

NORTH STAR

JORDAN JONAS'S ART OF JOY & FREEDOM

Words by JACK EVANS Photos by ELIAS CARLSON

By the rendering of primetime television, Jordan Jonas is some master of loneliness. He was the winner of the sixth season of the History Channel show *Alone*. Painted as a contest of grit, skill and mental endurance, *Alone* drops thinly equipped contestants in separate reaches of the wilderness and awards \$500,000 to the person who remains after all others have given up or been medically evacuated. Each season of the show spans months, and Jordan spent 77 cold days in his pole-and-branch shelter on the shores of Canada's Great Slave Lake to win Season Six.

When the show's crew picked him up, there was a part of Jordan that wasn't quite ready to leave.

His personal history carved him out well for the contest. Jordan had lived for cumulative years with Evenki reindeer herders in the middle of Siberia, simply for the joy of it. An Idaho farmboy by upbringing, he had hopped trains in his youth and worked around the country as a builder, usually raising money for returns to Russia. He fit the isolationist-hero's bill.

Within three weeks of initially being dropped in the Northwest Territories for the show, Jordan had hunted a moose with his

recurve bow and immediately secured a winter's store of meat and fat. He was the first contestant in *Alone's* history to successfully kill a big game animal, but it didn't take long for wolverines to start raiding his supply. Jordan built an impressive Evenki-style cache in a day, but even this did not deter the thieves. He then rigged an alarm system out of tin cans, engineering a nighttime confrontation with the wolverine. He killed it in front of his shelter with a hatchet, which was probably the most intense thing ever seen on reality television.

Other contestants were valiantly subsisting on the dwindling returns of rabbit snares, and many were pulled from the contest after reaching life-threatening thresholds of starvation. Personal battles with isolation and despair were their stories.

Jordan, in the meantime, was settling in for the long haul.

"I expected it to go on at least twice as long as it did," Jordan said. "I kept thinking: 'I need to make it to 140 days, because somebody is going for the record.' Even when I got that moose, I thought: 'well somebody else has probably got a moose too.'"

While the competitive bushcraft element of *Alone* is exciting,



the show's real intrigue is the unfolding of personalities — some that thrive, some that suffer. Filmed by the contestants themselves, with tripods and body cams, *Alone's* pinnacle dramas are the inner monologues spilled out before the camera, the contestants' only conversation partner. Hunger, confusion, self-doubt and longing for family are common themes that arise as the days wear on. Persistence, stubbornness, and the slog toward the cash-prize goal tend to form the more aspiring side of contestants' dilemmas. What's fascinating, though, is that some people clearly struggle less, and their navigation of the endless, lonely campout casts them in a light of unbreakable, near-magic resolve.

Two months in, the remaining others were either desperately hungry or starting to make dangerous mistakes. By the time the Great Slave Lake froze over, Jordan was ice fishing with an Eskimo-style net-thread on homemade skis.

Because of all this, Jordan became a fascinating figure. While some competitors obsessed over the potential of the half-million dollars to transform their lives, Jordan mentioned it rarely. Nor did he seem to share in the psychological struggles of most of his rivals. It was like he had nothing to win and nothing to lose — and thus nothing to fear.

So, what was this magic recipe for fortitude?

I met him on a hazy summer afternoon in Idaho, to see what kind of personality he had — to meet this manic mountain man.

It took some work to find Jordan's home, down dusty roads in the hills north of Coeur d'Alene. He was raised on this farm. His mother owns it still, and there she was, working in their vegetable garden while two small grandchildren rolled around in its dirt.

Jordan appeared in a t-shirt and loose jeans, clearly coming from some work project. He greeted me with an enormous smile, welcoming me up to the house, where his wife Janahlee stood on the porch with a newborn baby. There were further introductions to make: to their two children, Ilana and Altai, five and three, and to Jordan's mother Ann.

We gathered around a rickety table on the old porch, and while I'd come with questions prepared, Jordan, at first had more for me. "How were the wildfires back in Montana? Are there many elk in my area? Do I have hunting plans this season?" We talked about fishing, kids, and a new perfection of handmade skis he's working on.

Jordan had just returned from hosting an immersive, weeks-long wilderness survival course in the mountains, and he was very happy to be home. In a few days, though, he was heading out into the Bitterroot Wilderness for a ten-day solo elk hunt.

"With a rifle?" I asked.

"Oh, no! Never. Well, once, with a muzzleloader. But I got started late in life, mainly in Russia." Since then, I've only hunted with a bow.

