

Tide, Feather, Snow

A Life in Alaska

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*O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.*

—WALT WHITMAN, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*

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SETTING THE NET

MEAN HIGH WATER: *n.* Average height of water at high tide.

Moving to coastal Alaska meant moving to the water life, although I hadn't known it until I arrived. Nothing is separate from the sea—not the sky, not the land, not a single day, nor my mood. I wasn't used to this. I wasn't ready for it.

IT WAS THE middle of July when John dragged out a tangle of net he'd salvaged from the beach months before. In winter, wind and surf reshuffled the beach, exposing hidden treasures—rusty bicycles, boat parts. He had wrestled the gill net from the sand and now wanted to set the net in front of the house for silver salmon that ran along the shore toward streams farther up the bay. I couldn't conceive how such a thing should be done—where to set the net, how to check it, what to expect. But John had a way of finding free stuff and asking a few questions here and there—at a potluck dinner, at the gear shop, in the neighbor's yard—and then he'd know how to do it.

John's certainty intimidated me. So I washed dishes and watched him through the kitchen window as he spread the clump of net on the lawn and got to work meticulously unwinding, untying, and straightening the whole thing out. The net took a day to untangle and decipher. When it was done the mesh stretched sixty feet across the grass and lay ten feet deep. The float line, a line of white floats across the top of the rectangular net, would hang the net from the water's surface and the weighted lead line at the bottom would sink to keep it open when submerged. I helped John fold up the net in the way he'd learned from a friend: He took the lead line and I took the float line and we walked from one end to the other, bunching it up along the way.

At low tide the next morning, I followed John down the edge of the bluff in front of our house, lugging the hind end of the net over my shoulder. I liked to believe my lithe, curveless body, though small, was strong and capable of bearing up to whatever I wanted to do. But I slipped under the weight of the net in muddy spots the wild raspberry had left bare. The sky was a wide open blue and the white sides of gulls glinted far out on the bay. In front of us, the retreated tide exposed a mud mirror that reflected the mountains across the water. Clam holes and the coiled castings of marine worms pocked and pimples the reflection. We weren't the only ones who had decided to try for silver salmon. Two nets were set in front of houses farther up the bay, and with the tide out, their lines and pink buoys lay idle on the flats.

John had planned it all out. We staked one end of the net close to shore, stretched the mesh perpendicularly across the mudflats, and then anchored the other end into the mud. Then we dragged the lead line away from the float line, opening the mesh. It was as flaccid as an empty sleeve and so far from the water it looked as though it would never be submerged. But John insisted that silver

salmon run through the shallows. For good luck, we tied a buxom white mermaid buoy to the net. Then there was nothing left to do but wait out the tide.

EARLIER THAT MONTH, we had bought fishing licenses at the grocery store and picked up a colorful newsprint booklet that explained the fishing regulations for Southcentral Alaska. The sixty-page publication included colorful drawings of rockfish and salmon, maps of river mouths and bays, instructions on how to efficiently kill your catch, and detailed directions on where and how to fish. John and I had moved to Alaska not quite a year earlier and had learned that with fishing, as with everything else, there were clear distinctions between locals and outsiders: Only residents could use nets to catch fish for themselves, while tourists were limited to hook and line.

New to the town of Homer and eager to fit in and stake out our own territory, we quickly realized that Kachemak Bay, on which we now lived, was already a crowded place. Even with its convoluted coastline and dozen islands, every bit of nature's real estate had been claimed. All five species of Pacific salmon populated the bay, fattening off its rich waters and swarming local streams. Humpbacks, orcas, and fin whales regularly plowed the water, sending the sound of their exhalations over the surface of the bay. Forests of ribbonlike kelp grew thickly from the seafloor, feeding urchin and harboring sea otters, who napped while wrapped in the green fronds. Long strands of kelp washed ashore and quickly became whips and jump ropes for children playing on the beach, or were sliced and pickled in jars. When the bay withdrew at low tide in the spring, shorebirds up from California and Mexico on their way to nesting grounds farther north crammed the flats, needling their bills into the mud for pink, thumbnail-sized macoma clams. Above, marsh hawks patrolled for the stragglers and the weak. Hundreds of snow geese owned the head of the bay each spring, and the rocky shore on the south side of the bay, which was dimpled and nicked endlessly, was as populated and compartmentalized as the oldest city block. Sea lions claimed Sixty Foot Rock as their haul-out spot and occasionally lorded over the harbor, eyeing passersby with dogs. In summer, a clump of nearly naked rocks became a boisterous colony of nesting gulls, kittiwakes, puffins, murrelets, and cormorants. The chatter clattered loudly above the sound of the surf, and the ammonia smell of guano could burn your nose from more than a quarter mile away.

The town we had moved to called itself the "halibut fishing capital of the world," and all summer long, charter boats ferried tourists to the mouth of the bay so they could drop lines to the bottom of the sea in search of these flat bottom fish. From time to time, a hook brought up a monstrously large halibut, which might bring its captor the annual derby loot, a prize large enough to buy a new luxury car unfit for local roads. These barn-door halibut are taller than a man, weigh more than three hundred pounds, and have to be shot dead before they are hauled onboard lest the flex of their tails swipe someone off the deck.

The commercial fishing fleet streamed out of the harbor starting in the spring. Seiners nosed into narrow fjords on the south side of the bay when salmon ran thick and followed fish up the inlet to net the oily-fleshed red salmon that pulsed by the millions into glacial rivers that emptied there. Crabbing boats docked until fall, when their harvesting frenzy would begin in the icy Bering Sea. Long-liners, gillnetters, and tenders brought fish-filled hulls back to the harbor to be unloaded by cranes. A long pipe that pumped waste from fish processing and packing plants back into the bay attracted a storm of gulls at its mouth. The commercial vessels, which docked closest to the entrance of the harbor, were being pushed aside by an expanding army of charter boats and water taxis, pleasure skiffs, and private yachts.

