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# ALASKA SAMPLER 2015

*edited by*

David Marusek and Deb Vanasse

Running Fox  
  
Books

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## Inside this Volume

A BIG PLACE with big tales to tell — that’s the Alaska we strive to capture in this year’s *Sampler*. Once again, our selections take you across our state in fiction, essay, memoir, and more.

### [Fire and Ice](#)

by Heather Lende

*In the popular memoir *If You Lived Here, I’d Know Your Name*, Lende proves that life in small town Haines, Alaska, is anything but ordinary. Here, a brush with death reminds us of the choices that inform our existence.*

### [Cold Comfort](#)

by Deb Vanasse

*Lena’s best friend is dying, her faith is a sham, and her son’s choice in women is questionable. In this outtake from the novel *Cold Spell*, the glacier that abuts Lena’s homestead is both a comfort and a challenge.*

### [Homer Spit, 1972](#)

by David Hunsaker

*Two young Vietnam vets, two pretty nurses, and a spit of land that stretches into the ocean. In this autobiographical account, friendship means ditching your tent.*

### [Winter Too Short, Too Loud](#)

by Jerry D. McDonnell

*When a bad man killed Anita’s husband, the wrong had to be righted. In this story, the kass’ags accuse her of murder, with courtroom proceedings as foreign as the fixed-winged objects that appear in the Alaska skies.*

### [Special](#)

by Richard Chiappone

*Could there be a worse place to be a teen than Alaska? In this story, Chaz resorts to extreme measures to escape. The matter of how to inform his*

*stuck-in-the-sixties parents would be funny if not for Ariel's unexpected return.*

### [House Falling into the Sea](#)

*by Vivian Faith Prescott*

*The petroglyphs of Wrangell, Alaska, contain the stories of Charlie Johns' Tlingit ancestors. But in this tale, nothing Charlie does to protect the rocks is working, so as a big storm brews, he resorts to drastic measures.*

### [From Plantation Native](#)

*by John Tetpon*

*On his first day of school in Shaktoolik, Tetpon is punished for speaking his Inupiaq language. When his family moves to Nome and then Anchorage, discrimination and abuse test his fortitude. A memoir excerpt.*

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*Ranger Minder knows that a national park in Alaska is "girl-rich" in summertime visitors. In this chapter from an upcoming science-fiction trilogy, Minder's plans for romance are interrupted when something strange falls out of the sky.*

### [Forward Fan Funding](#)

*by the Running Fox Crew*

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### [From Dead of Winter](#)

*by Gerri Brightwell*

*It's 57 below in Fairbanks, Alaska, and taxi driver Mike Fisher can't see the road for the ice fog. In this excerpt from an upcoming crime novel, one thing becomes crystal clear — answer the damn phone.*

### [Their Last Winter](#)

by T. Louise Freeman-Toole

*Once winter sets in, there's no road access to the remote town of Eagle, Alaska. In this biographical sketch, Freeman-Toole shares her memories of the last days of two old-timers who lived — and died — on their own terms.*

### [Buckets](#)

by C.B. Bernard

*In Alaska, a lot of things can kill you, even the rain. In this short story, set in Sitka, Alaska, beach-combing bears aren't the only worry.*

### [Ballistics](#)

by Jeremy Pataky

*One shot, then another. In this true account, the response from the crowd at this Independence Day parade in small town Alaska is hardly what you'd expect.*

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## Fire and Ice

by Heather Lende

*Heather Lende has contributed essays and commentary to NPR, the New York Times, and National Geographic Traveler, among other newspapers and magazines, and is a former contributing editor at Woman's Day. She is a columnist for the Alaska Dispatch News. Her new book, Find the Good, is publishing April 2015.*

*This chapter comes from Lende's first book, If You Lived Here I'd Know Your Name, which is about Haines, Alaska, and the people who live and die there, as seen from her role as an obituary writer for the local paper, The Chilkat Valley News (circulation 1000). Lende says, "Fire and Ice is funny, sad, and hopefully enlightening. Like all the stories in the book, it speaks for itself, and is both a window into one small Alaska town and the people who live (and die) there, as well as my own story of making a home in Alaska. This is one my favorites, so I hope you like it, too."*

AFTER THE LAST fisherman's funeral, I decided water around here is best when it's frozen. As I help my youngest daughters into their ice skates, I hum the old carol "In the Bleak Midwinter": "Earth stood hard as iron, / Water like a stone." The afternoon is so perfect; it's like a big exhalation, throwing off all that crummy winter-weather tension. The bowl that Chilkoot Lake sits in is protected by a rim of high mountains and tucked back into a valley. Although a north wind blows forty knots across Lynn Canal, icing boats in the harbor at the foot of Main Street, here on the lake it's calm. Dark spruce trees and white mountains reflect on ice as hard and shiny as a marble floor. Chilkoot Lake is so big that, although I recognized the handful of Subarus and pickups parked on the road, their owners are out of sight. Looking across the ice, I can't see a soul.

I learned to skate on an artificial rink on Long Island, the kind filled with organ music and people in rented skates all circling around and around in one direction. I still can do crossover turns only to the left. Skating at Chilkoot is as different from skating at a rink as swimming laps in a pool is from snorkeling in the tropical ocean. Instead of weaving in and out of other skaters, the girls and I quietly glide about a mile out, to where the rest of the family is already playing

hockey. Chip and the three older children are crazy about the game. It's only a matter of time before the two younger girls join them. The games are so fast and rough that it's no place for cruisers like me. Every time I think about playing hockey, too, I'm reminded of the mother in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Instead of being killed by a Little Leaguer's foul ball, I'm sure a stray hockey puck will catch me right in the temple.

A safe distance from the game, a group of children my girls' age are learning to make figure eights. Leaving J.J. and Stoli there, I venture beyond the sounds of the game, beyond the voices and scraping of blades on ice. I am so far out I can't even hear a dog bark. The ice is absolutely smooth and clear and the air so cold that my breath makes frost on my eyelashes, scarf, and on the edges of my wool hat. I skate with my arms wide open, singing out loud: "I could have danced all night . . ."

Near the middle on the western side, I can see open water and an orange buoy ball floating way out in the distance, marking the danger. The best skaters, the oldest and wisest, have assured everyone that the rest of the ice is thick enough to hold a dump truck. Now I wish there were a dump truck here so I could see for myself. In places, the ice does look new, similar to the thin layer that appears overnight on puddles in September. The kind of ice that breaks like glass when children stomp on it. I slow down but keep moving across the stillness, hearing nothing but the *scritch* of my blades and the occasional muffled thud of a pressure crack underfoot. That sound makes my heart beat faster. What if the ice won't hold? Can I make it to the shallow end in time? I am about to turn around and go back when I see the tracks of a lone skater. Two graceful curves of white on the dark green ice, repeating in a simple pattern over the lake.

I catch up with Linnus and feel much better skating with a friend. We push and glide fast for fifty minutes in one direction, then slowly circle back to check on the children, Chip, and Linnus's husband, Steve, who is also playing hockey. Everyone is happy, so we leave them again and zigzag silently along the shore, back to the landing, looking for wolves in the woods.

ON THE WAY home, Chip and I take the kids to the museum in town to look at a traveling exhibit of blown-glass bowls, vases, and balls by world-renowned artist Dale Chihuly. They are beautiful, but they can't compete with the swirling

patterns of frost and bubbles suspended in the clear green ice at Chilkoot Lake. I think I love those much more than the fancy glass because I know they won't last as long.

As if Mother Nature wants to prove the point, the day after our perfect skate we wake up to whirling snow. Across town Tom Heywood looks out the window, too, and knows he doesn't have much time to enjoy the lake. Soon snow will cover the ice. Tom hasn't been skating yet this season and is in a seize-the-day mood. But the rest of his family isn't. His wife, Liz, has a cold, and the kids don't want to go. When his ten-year-old says he prefers his computer game, Tom leaves, alone.

Steve and Linnus, who also decided to get in one more skate before the heavy weather, come ashore as Tom starts out. They tell him the skating is great. Tom follows their tracks in the thin coat of dry snow out into the white winter wonderland. He is alone, so alone, in such a beautiful place that he thinks, *This is unbelievable*. He is happy; skating makes him feel light and carefree. The same way it does for me.

Tom is a mild-mannered former Midwesterner. A pilot, he has his own small plane. At forty-six, after teaching first and second graders for twenty years, he's retired and with Liz owns the Haines bookstore. He had children relatively late in life — two adopted Korean sons and a biological daughter. When he taught my kids, their favorite time of the day was when he'd play the guitar and sing with them.

Since no one is watching and he's in such a good mood, he dances. A few fancy moves, some curlicues, a swirl, and a loop on the white surface. He's left behind the other tracks now and skates toward a buoy ball. He wonders what it's doing out on the ice. He decides to go beyond it all the way to the end of the lake, something he can't do with the kids. It's a long way down and back, nearly ten miles. He's thinking that there is no place he'd rather be when suddenly, completely without warning, the ice gives out. One second he's skating, the next he's in the water. *This can't be happening*. Tom is incredulous. *I can't believe this*.

Hanging on to the edge of the ice, up to his neck in frigid water, Tom Heywood doesn't watch his life move before his eyes like a movie. Instead, he sees one still image of his wife and three children. *I am not ready to leave them*, he thinks, kicking to keep his head above water and gripping the ice with his left

hand. He knows he can climb out, and he says so, out loud, to the fish below and the mountains above. “I can do this,” he repeats, echoing the Little Engine in the story he’s read so many times to so many different children. “I can do this, I can do this.” Like an icebreaker, he moves toward his tracks, hoping he’ll find the solid section that held him just moments ago.

It’s so clear what he has to do; the challenge is so immediate that he acts without hesitating — almost. *This*, Tom thinks for just a second, *is how people disappear and are never found*. The snow keeps his hands from slipping; he has a good grip, but the thin ice caves in with each attempt to climb out. His long johns, jeans, sweatshirt, and down coat are heavy. He’s working so hard he doesn’t feel the cold. He almost gets his right knee up but the ice breaks, again and again. He’s not a churchgoer and knows he shouldn’t expect a hand now, but he prays for help.

Finally, after almost getting up and crashing back in the water six or seven times, he pulls himself out and crab-scoots on all fours until he’s sure he’s on safe ice. With a shout he thanks the angels of Chilkoot Lake and skates back faster than he ever has. He sails by the patterns he made earlier and knows that *that was a different life*. He hears a cracking sound and his heart beats harder until he realizes it’s the ice chipping off his coat, jeans, and ice-crusting skates. On the shore, arriving skaters help get him to his truck and take his skates off, but he waves them off and drives himself home. All he wants to do is get there. His family is at the kitchen table when he walks into the house. There’s so much Tom wants to say, he is so grateful and loves them so very much, but all he can manage is “I had a bad experience.” Later, he makes a sign warning of thin ice and drives back to the lake with it.

At the bookstore Monday morning, Tom greets well-wishers, who all want to hear his story. We think it’s a miracle he got out alive, especially with none of us there to help him. Tom says that isn’t necessarily so. “I know people say you shouldn’t go out alone,” he tells us, “but I’m really glad no one else was there. If Liz was with me, we both would have fallen through, and I can’t even imagine what would have happened if I had the kids.” Then he says, quietly, “I’m certain that somebody else would have gone in, so if it had to happen, I’m glad it was me.” I ask him if he’d skate again. “When I know it’s totally safe,” he says. “And I’ll be real cautious if there’s any kind of snow.”



WHICH IS ALL there was for the next two weeks. As the third line of “In the Bleak Midwinter” goes, “Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow.” It could have been making me temporarily insane. Although I don’t think that excuses me from thinking vengeful thoughts or almost committing a crime. Maybe I was just so cold I wanted to heat things up. I had been having trouble coping after close friends of mine split. He’d left her for a woman twenty years younger. I’ll tell you the story, but I won’t use names; this is too small a town for that. The whole episode had left me feeling as if my heart was under a glacier. It was just enough pressure to cause permanent damage, but not enough for people to notice unless they looked closely.

When my friend who was left home alone asked me and another friend to help her switch around the bedrooms in her house, of course we said yes. We would do anything for her. How we got from simply moving her old bed to almost cutting it up with a chain saw, tossing it out the window, and burning the mattress in the new girlfriend’s driveway at midnight, I’m still not sure. The three of us were playing a card game in my kitchen on a Saturday night when the question of what to do with the old bed made a spark that caught fire. Before we knew it, we were all excited and talking at once.

Chip has a dump truck. We could put the mattress in it, tip it off the back under cover of darkness, and light it before speeding away. We’d never have to get out of the cab. No one would know who did it, unless we passed Fireman Al on the way home. When Al was in college, he burned his folk’s cabin near Chilkoote Lake down to the foundation. It was an accident, and no one was hurt, but he decided to become a fireman instead of a biologist after that, so he could help prevent such a catastrophe from happening to anyone else. We agreed that Al would recognize us for sure.

“Then we’ll wear ski masks,” one of us said. “And dress in black,” another said. “And light it with a Molotov cocktail,” added the third, a librarian, who also mentioned that “you can learn how to make them on the Internet.” I thought we were doing some heavy housecleaning, not starting a riot. Luckily, our friend with the bed said that we couldn’t toss a bottle with fuel in it. The leftover shards of glass might cut a dog’s paw.

As I served up warm apple pie and ice cream, I recalled the song “Alice’s Restaurant” and all those eight-by-ten glossy photos at the trial, and I knew that while burning your own property in someone else’s yard might not be arson, it would, at the very least, be littering. We could all end up in jail, as Arlo Guthrie had. When I said so, one of my friends reminded me that Guthrie’s story did have a silver lining: “I mean, he didn’t have to go to Vietnam, right?”

But she knew what I meant. It wasn’t the law or government we were worried about, it was a higher authority. “If we burn your mattress this way now,” she said to our friend, “the smoke will only soil your soul — and ours.” We all agreed to a private bonfire on the beach, with just the three of us, the next day.

Still, I worried that the black smoke from all that foam rubber would attract Fireman Al and the volunteers. Chip came into the kitchen and put his pie plate in the sink with the others. “When they see who it is and what you’re burning,” he said, “they’ll run.”

Before we went to sleep, I asked Chip if he thought I was crazy. “Yes,” he said, “but you were when I married you.” I thought about our wedding, how happy we were, and then my friend’s wedding, which had been such a fun day, too. I was suddenly dizzy with a grief that was worse in some way than the dying kind. I was so afraid it might happen to us, too, that I turned out the light and kissed Chip hard.

In the morning my friend canceled the burn. She’d heard that the wind had blown most of the snow off Chilkoot Lake and said she’d rather go skating. So instead of standing by a bonfire watching her old life go up in smoke, we started her new one gliding over thick ice.

A few weeks later, I went to see Father Jim. I was writing a story for the paper on his Catholic mission boat, the *Mater Dei*. We met over coffee in the rectory. When the interview was done, I told him I’d been having some trouble lately with forgiveness. I didn’t tell him how we’d almost burned a man’s marriage bed in his new girlfriend’s driveway, but I did ask if you could still be a good Christian if you were thinking really bad thoughts. “Heather,” Father Jim said loudly in his South Boston accent. (I think he used to work in big cathedrals.) “Heather,” he said, warming up for the punch line the way he does. “Heather, when God taps you on the shoulder and says it’s time to go, he’ll ask you one

question: *Have you been good to my people?* If you can answer yes, then you've got it made."

On the way home, I ran into Christy Tengs Fowler, a close friend of the Stuart family's, at the library. She asked me if I'd be writing Gene Stuart's obituary. I told her I would be, as soon as I finished Father Jim's story . . . and I needed to record an essay for the radio . . . and I had to write my column, too. I didn't have time to visit with anyone about anything right now, especially that obituary. It was terrible and sad and could wait — the weekly paper wouldn't be printed for six more days. But Christy needed to talk and I'm her friend, so I slowed down and we moved out of the doorway to a quiet corner. Gene had died that morning in Seattle from the burns he'd suffered in a fire at his remote cabin the afternoon before. He had been lighting a wood stove with diesel fuel and the fumes had built up and it had exploded. He was on fire when the friends who were out there with him pulled him through the window and then "dropped and rolled" with him on the ground to put the flames out, the way Fireman Al has instructed us all to do. A helicopter that usually transports extreme snowboarders and skiers saw the cabin in flames and radioed town. They flew Fireman Al and an emergency medical technician in to help Gene just as it was getting dark. Then a Coast Guard chopper flew him out of town from the airport. Doctors at the Juneau hospital decided to send him on to a burn center in Seattle, but there was not much that could be done. If that wasn't bad enough, Gene's dog, Willow, died in the fire, too.

Gene was a sawyer in the old mills; he ran the huge blades that cut logs into boards. When the mills were shut down, he became a fisherman out of necessity, naming his boat *Reluctant*. Mostly, Geno, as his friends called him, was a practical joker. He came up with electrician Erwin Hertz's slogan: "Hertz Electric — We'll Fix Your Shorts." Gene was a good man, and he was good to God's people. I told Christy what the priest had said about that, and I decided to take his words to heart. I promised Christy I'd start Gene's obituary whenever the family was ready, and asked her to let me know when they wanted to talk with me. My other projects would have to wait. Christy told me she felt awful for Gene's widow, all alone in her house. "She doesn't even have her dog," Christy said. She also couldn't help thinking about how quickly life can change.

WHEN I GOT home, Chip's big old boat with the blue tarp flapping on the deck

looked as pretty as a white-sailed sloop in the harbor. The skates and boots all over the floor in the mudroom, the dishes in the sink, and my good old dog sleeping on the couch all seemed to shout, *A family lives here; they are busy and happy and a little messy but someday that won't be so and you'll be sorry.* A little joy has come from all this winter's sadness. After Tom fell into the lake and lived to tell about it, his wife, Liz, said she didn't care anymore what he bought her for her upcoming birthday; he'd already given her the best present ever — himself. My friend's divorce has given me a new appreciation for my own marriage. That doesn't mean I would want the bad in order to have the good, but I know that love and life are all mixed up with loss and death, just like beautiful bubbles frozen in the lake.

Robert Frost wrote that the world may end in fire or ice. Well, from what I've seen, heard, and imagined of both this winter, all I can conclude is that the world could end in any number of ways, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. The only choice any of us has is what to do if we're still here after it happens. Do we die a little death every day ourselves or do we reach for someone's hand and dance again?



*Learn more about Heather Linde at [www.heatherlende.com](http://www.heatherlende.com). For more great reads from Alaska's best authors, visit our fine [independent bookshops](#).*

# Cold Comfort

by Deb Vanasse

*At age twenty-one, Deb Vanasse was dropped by a bush pilot on a gravel runway in middle of the Alaska wilderness. No roads, no houses, no cars, no people — only a winding brown slough and tundra spread flat as prairie. She had come not for adventure but to live, an isolating but evocative experience that has inspired many of her sixteen books. Between her mountain home and a glacier-based cabin, she continues to enjoy Alaska's wild places. Library Journal calls her "one of Alaska's leading storytellers."*

*"Grabs you from the opening line and won't let go," says Publishers Weekly of Vanasse's novel Cold Spell. From that novel, Lena Preston has proven a favorite among readers. Decades ago, she and her husband Walter homesteaded near Alaska's Resurrection Glacier, tying up access so that those who want to see the ice up close must pay a fee to travel past the Prestons' gift shop and through their campground.*

*In Cold Spell, each chapter is titled after an aspect of glaciers. Although Lena plays an integral role in the novel, chapters from her point of view were cut from the final version. Featured here are two of those chapters, "Mass Balance" and "Trimline."*

## **Mass Balance**

*The sum of accumulation and loss*

IN THE MINERVA Jones Bible Study, shapes sliced through God's word like cookies cut from dough. Squiggly lines for actions. Rectangles for results. You yourself got a star, while God, three in one, was contained in a triangle. A short, chipmunk-faced woman, Minerva wore at her neck a bright orange scarf that fluttered as she click-clacked in high heels across the video screen. You had only to apply the right shapes, Minerva promised, and every truth of God would come clear.

If Minerva Jones were to step out from the screen, Lena would suggest she take a load off, the way she herself did every morning, settling into the wide, creaky-sprung chair in her bedroom, her leather-bound Bible winged across her lap. Most mornings, a wisp of steam would rise from her coffee, folding and unfolding on itself like the northern lights that shifted across a winter sky, confounding the whole notion of shape.

Once the steam disappeared, Lena's coffee would be the right temperature to drink, neither too hot nor too cold. In her last video lesson, Minerva had applied triangles, rectangles, squiggles, and stars to show how Jesus despised the lukewarm. Given the Lord's preference for extremes — hot or cold — Lena suspected the glacier would suit him fine. She pictured Jesus up on the ice, which she could see from her window, white on white, a study in peace and cold and proportion.

Minerva, however, would put the glacier in a box shape. Who needed ice when a whole world, an entire universe even, was contained in the book that rested across Lena's lap? Minerva Jones was the sort of woman Lena should want for her boys, a Proverbs 31 woman, of noble character, blessed with eager hands that brought food from afar, a woman who laughed at the days to come.

In her workbook, Lena copied verses from the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs, squiggling purple lines under the bringing and laughing and spinning and sewing done by a woman of honor. From a clutch of colored pencils, she chose a red one to box in the results, as Minerva directed: a little rectangle each to contain *confidence, blessings, praise*. Still, Lena wasn't convinced. The women she actually hoped for, for her sons, were women like Darla — funny, irreverent Darla, who didn't have to sit in a special chair, the way Lena did, to recall who she was, beneath what everyone expected of her.

With a blue pencil, Lena attacked a verse out of Psalms: *I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from my fears*. Dutifully, she formed red boxes and purple triangles and green stars and blue squiggles. But the shapes failed to make clear how the Lord could hear someone seeking, or how fear might be delivered, wrapped up like a package. These were Lena's chair-thoughts, reflections on the ways God made no sense.

Her habit was to displace these blasphemies by reflecting on memories of small things: A ladybug creeping up a thin blade of grass, its dotted wings a

curved, protective shell. The tiny fingernail of a newborn child, thin and translucent. The gentle, rolling laughter of Lena's sister, Judy, before the river swept her away.

At the familiar creak of the front door, Lena skewed her chair away from the window. After thirty-eight years, she'd grown large with the ice, and in certain ways, cold. She envied how the glacier sat, barely moving, day in and day out. She shut her Bible and pushed herself out of her chair.

She found Walter in the kitchen, his hands pressed against the countertop, leaning into it as he prepared to fill his mug with coffee. Though short and compact as ever, he was gray now and wrinkled, toughened by thirty-eight winters in Resurrection.

"Walter Preston," said Lena. "Those jeans are filthy."

He tilted away from the Formica to peer at his legs. "Band saw's not working right." With one palm, he brushed a dark, oily patch on his thigh.

"You're making it worse," she said.

He rubbed the greasy heel of one hand against the palm of the other.

"Now you've spread it." Lena retrieved a jar of Orange Goop from under the sink and slid it across the counter to him.

"Kenny called." Walter's gray eyes puzzled at his wife. "Over to the shop," he added. "Said he got no answer here."

Lena steadied her hand, pouring coffee. Without letting it cool, she downed a gulp, burning her tongue, then cradled the mug in both hands. They hadn't turned yet, her hands. They hadn't fallen to age the way her face had, and her hair. Her hands were still plump and white with nails that drew envious glances for their hardness and length.

She wouldn't ask what Kenny had said. It was the same now, each time they talked, which was why she'd let the phone ring and ring. Ruth this and Ruth that. It was all Lena heard from him anymore. She wished her son had never gone south. Nothing good came when you ran from the cold. Now, nothing good had a name, and two children.

"Ruth and her girls are driving up with Kenny," Walter said. "To live in Alaska."

"Of course they are." Lena made certain her voice gave away no surprise, no disappointment, as she wiped circles over the countertop, already clean. Sunlight

chiseled between the blinds, lighting a patch of sawdust that clung near the dark spot on Walter's jeans. "Change out of those pants. I'll soak them in borax."

Walter glanced down, the stain already forgotten.

"I'm concerned about Darla," Lena said, so she wouldn't have to talk about Kenny. She wrung the dishrag and started wiping again. "Her doctor is awful." She couldn't expect Walter to appreciate the horror of the oncologist's waiting room, the silver-foiled wallpaper shot through with pale purple stripes, the chairs colored like a cheap Easter dress, the carpet tinted the shade of plastic lilacs baked by sun.

"Her appointment yesterday was for two o'clock," Lena said. "We waited till forty-three minutes past. The receptionist could have cared less." The girl was too young for the job, her shiny black hair falling over a silk scarf tied like a headband and blotched with lavender, as if her primary function was to enhance the decor. "I told her we'd driven over two hours to get there. *Good care can necessitate waiting*. That's all she said." She spared Walter the way the girl had blinked slowly at Lena, her black eyelashes three times too long for her face, hideous purple shadow streaked over her eyelids, a shade that showed all too naturally through the thin, puffy skin beneath Darla's eyes. "That girl had no business in a doctor's office."

As usual, Walter did nothing to hold up his end of the conversation.

"Scott would have blown a gasket," Lena said. Darla's husband lacked patience. He liked everything to line up his way, right now, and Darla's cancer threw a wrench into that.

"When we finally got out of there, it was rush hour, and Darla was beat." Lena, too, had been exhausted, helpless against her friend's disease, not to mention the traffic that crawled past a maze of cafés and gift shops and hotels to where the highway began.

Walter stared into the bottom of his mug, circling it over the countertop.

"Stop that," Lena said. Walter tucked his hands in his pockets as she scooped up the mugs, hers and his. "That doctor. You'll never meet such an arrogant man. He had an oil painting up on his wall. Mount Drum. But he insisted it wasn't. He actually argued the point. Mount Shasta, he claimed." The doctor's easy white teeth and the golden hairs on his hands suggested palm trees and golf carts and cocktails garnished with bright maraschino cherries, one of those people that



came north for the money, barely tolerating the weather and complaining the whole time. “Guaranteed he hasn’t been here a year. He said awful things about Darla. Her blood work’s not promising. Too many CTCs, whatever those are. Talked with no regard for her feelings, like she wasn’t right there in the room.”

Walter shifted. If it was Lena with the cancer, he’d be helpless. She knew that.

“Go on now,” she said. “Get out of those jeans.”

“You might like her,” Walter said. “Someone to pass the time with, now that Darla’s not feeling well.”

Lena reeled backward through her thoughts. Walter clamped on a topic like a dog on a stick, and good luck wresting it away.

“You haven’t heard one thing I’ve said.” With a plain white towel, Lena began wiping the dishes. “Not one thing.” Indignation rose from her belly. “This woman with Kenny could never replace Darla. Shame on you for even thinking such a thing.”

There were words Minerva would encase in boxes, consequences that occurred whenever Lena got out of the chair. Judgment. Righteousness. Justice.

Walter, of course, knew nothing of that. With a tight, crooked smile, he stepped out of his stained jeans and handed them to Lena, right there in the kitchen, with only her to see, and the glacier.

*In a community divided between believers and everyone else, Lena keeps secret her religious doubts as she struggles to buoy up Darla against her disease and to contain her own worry over Kenny, who arrives as Walter said he would, with Ruth and her daughters in tow.*

*Prior to the start of “Trimline,” Lena helps Ruth track down sixteen-year-old Sylvie, who had hitched a ride with a trucker (referred to here as “that man”) in what she intended as the first step in running away, back to Minnesota.*

## **Trimline**

*A clear boundary that indicates the maximum thickness of ice*

WALTER Poured the last dregs from the pot to his cup and followed Lena out to the porch, where their coffee sloshed comfortably with the creak of the bentwood rockers. Even when young, they had rocked like two old people on the porch until darkness crept through the valley and night swallowed the glacier. They'd been ambitious back then. Life had spilled over with possibilities.

Lena wrapped her hands around her mug, already cooling. "To think what would have happened to Sylvie if that man hadn't pulled over." She sipped the coffee, lukewarm and bitter. It must have been God, she was going to say, who'd helped them to find Sylvie, but then Lena hadn't once actually prayed for the girl's safety, and she doubted Ruth had prayed either.

"I like to think that at that age I had more sense," Lena said, and Walter agreed that she had. He of all people would know, because at sixteen his eyes were full of nothing but Lena, who knew the right way to laugh and the right time to smile and how to tie back her hair with bias-cut ribbons that showed bits of green through plaits that gleamed when she positioned herself a certain way in the light.

Walter leaned forward, elbows on the knees of his jeans, worn through to the white threads, though he refused to let Lena patch them. The slant light burrowed into the lines at the edges of his eyes and his mouth, his face furrowed like an old dog's, proof he had once smiled and laughed, had even once twirled Lena over the plywood he'd pounded onto their floor joists with galvanized nails, his feet light in steel-toed boots. "You like her well enough," he said.

Lena stopped rocking. Walter was bad about context. You had to guess.

"Sylvie?" she said. "She's at an awkward age. Horrible embarrassment for Ruth, making that scene at the picnic." Walter hadn't been there, of course. He never made more than a brief appearance at church events, and so had missed Sylvie seizing on the preacher's call to unburden her secrets, which she took as license to confess to the gathering, in vivid detail, how she had once stumbled upon her father embracing a woman he eventually ran off with.

"Might have done Sylvie some good, getting something like that off her chest." The gist of the situation was known to Walter, given the gossip that worked its way quickly through Resurrection.

"What she did was spiteful, if you want God's honest truth," said Lena. "I don't know what Ruth will do with her now."

Walter raised his eyebrows. "You said that man didn't hurt her."

"If Sylvie's to be believed." Lena rubbed her thumb over the smooth glaze of the mug. "I expect he thought she was older. Either way, he was angry. Ruth got that much out of Sylvie, before she clammed up."

"She got what she wanted," said Walter. "Her mother's attention."

"That wasn't what she wanted at all." Walter could be so off target. "Sylvie wanted to go home. Back to Minnesota."

"And Ruth?"

The chair's rails clacked as Lena rocked, forward and back, recalling her meltdown in the car with Ruth, over Judy. "Ruth means well. I just wish...well, she's not what I'd have chosen for Kenny."

Walter twirled his empty mug on one finger. "Of course not."

"Stop that," said Lena. "You'll break it." It was one of those things she couldn't put her finger on, the point at which her annoyance overcame generosity in certain relationships.

