



# The Cloud Atlas

Liam Callanan

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THE  
CLOUD  
ATLAS

LIAM CALLANAN



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*To Lucy  
Would that I had  
had such a map*



*No morphine: no use, the doctor said.*

*The boy would die within the hour, and morphine was in short supply. He was saving it for the soldiers—for American soldiers, he added, checking the wall clock, then his watch, then me. It was four o'clock, 1600 hours Alaskan War Time, on July 6, 1945, a mere thirty-four days before fighting in Japan officially ended. The boy was Japanese.*

*When I was a boy, I was told a writer should date his age from the day he started writing. I can't remember why I was told this; I just remember that I liked it enough to repeat it over the years to those who might benefit from the wisdom. To anyone. To people like my drill sergeant.*

*He had a quick reply: a soldier should date his age from the day he started killing.*

*If that's so, I was even younger than the world took me for back then. An eighteen-year-old sergeant. I'd been in the army for ten months, waging a secret war, from Alaska, for six. I'd trained in bomb disposal. I'd learned to speak some Yup'ik, I'd fallen in love with a woman who talked with touch, I'd shot a bar glass out of my captain's hand.*

*And now, in that tiny room, in a mission infirmary just inland from the Bering Sea, the weather cold and wet, I was sitting at the side of a boy who was dying.*

*I was AWOL.*

*And for the first time since putting on a uniform, I was crying.*

*At eleven, the boy died. At midnight, I turned three days old.*

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# CHAPTER 1

I'M A WANTED MAN.

That's hardly enough to distinguish me around here, of course. I've heard it said that a percentage of Alaska's population is always fleeing something—the authorities, spouses, children, civilization. By comparison, I have it easy. It's just a couple of old priests hunting me, and I know them both. I could take them if it came to that, and it won't.

I'll be honest up front. They're coming after me for the most mundane of reasons. The only thing slightly extraordinary is that they're coming at all. For a while, I thought they would just forget about me, and that I'd be able to live out my days like most fugitives here: not entirely free from want, but free from those who want you. But no, first one sent a letter and then the other: these initial letters just suggestions, of course. Then a second round, with a request. And the third round, with an order. Come home.

Now, I served in the army. I know what it means to disobey an order, even a bishop's, and yet I did.

Let them come.

They say they will. This Friday, two days from today. My superiors (the bishop himself, they'd have me believe, and his right-hand man) are flying all the way out here to my lonely home in the bush to haul me in for the crime of—believe it or not—growing old. Apparently you can't be seventy-three and live in southwestern Alaska, though this fact seems lost on a good portion of the population here in Bethel. But no, it's been decided. It's time I came in, returned stateside, or, as those here say, Outside. When I've asked what I'm to do in retirement, they've said, *Rest, write—almost sixty years in the bush, what stories you must have!*

A younger man will replace me, I'm told, but who are they kidding? Silver-haired fiftysomethings count as young priests these days. And the fact is, fifty may be too old—if the silverhair being moved here is from, say, Phoenix. Me, I grew into this environment. I came during the war, left for seminary, and returned to stay. I've had fifty-six years to get acclimated, and the hardest part of that acclimation came when I was young and could take it. Show me the golf-tanned, fifty-year-old suburban priest who will survive transplantation here—I don't care how carefully he parcels out his multivitamins.

There is a bit of mystery to their pursuing me. There's another Catholic missionary I know who

lives up north on the banks of the Yukon, in much rougher conditions than the relatively civilized frontier life here in Bethel (which includes electricity, a hospital, even alcohol—though only by mail). This Yukon priest, he's eighty. Maybe ninety. No one's coming for him. And his parishioners don't even like him, at least not as much as mine do me.

It's why I didn't answer any of the letters I received. One, I've aged into a fine contrarian, but more important, I wanted these men to come tell me face-to-face that I needed to retire. That way, when they said, *It's because you're getting old*, I could study their eyes and see what the other reason, the real reason, is.

I have an idea.

It's not about the man I killed, or the boy I didn't save. It's not even about the woman I loved.

But the shaman—

Well. Yes. This all might have something to do with him.

THE LOWER PART of Ronnie's leg was not torn off by wolves, though that's what he tells most people. And if someone got to see it, which almost no one ever does, that person might come away thinking he was telling the truth. His right leg ends just above the ankle in a tight red scar, the exact size, shape, and color of angrily pursed lips. The skin around it, smoother than silk from all the creams and ointments medical staff insist he use, colors with the weather and hosts storms of its own: clouds of bruises—red, blue, and purple—gather, encircling the stump, spreading, growing darker, and then fading. The amputation is relatively new, the prosthesis even newer, and learning to walk again has been a battle for him. After watching more than one afternoon's practice devolve from laughs and jokes to curses and grunts and perspiration and Ronnie begging, *Please, please take it off, let the swollen stump pulse and breathe as it wants to*—well, a person wanted those wolves. *He* wanted them. I wanted them, pacing, their fiery eyes sizing him up, but at least looking him in the eye, not like the diabetes that was truly to blame.

By some accounts, I should be glad that Ronnie—just installed in his room, at the end of the ward with windows looking west—is ill; for years, he had been trying to kill me. Nothing special, just a shaman trying to roust a priest. But shortly after arriving in the hospice, diabetes flaring and pneumonia threatening, he summoned me to his bedside. Plans had changed, he said. He was no longer seeking my death. And to prove his sincerity, he gave me the talisman that he'd planned to use to speed my demise.

