimes hundreds of miles between them, since most of the island isn't habitable or arable. It's easy to feel alone. It's a snowy desert. A snowy moon desert.

Winter trapped everything in Iceland. The waterfalls, usually thunderous and proud, were frozen in place. The mountains, omnipresent, omnipotent, were softened by blankets of snow. Glaciers grew larger and knocked into each other. The wind pushed everything and everyone into shelters. Except the foolish Aurora Chasers, in their mini SUV, trying to decide if the sign that said, "ROAD CLOSED FOR WINTER" was serious or a suggestion.

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We were at a dinner party in December, 3 months before heading to Iceland, eagerly discussing our upcoming trip to any friend not sick of listening to us yet. We could hear ourselves talking too much, but we were too excited, and our friends were too patient. We pulled out our Excel sheet itinerary and passed it around the table; our friends made polite "Ooh" sounds.

"Are you going to see the Northern Lights?" one asked.

Now we hesitated. "Well," I said, "they're pretty hard to find."

"They're always there," Avery amended, "but a lot of times it's not dark enough to see them, or it's too cloudy or snowy. They don't always burn brightly enough. But we would love to."

"Aren't there tour buses you can take to see them?" another friend asked.

"They don't guarantee that you will, and if you don't, you're out of the ticket price," Avery said.

"But we're going at the end of winter," I said.

"There's a very good chance we'll see them," Avery said.

"We'll definitely see them," I said, in a fit of cocky competitiveness.

"I thought you said they were hard to find?" our friend said.

“We’re going to think positive,” I said. I could feel my cheeks start to heat up. I was feeling competitive toward every person who goes to Iceland in search of the Northern Lights – maybe they didn’t get a chance to see them, but we would.

“But it will still be a wonderful trip, even if we don’t,” my boyfriend said, putting a steadying hand on my shoulder. I sighed and agreed; I should be grateful that we were going at all. But in my heart, I was already burning with the need to see what so many others failed to.

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So eager was I to have an adventure that I almost – *almost* – forgot about the hurdle that was my mother. My mother. I feared and loved her in equal measure, and mostly feared that she would stop loving me. Any “mistake” I made and I was reminded that she really could stop loving me, any time she wanted to. It was how she kept me controlled and obedient: I was desperate for her to love me. And one of the worst mistakes I could make was traveling. Without her.

I took weeks to drop hints. I wanted to ease her into the idea of me traveling. Maybe if it wasn’t a shock, it wouldn’t trigger her anger. I casually mentioned that Avery had vacation days coming up at work. That I was receiving flight deals in the mail. That you could see the Northern Lights from Kansas sometimes, did you know?

It didn’t matter. Once I told her – I was sick with anxiety the entire day leading up to the conversation – she exploded.

Why did I always leave her behind? Why did I always choose other people over her? Why was I so selfish, so thoughtless, so cruel? Why did I abandon her at every opportunity? Why did I waste my money when I could be spending time with family?

The reasons for her toxicity don’t matter. It was enough that she believed what she said, and that she made me believe it, too. I was selfish. I was abandoning her. Was a vacation really worth hurting my own mother this way?

I curled into myself. I desperately wanted to escape the guilt but just as desperately wanted her to forgive me.

“I don’t know if I can go,” I cried to my boyfriend. “It’s not worth it; it’s too hard; I feel awful for doing this, for making her feel this way.”

“You’re not doing anything wrong. You’ll be gone for a week. You’re an adult going on vacation.”

“No,” I said. I didn’t know what I was saying no to.

I spoke to my mom later that week. “I will never forgive you if you go; if you leave me behind,” she said.

I couldn’t think straight. Was I abandoning her by going on vacation for a week? Was I a horrible daughter? Or was it wrong for her to say those things to me? I couldn’t remember that we went through the same conversation every time. I wanted to throw up.

“If you go, I don’t have a daughter. If you go, I wasted 18 years of my life on you.”

Avery pulled the phone away from me. He pulled me into his arms. I soaked his shirt with tears.

“We have to go find the Aurora,” he whispered into my hair.

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The first few days of the trip – what should have been the most exciting as we explored a brand-new country – were riddled with anxiety. I constantly checked my emails to see if my mother had written to me, both dreading and hoping.

I was too stuck in her web; every pull I made to get away made me stick more.