It was talk about hunting, and these deep immersions, that eventually led us to the topic of *Alone*.

"It was wonderful just being out there," Jordan said of his time in Canada. "Seeing the animals and thinking about them,

even if you're not hunting them, you realize we're totally, not at all that different. And sometimes you could see the northern lights! And you're hearing the water freeze up, making these crazy sounds, with the insane light movement in the sky — it's just surreal."

"When it ended I couldn't believe it! I was ecstatic, but a little part of me was also thinking, 'Bummer. I didn't even feel like I was getting started yet.' It did seem too soon, in a way."

He hadn't had enough.

"But whatever that voice was, it was overshadowed by the shock and excitement. I was just thrilled to see my family again."

With Altai and Ilana clambering around him, I wondered how such a connected, familial person was able to stand the solitude — and why he would seek it out. Perhaps it was out of habit.

In 2006, Jordan, aged 22, received an invitation from an acquaintance to help build an orphanage with a missionary group in central Russia. He was living in Virginia at the time, and as he had throughout an ambitiously wild youth, he jumped at the chance for the journey.

"I went over there, but I didn't want to live with the American guys in the village because I wanted to learn Russian quicker. So they sent me to a neighboring village with these Russian families and I lived with them for a year. Two of the guys there had been in prison with an Evenki fellow and changed their lives, found God in prison and all that, so they kept saying to me: 'You've got to go meet our buddy up in the north!' Then one day he came through to sell furs and invited me to live with him. I spent a season with him and then he snowmobiled me out to his cousins, who were nomadic reindeer herders. He dropped me off at their tipi, vouched for me, and they took me in right away. I almost didn't know people like that existed until I met them."

Jordan returned to Siberia continually for over a decade and only missed his return this year because of travel restrictions. During that time, he spent cumulative years herding reindeer and went on his own months-long immersions, fur trapping and subsisting by himself. Such an adventure must have been hard to turn away from.

Throughout our conversation Jordan returned again and again to the theme of all that we've lost in our urbanized ways of life.

"You're not going to die from appendicitis here, and you're not going to starve if your hunt goes poorly. You have all these safety nets in the modern world, but you are never going to get the pure dopamine rush that you get like when I shot that moose, or when you catch one of those giant fish. I mean, when's the last time I literally jumped for joy like I did then? It's all-encompassing and it feels amazing to know that this gift, this animal, is meeting all your needs. We have such strange problems to navigate in this American way of life, but in Siberia they can still have it fairly purely."

The dilemma of 'two worlds' is common enough among adventurers. For some, the love of family and friends — of home — distracts from the drive forward, to discover, and the impulse to





search in the world alone. For others, the love of animals, extremity, and revelatory isolation — that freeing ground of the uninfluenced mind — draws them further and further away from human connection. I've known many people to struggle with reconciling these equal and worthy draws, so I asked Jordan if he had ever considered moving fully to the literal center of Siberia.

"Yeah," he said. "But the decision was hard. I kept thinking, 'I have a family back home, but I want to be included here in Russia.' I ended up pretty convinced that if my family was with me, and if Russian was my native tongue, I would choose that way of life over the modern way of life. We've gained so much in the modern world that I wouldn't want to give up, but we also don't really know what we've lost, you know? All these connections with our own creativity and resilience... it just feels like the way we're meant to be."

But for all his hermitic tendencies, Jordan kept recognizing his reliance on human connection, and with it, weighed the costs of a disappearance from his home world.

"When I first arrived in Siberia and was learning Russian, I remember thinking, 'I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy.' I was mostly just laying in my bed, miserable. I think that was my starkest experience of isolation and it was pretty serious. Even though people are around, you're just missing all the jokes and the meaning, and in a weird way it was the harshest kind of lack of connection."

"But then you get through it and you learn those lessons. That really... prepared me."

Jordan learned how to herd reindeer and to ride them. He learned foraging and hunting, and, finally, became fluent in Russian.

He would return to America to renovate houses and earn money, always for the next Siberian immersion. All the while, he maintained a serious search for outer perspectives on the concept of resilience, to help him face battles with loneliness and the wild elements.

"I read *The Gulag Archipelago* in my early twenties, I think at the right time," he says, referring to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's epically painful and triumphant chronicle of Soviet prison camp survivors. "I thought a lot about what my grandparents went through."

Jordan's ancestors were ethnic Assyrians, hunted and persecuted en masse from modern-day Turkey to Armenia to Iran less than a hundred years ago. Jordan's grandmother and grandfather each saw nearly all of their family members killed, but managed to escape to America and raise a family "full of joy, and without hate."

