

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

1999

Cloudberries

Marie Beaver

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

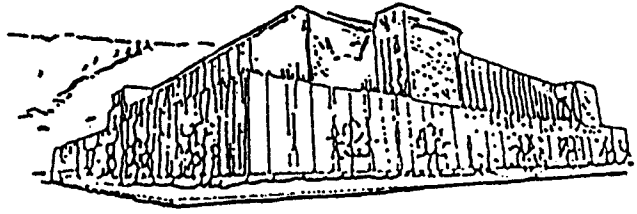
Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Beaver, Marie, "Cloudberries" (1999). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 1813.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1813>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.



Maureen and Mike
MANSFIELD LIBRARY

The University of **MONTANA**

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

*** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature ***

Yes, I grant permission

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature

Maureen Beavert

Date

May 25, 1999

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.

CLOUDBERRIES

by

Marie Beaver

B.A. Stanford University, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

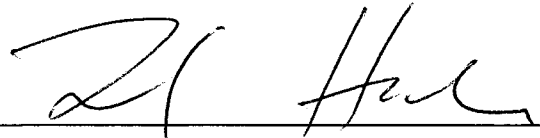
for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts


The University of Montana

1999

Approved by:



Chairperson



Dean, Graduate School

5-28-99

Date

UMI Number: EP36094

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP36094

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

WackAttack

I received Wacko as a consolation gift from a boyfriend who was breaking up with me. Even after this boyfriend moved out of the small cabin we shared, I still had hopes we would get back together. But when he presented me with six-week old Wacko, I knew it was all over. He was extremely allergic to dogs.

Wacko was my first pet, and I loved him right away. It was a different kind of love from loving a parent or a lover. With his brown eyes and big puppy feet, he was so helpless. The world was thick with dangers--cars, antifreeze, dog-hating humans, even dog-hating dogs. Wacko had no one else on this planet but me. I aimed to make sure that no harm would come to him. Most of all, I wanted him to have the very best life possible, starting with a warm place to sleep, lots of belly scratches, and an abundance of milk bones.

I had no control over these feelings. They came over me like a brainwashing. One second I was non-mother, and the next, I was mother.

Our first night together, thinking that Wacko would be lonely without his siblings and his first mother, I brought him to bed with me. It was January in Fairbanks, Alaska, and Wacko had spent his first six weeks outdoors in a kennel. Used to temperatures well below zero, he began to pant. His whole body shook as he panted, and he wouldn't stop. I moved us to the floor which, poorly insulated, was colder than the rest of the cabin. He continued to pant. When I offered him some water, he turned away. Convinced that my dog was on the brink of a heat stroke, I moved the entire operation outside. It was cold out--twenty below zero--and my ten year old sleeping bag had patches all over it. I squeezed into it, wearing a down parka, two wool hats, and all the long john layers I owned. Eventually, Wacko stopped sounding like a wheezy jack hammer. With a gremlin kind of grunt, he flopped down in the snow.

Soon, a new worry entered my head: Wacko might get too cold. Even though I knew he was an outdoor dog, it occurred to me that he was probably used to snuggling up to his brothers and sisters for warmth. I couldn't sleep until I had made a bed for him out of some blankets and forced him to lie in it (he kept trying to leave). It was a long, cold

night. When I awoke in the morning, Wacko had moved off the bed and lay curled in a small snow pit his body had melted.

As the weeks went on, Wacko grew accustomed to living indoors, and I found myself adoring him in ways I never thought possible. At night, I'd hear him get up and go to his bowl, and I'd think, "oh, he's eating." I'd catch him asleep on his back on the couch, his belly moving up and down, his pink tip of tongue showing, and I'd have a Wack Attack, as I dubbed the urge, and smother him with kisses and repeated declarations of, "I love you." His ears flopped-over just right. His breath smelled wonderful, like corn flakes. I preferred his black nose to the pinks and browns and calicoes of other canine noses. And the funny way he ran, like a rabbit, was so unique, so Wacko.

As for the fact that he never licked me or followed me around the house or jumped all over me when I came home from work like puppies were supposed to do--oh well. The last thing I wanted was one of those needy, attention-seeking Golden Retrievers who were always pushing a wet nose into your hand or leg. Wacko was a Husky, the wildest of the dog-race. Huskies possessed a degree of independence and self-respect that the other species had lost long ago in their evolutionary descent.

I had lived with Wacko for several weeks when a friend, Dirk, came over to dinner and suggested that it might be time to start teaching my dog a few commands, starting with, "Come." Dirk went outside and collected his Golden Lab, Cody, from the car. The dog had a squished-in nose and droopy pink gums. I liked him immediately.