It resembled a voodoo doll, and it resembled me, as much as such a thing could: short and starting to stoop, gray hair, something like glasses. He had dressed me in my blacks, although I rarely wore or wear clerical garb out here in the bush. Such clothes aren't warm enough for winter, too scratchy for summer. Besides, people knew well enough that I was the local Catholic priest. Ronnie knew; that



why he wanted to kill me: my God and I had driven his people and powers away. We had had the argument for decades, ever since I came to this part of Alaska to replace the previous priest, who had disappeared (some said literally, said they watched him fade away, limb by limb, until all that was left was a mouth in an O of horror, until there was nothing).

Ronnie liked to suggest that he had something to do with this disappearance. He was, then as now, the local shaman, a bit green for the role at the time, but few sought the job (Ronnie would claim the job sought the man). Ronnie himself wasn't a great advertisement. Whatever his success had been with my predecessor (who my superiors suspected had simply fled, hysterical, out into the tundra on a winter night—we'd lost more than one man that way), Ronnie's efforts with or against me were unrewarded. Charms were tacked to my door; various sacrifices filleted and placed about my corrugated tin chapel; and, of course, much scheming and chanting and brow furrowing was done out of sight. All to no avail.

And for an interloper, I was, and am, innocuous enough. Better yet: I have had a positive effect. Well, missionaries all tell ourselves that, but I have, I really have. With the help of modern medicine, I have healed the sick; with the help of the bishop, fed the hungry; with help of wealthy, faraway, misty-eyed parishes, clothed the poor. I have insisted on saying Mass, but I adjusted my schedule to meet their needs. What's more, I've eaten their food, I've tried to talk their language, I've played their games with the children. The previous man outlawed traditional dancing. I've encouraged it and attempted to learn.

And I've blessed things. Babies, houses, holes in the ice. Dogs, and later, snowmachines. Outboard motors and cases of Crisco. Nets, knives, and sewing needles, yes; but guns, never. And once, a dead woman's stuffed parakeet, although that was more exorcism than blessing. Her widower had remarried; the man's new wife said the parakeet helped friends cheat her at cards. *Saint Francis, pray, it's not enough that this woman has to make a life in the subarctic tundra? With a husband who keeps his first wife's parakeet? Peace, Saint Francis. Go easy, O Lord.*

And this hospice, Quyana House. It's a curious, mostly empty place, located well outside of town. It blossomed on the grounds of an abandoned radar installation, and is supported almost entirely by a Seattle family whose son drowned here one summer while serving as a missionary-in-training.

THE HOSPICE IS OFTEN empty because it's hard to get to, and people don't quite trust this Outside generosity. (*Quyana* means “thank you” in Yup'ik, which is all well and good, since this part of Alaska is Yup'ik Eskimo, but people find it a strange name nonetheless: just who is being thanked, and for what?) Plus, the old and terminally ill usually die at home—or at the hospital in town. The hospital, known as the Yellow Submarine, but the way it snakes along the tundra, long and flat, its every corner rounded, it looks more like bars of soap smushed together, or maybe some Outside architect's idea for a hospital on the moon. It stands on stilts; just about everything in town does. Otherwise, buildings would melt the permafrost and slowly sink into the tundra. But the hospital's awkward seventies *Star Wars* design makes its stilts look like landing gear; the entire building seems poised for takeoff, and there are those in town who sometimes wish it would.

The hospice, on the other hand, is a soaring structure, seemingly composed of equal parts glass and light. We all await the storm that will level it, but month after month it survives, and maybe shouldn't be surprised: I've blessed the place half a dozen times. First, when they cleared the land for construction; second, when someone had fallen from some scaffolding and broken both legs; third and fourth came when a new wing went up and when it collapsed; fifth was the grand opening; and sixth was the dedication of the wing where Ronnie now lies, ready to discuss the terms of our truce.

I had put the doll replica of me in my breast pocket, taking care that the little arms and head were peeking out. At first, I did it as a joke, but then I had this sudden, inexplicable need to cough, and I thought: play it safe. I gave the little guy more room and Ronnie smiled. He knew I was thinking of the word, the word that's become a central tenet of my amalgamated Alaskan faith, a word that inevitably becomes part of any religion that spends too much time in the subzero subarctic dark: *maybe*. No one from Outside understands this law of the bush. No one understands how rock-solid principles can slide here; how black-and-white so inexorably mists to gray; how a priest, a true believer, a defender of the faith, a dealer in eternal truths, can find himself spooked by a makeshift voodoo doll. It can't happen. It's not possible. You repeat this like a mantra, and then you get back to the word.

*Maybe.*

For Ronnie, God bless him (if only either were interested), there is no *maybe*, only *is*. On those occasions when we do talk theology—which is seldom, sadly, now that he's more sober—Ronnie always taunts me with his trump card: proof. Show me proof of your God, this Jesus, he'll say; I usually respond with some version of the Apostle Paul's insistence to the Hebrews that faith is the evidence of things not seen. Ronnie finds this rather pat: his proof, he says, is in the stars, in the grain of snow blowing against the glass, in the salmon who return every year, in the Yup'ik people, who, despite everything, still walk the earth. All this is proof of spirits—his spirits—at work.

Diabetes, on the other hand, is proof of my work. Not me personally, not even my God, but certainly my people, he says. And it's true, junk food is replacing alcohol as the white man's new smallpox, and though it takes longer to kill the native population, the unhealthy shift in diet from what the land provided to what air cargo provides—Spam, Pop-Tarts, and worse—still takes too many lives too early.