The long car rides as we road-tripped the Ring Road meant a lot of time in my own head. The expansive landscape, uncluttered with any buildings or trees or electrical poles, also didn't have much to distract me. It took a while for my eyes to adjust to my surroundings; they were turned inward to my mother's face as she shouted her last words at me. When I flew home, would I have a mother waiting for me? Had I thrown away our relationship for a trip to Iceland?

But eventually, I noticed the winter was a study in harsh beauty. And I watched rugged, hairy ponies saunter through snow banks. We tried to feed one of them an apple from our hands. And we stopped in little towns and tried fish freshly fried. And we made friends with patient bakers while eating their pastries. And we swallowed hakarl, fermented shark meat, and then chugged Vodka to wipe out the taste of formaldehyde. And we slipped into natural hot springs and felt our legs heat while our faces froze. And Avery put me in charge of the Northern Lights tracking and I desperately searched for them in every night sky. I had to find them.

Every night we didn't see them felt like proof that she was right and I was wrong. I had somehow made the Northern Lights my reason for going – my “once in a lifetime”. So if I didn't see them, then I had wasted my time. I had abandoned her for no reason. Everything she said about me – selfish, cruel, thoughtless – would be true. And patient, lovely Avery deserved to see them, too. I was the one forcing us to stay out late into the night, parked in snowy clearings on the side of the Ring Road with no light and no heat, while the wind rattled Aurelius. I was asking for one more hour, just one more, maybe it will come out in the next hour, the forecast said it should be bright tonight. I couldn't waste his time, too. I asked for too much. I made so much my responsibility.

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Every now and then, the sun would burst through the clouds in a spectacular show of strength. We were there in March, so the sun did shine during the day. It would burn away the gray so that robin egg blue spilled through. Patches of moss green would peek between shutters of melted snow to give us a taste of what was to come in Spring.

We were stopped at a crossroads during one such sunny breakthrough. We laughed in delight and stepped out of the car. The wind was still startling but the sun gave us strength. On the road ahead of us was a 2-car sedan – a blue Honda – also parked at the crossroads. The couple inside was arguing in Korean. After a few minutes, they turned left – onto the path with the sign that said, “ROAD CLOSED FOR WINTER”. We watched their car chug up the pathway with nary a worry. The road ascended and the car disappeared over the hill, sunlight streaming to light their blessed way. The gray clouds were gone and the sky was a dazzling, shocking blue.

My boyfriend and I are competitive. Very competitive. More competitive than you.

“If that little car can make it, so can we,” Avery said, jumping back into the driver’s seat.

“We’re in a freaking SUV,” I said, omitting *mini*. “And the weather’s nice. Probably melted all the snow on that road.”

“Yeah,” he said as the engine roared. He turned left, and I stuck my tongue out at the posted sign.

“And the sun won’t just shine for *them*, it’ll shine for both of us.”

“We’ll probably overtake them.”

“We’re in a freaking SUV,” I repeated. Our competitive adrenaline was pumping for no reason. But we didn’t want to be outdone by a tiny car. We didn’t want to seem like the less adventurous couple. We didn’t want the “boring” story when we went home: “we just took the road well-traveled; left the less-traveled road for others”. This inner drive is both our flaw and strength as people.

We drove up the winding mountain road. The sun blazed strong and the snow was mostly slush and mud – nothing Aurelius couldn’t handle. We smirked at each other and kicked in the 4-wheel drive. We drove for 15 minutes with no sign of the other car. As we ascended, the valley spread out below us and we could see patches of green grass and blue ice making the snow into a quilt. Little streams were beginning to form; they hummed over ice and rock. Behind us, the mountains formed a tall, solid V shape. They seemed insurmountable and reliable. The landscape was so wide and wild, it was easy to imagine warriors racing across the earth on horseback.

“I see the other car,” Avery said.

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The little blue Honda had both back wheels stuck in mud. To its right was a steep drop off the mountain of about 100 feet. To its left, the couple from earlier – a young man and woman – were arguing loudly.