He set the mug on the porch. From the narrow tips of a spruce, a thrush called out a full-throated song. Walter cocked his head. "Bachelor bird. Calling for a mate."

"You don't know that," Lena said. Another habit of his, jumping to conclusions. "Could be a female. Could be she's hungry." Lena tightened her sweater over her chest. She'd grown up on the Palouse, where summer nights exploded with sound, the crickets and the frogs and the buzzing cicadas set loose from the heat of the day. Sometimes she thought if only the river would hush, she could hear those same sounds here, layers of life tucked into the grasses and trees. Then winter would come and the river would slow and one morning she'd wake to the solid mass of it, cold that brought a quiet so loud her ears nearly burst, a beautiful penance.

She felt Walter watching as she rocked, the watery blue of his eyes searching and wondering, not so different from the boy he'd been at sixteen, awestruck and shy. She shifted, keeping her rhythm.

"She can't afford to go back," Lena said.

Walter tipped his head.

"Ruth. She doesn't have money. No one thinks of that, when they set out for Alaska. And of course she was crazy for Kenny." This brought back, unbidden

and without reason, the old sorrow. Judy, too blunt to be charming. Judy, who brought out the worst in their father. Judy, who'd run off at sixteen with a boy in a van, not so different from Sylvie.

Lena set down her mug and twisted her hands in the wide expanse of her lap. The breeze, cool with night, teased the blunt ends of her hair, stiff and gray. "I hate to see it end badly," she said.

"This is hard country," said Walter.

She steadied herself with the clicking, the clacking, the slow grooving of rails into wood. "I thought I might offer a loan," Lena said. "Some money to help them get home."

Walter pursed his lips, like a fish caught in current. "Kenny won't like that."

"It will only get worse, with Sylvie. You should have seen how she stared out the car window, all the way home." She rocked harder. "And Ruth doesn't seem happy." Lena cupped her hands over her knees. "I know it's hard to adjust. No malls or places to run get your nails done. But it only gets tougher once winter comes." No one had offered Lena a way out, in the early years when it might still have been possible. The ways in which that might have changed things were too many and vast to consider.

"Ruth helped cut up that bear," Walter said.

"I'm not saying she hasn't put out some effort. I'm just saying it's a square peg and a round hole. Do you know what she's done to Kenny's nice kitchen? Stained every last one of those countertops, dark as dirt. Now she thinks they need tile. And that garden. If she gets one meal out of it, I'll be shocked."

"Been awful dry lately," Walter said. "And she can't enjoy hauling water in buckets. It wouldn't hurt Kenny to dig a well. Put in a septic."

"You don't hear me complaining," said Lena. "Despite how they traipse through here for laundry and showers." She sounded petty, even to herself, and it must have seemed so to Walter, too, because instead of responding he fussed with the seams of his jeans.

"I was thinking to charge more," he said at last. "When you charge more, they see how it's special."

It took a moment, but Lena latched onto his meaning. "Folks can drive two hundred miles and see Worthington Glacier for free," she said.

“It’s not the same,” Walter said. “Not the same as camping right next to it. Waking up to the chill of the ice.”

“No one camps that way anymore. They want plug-ins and asphalt and wireless internet.”

“We could give them all that. Make some improvements. Invest, like the boys always say.”

“We get ten tourists a day. On a good day, fifteen. Just passing through. That stuff in the gift shop has sat there for years.”

Walter’s jaw tightened, and Lena felt it, too, the weight of this place where they’d come to be free. “We work hard,” she said. “But it takes more than effort.”

“The boys could help,” Walter said. “We’re not getting younger.”

Lena stiffened. “Don’t go running our boys off.” For the most part, Walter had been a good father, patient if a little too quiet, mostly present if a little too distant. Still he lacked the urgency that weighed heavily in her, the fear that her boys would get ground down the way Judy had, that without a mother’s love and concern they’d be lost.

The sun swelled the mountains with an evening hue, a pink as fresh as new skin. Lena crossed her ankles, pointed and dainty and smooth. “You’ll never guess what Kenny was doing today.”

Walter’s rocker clacked a beat off from hers.

“Chipping ice off the glacier,” she said. “He hauled a big cooler over the rocks. Thinks he’ll get three dollars a bag, selling it up at the rest stop.” She leaned back in the rocker. “Of course Ruth put him up to it.”

The pink sky tilted orange. “They sell much?” Walter said.

Lena flattened her palms on the arms of her chair. “Walter Preston. You’ve not heard one word I’ve said. Of course not. Ruth and I had to run after Sylvie. I expect that ice is half-melted now.”

THEY’D BEEN IN bed only an hour when the phone jarred Lena from sleep. Walter’s wide feet brushed the plywood floor as he felt his way to the door, silent and slow, while the phone bleated, insistent. Lena lay awake, her breath pinched in her chest, her knees tucked to her belly, curved in on the warmth of herself, as she blinked back the shapes that rose in the dark. The long, wide expanse of the dresser, its mirror beveled and shining and cracked in one corner from when

Steven flung a toy truck as a child. The wide, creaky chair, where Lena sat with her coffee and Bible. The hook where Walter hung his shirt every night, saturated with the smell of sap drained and dried from lumber cut at his mill, of wood straightened and planed, of trees conformed and transformed.

There were nights Lena woke gasping and fighting the sheets. In the end it was always the same, her dreams of Judy alone with the cold, and no one to help. To push the nightmare aside, Lena would squeeze her eyes against it and fill the dark with some pretty memory, of Kenny taking his first uneven steps or Steven squishing peas into the tray of his high chair. But tonight she let the thoughts of Judy expand and fill in their proper place, next to Lena's doubts, which she'd come dangerously close to revealing to Ruth before they'd found Sylvie, her faith fragile at best.

Lena folded the pillow over her ears. She didn't need to hear Walter's hello, or the pause as he took in the news. She knew. Knew he would shuffle back over the floor to sit at the edge of the bed. Knew he would touch his hand to her hair and in a slow voice tell her the thing she most dreaded and also expected, that Darla was gone.

Tears leaked to the sheets. She'd never been one for crying, disdaining it as weakness, proud of her stoic response to tragedy, an outward rendering of faith. Weeping was one more sign of her body's betrayal, its breaking down, letting go.

She let go of her grip on the pillow as Walter padded back down the hall, more slowly than he'd gone. He raised the blankets and crawled between the sheets. She waited as he lay on his back, stiff and staring up at the darkness, the outline of the ceiling fan, not yet hooked up to power. He was thinking, she knew, of how to tell her, of words for what there should never have to be words, and though she might have helped him by saying she knew, she waited, listening to the rise and fall of his breath, so soft.

At last he turned and hugged his arms to her flesh, the hair of them gentle and curled. With the side of his thumb, he stroked her belly. "I'm sorry," he said.

The damp spread over her pillow as Lena turned. She pressed her lips against his, old and soft and familiar. He took her face in his hands, then moved them down her arms past her waist — what little was left of it — to her hips, his fingers thick and calloused, a reminder of all he had built with his hands, the house and the shop and the campsites and the tram.

She pressed close, wanting to feel only him. The apostle Paul preached hard against the flesh. Lena could quote him, chapter and verse. But parched by desert, Paul knew nothing of ice, and so she was inclined to forgive him.



*Read more from Deb Vanasse at [www.debvanasse.com](http://www.debvanasse.com) and [www.selfmadewriter.blogspot.com](http://www.selfmadewriter.blogspot.com). For more great reads from Alaska's best authors, visit our fine [independent bookshops](#).*

# Homer Spit, 1972

by David Hunsaker

*Based in Juneau, Alaska, and Venice, California, Dave Hunsaker has written for most of the major studios and has worked with several well-known actors and producers, including Robert Redford and Leonardo DiCaprio. Hunsaker's graphic novel, *The North End of the World* (illustrated by Christopher Shy) was published by Black Watch Comics. For ten years he was Artistic Director of the Juneau-based Naa Kahidi Theatre, an international touring company of Native Alaskan artists. He is a recipient of the Alaska Governor's Award for the Arts and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Alaska Southeast. He is a Fellow of the Sundance Institute, a member of the Writers Guild of America, and an adopted member of the Lukaax.ádi Clan of the Tlingit Nation.*

*This creative nonfiction by Alaska screenwriter and playwright Dave Hunsaker is set on the famous Homer Spit, a narrow point of land projecting 4.5 miles into Kachemak Bay. Each summer during the 1970s, a tent city of seasonal cannery workers, visitors, and other "spit rats" camped out on its windy shores.*

A DRIFTWOOD FIRE in the rain makes a very distinctive smell. It mingles sweetly with the smoke of the dope George scored in Anchorage, which we are told is called "Matanuska Thunderfuck." Amy and Alonna seem to think it is a pretty big deal, but George says it is nothing compared to the stuff he and I used to smoke. He doesn't say where.

"We have jaded palettes," I say.

"The hell you mean by that?" says George with disgust, and I go quiet.

What else beside the smoke? The smell of wet wool off the sweater I'm wearing, a handknit gift from my sister. An unknowable rich scent when I lean close to say something to Amy: her shampoo, maybe, some new brand I'm not familiar with, patchouli oil, vanilla behind her ears like the girls in high school used to wear, maybe. I don't know. I've been away too long. Familiar-unfamiliar. Whatever it is, it makes something ache sweetly down in my deepest, most secret self.



What else? The sappy, sticky sweet, smell-taste of the Yukon Jack that George passes me. Weeks ago, when he first started buying it, I asked him, “Why the hell are we drinking this shit?”

“Cause we in Alaska now,” he said solemnly.

“You mean like, when in Rome?”

“We sure as hell ain’t in Rome.”

“It’s just a saying.”

“When you in some other country, man, you drink what the people drink.”

“Like Tiger Beer?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said George, looking me in the eye. “Like Tiger Beer.”

What else? No, that’s enough.

It’s our third night by the fire with Amy and Alonna. We met them four days ago when they pitched their tent next to George’s and mine. We have been camped here on the Homer Spit for well over a week, so by the time they arrived we had become old hands. We helped them build a driftwood barricade against the prevailing wind, and showed them how to rig a second rain fly out of Visqueen against the ocean damp. We figure all that local knowledge has made us heroes.

They told us they are nurses at a hospital in Anchorage, and I made some lame crack about how we should put a red cross on their tent, and George shot me that look, and I shut up.

Naturally they have their own car, and last night they drove into town for dinner, and I missed them beside this fire. I talked about them too much, and George told me to knock it off, they weren’t all that hot anyway, but it wasn’t so, they were beautiful. I didn’t say anything, but I’m pretty sure he was only saying that because he thought he didn’t have a chance with them, or didn’t have the energy to try anything.

So after supper, George and I went up to the Salty Dawg for a beer. The place was crowded with fishermen, and I couldn’t find anywhere to sit down. George played pool while I drank beer and watched. A couple of fishermen appeared not to like us, and I was taking their measure, wondering if this was going to be like that time at the NCO Club in Da Nang with guys from BRAVO. I was wondering how I would do, but this time George stayed cool and ignored them. He held the table for six games straight, but then he saw that my leg was giving me trouble

from standing, so we left their quarters on the table and went back down to our tent and our fire. We drank Yukon Jack, and I talked about Amy and Alonna some more.

Now tonight they are back with us, and it is raining, and it is very good in our smoke. Best of all, I think I see the signs from Amy, things I remember from two years ago when I was still part of the real world. George is being a perfect gentleman, which he always is in the presence of ladies.

They are kind of hippie chicks, Amy and Alonna, and I can tell they think it's cool that a black man and a white man are good friends as George and I obviously are. They ask us how we met, but George just says we go way back.

Our brilliant disguises are coming along pretty well. George's hair is starting to blossom into a respectable Afro, and mine is as long as I've been able to get it in four months. I am disappointed with my beard, though. George's has come in much better. He still wears his o.d. field jacket because it's the only coat he owns, but what the hell? Lots of people wear them. I have my sister's sweater and a very fine down vest I spent good money for at a mountaineering store in Spenard.

Amazingly, George and I had no trouble hitching a ride down here from Anchorage. Some Texans in a van picked us up, and George told them they needed me to guide them to Homer because I had been here once before. They pretended to go along with that, even though I'm pretty sure they knew that on the whole route there is only one intersection to speak of.

George and I have come to Alaska because I am curious and romantic and seem to have no place else on earth to go, and because he wants to catch fish. At first I would try to fish with him, but I quickly became self-conscious because I knew my leg was holding him back. Now I am happy to hang around wherever we are camped, strumming my guitar and making up songs and cooking dinner. I am a lousy cook, but George pretends to like what I give him. Usually he has a salmon, and we eat it for supper and for breakfast, along with whatever else I have been able to scrounge.

Tonight I barbecue George's fish of the day for Amy and Alonna. Alonna hardly touches hers, but Amy says it's scrumptious, which is in itself one of the signs I was talking about.

Before we came up here, I was three months in Madigan Army Hospital, trying to learn to walk again. George finished the Tour, then came and got me. Now we are camped on the Homer Spit for an altogether indefinite length of time.

The clouds and mist and drizzle gather around us, and the late August summer is waning noticeably. Tonight I know somehow that it will get darker than it has since we came to Alaska. Signs of things to come.

Alonna has one more toke, then says goodnight and goes off to sleep in the Red Cross tent. It's maybe ten o'clock. George waits not more than three minutes, then he goes too, back to our tent, Little Blue, we call it. He is a gentleman, a Virginia gentleman of perfect discretion. Maybe I already said that.

Now, finally, I am free to speak to Amy from my heart, to pour out all my dreams and hopes about Alaska, all about the future, "North to the Future," says her license plate, with no mention of the past. No mention.

She is a good listener. I slyly let the fire burn down to embers, and she scoots closer. My heart is so full right now I think it could burst.

Hours we spend there. Hours and hours. Now this:

I crawl into Little Blue. George is sound asleep, I can tell by his breathing. I have slept beside this man for so long now I know everything about his sleeping. I know, for example, that he is an even lighter sleeper than I am, so I don't even have to speak or make a sound. Sure enough, he awakens.

"Yeah?"

"Look, man, I need the tent," I say.

He blinks himself the rest of the way awake. "Damn. I never thought you stood a chance."

"It's still raining," I say apologetically.

"That's alright. Fish bite good when it's raining."

I crouch there in the tent as he pulls on his pants. I am aware of Amy alone by the fire, but right now I need to know that all is cool with George.

He puts on his field jacket and takes up his casting rod and some pixies. He crawls out of his tent, leaving his sleeping bag warm from his body.

"I owe you, man," I say.

"Damn right," he says, and his grin tells me everything's okay.

I limp back to Amy by the fire, and I watch as George makes his way down to the whispering surf. I watch as he takes his first cast. Nick Adams with an Afro, I think to myself, always the goddamn, would-be English major.

Then I lead Amy to the tent, and inside it, gather her in my arms, and maybe the scent of her and the touch of her and the big generous heart of her will bring me the peace I have been hoping for all this long time. And maybe there's a silver salmon out there someplace, swimming in the black nighttime waters of Kachemak Bay that will do the same for George, will feed us, and somehow help us all to make sense of the world once again.



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# Winter Too Short, Too Loud

by Jerry D. McDonnell

*Jerry Dale McDonnell's published fiction and journalism — South Dakota Review, Over the Transom, Cirque, Mungbeing.com, Explorations, Dan River Anthology, Northwoods Journal, Anchorage Daily News, The Peninsula Clarion, The Alaska Journal of Commerce, Calaveras Enterprise — portray the north and the west of what is and could be. His plays have been read at the Last Frontier Theater Conference in Valdez and also on the East Coast. Currently he is the Drama Editor and one of the fiction editors of Cirque. He winters over in downtown Alaska, but summers often find him somewhere in the bush of the far north, sometimes volunteering in one of Alaska's fifteen National Wildlife Refuges on projects from invasive plants to science camps for kids to counting walrus.*

*When McDonnell was a teacher in Manokotak, Alaska, an elder told him she remembered seeing her first airplane. She said it had a red circle on it. It was 1990. WWII would have been in her childhood, as it was in McDonnell's. That statement spurred this story, set in the Bristol Bay region and rife with post-contact tensions and conflicting world views.*

ANITA WAS NOT afraid of many things. The day she killed the strange, *kass'aq* outsider had not bothered her. He had killed her husband. Some of the people said she had killed the killer. She didn't mean to kill him, but he was a bad man. Her husband was a good man. It was right. The way Anita saw it, the bad man had killed himself by being foolish. But now, this noise she heard coming was like no noise she had ever heard before. She saw it on the distant horizon, approaching like a duck flying straight and fast. Quickly, Anita pulled her fishing stick and line from the ice hole and slipped into the sled under her caribou robe, flipping the lighter tanned side up to blend in with the snow. The napping dogs, already burrowed into the snow, blended in well; the thing in the sky would not be able to see them unless the noisy thing had eagle eyes.

The sound in the sky was deafening, louder than an angry bear. Anita held her hands over her ears. As the sound decreased, she peeked out from the robe and watched the bird thing in the sky; it glided like an eagle, but if those were its

wings they never moved. Taking its sound with it, the thing moved like a well-thrown spear until it faded into the gray sky. Never once did the wings move. It was nothing she had ever seen before and in these times it was wise to stay hidden. She thought it must be another thing from these Russians or these other people who had come to her land. These strange ones were strong and rude and knew little of the land. She recorded the sky thing well in her memory to be able to describe it to the people and warn them. The dogs had only cocked their ears at the noise but did not seem too alarmed, which gave Anita hope.

THE THING IN the sky did not come back. Anita went back to her ice fishing. When the sun was low on the horizon she woke the dogs, fed them, and drove the sled toward home. She pulled all of her snares and stored the useful pieces on the sled. At this time of year in the far north, there would be light for several more hours. Summer was near and darkness had reduced itself. She had been gone most of the winter, yet it was still a distance back to her dugout, eight or ten hours by dog sled if the trail was good. Maybe she had stayed out too long at this time of year, she thought. It was a thing she had been thinking about for several days. For over a week, she had rested the dogs but not herself. Sometimes it was becoming hard to concentrate on things, difficult to do things the proper way. Crossing the pass over the mountain range would be the worst as it had snowed several inches a few days ago, coating the old snow and ice. It would not be easy to see thin ice or bad snow. The temperatures were warming, which meant soft, rotten snow and ice on the waters that she and the dogs could break through.

A greater danger may lie near her dugout and the people. Some people may still be looking for her. Some other people might be willing to turn her over to the *kass'aqs*. In recent years, people were doing strange things, and Anita was not like the other people of the region. She was only half related in some peoples' eyes. The Dena'ina half of her had made her tall and the Yup'ik half had made her heavily boned. Her eyelids lacked the epicanthic folds of the Yup'ik Eskimos, but her skin was a light color that turned to olive when weathered by the sun, as opposed to the darker skin of an Dena'ina Indian. Her facial features were more sculptured, less flat than the Yup'iks. She had inherited the best traits from each. Being half of each, she looked different to both races. To some she was beautiful; to others she was odd. She was strong and liked to be alone, which for some men

was too much not like a woman. No other woman lived alone. Even women without children lived with their sisters or mothers or someone else. Most of the winter, Anita tended to her snares, running sled dogs in the interior of Alaska. In the summer she tended her nets, taking fish like a Yup'ik from the Bering Sea and the rivers. And she dressed like a man.

Sensing they were going toward home, the dogs were anxious, and they ran too fast. Anita slowed them with soft calls, lightly applying the brake and riding the runners. Her dogs, like trusted friends, listened to her every utterance. The only sounds were the soft sliding of the sled's rails and the paws of the six dogs on the snow. The terrain was flat, white, covered with wind-swept ridges of snow and ice. A few clumps of bushes could be seen in the distance along the edges of the drainages. The late evening sun reflected a red hue from the sky and onto the distant mountains, foretelling a clear day ahead. Anita continued riding the sled rails because she was so very tired. The dogs were rested and fed, and she knew a moon would rise late this night, allowing her to travel the short hours of darkness if she wished. As the day spent itself, the temperature dropped well below freezing, making the snow firm. Yes, she would try to cross the pass tonight, before the next day's sun warmed the snow, no matter how tired she was.

THEY MADE GOOD time for five hours with short rests. At the foot of the mountains, a full moon reflecting off the snow, Anita and the dogs stopped. Now they had to cross the river, and leads were already starting to show. The visible amount of her exhaling breath told her the temperature was continuing to drop, but it was difficult to know if the ice was clear, meaning safe, or frosty-colored with cracks, meaning not safe. Two major leads in front of them presented open water over deep holes. Unhooking Alag, her lead dog, she walked along the bank a distance, looking for a safer place to cross. Delighted to be free of the harness, the dog romped beside her. At a spot that looked solid, hanging onto a clump of grass on the bank, Anita tested the ice by stomping her foot and listening to the sound. She tried to pry a large rock from the bank to throw on the ice, but the ground was still too frozen.

“Alag, go,” she pointed. The dog obeyed and walked onto the ice, crossing to the other side. The weight of the dog would not tell her much about the thickness of the ice but it seemed solid under the inches of fresh snow. Anita then tested the

ice underfoot and found that her 120 pounds did not cause cracking sounds near the edge, which is usually the thinnest ice. A third of the way across the river, she bent down to the ice and swiped away the fresh snow with her seal-hide mittens. The ice beneath was slightly frosty, but it did not show any cracks. It might hold her, but would it hold the sled with the furs and the fresh meat from the caribou she had recently snared? Reading the evening sky, Anita forecast a warmer tomorrow, making the ice less sure. If she remembered correctly, the river bottom at this spot was not too deep except for two holes. The night would not last long. Exhausted, she made her decision.

The dogs raced onto the ice. Running behind the sled and pushing hard, Anita shouted them on when she heard the ice crack beneath the runners. Her next step found open water; she was instantly immersed up to her chest. The current beneath the ice dragged at her mukluks and her sealskin pants. One hand gripped a runner of the sinking sled. She was stretched out; the dogs pulled her toward the shore while the current pulled her under the ice. Water went over her head. Her hand began to slip from her mitten just as one foot found bottom. Emerging from the water, she saw the dogs straining on the harness, trying to free the sinking sled. Shouting encouragement to the dogs, she pushed hard off the bottom, found shallower water, and put her weight behind the sled, lifting it and shoving it toward shore. Abruptly, she was being dragged across the ice, onto the shore and across the tundra, the dogs running madly, the sled bouncing behind them over drifts of snow. Her strength gone, she lost her grip. The last thing she saw from a shrew's view inches from the surface of the cold, moonlit snow was the dog team and the sled fading into night.

ANITA FELT THE warmth of sun on her face. She saw her Yup'ik husband coming across the tundra, a pack dog walking behind him. As usual, he was smiling and laughing. He had two rabbits in his hand. Behind him, a flock of ptarmigan still in their winter white plumage flew up over his head and scattered in every direction as a large black cloud came racing faster than a flight of ducks across the sky. The cloud descended and overtook her husband. He looked surprised as the cloud swallowed him like bear eating a shrew. And then she was cold.



Anita opened her eyes. The moon in a clear, dark sky waited on top of the mountain in front of her. She could only see a few stars. Alag kept licking her face, making it warm. The rest of the dog team waited, all still in harness, the sled behind them. It was hard to get up. She was shaking; her skin parka and pants were frozen stiff. She had stayed out too long, should have pulled her snares a week ago. Quickly, she took off her parka, knocked the ice from the fur inside it, and put it back on. She did the same with the pants and the mukluks. In a frenzy she found the caribou robe. The robe around her, she began running in circles. The dogs were barking. One tried to break from the harness. Another picked a fight with another. Anita ran to the sled, shoved the sled brake into the snow, broke up the fight with blows, and calmed the dogs. She was still shaking. She had to move. She needed fire. The dogs settled, she pulled the brake and gave the command. Running behind the sled, she drove them toward the mountains where she knew there was a stand of cottonwoods. It was hard to keep up the pace; her heart was beating, she was still shaking, her vision was blurring. Her husband, riding in the sled, talked to her and joked.

“Did someone have a nice swim?” he said.

“Why did you leave me?” she answered.

“Someone smells better now with the cool waters taking away the sweat. You were starting to smell like an old bear existing on salmon carcasses.”

“I need you. Why did you die?”

“I’m here. I brought your dogs back. Keep running. Someone would run with you but his feet are sore. Someone has been walking for moons looking for you. Why do you stay out so long? Besides, the view is better here lying on the sled watching the moon set over the mountain and the stars twinkling.”

“I saw something today.”

“The airplane? Oh yes, I saw it too. There will be many more of those in the coming years.”

“Airplane. What is an airplane?”

“It is something people ride in.”

“In the sky?”

“Yes, in the sky,” he said. “It carries people places very quickly. Someone is not shaking anymore. Someone must be getting warmer. That is good. I loved a strong woman. Keep running.”

“But how does it get in the sky? And how does it get down? Its wings don’t move. It doesn’t have feet, and it is very noisy. It hurts someone’s ears.”

“They all have feet. Some are hidden like a bird when it flies. The cottonwoods are ahead. A fire will be nice. Someone is getting cold.”

“Why didn’t you fight back?”

“It was useless. There were too many of them. We didn’t know of the gun then. It shoots a very small dart that doesn’t even have a point on it. It goes right through your skin like a spear or an arrow; it can even crush bones; it is very powerful. I thought if I walked away they would let me go.”

“He shot you in the back. He was not a good man,” she said.

“But you got away. It was you they wanted. They wanted to use you. They thought you were very beautiful. That is why the one came looking for you.”

“He found me.”

“I know. But he will bother you no more. And we are here. Here is the wood to build a fire. Get wood. I will watch the dogs if you set the brake.”

Anita found some dry limbs low on a tree, quickly snapped them into smaller pieces, and with some tinder she had in the sled and her tools that made sparks, a fire quickly came to life. The fire going, her parka and pants drying close to the heat, she turned to talk to her husband, but he was gone. She put on larger pieces of wood and looked up at the stars. The moon had set over the mountain. The sun would be up shortly. As tired as she was, she knew she must go on. She couldn’t wait another day to cross over the pass.

THE CROSSING OF THE PASS went well and the dogs took her down the southern slope as the sun came up. On a ridge far to the east, she saw a bear coming out of hibernation. It came out of the snow, put its head in the air, sniffed, rolled its head, and then lay down in the sun and went back to sleep. In the distance to the south, she could see the dwellings of a group of the people who had gathered for the winter at a wide spot on the river not far from her dugout. For over three moons she had been gone, living at her secret cave far in the interior where she and her husband had, against tradition, lived together most winters. He did not stay in the men’s house like the rest of the people and the couple did not have children. Most people thought they were an odd pair. Anita stopped the dogs halfway down the mountain. Looking at the dwellings, fear set into her heart.

What if the strange ones, the *kass'aqs*, were waiting for her? A mere few hours by dogs on the other side of the river, one could be at the settlement on the coast of the sea where the strange ones had built dwellings of wood a few years ago and people in large wooden boats began catching salmon. Anita had only been told about it, but the strange ones had named it Dillingham, south of their summer fish camp on the coast. Anita looked at the dwellings on the wide spot by the river for a long time, trying to see if anything looked strange before she started the dogs again.

“I TELL YOU, it went straight. It did not swoop or glide silently like an eagle: it went straight. It went straight like an arrow. If it was a bird, the wings did not move. Not once did it flap its wings,” Anita told the people. “And it made a loud noise. It is called an airplane.”

“We know. We have all seen one. Wassilie touched one in Dillingham. There is a place where they take off and land there.”

Anita waited to ask if anyone had been looking for her. She knew which person she would ask when the time was proper. Some people were afraid for Anita's safety. But some looked at her strangely and trust was not in their eyes. Many new things had happened since she left last fall. One person went to Dillingham and did tasks for men who gave him a thing called money. It was used to get other things. Most people here would not take it because it was useless. But the *kass'aqs* liked this money very much it seemed. They seemed to think it is sacred. If you tried to take it from them, they would kill you. Young Natasha took some to look at it and the person became very angry and threatened to hurt her. Another older person took some and they took him away. He was in a place they call jail. He only wanted to look at it to see if he could make something out of it. He thought maybe he could patch a kayak with it or put it on a parka as decoration, but it wasn't very pretty; it was very nothing, just green with small pictures and designs on it. They must be sacred pictures.

Anita did not tell anyone about seeing her husband and how he had saved her. Most people were already afraid of her because of her strange ways and her strength. But still the ones who were afraid of her and did not have trust in their eyes took a portion of the caribou that Anita shared with the people. After the

sharing of the caribou, she took the dogs to her sod house. While taking care of the dogs, Elena, one of her husband's sisters, came to her dugout.

"Someone was gone a long time and is tired," Elena said. Anita merely nodded while she unhitched the dogs, fed them, and bedded them down. She thought about telling Elena about seeing her brother, but she did not. They watched a flight of circling cranes coming from the south and then sat quietly outside the dugout looking across the tundra toward the mountains. A time passed while they watched the birds in the sky, the clouds moving, and felt the spring wind on their faces. The sun had fallen near the top of the mountain before Elena spoke again. "Some *kass'ags* were looking for you this winter. They came twice. I don't think they like winter. Maybe you should not have come back. Maybe you should go north to your other people." In silence the two ate some hot food Elena cooked for them. Before Anita fell into a deep sleep in her dugout, she gave Elena some beaver hides.

THE SUN WAS high in the sky the next day when Anita heard Elena calling out as she ran to the dugout. Anita, still asleep, vaguely remembered hearing Elena's warning cries or the *kass'ag* men and the Yup'ik men shouting. Guns were shown, bows and arrows and harpoons were lowered. Stern looking *kass'ag* men beat Anita while the people looked on helplessly. Anita lost consciousness and only vaguely remembered the sled taking her to Dillingham or the fact that she loosened her bonds on the trip and tried to choke a man when they lifted her off the sled with her feet still bound. She barely remembered getting beat again by several men and hit hard on the head while a group of *kass'ags* and a few native people she did not know watched.

Hurting and hungry, she awoke in a dark place of solid wood like none she had ever seen. Then she was taken to a larger closed-in place of solid wood filled with light. Strange men spoke in words she did not understand. Her husband sat beside her at a thing he called a table.

"They are giving you a trial for murder," he said.

"Is that the same as killing?" she asked. Anita was beginning to understand as she saw some of the same men who had been there when her husband was killed. "What does this trial do?"

"It kills people," he said. "Don't be afraid. It is not so bad."