Diabetes sent Ronnie to the hospital more than once, then trouble with his liver. For years, he drank too much, but as I'm down to one kidney, I'm not one to lecture him on that. He's been using the hospice for his health care of late. He likes it here; it's quiet, no one bothers him. But he bothers them since they're not really set up to deliver the care he needs, unless he gets really ill. He used to respond that if they kept it up, he would be that ill, and for a while, that seemed funny. But now he's more sick more often, and they just shrug and let him stay as long as he wants. I think he misses fighting with them. I miss it, too.

In the past, we'd talk and joke a bit whenever I visited him here. (Or rather, I talk, and Ronnie shakes his head and rolls his eyes: I talk too much.) Whenever he fell asleep, I would pray, as much a function of habit as anything else: when I first started visiting Ronnie back in the hospital, I would ask him to pray with me, and he would inevitably fall asleep. Eventually, it became a kind of ritual that

soothed us both. I sat and prayed, he slept, and in this way, we visited.

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The balance has shifted of late, though. He's dying. Or rather, he thinks he is and wants me to think the same. I'll admit: he is asleep more than he is awake, and when he is awake, it's very strange. He stops, mid-conversation, and searches around the room: something is missing, or something is here. "I can hear him," he'll whisper. And sometimes, when there is something to hear—a distant moan or a cough—he'll say, "Tell me how he died," which I never understand: Does he need a primer? What does he think he'd learn from the other patients? Then he'll look at me, and I can see in his eyes what he wants to say, what he's never said to me, not directly: *I need your help*. Help, real help, is back in town, back at the hospital. But whenever I ask about moving him there, he shakes his head.

"Everyone is gone, Lou-is."

Ronnie alone has never called me "Father," and whenever he says my name, he mimics the exaggerated, not-sure-if-you-speak-English pronunciation I used when I first introduced myself, what, Forty, fifty years ago? A century, maybe.

"Gone where?" I asked, and he nodded his head toward the window. "To the festival?" I said. He shook his head and stared outside, silent. One of the smaller villages upriver was hosting a gathering as always, they'd scheduled it for the last days of winter, at just about the point when you simply couldn't take it anymore. Alaska's winter calendar is full of these events. They say that, in Anchorage, if you have a tuxedo, you'll have something to do every night from November through March; or here, the same is true if you swap the tuxedo for a snowmachine.

I don't have a tuxedo—clerical garb is just as black and much cheaper—but I do have a snowmachine, which I got from the high school shop class. They'd gotten it from the manufacturer who'd donated it with only one condition (courtesy of their lawyers): students couldn't ride it, just take it apart and put it back together again. Which they did for ten years, before giving it to me, with the teacher promised, the "vast majority" of its essential parts intact. But I take it out less and less of late. Not because of my body—though my bones do increasingly feel as though they were made of kindling—but my mind. The older I get, the more recent my youth seems, and the more I recall that first youthful trip I made into the bush. I was a soldier then, not a priest, and it was summer, not winter.

This is another reason why I always visit Ronnie. He's good at hauling me into the present.

"There's no one left," he said again. "No one for me, no one for you."

I shook my head, and he repeated the line, louder. My hearing is lousy; a wartime blast took half of it and age has slowly been claiming the rest. I compensate well—I'd understood Ronnie just fine—but he likes to have an excuse to shout. Sometimes I find myself shouting back; we've acquired a certain reputation around town.

"No one!" Ronnie shouted. But no smile.

"We have each other, Ronnie," I said, at a normal, chaplain-to-patient level.

No smile. "This is what we must talk about. You and me," Ronnie said, his volume falling all the

while.

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RONNIE WANTED several things. First, twenty dollars. Then, my signature on a form. And most important, my promise that I would help him die. I gave him the twenty. I signed the form without looking, but then took it back when he made that last request about helping him die. I may not be the Church's best priest—actually, there's no confusion on that point—but I wasn't about to help a man, my friend, commit suicide.

“Not suicide,” Ronnie said. I was simultaneously trying to read the form and figure out what was going on. “This paper says you can tell the doctors what to do. And that paper is called a will,” he said. “I'm leaving everything to you. If you help me.”

“I take ‘everything’ to mean the twenty I just gave you.”

Back in his drinking days—or, let's call them what they were, decades—Ronnie's anger was noisy and physical. But of late, his most serious weapon is silence. When he is upset, he closes his mouth and sometimes his eyes.

He started again. “This is what they told me: you sign this, you make decisions for me. When you can't.”

“Like always,” I said. Like when it was time to leave a bar. Like when it was time for him to finally see the doctor.

“These are my wishes,” Ronnie said. “I wish to die. No ‘ex-tra-or-di-nar-y measures.’ ”

“Ronnie,” I said. “You're not dying. And I'm not going to let them kill you.”

He waited a long time before replying. He closed his eyes, and for a moment, I thought he'd gone to sleep. “I don't want you to let them *save* me,” he said, opening his eyes once more.

“Ronnie,” I said.

I've introduced Ronnie as the man who was trying to kill me, but the truth is, he has probably kept me alive all this time, this far from the rest of the world. “Okay,” I said. I handed back the form. “But if you die, you promise I'll get the twenty back?”

Absolutely not. He needed the money to pay for a special bracelet from Alaska's Comfort On program. The program is for the very ill; the bracelet indicates that you do not want to be resuscitated. Paramedics and other medical professionals have to honor it. I've seen the bracelets at work—it's like a magic charm. Say a crisis occurs. Say people automatically rush to deliver aid. Then they spot the bracelet, and it's almost as if they bounce off the patient.