"Check this out," Dirk told me.

"Sit," he said. And, what do you know, Cody sat.

Wordlessly, Dirk threw a pencil across the room. The dog quivered but remained seated.

"Letch," Dirk said. Cody, still sitting, started to whine.

"Fffffff-airbanks," Dirk cried. The dog's whine grew louder and gained a low growl, much like the rev of an old engine trying to accelerate up a hill.

Dirk paused for a few seconds, elevating the drama, I guess. Cody broke into full-throttle yelps as if he had got his tail caught in a door. I was about to go and get the pencil

for him.

Finally, Dirk yelled, "Fetch!" Cody bounded off, gummed the pencil, and delivered it to Dirk's feet.

"Good dog!" Cody jumped onto Dirk's knees and licked and licked his face.

Despite my disdain for needy dogs, I found the scene quite touching and resolved to start working on "come" with Wacko. In the past weeks, while on our walks, he had disappeared a few times, leaving me crazy-worried, calling and calling his name. When he finally returned, panting, a mask of saliva frozen to his snout, I never knew whether to scold him for taking off or praise him for returning. So of course I always said, "good dog, good dog," but since Wacko continued to vanish into the trees and take his own sweet time returning, I did not think this method was having the effect I wanted.

I bought a dog-rearing book, which said that dogs were a lot like children, ready to test the parent and see how much they could get away with. It was the parent's responsibility to not let this happen. Children needed and wanted limits. They needed to hear the word, "no."

I nodded when I read this. "No," was something I rarely heard growing up. Yet, I had always wanted to hear "no," or some form of it. When my parents looked over my school papers, I craved to hear anything besides, "That's great, Darling." Though my friends would have fumed to hear me say this, I longed to have to do chores like they did: setting the table, taking out the garbage, making my bed. My best friend Kim had a chart in her kitchen which listed chores along the top edge and the kids' names down the left-hand margin. Whenever she or her brothers completed a task, they got to put a check in the appropriate square. I wanted a chart I could bombard with checks.

I filled my pocket with kibbles, as per the instructions in Chapter Two, "Teaching Your Dog to Come," attached a leash to Wacko and sat him in the corner of the cabin. The book made it sound easy. I was supposed to back up while Wacko stayed seated. Then, I'd say, "Come." If Wacko complied: great. If not, I'd yank on the leash. When he arrived at my feet either by force or by will, I was supposed to say, "Good boy, you come," which troubled me because it wasn't grammatically correct, but the point was to institutionalize the word "come" in the dog's vocabulary. Then I'd give Wacko a kibble.

The problem was that Wacko knew I had food in my pocket. He could smell it. So when I put him in a corner and backed up, he immediately followed me, his nose aimed high in the air.

"No," I said, returning him to his corner. "You're supposed to wait until I say, 'Come.'"

The next time, I retreated when I thought Wacko wasn't paying attention to me, when he busy licking a paw. As soon as I took one step backwards, however, he halted mid-lick and bounded to me. "No," I yelled, louder. At my cry, he dropped flat on the floor, as if scared. I melted.

"I'm sorry, Honey," I said, sitting down and placing him in my lap. I didn't like scaring my dog. He was so young, so easily confused. Besides, he'd have plenty of time to learn his commands. I decided to quit the lesson for the day.

The months went by and Wacko grew into his feet, becoming ninety pounds of Husky. His nose elongated, making his face appear narrow and wily, like a wolf's. I carried on the obedience lessons, although they often mimicked the first one, with me ending up on the floor saying "sorry," and "I love you." In time, Wacko eventually grasped the "come" idea. That is, he came, provided nothing else grabbed his attention. I thankfully gave up on the discipline lessons. It was so much work, being stern.

When Wacko was about a year old, I began dating Dirk, the owner of Cody. Though still in love with the old boyfriend, I was lonely and Dirk liked to outdoorsy things like go hiking and look for birds. Plus, he bought me roses all the time. He asked me what I wanted to do for the weekend and then we did it. And he had these killer dimples that gave him an honest, almost innocent smile.

After a while, Dirk began complaining about an unbalance in our relationship. He bought and read a self help book called, *The Passion Paradox*. At his urging, I skimmed the book. As far as I can remember, it described two types of people in an unbalanced relationship: those that are one-up and one-down. One-uppers are semi-bullies who become easily impatient and bored with their partners. One-downers worry obsessively about

everything from a midget pimple to why their partner is fifteen minutes late with a phone call. After reading the book, I wasn't prepared to make any judgments on my relationship with Dirk, but I did know one thing: I was one-down with my dog. Wacko did whatever he wanted, and my job was to worry about him. I thought this was so hilarious that when Dirk called, asking me what I thought about the book, I thanked him and told him that it had really helped my relationship with Wacko. He didn't laugh.