THE CENTER OF town squatted between the end of the highway and the beginning of the shore, and I quickly realized the sea was the backdrop for everything that happened here—a witness to weddings and deaths, to visiting dignitaries as well as to small, daily indignities. It hosted a beach barbecue for a visiting Kennedy and embraced a truck, stolen from a gay high school teacher, that had been charred and abandoned at the edge of the surf. Every house in town faced the bay or wished it did. And in places where there were no views of the sea, they had been painted on earnestly in colorful murals—inside the bank, on the side of the middle school, on a concrete wall next to the Christian bookstore, on the exterior of a shop that sold electronics for boats.

Like any seaside town, the community was continuously fortifying itself against the very thing everyone had moved here for. Years before, a sandy spit that stuck four and a half miles into the bay and marked the remains of a glacial moraine had been deemed reliable, and before long a boat harbor, hotel, souvenir shops, and fish packing plants crowded its tip. But the powerful 1964 earthquake dropped the Spit six feet into the sea, so the Army Corps of Engineers reinforced it with wood, steel, and rock. They came back again and again, each time bolstering up the sandy handle, though at high tides during storms, waves still washed over the road that ran the length of it. And to keep the sea from claiming real estate within city limits, the town built a seawall to anchor the eroding bluff. But during the first winter, waves harassed the seawall so fiercely it gave way.

The word “Alaska” was likely taken from the Alutiiq word *Alaxsxaq*, which refers to the thing the sea throws itself against. And, more than any other state, Alaska is defined by water. In Southeast Alaska, days and days of rain souse temperate rainforest, where spruce can grow to two hundred feet tall and as wide as cars at their bases. Southcentral Alaska, which was carved and recarved by icy glacial waves, is dominated by rushing salmon streams. Each summer, fishermen spill out of RVs in chest waders and line the edges of the region’s waterways like human riprap. Much of western Alaska is low-lying river delta that gets flushed by the sea. Extreme spring tides bring the Bering Sea dozens of miles inland, so you can be standing calf-deep on tundra with no land in sight 360 degrees around you and the sea creeping ominously up your boots. The topography of the Arctic is dictated by the habits of frozen water. A waterproof layer of permafrost below its surface traps rain and snowmelt so that the landscape is freckled with lakes, in some places creating terrain more aquatic than terrestrial. And each winter, ice drives wedges into the tundra that split the ground into polygons so regular it could be the surface of a soccer ball stretched flat. Even the interior of the state, hundreds of miles from the coast, is at the whims of giant rivers, namely the Yukon and Kuskokwim. Around the hem of the state, the sea has laced a coastline so frilled it would wrap nearly twice around the waist of the earth if unraveled. And the sea surrounds Alaska’s thousands of islands and claims them as its own. Here, the sea and its rivers serve as highways, supermarkets, landing strips, sewers, mail routes, and navigational markers. Water includes and excludes, carves the land, and ferries it away.

As if that weren’t enough, fish carry the ocean into the very middle of the state: Each year, millions of salmon swim more than a thousand miles up the Yukon, and countless more make their way up smaller rivers and streams all over the Alaskan coast. They work their way against whitewater and fling themselves up waterfalls. So singular is their purpose that they don’t eat during this time and instead digest their fat reserves while alive. The fish turn rainbow colors and white fungus spreads along their skin. The males sprout grotesque humps and their jaws contort fiercely in their fight to fertilize a female’s eggs, which she lays on the gravel bottom of a stream or lake. When this work is done, they slowly die. Creeks become scenes of death and decay, strewn with stinking fish carcasses. First, gulls come to peck out the eyeballs. Then bears creep in to scavenge. And everything else arrives too: flies, beetles, eagles. Years later, when those bodies have been replaced by countless others and that sea-fed flesh has long since soaked into the ground, pieces of those fish appear as chemical signatures in the leaves of Alaska’s trees. Here, the sea surges far inland to feed the

terrestrial world.

MINE WAS A landlocked childhood. In the Maryland suburbs where I grew up, there was no evidence of the sea anywhere. The earth was clay, not sand. Heavy, gray-trunked trees cluttered the horizon. The air smelled of wet leaves. And when the months of summer's swampy heat arrived, we craved a breeze blown off the sea. So we piled into the family station wagon and lumbered out to the beach. First past the cornfields and chicken farms, then through the sandy stands of short pines and the tiny getting-to-the-beach towns with clapboard houses and small wooden churches. We spent a week lying on towels spread over sand too hot for the bottoms of our feet and diving through dingy waves. On the other side of the break, I floated on my back with my toes to the sky and at night I would fall asleep feeling the rise and fall of the sea inside me. I took shells home to arrange along the windowsill to remind myself of where the land stops and the water begins.

Perhaps this pull to the sea is in my genes. My grandfather was a captain in Britain's Royal Navy and served during World War II. As a young officer, he kept a scrupulous journal that documented the activities of the ship and included hand-drawn diagrams of ports, riggings, and engine parts. Later in his career, he wrote a manual about piloting the waters off Ireland's rocky coast. Maybe deep in my cells lies a need to know these things: how to navigate rocky shores, how to name the parts of a ship, how to feel comfortable with the sea.

But once in Alaska, I felt adrift and confused. I was a stranger in a place where days were quartered by the tides, where the year was marked by seasons of fish. I was marooned by words I didn't know: beam, bilge, pitch, draft. People spoke about the surface of the sea with common words made foreign: lumpy, messy, calm as glass. There were so many words to learn—no fewer than three dozen to describe sea ice, including pancake, rind, fast, and brash—and countless more to describe boat types and parts. John learned new terms quickly and used them easily, confidently. For me, learning each word became a small act of appropriation, and I felt my mouth form around these foreign sounds tentatively. "Skiff," I said to myself many times before I used it aloud. These small, open boats are as ubiquitous as cars in coastal Alaska. Skiff, skiff. The sound traveled backward from the front of my mouth, between the tip of my tongue and the space behind my top front teeth to the round hill of my tongue. Then back out to my lips, where the sound of "iff" dammed up between my lower lip and front teeth.