Ronnie had ordered his bracelet C.O.D., the way many people shop in the bush. They go through catalogs, place orders, and hope the money will be there when the goods come. It is heartbreaking to see the pile of unclaimed boxes at the airport after Christmas. UPS sends a man out to haul it all back each January; I call him the anti-Santa. But Ronnie had planned ahead: he'd had the band shipped cash of the church. Asking for the twenty was just a courtesy; the bill was already waiting for me.

I tried to tell Ronnie that he probably wouldn't need such a bracelet in the hospice, but if he was worried, we could talk to his doctor and make a note on his chart. I even knew the shorthand; I'd seen it on dozens of charts before: DNR, *Do Not Resuscitate*. Ronnie smiled, the smile he always used when he was reminded how much wiser shamans were than priests.

"It's not for me," he said. Then he took a deep breath, the effort of which seemed to drain his face of the smile. "It's for the wolf."

RONNIE'S PASSING WAS no minor thing, not in his mind. As he saw it, he was the last shaman, the last in the area to possess his gifts, or his knowledge. Generations of missionaries had driven what magic they could from the land, but the spirit had persisted. Now modern life—airplanes, college educations, government jobs—was removing what remained.

I told Ronnie that he didn't need to worry; Yup'ik traditions were preserved in books, on tapes (thanks in part to the boundless altruism of oil companies). And the tundra teemed with academics whenever the weather was warm. Some summers, it seemed a Yup'ik family was likely to see more anthropologists than salmon.

Ronnie never listened to me, and he didn't now. What he had to say couldn't be discussed in a classroom or read about in a book, he explained, between gasping breaths so theatrical I almost took them for real. But he persisted: he needed to pass along his *stories*, from one man to another, so that they could pass on to still another, and another, so that the knowledge and spirit of the Yup'ik would not vanish from the earth.

And it was more than that. He had something to tell me, he said. A particular story. A secret. Something I should know, "after all this time."

He closed his eyes.

I patted Ronnie's hand gently and moved to go. I couldn't stay. Having witnessed the deaths of both friends and enemies, I know that it can be harder to lose a foe: you lose a boundary, a cause. And since Ronnie was both friend and foe, I imagined losing him would be harder still. It's a kind of love, I suppose.

"Ronnie," I said, but that was all I got out before I was stormed by a crowd of emotions, memories, old mental movie clips. Ronnie wasn't awake enough to see me rock back into my chair. This has been

happening to me more and more, lately: a kind of memory-induced vertigo. It's disturbing, clearly a illness of some sort, something inside breaking down. The woman who cleans my quarters, a woman myself baptized but who still believes in all sorts of spirits and magic, told me the problem had to do with a restless soul. She suggested collecting some *ayuuq* from the tundra and making iced tea from it. *Ayuuq* is called Labrador tea, Eskimo tea, tundra tea, or *ayuuq*, depending on who's doing the calling, and the list of illnesses it cures is diverse as well. A tattered copy of *Reader's Digest*, meanwhile, told me the problem was corroded neural pathways and suggested I drink brewed garlic. I thought about distilling the best of both methods by taking up whisky again, with ice, but Ronnie lying here in the bed is evidence enough that alcohol won't work.

Ronnie's eyes opened, failed to focus, and then closed again. He spoke anyway: "In the beginning he told his chest, "there was Raven."

I settled back. I have heard multiple stories of creation in Alaska, but in the beginning, there was always Raven. The version Ronnie tells is my favorite. In the beginning, Raven scratches at the earth with his claws and makes hills, mountains. The countless gouges his talons leave in the soil fill with water and become lakes, rivers, and sloughs.

Upon this land, Raven created a man of stone. Formidable and strong—a man designed to survive the harsh climate of southwestern Alaska. But then spring came, and the snows melted, the soil turned to mud, and the stone man sank deeper into the tundra with every step.

So Raven tried again. This time he molded a man of clay, or dirt. More fragile, more vulnerable—true; but more adaptable and better suited to travel the land he had sprung from.

It's a sign of how long I have lived here that I know Ronnie and his stories so well. And while I was always more interested in hearing a new story, I was still intrigued to hear Ronnie tell one I already knew and see what use he might put it to. Did he feel like the man of stone now, sinking into his illness? Or the man of clay, so easily broken?

Or perhaps he and I were the two first men—but which of us was stone, which clay?

I asked him. He scowled.

"This is what I have said," Ronnie said. His breathing became his punctuation. "In the beginning there was Raven. And then, a family. A mother. A boy. Her lovers. His fathers."

"More than one?" I interrupted, still not understanding. "Sounds like quite a story."

Ronnie closed his eyes, and when he opened them once more, he spoke. "This is not a story. This is true."

A nurse arrived, bearing a syringe on a tray. Ronnie scanned back and forth: me, nurse, syringe. He settled on the syringe.

"You heard what I said?" he told the syringe as it approached. "You told the doctor? No painkiller. No sleep medicines." He pointed at me. "I have things I need to discuss. With my *priest*." The nurse

nodded gently, and reassured him that his request had already been written down on his chart. The she explained that she was just there to draw blood. Ronnie watched carefully as she cinched the constricting band around his arm, searched for a vein, and then drew what she needed.

“What she wants to take,” Ronnie said, “is already gone.” Which might have been true, considering that years of drinking had likely left his veins more full of Gilbey's gin than blood. When she was finished, he sank back into the pillow.