Anita was having trouble knowing where she was and her head still hurt and she couldn't understand what people were saying and the room was hot and stuffy and she had never been in such a large closed-in place with so many strange people and the smell . . . a man who was dressed different than the others came to her and said a few words in her language, but pronounced the words oddly. And then he brought a man she had never seen before to translate. The translator said the man who dressed differently was a Russian Orthodox Priest who wished to help her. Another man sat beside her where her husband had been. The translator said he also was to help her. Much talking went on, people sometimes shouted and pointed at her. The translator said things to her about their laws, but she did not understand. Anita only wished to be alone back on the land with her dogs. She put her head down on the table and saw herself far north with her husband in their winter home where no one else came. She wished these people who said they meant to help her could let her go there and be left alone; the noise in this place was worse than the airplane, and the smell of the large wooden place with so many *kass'ags* and a few natives was very, very bad, and she was too hot, and she tried to take off her parka, but people again shouted and pointed at her, and a man in front of everyone banged a club on a table . . . she passed out.

When she awoke, her husband was beside her in another wooden place. It smelled good, and light came in through an opening you could see through.

“Stay strong,” he said. “Things are going to get better.”

“What is this thing I am on?” she asked.

“It is called a bed. Isn't it nice? It's warm and soft.”

“Where am I?”

“You are in the Dillingham place. The trial is over.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you are going to die.”

The Orthodox Priest man came into the wooden place through an entrance. “Are you well?” he asked in her language. She could see another man behind the priest on the other side of the entrance sitting, watching.

She turned her head to see the priest but did not know what to say. She turned back to her husband, but he was gone again. The priest sat beside her and began to unwrap her bandaged head. Until then, Anita had not realized that her head was wrapped in bandages. “Take this,” the priest said, handing her a pill and a cup of

water. She did not want to take it. He was one of the *kass'aq* people, but his voice was smooth and gentle. Most of the words she did not understand, but his smile was like a sunrise over the tundra on clear sky day when the ptarmigan came out of their snow caves. She sensed she could trust him and took the pill. He changed her bandages. She didn't want to, but soon she fell asleep.

WHEN ANITA AWOKE, she saw a half moon through the opening against a night sky. Feeling better, she got to her feet and walked to the opening and touched it. It was clear, cold, and solid, but she could see through it. Tapping on it with a finger, it made a small thumping sound. Stars in the sky were twinkling and the snow reflected the light of the moon. Two stray dogs that ran across the tundra stopped and looked back at her as if it was an invitation. Anita placed both hands on the opening, laid her cheek against the cold glass, and closed her eyes. The land of ice melted before her and she saw a bear wading across the river. A caribou walked around her snare and her husband sat on the bank of the river, laughing, carving a stick. He was so happy. Always so happy, and he was still happy. She opened her eyes and cried.

“What are you doing up?” a loud voice shouted. A man came through the entrance. He was big and had a hairy face and had a rifle in one hand. “Seems you're well enough to hang now.” Anita stood firm like an esker of stone. Her tears stopped. Her eyes narrowed as she clenched her fist. The man rushed to her, grabbing her by the arm, pulling her to him. His smell was unbearable and his smile evil. Dragging her away from the window, he underestimated her strength. Anita swung her free fist into his groin. He doubled over. She raised her knee swift and fast into his face and then raised it again, catching him again in the groin. The man fell heavily to the wooden floor and the room shook. Anita acted quickly. Tearing off the flimsy cloth they had dressed her in, she found her skins in the corner and was half-dressed when the Russian Orthodox Priest came in. Anita swept the rifle from the floor, held it by the barrel, and raised it to use as a club.

“Hold on,” the priest said gently, his hand open at the end of his outstretched arm. Anita held. Slowly she lowered the rifle. “You don't even know how to use it, do you?” he said. “When you caught the man in your caribou snare, you didn't mean it, did you? But you left him hanging there and he froze to death. Isn't that

the way it happened?" Anita nodded, but she didn't understand completely; his Yup'ik was not good. She pieced the words *snare* and *man* and *froze to death* and worked on them as she continued dressing. "If you go, they will come for you," he said. "I've convinced them you deserve another trial. We are waiting on a proper judge." Anita walked toward the door. The priest moved and blocked her way. Anita stared at him. She did not want to kill him, but she must leave. Their stares connected. Anita's brow wrinkled, her jaw flexed. The priest finally gave a crooked smile and stepped aside.

The house where she was being held was on the edge of town. Anita looked into the night sky and began walking across the tundra in the direction of her sod house, wondering how long the darkness would last. The half-moon was high in the sky, and she could see a distance toward the mountains. After a half hour of walking, she began to feel faint, her head again hurting. Touching her hand to her bandaged head, it came away with stains of blood. She walked until she fell.

"Get up," her husband said. He was dressed like the priest.

"Why are you dressed like that?"

"Get on the sled," her husband said.

Anita looked at the sled pulled by dogs she did not know and pulled herself up onto it with her husband's help and then passed out.

When she awoke, she was lying on the snow not far from her dugout as the light of a gray day began from the east over the mountain. There were no tracks leading to or from where she lay. Before she could raise herself, Elena was at her side. "You must not stay here. You must go upriver. Can you travel?"

"Where is the sled?" Anita said.

"What sled?"

"The sled that brought me here."

"There is no sled. You walked here. I saw you coming, and I saw you fall. I was sent to watch for you, I think. I had a dream that you were walking from Dillingham and were in trouble. I have been waiting all night."

"Then you saw him. Sammy. Your brother."

"No. You must be still hurt bad. Sammy is dead. You know that, don't you?"

"But the tracks? There are no tracks."

"It is snowing. Of course there are no tracks."

"My dogs," Anita said.

“We will take care of your dogs until next winter. Now you must hide like only you know how, where no one will know. There is one man you can trust who will help you stay upriver until you get well. He is from another people south of Dillingham. He saw what they did to you.”

A WEEK LATER, Anita watched the man called Alexie paddle his kayak back down the river, leaving her with instructions to go someplace even he would not know. As she walked into the mountains, her dog Alag by her side, she talked to Sammy, who was as usual laughing about how funny the *kass'aq* man looked hanging frozen to death from Anita's snare. Anita laughed with him, saying how the priest thought she didn't mean to kill the man who killed Sammy. The bad man did look funny hanging there. Alag hid in the trees with her when the airplane flew over them, making the noise one could hear from far away.



*Jerry D. McDonnell blogs at [www.alaskareflections.blogspot.com](http://www.alaskareflections.blogspot.com). For more great reads from Alaska's best authors, visit our fine [independent bookshops](#).*



## Special

by Richard Chiappone

*Richard Chiappone is the author of Opening Days, a collection of essays, stories and poems, and the short story collection Water of an Undetermined Depth. His work has appeared in national magazines, including Alaska Magazine, Playboy, Gray's Sporting Journal, and The Sun; and in literary journals including Crescent Review, Missouri Review, and ZYZZYVA, and has been featured on the BBC radio. He has served as an associate editor at Alaska Quarterly Review, and now teaches at the Kachemak Bay Campus of Kenai Peninsula College and in the low-residency MFA program at the University of Alaska Anchorage. He recently moved from rural Anchor Point to the big city madness of downtown, metropolitan Homer.*

*Chiappone says the following story began with a boy ice fishing in upstate New York. A boy something like him, perhaps, growing up in a factory town, going off by himself in the woods and out onto the ice to get away from his dull, working-class home life and his six younger brothers and sisters. Somehow, the boy morphed into a teenager in a small town in Alaska. Somehow, he now had ultra liberal, ultra permissive parents, old hippies. Somehow he now had a radical, hipster older sister. For some reason, she was bald. Finally, the only thing remaining from the original was the intense confusion of being a teenager, trying to become oneself. Such is the power and mystery of revision.*

CHAZ PULLED HIS mother's Outback into the snowed-over parking lot and parked it under the Alaska Recreational Area sign, gaping through the windshield at the three bodies clad in snowmobile suits lying face down on the still-frozen surface of the lake. Another meth deal gone sideways? Maybe. The locals in the jacked-up school buses and Tyvek-mummied shacks in the hills above town were as rough as the muffler-bashing roads they lived on. That was true. But, still, in the middle of a lake, in the middle of the day? The only other vehicle in the snowy lot was a rusted Toyota stake-bed that looked old enough to have come across from Asia on the land bridge.

He reached for his phone just as one of the dead men raised an arm off the ice and then lowered it again as though waving. Chaz stopped. One of the other bodies did the same thing, a dead arm coming up off the ice and going back down again. And then the third man did it, too, and Chaz understood they were ice fishermen, lying on their bellies, looking into the holes they'd augered there, jigging. He put the phone down.

Jesus. Ice fishing. And he thought *he* was bored.

It was the third week of May and sunny, actual springtime at sea level in the little town on the bay, daffodils thick along the south wall of the Save U More, newborn moose calves tottering through intersections on knobby stilts, piles of dog shit rising like the dead on every thawing lawn. But here, a thousand feet up, aging snow still blanketed the ground, and the naked shore alders shuddered miserably in the wind off the frozen lake.

He slumped back in his seat, squinting past the prostrate fishermen. Beyond them the dense spruce forests stretched endlessly. God's worst idea ever: wilderness.

It was Sunday, almost noon, and this was exactly everything he had to do, all day.

It didn't help that Nettle had brought some hipster dickhead home from Humboldt to share her room in her folks' house and work on the family halibut boat for the summer. Chaz should've seen that coming. At Thanksgiving, she'd told him that it was "important to experience all kinds of experiences." In January she'd gone back to California a week before classes re-started. She hadn't come home for spring break at all.

Chaz's best friend, Evan, had said, "Chaz, you fag, remember that SAT question: How soon will a girl in college dump her dumbass boyfriend who's still back home in high school, in Fartfuck Alaska? Surely you picked A.) The minute she runs into an Eddie Vedder wannabe with a bag of weed in one hand and his dick in the other. Surely, dude."

This was *exactly* why Chaz was sitting in his mother's car watching guys lolling around on ice like pinnipeds, instead of spending the afternoon at Evan's getting high and playing Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock. Exactly.

Ice fishing. Jesus.

He tipped the seat all the way back and closed his eyes.

*Marilyn? Felix? There's something I have to tell you.*

When he opened his lids again the lake was a barren white pan with three holes drilled in it, the parking lot empty as well. The sky was going translucent with streaks of high, shredded clouds. The air in the car had cooled. He shivered and sat up. It was nearly time to go home. Time to tell his parents that he was leaving for basic training in two weeks.

The recruiter — a friendly, square-jawed guy who looked barely old enough to be out of high school himself — had arrived in town earlier that spring, just a few excruciating weeks after Nettle kicked Chaz's heart out of his chest once and for all. Chaz signed the same day his acceptance to Humboldt arrived — the only college he'd applied to, although he'd led the folks to believe he'd tried for their alma maters too.

Well, there was no going to Humboldt now. He didn't need to spend his freshman year spanieling Nettle as she hooked up with one older guy after another. Even *he* knew that.

He shook his head and muttered, "Women."

The week the recruiter was in town, his mother and six others her age had marched bare-breasted into the high school to protest the military recruiting there. Chaz watched in horror as they argued with the authorities in the commons crammed with students. His so-called best friend Evan laughed so hard he'd buckled over and cut his head on the door of his locker and had to go to the nurse. Chaz felt queasy himself. There was really no way to prepare yourself for seeing your mother perp-walked out of your school, naked breasts vibrating with indignation. Even so, looking back on it, Chaz had to admit that — as responses go — enlisting may have been a little over the top.

IN THE KITCHEN that morning, he'd come so close to telling them what he'd done.

So close. The sun was shining, and they were cooking and listening to Neil Young. For old folks, it couldn't get much better than that. It would've been a perfect time to say it.

He sat at the table nursing his coffee, watching Marilyn wrestle a heavy copper-bottomed pan onto the big six-burner stove. "Chaz honey, you can't mope

your whole life away over one girl. Take a drive,” she said. “Take the Subaru. I filled it yesterday.”

Chaz grunted noncommittally.

“And don’t just go over to Evan’s and get high and play video games all day.” Marilyn crouched over a low drawer, looking for the pan lid now. “Get some sunshine. Vitamin D. It’s been a long winter.” There was a pause. Her eyebrows went up. “Or you could cook with us!”

She was fucking serious.

How could someone give birth to a person, live with him for eighteen years, and still not know one single thing about him? How was that possible? Cooking with his parents?

Jesus. Really, Jesus.

Felix came out of the walk-in pantry knotting his apron behind him. “Your mother’s right, Chazbo. Cooking will get the girl off your mind.” He stirred through a drawer of clattering kitchen implements, came up with something Chaz hadn’t seen before. “Plus, I’m telling you, chicks can’t keep their hands off a guy who can handle an herb mincer.” He rattled the tool and winked. “Listen to your old man.”

Chaz smiled.

Marilyn laughed. “That’s right. Listen to your father, honey. Forget about her. There are lots of other fish, as they say. Next year at college...”

Well, that was the whole problem, wasn’t it? It was definitely time to tell them that the current dearth of female appendages clutching at him wasn’t the only thing on his mind today. He opened his mouth to say it. “I joined — ”

But the folks were on a tear now. Marilyn came up behind Felix and smashed her bosom between his shoulder blades. She raised a hand to stroke the top of his head, and an avalanche of bracelets slid to her elbow. “A bald man in an apron. Yum.”

Neil Young moaned from the iPod speakers.

Chaz studied the bottom of his cup.

For almost a year now, the folks had been enjoying a surge of late-in-life, prescription-drug-fueled concupiscence. When their howling first penetrated his bedroom wall, Chaz had asked his sister, Ariel, to talk to them before she left for

college again. “Seriously!” he pleaded. “It sounds like they’re filming a nature special in there.”

Ariel had grinned. “Imagine what it *looks* like.”

Jesus, he missed his sister.

As always, Ariel was off somewhere doing God knows what between semesters, and Marilyn and Felix were still apparently determined to re-live their youths, one orgasm at a time. That was none of his business. Fine. But listening to the gross soundtrack of their exuberant humping was a major downside.

Felix pushed back against Marilyn’s breasts and said something about eggplants.

Chaz decided to make a break for it before they started rolling around on the kitchen floor. He grabbed his canvas Carhartt coat. All the senior boys were wearing them that winter. “Goodbye, horny old people,” he said, heading for the door.

Marilyn called out after him, “Be home for dinner, sweetie. There’s going to be a surprise guest. Have fun!”

Fun? In a town whose sole movie theater was in a Quonset hut? He was eighteen years old. He shouldn’t even know what a Quonset hut was. Could there be a worse place to be a teenager than Alaska? He doubted it.

DRIVING FROM THE lake back down to town, he decided to tell them over dinner, when spirits were always highest. The surprise guest would be no problem. There were no surprise guests. He knew all of Marilyn and Felix’s friends. Like his parents, most had arrived there at the end of the road in the seventies: Peace Corps vets, adventure travelers, painters and potters and weavers and musicians and optimistic vegetarian homesteaders. They’d come to Alaska to grow their own groceries, children, and cannabis. By now they’d given up dope and taken up meat-eating, traded their Volkswagen vans for Subarus and Priuses; left their off-the-grid cabins for fully plumbed homes with ocean views, good kitchens, and wifi. They’d all known each other for decades and, it seemed to Chaz, had all been married or otherwise attached to each other at one time or another as well. The parentage and step-parentage of the children in the town was as complex as a strand of DNA — another reason nobody called anyone Mom or Dad.

He changed his mind, coming up the porch stairs, deciding to blurt it out before the house filled with sub-geezers shouting politics over their salmon carpaccio.

But when he opened the back door, there was a red suitcase he recognized parked in the entry hall. He sucked in a breath of foody kitchen air and said, “Ariel.”

As if conjured by the utterance of her name, his sister stepped into the hallway. Ariel. Home. She’d missed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and spring break. Hadn’t been spotted in over a year. In fact, she rarely made contact at all — except to arrange for another infusion of cash from the folks.

Were Marilyn and Felix upset about any of that? About anything Ariel did? Ever? No way. Ariel was being independent, colorful. She wasn’t missing semesters of college. She was traveling, becoming a citizen of the planet. When she wrote from Amsterdam, “I’m living entirely on hash and sex,” the folks swooned in a fond remembrance of debaucheries past. They’d once been smokers of all things smokable, snorters of that which needed snorting, poppers of pills with kinky insider nicknames they still remembered. They’d done it all. Everything. And back when it was still meaningful, they were quick to remind you. And poor Ariel kept trying to live up to their standards.

But now she was here, right in front of him, at last. His fabulous sister, Ariel: Evergreen College, class of whichever future year she ran out of either majors to switch to or charm to maintain Felix’s bankrolling.

He and Ariel stood studying each other in the back hallway. Ariel looked older, a little thicker, but even more beautiful than he remembered. She was wearing the lightweight black cashmere sweater he’d sent her for Christmas — the tip of her Sanskrit tattoo showing at her décolletage — tucked into tight black jeans, silver studded belt. On her feet: deep red witch boots with black Velcro straps and two-inch heels. She was bald.

That was new. What happened to the massive basket of red-blond dreads she’d first cultivated in eleventh grade — a look that Marilyn had attempted to match in misguided solidarity until Ariel promised to murder her mother in her sleep if she saw a single small cornrow anywhere near that middle-aged scalp.

Ariel, bald.

Chaz stood there grinning. Not even Marilyn would try to expropriate this one.

Ariel reached over and yanked the canvas collar of his coat straight. “Carhartt?” She grimaced. “Eee-eye Eee-eye Oh.” She pushed past him, a whiff of citrus lingering in the air behind her. “Duck hunting?”

“I sort of went ice fishing today,” he said, and found himself so happy he started to cry.

Into the pantry closet she went, as if her appearance there was entirely normal, as if it hadn’t been months since she’d finally answered her only brother’s pathetic messages about Nettle’s betrayal — Ariel’s voice on the phone from God knows where, booming drunkenly, “Forget that little twat, Chaz. And don’t do anything stupid! You hear me? In this family, *I’m* in charge of stupid!”

Too late.

If Ariel had been there, she would have shoved those papers up that friendly recruiter’s friendly ass.

Now Chaz watched her disappear into the pantry, the top of her skull mossed with blond fuzz. He sniffed and wiped his eyes.

*Note to self: no crying in boot camp.*

Ariel. Still trying to horrify the folks. She’d been working at it a long time. The dungeon vampire slut phase. The blessedly brief vegan era (which Marilyn, to her credit, stoically cooked right through as though she actually considered lentils edible). The excruciating “men in uniform” phase (which, to Felix’s obvious relief, had been another short one, but only because there was just a small Coast Guard contingent on the bay and not a Naval base). Chaz had watched in amazement as Marilyn and Felix proclaimed each nightmare Ariel unleashed on them *artistic, inventive, or original*. Because, above and beyond all else, in a town crawling with more-interesting-than-average children, it was important that theirs were special.

“You’re the surprise guest?” Chaz said, as Ariel rummaged in the pantry. “I was hoping maybe it would be an old nun or the produce guy at Safeway. Someone, you know, interesting.”

She snorted a laugh, but he still felt his mood sag, suddenly wondering why she was home now. Yes, it was the end of the semester, but wasn’t there some Reed College, beret-wearing jerkwad out there waiting for her in an organic

opium den somewhere? This little town — five bars and a community college, nine churches and thirty charter boats — clinging to the tail end of the continent like the last flea on a very large dog, couldn't possibly be the most interesting place Ariel could find to spend the summer. That would be too horrible. Something was up.

Ariel came out of the pantry hefting a dark wine bottle. She appraised him with older sister impunity, tossed the bottle from palm to palm. "Ice fishing in a farmer coat, Chaz? God, that little bitch really creamed you."

Chaz tried to say that he was over Nettle, but a sudden calamitous crashing of pots and pans rang out in the kitchen.

Ariel jumped, barely catching the wine bottle against the sweater Chaz had paid a fortune for at Nordstrom in Anchorage. On Christmas Eve, he'd given an identical one to Nettle, and she'd declared it "bourgeois" and laid it back in its tissue-lined box saying she was concerned that they didn't share the same "moral core," that they didn't "value the same values." Apparently she'd been right.

But loyal Ariel was wearing *her* sweater, and now she clutched the bottle even tighter against it with mock horror. "I drop this baby, Felix rewrites the will."

And then all the sarcastic silliness left her face. She bit her lip and sighed. "Christ, Chaz. You look like shit. The next time I see Nettle, I'm going to gouge her fucking eyes out."

Chaz threw his arms around her and crushed her to him. "How long will you be here?" He pressed his cheek against her ear and squeezed until the wine bottle dug into his breastbone. "How long?"

"I'm going to drop it!" she screamed, laughing.

"Oh, lunatics," Marilyn sang from the kitchen, "that's a very good pinot!"

"Ariel!" Chaz hugged her even harder. "How long do you have?"

OVER DINNER — Marilyn and Felix's specialty: smoked local sablefish in a vodka/tomato cream sauce, lemon risotto, green beans with fresh mozzarella — Ariel regaled them with tales of her travels with the boyfriend *du jour*. Marilyn and Felix reminisced about countries they'd hitchhiked across in the 70s. Felix seemed pleased to hear that Turkey was just as Turkish as it had been when he last checked. Marilyn tried to bring the conversation around to Morocco, but Ariel



wanted to talk about Tunisia. Or something. Chaz was not following closely. He ate silently, watching his wild and beautiful sister working hard at being her wild and beautiful self, and waiting for an opportunity to tell them what he'd done.

His mother had shifted gears — and continents. “After Bali, I hitched a boat ride to Darwin. In those days, Northern Australia was so — ” Marilyn stopped, mid-sentence. She looked at Chaz, and then at Ariel. “This conversation is boring your brother, dear. Maybe he has something more interesting to offer?” She gave him a look.

“Me?” Chaz snorted. “You guys are boring, and that’s my fault somehow?”

Ariel raised her eyebrows appreciatively. “Touché.”

Marilyn frowned, stirring a string bean through the sheen of tomato cream sauce on her plate. She looked across the table at Felix as if she thought he should do something.

“What?” Felix said, and left his mouth hanging open.

There was a small pink crescent of sauce on his chin. In the dense silence, Ariel reached over and dabbed at it with her napkin, gently pushing her father’s jaw shut in the process. Then it was Marilyn’s turn to snort, and the whole table exploded into laughter.

“Me, boring?” Felix roared, hammering the table. “I’ll drink to that!”

Marilyn shrieked, hurled a gulp of wine down her throat and shrieked again. Ariel guffawed, clutching her stomach. They couldn’t get it under control. They didn’t want to. This was what they loved most. Barely contained chaos. They laughed at the din of their own laughter — Marilyn baying like a coyote, Ariel squealing with hilarity, Felix choking and coughing and laughing and laughing and laughing.

“Boring!” Felix gasped, and they laughed harder still.

Chaz tried to laugh, too, but without much success, given that he could end the hilarity with four simple words. Once again he made the decision to tell them. But even as he did, he noticed the tears coursing down his sister’s cheeks.

They weren’t the tears of gaiety washing Marilyn’s face, or Felix’s. These were running *from* the laughter, not *with* it. And then it hit him. She was sick. She hadn’t shaved her head to get even more attention. She was bald because she was sick. That’s why she’d come home. She’d tried to keep it from Marilyn and Felix as long as she could. But now she’d come back to them, as though they could

somehow get her out of this trouble — like everything else they'd fixed for her. Why else would she take time out from her travels, her adventures, love affairs?

Why? Because she was really, really sick.

Chaz waited, something tugging at a nerve in the right side of his neck.

They finally pulled themselves together, sipped their wine, dabbed the corners of their eyes. Felix sighed, "Oh, brother," and speared the last lambent sliver of fish on his plate. Ariel held her arms tight across her sweater and let out a long whoosh of air.

Chaz watched his sister carefully, the idea of her sickness growing inside him like...well, like a sickness. Some metaphors can't be improved upon. She seemed smaller now, softer, and fragile too. Ariel, fragile? That was a word he would never have imagined in the same breath as her name.

Their parents still couldn't see it, Chaz realized. They refused to figure it out for themselves, and Ariel was not intending to tell them until it was impossible to hide. He knew her that well, even if they didn't. She was sick and she was embarrassed by that and had been covering it up, trying to make the shaved head a statement of some kind. But sooner or later it had to come out, because there was no way to be sick ironically, no way to make being sick cool or smart. Sickness was not special. It was common. Anybody could get sick. She was not going to admit to being that ordinary until she absolutely had to. And neither were Marilyn and Felix.

Felix smiled fondly at Ariel. "I gotta tell you, I love that dome. You look more like me than ever."

Ariel leaned almost out of her chair, grinning. She put one hand behind Felix's neck, pulling him to her. They touched the tops of their hairless heads together.

"Let me get the camera!" Marilyn leapt out of her seat.

Felix and Ariel remained leaning into each other as if joined at the skull.

Marilyn was already back, snapping the photo.

Before he could stop himself Chaz said, "When are you going to tell them about the hairdo, Ariel?"

Ariel pulled away from her father and straightened in her chair. "Sure," she said, calmly. But she gave him a look that he couldn't read. Was she bluffing or not? "Sure," she said again, more cheerfully.

Marilyn still clutched the camera in both hands. “What?” Her eyes glistened with anticipation. “Is it a surprise? Wait. Let me get dessert.”

“She just wants to look like me,” Felix said. “Lots of women do.”

Ariel stared across the table at Chaz a moment longer. Then she blithely launched into a story about her friends at school all shaving their heads in support of women in the shoe factories of Bolivia, or maybe it was Botswana. Chaz tuned it out.

Marilyn and Felix were listening, though, and that was the important thing. They were enthralled again, devouring what Ariel was saying, pleased that she, their daughter, was carrying on the work that they had started so long ago, the hard, hard work of being interesting.

“I have a surprise too,” Chaz whispered. But nobody seemed to hear him.

AT THE LAKE, after the ice fishermen had gone, he’d walked down to the shore through the granulated snow, the wind like a hand between his shoulder blades, urging him out onto the ice. A gust slammed across the lake and sent a long shiver across the top of the spruce forest on the far side. He knelt at one of the holes the men had left, zipped the heavy canvas coat up, and lay with his chin on the small mound of ice chips surrounding the hole, his hands shading his face as he peered into the clear water. Halfway down, perhaps six feet below him, a Dolly Varden char hovered, suspended in the water column, motionless but for the smallest movements of its white-rimmed pectoral fins. Its lavender torpedo form was dotted with dreamy pink spots, the tip of its snout a flaming yellow-orange. Even by trout standards, the fish was extreme, extravagant, extraordinary.

Chaz whispered to it; “I joined the Army.”

THEY WERE RAVING about the dessert now.

Not sure what Marilyn had put in front of him, Chaz lifted a spoonful to his lips. The food acknowledged, his sister went back to her story, and his parents joined in from time to time, Felix saying, “I read something about those factories somewhere,” Marilyn groaning with weary indignation, “It never ends.”

Chaz let the sugary dessert lie on his tongue, melting, as Ariel, his beautiful, bald sister rambled on, clearly knowing, as Chaz knew, that their parents, Marilyn and Felix, would not only believe her, but were already forming the idea of

repeating this story themselves, at this very table, over some of the best damned meals you could find at the end of a road to nowhere, savoring the idea of retelling it to their friends, again and again and again, for years to come — even long after their children were gone.



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# House Falling Into the Sea

by Vivian Faith Prescott

*Vivian Faith Prescott is fifth-generation Alaskan, born and raised in Wrangell, Alaska. She lives in Sitka, Alaska, and part-time at her family's fish camp in Wrangell. She's married to US Coast Guardsman and poet Howie Martindale, and together they have six children, seventeen grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. Vivian is of Sáami, Irish, Suomalainen, and Norwegian descent (among others). Her children are Raven of the T'akdeintaan clan/Snail House (Tlingit). She has an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Cross Cultural Studies from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She also has a M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Alaska Anchorage. Vivian's short stories, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies such as Cold Flashes: Literary Snapshots of Alaska, Cirque, Altered States, and Tidal Echoes.*

*"House Falling into the Sea" is a fictional story appearing in the forthcoming linked collection The Dead Go to Seattle (Boreal Books). The story depicts an Elder's struggle to come to terms with loss and change. The stories in The Dead Go to Seattle connect through generations of families living in Wrangell, Alaska, prior to and in the midst of worldwide catastrophe: global warming creating havoc with the island's inhabitants.*

CHARLIE JOHNS KNEW it was going to be a strange year when he found a three-headed dandelion blooming in mid-October. Charlie sat drinking his coffee in front of the picture window at his home on Petroglyph Beach. His dog, Ossa, an old Australian shepherd, sat beside him. Charlie was Wooshkeetaan, Eagle, from the Shark House. He is called *Aan gux* — the keeper or backbone of the land. His mother was from Hoonah but he'd lived in Wrangell all his life. His father was Kaawdliyaayí Hit: House Lowered from the Sky. Here, Charlie lived among people from the Sun House and the Dogfish Intestine House as well as the Norwegians, the Finns, the Sáami, the Filipinos, and even the Chinese and Japanese. There were Vikings, wizards, bears, *siyokoy*, dragons, and *Susanoo*.

The best thing, though, about living in Wrangell was living among stories. He practically lived at the coffee shop. Their stories lived there, and at the gas pump,

and the work float, and at Shakes Island, and among the petroglyphs beside his house. Since Jesse, his wife of many years, had died, he began to spend his time among rocks, wandering with his thermos of coffee along the beach. He knew exactly where the Raven stealing the sun story was carved as well as the spiral and the killer whale. But he worried lately about the beach and the erosion happening all along Alaska's coastline.

The previous winter, an ice floe broke loose from the Stikine in March. Early break up, they called it. He didn't believe it. But, the large sheet of ice came round the corner, then along the shoreline, and smashed into his beach. The tides were higher these past few years and the storms stronger. In fact, the sea had eroded the shore so many times that he had to move his house back two times in the last twenty years. It wasn't just Wrangell, though. It was Shishmaref, Sitka, Tenakee, Newtok, villages on the Ninglick River, and more.

Now Charlie sat down in the wet sand, tucking his raincoat under his butt. He held his thermos in his gloved hands and took a big sip of coffee. The gulls circled overhead, which made him feel comforted, since Jesse had been a seagull. She was T'akdeintaan. Some people called her a kittiwake, but she was old school and claimed she was a seagull. He looked up and screeched back at them.