For years, Alaska had been the territory of my dreams and aspirations. And once I arrived, I wanted nothing else than to feel at home here. But, having grown up in East Coast suburbs where dead ends were referred to as cul-de-sacs and where my main skills were playing Chopin nocturnes and getting good grades in school, nothing I had known before seemed useful here. I was surrounded by people who boasted local know-how and carried around the knowledge of fish, tides, boats, and weather as ballast. This was how people navigated this place, and how they possessed it. And from the moment I arrived, gaining this knowledge seemed the only way to feel like I belonged.

But becoming comfortable with the feel of new words in my mouth was not enough. I had to learn their meaning, and the patterns in fish and weather, the behavior of the sea, which governs life here. I learned that on sunny summer days a strong wind would pick up across the bay. This day breeze was created when warm air rose up from the land and sucked in cold air lurking above the sea to fill its place. It could lift the surface of the bay two or three feet and aggravate tiderips, but would predictably lie down in the late evening when the temperature dropped and fishing boats returned to the harbor. I learned the cycles of the tides and studied the seasons of fish—when to expect herring, halibut, hooligan, or salmon. I needed to know the difference between a seiner and a longliner,

between reds, pinks, silvers, and kings. I needed to know the feel of a following sea and the risk of wind against tide.

I learned too that to live by the sea was to be pummeled by constant change. One hour, you watched waves batter the cobbles at the foot of the bluff, and then later, the tide receded, leaving the beach silent and open-palmed. And the weather was shifty and capricious. It snowed in spring, hailed in summer, froze and melted and froze again all winter, and fall could be long and dark and wet. You could watch fronts spinning off the Gulf of Alaska, pinwheeling bands of clouds over the mountains across the bay. Some days, wispy clouds raked the sky; on others, cumulus tumbled over the bluff. Rain in town turned to snow as you drove out, and fog pressed in so thick you could barely see past the hood of your car—then you'd get up to the top of the hills behind town and find the sun blaring. Because seaside folks are used to an unpredictable sky, constancy makes them nervous. People here got antsy with day after day of sun. And they knew to wait out squalls beneath a tree or in a coffee shop, to wait out the wind in a cove rather than make the crossing from the other side of the bay.

Nothing was predictable. Nothing stayed the same. On sunny days, the water looked deep blue or as green as jade. Under clouds, it was a skin of mercury pulled taut or gray, windblown silk. And, as if to mimic the sea, the town itself was constantly metamorphosing and evolving. The school bus garage became a pizza place and liquor store; the travel agency moved into an old restaurant, and a hair salon took its place. The biggest bar in town closed and sat empty and the pottery shop became a burrito joint. Remaining patches of green were graded and built upon, giving the town an awkward stepped arrangement: The end of the community college's parking lot was at eye level with a tiny church right behind it, and a vacant shop sat on the slope below the gravel pad it should have been built upon.

Insistent on change, the sea cares nothing for history. The black seams of coal that lined the bluff's edge contained ancient plants. But the sea made everything new again. Coal dropped to the beach in rectangular chunks and, after storms, people drove trucks onto the sand to collect it to heat their houses. Waves wore down what was left to black grains that gathered like shadows around the bases of rocks and in pools in the sand. Near the sea, the earth is never still. John and I would wake to find a few more feet gone from the edge of the bluff in front of our rental house.

Living in a state of constant change set me adrift. So I bought a piano, sold on consignment from a shop a hundred miles up the highway. I imagined the weight and bulk of it as an anchor, something to root me and tether me home. We wrapped it in blankets and drove it down the highway in a borrowed trailer under spitting snow. It took six of us to lift it into the house. But as we moved it from one rental place to the next, dragging this anchor didn't make me feel at home.

Unpredictability and change require the sea's inhabitants to adapt or die. This creates bizarre creatures suited to live near boiling undersea vents, in subzero temperatures, in super-saline waters, in places slapped remorselessly by storms, and in the sometimes dry, sometimes drowned intertidal zone. So, when the tide goes out, anemones close in on themselves and wear shards of shell and stone as armor against the deadly dry world. Eel-like gobi fish linger in the wet spots beneath stones until the sea returns. And limpets tightly clamp their conical shells against the surface of rocks to trap the moisture they need to live. The sea is guiltless, harsh, and sustaining. So you go adrift, leave yourself to the mercy of currents, wear your skeleton on the outside, anchor yourself—or crawl under a rock.

The town was filled with an odd assortment of people who had found their own ways to live. There was the long-bearded man who carved walking sticks and sold them next to the entrance to the warehouse supermarket. One day, the cabin he'd been squatting in mysteriously burned down. There was a young loner who hiked into town from his cabin ten miles back in the hills. He wore fatigues, carried an army frame pack, and always traveled with a black mutt. In the middle of winter, he walked to his neighbors' property and shot at them through the windows of their house. There was the woman who sold tie-dyes and lived in a purple bus parked next to the diner. And there was the man who

dressed as a woman, showing up at the supermarket with his wife. She was short and dumpy, he was tall and dazzling—long painted nails, gold chains, a beaver fur hat, a touch of color on the lips—a bit like a dressed-up horse.

Although the sea is fiercely whimsical, it wastes nothing. Sunlight is trapped and never let go. Calcium, which comes first into the ocean from mountains, becomes shells and teeth and backbones and all of those things all over again. The sea's frugality was contagious. Retired boats were dragged ashore and made into houses, bed and breakfasts, sweet pea planters. Old cabins were picked up and moved, reroofed, added onto. Oil drums became barrel stoves and barbecues. Old fishing nets were strung between spruce posts to keep moose out of vegetable patches. And rubber boots too worn to be waterproof were cut down into slippers, easy to put on and take off for the walk between back door and outhouse.