“Raven,” he said.

“Ronnie,” I said. “What are you bothering the nurses for? They're going to take good care of you. There's one thing they do better in the hospice than the hospital, it's take care of pain. So if you're uncomfortable, let them—”

“What I need to say, I need a clear head to say,” he said.

Now, a few years before, there's only one thing Ronnie would have said next: *So let us drink.*

Instead, he said something I'd never heard him say before: “Father.” I tensed. Then another surprise: “I want to confess.”

This was so startling I assumed we were joking again. “Oh, Ronnie,” I said. “Let's just talk. Our friends.”

“Enemies,” he said, and smiled. “I want to go to confession.”

“You're not even Catholic, Ronnie,” I said, sure the floor was groaning and splitting beneath me like some last chunk of springtime ice in the river. Was Ronnie ready to believe? Had he finally found his proof?

“I don't have to be Catholic to tell secrets,” Ronnie said. He drew a deep breath, and then another and another, and in another moment, he seemed deep asleep.

RONNIE IS NOT CATHOLIC. Nor is he Russian Orthodox. Nor Moravian Protestant. Nor Baptist, nor a member of any of the other churches that crowd vulnerable Bethel. As a result, it was somewhat difficult for me to obtain for him a position as assistant chaplain at the hospice some time ago, but was certainly easier than getting him a position titled, say, “staff shaman.”

It's not that people would have frowned on the term *shaman*. (Or maybe they might have; it's a white man's word, and imprecise the way white men's words are. *Angalkuq* is the Yup'ik term for Shamans, or *angalkut*, served many functions in times past, but a chief duty was healing, and even the hospital in town incorporates such traditional medicine into its care today.

But people did frown on Ronnie. He was, way back when, an *angalkuq* of some note. Most because he was a final, and absolutely unrepentant, holdout against the missionaries. As such, he merited a certain amount of respect, even from those God-fearing Natives who no longer sought his services—so much of the old ways had been lost, but in Ronnie they had a time capsule, a treasury, an unassailable fortress.

Until a tide of alcohol flooded it.

Ronnie's abilities had waned during the war, it was said, maybe before. Some said it happened gradually, some said abruptly. Some said Ronnie had done something, and others said something had been done to him. But every version of the story I heard turned out the same way: the war had brought soldiers; the soldiers, alcohol; and alcohol, for Ronnie at least, brought fleeting glimpses of the ethereal provinces he once visited regularly.

By the time I met him, he lacked both powers and respect. To my shame, I did nothing to help him. I thought an enfeebled foe made my job that much easier. Though Ronnie's various attempts to run north out of Alaska, or out of this world altogether, were occasionally frightening, withstanding them seemed to burnish my reputation in the community.

But eventually, I'd had my fill of respect. And I'd come to like Ronnie—in part, because no one else did. So I went to him. I worked with him, as much as he'd let me.

He should have been long dead by then, and I think he knew this. I say that because I can't think of any other reason why he would have let me help him as much as I tried to. Except for one. I suggested a dozen times he enter a treatment program, but he didn't agree until I—or a mischievous God putting words in my mouth—announced that if he stopped drinking, I would as well. I wasn't an alcoholic, but—well, drinking wasn't improving me, either.

In any case, I could see in Ronnie's smile gratitude for someone joining him on the difficult road ahead—and also delight that he had found yet a new way to discomfort me.

We've had a truce, a delicate one, with alcohol ever since. But a strange thing happened when Ronnie sobered up: he had nothing to do. He'd had nothing to do when he was an alcoholic, but being drunk was itself a kind of occupation: you had duties and obligations, like being disorderly, you had an office—in Ronnie's case, a jail cell—where you could reliably be found.

So for the past three or four years, before this most recent set of ailments put him in bed instead of beside one, Ronnie has worked with me at the hospice. I suppose I could have tried to get him a place at the hospital in town, but they were already staffed with Native healers (with far finer reputations than Ronnie's), and besides, I wanted someplace quiet. Out of the way.

Ronnie has insisted that his powers have dimmed to such a degree that he's of little use to anyone, but even I can see that certain patients, certain families, get a measure of peace from our visits. They don't look to Ronnie for a cure any more than they do the hospice. Rather, they just want some sort of assurance that the one who is ill will pass through death and into the next life more easily.

Unfortunately, other families want Lazarus-level care, and this leads to disappointments. I know—



thought we all knew—that sometimes people get better, and sometimes they don't, especially in hospice, but I guess some people expect more of Ronnie. And so when patients he's visited with die—though they were going to die anyway (we all die)—it counts against Ronnie.

And lately, me. I'd thought my role was innocent enough, just nudging Ronnie into spending his last years more productively, more spiritually, but no. Ronnie visits, a patient dies—a parishioner, no less, albeit one who *always* dozed through Mass—and word spreads around town. Maybe two others outline their diagnoses for a month or two, but another dies suddenly, maybe another, and maybe to those who haven't stood beside Ronnie and seen the—for lack of a better word—peace he brings, it all adds up wrong.

And so word travels, this wide-open land doing nothing to check its course, and the bishop hears one of his priests is aiding the practice of witchcraft, and an inquiry is made, and another, and these are ignored, and then you are where I am. At the bedside of a shaman, magic having failed both of you, at the mercy of gossips and gods and bishops and ravens.

So I sat with Ronnie for a while, waiting to see if he was faking sleep—or death. But his breathing settled into a quiet rhythm, and when a gentle snoring commenced, I rose to leave.