A year later, however, we had swapped roles. I had fallen in love with Dirk, but he wasn't so clear about me anymore. I'm not sure how this happened. It could have been poor timing. More likely, he was one of those types who love the chase but not the victory. Whatever the cause, he did say that I had made him suffer so much that first year, he would never pander to another again. Also, like many men in Fairbanks, he had grown a big, scratchy beard (covering his dimples) and gotten himself a recreational dog team. Behind the sled, he turned into Captain Control, barking "gee," "haw," and "let's go." He'd pump a fist in the air if the dogs were running fast, making turns. But one screw-up, and Dirk would yell in their faces. Sometimes, he kicked them. Once, he whacked Cody so hard in the mouth, the poor guy bled for half an hour.

I was confused and wondered if I would have been better off without the new Dirk. But I postponed making a decision, hoping that he would return to his old sweetness as soon as he realized pandering was no longer something he needed to do with us.

Wacko killed his first cat during a low point in my history with Dirk. It was mid-February, and Wacko and I were running together on a quiet road on the outskirts of Fairbanks. At one point, he sprinted into the woods and began barking.

Thinking he was after a squirrel and would come only after he gave up the chase, I didn't call, just waited.

When Wacko finally emerged from the spruce, he carried a limp black cat in his mouth. I still remember the stab of dread in my chest when I saw the body. It felt like an ice cube had gotten stuck between my lungs. I couldn't breathe, and then the coldness traveled to my shoulders, making me shiver.

Wacko had blood all over his face. He was panting hard and hacking.

I took a deep breath. "Give me that," I said, walking toward him. He dropped the cat on the snow and wagged his tail. This was too much. My dog had just killed a cat and was happy about it.

"Go away," I screamed and kneeled, hoping Wacko had just stunned it. But there was no mistaking those opaque eyes, those cloudy marbles. It amazed me that they could lose animation so quickly.

I stood. Wacko half-lay, half-squatted in the snow a little ways off. His ears were pushed back and his chin jutted out, in a gesture of submission. He knew he had done something wrong, and for a second I actually felt sorry for him. Then, horrified that I could feel sympathy for my dog, the murderer, I shook off the feeling.

I decided I had to find and tell the owner. But first, I ran Wacko home--otherwise, no matter how much I hissed or cursed, he would follow me to right to the owner's doorstep. As I jogged, I wondered how I was going to break the news to whomever owned the cat. It was going to be a huge, sad, lingering scene. My only hope was that the cat belonged to some teenage kid who liked to rubberband its ears together or decorate the fur with bits of velcro. Yes, a mercy killing would be nice, I thought.

When I returned the neighborhood, I left the cat where it was and knocked on the door of the first house I came to. An ancient woman appeared. She had wrinkles everywhere, on her neck, on her hands, on her eyelids. Her whole body shook as if she were made of paper and a tiny breeze was blowing on her. I guessed she had Parkinson's Disease.

Oh God, please don't let it be her, I said to myself.

"Uh, you don't have a black cat, by any chance?" I asked.

"What?" she shouted. It appeared she was also hard of hearing, and I almost left right there. This woman obviously had a full cup of suffering. But I repeated the question, loudly, and she said, "Black? You mean Crunchy?"

That's when I started crying. Crunchy!

"What's the matter?" she shouted.

"My dog ... Crunchy." I couldn't quite say it, but she got the idea. She took me inside and sat me at her kitchen table. Sitting tall in a high-backed chair, she didn't look at

me but past me, as if miles or years away.

“I’m sorry,” I finally said.

She shrugged. “I’m ninety,” she shouted. “I’ve had lots of dogs and cats in my life.”

I stopped crying. It was going to be okay, maybe. She got up and made some tea. When she shakingly delivered the cup, half of the drink lost in the saucer, she shouted, “I have Parkinson’s Disease.”

I nodded. I knew this, but her bluntness unnerved me. I wanted to say “I’m sorry” again--not just for the cat but for all her troubles. But she seemed too dignified for that kind of fussing, so I refrained.

“Come again,” she yelled when I finally left, as if I’d been paying a social visit.