The town's food web was as intricate and efficient as the sea's. Money shuffled around the community continuously. Benefit parties were held in the biggest bar in town or in local schools for a boat man whose house burned down, for a woman with a gut disease, for the four widows and thirteen children left fatherless after a charter plane carrying fishermen home plunged into the sea. A few coins dropped into a jar at the drugstore helped a mother of four whose husband died of a heart attack while playing soccer with his son in the high school gym. Everyone was connected through a network of buying and selling, giving and needing, through things left at and rescued from the dump, items sold and requested over the radio, gear exchanged at ski swaps, odds and ends bargained for at yard sales. It wasn't uncommon to see your old jacket or sweater on a friend who had bought it from the local consignment store and didn't know it was yours. Sometimes "benefits" that accompanied a salary meant fish, bread, a skiff ride. Every skill was taken advantage of, and people in town were sometimes surprised to find themselves suddenly in the role of debate coach, salsa dancing instructor, or board president.

It was so obvious to eat directly from the sea that the grocery stores sold little seafood. Instead, people put up cases of salmon in glass jars, packed a freezer's worth of fish, smoked long strips of red flesh to savor and give away all winter. Those with boats threw out lines for halibut, because they knew they'd tire of salmon by midwinter. Those without begged rides. Gardeners lugged mats of eelgrass from the beach to feed their soil. They composted fish heads and tails and fed the slurry to broccoli, pea plants, and greenhouse tomatoes.

The sea takes then gives back, it cuts and calms, it slaps and laughs and whispers. It constantly leaves small tokens at your feet—a dead seal, a still and eyeless thrush, a wrack of spotless mussel shells as blue as jewels. And suddenly, at slack tide, the wind quiets and the water stops its charging. For a moment, you can believe that everything is normal, that the sea is well-behaved and you are in control.

AT HIGH TIDE six hours after setting the net, John and I pulled a pale yellow canoe stored in the sloping garage next to our rental and dragged it to the edge of the bluff, leaving a stripe of flattened grass. A breeze was kicking up whitecaps on the bay. During the hours we'd been up at the house, the entire net had been submerged and the tide had arced the float line as it pressed into the bay. From the top of the bluff, we could see the silver side of a fish blinking in the net just below the surface. I grabbed John's wiry arm and jumped up and down in my rubber boots on the grass. We cheered. The plastic mermaid's head tethered to the net, swung her tail about wildly as if in celebration. Seeing one fish bobbing in the net made us hungry for more.

We let the canoe slide almost entirely of its own accord down the bluff, while we slipped

alongside in rubber boots. The boat was not a seagoing vessel, and sitting on the gravel beach it gaped open, ungraceful and unseaworthy. ~~But we had nothing else. So we carried it to the edge of the water,~~ where the bay began to stroke its lemon sides, making it dance awkwardly.

I got in the bow on my knees, and John gave us a shove as he climbed into the stern. We paddled out to where the silver salmon bucked in the net, and John directed me to pull the top of the net into the boat so that I could free the fish. The boat bobbed as I leaned over the bow and reached my hands into the cold water to grab the float line. I heaved the line and the fish trapped beneath it over the gunwale. The fish hung in a mess of net in front of me. It was a handsome silver salmon, nearly as long as my arm. Its skin was fresh, metallic, and alive. The fish had spent more than a year at sea before making its run to spawn. As it had swum up the bay, it had hit the net, which was invisible in the murky shallows in front of our house. Its head had gone through the mesh but the line had cinched the fish behind its gills where the body widened. The more the fish struggled, the tighter it was bound.

Holding the net with one hand and the fish's head firmly with the other, I traced its body back through the net the way it had entered. Its scales were slick between my hands. I pulled the blue filament over the head and yanked it out from beneath its gills. The line left dark scars where it had tightened behind the fish's small dorsal fin. When it was free, I held the contorting body, about eight pounds of nearly all muscle, against the bottom of the boat. Its gills opened and closed, struggling in the air. I reached in my back pocket for a knife and pressed it through the gills and then into the head between its eyes, hoping I was reaching its brain. Though I only half-cared, a knife into the head seemed less cruel than letting the animal bleed slowly to death. Blood leaked from the gills toward the center of the boat and scales gilded my hands.

From the stern, John worked the bow of the canoe along the float line, and, bit by bit, I pulled sections of the net into the boat and plucked out other salmon. The fish lay twitching in the bottom of the boat. We ferried them back to the gravel beach in small batches. We spent the rest of the afternoon with the fish, taking them out of the net as the tide receded. John unbound an earth-colored flounder, palm-sized with skin like sandpaper, and lobbed it into the water where it smacked and then swam away. We undid jellyfish from the mesh and they dried on the mudflats, each its own gelatinous cosmos. John worked quickly, moved decisively. I was trying to figure out how to do the same.

By the end of the day, we had nineteen fish and had lugged them up the bluff with stringers through their gills. With the evening sun slanting across the yard, we lay plywood planks on the grass and while John filleted, I cleaned the fish as he had shown me. One after another, I slit the bellies from tail to head. I pulled out sacks of roe—like red-orange pearls, deep red kidneys, other innards of white, browns, and green. I cleaned out the bloodline, scraping the coagulated blood along the fishes' spines with my fingers. Brown, spider-sized parasites congregated around the tails. John filleted the fish, unpeeling their flesh in deep orange cakes iced in silver.

Even though the bay was rich, what you ended up combing from the sea was always a mystery, a surprise, a gift. And despite the hours of setting and picking the net, of carrying fish up the bluff, of cleaning, filleting and packing, what we pulled from the water felt free. We could scavenge a net and borrow a canoe to fill our freezer.

It was after midnight by the time we had wrapped all of the fillets in plastic and stacked them in the freezer. A rich indigo had begun to pull across the sky, east to west. John unraveled the garden hose and we rinsed off everything on the grass—knives, planks, canoe. My hands and arms throbbed from the carrying and cleaning, and my skin smelled like fish.