Every morning since Jesse's death, he'd made a point to check up on the rocks.

Someone had to. Someone had to take care of them. Jesse who used to clean up the beach. She'd pick up Pepsi cans and white plastic grocery bags. Now it was his turn, he supposed, a sad turn. But he'd take it. He'd take anything that would still connect him to Jesse. He'd started by just trying to sit among the rocks but he couldn't ignore the garbage. Once he'd found remnants of a small fire and a pile of beer bottles. Another time, a roll of butcher paper that people used to make rubbings of the petroglyphs, lying wet and soggy on the beach. He found orange letters sprayed across a petroglyph and it wasn't even something profound: the numbers "1995." That really pissed him off.

These were his people's petroglyphs. At least that's how he thought of them. He often had words with the tour guides and the town fathers when they'd claim they didn't know who carved the petroglyphs. They were his ancestors. He knew this. It was as if the white folks were saying that the land around here really

wasn't Tlingit territory because they weren't here first. You migrated here and so did we.

Sometimes he had to stop the tourists from defacing the petroglyphs. At first, he simply stood on the porch with his rifle in his hand. That's when the cops got involved and told him not to scare the visitors — they don't call them *tourists* anymore. The government had made the beach a state historic site and all that did was bring more people there. Some protection.

One day, the government sent his nephew Johan to talk to him. "You're in trouble, Uncle, for telling folks there's a limit per day and they can't go down there."

Sure, he'd done that. It was clever. He was the first one there in the morning, standing on their new-fangled platform and boardwalk, telling the tourists that the place was closed for renovations, or they had reached their visitor limit already, or that they had to go to the imaginary ticket booth in town and get a ticket. They always believed him. Who'd think an old man like him would be a liar.

"You are sooo lying, Uncle Johns." His nephew Johan had chuckled.

Now Charlie looked up at the typical clouds shrouding the mountains. No, he didn't mind local folks coming down to the beach making petroglyph rubbings. He loved to see little kids tracing the spiral petroglyph with the fingers. He'd tell them about the cycle of salmon. He used to help the kids find the petroglyphs they wanted. Then he'd supervise them. That was before it became illegal to make rubbings. Now they had fake ones on the platform that tourists could make rubbings from. He supposed it might be for the best. But this past summer, someone had spray painted a genuine petroglyph with blue paint. It had been there nine thousand years, maybe ten thousand. Probably weren't kids because all the kids he'd met on the beach really liked the glyphs.

Charlie took another sip of his hot coffee and then remembered he'd stuffed a breakfast roll in his raincoat pocket. He took it out, ate some, and shared a piece with Ossa and a brave gull hopping on a rock nearby.

The clouds darkened, moving a sheet of rain toward the shore. He supposed he'd better head back inside. Besides, the beach was clean today and the man in the green state uniform would be showing up soon. After the last blue paint incident, Charlie was pretty mad, but he'd always been told to think about his

words first before saying anything. He didn't know what he was going to say yet, but something had to be done. He just didn't know what.

Plus he didn't think the local government or the state of Alaska was used to Natives speaking up about things, especially in Wrangell. Recently, his niece, Sarah, got the city to say that the Tlingits were here first. She had to keep writing letters to them, put stuff in the paper, and finally, she called the Governor. The city used to say that Wrangell was the first white settlement in Alaska. They forgot all about the Tlingits who've inhabited the island for thousands of years.

Then, in the 1970s, the lawyers left Wrangell Tlingits out of the land claims. He and his friends went to all the meetings, went to DC, and still they forgot. Said *oops* and went on giving out their land to other tribes. They now called Wrangell Natives "the landless." Without the land we are nothing. Without the rocks we are nothing.

He stood and walked among the rocks, heading back home. Ossa followed him, sniffing seaweed along the way. He shook his head. He wasn't landless. It was a strange concept for sure. He could have claimed this beach instead of the state owning it. Maybe claimed Farm Island at the mouth of the Stikine River instead of the white farmhand and his relatives who now owned it. His dad had hunted and fished there. That river was in his blood. *Stikine* meant *Bitter* or *Silty Water*, not *Great River* like the touristy types called it. Hell, it was silty and it could be very bitter. The river had even taken a few of his friends' lives. One fell off a river boat, the *Madeline Rose*. And one winter, another friend went trapping and was found dead, stuck to an ice floe.

Charlie nodded to the river water, mixing with the green ocean in front of his house. Respect that river. Respect the rocks. He was nearly to his house when he turned back toward the beach. A small man walked among the petroglyphs. Charlie thought he recognized him and yelled, "Morning, Mr. Lee." But the man didn't look up. That's when Charlie remembered that Old Mr. Lee had been dead a few years. He and Mr. Lee used to have coffee at the gas station and bullshit about old times. A long time ago, Mr. Lee had told him that the townsfolk didn't want the Chinese buried in the white cemetery. They used to cut them up and shove them into barrels and salt them. Then someone was supposed to let the Chinese government know so they could come get their countrymen. Mr. Lee said he



didn't know if anyone ever did, but he was never going to set foot on Deadman's Island, that was for sure.

The man bent down and rubbed sand off a rock, the spiral petroglyph — Charlie's favorite. The man crouched there, staring at the rock. Finally, Charlie turned back and headed up the beach a little farther, to his house. The tide was flowing inward, already lifting a log from the beach. Soon it would be pitching October waves onto his front porch.

Last week, Johan had come to visit. He asked Charlie about moving the house back again. Charlie had said, "I'm not moving back. I'm old. I won't be able to see the petroglyphs if I move to where you want me to, anyway. And I'll be too close to that damned road."

CHARLIE AND HIS friend Nillan Hetta sipped their coffee and looked out the window.

"The big tides are coming. Lots of bad weather," Nillan said. "You ready?"

"I'm ready."

"I like your plan but you're a crazy son-of-a-bitch, you know that?"

At three a.m., four days later, on a November night, the dark folded over the island and the wind howled. No one could hear Nillan rolling the bobcat off the back of his lowboy trailer and driving it down the beach. The bobcat heaved the rocks into Charlie's house. Charlie had torn out the two-by-fours on his front doorway to make it bigger, then eventually the wall, and most of the walls inside his house. Nillan drove right up a makeshift ramp and set the rocks down in Charlie's living room and in what was once his bedroom and kitchen.

The previous week, Johan and two of his buddies had come over and put in Styrofoam floats beneath the house. They didn't think it would hold forty petroglyphs, but some of them wouldn't be able to move, anyway. They'd pile in what they could. Now, the house sank down a bit, but the large logs beneath it held. After all the rocks were loaded, Nillan put the bobcat away and drove home in the dark.

Waves thrashed the front of the house, like a carwash blasting a truck, smashing into the large window. The tide stuck its tongue under the logs and lifted Charlie's house as if it were a piece of candy to be eaten. The house rocked and then lifted, bobbing on the sea. Charlie sat inside in his recliner, the only piece of

furniture he saved, holding on to a two-by-four post. Ossa, big as he was, jumped in his lap. Ossa whined. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

The current shoved the house out hard and it thumped. What was that sound? Charlie cringed as he felt the rock scraping the floats beneath him, but it didn't stop the little house from floating. The storm surged and the wind blew. Out his front windows, the night was so dark he couldn't see anything. Hanging onto the skeleton frame of his house, he left Ossa on the chair and went to the living room and then the bedroom, looking out the windows. Through his bedroom window, the faint outline of the shore swept by. He was moving fast. Real fast.

Charlie sat back down in his chair, trying his best to take sips of coffee from his thermos. That's when he heard it. He'd heard that sound before, a howl spiraling by. Nillan, who worked for the Forest Service, had once taken him to Garnet Ledge to show him the destruction left by one of those winds. No one believed Nillan when he'd reported that something like a tornado had torn through the trail, making a swath through the trees, so he'd shown Charlie. Charlie remembered the giant spruce and hemlock toppled as if they were sticks.

Now the house spun around. The wind knocked the kitchen window in. Glass crashed onto the petroglyphs. The house moaned and creaked with each wave that hit it, slopping over the logs. Beneath him, the floorboards wobbled and a large piece of the float gave way and popped up from beneath the house. One corner of the house sank down. A piece of float whipped up and hit the roof hard. The house shook.

"Shit," Charlie said to Ossa, who now quivered at his feet. The house rocked and rolled on the waves as he clambered over the rocks on his hands and knees to the corner of the living room where water was seeping in fast. The wind howled and the house twisted again. Finally, the house stopped twisting. It went up and down as if riding huge waves.

Charlie looked out the living room windows and, this time, he was face to face with the white froth of a wave at least ten feet high. "Christ, the size of the waves," he said out loud.

He kneeled among the petroglyphs, his hand clutching a two-by-four post, and hung on for what seemed like hours. Waves and wind bellowed through the house. The house tilted and cracked with a splitting sound. Charlie fell sideways, hitting his head on a rock.

Water, waves, and wind roared through his ears as if he had an inner ear infection. He woke to Ossa licking his face. He blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness, then reached out and felt around. Beneath him, it felt solid. Should he move? His back hurt. His arm was on fire. He reached to touch his arm, feeling a big gash, sticky with blood. It was then that he realized that the ground wasn't bending like the floorboards in his house. He was lying on a beach on a small piece of his living room floor. He sat up. He could see the airport lights. He was on Deadman's Island.

Crap. He hadn't made it far. The wind had picked him up and slid his house on the waves to the small island. He could make out sand around him and a rocky beach. He stood and patted his dog. Ossa dripped water. The old dog stank, plus he limped, but his tail still wagged.

Charlie walked along the shoreline, discovering pieces of his house: a wall with sunflower wallpaper, a log from the float beneath the house. There, a piece of his roof. Over there, a small refrigerator banged against a rock. Crap. He stepped over a rock. Parts of his house were scattered up to the tree line, where he found his recliner upright, as if waiting for him to sit in it and flip the television channels. Maybe he could change this channel.

Rain pelted his face. He rubbed his hand across his partly bald head. He'd always dressed in layers, so he took off his flannel shirt and tied it up like a hood. He walked a few steps farther and his foot clunked against a rock. He bent down close to the rock, touching it. "What the hell," he said, feeling the swirl in the rock at his feet. The swirl, he knew, was the symbol for new beginnings in many cultures: Maori, Hawaiian, Tlingit, and Finnish.

He tried to adjust his eyesight, but it seemed darkness had swallowed up the beach. Maybe he had a head injury. He couldn't tell the rock was a petroglyph until he touched it. Floor boards from his house surrounded him. "Well, Jesse, I've done it now." He didn't know, really, what he'd done. Or at least the consequences. But it would make a good story, anyway. He stepped around the petroglyphs sunk into the sand. They were stuck, too, like he was.

Charlie sat down and rested for a minute next to the Raven stealing the sun glyph. He traced it with his finger. "Well, Raven," he said out loud, "I guess we'd better build a fire."

Up near the tree line, Charlie fumbled with the lighter that was still in his pants pocket. His hands were cold. His thumb barely worked, but eventually he lit it. Moss covered the stumps, stones, and roots, so he couldn't see where the graves or the ghosts were. Were the barrels still here? Were there graves? Markers? He'd never been here. Never wanted to go here, really. With the lighter held out to the woods, he said, "Ch'a aadei yéi xat na.oo." Please forgive me. It was one of the few Tlingit phrases he knew. In English, he asked the island's dead to forgive him for trudging around.

Charlie gathered wood from the small stand of trees and found a dry spot under a tree and built a fire. The rain softened to a light mist. The fire lit up the beach and Charlie sat by the fire, rubbing his hands over Ossa's hair. He stopped in mid-stroke, seeing a shadow walking along the beach. It looked like a small man or a child.

The person stopped near the spiral rock and bent over. The person never looked in Charlie's direction, in the direction of the fire, but instead traced the spiral pattern over and over. Charlie knew what he was doing, as he'd done the same thing many times, pressing his finger into backbone of the spiral, letting his mind wander to a centered place in a spiral galaxy, our Milky Way. In the early morning light, the man faded away, and the fire died down to white ash.



*Vivian Faith Prescott's website is <http://vivianfaithprescott.com> and she blogs at <http://planetalaska.blogspot.com>. For more great reads from Alaska's best authors, visit our fine [independent bookshops](#).*

# **From *Plantation Native***

by John Tetpon

*John Tetpon proudly bears the Inupiaq name of Nasoalook (Nashalook), who was the last living shaman in Unalakleet, a village just south of his childhood home, Shaktoolik. When he was ten years old, Tetpon moved with his family to Nome; four years later, they moved to Anchorage.*

*To this day, Tetpon says, his life has been a struggle for cultural identity. “To recover what the church and the BIA school erased from my life has been my focus,” he says. “It has been a journey to the vast nothingness, an empty soul looking for something I missed but couldn’t identify. That emptiness was always there, my constant companion. For decades I sought fulfillment and found nothing. Now, at age seventy-two, I have finally come close to an answer or two. Forgive my anger. Forgive my disappointments. Forgive my pointing of fingers. Forgive my discontent. Forgive my dis-ease. Just abide with me.”*

*The excerpts that follow come from Tetpon’s memoir-in-progress.*

## **Shaktoolik, 1943**

I WAS BORN in Shaktoolik, Alaska, a small village of about 130 Inupiaq people located on the shores of Norton Sound, on a narrow spit of land between the Bering Sea and a river. The day of my birth, January 5, 1943, was said to have been bitterly cold, with a stiff north wind blowing hard against the lightly insulated house we called home, a two-story tarpaper affair fitted with a cement chimney and heated by firewood cut from logs gathered from the ocean shore

I am one of nine children, and the third from the oldest. There were six of us boys and three girls. Growing up in a village gave us limited knowledge of the world outside. We would leaf through *Life* magazines and the *Saturday Evening Post* and see photos of cars, farms, railroads, highways, cities, large houses lit with electricity, and airplanes, causing us to wonder where these things came from. All we had were wood stoves, three-room houses, and dog teams.

What couldn't be hunted or gathered from the land was mail-ordered from Montgomery Wards and Sears Roebuck. Well-used catalogs and magazines spent the end of their days in outdoor toilets. Crumpled and softened before use, their pages doubled as toilet paper. In most households, laundry was done on washboards and the clothes hung out to dry.

In winter, the need for wood for heat was constant. Sometimes late at night, when the stars were out, we could hear our neighbors cutting wood with a lumberjack's saw. The sound is unforgettable — *whee-whew, whee-whew* — all night long. I never paid a lot of attention to it, but I also knew when we ran out of firewood at our house — we could see our breath in the air. But that was a common occurrence and no one in our household gave it much thought. It was a fact of life.

In those days, shoes were scarce. Most of the time, we wore handmade skin boots, except in summer when we each got a pair of rubber boots. And if we were lucky, we also got a pair of Montgomery Ward overalls, which were always a little too big, but we were expected to grow into them.

Shaktoolik was probably like any other Native village back then. There was one store, a post office in the front arctic entry of my Uncle Simon Bekoalok's house, one schoolhouse, and one church. Back then, life in the village was tranquil. Peaceful. These were the days when things like homicide and suicide didn't exist, days when alcohol and drugs weren't even a thought or concern. Tribal councils ensured that long-held standards of village behavior, handed down from generation to generation, were followed by everyone. We children learned quickly that a village curfew was a rule to be followed, lest a visit by a tribal council member was made to our home.

Discontent, if there was any, was never shown in the open.

Our only means of knowledge of an outside world were our radio and magazines and books. For me, my world was the sky, the horizon, and the hills, rivers, lakes, and tundra. Once in a while, if radio reception was good and the battery was strong enough, we would listen to music along with radio shows like *The Green Lantern*, *The Inner Sanctum*, *Doctor Six-Gun*, and *The Lone Ranger*.

Like most villages, Shaktoolik was a case study of feast and famine. There was plenty of game in spring, summer, and fall, and little to none in winter. Dried

fish stored in a cache built on stilts behind our house provided most of our food. Sometimes the cached fish lasted until spring, and sometimes it didn't.

The center of life for the villagers was the church and the Bureau of Indian Affairs school. These provided rhythm and cadence to our daily lives. In the 1950s, Christianity was booming in our part of Alaska, and everyone went to church. By that time, most villagers had come to believe that their culture came from the devil because white preachers said so, and old practices like singing Inupiaq songs and Inupiaq dancing had been extinguished.

There was great fear among villagers that they would go to a place called Hell if they uttered anything cultural or if they danced. Shame and angst stood firmly against anyone saying the Inupiaq word for *shaman*. Villagers stood in awe of white people and treated them with a combination of respect and fear. Elders who had once been the foundation of our cultural heritage had become pillars of the church, and though I didn't know it then, our cultural practices were being erased. And with our culture went the language. The Bureau of Indian Affairs teachers demanded we learn English and forget Inupiaq. None of our parents chose to object.

ON THE FIRST day of school, I was so excited about school that I was caught speaking my own language to my friends. "We're going to learn how to read and write, just like our older brothers," I said out loud. Really loud.

I was smiling and happy.

An arm grabbed me around my neck. The teacher. I could see his white shirt and plain black tie. He lifted me off the floor by my head, shoved a bar of soap in my mouth, and began to grind it over my teeth and into my throat. I gagged. I gasped for air. I could feel my legs thrashing about. I tasted the soap as it began to bubble in my mouth. Every time I took a breath, I felt soap bubbles in my throat, but no air. I wondered why this was happening. What had I done?

The teacher dropped me on the hardwood floor. I was limp. I could barely breathe. I was crying. I was confused. At six years old, I had never been so mistreated by anyone. All I had done was tell my friends that we were going to learn to read and write. Wasn't that the purpose of school?

“This is how I will deal with anyone speaking their language!” yelled the teacher. “This is what you will get when you speak your language! This is what you will get when you do not speak English!”

At the time, I did not know what he said because I could not understand English. I got to my feet, still whimpering. And scared and confused.

“Give me the yardstick!” yelled the teacher. An older student quickly complied, his body language speaking fear and trepidation. The teacher walked me to a corner and placed the stick in my hand. “Face the class! Stand here with it, stick it out as far as you can, and KEEP IT THERE!”

An older student interpreted. With tears rolling down my face, I did as he ordered. I stuck the yardstick out as straight as I could. I held it there for what seemed like hours.

DESPITE THIS AND other injustices, my memories of being raised in Shaktoolik are mostly happy ones. I was a boy who took risks, but boys in small villages like ours were closely watched even as they wandered and explored like puppies. “They’ll learn,” was the by-word for us. And we did.

In the spring of 1953, my grandmother Kipo took ill. She was perhaps in her eighties, though no one knew her real age because birth records were never kept until schools were established. She lay in bed and ceaselessly sang gospel songs translated from English to our Native language. Since she did not know how to read, she would write her songs in hieroglyphics — picture songs. One of her favorites was “In the Sweet By and By.”

Grandma Kipo was a frail little woman. She stood about five feet tall and couldn’t have weighed more than a hundred pounds. She never went anywhere without her *blot-tuq*, a head scarf made of cotton or flannel. And she always wore a dress. Everywhere. Even out on the tundra when she was picking berries.

Grandma was our rock. When our parents went squirrel trapping or hunting in summer, she took care of all of us, a house full of kids. We weren’t sure where she came from. Some said she was born and raised along the lower Kuskokwim River. There was almost nothing she couldn’t do. Once she and I went out on the tundra to place snares for rabbits. After a night, we went back to check and sure enough, there were three or four.

We had fresh snowshoe rabbit soup for supper.



Grandma was a storyteller. Her stories must have been told years ago by her own parents because they all had a reason behind them. At bedtime, her stories were scary and the endings always had a “be quiet and go to sleep” purpose. We all loved her dearly. To sit in her lap was a special treat.

One day in late May, Grandma Kipo asked my brother Floyd and me to go out hunting for fresh game. She looked small and pale and was very weak. As she gave each of us a small hug, she said goodbye.

Floyd and I walked for what seemed like miles. The ground still had patches of snow but the air was warm enough for light jackets. Once we had a few ptarmigan in hand, we sat on a beach log to rest.

“Do you see that?” Floyd asked in Inupiaq.

We were both facing the village and could see the sun glisten on the rooftops of the houses. The sky was bright blue with a few white clouds hanging high. As we trained our eyes on the village, a bright shaft of light slowly made its way from the heavens and touched the top of our house.

“She died,” Floyd said.

We ran home as fast as we could. As we reached our front door, villagers had started going into our home to pay their respects and wish our family well.

Until we were adults, Floyd and I never mentioned that shaft of light to anyone.

## **Nome, 1953**

SOON AFTER GRANDMA was buried, our family moved to Nome, a small Northwest Alaska town with a long history of gold fever, frontiersmen, lawlessness, taverns, bars, cars, and churches. In 1953, the atmosphere of a rowdy frontier town still hung heavy in the air. Some bar owners wore cowboy hats, chewed tobacco, and wore fancy cowboy boots — like the one who allegedly kicked a Native man to death in front of his bar. The owner said the man had made a pass at his wife. Some said that in exchange for a \$250,000 bribe, the bar owner got off.

The town’s newspaper, a tabloid-sized publication called the *Nome Nugget*, rarely ran a story about Native people. It was as if Native people didn’t exist. In Nome, Native people were like background noise — and looked upon as

nuisances. Shopkeepers, restaurant owners, bar owners, and owners of seedy hotels hung signs on their windows that said *No Eskimos or Dogs Allowed*.

Nome was a small town, and everybody seemed to know everybody else's business. Dad would always remind us we were to keep the family name clean. He and Mom never drank like lots of other Native people did in town. So we didn't grow up in a home that was terror-filled as our neighbors did. Which is probably a good thing. But we were tied to a religious lifestyle, with dysfunctions similar to those of families crippled by alcohol.

In Nome, the Evangelical Covenant Church, of which I was a member since birth, practiced an acceptable form of racial division — white members sat on the left side, and Native members sat on the right side. I didn't think much of it then. It was normal. And although "love thy neighbor as yourself" was preached from the pulpit, the all-white leadership never said a word about prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination in Nome, which was everywhere.

Having grown up in the small, protective village of Shaktoolik, I was unaware of the evil that people can visit upon others, especially evil from those who hide behind religion and Jesus. One such man was a choir director at the church, a man who also was a radio announcer at the local Armed Forces Radio Station, AFRS. He would spend time at our home, eating with us and visiting.

One day he asked my parents if I could spend the night with him at the Covenant Church parsonage. I didn't think anything of it because he was supposedly a man of God, a good person. Upon getting to the home where he lived, he undressed me and placed me up on his bed and covered me and crawled in beside me. I felt his hands on my private parts. That night he introduced me to feelings I had never before felt. I was at once ashamed and dirty. He told me to never let anyone know.

Other times, he would bring me to the radio station and touch me where I knew deep inside there was something wrong. I began to hate seeing him in church and having him at our house, laughing and talking with my parents as if there was nothing wrong. I grew to hate him. I knew deep within that something was taken from me, something that was sacred.

I could not tell my parents. What would they think? What would they do? I kept that experience buried deep inside. In my adult years, I drank a lot. The pain never went away. It was always there.

## **Anchorage, 1957**

IN SEPTEMBER 1957, I entered the seventh grade at Anchorage Junior High School, located in the downtown area. I had no friends. I recall many lonely days of walking the ten blocks to school and back to our shabby little house on Karluk Street in Fairview, a suburb of Anchorage where most of the poor people lived, especially Blacks and Natives.

Our family lived next door to a preacher named Job Kokochuruk and his wife Mary and their adopted daughter Alice. Job and Mary held church in the front room of their house every Sunday, and our family made up the only church members. That was the birthplace of the First Evangelical Covenant Church of Anchorage, which now stands at 12th and C Street, near downtown Anchorage.

There were two good things about going to church there — I learned to play the guitar and it was a safe place to be. And I learned to dress in suits bought from the Salvation Army Thrift Store. I wore “new” shoes, and “new” shirts, too, also from the Salvation Army Store. Before school started, it became our shopping center.

We barely ate during our first year in Anchorage. There were times when Dad and I would walk miles to a game processing plant on the west end of town and pick up a box of moose meat scraps and take it home for Mom to make into stew. Dad also carved small ivory pieces for sale. My cut from helping him sand the pieces was usually a pencil or a comb for school.

My first teacher at Anchorage Junior High was Mrs. Goodfellow. My second one was a blind man named Jimmy Trietch. I recall his walking cane well; he regularly used it to poke students when they misbehaved.

One day Mrs. Goodfellow announced that there was to be a spelling bee in class. I had never heard of a spelling bee but won handily, though I didn't know a whole lot of English. Perhaps it was a fluke, an anomaly. Or perhaps it was the result of that first grade teacher punishing me for speaking my Native language and ordering my classmates and me to learn English and learn it well.

After winning a few more rounds of the spelling bee at the school, I became the overall winner for Anchorage Junior High and was entered in the all-schools

contest. My picture appeared in the newspaper. There were students from all over Anchorage, each a winner in their school.

After several days of spelling, I misspelled a word and was counted out.

As the year ended, I remember being told by my seventh grade teacher that although I was not as well educated as the rest of the students, she would pass me on up to the eighth grade. The next three grades, eighth, ninth, and tenth, remain somewhat of a mystery to me. I don't recall learning much. I do remember, though, that my biology teacher, Mr. Burlingame, once stopped me in the halls of West Anchorage High to ask me why I was failing.

"Johnny," he said. "Our records show you have an IQ of 145. Why are you not making it?"

I didn't have an answer for him, but did say I would try harder. I never studied, though. I was more interested in playing rock and roll on my guitar. Because of my loneliness, I immersed myself in music and learned to play the guitar well. Duane Eddy, The Ventures, and even Chet Atkins were my guitar heroes. I decided I'd had enough of church and church people. I began smoking cigarettes, an act that took the courage of a lion. Church people raised their eyebrows all the way up to their conservative, slicked back hairlines. I knew they had me destined for hell. I grew my hair long, Elvis Presley style, and began experimenting with booze — a beer here and a beer there.

MY JUNIOR YEAR in high school, a new school complex opened in East Anchorage. Most of the students came from poor backgrounds, from Fairview and Mountain View as well as Eagle River, Chugiak, and other outlying areas.

As my guitar acumen increased, so did my popularity. But having been a solitary loner and a shy one at that, I had trouble relating to others. Still, I tried as hard as I could because I liked being around people. I was soon being asked to join or form a rock and roll band.

I found a drummer and another guitar player. Richie, the drummer, looked Italian, with black hair and an animated personality. Girls loved him. Don, the guitar player, was tall and lanky, with big, blonde, curly hair. He did best — musically, at least — when he was sort of drunk. Raised by a single father who drank a lot, Don drank a lot too.

The three of us would practice for hours in the Richie's garage. Eventually, we named our group The Rhythm Kings, and we began getting gigs. On any given Friday night, and it always happened an hour before stage time, Don would call to let us know he was in jail. Drunk again.

"Come bail me out," he'd say. "Thirty bucks." And off we'd go to the Sixth Avenue Jail, hand over the thirty dollars, and bring Don and his guitar to our gig. I think Don drank before stage time because he was shy, maybe nervous. It never bothered me.

With The Rhythm Kings, I felt like I belonged. I still play. Blues and classic rock. Old school stuff.

Back then, we played every weekend at a teen hangout called the Century Club and at an occasional bar. Fairview was a neighborhood where petty criminals hung out, and there was no shortage of small bars and nightclubs from which they plied their trade in drugs and prostitutes. One was called The Flame Lounge on Gambell Street, a gravel road running north to south through Anchorage. The Flame advertised as one of the few stripper bars in town.

The weekend my band played there, we had to bring my parents, since we were underage. For four hours, Mom and Dad suffered through the gyrations of a stripper who appeared to be in her fifties. I recall cellulite on her legs, her smelly perfume, her false eyelashes, and her half-hearted dances to our attempts to provide stripper music, a task at which we must have failed miserably. After we got paid, we never went back, although we were invited.

At another club in Big Lake called the Playboy Lounge, my band made yet another musical foray into unknown territory — country music. We could get through a popular song of the day called "Harbor Lights," and we managed to play the song quite a few times. My most vivid recollection is of drunks coming up to the stage to ask: "Hey, can you...can you play...play that...that...song 'Harbor Lights'...one...one more time?"

There is one nightclub I will never forget for as long as I live. It was at the local Moose Lodge on Arctic Boulevard. My band had a New Year's Eve gig there, and we were excited about being booked. We were in a high-class place now, or so we thought.

A half hour before midnight, when the celebration of the coming New Year was supposed to be marked by cheers and happiness, a drunk walked up on the

stage, took my microphone in his hand, looked at me, and asked, “Are you the head nigger here?”

Politely, I asked him to get off the stage. That was his trigger. In front of about 200 patrons, he pulled back on his arm, made a fist, and struck me in the face. Richie jumped to my defense, pushing the man so hard he fell onto the floor in a drunken heap. A knockdown, drag-out brawl ensued.

The manager quieted things down and asked us to leave.

“Not till we get paid,” said Richie. I knew he needed the money because he didn’t have a father and was being raised by a single mother. “We came here to play. We’re here. We’re already set up on the stage.”

Richie and the manager walked away for a minute, and Richie came back with cash in hand — \$300, the agreed-upon amount.

Richie was my buddy, my protector. He always came to my defense. I liked the way he smoked a cigarette, kind of like James Dean, with the same look and style. He had star quality.

One day, Richie came over to our regular practice session, sat down on his drummer’s stool, clapped his hands once, and wrung them together like he had a big announcement to make. He did.

“Well, guys,” he said. “I joined the Navy today. I’m shipping out in a couple of weeks.”

I was stunned. Tears welled up in my eyes. The Rhythm Kings would be no more. I would later learn that Richie became a Pentecostal preacher at a California church. That’s the kind of person he was. I lost track of Don after the band split up.

ACROSS AMERICA, RACISM was rampant. The news on television told of it nearly every day. Blacks were being jailed, and Dr. Martin Luther King was at the forefront of peaceful resistance to violence in the South. For me, there was an undercurrent of racism in school. I fought nearly every week with a different white student who wanted to see how tough I was.

One fight I have never forgotten happened in a bathroom where the walls became smeared with my blood. I don’t know why it happened. It just did. I do remember the racial taunts that preceded every fight. They became as normal as

the rising of the sun. I felt powerless to fend them off. I resigned myself to them as a fact of life that would probably never change.