On the way out, I checked his chart for the DNR. I didn't see it. But something else was written there, two words that sent me back to my seat beside him and kept me there for the rest of the morning.

I WANTED TO CONFESS, too. I go to confession regularly, of course, once a year, at least, whether I need to or not. I usually avail myself of another missionary who's passing through (I prefer the foreign ones, whose faith is always stronger than their English), or I go during one of my visits to Anchorage or Fairbanks. But there, partly out of respect for my brother priests, I confess only what is expected: the petty excesses, errors, failures of daily life. I'm not about to saddle them with all that happened to me, especially during the war. It is enough that I should bear that: I don't want them to suffer with it as well. Wartime transgressions, I figure, will wait for my deathbed, for last rites, when I can cough the words out in an unintelligible rattle, be forgiven, and then go on to my reward.

And this is exactly what Ronnie, my brother shaman, was doing. And that's how I realized what was missing: release, reward. Oh, I'm old enough, have seen enough, that there have been times of late when I've wanted to die—long, dark nights of the soul are nothing new in a land where winter nights can last twenty hours or more. But who could wait, like Ronnie, until the precipice before death? I wanted to tell *my* secrets, now, ones I have held fast for a lifetime. And who would listen to Ronnie.

No, I've not wanted to burden a brother priest with my secrets, but I'd happily burden Ronnie: he's dying, after all; he won't have to suffer me long. As I waited for him to reawaken, I began to draft my speech in my head. But the longer he slept, the longer my confession became. I worried I would never

get it all out if I waited for Ronnie to reawaken. So I didn't wait. Instead, in low tones, mumbling myself, to Ronnie, I started my story.

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In the beginning, Ronnie had said, there was Raven, trickster and creator of the Yup'ik world.

My story also began with something that flew.

IT WAS A MOST INGENIOUS device. Leave aside the compliment implicit in *ingenious*—yes, yes, this was 1944–45, they were still the enemy—and for now, simply admire the handiwork, as I did each time we found one intact.

A four-tier wedding cake, mostly aluminum, two feet tall. The top tier is a plastic box, a little bigger than one you'd use to hold recipes. Inside the box, a liquid solution of 10 percent calcium chloride, which insulates the small, 1.5 volt wet-cell battery, equal in heft to a good-size bar of soap. Two wires emerge from the box: follow them down. One disappears into a larger wooden box, the cake's second tier. This is where they housed the aneroid barometers: three smaller ones, each calibrated to complete an electrical circuit at a specific altitude, and one larger, more sophisticated barometer that served as the primary control unit for the flight.

Okay, working our way down now, top to bottom, just like you would (and I did) in the field. Nothing explosive yet.

Next: the wooden barometer box is sitting on a large, round Bakelite platter. Innocent enough. But look beneath (or don't; it *was* unnerving, even for me, hurriedly trained in bomb disposal). Dozens of wires, all crisscrossing this way and that, many of them connecting to contacts on the bottom of the Bakelite platter, and still others descending to the cake's two lower tiers, the two round aluminum rings spoked like wagon wheels. I suppose I should be more exact. We're not following wires; these are fuses. Twenty-four inches long. Burning time of two minutes, sixteen seconds. Wired in pairs so that if one fuse failed, the other would finish the job. Smart. While airborne, the barometers set the fuses off during the final descent. On the ground, clumsiness or ignorance did the job equally well.

Bang: it wasn't the fuses you had to worry about, though, not ultimately. But they were connected a little—well, squibs is what we called them, because to call them what they essentially were, firecrackers, made it all sound like fun.

When the firecrackers popped, one of the thirty-two sandbags would drop, and as each one dropped you got a better view (if you were watching this contraption in flight, but few were that lucky) of what all this fuss was about. Around the circumference of the ring dangled four or more 5-kilogram thermite incendiary bombs, which would explode on impact. And in the middle? In the middle dangled a nasty black 15-kilogram antipersonnel bomb, finned like a torpedo and filled with picric acid or TNT. When these exploded, you'd encounter debris scattered as far as a quarter mile away. And for variety, sometimes you'd discover some strange canister hanging there you didn't recognize

all.

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Oh, and the flash bomb—250 grams of magnesium powder that you'd find if you followed the longest fuse—followed it from where it began, beneath that bottom tier, followed it to where it climbed, up, up, sixty-four feet, where it burrowed like a canker into the side of those magic balloons.

That's what they were, balloons.

Who wouldn't be curious coming upon one in a field, beside a road, among trees? Even deflated, floating on the forest floor like it was melting away, wouldn't you marvel at it? Thirty-two feet in diameter, one hundred feet in circumference, and the whole of it, most incredibly, paper, made from mulberry trees or rice, *washi* paper. Each balloon required forty to sixty paper panels, and each panel was painstakingly made by hand, in thousands of homes across Japan. Each household produced the share, then handed it up the line to authorities who handed it up to factories (in one case, a converted opera house), where women and children—girls, all who were left then, and who were found to be more skilled than the boys anyway—joined the panels with glue made from a potato-like vegetable. (The vegetable: *konnyaku*, “devil's tongue,” quite edible, quite Japanese; to reply in kind, we'd have had to caulk our bombs with apple pie. In any case, with food growing scarce in war-winnowed Japan, workers began eating what glue they didn't use, and then, whatever glue they could find.)

A balloon of paper and potato glue, a wedding cake of firecrackers and aluminum. Designed to silently ride the winds across the Pacific, barometers triggering ballast drops when necessary, and then, finally, descend into the impregnable United States mainland, setting forest fires, killing soldiers, civilians.