It was dark outside, and I left the cat on her car like she instructed me to. She said her son would deal with it the next time he visited. The near full moon hung low in the sky. An amber light slanted across a snowy field, broadcasting crystals that looked like tiny sea anemones. Birch with pale gold, flaking bark dotted the snowscape. Long, crisp black shadows streamed from each tree, making the forest appear doubly dense. By the time I arrived home, I felt drained, but not as distraught as I had been earlier. Wacko ran out of his doghouse and did a little paw dance. I almost let him off the chain but an image of the old lady shaking in her rocking chair persuaded me to leave him where he was.

Two hours later, about to go to bed, I broke down and brought him inside. The temperature had dropped to thirty below zero, and he wasn't used to sleeping outside when it was that cold.

Dirk arrived minutes later. When I told him what happened, his eyebrows merged and he said with a pinched tone, “Why is Wacko inside on the couch instead of outside on a chain?”

Too late I realized I should have held my tongue. Dirk and Wacko had a history of not getting along. Whenever Dirk hooked Wacko up to his team, my dog ran with his tail up, which I took as a good sign: he was having fun, yippee. But according to musher wisdom, this meant that he wasn’t trying hard enough. Also, Wacko’s tug line was always slightly loose--proof that he was sneaky and knew how to make it look like he was pulling

without really pulling. Wacko frequently helped himself to cookies and butter and other food left on the table. Once, he walked right up to Dirk's backpack and pissed on it, which was strange behavior for Wacko who for all his problems, had grasped at an early age the complexities of pissing laws (outside--okay, inside--not good). Dirk/Wacko interactions often resulted in Dirk cursing my dog and long periods of Wacko being chained-up. Despite these disciplinary measures, however, Wacko never seemed to improve. Whenever I mentioned this fact to Dirk, he'd snap, "I'm not the one who spoiled that dog during his formative months."

"Why isn't Wacko outside on the chain?" Dirk asked again, louder.

"He was," I said.

"For how long? Five minutes?" Dirk slammed a fist on the table. "This is incredible, Marie."

He stomped over to Wacko who yelped. "I haven't even touched you yet, you big Simp," he said, grabbing his collar and dragging him across the floor and out the door. When Dirk returned, he was breathing hard. I couldn't tell whether it was from the exertion or a great deal of anger.

"Four hours," I said. I had done some calculating while Dirk took Wacko outside.

"He was on the chain for four hours."

"What else?" he asked.

"Um. What else what?"

"Did you do anything else that might be construed as discipline?"

"Yes. No. Sort of," I said. For some reason, I couldn't remember what I had done. Then it came back to me. I had shouted with utmost sincerity at Wacko to go away. "Yes," I said.

"Well what was it: yes or no?"

"I said yes, you Asshole." I was suddenly angry.

Dirk screwed up his eyes. "I'm not an asshole."

I shrugged, regretting that the word had come up.

"I'm not an asshole," Dirk repeated, louder this time. I didn't like his tone so of course I had to dispute him whereupon we got into a highly technical and very loud debate

on the definition of an asshole.

Finally, Dirk yelled, "Wanna know who's the asshole? Wacko."

"Wacko?" I laughed. I couldn't help it. "Dogs can't be assholes," I said. "Assholes have to have a consciousness. Wacko's just being a dog."

"Marie, ugh." Dirk covered his face with his hands. He was pretty angry, I could tell. When Dirk couldn't find the words, it was a bad sign. He lifted his head, dragging his fingers down his cheeks. "How many times have I heard that? Get a grip. You have no control over that dog. He sleeps on your bed when he wants. He eats your chocolate chip cookies when he wants. Now he's munching cats when he wants. I call that being an asshole, but if you don't, then at least know this: your dog doesn't respect you."

He said this last part slowly as if delivering dire news. But all I could think was: Respect? It wasn't my backpack that Wacko pissed on. I almost said this but let it go. I was exhausted.

"I'm going to bed," I said.

"Come on. It was just getting good."

I didn't say anything.

"All right," he yelled. "Don't answer me and don't take responsibility for your dog's delinquency. One thing's for sure though: you are the worst mother in the world. I never want to have kids with you."

With that, he grabbed his coat and left, slamming the door behind him. I listened to his car chug and whine before starting in the thirty below cold. It rumbled down the road into silence. I went to the couch, sat cross-legged, and tried not to let these last words get to me. But it was impossible. Dirk knew where it hurt. My kid lust was no big secret. He had seen me at parties, the only adult in the kids' corner, helping put together Lego houses and battleships. Once in line at the movies, he caught me ogling the very pregnant woman in front of me. "It's not nice to stare," he whispered. Startled, I said, "I didn't even know I was staring." We sometimes talked about my desire to have kids, though only as a curiosity, never in relation to us as a couple or our future. In fact, the only future we ever discussed involved plans for the weekend, which made Dirk's comment--that he never wanted to have kids with me--seem even more harsh.