"The Armenian Genocide was such a catastrophe, both for the culture and the individual," Jordan recounted. "My grandparents confronted all that real suffering in a way that maintained love and peace and hope. When I was young, I'd think: 'I'm pretty cold and lonely out here,' and then remember them. It puts a lot in perspective."

Across the span of his life, Jordan would recall what he knew

of these ancestors in his most trying times.

"One of the Evenki guys was always talking about dreams. He would tell me about them, what he thought they meant, and ask me what I thought they meant. I usually have the dumbest, most pointless dreams in the world, so I never really understood him. But when I started trapping in Siberia all alone, my dreams all turned... vivid. They all became relevant. I was dreaming in ways that were speaking to my needs."

"I would go to sleep and be playing basketball with my brother, or something like that. I'd see family members, people I knew, and have these good and meaningful conversations — like they were with me. I started paying attention to their meanings, realizing that this was a tool, and it showed me how I was starved of human connection, and missed hanging out with the people I loved."

Jordan sought more of a balance, particularly after meeting his wife, Janahlee, and moving fully into a permanent home in America.

"A lot of my life I've been jumping between places," he told me. "For whatever reason, though, maybe it's experience or personality, I never get culture shock or this destabilization or anything. I'd be in Siberia, in the most remote place in the world, and then two days later be in New York City, hanging out with Janahlee and it'll seem pretty normal. The transition never bothered me, but I did miss the clarity and sense of being in the 'right place' that you can have when you're out there in the woods. It made me wonder if there were ways to integrate these two sides in some way. I don't know. It's interesting..." he trailed off.

Later on in life, at a friend's urging, he signed up as an applicant to *Alone*. He heard nothing, for years, until a History Channel casting director ultimately called him. He was added to Season Six's lineup, and while the show had visited British Columbia, Argentina and Mongolia in previous seasons, auspicious good fortune would have Jordan deployed to the Canadian Taiga.

"When I found out where we were going I was excited, because I know you can live by yourself there. That doesn't make it any easier to actually do, but the thought puts your survival in your own hands, at least, and you know you're not just being stuck out there for a starving contest."

Over the seasons, the "starving contest" mentality has become something of a motif on *Alone*. Each season, several contestants arrive with copious bushcrafting knowledge, but little experience living a protracted, settled hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Since no one had ever killed a large animal in five previous seasons, many contestants end up waiting on the days to pass, hoping to be crowned the winner before they grow too frail to remain in the bush.

Jordan, being the leanest — and probably the tallest — male contestant on Season Six knew that he would need a strategy to keep himself especially well-fed. He took on a whole different mentality.

"I was shocked that I was the only person to hunt a moose. The whole reason I had the confidence to sign up for the show is

because I watched the first two seasons and nobody was hunting the bears! A lot of people were afraid of the bears. Some people, even a few who did very well, had never hunted before the contest. Weird time to start..."

Jordan himself had only started as an adult, in Siberia. Still, his eagerness for the pursuit showed — mistakes and all. Jordan stalked down the first moose that passed his camp and cleanly missed it.

"That was the biggest moose I had ever seen, and it was beautiful, awe-inspiring. I shot and missed and, funnily enough, I wasn't even disappointed. My thought was, 'This is like seeing a dinosaur. I have got to figure out a way to have another encounter.'"

He engineered another encounter using a technique not often seen in Canada — the "reindeer fence." By downing trees along well-worn animal paths, the Evenki are able to corral wild game and their own free-ranging, domestic reindeer. Jordan's fence perfectly redirected a second moose his way, and although he couldn't have known it, the successful hunt instantly upped the game of *Alone*.

Other contestants were struggling to garner rabbits. Jordan, taking another page from the Evenki lifeway, had set "at least a hundred and fifty snares," and kept busy in his free time by sewing a strikingly fashionable rabbit fur vest. *Alone* is designed, though, to simulate the truest sense of solipsism, and no contestant knows how their rivals are doing, nor how much longer they'll have to compete.

"By November, the lake had frozen over, and faster than I expected," Jordan said. "The moose and all the fish and rabbits made for plenty of meat, but I knew I'd need to get something big again to last the winter. I suppose I could have killed a musk ox if their migration came through towards spring... but I was thinking that by January everyone else would be so miserable, bored and cold that they'd quit. I knew that one of the most important things was to not let myself become bored."

The frozen shore of the Great Slave Lake, though, was Jordan's ideal playground.