Ingenious. Yes, I'll use the word. Considering that any one balloon, landing in the right spot, or even in a wrong spot, could do an incredible amount of damage.

But the Japanese didn't just send one balloon. Over the course of a few months, beginning in the fall of 1944 and ending in the spring of 1945, they launched close to ten thousand bomb-laden balloons, an effort which, by its end, had required the concerted effort of millions of people.

I'm not sure what the word for that is.

Years after the war, I was on a retreat with a German Jesuit who had been in Japan when the atomic bombs were dropped. One night at dinner, it came up that I had been a soldier in the war. He fixed me with a stare, and then asked me a question he'd obviously been asking Americans ever since V-J Day. “Why?” he said. I knew better than to answer, but then he asked another question. “Why two?”

*Why ten thousand?*

But I didn't say it.

And in the end, of course, he was right. You only needed one, be it atomic bomb or balloon.

One balloon could halt the development of the atomic bomb, in fact.

And one did, temporarily, on April Fool's Day, 1945, knocking down power lines that led to the Hanford, Washington, atomic energy plant, which was producing materials for the bombs that would later be dropped on Japan.

Or—

One balloon could result in the only World War II civilian casualties due to enemy action on mainland U.S. soil.

And one did, on May 6, 1945, in an Oregon forest, where it intrigued children on a church outing. It exploded, killing all five, plus a young woman, pregnant, who'd been watching over them, while her husband, the reverend, was parking the car.

Or—

One balloon could carry a small life from one world to another.

It is this last balloon that carried me into this life, into this hospice, to this bedside, this mumbled confession.

Or it was all ten thousand.

It's simply a question of what you believe, or what proof you have, and I might have asked Ronnie what he believed, but I didn't; he was sleeping. So for a response, I was left with words scribbled in bold at the top of his chart, proof of Ronnie's wishes, words Ronnie thought would help ensure he said all he needed to say.

“NO MORPHINE.”

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## CHAPTER 2

IT'S STILL WEDNESDAY. I'm still in the hospice. It's not clear where Ronnie is. He's lying on the bed, same as he was. But with his eyes closed, his breath a series of uneven sighs, it's clear he's somewhere else. Not gone, but going.

I hadn't gotten too far into my monologue when Ronnie's nurse, a new one, came by. I had grown accustomed to the silence of Ronnie's room, how the light that bled through the shades made things more silent, and then this nurse came in, unable to stop talking.

Within five minutes, I had heard her life story, up to and including that very moment. She worked for a company called TravelNurse; the company sent nurses around the country, even the world, helping facilities fill gaps.

Fortunately, nothing about her monologue required a reply, or even much of a reaction, so I stayed mute, my thoughts gone to fuzz while she talked. As she left, though, she suddenly turned.

“You can hold his hand, you know,” she said. “Sometimes, when patients—sorry, loved ones—are too tired to talk, or even listen, you can, well, *communicate* with them just by holding their hand.” I watched as she lightly picked up Ronnie's hand. He did not awaken for the demonstration. “It's easy,” she said. “Well, maybe not for men.” She smiled. I smiled. And then she laid Ronnie's hand back down, paused a moment, and left.

“Ronnie,” I said, sure he was awake now.

But if he was, he made no sign of it. I settled back in my chair, but then a sound at the door made me start. It was just the nurse, checking to see if we were holding hands. We exchanged a smile again, both of us trying to out-pity or -patronize the other, and then I adjusted my chair so that I could better see the hallway. It wasn't the nurse's return I feared; I'd become jumpy at the thought that those coming for me would arrive two days early, and find me at the scene of the crime.

THE FIRST TIME Ronnie and I raised someone from the dead, it probably wasn't worth the effort.

Fats Haugen was about to achieve what his behavior suggested he'd always sought—death by drink. ~~There were those of us who wished him well in his quest. A Virginia native whose first name was~~ made even worse by the fact that he'd chosen it for himself, he'd come to Bethel in the 1950s, taken a Yup'ik bride, Mary, and acted wretchedly—especially to her—ever since.

But Mary was a saint. And beautiful. And it was because of her that I often attempted to reach out to her husband, to get him counseling, treatment, time, space—whatever he needed to return to humanness. Mary said he was Catholic; I urged him to come to confession. I'm always amazed what sort of healing confession can get started. But he spat it all back at me, sometimes literally. Mary came to confession instead, weekly, I think as a way to compensate for him, but she had to struggle to come up with any sins worth confessing. Instead of penance, I would sometimes send her forth to go and kick a dog—and tell her not to come back to confession until she had.

But she never could or would, and so I loved her dearly and knew I would do anything for her. That's why, when she knocked at the rectory door late one night, eyes full of tears, and asked if I would come and “pray over” her husband in the hospice, I did not hesitate. And when she asked, mumbling, eyes averted, if Ronnie might come along, too, I still did not refuse. I loved her this much that I could have said “Ronnie who?” or “What are you talking about?” or “The rumors you've heard about Ronnie and I calling on pagan spirits to heal people aren't true,” but I did not.

Which is how we came to find ourselves holding hands, Ronnie and I, and Fats and Mary, the doors closed, lights dimmed, and Ronnie breathing an ancient chant in an ancient language, almost below hearing.

No, it isn't easy for men to hold hands. Fats squirmed, though he hardly seemed to have the strength to. I felt anxious, too, watching Mary divide her desperate looks between me and the door, where I'm sure she thought the devil would appear.