The next morning, we clambered down the bluff to where we had stashed the net in a wide plastic bucket. Neighbors down the beach, with whom we'd shared bonfires and beer, had asked to borrow the net. Emboldened by our success, John had offered to set it for them so they could pick it later in the afternoon. As we pulled the net from the bucket, we realized something was amiss. The float line had

severed from the net. It had been cut. And the mermaid buoy was gone. We'd been vandalized, and I had that sick feeling in my stomach of having been robbed. It was a mixture of rage and embarrassment. I knew John was already calmly scheming about how to reattach the float line and get the net back into the water as questions spun through my mind. Who did it? What had we done wrong? Had we taken someone's fishing spot? Was it because we hadn't lived here for long enough? It was too purposeful to be random. Whoever had cut the line had to have been carrying a knife and had to be willing to walk away with a voluptuous mermaid under his arm.

We walked up the beach then down. Wind had picked up on the water and it nattered in our ears. We looked for signs: the mermaid buoy abandoned in front of someone's house, resentful neighbors, suspicious tracks in the sand. We found nothing. There was no way to know who did it or why.

We trudged up the bluff to call the neighbors to let them know it would be a while before we could set the net again. John went out to the garage to look for odds and ends he could use to fix the net. I sat at the kitchen table and watched the birch tree in the yard lean against the wind. I wondered whether it was wind that helped make birch such a strong wood, and wind, too, that made these trees bear canopies of such delicately sinuous branches.

Here was the push and pull of this place. At one moment it felt like your own. But then the tide flipped, the high pressure broke, night swung its curtain in front of your eyes. The tide was beginning to turn, and soon it would rush across the mud flats toward the beach, first in a thin sheet and then in small waves, each tripping over the last. Within hours, the impressions our boots had left on the sand would be covered by water; there would be no evidence we had been there at all.

PASSAGE

FORECASTLE, ALSO, FO'C'SLE: *n.* *The section of the upper deck of a ship located in the bow forward of the foremast.*

On the day of my departure for Alaska, I sat at an empty picnic table near the edge of the dock eating my last meal on terra firma: Alaskan halibut fish and chips. The ferry I was about to board was tied up in Bellingham harbor—its most southerly port of call—and it heaved a bit, making preparatory grunts and murmurings like an orchestra warming up. The late summer sun scattered sharp shadows across the grass and wind snapped the ship's flags. It was my first time traveling on my own, and, sitting at the edge of the continent, I was completely, terribly, and excitingly alone. I would be retracing the voyage of countless others who had traveled to Alaska before me: gold rushers, early pioneers, thrill-seekers, miners, surveyors, fur hunters, fishermen, law makers, sightseers, and naturalists. By sea, the trip would take one week.

After finishing my meal, I boarded the M/V *Columbia*, a stately white and navy blue-hulled ship. Like many of the passengers, I made the low-budget choice and didn't pay for a cabin. Instead, I claimed a lawn chair that folded flat as my bed in the "solarium," a deck enclosed by three walls and a roof, with radiating heaters on the ceiling. I stashed my bags and set off to explore the ship. These ships had been the workhorses of Alaskan sea travel for many years, used for commuting between coastal communities and for delivery of cars to towns where they'd never been before. More recently the ferries had become popular with tourists as a more modest alternative to cruise ship travel.

I dashed around the ship those first few minutes aboard. A forward viewing area at the bow had movie theater-style fold-down seats. A large deck opened at the stern. A dining room, cafeteria, and lounge sat amid-ships. Scores of cabins with small, rounded doors were scattered around the ship, and cars, trucks, and RVs were strapped down on the lower deck. It was the tail end of the tourist season and although the ferry—the largest of Alaska's fleet of eleven—had been built to carry five hundred passengers, the ship was fairly empty.

I planted myself at the bow to watch the ship untether itself from land. Deckhands detached ropes as fat around as my thigh from the dock and wound them up onboard. The anchor chain with links the size of loaves of bread was reeled into the hull. We were off. On my first trip to Alaska, I was going there to stay indefinitely.

I had wanted to move north slowly in order to watch the landscape metamorphose and to feel the true distance that separated the life I was leaving from the one I was going toward. As the ferry chugged through British Columbia's Inside Passage, the landscape regressed: Buildings were plucked off shorelines, roads erased from treed slopes, boats disappeared from the water. Green islands emerged from the sea like knees and rounded hills of spruce and hemlock became stout mountains along the shore. It looked as though a monstrous needle had been stitched through the very fabric of the land and smocked it along the coast. The ferry moved through narrow passes where seals bobbed

their bulbous gray heads off the ship's gunwales, and one morning I awoke at 5 A.M. to see the fin of an orca knife the black surface of the sea. The region wasn't entirely devoid of human artifacts. Navigational markers alerted captains from atop hills, and great swaths of forests had been clear-cut, leaving them looking naked and shaved.

Somewhere in those narrow passages the ship crossed the invisible boundary between British Columbia and Alaska. Minutes of latitude ticked by. Each hour pressed new sights against my eyes: wood cabins graying near the sea's edge, grasses combed right up to the shore, a hundred kinds of green. I was enchanted.

My romance with the largest state had begun years before, in the fifth grade, with an assignment to write a report on the state of my choice. I chose Alaska because I knew it still held undeveloped territory and pictures of it evoked wondrous things I'd never seen with my own eyes: brown bears as large as station wagons, glaciers like icy interstates through mountain ranges, peaks so sharp they looked like saw blades against the sky.

I turned in a 43-page assemblage of cursive paragraphs on lined notebook paper, magic marker drawings, magazine cutouts pasted on blank pages, and photocopied geography handouts I'd carefully filled in with erasable pen. The next week, the class held a banquet in which each student brought a dish from his or her state. My best friend studied Idaho and toted in a pan of scalloped potatoes. I brought the only dish my mother and I could think of, Baked Alaska, which involved carving a cavity in a store-bought angel food cake, packing it with ice cream, slathering meringue over the entire thing and baking it quickly at a high temperature. One thing on the outside, something very different within. Alaska was lodged permanently in my mind.