"I'm not an artist in any way, but when you're in the woods, it's like your creative juices are flowing. You're thinking of all these things you can do to trick the animals, or to solve the issues that arise. It started making sense to me, how art developed, with people just coming up with these inventions out of their bright creativity. It's wonderful to be that tapped into it, whereas in the modern world, you can skim by so many problems without having to even process them. Out there, there's always problems and you're always having to come up with solutions. It seems like that same creativity develops into art and other things. Early humans, even when the living was rough, took the time to build figurines and carvings, and to paint. The source of that, which you can feel, is so interesting and so easy to lose track of in modern society."

Indeed, by the later days of Season Six, Jordan quite resembled a busy and curious early human. The living was rough, but he had not grown disenchanted in the slightest. He seemed to be integrating his entire life's interests into his winter campout on the

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barren lakeshore. He seemed very happy.

Daily, he adjusted his food sources of moose meat, fishing net and rabbit traps. He perfected his cache system, but wolverines — genius thieves — found their way to his best, most nutritional stores of fat and organ meat.

“I kept thinking back to the books and to my grandparents’ experience,” Jordan said. “Having that perspective was invaluable. I think that made the suffering pretty easy. Facing constant problems, I tried to choose to proactively solve them, rather than stay in a reactive state all the time. I missed the first moose, so what can I do to make another encounter? The wolverine stole the meat, but what can I do to catch him next time?” It’s more of a fight, rather than a flight mode.”

Jordan got a fight. The wolverine prowled into his camp in the dark, tripping the wire-trap alarm. Jordan snuck out of his shelter to face the animal. He pinned it to the ground with one shot from a bow, and killed the wolverine while it hissed and snarled with a hatchet “A bit like this one,” Jordan said, holding up a medieval-looking Evenki short-axe that was resting on the porch.

In his visceral victory over the wolverine, Jordan looked like the wildest of wildmen.

The second-to-last contestant dropped out of the show after two-and-a-half months on the ever-sharpening edge of hunger. *Alone’s* safety crew then brought Janahlee with them to Jordan’s snow-coated spruce hut.

She snuck up behind her husband and jumped into his arms by surprise. He was nearly knocked over. Jordan held her tight, could barely talk for his amazement, then apparently wanted nothing more than to show her around his spruce-branch home, his collection of smoked moose, and catch her up on the wolverine story.

“When I was younger,” Jordan told me, “I was accumulating all these unique experiences, and I spent years out there doing all these really cool things. There came to be certain moments when it really struck me: all those things that were awesome or crazy or wild just stayed with me, and now my memory is going to forget it and it’ll all be gone. Those experiences, even, are vain. That all turned into an interesting epiphany for me that my own, solo experience isn’t the point of life.”

“A lot of people complained about having the cameras out there, but I was infinitely grateful for it. In Siberia, I didn’t have a camera. There were so many experiences that just went into my head and out the other side, and I can’t explain them or relate them to people. Whereas on the show, all of a sudden, the people that I love were going to see this aspect of me! That goes beyond just telling a story.”

“That was some of my motivation going out there. Even when I first talked to the History Channel, they asked me: ‘Why do you want to be on the show?’ And I told them, ‘Well, what would I do to have a record like this from my grandpa?’

“It’s cool to be able to deposit that into the world. The value of sharing is so important, and it made me not feel alone. Honestly,

it’s kind of abstract, but I just didn’t really feel alone because the whole time I thought: ‘I’m out here sharing this.’”

I knew that Jordan was appreciating sharing physical closeness with his family at the moment. His survival schools, now high in demand, keep him in the woods for a few months out of the year, and the elk hunting expedition he had planned for himself was days away. But before I left the farm, we decided to go for a wander in the nearby woods, and Altai and Ilana plodded along in tow.

The young brother and sister were equally talkative. As we walked, they narrated the path through the forest. “Sometimes we can catch a fish here,” Altai told me. “I’m taking this branch,” Ilana declared, dragging a pine bough larger than herself. “It’s my bed.”

Jordan seemed to have good partners for his life, lived between the wilderness and home. Indeed, over the course of the day, he had talked about an abstracted idea of bridging the gaps between the two by creating more nature-reliant, communal societies like the Evenkis’. He told me: “We lose track of what we miss out here in America. I’ve thought a lot about what it’s like compared to Siberian life over the years, man. And I ask myself, ‘what can we do?’ And I think: ‘maintain that here.’”

Here, walking into the woods with his family that was always with him, it seemed to me that Jordan was maintaining the love of life not in some wild, dreamlike, solipsistic path, nor in the sole safety of comfort, but in himself. ♫