We pulled over to the left side and put on the emergency brake. It turned out that the couple could only speak Korean, but the problem was obvious. The four of us mimed back and forth and eventually the young man got into the driver’s seat and Avery, the girlfriend, and I stepped behind the Honda and pushed while he hit the gas. For about an hour, the tires churned, sinking deeper. We searched the plateau for large rocks to push under the tires to give them purchase. The young couple were very fashionably dressed in Gucci and I felt bad that their sweaters and shoes were muddy. We were just miming to each other that we may need to call some kind of tow truck – Avery acted as the crane while I acted as the car – when the tire treads found purchase on the rocks and the little Honda shuddered forward on the road.

We all cheered and hugged, transferring mud from sweater to sweater. They got into their car and made a 32-point turn to head back down the mountain the way they had come.

“*Gamsahabnida*,” the girl called out to us from the window while her boyfriend lit a cigarette.

We decided to turn around, too. There was no more competition: just friends who had taught us a lesson.

Halfway down the mountain, we both squinted through our mud-splattered windshield at a road sign. Like in a cartoon, it had two wooden arrows pointing in opposite directions, the long names of Icelandic towns on each arrow. We didn't recognize either name.

"Is this the right way?" Avery asked, turning right.

"Yeah, this looks right," I said confidently. Famous last words.

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Of course, we were lost. We became more lost when we would pull off to the side of the road every five minutes, for one more picture of larger than life mountains and giant waterfalls. In California, seeing a waterfall is a special trip, usually the reward after a long hike. The waterfalls are lovely, but are about 20 feet high, usually. The waterfalls in Iceland are so ubiquitous it's like they've replaced the trees. They fill the nooks of mountains, their roar can be heard for miles before they come into sight. They look like showers for giants – very powerful showers.

Red-roofed churches were dotted sporadically across the otherwise empty landscapes, rusty contrasts to the white and gray and blue. No one was inside of any of the ones we walked up to.

Finally, we admitted we were lost, and that much of the environment looked the same and is that the road we came down, no, no, it's that one to the left, but we didn't see *this* waterfall before, wait, was there always a pony herd, we're lost.

We saw a white house on a little hill, almost blending into the snow banks except for its black roof. It was the only house for miles in any direction. There was smoke curling from the chimney. When we drove to the front door, sheep and goats scattered. We argued for a moment about who would knock, but eventually I did.

A woman opened the door. She was sturdy, solid. You could tell she could carry sheep by herself and that she must do it every day. Her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned.

"Yes?" she said.

"Hi, we're so sorry to bother you –"

"You're lost." She spoke in clipped, unaccented English.

"Yes." We tried charming *sorry-for-being-annoying-Americans* smiles.

"You can't read?" she asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"You can't read. Otherwise you would have read the sign that said, 'ROAD CLOSED FOR WINTER'."

Our smiles stiffened, and our cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

She stomped outside and pushed through the sheep and goats gathering around her front stoop. She walked around the side of the house and disappeared from sight. We stood awkwardly, not sure if she wanted us to leave. Avery tried to pet the nearest goat, but it shied away with an affronted look.

She reappeared after a few minutes. She flicked open a large map with a *snap*.

“Here,” she pointed at a spot. She moved her finger along one black line. “You want to go there. This road will take you back to the main road.” She looked up and raised both eyebrows. “Back past the sign that says the road is closed.”

I stared at the gray collar knitted as triangle shapes into her wool sweater. I like direct, honest people, and this woman was both; I was embarrassed that she saw us as incompetent.

My boyfriend took the map from her and held it up to the sun, squinting.

The woman shoved a thermos at me, and a small paper bag. “Stay warm,” she said.

“Thank you so much,” I said, and I swear she smiled.

Back in the car, we peered in the bag and smiled joyfully seeing it was filled with *kleinur*, Icelandic donuts. I opened the thermos: strong coffee, sweetened with what smelled like vanilla. I felt warm all over without taking a sip.

Remember you don't deserve this, my mother's voice interrupted my thoughts. *Remember that I'm home alone while you're gallivanting with your boyfriend.*

I shoved the thermos at Avery. “I don't like coffee,” I said, and turned away, ashamed for many reasons.

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Our experience of Icelandic people was similar wherever we went: direct, honest, solid. They bluntly tell you if you are being stupid as they help rescue you from a snowstorm. They don't pry but they aren't shy.

Everything in Iceland feels large. Statuesque people. Imposing mountains. Thunderous waterfalls. Light that fills the entire night sky. Huge swathes of untamed land. Even the small things seem filled with a large spirit.