The summer I was fifteen, I went backpacking for two weeks in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Tall rhododendrons reached pink blossoms skyward at the tops of twisted trunks, and creeks ran cold and clear, unlike the one that pattered warmly behind our house. At night, I lay under a clear sky and saw more stars than I'd ever imagined and spotted satellites zipping across the Milky Way. And yet I couldn't stop thinking about *Alaska*. The mountains of the East were humped with age and the forests, crisscrossed by logging roads, seemed tame.

Eager to go north, I applied for jobs in national parks in Alaska. They were all taken. So I settled on stints of trail work in the Rocky Mountains. Here the land cleaved and towered dramatically rather than shifting gently into the kind of shallow creeks and short hills I knew back home. In the Rockies I got my first real tastes of life in wild places: hiking thigh-deep in July snow on one day and soaking in natural hot springs the next; not seeing anyone else besides our small trail crew for days at a time, then suddenly coming upon a well-appointed lodge where the lonely caretaker cooked us an enormous dinner of linguini and wild mushrooms. I drank straight from cold streams and washed in whatever trickle we had camped next to. Mail and groceries came by plane to a backcountry ranger station, where we'd return once a week for gas-powered laundry and a one- or two-day respite from our fifty-pound packs. This was the largest and wildest landscape in the contiguous states, but still I hungered for more.

I know that love had something to do with my pull toward Alaska. During college, I had never managed to find one of those normal boyfriends—a history major from a Boston suburb, perhaps, or pre-med student who liked to jog. Instead, I fell for men in the woods—men who knew how to chop wood, pack horses, and hail bush pilots by radio. I fell for men who knew how to say nothing as the full moon rose over the piñons, knew how to recognize the butterscotch scent of Ponderosa pines, and how to enjoy a life of hard work.

I graduated with a biology degree, and as soon as I found a job teaching science to fifth-graders on the Oregon coast, I quickly packed my bags. Between the snarled pines along the shore and the waves tumbling up toward them, I met John. A teacher in this ecosystem for years, John was a lanky

man with a close-cropped brown beard and head of short, nearly black hair that peaked at his forehead. He was often quiet around people our age, but teaching drew out of him a dramatic flair that mesmerized young students. From the beginning, I was impressed by his ability to name all of the creatures in nearby rocky tidepools: buffalo sculpin, sea cucumber, opalescent nudibranch. But it was because of birds that I fell in love with him. Everywhere we went, John knew all of the birds: western grebe, Townsend's solitaire, ruddy turnstone. He kept binoculars slung around his neck at all times, and with one hand steadying them as he walked, it looked as if he was holding them against his heart. On our days off, John took me to a lush oasis in the middle of the Oregon desert that was filled with birds. We paddled a borrowed canoe to an island where hermit thrush sang from the high boughs of ancient trees. Together, we sought out yellow-headed blackbirds, lazuli buntings, and American avocets, which wade on skyblue legs.

This sudden awareness of birds was a revelation to me. I had never bothered to look at birds or to learn the names of plants and animals where I had grown up. Although I was a biology major, I had spent more time designing experiments in the greenhouse and lab than in paying attention to what was happening in the woods. I knew maples and oaks and could recognize the cooing of mourning doves, but not much more. Once you know a place's natural history, I realized, instead of the landscape feeling smaller in its familiarity, it expands exponentially. John and I spotted falcons above an old landfill and bright yellow warblers in a power line right-of-way. We spied hawks in the suburbs and watched a black cyclone of tens of thousands of chimney swifts funnel into an old smokestack to nest. John was attuned to a frequency of sound I had never known before. When we rode bikes around town in the morning, he'd point out robins when he heard their call. When we watched movies together, he'd notice which bird vocalizations had been dubbed in without regard to natural history.

During those first weeks of training in Oregon, as I became an ardent student of this foreign landscape so that I could turn around and teach it, John took notes on me. He wrote that I had looked harder than the other teachers had at the chitons, barnacles, and anemones that opened like dahlias below the surface of the water. He had seen me linger at the tidepools holding decorator crabs, which attach seaweed to their backs for camouflage, and study the inside of a rock cave, where gooseneck barnacles hung in decadent clumps. These were his field notes, containing pen-and-inks of sculpin and thrush. He tore them out of his notebook and quietly slipped them to me. When I read them, I felt as closely observed as the birds John had dedicated so much of himself to; with a naturalist's keenness, he had recorded my small movements and the things I said.

When we weren't teaching school groups, John was teaching me. When we went for walks, he pointed out which skinny trees with the narrow leaves were Indian plum, one of the earliest to flower in spring. At night, we lay in my single bed in a trailer parked just out of reach of the surf, listening to the coastal downpours against the metal roof. We felt everything was conspiring in our love: the indulgently blooming azaleas, the gracefully sculpted offshore rocks, the way the sun dangled rainbows from the sky.

John had spent a few summers studying birds in Alaska, and when he told me he was ready to go back there, this time to stay, my eyes widened. "Yes," I said. His desire to go to Alaska was an urgent craving; mine had been a long, slow ache. So we decided on a town at the edge of a bay that filled with birds each spring, where John had been offered a job teaching at a small elementary school. He drove up the highway to Alaska that summer in a packed Volvo station wagon. I stayed behind to finish my job and counted on him to meet me at the ferry dock two months later.

As the M/V *Columbia* squeezed through close passages, I could easily spot the brilliant white heads

bald eagles sitting sentry in spruce trees along the shore. Gray gull-like birds dipped into the sea off the bow. I puzzled over my bird guide, trying to identify them. Were they northern fulmars? Flesh-footed shearwaters? Mew gulls? John would have known.

For years I had wanted to go to Alaska and yet, as I stood at the deck rail, I forgot how I had made the decision to move. I felt as though I were carrying out a plan made long ago, perhaps by someone else. I realized that once the split second had passed in which I'd made the decision to go, the rest of my life had aligned politely behind it. By the time I'd boarded the ferry, I was miles beyond turning back.