I prayed for Fats, but I must also admit that I prayed for Mary, for Ronnie, and most of all for me because I knew what I was doing would get me in trouble eventually. Praying with someone in the hospice is one thing; laying on hands is another—though it has a long and honest Christian tradition behind it. But joining hands, participating in a rite that, Ronnie assured me, was all about Native spirits and had nothing to do with “*your* god”—well, this wasn't exactly what generations of missionaries before me had preached, prayed, and died for.

And then it happened. Fats stopped squirming; his eyes shut and his mouth opened, releasing a low moan.

“Tell me how he died,” Ronnie has asked. Well, I would have thought it went like this. I have visited the dying for many years, I have administered last rites many times. I know what last moments look like. Fats was in the midst of his. But something happened.

Mary cried out: “Frank!” A perfectly lovely name.

“Come,” said Ronnie quietly.

I checked the monitors. Ronnie was always in charge of whatever magic occurred. I too

responsibility for the constellation of blinking red lights surrounding the patient. Fats's blood pressure was incredibly low, but climbing.

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Ronnie repeated his instruction. Fats moaned again, a little louder. Then Ronnie looked at me and rolled his eyes, ever so slightly. "It's not going to work," he whispered. "He's not here."

"Who's not here?" asked Mary. Fats moaned once more, soft again.

"No one—" I started.

"My *tuunraq*," said Ronnie, quite nonchalant now, as though he were referring to his attorney and not his favored spirit helper, his animal familiar—a wolf, in fact, whose capricious absence Ronnie had been lamenting for some time. It was the *tuunraq*'s job to enter the patient and clear out whatever was bad—a bit like spiritual angioplasty.

"Father!" Mary hissed, letting go of our hands. I nodded Ronnie out of the room, and turned to Fats.

He'd stopped moaning, which wasn't too much of a surprise. While Ronnie wasn't always able to bring on a cure, his touch—the lights—the chanting—could all have a disproportionate effect on the susceptible mind.

When Fats opened his eyes, I paused. And then I made the sign of the cross and Mary followed suit, and then, much to our joint surprise, Fats did as well. "Pray with me, Fats—Frank," I said, not because he would, but because I knew it was Mary's heart rate we then needed to ease. I began a Hail Mary. And then Fats, God bless him, was finally moved to speak.

"Father," he said, "I want to confess. . . ."

And that, to me, was magic.

I SAT THERE AFTER she left, Ronnie's TravelNurse, and stared at my own hands. And when the memories of what they had touched, held, let slip, grew unwieldy, I turned to Ronnie.

I stared at Ronnie's hands for a minute, small and muscular, the knuckles cracked white. Then I picked up the one closest to me, and held it, lightly, like the nurse had. And when he didn't reply with a whisper or *hoo* or squeeze or tap, I smiled again; he was sleeping soundly. Time for me to leave.

After a bit, I squeezed his hand to let him know I was going.

Nothing. I stood, drawing the hand up with me. I squeezed harder. And listened.

Nothing. Something was wrong.

With my free hand, I went for his shoulder; I kept clutching his dead hand with mine. He'd become his own, life-sized voodoo doll. I called out his name, louder and louder, and then I called for the nurse, and then I called for God, and then I called for goddamned Steven Gottschalk.

BEFORE THIS MORNING, I could not have told you what Ronnie's hand felt like—I could have imagined it, perhaps, but that would have been a feat of imagination, imagination driven by the visual details my mind retains. But Steven Gottschalk's hand, I remember every fiber of it, even the whorl, and every second it took me to realize that what I'd found there on the ground was not a pinhead black glove but a human hand.

It was our last week of bomb disposal school at Aberdeen Proving Ground, just inland from the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, and I was holding Steven Gottschalk's hand. The rest of him had just been rushed back to the base hospital, though he would die before he arrived. Those of us who remained had been told to fan out over the frag—fragmentation—zone. We were looking for parts of the bomb he'd been working on. I didn't even know what I'd found until I bent down, and even then, it was a moment or two before the recognition took hold and I began to retch.

I was unprepared, in every respect. We didn't train with live ordnance; but in this case, a true accident had left a bomb in a precarious spot on base, and Gottschalk, an instructor, saw this as a valuable teaching opportunity. He positioned us someplace nearby but safe, and then went to work. Later, they told us that that was how he had wanted to go, but I didn't believe it. No one wants to go like that, and Gottschalk had told us in the classroom how he had once dreamed of becoming a pilot. When that hadn't worked out, he decided to give bomb disposal a chance.

My career path was more direct. I'd earned my way into explosives training. In part because I was book-smart and good with diagrams, but more because I scored the absolute lowest—of any recruit ever, I was told—in marksmanship. As one sergeant put it, me with a gun in my hand was a bomb waiting to go off—so why not volunteer to go to school where I could learn to prevent similar explosions?

I did learn. Quickly. And I became consumed with strange, twin desires. One, to prove myself an expert that those who once laughed at me would feel ashamed that they ever had. And two, to edge as close to death as I could as often as I could, with the faint, teenaged hope that I might just die—and those who had once laughed at me would feel even worse.

My drive was mistaken for talent and my recklessness for courage, and the result was that I was promoted rapidly (not such a feat, sadly, in bomb disposal, where sudden openings were frequent). I made sergeant in just a matter of months. But by then, my war—with those who had laughed—was over. My zeal went away with Steven Gottschalk's hand, just as surely as if he had reached inside me and pulled it out himself. But it was too late; my course was set. I finished training and received orders for the South Pacific.



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