This was Alaska — the Last Frontier. The Indian wars raged on.

In 1961, I was a senior in high school. I was in love. What a girl she was. Slim, trim, and beautiful. And what a dancer — doing the Mashed Potato was her favorite. We were an item and the whole school knew it.

I was excited about graduating from high school that year. When April rolled around, I knew it was just a matter of weeks before the long ordeal of schooling would be over. One afternoon, as my girl and I were holding hands and talking in the hallway, the vice-principal spotted us. He quickly stepped between her and me. “Johnny,” he said. “We have a rule here. No holding hands.”

With that, he ushered me to the office and gave me my walking papers. I was expelled. Summarily dismissed. Done. I was not to come back. There would be no graduation ceremony for me.

“Johnny, you are a real discipline problem here. You are no damn good. You will never be any good, and you’ll end up on Fourth Avenue just like the rest of ’em,” the vice-principal said as he led me to the school’s front entrance.

That afternoon I walked from East High in Anchorage to Chugiak, a distance of about twenty miles. I cried along the way.

I was angry, not only with the vice-principal, but at my parents as well. I was angry because I knew they would do absolutely nothing. And they didn’t. My parents had a fear of white people in authority — the same kind of fear and genuflection shown to teachers in Shaktoolik and Nome.

“I will make \$30,000 a year, even without a high school diploma or a college degree,” I vowed aloud as I walked along the highway, tears running down my cheeks. “And it will be at the Anchorage School District!”

I also swore that should I have children, I would never allow them to be abused or mistreated. That was a solemn promise I made to myself.

Years later, in the fall of 1973, I was hired as Coordinator for the Indian Education Act program at the Anchorage School District, at a salary of \$29,850 a year. My job was to meet with administrators and faculty to help set up educational programs for Alaska Native students in Anchorage schools.

I knew that same vice-principal was still at East High School and that I would someday encounter him either in the halls or in the faculty lounge.

One morning, on my way to another school, I decided to grab a cup of coffee at East High. I walked into the faculty lounge, filled a cup with coffee, and looked around for a place to sit. At a table a short distance from me sat the man who ten years earlier had dismissed me as a hopeless case, the one who told me that my destiny was to be yet another Native drunk on Anchorage's Fourth Avenue.

I walked up to him. "Hello," I said. "You remember me? I'm Johnny Tetpon."

Now with white hair, the vice-principal looked up at me. I was dressed to a tee: white shirt and tie, expensive slacks, a brand new pair of shoes, and a cashmere overcoat.

The vice-principal said nothing. When he turned his head to look at his cup of coffee, I left. He appeared sad. I felt a tinge of pity for the man.

A few years later, I would have one more encounter with the vice-principal. I was sitting in a room full of people attending a twelve-step program for alcoholics when he walked in. He looked like a broken man.

I never saw him again.



*After attending the University of Alaska in Anchorage and Fairbanks, John Tetpon was awarded a year's fellowship at Yale University. A former reporter for the Anchorage Daily News and the Anchorage Times, he also worked for the Alaska Federation of Natives, the Alyeska Pipeline Service Company, and several Native organizations. After forty-plus years in public service and the private sector, he is now retired and spends his time as an artist, writer, and musician.*

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# Sex on a Glacier

by David Marusek

*Author David Marusek writes science fiction full time in his low-maintenance cabin near Fairbanks, Alaska. According to Publisher's Weekly, "Marusek's writing is ferociously smart, simultaneously horrific and funny, as he forces readers to stretch their imaginations and sympathies." His work has appeared in Playboy, Nature, MIT Technology Review, Asimov's, and other periodicals and anthologies and has been translated into ten languages. His two published novels and clutch of short stories have won the Theodore Sturgeon and Endeavour awards and earned numerous nominations.*

*Marusek is currently at work on an epic science fiction trilogy about love, faith, and space alien invasion in the Alaska bush. Upon This Rock: Book 1 — First Contact is set in the southeast corner of central Alaska in the largest national park and preserve in the U.S. The action is contemporary and involves a large, troublesome family living in a remote compound within the park boundaries. The following excerpts introduce us to one of the book's young human protagonists and his star-crossed house. McHardy is a ghost town located in the middle of the park with public access only by footbridge.*

*from the chapter **Trash Run***

CASEY WAS AT Mail Day when he overheard a couple of locals talking about Orion Beehymer's great grandnephew's car accident. Beehymer was the area's eldest old-timer. He had come to McHardy in the 1960s, well before the establishment of the park. His great grandnephew, who lived down in Oregon, had been texting while driving and caused a serious traffic accident.

Beehymer volunteered to cover the boy's attorney fees and needed to sell off a town lot or two in a hurry to pay them. He owned more of the townsite than anyone else; he'd been buying up the McHardy Monopoly board since 1971.

An impending land sale qualified as headline news in McHardy. Small subdivision lots inside the national park were rare enough, but McHardy townsite lots *never* came on the market. Casey knew what he had to do with this intel — inform his boss, the park superintendent. Despite ANILCA, the federal law governing public lands in Alaska, the park’s long-term bias was to extinguish private inholdings whenever possible. So Casey called park headquarters in Copper Center and dutifully reported what he’d heard. Superintendent Rogers thanked him but said that because of budgetary sequestration, the park would be unable to take advantage of the Beehymer family’s bad luck in Oregon.

Casey wasn’t sure what sequestration was, but he took it for a no.

Not that Beehymer would have sold land to the park service in any case.

A couple of days later, Casey happened to run into the elderly land baron in person on the narrow footbridge across the Caldecott River. “Heard you’re selling town lots,” he said to him.

“Just one lot, ranger.”

“How much you asking?”

“How is that any of the park’s business?”

“I don’t suppose it is. I’m just curious, you know, as a private citizen, not as a park employee.”

Beehymer looked him over. Apparently, all he’d seen of Casey before they spoke was his uniform. “I never heard of a flat hat with a pony tail. Just what kind of parkie are you anyway?”

“A backcountry ranger. We grow beards too. And yodel.”

Beehymer studied him again, this time with a calculating squint. “Forget it. I’d never sell to the likes of you — whatever the likes of you are.”

“I don’t blame you, but I’m not in the market anyway. I was just curious how much a lot goes for in McHardy these days.”

“It’s a lot with a house.”

“Really? It’s got a house on it?”

“That’s what I said. And two sheds and a functioning well. The *only* functioning well on that whole block.”

“So, how much you asking?”

“Fifty-six thousand US dollars, with owner financing.”

Casey didn't have a handle on real estate values, but it seemed to him you couldn't buy a house anywhere for that little money, let alone a house inside the largest national park in the country. A mob of possibilities crowded his mind.

Like most of the other male rangers at Caldecott, Casey lived in the men's bunkhouse. He shared sleeping quarters with five other park and concessionaire employees. This total lack of privacy had put a major crimp on his love life. A national park in Alaska in the summer was an incredibly girl-rich environment. Besides the steady stream of exotic foreign girls visiting from every corner of the globe, there were the seasonal workers, including his female colleagues in grey and green. More than 200 seasonal workers, at least half of them college girls, came up to McHardy and Caldecott each summer to bus the tables, serve the ice cream, interpret the Nature, drive the vans, row the white waters, and lead the glacier hikes. And on the mind of every college girl embarking on her Alaska adventure was the possibility of a summer romance with a tall, strapping, handsome, tree-hugging, 420-friendly, educated, gentle but firm and studly park ranger in his faux-military-style NPS uniform.

At least that was Casey's observation. The problem was finding a little love nest under the Midnight Sun to call his own. A house, his own house in the ghost town of McHardy, would solve that problem big time.

"Fifty-six thou?" Casey said, turning numbers in his head. "Sounds reasonable. So, what's wrong with it?"

"Nothin's wrong with it."

"Then how come nobody's bought it yet? There are plenty of folks wanting to buy town lots, I hear."

"Because nobody came up with the down payment yet."

"Oh, yeah? How much is the down payment?"

"Fifty-six thousand US dollars."

Casey laughed. "That's some owner financing you got there!"

"You can take it or leave it, ranger. Now, I answered your questions. Am I free to go, or are you detaining me?"

"Show it to me."

"You said you're not in the market. Don't waste my time."

"I might be in the market after all."

"You might be, but you'd still be a ranger."

“Listen, Mr. Beehymer. I get it. You’re not a fan of the park service. I’m used to that. But I’m a private citizen too, and a man, and it’s my opinion that a man would have to be totally insane not to want to own a little piece of this.” He waved his arms all around to take in the glacier, the volcano, the former copper mine, Larkspur Peak, Stubborn Mountain, the birds in the sky, the torrent of water under their feet, the billowing road dust, the mosquitos, the fresh odor of earth sprouting new life everywhere you looked.

Orion Beehymer stared at him.

LUCKY STRIKE LANE was located off Main Street on the south side of town. It was unpaved dirt and ended in a cul-de-sac at the McHardy Creek Trail trailhead. The house stood halfway up the block, and to get to it they passed other houses that were either boarded up, falling down, or abandoned altogether. Some had rusted-out old pickup trucks parked on rotting tires in the street out front.

Casey snorted when he first saw the house Beehymer was offering for sale. The exterior siding was falling off, exposing black tarpaper walls. Portions of the roof were boarded over with tattered blue tarps. What windows there were, were broken. Fireweed and horsetails had completely taken over the yard. And one of the advertised amenities, one of two outbuildings, was a flattened pile of splintered rubble. Beehymer stood in front of the expired shed with an expression of befuddlement — when had this happened?

The front door of the house was unlocked, but Beehymer couldn’t force it open more than a few inches. “Frost heave,” he said by way of explanation. “Let’s go around back.”

They entered the house through the back door, and the horror show continued. The hardwood floors were so warped it would take a Mars Rover to navigate them. Paint flakes cascaded from the walls like dandruff. The ceilings all bowed in on their centers, evidence of leaks. The living room ceiling sagged so much Casey was afraid to enter, in case it collapsed on him. Animal scat and not a few tiny, desiccated rodent bodies lay everywhere. The entire bedroom was full of spruce cones, the work of a hyper-enterprising squirrel. The house’s only heating source was an ancient Preway oil-drip stove. No telling if it was still operational. The walls were originally wired for electricity, but the town’s power plant went dark in 1938. And the odor! There was mold somewhere and plenty of it.

Casey looked at Beehymer. What he wanted to say was *You have got to be out of your freaking mind, old man*. What he did say was, “I was looking for something a little — nicer.”

“Thought you might say that. Follow me.” Beehymer led Casey outside to the second, still extant shed. In contrast to the first shed and the house itself, it was of recent construction. Its paint was fresh, the roofing looked good, and the sole window was intact. Inside the shed were work benches, shelves, and bins. There was even an iron anvil in the corner. But what caught Casey’s attention was the twin bed at the far end, next to a camp stove, a propane lamp, and a dish rack.

“Lookie here,” Beehymer said as he unlatched a trapdoor in the floor. He hoisted up the foam-insulated door and shined a flashlight down a large, rectangular hole in the ground, maybe ten feet deep. “Original root cellar. Never freezes down there, no matter how cold out it gets.”

Casey nodded. “Let me get this straight,” he said, helping Beehymer lower the trapdoor. “You’re asking \$56,000 for a shed with a root cellar.”

“Not at all. The town lot by itself is worth what I’m asking, maybe more. The house is a bonus to sweeten the deal. And don’t forget the well. It’s rare to have one here. They used dynamite to dig it.”

“I’m sure the well is great. But the house is more like a giant liability than a sweetener. It’s a mess of lead paint and probably asbestos that needs to be torn down and safely disposed of.”

“You could do that. Tear it down and build new. But let me ask you this. You ever hear of historical preservation?”

“Like what the park service is doing at Caldecott?”

“That’s preservation on an industrial scale. What I’m talking about is smaller. You never wondered why folks around here aren’t tearing down all these firetraps? Because they’re historical, that’s why. All you need to do is get the house listed on the National Register of Historical Places.”

“Um, how do you do that?”

“It’s a cakewalk; this whole town pre-qualifies. And not just the General Store and museum. Private residences too. Hell, even that sorry knocked-down shed out front qualifies as a historical place. Then, when you’re registered, you apply to the state office of History and Archeology for a grant — up to \$50,000. I said grant, not loan. I’m talking about free money. Fifty grand. You live in this

shed while you're working on the house. That little wreck of a house can pay for itself in no time, lead paint and all. That is, ranger, if you wanted to become an *inholder*." He sneered the final word.

*The ranger buys the house but doesn't follow through with the whole historic preservation scheme. Instead, he recruits a cousin from Michigan to come up and help him renovate the derelict house to make it habitable. At least habitable enough for a guy. It probably wasn't a good idea, then, to invite a French woman he'd met the previous summer in Anchorage to visit his little "chalet in the park."*

### **Sex on a Glacier**

DANIELLE ARRIVED ON time at Ted Stevens Anchorage International after an exhausting 24-plus hours of travel with multiple layovers, full-body scans, and legal groping by TSA agents. She and Casey spent the night at the home of one of Casey's Anchorage friends and set out early the next morning on the day-long drive to McHardy. Casey was due back at work the following day.

Danielle ooh la la'ed at the epic scenery for the first couple of hours. The Glenn Highway followed the Matanuska River between two spectacular ranges of mountains. When they passed the grand Matanuska Glacier, glittering in the sun, Danielle asked him to pull over.

They used the public telescopes at the Mile 101 rest area to gaze at the ancient blue ice. Danielle so effused about the beauty, the splendor, and the grandeur of the sight that Casey said, "If you like that one, just wait till you see Caldecott Glacier. This one's nothing compared to the Caldecott."

He didn't want to tell her yet, but ever since their memorable hookup at the Captain Cook Hotel last year, he'd been entertaining a little fantasy in his head in which she played a central role. It was called "Sex on a Glacier."

Casey gassed up in Glennallen and turned south. The Wrangell Mountains were out, but Danielle had fallen asleep and missed one of the most spectacular parts of the trip, their descent into the grand Copper River Valley.

She awoke seventy miles later in Chitina, another ghost town resurrected by historical preservation. There they bid adieu to blacktop, crossed the Copper

River, and began the final leg of their journey, the 59-mile McHardy Road through the park.

Despite her nap, Danielle seemed less and less enthusiastic with each passing mile. She didn't complain exactly, but she set her jaw in a grim look of forbearance, as though counting the minutes till the ride was over. She looked straight ahead, not turning to look even when he pointed out astonishing views and vistas.

After ten weary hours of travel, they arrived at the private parking lot at the end of the McHardy Road. To Casey's surprise and relief, the parking booth was manned by Drew Reed, a local. The odd pioneer family and their encampment were gone. Good riddance. Their school bus was still parked in the lot, but it seemed to be vacant. Drew told him that Orion Beehymer had offered the family another of his lots to camp out on until they found something more permanent.

"More permanent?" Casey said. "They're planning on staying in the area?"

"I guess. Pappy Prophecy — that's the old dude — says that God sent them here to multiply and prosper."

"But haven't they multiplied enough already?"

Danielle asked Casey if something was wrong. Casey parked in his old spot at the end of the lot and replied, "No worries." Danielle drew a blank, and he rephrased, "There's nothing wrong. Everything is good."

He shouldered his duffel and hoisted two of her suitcases.

"We walk?" she said, looking around the stony lot.

"Yes, a little ways."

They set off for McHardy, and when they reached the footbridge, Danielle stopped short, appalled by what lay before her. Or rather, by what sprawled beneath her feet — the churning, foaming, thundering Caldecott River. Casey tried to reassure her. The bridge is sound. The bridge is strong. An army tank could drive across it, if it was a particularly narrow tank. He demonstrated by jumping up and down on the steel grating.

Then, out of the blue, Danielle asked an odd question, one that must have been on her mind for awhile: how far away was the nearest hospital? Confused by the question, Casey had to admit that the nearest medical facility of any kind was located in Glennallen, where they had gassed up four and a half hours ago. "But

don't worry," he said, trying to reassure her, "if there's an accident, we can always medevac out."

"What is this medevac?"

In the end, she crossed the river with her eyes closed, clutching Casey's hand. When at last they'd hiked through town and turned the corner onto Lucky Strike Lane, Casey thought they were home free. He was wrong. The vacant lot that Beehymer had loaned the Prophecy clan turned out to be the brush-choked one next to his own. The crazy family had become his next door neighbors! And like a family of land beavers, they had already cleared the lot of willow and aspen brush and piled it next to the street. The pile was so large it spilled over into Casey's driveway. In the center of the lot, tents and lean-tos surrounded an open fire pit. Dozens of children played in a yard already worn down to bare dirt. Older children tended goats in a makeshift pen and hauled water in plastic jerry jugs and helped prepare dinner at the fire pit. Woodsmoke permeated the area. It looked like they'd been camping there for weeks instead of just the two days he'd been away.

Danielle, in her gorgeous accent, asked, "What does it mean?"

"It means we have neighbors," Casey said.

Danielle slapped the back of her bare neck, and when she removed her hand, there were five bloody smears on her palm. He'd forgotten to warn her about Alaska mosquitos.

Then Danielle turned her attention to his "chalet." Casey looked at it, too, and saw his house for what it was: a tiny, century-old, unpainted shack half-hidden by weeds, with a crooked stovepipe jutting from a moss-covered roof. He had tried to prepare her for rustic accommodations, but as she followed him through the warped doorway, he wondered if he prepared her enough.

She wandered through the tilting rooms in silence and then turned to him with a look of hope in her pretty French eyes and said, "You are joking me, yes?"

Casey dropped their baggage on the living room floor. He wanted to fetch the rest of her stuff from the pickup before some yahoo walked off with it, but the aroma of grilled meat coming from his new neighbors reminded him how hungry he was. So he led Danielle to the kitchen area to show her how to light the propane camping stove that served as his range. Of all the rooms, he had spent the most time and effort fixing up the kitchen area, installing shelves and a wash



basin, a dish rack, and floral print curtains. He had debated with himself whether his attention to the kitchen was in any way sexist, but she was the one who had told him how much she enjoyed gourmet cooking. He surveyed his stock of canned goods and asked her if she liked beef stew and green beans. He laid the can opener on the countertop and pulled a frying pan from a hook.

“I gotta go get the rest of your stuff,” he said and headed for the door. “I’ll be back in about 45 minutes.”

An hour later, when he returned, Danielle was standing in the same spot, and dinner was still in the cans. “I look,” she said, “and I cannot find the toilet room.”

“Ah, the toilet room,” he replied. He’d forgotten to tell her about the outhouse.

THEY SLEPT TOGETHER chastely, both of them too tired and stressed out to attempt lovemaking (though Casey was briefly up for it as he spooned against her silk-clad French hotness). He had stapled cardboard over the bedroom window to block out the midnight sunshine, and the neighbors graciously kept their noise level down.

Casey slept soundly and awoke in the cool hush of early morning to find Danielle still beside him. Her pretty face seemed completely relaxed. Her pretty breasts pressed against the sheer fabric of her chemise. Intermingling fragrances of unbathed bodies seeped from under the covers.

But Casey resisted the tug of his desire and slipped out of bed. Poor baby, she needed her rest. He eased the door shut behind him and tip-toed to the kitchen area to make a hearty breakfast of flapjacks, maple (flavored, high fructose corn) syrup, cantaloupe, and French Roast (instant) coffee. The Prophecy camp outside the kitchen window was stirring. One of the boys was heating water over the fire pit while older girls prepared to feed their little army.

Danielle was awake when he carried the breakfast tray (a scrap of plywood) to the bed (a queen size mattress on the floor). She was listening to the increasing commotion next door but seemed refreshed, and she smiled warmly when he entered. They discussed the day ahead while they ate. Though it was Saturday, it was a work day for Casey. He supposed she’d like a day to herself to settle in and unwind. If she wanted to stretch her legs, there were plenty of things to see in the little tourist town. He drew her a map and highlighted points of interest. There

was the saloon, now part of the hotel, the mining-era museum, gift shops, and the St. Elias Mountain Center. The Mountain Center was a popular destination for culturally and ecologically sensitive young people and, if he wasn't mistaken, its annual nature writing seminar was underway. Maybe she'd like to go over there and write a poem?

Casey donned his ranger uniform, collected his gear, and kissed Danielle good-bye. He fetched his dirt bike from behind the shed, but before starting it, he decided to pay his new neighbors a friendly visit to talk about the brush pile. He found the old patriarch seated at a picnic table serenely sipping coffee as his noisy brood swirled around him. The children stopped in their tracks to stare at Casey. Casey politely introduced himself and wished Prophecy and his family a pleasant day. Prophecy nodded in response.

"Say, I wonder," Casey went on, "could you tell your sons to kindly move that brush pile off my driveway?" As he waited for a reply, Casey uncrossed his arms so as not to appear hostile or overly aggressive.

After glancing at the brush pile, sipping his coffee, and glancing again at the brush pile, Poppy Prophecy raised unblinking grey eyes to Casey and said, "H'ain't on your property."

Casey practically fell over in surprise. "What do you mean it *h'ain't* on my property. Of course it is." And he pointed to the large rock next to the driveway that marked the corner of his lot.

Prophecy only shook his head and pointed to a second rock. "Orion tol' me that rock yonder is the corner. He says your driveway encroaches on his lot and he wants you to move it."

"Move my driveway?" Casey said, stunned by the absurdity of the idea. "That's crazy. My drive is certainly not encroaching. That's the legal corner, and that —" he said, pointing to a tree at the rear of the lot — "is the . . . is the —" The tree was gone, cut down with the rest. Anger flared in him. "You fuckin' cut down my tree!"

In an instant, the three older boys were surrounding him. The eldest, the one who had bedeviled the motorcoach driver, was tall and dark. The middle one was heavysset and gentle-looking. And the fiery youngest one was wearing a patch over his right eye. If Ben Cartwright of the Ponderosa and his sons had evil twins, these Prophecies could be them. Casey waved his arm at his corner rock and

loudly asserted his ownership. Then he said, “I have to go now, but you’d better rectify the situation before I return.” He stalked back to his bike and started it. *Rectify*, he thought. *Did I just use a ten-dollar word with that old hillbilly?*

Casey spent the day inspecting a beaver dam that threatened to undo a couple of summers’ worth of salmon stream restoration work near Round Lake. He was well out of cell phone range and unable to call Beehymer. When he returned to the ranger station at Caldecott, he learned that Beehymer had left town that morning, and no one knew when he’d return. After work, Casey wanted to check in with Danielle and see how she was doing, but he couldn’t stop stewing over that big pile of brush next to his drive, and he rode out Stubborn Mine Trail to Dell Bunyon’s place. Pastor Bunyon was a resident of long tenure and one of the most level-headed locals Casey had met (though Bunyon believed in miracles and preached from the pulpit that President Obama was a crypto-Muslim). Bunyon welcomed him inside and listened sympathetically to his story. When Casey was finished, Bunyon told him that with the recorder’s office fire, everyone in McHardy was pretty much in the same boat.

“Wait. What?” Casey said. “Fire?”

“Chitina used to have the recorder’s office for this district, but it burned to the ground in 1961, and all property records of the original town were lost. Add to that the sloppy way they laid out McHardy in 1910, and no one’s really sure where all the boundaries are. Or, for that matter, who the legal owners are. When the copper mine closed in 1938, people just kinda pulled up stakes and left everything behind. Do you have a warranty or a quit claim deed to that lot?”

“I’m not sure. What’s the difference?”

“I’ll bet it’s a quit claim deed. That means Beehymer’s selling you his interest in the property, but he isn’t guaranteeing he even has any interest in it.”

“Huh?”

“The town’s been trying for decades to scrape up the money to have the entire townsite re-platted, but Orion’s against it, so nothing’s happened yet. But don’t be too concerned. Odds are no one else has a better legal claim to that lot than you do, wherever that lot actually is”

No wonder Beehymer hadn’t been able to find another buyer.

As they talked, Bunyon’s eyes seemed to mist up, and he had to blow his nose. “In the end,” Bunyon concluded, “we must fall back on the Bible’s

admonition to love our neighbors in order to keep the peace in McHardy. And frankly, you have nothing to worry about. Mr. Prophecy is a Christian man; he'll do the right thing. And just consider his position for a moment. With all those mouths to feed and no roof over their heads, he's in a pickle. Cut him a little slack, ranger, and God will reward you for your patience." He wiped a tear from his eye.

When Casey arrived home, he found his drive now completely blocked with brush. If it even was his drive, or his lot, or his house. As Casey detoured his bike around the brush to the shed, something inside him snapped. Leaping off his bike, he started at one end of the pile and began flinging the brush back into Prophecy's yard as far as he could. He worked up a sweat in no time, and the three evil Cartwright twins came over. They didn't speak or interfere but only watched with smug expressions on their dopey faces. Before long, Danielle came out of the house to watch too. To Casey's surprise she was still wearing her skimpy bathrobe from the morning, and to his delight the boys were scandalized enough to avoid looking at her. When she came off the porch to speak to him, they left.

"Hi, honey," he said, tossing a young aspen across the line. "How was your day?"

"Okay," she said in a small voice. She didn't seem okay. Her hair was a mess, and it looked like she'd been crying.

"Did you see the town?"

"*Non.*"

"Check out the Mountain Center?"

"*Non.*"

"The museum?"

"*Non.*"

It occurred to Casey that she'd spent the entire day in bed. "Go inside and get dressed, and I'll take you for a ride, okay?"

She shrugged her delicate shoulders and shuffled back inside.

Casey took her to the Caldecott Glacier Lodge in the mill town to sample the finest dining in a thousand square miles. Then he took her to a lookout above the town where a breeze kept the mosquitos at bay. He pointed out two bald eagles riding updrafts next to Eureka Ridge. Bald eagles, of course, did not resonate in the European imagination, and Casey explained to her their significance to

Americans and the threat of their extinction in the last century due to poaching and DDT use. He told her the names of the mountain peaks and glaciers surrounding them. He talked about the geology, wildlife (but not bears!), and human history of the area. He explained the purpose of the 14-story ore concentration mill beneath them that the park service was restoring. Casey was a backcountry ranger, not an interpretive one, but he had soaked up enough local lore to impress a visitor. Danielle's spirits lifted a bit, and by the time they returned home she was smiling again. The brush Casey had flung across the property line had not been re-staked on his drive, and so he was smiling too.

That evening, after a bottle of wine, Casey heated up many gallons of water so that they could each bathe in the galvanized basin he used for a tub. One thing led to another, and soon they were in bed making love. It started out tender and exploratory but gradually grew louder and more frenzied. Loud and frenzied enough, Casey hoped, to reach the Prophecy camp. And, in fact, as he brayed the arrival of his climax, a couple of fiddles next door struck up a bluegrass tune. Afterward, as they lay in each other's arms, he and Danielle listened to the music and agreed that those people were quite fine folk musicians.

The next day, Sunday, Casey took Danielle back to Caldecott, where he set her up with a computer in the ranger office while he worked, and she spent the day catching up with her friends on Facebook and skyping with her son in Toulouse. After work, Casey took her to the lodge again for dinner, and things were looking so promising that he broached the idea of camping that night on the glacier. She didn't seem too enthused by the idea, but she agreed to go along. After dinner, he borrowed camping and hiking gear from the backcountry storeroom. They hiked up to Bough Glacier where it collided and merged with the Caldecott Glacier. Although it was after midnight, the sky was as bright as noon. They crossed a little open ice with crampons on their boots and skirted a gaping crevasse, pausing to peer down its cyan-blue throat. He chose a campsite on top of gravel-crusting ice and pitched the tent. He had packed in a few pieces of firewood, and in no time at all he had a cheery little campfire going. They sat side by side on a ground pad next to the fire and draped a sleeping bag over their shoulders. The honeyed fragrance of wildflowers drifted over the ice. The natural world in all its primordial glory stretched out below them. There were no

buildings or roads in sight. No power lines, airplanes, or radio towers. No sign of humanity whatsoever. It was just them and the unsullied Earth.

It was the perfect occasion for a joint, so Casey pulled one out of his pocket and offered it to Danielle. He lit it for her, and she took two tiny sips before passing it back to him. A couple of minutes later, she scrambled to her feet and went into the tent.

Yes! Sex on a glacier.

But when he joined her in the tent, she was wrapped up and trembling in a fetal position.

“What’s wrong?” he said, alarmed. She told him what was wrong in rapid-fire French, of which he understood not a word. So he covered her with her bag and lay next to her. In a little while she switched to English.

“It is too much.”

“What’s too much?”

She waved her hand at the world beyond the tent flap. “Too much crazy people. Too much mountains! Too much . . . *outside*.”

It was the dope. She was a little freaked.

“Well, then, it’s a good thing we have a tent,” he said, “so we can stay *inside*.” He took off his boots and helped her with hers. He placed the boots outside the tent and zipped up the flap, shutting out all that overwhelming space. She removed her trousers and slid into her bag and zipped it up to her chin. He undressed and got into his own bag next to hers. The midnight sun, shining through the thin tent fabric, turned everything orange.

“Don’t worry, Danielle. We’re perfectly safe here.”

“*Merci*,” she said in a small voice.

“*De nada*.”

He gazed at the back of her head for a long time. A breeze rose to gently buffet the side of the tent. They were both too wide awake to sleep. Eventually, she unzipped her bag and said, “You like to come here?”

She didn’t need to ask twice. Sex on a glacier! Sex on a glacier! He unzipped his bag and draped it over the both of them. He helped her off with her shirt and bra. Gaa, he loved her breasts. Firm little handfuls. Her nipples swelled when he teased them, and her breath grew deep and her fingers bold. She seemed to especially like to stroke his cock, and he was out of his undies before she was out

of hers. The dope intensified every touch. He had a log between his legs, and she was scooting her hips beneath him to receive it when there was a sound like a rifle shot. It was distant but sharp.

She froze. "What was that?"

"Nothing. Just the ice buckling."

"A crevasse opens?"

"No, no. This glacier is moving about a half meter a day, so it grinds and bends, and cracks all the time. Nothing to worry about."

Easier said than done. He entered her at last, but she no longer seemed to be interested. He tried to rekindle the mood, but she said, "Just hurry."

He was at the point of no return, so he came, but it was a fizzle and a disappointment, and she immediately slipped him out of her. She retrieved her clothes and began to dress.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Take me away from this place."