Inside the ship, I studied maps on the walls, posters about Alaskan towns, pictures of Alaskan birds. I realized how little I actually knew about the state. While low clouds wrapped themselves around the ship's windows, I imagined Homer, the town where I was going to live. I pictured a place dark with spruce, a coast of black rocks beaded with white barnacles, and scattered wooden houses that were neatly trimmed. I imagined that John and I might rent a cabin somewhere in the woods. We might live without running water, as we had heard was common among people living a little ways out of town. While in Oregon, I had subscribed to one of the community's two local weekly newspapers and in the evenings, I sat at the dinner table reading the police blotter aloud:

AUGUST 9: A city worker at 9:42 A.M. reported graffiti painted on city property.

AUGUST 10: A man at 7:56 P.M. reported a black bear in the backyard of his Birch Way house.

AUGUST 12: A woman at 10:52 P.M. reported an extremely drunk man lying in the middle of Jackson Street. Police arranged for the man to go home in a taxi.

AUGUST 13: A woman at 2:49 P.M. reported a missing purse.

I assumed the matter-of-fact, Dick-and-Jane language of these compressed stories captured the town's worst ills; it seemed quaint.

When I stood at the deck rails, I remembered how I'd stood there in my mind years before. Part of the assignment for my fifth grade report required that I imagine and write about a visit to my chosen state. Worried that I might not have enough material, I started the voyage at my Maryland home at the beginning of a tedious, six-day drive across the country on major interstates I had located on my father's road atlas. On day seven, I drove my car onto a ferry in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, for the one-and-a-half-day trip to Juneau. By the next morning, I had befriended an Eskimo man and he was teaching me how to fish off the deck. I saw puffins on rocky cliffs. I ended the story of my trip on day nine, when I drove my car off the ferry at Juneau. There, my imagination faltered, and I mentioned only that I'd spend a few weeks enjoying "beautiful sights."

Just as the maps went blank north of California before Alaska's coast had been traced, my mental map petered out once I crossed the edge of the state. I'd seen pictures of its coastline, glaciers, and big mountains. But my image of this immense state was as incomplete as an unfinished dot-to-dot. I couldn't know how it fit together—how expanses of tundra gathered like fabric around the foothills of mountains, how rivers cast off old oxbows and curves, how spruce forests scattered into treelessness,

how glaciers receded, leaving giant mounds of old mountain parts aflame with stands of cottonwood and birch.

“I have lived in Alaska for a couple of years,” I wrote at the end of my fabricated visit. “I really like it here. Most of my friends are Eskimos and I have learned to speak Aleut. I am going to school here and I am not sure what will lie ahead of me in the secret and mystical land of Alaska.” I wonder whether anyone else in my class took their report as personally.

Two days after leaving Bellingham, Washington, the ship slipped into a narrow, liquid crease between velvety green hills. We were approaching Ketchikan, the first Alaskan port, where I would get off the ferry to switch ships for my final destination of Seward, another three days away. We were at the southern tip of the Alaska Panhandle, the strip of coastland and islands that stretches five hundred miles southeast from the state’s mainland. Southeast Alaska, flush with the kind of temperate rainforest I had become familiar with in Oregon, is dotted with communities accessible only by air or by sea. Low, wet clouds parted the day we arrived in Ketchikan. At the edge of the water, a clutter of tourist shops, wood houses on pilings, and defunct logging mills glistened under the sun. Thirteen feet of rain that washed in each year had scrubbed everything in this small town clean.

But Ketchikan was filthy with salmon. Pink salmon were running up the creek in the middle of town so thick the whole place reeked. At the mouth, fish stirred the surface of the water into a fierce froth. Two local men stood on the bridge which spanned the creek near its mouth as their children dropped fishing lines over the edge. The men joked about how bad the town would smell in a couple weeks.

After checking in to a small hotel, I clambered down to the creek. Female salmon shimmied the tails over the creek bed to dig depressions called redds where they would lay eggs. Males surged upstream, vying for the chance to fertilize. Stepping from stone to stone, I saw fish in every stage of dying and decay. For miles upstream, the bodies littered eddies, rotted in rock crevices, and lay splayed and decomposing along the banks. All around me, gulls attacked the rancid flesh.

Later, I hiked up a squat mountain on the back side of town that was flush with rainforest. The spruce and hemlock trees, which I had become familiar with in Oregon, were wide and tall. Ferns leaned over the trail, and moss fleeced the trunks of trees and every surface otherwise left bare. Below me, sunlight silvered the sea between green islands. And inland, these dense woods, striped here and there by timber harvests, stretched to the horizon. For two days, enormous cruise ships, like supine skyscrapers, pulled in and out of port. They poured out passengers who swamped the local shops for a few hours and then sucked them back in and took off.

Ketchikan looked just like the town I’d imagined was my final destination, and the doubts I’d been having about my move were replaced by the near-electric feeling of possibility that was an undercurrent of my two days there. Each step I took up the fish-strewn creek was charged with the feel of bears; one might prowl in for a meal of sluggish salmon at any time. The rancid scene of life and death playing out so pungently in the middle of town was just a small part of the life that was sparking off everywhere around me. I got hints of the locals, the community of people on the other side of the fresh coats of paint that colored the buildings within a walker’s radius of the cruise ship dock. I knew there were many stories the façades didn’t tell. And I recognized a new potential within myself as a young woman traveling alone, new to this town, infinitely intrigued and intriguing. If these were my first few steps on Alaskan soil, what would the next hundred bring?

In Ketchikan, where industry once thrived, it now faltered. Tourism was taking over a greater share of the market, and people were figuring out new livelihoods. The town had a jumbled appearance: Charmless store-fronts abutted public displays of elegant Native art. Drab houses crawled up the mountainsides near town where lush forest was pulled in like a cloak. The timber industry left acres of scars in the foothills while tourism painted a sheen of cuteness on the few blocks that made

up downtown. The riches of the place lay in its wild coastline, its acres of forests, and in the opulence of salmon that thronged in from the sea.