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There were no guardrails for most of the Ring Road, and the highway was level with the surrounding land. It's just a dark stripe in the middle of the earth. So it's easy to feel like you can slide off the road and suddenly be driving on black sand, or dried lava, or, terrifyingly, on ice.

This was especially frightening at night. There were large stretches without light except from car headlights. At one point, I had to drive us across a bridge that stretched over a lake filled with giant glaciers. The bridge had one lane and no shoulder. If a car came from the opposite direction, there would be no space to get out of the way. And it curved upward, so that I couldn't see over the top. I had to trust that oncoming headlights would warn me. I would just reverse over the glacier-bridge with very short handrails. Thankfully, no other cars appeared. We were a small gray dot, moving ahead on the Ring Road, acres of white to either side, glaciers below, and a black sky above – with no hint of the Aurora.

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My boyfriend was too tired to drive. It was past midnight and once again, we had sat for hours in the darkest clearing we could find after researching where others had seen the Northern Lights earlier. We still hadn't seen more than the misty green road on the first night. It seemed like we had always *just* missed them, or that they were always a few more miles ahead.

"Remember that they're not our only reason for being in Iceland," Avery gently reminded.

I smiled and nodded but my heart was heavy. The Lights were my justification. The salve to the unhealthy guilt my mother instilled in me. I knew that if I told Avery my reasons for wanting to see them, he would drive us straight to a hotel and close the curtains. He wouldn't want guilt to rule me. So I kept it to myself – because I believed I deserved the guilt, and because I wanted to prove her wrong. It was years later before I could admit how unhealthy these patterns were.

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Avery fell asleep. I was driving. To the right of the road, the land sloped downward into an enormous lake. The kind that hid monsters. To my left, the land was level with the road, and again, there were no guardrails. I concentrated on not edging off onto the ice or into the water. The sky was cloudy; no chance of seeing the lights.

I had somehow found a radio channel that was only playing Beatles songs. Mouthing the words to *Eleanor Rigby* and *Hey, Jude* kept me awake.

Of course, it was at this exact moment that the sky exploded.

I almost missed them because my mind couldn't register what I was seeing. I shot out my right hand and violently shook my boyfriend awake.

He came to angry, ready to fight. "What's wrong?!"

"Look!" I screamed.

When I remember this moment, part of me thinks, *I've made up this memory. It's too cliché, too much like a movie, to be real. I'm lying to myself and others.*

To call the colors purple, blue, red, green is the real lie. They are lilac, sapphire, lapis, rose. They curve, they caress, they crescendo. Their hues were reflected by the still black lack so that Aurelius was lit up from above and below with a heavenly rainbow.

"Should I pull over?!" I screamed.

"I don't know!" he screamed back.

I realized I was about to crash the car and hit the brakes. We gaped. It was like seeing into another world. It was like the sky had become an ocean, shimmering and undulating. We rolled down the windows and could hear a faint, silver *hum*.

"Angels are humming," I whispered nonsensically, and my boyfriend, bless him, nodded.

A streak of ruby shot through and the lilac deepened into violet. It was so bright that the snow was illuminated. We could see everything around us. We could see the sleepy town we were driving to

miles ahead. We could see the entire lake and all the mountains. We could see a curtain being pulled back from the sky.

Then someone blew out the candle. The lights – without a shudder, without a sign – snapped out of existence. We were enveloped in darkness so quickly that our eyesight blurred. We blinked. We shivered.

There was no time for thought, much less a picture. We wondered if anyone would believe us. After a few minutes, we drove forward toward the town we could no longer see.

At the hostel, my boyfriend took a shower while I messaged my mother.

We saw the Northern Lights, I wrote.

I'm happy for you, she responded. My heart sped up. I didn't know if she was being sarcastic. But her words gave me hope.

I flopped onto the bed and sighed. When I closed my eyes, the Aurora danced in the darkness. I held onto their memory.

Maybe other worlds exist, I thought, remembering the way they curved into spire and minaret shapes.

And that was the first time I wondered that to myself. *Other worlds exist*. Beyond my world. Outside of the one I built based on my mother's foundation.

She didn't want me to travel because she didn't want me to see worlds outside of hers. But now I had seen them, in every color.

When we woke up, Aurelius was dusted with snow. We wiped the windshield and drove toward the fjords. I shut off my phone and ate a warm kleinur.