"Right now?"

IT WAS NEARLY three A.M. by the time they returned to the house on Lucky Strike Lane. He thought they could still salvage the warm feelings of the day, but she said she wanted to sleep alone, so he slept on the couch in the living room. Not three hours later, he was awakened by the sound of digging outside the house. He went to the kitchen window but couldn't find the source. He peeked into the bedroom and saw that the noise had awakened Danielle as well. It sounded louder in the bedroom. He pulled cardboard from the window, and right outside was the eldest Prophecy boy digging a pit. Casey's anger flared, and he tried opening the window. But the sash was glued shut with a century's worth of paint. So Casey threw on some trousers and boots and stormed out and around the side of the house.

"What the *fuck* you think you're doing?" he demanded.

In a flawless imitation of his father, the man looked at the pit under his feet and then at the shovel in his hand and then at the pit again before looking at Casey and saying, "Why, I'm digging a hole."

"I can see you're digging a hole, you ape."

"Then why'd you ask?"

Casey trembled with fury. “Get off my land this instant! You’re trespassing.”

“You’re the one doing the trespassing, son. Like Poppy tole you yesterday, the property line goes right through here. This is our land. We need an outhouse, and Poppy says this is a good spot for it.”

“I don’t give a *fuck* what Poppy says.” Casey tried to snatch the shovel out of the evil Cartwright twin’s hand, but he tossed it to evil twin Hoss, who had materialized at his side. Evil twin Little Joe was there too. Casey didn’t waste his breath on them but marched to his shed and retrieved his own shovel. He backfilled the pit while they watched. They laughed and went back to their camp.

DANIELLE DIDN’T LEAVE the house for the next three days, not even to visit the outhouse. Casey couldn’t entice her outdoors at all, not to go to dinner or take a walk or visit the mill town. He put together a honey bucket arrangement with a plastic pail and old toilet seat in her bedroom, and he dutifully emptied it each morning and evening. He spent as much time with her as he could manage. He left her his iPad, and she whiled away her days on it. She allowed him to sleep with her, but she was in no mood for sex, and he didn’t push it.

Meanwhile, Casey deployed shark repellent against the neighbors by frequent urinating next to the side of his house. He kept his back to the camp, and he wasn’t visible from either the bedroom or kitchen window, so it wasn’t as if he was exposing himself. He just spread his legs, unzipped, and let it splash, and that seemed to be enough. The Prophecies rearranged their tarps and tents to create a wall of privacy between him and themselves. Score one for Ranger Rick.

On Casey’s first day off from work, Danielle woke him as she crawled over him to get out of bed. He dozed again but awoke when he heard her busy in the kitchen. In a little while he could smell bacon frying. She was making breakfast. Perhaps the worst was over. She was settling in at last, giving Alaska a second chance. He lay in bed with his morning chubby and dared to feel optimistic about the remainder of her visit.

A moment later she shrieked and screamed, and Casey was on his feet and in the kitchen in an instant. Ashen-faced, she pointed to the window. He approached it carefully and looked out. A tripod made from spruce poles stood right outside. Hanging from the tripod by its hamstrings was a goat that the boys had



slaughtered and bled and were presently gutting and skinning. Without its hide, the goat looked disturbingly like a gutted child hanging upside down.

A WOMAN WHO worked for one of the guiding companies was leaving that morning to pick up supplies in Anchorage, and she agreed to take Danielle to the airport. Casey helped carry Danielle's things across the footbridge to the van. They embraced and kissed goodbye. He never expected to hear from her again, and he never did.

The following evening, when he returned home from the ranger office, Casey was surprised to discover that the Prophecy camp next door was abandoned. All the tents, tarps, and belongings were gone. The family had left behind only trampled ground, a fire pit, and the cleared brush. Good riddance. He hoped that they too had left the park.

He wasn't so lucky, as he later learned. Beehymer had returned from wherever he'd gone and agreed to lease them his old mine site out at Stubborn Mountain. Well, at least they were sixteen miles away; they weren't likely to bother Casey anymore.

Yeah, right.

*In the following months, much water passes under the footbridge, Casey meets his true soulmate, and the troublesome Prophecy family graduates from being his personal problem to being the park service's problem.*

*In December, 2012, Casey makes an 80-mile round-trip trash run by snowmobile into the deep wilderness. Due to global warming, a glacier that has served as base camp to countless mountaineering expeditions since the 1930s is melting. Every year, a new crop of abandoned climbing gear sprouts from the ice like spring crocuses. It's part of the backcountry ranger's job to clean up the mess.*

*On his return leg, hauling a sled overloaded with trash, Casey takes a break on the riverbank across from Stubborn Mountain. He's not far from an old copper mine where the Prophecies have settled.*

*from the chapter **A Portent in the Sky***

THE TEMPERATURE WAS dropping, and a frozen haze obscured the stars. Casey poked his campfire with a stick, sending an armada of burning embers into the ocean of the sky.

Across the river flats, the snowy slopes of Stubborn Mountain glowed under a three-quarters moon. The mountain stood apart from its neighbors, and Casey could see it in its entirety, bottom to top. It had an iconic mountainy shape, like what you could use for a smartphone app. Press here for Mountain. It was named Stubborn because during the last Ice Age, it had blocked the advance of the Caldecott Glacier, splitting the wall of ice into two channels, and being worn down in the process.

Casey used his stick to trace a ridge down the ghostly mountainside to where the Prophecy compound was located . . .

HE STIRRED SNOW into his campfire, more out of habit than necessity. It was time to head back. Tomorrow was another workday, and there was a busload of Japanese tourists due at the lodge.

Ordinarily, the entire Caldecott mill town would be padlocked at this time of year. Casey's employee contract never ran beyond October, but this year the park service was participating with the state's Department of Commerce, TravelAlaska.com, and the lodge concessionaire in conducting a feasibility study of wintertime tourism in Alaska. For some reason, Alaska was not a popular tourism destination during the months of December and January, except for young Japanese couples who were lining up to visit. Folklore in Japan promised good fortune to couples who consummated their marriage under the dancing lights of the aurora borealis. Conceiving a child under their influence was considered even more propitious. And since the Northern Lights rarely appeared over Japan, Alaska had the rare opportunity to profit from a harmless superstition.

Casey started the Ski-Doo and checked his load. One of the tie-downs that secured the bundles of trash to the freight sled had come loose, and while he was fixing it, he heard something odd. It sounded like bacon sizzling, or soda fizzing, or maybe a hissing cat. He turned all around to find its source, even pulling back his hood to free his ears.

When Casey looked north, he saw something weird in the darkness — darker darkness. As though a triangular piece of the night sky was missing, stars and all, along with the snowy flank of Stubborn Mountain. While Casey was trying to puzzle out what he was looking at, the triangular shape lit up from within, revealing itself to be a giant cone, hollow apparently, resting on its base, and at least as tall as the mountain it was blocking.

At the same moment, a bright object, like a shooting star, entered the cone at its apex and streaked at supersonic speed straight down toward the ground. It spit out flames and sparks in all directions as it fell, and the closer it approached the ground, the slower it went, until it hardly seemed to be moving at all. Meanwhile, the cone's surface, like welder's glass, dampened the intensity of the light. And for all the pyrotechnics involved, there was no sound but the constant hissing.

Casey watched with his mouth hanging open, too awestruck to be afraid, or to dig out his phone to video it. By the time he remembered his phone, it was too late. The object — a meteor? a top-secret military weapon? an alien UFO? — had touched down, and its light was extinguished. The cone went dark as well, allowing the stars and mountain to return.

The ranger put his phone away and dug out his Garmin GPS. He used his bearings to guesstimate those of the object. He put a pin in it and jumped on his snowmobile.

Using the western flank of Stubborn Mountain as a guide, Casey drove straight for the likely landing zone. He was forced to break new trail, and the loose snow and his heavy load bogged down his engine. So he stopped to unhitch the sled before continuing. He drove carefully and kept a sharp eye on everything within the range of this headlights.

He'd covered about six miles when he saw something and stopped again. There was a shallow ledge in the snow, like a step about eighteen inches deep. The snow on his side of it was untrammelled while the snow beyond looked flattened and compressed. The ledge itself extended in both directions in a gentle arc as far as his flashlight could reach. Could this be the imprint of the giant cone?

Using his flashlight as a probe, Casey dismounted and poked at the air above the ledge. Nothing. He recorded another GPS reading and drove on.

The compressed snow covered an area several miles in diameter. Casey searched it for a couple of hours. It would have helped to know exactly what he

was searching for. Would the bogey still be hot? glowing? radioactive? Was it as large as a house or small as a stone? Would it shoot laser beams at him?

Daylight would have been a big help too. So would a full belly. The temperature had continued to drop, and both he and his snowmobile were running low on fuel. Whatever the object was, it would likely keep until tomorrow. That is, unless the Prophecies saw the light show from their compound and decided to check it out. That possibility alone kept him searching for another hour before finally calling it quits. He backtracked to the curved snow ledge he'd found and followed it, stopping a half-dozen times to log more GPS coordinates. If the object had landed in the center of the cone's base, as it had appeared to do, and if he could remember enough high-school geometry, he'd be able to use the GPS record to calculate its location. For now, though, he retrieved the trash sled and headed home.



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## **From *Dead of Winter***

by Gerri Brightwell

*Gerri Brightwell is originally from Great Britain but now lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, where she teaches at the university. She has two*

*previous novels: Cold Country (also set in Interior Alaska), and The Dark Lantern (set in Victorian Britain). Her short work has appeared in such venues as BBC Radio Four's Opening Lines, Gargoyle, Redivider, and BLIP.*

*The following excerpt is an abridged version of the opening of the novel Dead of Winter. It's fifty-seven degrees below zero, and things soon start going wrong for Mike Fisher, a sad-sack cabbie in Interior Alaska. Before long, he finds himself searching for his missing daughter through a tangle of kidnappings and murders connected to a local militia.*

## 1.

FISHER STOPS AT the lights. It's going on four p.m. and the town's got that deep undersea feel he hates. Beyond the windshield, shapes swim out of the darkness: a lit-up city bus heaving itself through the intersection, a busted-up Chevy bouncing in slo-mo over a snow berm, a cop car trailing it silent as a shark. Headlights catch frost clinging thick as algae to a fence. Across the road, a row of buildings squats against the cold. Neon flashes red and pink and green. Hot girls. Cold beer. Small splashes of color against the sub-arctic night.

Fifty-seven below when Fisher reached the airport to drop off his fare and the ice fog's settling in. Already the streetlights are blurred and past the intersection it's real bad, like a stirred-up sea. Here traffic making the turn vanishes — red taillights hang for a moment, then shrink and wink out like they've gone forever.

That's how it gets you, that kind of cold. It seeps into your soul. It doesn't help that the news is on and Fisher has it turned way up over the rush of warm air from the vents. A suicide bombing in Iraq, the cops here in town looking for a missing state trooper, a pile-up on this very road a few miles away, where it leads to the army base and the ground's low and the fog can get real bad. Two people dead, three injured. Fisher's hands tighten on the steering wheel. He thinks of twisted metal and severed limbs, of heads dented and broken. He wonders when it will be his turn to be snuffed out. Those people, minding their own business, driving to the store or to pick up the kids, and now they're dead. No warning, just gone.

He thinks what he'd leave behind. Not much: a dingy trailer beside his hardly-built house; a sulky, troubled teenage daughter; an ex-wife who's reinvented herself right out of remembering she loved him once-upon-a-time. I'm not a has-been, he thinks. I'm a never-was, a two-hundred-and-forty-pound sad sack, a class A freaking loser.

He takes a breath and lets his eyes close. Now that he's wrapped in his own darkness, the ache in his head swells and an echo starts up in his cheeks, only that pain's sharper and more insistent. This is the root of his misery. The cold's squeezed all the moisture out of the air, and it's so dry it's making his sinuses smart, as though the front of his head has been hollowed out with a knife. He needs something to dull it — Christ, maybe he should call Grisby, get himself some Vicodin, because the pain's bad enough to leave him swimming inside himself, to make the day feel cursed, to make him wish he'd called in sick and watched TV until it was time to go to bed again.

Two hours left of his shift, unless he quits early. Two hours of driving through ice fog and the ache in his head. But hell, the cold means money. People stranded by dead batteries. People who won't be waiting for the bus. Fuck, he can do it.

Staring out the windshield, he can't remember who his fare is. He stops himself glancing in the mirror. A game he has: Who's he driving now? He pictures himself pulling up at the airport, the surly guy he was dropping off shoving a twenty at him. Someone coming across the sidewalk, a spidery silhouette, and now he's got it: a lanky woman in a long coat and a skirt, pulling a small case on wheels. Longish hair. A thin, sour face, a beaky nose. Now he looks in the mirror: her face's bonier than he remembered, her eyes deeper set, but that sour expression's there all right, as though she can't believe her stinking luck at finding herself in Alaska, and not one of the beautiful parts, but the undramatic and deep-frozen Interior, and to cap it all, she's being driven to her hotel in a turd-brown Bear Cab with a cartoon grizzly painted on the side, for fuck's sake. Who came up with that? Maybe she thinks Fisher did.

No hat, a thin scarf, her wool coat some Lower Forty-eight designer's idea of winter wear. She must have thought January in Alaska wasn't anything to bother herself about because, hell, she's from Minnesota or Michigan where their winters beat all. Fifty-fucking-seven below. No wonder she looks pissed and closed in on

herself as she stares out the window. She has her case perched beside her like it's a pet. No other luggage — Fisher'd have pegged her as someone in town for a conference or a job interview, except she's headed to the Valu-Inn. A dump of a place. Maybe she doesn't know that. Or perhaps by now she's decided the whole town's a dump. One time he drove a young Scottish woman from the university to a hotel downtown. It was summer and he asked what she thought of the place. She said she'd expected it to be like Sweden, but instead it looked junky and half-derelict, and he'd laughed and said she was seeing it on a good day too, then had driven fast because he wanted to be shut of her.

Fisher drives this route so often he can pretty much guess how much longer the red will last: long enough for him to reach into the glove compartment, snatch out his bottle of ibuprofen, snap off the lid with his teeth — not enough time to take off his gloves, he thinks — and tip two onto his tongue and wash them down with his half-cold coffee. He's almost right but the light changes as he's lifting the cup. The pickup to his left surges into the intersection on a cloud of exhaust and he can't see a damned thing, but he finishes the motion of bringing the cup to his lips — the coffee's colder than he thought, disgusting in fact — and he tips the cup too far. Coffee dribbles around his mouth and he swallows quickly, wipes his chin with his glove. From his pocket, his phone rings. He ignores it and steps too hard on the gas. Over the bleat of the phone comes the rush of tires spinning and the slight slip of the cab's rear shimmying.

“Fuck it,” he says under his breath and eases up until the tires grip and the gleaming road hauls itself beneath them. The cab bounces over the bumps of ice and its frozen metal groans like a ship going down — at least, like a ship going down in the movies. Then there's a flash of headlights from vehicles waiting at the intersection, the blankness of the fog closing in, and the phone stops ringing.

## 2.

HOW OFTEN DOES Fisher's phone ring in the next two hours? Later when he counts, he'll come up with four times: he'll remember that it rang in the supermarket parking lot as he was helping a skinny old guy into the backseat and settling his groceries beside him; that it rang as he was nosing the cab through the fog downtown with a smug, overweight teenager in the back ferociously chewing



gum until he let out a stiff laugh and caught Fisher's eye in the mirror and said, "Bear Cabs — dude, how the hell did you come up with that? You should dress up in a bear suit. Wouldn't that be crazy?"; that it rang again while he was on the expressway getting a lecture from a bland-faced, bristle-haired old woman about not wearing his seatbelt, and trying to tell her no cab driver does, it's too risky; and that it rang again while he was trying to pull out from a stop sign into the thick of the five-thirty traffic by Fat Al's Pizza.

He doesn't pull the phone out and check his messages. There's something about the cold air peeling in off the cab's windows and the raw pain pulsing through his head that makes him think, *Fuck you all, fucking leave me alone*, because really, who could be calling? Someone he gave his card to, someone wanting a ride when he hasn't had any slack time all afternoon. Could be Sally wanting to talk, but that thing they had is over because who needs a girlfriend who's got a husband she forgot to mention on the first few dates? Could be his step-mother wanting something — she always wants something — or Grisby saying let's meet at the Klondike for a drink when all Fisher wants is to go home and sit with his dog in front of the TV. Maybe it's his daughter — but no, Bree's off to Anchorage with her mom for a couple of days, or should be unless she's fucked things up again. She has a way of doing that.

It's close to six before the idea of all those missed calls needles him and he pulls over outside the Gas-N-Go. Over the radio comes Reggie's scratchy voice, telling him he's got a fare that wants a no-smoking cab over at the movie theater. Fisher tells Reggie he needs to look at a clock because his shift's about over, but Reggie barks back that he's not far away, is he? And hell, doesn't he want the money?

Reggie's always seething, like it's the only way he knows how to be. Two new cab companies have started up and all he could think to do was paint that ridiculous smiling bear logo on all the Bear Cab vehicles. Who wants a beaten-up taxi with a smiling bear on the door when they can take a sleek white City Cab? Reggie calls them Shitty Cabs, but hell, even their drivers look sleek, not fat-butted men wearied by life, or hard-bitten women with hard-set mouths, or ex-cons who can't do much except drive, and who've been known to take a fare to the airport then come back and rob their house. At least, that's how it was before the cops wised up and now the cabbie's the first person they suspect.

The movie theater's only a few minutes away, and this far up Airport Road the fog's cleared a little. Still, the streetlights have a grimy halo around them, and the blacktop a sleek crystalline look. With its dying-ship groan, the cab lurches over the lip of snow into the movie-theater parking lot and Fisher pulls up close to the row of glass doors. Someone hurries out. A man in a green parka and a fur hat, with squarish glasses too big for his thin, mousy face and a peering look about him. Grisby, like a freaking vision summoned up by the gnawing aches in Fisher's head.

He stoops to look through the window and Fisher lowers the glass a little. He calls out, "It's OK, it's me. Get in."

Grisby gets in beside Fisher and taps him on the knee. "Hey man, I called you, I dunno, a hundred times. Why didn't you pick up?"

"Been busy," he says. "Fuck, like you wouldn't believe."

"What's the point in having a freaking phone if you don't use it? I mean, that's the whole idea, right? You have it with you so that if someone needs you, they can call and there you'll be. Like the freaking cavalry. Had to call Bear Cabs and ask for a no-smoking and hope it'd be you. Fuck it."

"What happened to your car? You lose it again?"

Grisby pushes back his hat a little. The bulk of the fur makes his face look small and pale beneath it, as though he's hiding. And maybe he is. He says now, "No, I didn't lose it. Shit, it won't start."

"You turned it off when it's fifty-seven below and went to watch a movie?"

"Christ, no — something wrong with the starter. Either that, or the spark plugs. Fuck, I dunno." He sniffs and wipes away the moisture the cold's left beaded on the stubble beneath his nose. His glasses have misted up from the sudden heat and he pulls them off and rubs the lenses with the fingers of his glove. "Just get me out of here."

Fisher swings the cab round and the headlights slip over the exhaust blooming from parked cars. Just before the access road, he slows. "Where to?"

"How about that place does the Hawaiian burgers?"

"That's right here." Fisher nods at the bright windows of the restaurant just ahead on the corner. It's always like this. There's something not right with the way Grisby's wired, like he's permanently lost and always will be.

Grisby pushes his glasses back on and stares about him. He rubs his chin and his glove grates over his stubble. It looks like he hasn't shaved in a few days, and that means trouble. "Well shit," he says, "somewhere else then. Wherever."

"C'mon Grisby."

"I've just spent the whole freaking afternoon watching dumb-ass movies. Give me a break."

"Tessa mad at you again? Is that it?"

"I need a place to hole up for a few days, that's all."

At first Fisher doesn't say a word. Grisby's going to leave the shower running and the water tank'll run dry, or he'll so well-and-fucking-truly lose the TV remote that they'll never find it, or he'll spill his beer on the sofa and not say a word until Fisher's sat down in it, or he'll forget to let the dog out while Fisher's working and poor Pax'll piss all over the carpet. That's what he did over Thanksgiving when Tessa threw him out of her place, then came looking for him and tried to kick in the door. But what can you do? Grisby showed up with all the fixings for dinner — for the Thanksgiving dinner he was supposed to be sharing with Tessa — plus Vicodin in one pocket and Percocet in the other, and a bottle of bourbon to wash it all down. Man oh man.

Fisher lets his breath out between his teeth then steers the cab onto the access road. "OK, but I don't want Tessa coming round looking for you again. She's a piece of work. And you still haven't fixed the dent in my door."

"Don't be like that, man. Your trailer's a piece of crap and you're worrying about a dent in your door? Besides, who the hell helped you get the foundation in for your house? Who you going to call to help you unload lumber this summer? Hey?"

Fisher slows for a stop sign, then glances over his shoulder as he changes lane. A gas station across the way, a small Mexican restaurant, a hair salon, and it might just as well be two in the morning for the whole strip looks deserted. He pulls up at the lights with the turning signal clicking away and his hands off the wheel. He picks up the radio and tells Reggie, "Nine. Fare to Safeway on Airport and Dawson. Then I'm coming in."

Reggie's voice crackles back at him, "Switch to channel two, Fisher."

Fisher jabs the button, says, "What the hell?"

“Better not be one of your flaky friends you’re giving a ride to who’s gonna light up in the cab, Fisher, or puke on the seats, or sell painkillers to a real-life goddamn paying fare. You got that?”

On the palm of Fisher’s glove the microphone looks small, a shrunken head with hard slits across its surface. He says, “What is it with you, Reggie? You wanted me to take this fare,” then he jams the thing back into its holder.

Beside him, Grisby’s tapping his glove against his knee and his knee’s jerking to a crazy beat that’s got nothing to do with the Eagles’ number coming through the radio. Then he bursts out with, “You’re like Captain freaking Kirk in this thing, cruising along nice and warm. But just look out the window — it’s some blasted alien planet, and you’re the hero, man, carrying me away.”

“Why’s she mad at you this time?” He glances at Grisby, and Grisby drops his smile.

“Nah,” he says, “we’re cool. I’ve got some guy says I owe him for the Vicodin he bought off me. Says it was Tylenol and now he wants his money back. Three hundred bucks.”

“That’s a lot for Tylenol.”

“Wasn’t Tylenol, man. I know the difference. He even has the freaking nerve to show me the bottle and tip out these freaking Tylenols like it’s proof or something, and he tells me he wants his three hundred bucks back. Can you believe it? He’s switched them out, then he shows up at my place and threatens me with a crowbar. How the hell did he find out where I live?”

Up ahead, the supermarket stands out bright against the night. Fisher pulls into the parking lot. “My sinuses are acting up — what you got?”

Grisby’s head swivels toward him. “For real?” He sighs, then pulls off one glove and digs in his parka pocket. He holds up a small plastic bottle. “Give you these for what I paid for them — what d’you say?”

“Sure.” Then he sighs. “Listen, my shift’s about over. I’ve gotta drop off the cab, then I’ll pick you up right here, okay? You can wait in the lobby.”

Grisby stares out the window. The moon’s half-full and hanging low in the sky, a world away from this frozen town. “No way, man.” His hand closes over the bottle and he turns back to Fisher. “No way, I mean, what you want me to do? Go stare at fresh produce for an hour? Check out the low-fat low-sugar wheat-

freaking-free organic breakfast cereals? And what if it slips your mind to come get me?”

Fisher leans on the wheel. “D’you get banned from there too?” He sighs, though Grisby doesn’t answer. “Fuck it.” He steps on the gas and steers the cab back toward the main road. “When we get down there, go warm up my car. Don’t come in, understand? Reggie sees you, he’s gonna freak.”

“Whatever lights your wick, Fisher, sure thing,” and he does a mock salute.

### 3.

THE ROAD OUT to Fisher’s place has a precipitous turn where it curves back on itself. On both sides the road drops away where gold was dug out of the ground by titanic dredges. Behind them they left piles of gravel tailings and these holes broad and deep as the foundations for skyscrapers. Across one of these holes the road barrels out, then switches direction a full ninety degrees, then switches again to climb the hill where you’ll find Goldpanner Trail and Paydirt Road, Grubstake Street and Hardluck Alley, then Luckystrike Drive where Fisher turns.

In the tunnel of his car’s headlights, birches bend in under the snow frozen onto their branches. Through the trees, a flash as Fisher’s headlights catch his trailer. Three years ago, when the price of heating oil skyrocketed, he covered it in foil-sided insulation. Now it gleams like a relic from the space program that fell out of orbit and landed intact. Behind it, barely visible, the outer walls of his unbuilt house rise like a stockade. He’s known people driven by the endless light of Interior summers to put up a house in four months — walls, a roof, windows and doors, enough to live in and spend the winter sheet-rocking the inside. How come in six years he’s gotten almost nowhere? He recognizes this thought: it meets him every time his car pitches up the last few yards of the driveway.

Grisby’s saying, “Man, we should move to Hawai’i. I mean what are we doing here? Imagine stepping outside and picking mangoes in your own freaking garden. Juicy and warm—”

“Yeah yeah, I get it,” says Fisher. He turns off the engine. “Hawaii’s paradise. Right.”

“Your problem,” and Grisby swivels to face him, “is you don’t have any imagination. That’s what’s gonna get you away from here. If you can’t imagine

someplace else, you're never gonna be someplace else. Know what I mean? Look at what you're working on — your house, for fuck's sake. Every fucker in Alaska wants a house in the hills with a goddamn great view, and to build it with their own hands and all that shit. And for what? So you can look out at all the freaking snow? And all the hills covered in snow? And the mountains covered in snow? Really — what's that all about?"

Six miles ago Fisher popped a Vicodin. Now everything's slowed down a little. He sees himself shove open his door and snatch up an extension cord from the snow, and push the metal prongs of his car's block heater into it until the orange glow of the idiot light comes on. Already his fingers are numb, but they feel so very far away. Then he's treading through the snow toward his trailer and pulling his keys from his pocket. On the front steps his boots thud and squeak and the sounds travel right through him, like he's no more than the wooden steps, then he pushes the key into the lock and feels the sweet click as it gives. From behind him comes the slam of a car door then Grisby's right there, jumping from foot to foot saying, "Fuck it's cold, man oh man."

Enough ice has built up on the doorstep that Fisher has to shoulder the door open. His shoulder should hurt but it doesn't. Instead a curl of fog rolls across his carpet and vanishes against the far wall where his DVDs are stacked. In here the air's swampingly warm and layered with smells: the pizza he ate last night, the bathroom that needs cleaning, the clothes and bedsheets that need washing, and over it all the woolly stink of dog.

"Paxson?" Fisher calls out. "Pax? Come on boy." From the bedroom doorway comes a stiff-legged dog the color of old snow. He has sad eyes and bent ears, and pushes the bony dome of his head against Fisher's shins.

Grisby treads across the carpet with his boots on, leaving lenses of compressed snow. In an instant the TV's spitting out sound and light. Local news and Grisby snorts. "Christ," he says, "look at that backdrop. Looks like it's made out of cardboard. If she sneezes, it's gonna fall over. And that hair! Man, someone take her hairspray away from her, *please*," and he snorts again. Floating on the screen beside the newsreader's head, a photograph of a young man with hair so blond it's almost white. Where his collar should be hang the words *Missing trooper*.

Grisby calls out, “Some cop doesn’t show up to work and he’s *disappeared*? Man, they’re short on news. And the cops themselves can’t find him? Christ, we’re in Interior freaking Alaska — how many places could he have got to?” He lets himself drop into the recliner and kicks out the footrest, says, “Ah, who gives a fuck,” and switches to CNN.

Fisher scratches Pax behind the ears until the dog lets out a chesty rumble. A cloying stink rises off him, and a gluey thread of saliva dangles from his mouth. One day before long, Fisher thinks, he’s going to come home and call out, “Paxson!” and the dog won’t come. He’ll keep calling his name as he crosses to the bedroom, a way of warding off what he knows he’s going to find: his dog dead and stiff at the foot of his mattress with his eyes gone dull. What a job it’ll be to wrap him in a blanket and carry him outside. Not to bury him, not unless it’s summer and the ground’s thawed — but to where then? He doesn’t know.

Pax’s bowl is still half full. Not a good sign. He isn’t even whining to go out and he’s been in here since morning.

“Hey man,” Grisby calls out again, “got a beer?” With Grisby here everything feels thrown out of its usual orbit. Grisby snaps his fingers at Pax to make him lie down, and the dog wants to, but he won’t: there’s his blanket folded up by the recliner, but it’s Fisher he wants to sit by, and Fisher’s hanging his parka on a hook, and even when he’s finished he doesn’t sit down but tosses a beer to Grisby and opens one for himself. Then Fisher leans against the small table where he eats his meals and lets the cool fizz of the beer wash over his tongue. If it wasn’t for the Vicodin, he’d be all on edge, he’s sure. That’s the way it goes when his sinuses are bothering him, as though he’s slightly out of sync with the world. Instead he feels poured full of honey.

Only now does Grisby pluck off that ridiculous fur hat he wears. Without it, his head looks fragile and misshapen, long and narrow like a bean. His hair’s thick and dark and flattened like it’s been licked down, and his face is lit by the colors of the TV because he’s tilted slightly forward, away from the backward lean of the chair. He lifts his beer and takes a swig, wipes his hand over his lips. He aims the remote like a man shooting another man down and blinks the TV through one channel after another until he settles on cartoons.

From a box by the window, Fisher plucks a tissue and blows his nose, blows so hard that his cheeks smart and air wheezes back into his head and blood stains

the tissue. He should have picked up some Sudafed, he thinks now, some Afrin too, because hell, the Vicodin just makes you feel better. What's he supposed to do? Get enough from Grisby for tomorrow? Or spend another shift peering through the fog inside his head at the fog that's settled over the town, carrying the ache in his face with him everywhere he goes until the cold lets up? And maybe even then he'll still feel bad. Just after Thanksgiving, he got so bad he went to the clinic. Put it all on his credit card — one hundred and seventy-five dollars for the consultation, sixty dollars for the antibiotics and some spray that had the raw smell of geraniums and he couldn't bear to use, and he's still paying it off, Christ almighty.