Forty-eight hours later, I boarded the M/V *Kennicott*, the state's newest ferry. It was smaller and emptier than the *Columbia*, and I dropped my bags in an abandoned observation room on the upper deck. Having little money and eager to exercise the sense of self-reliance I associated with Alaska, I never bought a meal on either ship. I had stocked up on dried soups, instant oatmeal, and fruit before I left and used the ships' microwaves for primitive cooking tasks.

For two more days, the ship continued up the Inside Passage in still seas buttoned down with islands and hemmed by an infinitely furrowed coast. As the mountains along the shore grew sharper, I thought about how I had grown up without topography. The land I had come from had been flat and tame. Here, undeveloped land stretched from the edge of the water as far as I could see. Whole mountain ranges were left to their own devices. Entire watersheds flowed unbothered from their heads to the sea. Great plains of ice were free to grind mountainsides into dust and shoot out chalky rivers.

As I leaned against the gunwale, it occurred to me how much I couldn't see, and how hard it was to grasp what I could see. A few years later, I read the account of a similar voyage to Alaska by John Muir, the naturalist and conservationist. In 1879, twelve years after the United States purchased Alaska from an indebted and overextended Russia, Muir took a mail steamer northward from Portland, Oregon. After a childhood in Scotland and then Wisconsin, he had explored the country at a naturalist's pace. He walked a thousand miles from Indiana to Florida, and traversed much of California on foot. He fell in love with the Sierra Nevada Mountains and became an ardent voice for conservation in the West. At age forty-one, he traveled to Alaska for the first time and stood on the deck of the ship gawking at what he saw around him. He called the landscape off the bow "hopelessly beyond description," which was, for a man who spent his time scrupulously observing and documenting the natural world, no insignificant admission. I imagine what he meant was that the very scale of Alaska's coastline was dizzying, and to comprehend it all would take more than a lifetime.

Two days from Ketchikan, the ship turned west and left protected waters. As we crossed the Gulf of Alaska's stormy threshold, twenty-five-foot seas thrust the bow skyward and drove seasick passengers to seek open air in which to vomit. Having swallowed the appropriate orange pills, I stood valiantly at the bow, feeling it thump in each swirling trough, until the captain called us all back inside. Rough seas came with winds that blew so hard a cargo door was torn off its hinges. The state's brand-new boat was forced to backtrack to its last port, and the purser announced a seventeen-hour delay and free cafeteria meals for all.

In this close world, I made friends easily. A short, muscular blond guy about my age who had claimed a reclining deck chair near mine confided in me that his handgun was stashed in his truck (which was belowdecks) and that he would never be so stupid as to travel without one. I met a high school teacher from Los Angeles who had decided one day to escape his life and head north. Another man had left behind a girlfriend and young baby in hopes of finding work. He said that he would send for them. I met a nurse moving alone to a remote Native village, and a man from Long Island who had just been hired to be the director of a prestigious science center in Alaska. His girlfriend had come along for the trip, but wasn't going to stay. I couldn't help wondering whether one of them would change their mind.

We traded cameras and took pictures of each other at the bow with the coastline spread grandly behind us. We gathered at the gunwales when someone spotted a pair of whales. We swapped magazines and books. We were all in suspension—awaiting a new job, a remade life, an adventure, newfound solitude. There was no other choice but to take people as they were, which meant without an identity tied to job or geography, and with little baggage. We were in it together, bearing the two-

story-high swells, the smell of vomit, the limitations of comfort. We became tribes, banding and disbanding easily—over dinner or a Scrabble board, at the deck rails, with a pack of cards. We were in the midst of in-betweenness, neither in our old life nor in the new, standing on our own clean slates. Off the stern, the sea flattened the ship's wake and erased our tracks.

Soon after the cargo door was repaired and we were again on our way, the ship slipped into Prince William Sound between glassy waters and a low ceiling of clouds. I parked myself at the deck rails and watched black and white Dall's porpoises play in the bow's wake. They dashed in and out of the emerald water that raced against the hull. Dark mountains rose like sleeping giants at the water's edge and two long islands—Hinchinbrook and Montague—closed behind us. In front of us, the sea was pulled taut. Wooded islands foregrounded the mainland darkly. Waterfalls flung thick, white cords down black slopes, and everywhere the undulations of the coastline produced an endless string of bays, inlets, and coves.

Ten years had passed since the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, which had leaked at least eleven million gallons of crude oil into the Sound. Tides had washed the crude out of the protected Sound and swept it westward, greasing 1,300 miles of coastline—enough to blacken the beaches from Boston to Cape Hatteras. I was fourteen years old at the time, and the news stories of the spill had left indelible images in my head of birds blackened with oil, workers in rubber suits and masks trying to rinse beaches with heavy hoses, and one dead sea otter after another. But now, viewed from the ferry, the region looked pristine. I didn't know that you could dig into nearby beaches and still find oil blackening the sand. Nor that the spill had spelled both bust and boom for many Alaskans.

We stopped at Cordova, a fishing town of about 2,500 people, squeezed between mountains and the Sound. Low wet clouds had settled comfortably in town, and from the bow I couldn't see past the docks where locals lingered in rubber boots. After a few passengers and a truck or two left the ship, we were off once again.

Eleven hours later, the ship muscled into a narrow bay under a fat moon that spilled a path across the black sea like a film of milk. At the head of the bay sat the town of Seward, a community of about four thousand people who lived mainly off of fish and tourists. In the moonlight, I could see buildings cluttering a narrow shelf of land between steep slopes and the sea. My eyes scanned down a series of pools of yellow light beneath streetlights at the edge of the dock. There was John, standing in rubber boots waving up to me with both arms. He looked like he'd been here for years.

I smiled back and waved. "Awww," said the nurse who stood next to me at the rail. There was the man who was the convergence of the life I had left behind and the new one I would create. I felt a split second of disappointment. The end of anticipation is always a letdown; the beginning is already over. Those floating moments on the ferry were done, but I knew John would have another adventure planned, and then another. I threw my backpack on my back, picked up a bag with each hand, and walked through the gate.

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