He lets himself sink onto the sofa, although here the chilled air from the window drifts down over him — it touches the back of his neck and he shivers. The plastic he taped up over the glass is ripped from when Grisby tossed him a beer and missed, and he's out of tape to fix it. Buy tape, he tells himself, buy milk, buy some fucking cheese and some fucking healthy apples. He closes his eyes and the Vicodin makes the whole idea of the supermarket float gently away, and he listens to the squeaky voice of a cartoon character, the rattle of fake gunfire, the soaring of the music, and he imagines some hero taking off into the sky.

He could fall asleep except for that cold creeping in around him. There's a throw over the arm of the sofa and he wraps it around himself, right up to his neck. Pax lays his snout in the dip between Fisher's knees. Fisher rubs his thumb over the smoothness between the dog's eyes, tells him over a yawn, "You're a good boy."

No wonder when a bleating starts up, Fisher doesn't move. His phone. Fuck it. Let it ring. Grisby calls out, "Don't tell me you're not gonna get that. I mean, Christ! What is it with you?"

But he does let it ring. He's not going to shove away Pax's snout, or get up from under the warmth of the throw, or focus his attention on anything in particular. In the end he won't pull his phone out of his parka pocket until Grisby's shut himself into the bathroom, and that's an hour and a half from now. Then he'll sit on the edge of the sofa and stare at the small screen, and only when he sees seven messages, four of them from Grisby, one from his step-mother Ada, two of them from his ex's landline, will he press the button to replay his messages and stare at the TV with the phone held loosely against his ear.



By then it'll be too late. This is what he'll hear: *Dad? Are you there? Brian's going fucking ape-shit. Can you pick up? Please? I can't deal with this. You've gotta* [voice becomes indistinct] *and get outta here. Just come and get me, OK? OK?*

The next message is from Ada. He doesn't even listen to it. He scrolls down, presses his thumb against the button and hears Bree's voice all stretched and hollow. *Dad? Goddamit, pick up! What a fucking mess. I don't know what I've done. You got to get me out of here. I've* [voice becomes indistinct] *had no idea* [voice becomes indistinct]. *You're gonna come get me, right? Please Dad?*

He's on his feet without knowing it. His head feels thick and unwieldy. The dog's staring up at him from his blanket, his tail thumping the floor. Fisher still has the phone against his ear though it's telling him he has no more new messages and to press four to review existing messages, and five to — he holds it away from his head and stares at it.

Bree didn't make it down to Anchorage, and Brian — Mr. Step-Dad, Mr. Control Freak, Mr. Tight Ass — has gone ape-shit. But then, these last few months his temper's been like a humming wire. No freaking wonder. He's a man who dresses in dark blue button-up shirts like he's in uniform, and keeps his hair cropped short, and so totally lacks a sense of humor you can't trust him. He's a man who has a room downstairs he calls the den, but in truth it's his gun room where he opens the lockers one at a time and takes apart his handguns and rifles and shotguns, and oils them, and even — Fisher's seen this with his own eyes — sits with one of them cradled on his lap while he watches his big-ass flat-screen TV from his armchair. He favors movies like *The Deerhunter*, and *Platoon*, grim movies about soldiers that are full of tragedy and downplayed heroics and he sits through them with his face as unchanging as a photograph.

Fisher rubs his phone with his thumb. He needs to think but his thoughts are all over the place. Grisby's coming out of the bathroom. Beneath his zipped-up blue fleece the white edge of his t-shirt shows, and the sag of his too-big jeans over his skinny ass. "Hey man," he says, "what's up?"

"It's Breehan. She wants me to come get her."

But Grisby just sits in the recliner and rubs his face. "What she do this time?"

"Not that kind of trouble. Says her step-dad's gone ape-shit." Fisher turns away.

“Hell, you know how she is, Fisher. Come on, man, don’t let her do this to you. Just stay here and chill.”

Fisher snaps the phone shut and stares at its smooth shell sitting in his palm, as if it’s going to tell him something he doesn’t know. Like what to do. Like whether to put on his coat and drive all the way out there when, chances are, Grisby’s right. Could be Bree’s pissed at her mom for not taking her to Anchorage and came home buzzed and Brian’s mad at her. Could be Bree’s mad because Jan canceled the trip to Anchorage — really, who’s fool enough to drive all that way in this kind of cold? Fisher’ll get over there and Jan will tell him something like *Get out of here, it’s none of your concern*, and if he objects, she’ll fix him with her eye and say, *For chrissakes — you had your chance to be a real parent and you blew it. You can’t start now*, and Brian will rub that stupid attempt at a beard he’s grown this winter and say, *It’s all under control. Breehan knows the consequences of her behavior. Why don’t you just go on home?* and that will irritate the hell out of Fisher, and before you know it Jan will be shouting in his face and he’ll be shouting back, and Brian will have that tight-jawed look he gets when he’s about to get real nasty in that quiet way he has. Meanwhile, Breehan will have slunk off to her room. Maybe that’s why she called him — so that everyone’ll forget about her and what’s she’s done.

But Christ. Her voice was all choked up. Since when does Bree cry? She’s not the type and never was.

Grisby turns up the TV. Some cop show. “Tell me you’re not gonna go out there. You know what? She’s got you wrapped around her little finger. No wonder she’s such a headcase.”

“Shit, I think something’s wrong.”

“Something’s always wrong. Hell, I don’t blame the kid, but it’s just too freaking sad to see you jump whenever she calls, and she only ever calls when she’s gotten herself in trouble. Know what I mean?”

Fisher closes his fingers around his phone. How easy it would be to slip it back in his pocket, and whatever made Breehan call him will fade away as though it never happened, and nothing will be any different because he sat here in the warmth of his trailer instead of getting into his parka and boots, and warming the car, and driving the ten miles out to Janice and Brian’s place.

But he's flipped the phone open and he's dialing the landline. Maybe Janice'll pick up and be pissed that it's only him, not a client or one of her friends, or maybe he'll get Brian telling him everything's fine and why wouldn't it be? It rings and rings. No answering machine. Heck, they were going to have their landline disconnected until they took away Breehan's cell phone and couldn't leave her with no way to make a call if they were out. Even they wouldn't do that.

The phone's still ringing. Ten times, he thinks. He's been counting without realizing it.

Something's not right. He licks his lips and feels where the skin's turned hard. Brian's not the type to go ape-shit. He's a buttoned-up, held-in, clamped-down kind of guy, and isn't that what's scary about him? Because you can't help thinking that one day all that rage will come surging out? What if one day is today?

Fisher pulls on his parka. He doesn't have to go up and knock on the door, he tells himself. No, he'll just drive over and take a look. See whether anyone's home. If Bree's waiting for him, she'll come running to the door.

Grisby's watching. "Oh for crap's sake," he says and puts down the TV remote. "You're such a sucker."



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## **Their Last Winter**

by T. Louise Freeman-Toole

*T. Louise Freeman-Toole is the author of the memoir Standing Up to the Rock, which won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award and the Idaho Book Award. She recently completed a memoir, Asylum in the Woods: A Memoir of Secret Love in the Far North. She has an M.S. in Creative Nonfiction from Illinois State University.*

*Freeman-Toole wrote this piece following the death of two old-timer friends in Eagle, Alaska, where she lived for four years. A community that dates back to the gold rush era, Eagle is on the banks of the Yukon River and now has a population of 135. In the winter, the road is closed and the only access is by small plane. "Their Last Winter" received the Best Profile Award from the Alaska Press Club in 2013.*

### **Dave**

SOME WOULD CALL Dave a hermit. Others might call him a gentleman. His home was a plywood shack five miles upriver from the bush community of Eagle. His previous dwelling — a drafty log cabin not much larger than the new plywood structure — had been too big, “like living in a ballroom without a dancing partner.”

In the winter, my boyfriend, Billy, and I would check on Dave every few days, walking the mile-and-a-half from our cabin to be sure he had enough wood and food as the temperatures fell to thirty, forty, fifty below zero. Our visits always followed the same pattern as we fit into the simple rhythm of his day.

We hailed his cabin as we approached on the narrow trail through the woods. Dave, a gaunt figure in his seventies with an erect bearing, came to the narrow doorway dressed in heavy wool pants and sweater. “Greetings,” he called out in a gentle voice that conveyed a shy pleasure at seeing us again. He rarely received visitors; most people were deterred by the *Keep Out* sign at the entrance to the trail. Dave’s unwashed hair stood up stiffly and his tangled gray beard had yellowed around his mouth from decades of pipe-smoking. Dirt thick enough to have been laid on with a palette knife covered his face, already discolored and

scarred by frostbite. Soot that was ground into his pores stippled his face with black dots. It was commonly known that Dave didn't take a bath all winter, but that was not considered particularly odd behavior in Eagle, where many people lack running water.

Our neighbor invited us into his cabin for tea. With a courtly gesture, Dave offered me the best seat in the house: the end of his army cot closest to his tiny wood stove. He sat on an overturned bucket and my boyfriend sat next to me. Dave always apologized for having only one cup, but we came prepared. Billy would pull a tin cup from the pocket of his parka, along with half a loaf of homemade bread or — Dave's favorite — a hunk of cheddar cheese.

Throwing a handful of loose tea leaves into a pan, Dave let the tea steep while he filled his pipe from a pouch of Prince Albert tobacco. He took his time, as he did in all things. What did time matter in a place like Eagle, where life moved according to the seasons? Dave also was slowed by his right hand, which had been impaired by stroke some years earlier. And yet, somehow he still managed to cut all his firewood with a bow saw, haul water from town, and complete not-always-easy tasks like refilling the kerosene lamp.

I never tired of looking at the simple setting. A dented wash basin. A cast iron skillet. A single shelf held his meager larder: oatmeal, corned beef hash, canned peaches, and not much more. Wool socks dried on a line above the stove. A trapper's hat made of marten fur hung on a peg on the door. The few people Dave accepted as friends often passed things on to him, but he refused to accumulate more "scatter," as he called it; new things didn't stay long before he gave them away. We never left his cabin without a used sharpening stone, a handful of .22 shells, a can of evaporated milk.

Satisfied the tea was sufficiently strong, Dave filled Billy's tin cup, which the two of us shared. "Sugar?" he said, offering us an old tobacco tin, as politely as if holding out a porcelain sugar bowl.

As we sipped the strong tea, Dave rummaged around under the cot and pulled out a box of Royal Kreem crackers — saved for special occasions — which had absorbed the smell of kerosene from the lantern hanging overhead. We chomped away on the stale rounds, content to be in the warm room with our friend while the snow came down steadily outside the window.

Dave, who had few remaining teeth, always soaked his biscuit in his tea before slowly eating it. Then he tapped his pipe against the stove and said, “Wonder what the poor folks are doing today?” He let out a sigh and settled back on his overturned bucket, as relaxed and satisfied as if he were reclining in an easy chair and putting up his feet.

“Who?” I asked, the first time I heard him say this.

“Those poor folks who have so much they don’t know what to do with it,” he said, gesturing expansively around the small room. Here was all he required in life, almost within arm’s reach: food, warmth, tobacco, good company. What need had he of anything more?

Dave had drifted into Eagle one year and lived in a tent near Mission Creek. He did odd jobs around town — always for two dollars, earning him the nickname, “Two-Dollar Dave.” He let only few scraps fall about his past. Raised in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, as a teen he’d been taken out of school and sent to work as a hired hand on local farms. Later, he fought wildfires in Montana and had lived on the street more than once, in cities he didn’t name. Talking of the past brought a bitter twist to Dave’s mouth that marred his usually tranquil expression.

It was Christmastime that brought this look to his face most often, especially if he’d gone into Eagle to buy a few groceries and someone had made the mistake of wishing him a Merry Christmas. Back at his cabin, he’d paced back and forth in the suddenly-confining space, grumbling, “Christmas! What does everybody have to be so damn happy about, anyway?”

One winter, Dave suffered silently for months with a bad tooth. When I noticed he was eating softer and softer foods until he was living on soup. I inquired about the state of his teeth, as tactfully as possible. “Oh, I’ve got another bad one. I gotta have it pulled one of these days. But I’m no hurry to go to Fairbanks. Haven’t been there in ten years. Never had any need to leave Eagle.”

By late winter, Dave’s jaw was swollen, and he was in a great deal of pain. He asked me to help him get to a dentist in Fairbanks, two hundred miles away. I felt honored he trusted me with his closely guarded personal information: birth date, social security number, financial status, medical history. After I spent hours on the phone getting him set up with Medicaid and finding him a dentist, Dave

came to our cabin to verify his personal information to the social worker in charge of his case.

Our friend showed up wearing the gray wool Bavarian vest with beautiful embroidery he donned on formal occasions, and as soon as he came in the door, Dave thanked me again for arranging his trip to the dentist — an undertaking he seemed to think as daunting as organizing an African safari. Once I had the social worker on the line, I handed the phone to Dave; he held it gingerly away from his ear, speaking loudly, as if the telephone were some newfangled instrument.

A few days later, Dave reluctantly headed for Fairbanks on the small Eagle mail plane. I worried how the grimy old-timer from the bush would be greeted in the hygienic environment of a dental office. I hoped they could look past the dirt encrusted on his hands and face, his filthy white anorak and moosehide mukluks, and appreciate Dave's dignified bearing, gentle demeanor, and exquisite courtesy.

After Dave arrived back in Eagle, missing yet another tooth and happy to have it gone, I asked him, "How was your visit to the dentist?" He knocked his pipe on the stove and said with great satisfaction, "I was treated like a prince, a real prince."

In the end, Dave died a sad death more reminiscent of Eagle's gold rush era than modern life. In the last year of his life, his mind had started to go. He often wandered off and couldn't find his way back to his cabin. His neighbors tried to keep an eye on him, but we couldn't watch him every second. There was talk of sending him to the city. But, knowing Dave, it was always, "Maybe someday, maybe next winter. Not yet."

Somehow, Dave was exposed to the cold long enough to frostbite his feet. No one knows exactly how it happened, because he never mentioned it until gangrene had set in. By the time he was medevacked to Fairbanks, Dave was too close to death to be aware he was leaving Eagle. I was glad that in his last conscious moments, he was still where he felt he belonged: the place where he had found — after years of wandering — a home.

## **Vicki**

VICKI HAD MADE Eagle her home for more than twenty years. She was only sixty, but living for decades in a bush village ages you, prematurely wrinkling

your face as it either wizens or wisens your spirit. She went for years without leaving Eagle, content to stay right where she was, in her light-filled cabin full of houseplants growing exuberantly, almost reaching the ceiling. Evidence of her artistry was everywhere: a mustachioed portrait in clay of her ex-husband hung on the wall; lupines made entirely of hundreds of beads sprouted from tiny flower pots; her kitchen table always held her latest work in progress, often an intricately cut out and illustrated greeting card for a friend.

One winter, Vicki was furious to find herself “stuck” in an assisted living home not far from my house in Anchorage. Two months earlier, she had experienced acute liver failure and had been medevacked out of Eagle to Fairbanks, then on to Anchorage. Toward the end of her long stay at the hospital, she was given a diagnosis of end-stage liver disease and deemed too ill to return home to Eagle.

The assisted living home Vicki was transferred to was clean and full of conveniences lacking in her cabin in Eagle: running water instead of barrels of preciously hoarded rainwater, a bathtub instead of a tin wash basin, central heating instead of a cranky barrel stove. On our occasional trips to the supermarket, I pushed her in a seated cart, and she marveled over fresh produce she hadn't seen in ages. Asparagus! Avocados! Pineapples! My favorite moment came when she'd raise her arm and point ahead, issuing the command “To the CANDY aisle!” and we would charge through the store, Vicki giggling madly.

And yet for the four months she spent in Anchorage, all Vicki talked about was going home just as soon as the road to Eagle opened in the spring. In April, a friend drove the weak but determined Vicki the five hundred miles home. Two days later she called me, giddy with delight at her reunion with her half-tame squirrel, the lively juncos, the gray jays called “camp robbers” that ate from her hand. I had often witnessed this very scene in Vicki's yard: Snow White in rumpled flannel pajamas with birds of the forest fluttering around her and squirrels scampering about her feet.

But Vicki was no Disney character: By turns Bible-quoting and foul-mouthed, she had a mean streak and could hold a grudge for years, feeding it every few days — like a batch of sourdough — to keep it alive. Half child, half crone, alcoholic and true believer, brewer of restorative soups full of wild greens, and baker of towering chocolate-drenched cream puffs, this was my friend, Vicki.



“It’s right there in Psalm 104: 15. Wine ‘gladdens the heart of man.’ Don’t you think God wants us to be happy?” she’d say, raising high a glass of wine. Vicki’s Bible was always close at hand, the pages a palimpsest of the Word showing through colored pencil illustrations of Jesus, the women of the New Testament, angels, flowers, and trailing vines.

I’d liked quixotic, fractious, playful Vicki from the first day we met, enchanted by her pixie’s smile and incandescent laugh. Introduced through a mutual friend, she was nervous about meeting someone new until she looked at my feet and noticed I was wearing mismatched socks and Bean boots, although it was not the muddy season. She stuck out her feet, similarly clad, and shrieked in delight, “Oh, look at us! I knew we’d be good friends.” It was not always easy to stay friends with Vicki. In a place where people didn’t care about days of the week, let alone the hours of the day, Vicki was a fanatic about punctuality. It was not uncommon for me to arrive at her door and be greeted with:

“Where were you? I called you forty minutes ago and you said you were getting dressed. Well, it couldn’t have taken you more than ten minutes to get dressed, five minutes to warm up the truck, and fifteen minutes to drive here. So you are ten minutes late!”

If I was unfortunate enough to be twenty minutes late, I’d likely find her furiously packing up the meal made especially for me, having already called another — more appreciative — friend to come pick it up.

On days like these, if I stayed, Vicki’s talk turned to her childhood with an abusive mother, living on the streets of San Francisco as a fourteen-year-old runaway, and the father who shot himself in a motel room in Bakersfield. She’d pull out her twelve-string guitar and rage through the Grateful Dead’s “Fire on the Mountain,” beating the strings as she sang,

“Long distance runner, what you holdin’ out for?  
. . . You gave all you had. Why you wanna give more?”

On more peaceful days, we’d take walks together in the woods surrounding her cabin, and she’d stop to greet familiar flowers, plants, and shrubs, every one of which she could name and identify as a cure for particular ailments. We picked fragrant Labrador tea and coltsfoot leaves, smooth on top and fuzzy on the underside. Gathering armfuls of yarrow from alongside the driveway, she’d say,

“If you have a cold, yarrow’s what you need to drink. Coltsfoot’s the best thing for a cough.” I nodded, stowing the knowledge away for future reference.

“It’s all here,” she said, waving a wand of yarrow around the yard, over the woods, and down to the town of Eagle and the Yukon River far below. “God has given us all we need.”

The summer she returned to Eagle with just months to live, she longed to walk in the woods again but was too unsteady on her feet. She could only make it as far as her garden, where she sat and pulled a few weeds but mostly just watched the ants with the absorption of a six year old, the sunlight glinting off the terrace wall she’d built of dozens of wine bottles.

By September, when I arrived in Eagle for my twice-yearly visit, Vicki could scarcely get out of bed. “Hello, girlfriend!” she crowed as I entered her bedroom, waving me away as she plucked at her dirty nightgown. “Don’t come close. I smell like an old goat.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said, hugging her around her frail shoulders, careful not to put any pressure on her stomach, visibly bloated beneath the blankets. I heated water on the stove, helped Vicki bathe, and washed her hair in a basin. She was so thin I could feel the exact shape of her skull as I shampooed her baby-fine hair.

Despite being in unremitting pain, Vicki refused to be taken to the hospice in Fairbanks. She’d posted a Do Not Resuscitate order on the wall next to her bed. Other friends and members of her church were also doing what they could for her: keeping the fire going in her wood stove, re-filling the water jug next to her bed, dumping the honey bucket.

One day, I sat helpless as Vicki received yet another call from the hospital haranguing her about her unpaid bill. She finally burst into tears and said “All I want to do is die in peace. Can’t you please stop calling me?” After a few minutes of silence, during which Vicki murmured an occasional, “Amen,” she hung up the phone and fell back on the pillow, exhausted, tears still streaming down her cheeks but with a beatific smile on her face. “She prayed for me. The collections lady prayed for me!”

Vicki was relieved when we talked openly about her thoughts of suicide because none of her other friends would discuss it. She kept the option open, with a gun wedged between the bed and the wall. She talked dreamily about simply taking a walk in the woods, where she would lie down with her animal friends and

slowly become insensate from the cold. “Would you walk with me?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. But she returned, in the end, to the mantra that had kept her going all along: “God said not to come into his presence uninvited.”

Most of the time, I just sat next to Vicki’s bed, perched uncomfortably on a spruce stump that served as a stool. I held her hand and listened to her. Gone were the unhappy tales of her old life Outside. What remained were the stories of her sad, absurd, lonely, lovely, peaceful life in Eagle, and her sense of connection to this place — a bond she was determined would remain unbroken. I followed her graceful hand gestures as she drew in the air the shape of the cozy hogan she and her ex-husband had built of spruce poles, Visqueen, and sod when they first came to Eagle. I heard her voice drop as she told of the cabin that burned down with her three cats inside. I watched as she widened her eyes to show her astonishment when a marten had darted out from under the bed and slipped out the cat door the winter they’d lived in an old camping trailer and almost froze.

Now it was Vicki who was slipping away — my friend who had taught me to identify which mushrooms are safe to eat, the right way to cut salmon, how to make a palatable meal using only bulk and canned foods. She’d shown me how to live simply, surround myself with beauty, and remember to pray.

But I had to get back to Anchorage, for reasons that now seem unimportant. I left on what felt like the very last day of autumn, the trees bare, the sky a desolate gray, snow expected any day. When I went to say goodbye to Vicki, she clung to me as I pressed my cheek against her scabbed and skeletal face, and she gave me a loving kiss on the cheek. Not an air kiss, but the way my sisters and I used to kiss each other as children. I knew my friend, my sister Vicki, would not be here come spring.

Vicki died a few weeks later, in her sleep. Her grave had already been dug before the ground froze. The townspeople would soon be hammering together a coffin of plywood and preparing a shroud. They would handle her body with respect and care, despite her years of drinking, her eccentricities, her feuds with friends and neighbors. Though it had been a long time since she had made her famous donuts for village potlucks or played her guitar in church, she was still a member of the community. She belonged there, and she would not leave.



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# Buckets

by C. B. Bernard

*In 1999, C.B. Bernard left New England to write for a newspaper in Sitka, Alaska, where he began to research rumors of an ancestor who had explored the unmapped Arctic as a free trader a century earlier. Soon he found records showing that Captain Joe Bernard had also moved to Sitka two years before his death in 1972 — and that the state had buried his ancestor in the cemetery next door to the house he'd rented. He'd put nearly 7,000 miles on his truck driving to Alaska and parked it on top of his own family. That experience and his research about Arctic exploration and how the past century has changed the north led to *Chasing Alaska: A Portrait of the Last Frontier Then and Now* (Lyons Press/2013). It was a finalist for a 2014 Oregon Book Award and a Publishers Weekly Top 10 Pick and National Geographic top book choice. A former Alaska resident, Bernard now lives in Portland, Oregon, with his wife and a temperamental bird dog named Shakespeare.*

*In Alaska, a lot of things can kill you. Even the rain. This short story originally appeared in Gray's Sporting Journal.*

HATHAWAY SQUATTED LIKE death itself over the remains of the deer, dirty to the elbows with her innards. The smell rising from her open cavity burned like ammonia. Fluids stung his hands and forearms. His shot had entered behind the shoulder and low, spiraling through the doe's organs like a drill bit and bursting her bladder, tainting the meat with urine. Splinters of bone punctured the stomach. Gastric acid trickled out in a pair of slow streams that ran beneath Hathaway's legs and down the beach to the water.

He wiped his face on his sleeve, up high by his shoulder and away from the blood. Under other circumstances such a shot might embarrass him. This time it didn't matter. He wasn't there for the deer. He'd come to kill his friend John Stone.

Stretching the curve from his back, Hathaway stood and looked around the beach for bear. This was when they'd get him — startle him over a kill while his hands were busy, the scent of blood like a perfumed dinner invitation. His

quadriceps ached imagining the weight of a bite. He'd been near bears before and the smell of death surrounded them, fetid and rank, unapologetically savage. Bears terrified him. He couldn't imagine ever getting used to their presence here in Alaska. This was their damn country.

He glanced at his deer rifle, a stainless Winchester ought-six he'd leaned against a felled spruce left on the beach by the tide. It was cut and limbed recently enough that the exposed faces hadn't yet discolored. Concentric rings showed its age. Ancient. Dizzying. It seemed a sin to log it. He guessed it had broken away from a raft being towed past the town, toward the logging company camp.

Since the local Native corporation had sold the logging rights, the town had entered yet another evolution. After a thousand years, the corporation's animal totem — raven on brown bear on killer whale — had been re-imagined: helicopters swarmed the southern sky, log trucks prowled the roads, barges ghosted in and out of the bay at night, hulking shadows on a moonless horizon. The air trembled with activity. Locals remembered a time not so long ago when the paper mill was here, in town, and the sour smell of pulp coated everything like the rain, but now the pulp was made in Japan and the raw trees came from here, as if, having killed the town by suffocating its economy, the Japanese were coming back for its flesh and bones.

He'd heard fishermen in the harbors complaining about all the deadhead logs in the water, how they had to run them like a gauntlet while checking their crab pots, or cut them from their gillnets like bloated corpses. Before he'd come to the island, Hathaway had never run a boat. He still hadn't run one in the dark, and like everything else up here, the thought of it scared him. There were a lot of ways to die in Alaska.

He kept an eye on the tree line as his hands slipped through the warmth of the deer, cutting the organs free and scattering them on the nearby rocks. Without effort, he'd been able to distinguish the tracks of four distinct bears in the mud above the high tide mark. They bedded down in the beachgrass at the tree line, leaving flattened rooms of matted reeds and wild rye, and if the grass moved with the breeze Hathaway's heart leapt like a hooked salmon. Heaps of bear scat stood like pyres waiting to be burned. Making as large a mess as he could, he pushed the bears from his mind. Blood pooled between the smooth beach stones, leeching

outward from the body of the deer, butterflyed open on her back and spilling her insides out.

Her fawn still bayed from the woods. Not yet a yearling, it had stood over its mother when she fell, running crookedly up the beach and away only when Hathaway approached. For three hours he'd leaned against the boat, watching the woods, supposed to be hunting but killing only time while waiting for Stone to return. He'd almost laughed when the doe emerged from the grass a boat's length from him. Her coat glistened in the rain like fallen leaves. The rifle had come to his shoulder with unpracticed ease, and for a moment he'd felt good, felt the adrenaline like a drug, the thrill of his first hunt. He'd never killed anything bigger than a fish before. But when the last echoes of the shot stopped ringing in his ears, Hathaway saw where he'd hit her, saw she was just a small doe, saw the fawn jerkily approach, prodding with a rounded snout at its mother's body. Blood rushed to his face, unwanted, warm. The gun trembled in his arms. The doe had been a stroke of good luck. The fawn was the bad luck that came with it. That was how Hathaway understood luck to work.

Snow had moved down the mountain overnight. It pushed past the 500-foot mark, rain at lower elevations, though the misting they'd gotten running the skiff from town had let up some. The rain would be back. It always rained in this damn country. People in town wore it like a badge of honor. It keeps the hippies out, they said. Limits the tourists. In his time here, watching the cruise ships pull into port, Hathaway had learned that to be true. Who are these people who pay a fortune for a week in Southeast Alaska and then stay on the ship watching movies in port? But he'd also learned that sixteen months of endless rain could make a man forget who he was. His clothes never completely dried. Even covered in black garbage bags, the seats of his truck were always damp, his windshield opaque with fog. Mold insinuated itself into everything. Grass grew from the roof of every house in town, the closest anyone came to having a lawn.

In the Arizona of his childhood, towns diverted whatever water they could, wasting resources so people could irrigate their lawns. Each suburban home was edged by manicured sod that ended like justified text against a margin of desert. It made no sense to him, but neither did the ambivalence people here showed about landscaping: Houses cobbled together. Yards left as they were found or enhanced with abandoned boat parts, crab pots, fishing gear. No pride in appearances, as

though they surrendered to the futility of competing against the natural landscape without even a fight. *Lay down your rakes, brothers.*

Rain filled everything. It pooled in the curved hulls of boats in the harbor, of boats trailered in yards, rising in wheelbarrows and five-gallon pails left upright as though in supplication to God. It rode into the coffee shop on the plastic coats and rubber boots of those stubborn enough to live here, beaded up around window frames and dripped into wood stoves, masked the streets and gutters so they were implied rather than seen beneath inches of standing water. It even seeped its way into conversation, as if it were the most interesting thing that might happen on any given day. *Rain.*

And then, movement in the fringe of trees where the beach met the forest. A stick snapping, or a branch. Hathaway lunged for his rifle, his heart a rumbling diesel, his skin gone cold. The deer's blood slicked the gun's barrel. He held his breath as the motion carried through the tall beachgrass. The bear emerged just uphill from where Hathaway stood tensed and anxious, watching through his scope.

*Bang.*

"Don't point that thing at me, you jackass," John Stone said, walking toward him. The green wool of his halibut jacket disappeared against the backdrop of trees, creating the effect of a disembodied head floating above a pair of striding legs. Stone carried his rifle slung casually over his invisible shoulder as if he hadn't a fear in the world.

*You should have,* Hathaway thought, keeping the rifle trained on Stone as he filled the circle of scope until it could no longer focus.

"What the hell you doing, Hathaway?"

"I'm watching your back. There's bear sign everywhere."

"There ought to be. You see the bait buckets just back of the tree line? Season's not open for brownies. Must be a poacher hung them there."

Hathaway lowered the gun, but didn't put it down. "Must be," he said.

"We'll have to let Fish and Game know, we get back to town. Somebody stumbles on those things, he's liable to get himself eaten."

Overhead a patch of sky had opened up in the cloud cover, and a shaft of sunlight found the beach. Around here they call those sucker holes, because they sucker you into thinking the weather is clearing and then it rains on you.



Stone squinted in the sudden light.

“Any rate, I didn’t see much sign except for that fawn crying. If someone’s baiting bears here, that’d keep deer away. Surprised to hear your shot. Guess you got lucky, Hathaway.”

“I’m just lucky, I guess.”

Stone squatted down next to the splayed deer and pulled a cigarette out of a coat pocket. Predictably unshaven, the stubble rode high on his cheek, ending just below a scar the length of a rifle slug. Hathaway had no idea what injury had caused it. He imagined Stone the kind of man with a constellation of scars, a creation myth for each of them. Maybe he’d ask Abigail when he saw her. She’d know.

“Christ, you shot a doe? Must be her fawn, then. Jesus. At least you didn’t shoot *it*, too.” Stone studied the carcass of the deer for a moment, a halo of smoke surrounding his head. “The hell you do to it? Looks like you dressed it out with your teeth. Jesus, Hathaway. Thought you said you’d done this before.”

Hathaway answered him with the butt of the Winchester, swinging it by its barrel so the heavy stock connected with his temple. Stone’s cigarette hissed out against the beach rocks, wet with blood and rain.

*Lot of ways to die here*, Hathaway thought, raising the rifle butt again.

THE PULP MILL shut down in the ’80s. Predicting the town’s death, the editor of the newspaper called for the heads of the American syndicate that sold out to the Japanese. Some people cut their losses and left town, moving north to Anchorage or the Valley where they resorted to desk jobs or reinvented themselves as farmers. Others surrendered some piece of who they were and returned to the Lower 48 — *America*, they called it. After a period of economic darkness, commercial fishing kept the town viable. It seemed for a while that everyone in town bought a permit and a boat. The fleet continued to grow even as the numbers of fish diminished, until the market no longer could support the fishery. How could small-boat troll fishermen in Alaska compete with fish farms in Canada, Chile, and Norway? They couldn’t. They bought smaller, faster boats, and turned to charter fishing. To some, charter fishing was no different from commercial fishing — making money by harvesting the resource. Except the money came from cigar-smoking “sportsmen,” usually from Texas, who arrived in parties of

six and behaved like frat boys at a bachelor party. The client aspect of the business led others to see it as tourism, and wanting to tax it accordingly. The Texans slept at the fishing lodges, which fed them and shuttled them by van to the harbor and to the airport, their fish blast-frozen and bundled in waxed boxes; they never once stepped foot into town. Economically, the town felt their presence only in the sale of marine fuel or in property taxes even as they came and went in droves. It became increasingly difficult to catch salmon or halibut in the bay.

The Native corporation responded by selling logging rights to the Japanese. The rest of the town took drastic measures to resurrect itself by opening the doors to full-scale tourism. The mayor and the Chamber of Commerce built a deepwater lightering dock and invited cruise lines into the bay. While the rain and a general privileged laziness kept many passengers on board, some disembarked into the small downtown of wooden sidewalks and old Russian flair. They bought trinkets and postcards, took a few pictures and drank lattes at the coffee shop, then they went home and told their coworkers they'd seen Alaska, and wasn't it magnificent? They had the T-shirts to prove it.

Hathaway often marveled how one place could mean such different things to so many people. For him, it was about open space. About beauty. About wildness.

That's what had brought him here — at least ostensibly. He was newly arrived in San Diego, a few years out of college and already divorced, plowing a cubicle farm as a policy writer for the healthcare industry, when Clare had shown up at his door soliciting signatures on a clean air petition. Didn't he hate working in that environment? Didn't the crowds and the traffic and the smog get to him? Over margaritas she told him she'd always wanted to travel north. She told him there was a rainforest to save from logging, salmon to save from overfishing, eagles on the endangered-species list. She told him she wanted to protect them all.

"I love eagles," he said.

Six days later they were bouncing along the Al-Can in his truck, farther north than he'd ever been. The mountains rose straight up from the shoulder of the road. Fireweed burned in the clearcuts. He didn't even know Clare's last name.

They'd arrived in the midst of the charter fishing boom. Commercial market prices tanked for salmon, but sport fishing boats were turning clients away. There was no logic to it. The same people who wouldn't pay to eat salmon would pay to catch them. Hathaway became grateful for such people when John Stone hired

him as a stern-monkey on the *Keta*. He'd never scrubbed a deck or baited a hook in his life. He was unaccustomed to working with his hands and back, and it didn't come easily to him, but Stone tolerated him because he didn't get seasick. He'd come to Alaska to enlarge the boundaries of his world, and instead found it shrunk to the size of the fiberglass deck between the gunwales of a 27-foot Sea Sport. Nothing in his life prepared him for the long days of physical labor. His blood was filled with desert sand, not Pacific brine, and his English degree from Arizona State seemed a liability. Clients and guides alike, especially the Texans, treated him with suspicion.

He learned first to dumb down the way he spoke, then not to speak at all.

When Clare left, he stayed on with Stone and the *Keta*. Where would he go, back to San Diego? He barely remembered it, having fled before he even formed an impression. Thinking about it absently while bleeding Chinook on the boat, saving their gills for crab bait, his mind struggled to picture California as a half-developed, abandoned Polaroid. San Diego was Clare's home, not his. And before that, his ex-wife had marked the fenceposts and corners of Arizona. Hathaway had no home to go back to, and nothing yet to look forward to. The days he passed in mute labor on the rolling sea, the nights scrubbing out his loneliness with the stiff-bristled brush and soapy water, hosing fish blood through the scuppers into the harbor where the scales twinkled like stars beneath the sodium lights of the dock.

Abigail had black hair and crooked teeth. Her expression had a fatigue to it that worked her features like gravity. Above the puffiness, her eyes shone like diamonds. Like ice. The first time Hathaway saw her, she was holding a mug of tea close to her face, reading *Anna Karenina*, her hair tucked into a Chicago Cubs hat. Rain-soaked customers filled the coffee shop around them. Most were locals in faded rain gear, though Hathaway recognized a few brave cruise ship passengers by their matching ponchos with Holland America across the chests and backs.

"You like Russian literature?" he asked.

"Not really. But she throws herself in front of the train."

"I hope it's not research."

He smiled to show he was joking.

"There's no trains on the island." She didn't return his smile. Hathaway scoured her face for some hint of sentiment, but found only blankness. The same

expression he saw a dozen times a day in the salmon he stacked like firewood against the *Keta's* fiberglass bulkhead.

"I suppose I could throw myself in front of a ferry," she said, her expression softening, her eyes coming to life. Hathaway thought of the sucker holes, and how they enticed tourists into leaving their rain coats in their rooms.

He pointed to her cap. "You like the Cubs?"

This time she smiled.

"Like throwing myself in front of a train."

The coffee shop was almost the extent of their relationship's geography: at a back table, a book in her hands, a chimney of tea steaming beside her. Hathaway haunted the place on his days off. She never showed surprise to find him there.

They saw each other that way two or three times a week until one day she put her hand on his, leaning in close to share gossip she'd picked up around the harbor. He'd known her more than a month. At that moment it occurred to him to ask her last name.

"Stone," she said. "It's Stone."

THE RAIN BEGAN again. Just like that, like a valve had been turned, and the air filled with a spray that soaked through layers of wool clothing and skin until even his bones felt damp. Hathaway pulled his coat more tightly around him and tugged on his wool cap. He blinked into the sky.

Would it never end? A part of him wanted to be done with it, all of it. He'd always hated the desert as a kid, the way the arid heat forced life to adapt. No place for a childhood. Sand worked its way into everything the way water did here. The idea of distinct seasons had been a dream, a utopia, but this bordered on sadistic. Even his blood thinned with rainwater. Seven months after he'd arrived in country, he'd stumbled home from work looking for a beer, slick with fish but repulsed by the idea of a shower, of more water, to find a note on the kitchen table. Clare had gone back to San Diego. "It's not you," she wrote. "It's the rain." But there were days Hathaway couldn't distinguish between the two. He rode the swelling deck of the *Keta* as the skies poured down upon him, John Stone and the clients dry in the small cabin. Rain worked its way down the cuffs and collar of his Grundéns. His skin became perpetually wrinkled, his hands a clutch of prunes. Alaskans had names for everything — snow was termination dust, newcomers

like Hathaway were Cheechakos. They called the rain liquid sunshine, and swore it didn't bother them, but it had to. It had to.

The bait buckets were just five-gallon pails of brightly colored plastic. He'd stuffed them with fish guts from the *Keta*, hung them from spikes in the trees. When he'd shown up to rebait his first ones, he'd found bits of fish strewn from one end of the beach to the other. Land otters or mink. After that he left the lids on. Punched holes in them so the smell could get out but only bears could get in.

Water lapped against the beach, rain thrummed steadily on his shoulders and the rocks around him, and the fawn cried from the woods for its mother. At some point, Hathaway figured, it would run off. Learn to fend for itself. It would be fine, he told himself. Nature would take its course, and however he felt about it, he had his own business to attend to.

Walking through the beachgrass made him nervous. Taller than him, the color of a duck's beak, it seemed to whisper as he moved through it. In the matted grass where the bears bedded down, he found fish bones, whole key-shaped skeletons, bear turds lined with deer hair and dotted with berries. His rifle sling tangled, and the long, slim blades of grass tugged at his legs. Hathaway carried the Winchester before him. He listened intently, imagined himself a soldier on patrol in Vietnam, like his father. The bolt was closed. The safety was off. A shell locked in the chamber and three more in the magazine. Was surprising a Viet Cong more terrifying than a salivating bear?

Conscious of every sound, alert to any movement in the woods or grass around him, he hauled the bait buckets one at a time to his skiff. The stink of old blood burned his nose. When he carried a bucket, he gripped his rifle with his free hand instead of wearing it on its sling. Even though it took both hands to fire it, this way he could get to it more quickly. There would be no time to waste if he needed it.

THEY HAD ONE other place they met. Abigail had been a point guard on her high school basketball team, traveling around Alaska by ferry and airplane in search of a state title. Her eyes weren't kind as she remembered aloud the stout, smiling Natives from the northern coast whose set shots were unfailing line drives, honed by years of playing in low-ceilinged school gyms. Ten years out, she still missed the feel of the court. As a reward for sharing that piece of herself,

Hathaway offered to play one-on-one with her a few nights a week on the courts behind the elementary school.

Puddles covered the ground. Her ball was worn smooth by years of use, slick with rain. It slipped from his grasp on rebounds. His shots soared wild and away from the backboard.

“Didn’t you say you played in high school, too?”

“I did. Just not on a team.”

“The hell does that mean?”

He tried to think of the last time he’d been in a game, or even touched a basketball. Nothing came to mind. He dribbled the ball off his foot. His hook shots hit the backboard like a bullet, rattling the rim, or sailed high over the top and into the night.

SUMMER BURNED AWAY some of the clouds. Daylight lingered until midnight, or later, and there were days on the *Keta* when Hathaway stripped down to a T-shirt beneath his rubber overalls. Sea lions climbed onto the fingers of the harbors. Goats came down from the high shale ridges and grazed on the beaches. The whole world seemed to bask in the warmth.

No matter how much the town welcomed it, the sun never built up any momentum. It rained every other day.

Business boomed with the season, and Hathaway spent more time helping out around the lodge each evening after cleaning the boat. During that time he also got to know John Stone better. Hard labor had earned the boss’s respect. It was the only language he seemed to speak, and he let Hathaway drink the lodge’s beer and smoke cigars on the wraparound deck with him and the clients while they watched the rain bubble up in the puddles dotting the driveway.

Stone had been born in Alaska, up north near the Arctic Circle, in a cabin that had an outhouse because the ground was too frozen to dig a septic. His parents still lived in the same cabin. It still had no plumbing. Hathaway saw that as a symbol of Stone’s immeasurable ruggedness. That even his mother rolled her pants down over a cold hole in the earth.

Independently of one another, husband and wife were Hathaway’s only source of companionship in town. Mornings began when he unlocked the *Keta’s* cabin at 3:30. Most nights he closed one of the town’s two waterfront bars,

drinking pints of Alaskan Amber bought with boat tips, the only things from Texas that were small, making conversation with anyone who sat nearby. The next night he'd close the other bar. Alternating between them kept Hathaway from feeling like he was in a rut.

One night near the end of the summer, a Sitka blacktail ran across the gravel driveway of the lodge, chased by a neighbor's Lab. That week's group of Texans hooted and cheered from the deck, sloshing beer down through the porch slats. Later, as Hathaway loaded his truck to head to the bar, Stone suggested they fill their deer tags together that fall.

"You hunt, right?"

"Sure," Hathaway said. "Yeah. Of course."

Over dinners at the lodge, he watched the way Stone walked and moved. He listened to the way he spoke to the clients and tried to mimic it. It was the same way Abigail talked. He cursed the newness of his clothes, and wished for frayed edges to his Grundéns and Carhartts. When he was alone on the *Keta*, he took his laundry from his drybag and soaked it in fish blood, hoping it would stain.

FOUR RED BAIT buckets and two blue ones were lined up in the skiff's bow, and the rain beat out a percussion line on their lids. A sun-worn gas tank sat beside them. He'd wedged it between the cylindrical floats he used as dock bumpers so it wouldn't slide around the deck. He'd brought a vinyl camouflage drybag full of food and overnight gear, but nothing in it would chase away the kind of chill Hathaway had.

Covered in blood, Stone's body curved like a jump shot on the beach beside the deer. Early afternoon, already getting dark. Town a good two hours in his underpowered skiff, the 25-horse lamed by a misfiring cylinder, Hathaway still with work to do. He washed the blood from his hands and forearms in the cold water. The bears would come. He didn't want to be on the beach when they did. It was only a matter of time.

As he worked, he kept an eye on the tree line. When the beachgrass switched and swayed, he froze, realizing he'd made a Cheechako's mistake, putting the bodies between himself and his boat, between himself and the rifle he'd left leaning against the spruce log. He'd heard stories of hunters chased into the water by bears that fed on their half-dressed kill while the hunters succumbed to

hypothermia, chest deep in the cold Gulf of Alaska, their loaded rifles waiting uselessly on shore.

“Damn,” he said. “Damn.”

He wished he carried a Casull like Stone did, holstered under his coat. Smaller calibers might stop a charging bear, but he’d take his chances with the .454. Not that it mattered. He had little chance of reaching Stone’s body in time.

*So those are my options, he thought. Stand still and wait to see what happens, or go for Stone’s gun.*

The choice was made for him. He didn’t think he could move even if he wanted to. Fear rooted him to his spot. He thought of Abby, thought of the way her body felt against his. What the hell was he doing here?

High on the beach, above the mud, the grass parted. The orphan fawn tumbled out into the rain. It looked around the beach and bayed for its mother.

EARLY SEPTEMBER, THE long daylight hours gone, they shot hoops under the playground lights. Abigail sunk an arcing jumper from the top of the key that put her up 11 to 4. They played to 12, and she needed just one more bucket to get there. A mist hung in the air. Through the glare, Hathaway could make out the dim outline of the mountains looming like the shoulders of the town.

Over the months he’d learned to use his size and weight to his advantage. Fouling her seemed unfair, but he liked the way their bodies touched. The intimacy of athletics had never occurred to him before. When he dribbled, he hunched over the ball, curving his back to her defense. She had a mean outside shot.

“I’ll bet you miss your next one,” he said, stalling to catch his breath.

“What’s in it for me?”

“Besides winning?”

“I win all the time. I want something more.”

“Something more? Like what? Dinner?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“A favor.”

Stained with sweat and rain, her red sweatpants clung to her thighs as she spun the ball distractedly on an index finger. Even under the uneven lights she



wasn't beautiful. Hathaway's heart beat him senseless from the inside out. It was the exertion, he told himself. It was the game.

"I like the sound of that," he said.

"Maybe you shouldn't."

"Maybe I do."

"No. No, I don't think so."

"There's nothing you can ask for that I'm not going to be okay with," he said.

"That's how it is?"

"That's how it is."

"Well," she said. "We'll see about that."

Abigail checked the ball, and when he returned it she faked a shot. Leaping to block, Hathaway committed. He felt he could keep on rising into the night air. She dribbled beneath his upraised arm and put in the layup, laughing.

"Know what you did wrong?"

He wasn't sure where to begin.

"You left your feet," she said. "Never leave your feet."

THE FAWN'S BLEATING must sound like a dinner bell, Hathaway thought, gathering his gear in the skiff. Confused by what had happened, and frightened besides, it latched on to him as a surrogate mother, pausing from its cries only to lick the matted blood from its own legs. As Hathaway untied the boat from the trees and coiled the line loosely over his arm, shimmying sideways down the beach to the skiff with an eye on the grass, the fawn followed close on his heels. There was a grating mew to its cries that got under his skin, like the rain.

"Scat," he said, waving his arms at it and watching the tree line nervously. Hathaway didn't trust his senses in the fading light. With each minute that passed, he liked his chances on the beach less and less. "Go on, get out. Beat it."

Instead of chasing the fawn off, his voice seemed to draw it closer. Gangly, unsure on its feet, the deer walked like it was on ice. Under other circumstances Hathaway might have gotten down to his knees and reached out to it, let it sniff his hand. Scratched it behind the ear. The idea brought Clare to mind. Clare would have swaddled it in her fleece, brought it back to town and raised it as a pet in the backyard. Had it really been a year since she'd left? Any loss he'd felt over her had curdled. Women like her were a dime a dozen here, iron shavings to Alaska's

magnetic north. Drawn by what they see on television or read in some environmental magazine, they came with ideas and blasted everyone for their sins against Mother Nature, as if they could make the world a better place one lecture at a time. And then Mother Nature herself, in the form of rain, drove them away. Hathaway told himself he had no use for such people. People who want to save the world but don't care a damn about the people in their own lives.

Thinking of Clare rankled him, turning his impatience and fear to anger. He kicked at the fawn when it drew up at his feet. It dodged and retreated, skittish, and Hathaway missed, his rubber boot slipping on the wet rocks and sliding out from under him. Rocks dug into his back when he landed. He held the Winchester in the air above his chest, grateful it hadn't gone off.

"Damn it," he said, and climbed to his feet.

The rain had picked up again. Hathaway could feel the cold in his hands, wet from handling the coil of rope, from the rifle. The fawn followed him to the boat, but kept its distance. Putting his weight into it, he shouldered his skiff into the water and clambered over the bow. Digging a long, half-rotted oar into the shallows, he backed into deeper water, lowered the outboard, and pulled the starter cord. The engine sputtered to life like a waking animal. On the shore, the fawn stood knee-deep in the shallows, watching him, bellowing its orphan cry.

Pointing the bow south, Hathaway ran around the corner of the bay and idled a hundred feet offshore. Darkness enclosed him as he worked. There were no stars in the sky, and when he tilted his head to look for them the rain splashed his face, spilling into his eyes. One by one he emptied the bait buckets into the water, the fish guts spilling off the stern in a long chum trail. The water numbed his hands and forearms as he rinsed out the pails and nested them inside one another in the bow, where they wouldn't look out of place. When this was all over, his boat would look like every other skiff in the harbor when he motored back and tied off in his slip.

He'd put food in his dry bag. He was prepared to wait all night if he had to, anchored offshore and watching the beach in the darkness. Prepared to wait as long as it might take.

Hathaway gunned the motor, turning around and returning toward the beach. Daylight lingered only as a tease of dim color where the sea met the sky. He could make out the silhouette of the truncated volcano, dormant a thousand years,

beyond it nothing but ocean all the way to Russia. It was difficult to see where he was going in the darkness, and he ran faster than he should have, hoping to take advantage of what light remained.

Nearing the beach, the boat lurched, shuddered as if struck, and heaved at a 40-degree angle toward land. The contents of the bow — the gas can, the bait buckets, stray, rusted tools he kept loose — crashed to the port side, and the tiller jumped, wrenched from his icy hand. Hathaway grabbed a gunwale for balance as the skiff righted itself, swiveling to one side. Behind him the outboard whined briefly, a hoarse, metallic cry, and quit. He spun on the stern bench and leaned over the transom in time to see the log float past and vanish into the darkness, a deadhead, smaller than the one on the beach. He pulled the starter cord. Nothing. Again. Nothing. In the silence that filled the space left by the muted outboard, the rain pinged the skiff's aluminum deck and floorboards.

SHE'D SEEN THEM off at the harbor, even though it was a full hour before dawn. Dawn, which comes as late as 9:30 in October. As they'd loaded their gear into Hathaway's skiff, she'd stood swaying on the finger, half asleep, her eyes hooded beneath the blue baseball cap. Did she even own a coat? He'd never seen her wear one. Her sweatshirt hid her figure, which was sinewy and strong, primal and lean. Hathaway tried not to look, afraid he'd get caught.

He topped off his gas tank and bled the water from the filter as Stone untied the spring line from the cleats. There wasn't much activity in the harbor. Lights burned brightly through the windows of the liveboards, and ripples of tide rocked the floating docks and boats rhythmically.

"Good luck out there, both of you. Hope you get lucky."

"Nothing to it," Stone said, zipping his rifle into a waterproof case. "Just a walk in the woods."

Hathaway looked up from the fuel filter in time to see Stone lean over the gunwale to kiss his wife. He tried to gauge Abigail's reaction, to see if she would flinch or pull away, but the boat swayed beneath him, and he reached for the opposing rail to recapture his balance.

"Just a walk in the woods," he said. "Unless we get eaten by a bear."

"God, Hathaway," Stone said. "You're just like everyone else who comes up here from America. All you think about is bears. You worry too much."

“Yeah, Hathaway. Don’t worry so much,” Abigail said. “At least *you’re* in good hands.”

THERE WAS SOMETHING else. Hathaway strained to listen, unsure what to expect. What would it sound like? Would he hear panting, or would they roar with pleasure? Had it already begun? But another sound altogether came from the beach, downwind but not distant, pleadingly familiar.

“Damn it,” he said. “I don’t believe it.”

The breeze whispered at his side. It pushed him slowly, inexorably toward the sound, parallel with the beach, toward the bloodied deer and John Stone’s body, the silent outboard a dead weight on the transom. Hathaway scooted into the bow and readied the anchor, uncoiling the line from the overturned bait buckets. When he reached a spot close to where he wanted to be, he dropped the steel hook over the deck plate. The line slipped through his hands, a rooster tail of rainwater fanning his face, and stopped when the anchor hit the bottom. Hathaway jerked the line to set the anchor, gave it some slack and tied it off to a cleat.

Still the fawn bleated. Its cries curled with the night and carried on the wind like burrs, clinging to the legs of Hathaway’s pants and the sleeves of his jacket, heavy with rain, digging sharply into his skin.

“Get over it,” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth and facing the shore. “She’s gone, and she’s not coming back. Can’t you see that? You’re on your own. And if you stick around you’re going to get yourself eaten. *Damn.*”

How could nature have failed so blatantly? The fawn couldn’t survive the night. It wasn’t ready to be alone, unprepared to face the world. The world was a rough place. Especially Alaska.

The sky had turned pitch black already, and it was still only early evening. He had a long night ahead of him. There was a handheld marine band VHF on Stone’s belt. He’d wait until daylight and see if he could get to it. Maybe tomorrow someone would come from the logging camp in a boat, watching the beaches for deer, or a helicopter would pass overhead and he’d shoot to get the pilot’s attention.

He thought of Abigail, wondered what she was doing. He pictured her at the coffee shop reading Virginia Woolf, her lips sweet with tea; or watching the window for headlights in the driveway that meant he hadn’t gone through with it.

The image of her brought a bitterness to his mouth, a taste of bile that surprised him. Was that a possibility she'd even entertained? That he might fail? Maybe she'd already driven into town to the police station to report her husband and his deckhand overdue from a hunting trip, her face revealing nothing, her eyes the gray of his rifle barrel, discouraging second thoughts.

On shore the fawn bayed into the darkness, steady as the rain. It reminded Hathaway of a beagle he'd had as a child, an incessant barker his mother had banished to a chain in the back yard. The punishment only exacerbated the crime, and the barking continued around the clock. It carried for what seemed like miles through the flat, treeless neighborhood. Neighbors called. The police showed up a couple of times. One day he'd come home from school and the dog was gone. His parents never mentioned it. He never asked.

From his drybag he pulled a headlamp, yellow plastic with an elastic headband, and slipped it over his wet hat. The beam barely reached the shore. He couldn't make out any shape from the shadows, and didn't want to get any closer than he already was. He'd have to wait until daylight. Seventeen hours away. This damn country.

Something glinted in the falloff of the halogen beam as he scanned the beach. He turned back, looking for it. A pair of eyes reflected green in the light. The fawn. Its bleating carried across the water and filled the night.

"You're pathetic," he yelled. "You know that?"

Keeping the beam trained on the fawn, Hathaway felt for his rifle and lifted it to his shoulder, sighting the young deer in the scope. Even in the dim light from his headlamp, he could see it clearly enough. It stood on its spindly legs, mouth open, eyes wide. Hathaway braced a knee against the gunwale. He timed the patterned rocking of the boat.

He squeezed the trigger. The boat swayed. Rainwater ran from the rifle stock under his cuffs and down his arms. The sound of the gunshot rose upward through the trees and scattered resting birds into flight, ringing out along the face of the snow-covered mountain and into the darkness, echoing back from the other side of the bay, both slipping away from him and returning at the same time.



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## Ballistics

by Jeremy Pataky

*Jeremy Pataky grew up in the Inland Northwest and visited Alaska twice by boat before relocating over land. He earned a BA at Western Washington University and an MFA in poetry from the University of Montana. His work has appeared in Colorado Review, Black Warrior Review, Cirque, Ice Floe, The Southeast Review, and many others. Overwinter (University of Alaska Press, 2015) is his debut book of poetry.*

*Pataky migrates seasonally between Anchorage and his cabin near McCarthy, Alaska. This nonfiction piece was inspired by a Fourth of July celebration in Eastern Alaska and a letter sent by a friend to the author about the death and burial of a local man named James Sill.*

I STAND BESIDE the uniformed law enforcement ranger during the Fourth of July parade and watch the big fire engine with its volunteer crew growl along, followed by the fundamentalist preacher float with its generator-powered electronic organ, and then a vintage Jeep decorated as a bush plane taxiing down the dirt street. The motley marching band comes by with its flute, snare drum, tiny finger symbols, and clarinet. Because town is very small, the parade goes down the dusty main drag once, loops around, and then does it again. Later, the same street hosts the egg toss, tug of war, nail hammering contest, and the three-legged race. And because it's a small town, I know well the law enforcement ranger who stands, armed and armored, beside me. And because it's a small town, and a remote one at the end of a rough sixty-mile dirt road that itself begins in the middle of what some would consider nowhere, it's a rare day when a large crowd of people like this congregates. Independence Day, here, is thronged with people, making it by far the easiest day of the year — maybe the only day — when it's possible to blend into the crowd. And because it's an unincorporated town and technically private property, we are beyond the jurisdiction of my co-spectator, the National Park Service law enforcement ranger who lives here. A short walk in most any direction would get one out of town and onto NPS property, where one would be subject to the federal rules and regulations that entails. But it's the Fourth, and everyone in the valley is in from the woods to mix with the visitors

who've come in all the way from the big city to focus on each other and the occasion.

A dozen barn swallows swoop and dive above the crowd like cartoon fighter jets, their iridescence glinting like silent daylight fireworks blasted from the trees or the old fading buildings, reminding me where we are. Not far to the north in the valley, the terminus of the massive glacier yields its meltwater as a silty, gray river, all bracketed by weathered ridges that funnel the cool glacier winds down our way in the evenings.

A supersized white pickup, four-doored and generously endowed under the hood, slowly rolls by on the parade's first pass through town. The noise of kids, engines, four hundred people talking, laughing, a barking dog, a small plane whining overhead someplace, the noise of insects and birds, my thoughts turning things over, and the crowd of people and activity all make such a din and spectacle that I doubt myself when I think I see a large man I don't recognize, bald and swathed with a blue bandana, lift his arm from the white truck in the road and fire a round into the air with a revolver. The law enforcement ranger doesn't react, though, and the crowd is nonplussed. Everything remains normal. I must have mistaken what I heard and thought I saw — it was a backfiring motorcycle, maybe, behind me somewhere, I don't know. We are outside the jurisdiction of the only law enforcement officer within a five-hour drive and he stands close enough to me that if he fired his own pistol I would smell the spent gunpowder while my ears rang.

When the white truck, bedecked with American flags, rolls round again, one little pearl in a parade-shaped string of pearls, the whole procession pauses, and the white truck and the bandana man are stationed precisely before us, the ranger and me. And then one of the largest revolvers I have ever seen comes out of the truck in the large hand of the man who pokes it skyward and shoots, loudly, unmistakably, into the air, surrounded by the swollen crowd that helps me feel anonymous in this tiny town. It's an island in a sea of wildlands, an end-of-the-road town where the law enforcement officer beside me sees what I see, and hears it, and does nothing because it's not only out of his jurisdiction, it is not, in fact, illegal here. The parade sparks back to life and keeps moving, and the kids run and vie for the scattershot fistfuls of candy flung to them by volunteer firefighters, by backcountry guides sporting garish gear from the 80s, by Park Service



interpretive rangers fresh out of someplace else wallowing in their summer in Alaska. I notice one little girl in the crowd watching a pair of violet green swallows mingled in with the barn swallows swooping and diving above us all, though I doubt she sees their difference.

No one reacts to the second gunshot, either. I ask the ranger about it, and he tells me that that man's brother committed suicide here on the Fourth of July a few years back.

Just that small shard of the story places it for me and suddenly I know the men's names — the man shooting from the truck and his dead brother — though I wasn't here, then, yet, when it happened and I didn't know either of them. I remember the long letter a friend of mine who was here at the time sent to me, describing the event and the aftermath. I flash through shards of the story I'd heard through the years about the man who died — the three-tiered wedding cake he'd built in his workshop, his election as chief of the volunteer fire department, his friendships with the crew he worked with, restoring old buildings up at the historic mill town.

Apparently, when a well-liked man surprises the whole town by killing himself here, one possible outcome, even in this day and age, is that his friends and co-workers might build a coffin when they're all given administrative leave to deal with the shock, and they might place the body of their friend inside and carry it up the mountain to his own land and dig a hole, there, and bury him. The surviving brother might come to town some years later for the anniversary of the death, and join the parade, and fire off a tribute to his brother, a curt report as easy as saying that one busted syllable: *James*.



*Learn more about Pataky at <http://www.jeremypataky.com/>. For more great reads from Alaska's best authors, visit our fine [independent bookshops](#).*

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Alaska Sampler 2015

Edited by David Marusek and Deb Vanasse

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