My impulse was to rebel: get a cartful of cats from the pound and let Wacko at them. But I could see how this might be a little childish. Besides, Dirk was right. Wacko didn't respect me. I had not taken my mothering duties very seriously. I hadn't learned to say no. I was just as soft and pliable as my parents. Now a cat was dead and an old woman, sad.

It was time to change. From now on, I would treat Wacko with firmness, even severity, if need be. The first thing I did was leave Wacko on the chain overnight. I even refused to stick my head out the door and wish him good night.

The next day, I reinstalled the "come" lessons, which seemed silly actually since Wacko was by now well-versed in the exercise, coming directly when called, wagging his tail the whole time and snarffing up the kibble when I presented my palm. But let a squirrel rattle or a fellow dog appear and Wacko would jerk the leash out of my hand and vanish before I knew what had happened. The dog rearing book which I resurrected from a box said that I should by no means let Wacko do this. If he took off, I was supposed to chase him down--a mystifying prospect since my two legs couldn't possibly compete against his four. Plus, as soon as I started running after him, he thought we were playing a game and would sit, swishing his tail across the snow, his lips curled in a smile, until I was almost able to touch him. Then, he'd dart away and race around me a few times, finally stopping again to give me another chance at tagging him.

Whenever we went outside, now, I had him on a leash. From the cabin to the car, this worked okay. But when I took him for a run, despite Dave's insistence that he pulled like a slouch, Wacko worked his big haunches on the end of my leash. The constant pull would leave my underarm sore for hours after a run. On icy roads or trails, he was especially difficult, and often I found myself skidding on my belly while he dove after some particularly enticing smell or sight. The most common comment I received from the people we passed was, "who's taking who for a run?"

As the months passed, and the memory of the dead cat and that awful night faded, so did my resolve to discipline Wacko. Not only did I begrudge being constantly tethered to a maniac, but I felt sorry for him, tied up all the time, with no more freedom than a criminal. He needed to stretch his legs, work his lungs, and explore foxholes, rabbit

tracks, and other dog pleasures. Gradually, I took him off the leash. First, I let him run to the car by himself. Then he went on short walks, unleashed. Pretty soon, he was trotting beside me on our runs, as free as a bee.

A year later, Wacko killed his second cat. It was the same scenario as before. We were running together one fall afternoon. The birch and aspen leaves had just turned a warm, weightless yellow, as if they'd float up not down when severed from the tree. Wacko jogged behind me when, suddenly, he was in the bushes, killing another cat. This time, it went better, depending on whom you talk to: me or the cat owner. Of course, I felt horrible and irresponsible and cried, but not with the same intensity as last time. You'd think I would have felt worse, it being the second cat death. But the last batch of failed discipline lessons had given me a sense of futility about my mothering skills. I was a hopeless softie. I didn't like it, but that's the way I was.

The biggest problem was that I knew the owner. She was famous, kind of. She worked for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game as a biologist. The state was currently working on a controversial program to kill wolves in order to increase moose and caribou populations for hunters, and her name appeared all over the paper. Also, by unfortunate coincidence, she worked with Dirk--though this fact shouldn't have troubled me too much since he and I were now just an awful memory. We had finally called it quits several months earlier and were not talking. I wished him great misfortune, starting with a lifetime of unmanageable dog teams.

Julia, the biologist, cried and cried when I delivered the bad news. When she calmed down, she made me describe everything in detail and was particularly worried that her cat had undergone a lot of pain. At least, I could tell her the end had come quickly. When I left, she actually thanked me for my honesty. "Most people would have split the scene," she said. I had to admit, this made me feel almost noble. My dog may kill cats, I told myself, but at least I face the music.

Two years passed. I began seeing a man named Tony. We had been old friends until a racy date happened to us. We didn't even know it was a date at the time. We were

just looking for something to do on a cold February evening and wound up taking his snowmachine to a public cabin thirty miles north of Fairbanks and spending the night. Once we arrived and got the wood stove going and each shed fifteen pounds of warm weather gear, Tony brought out the wine (which should have been my first clue that this was not just a casual evening between friends). At some point, while he was rambling about salmon fishing, I think, I found myself unable to concentrate on his words. His cheeks burned pink from the two hour snowmachine ride. Relieved of his three hats, his hair jutted from his scalp at bold angles. He had this long, graceful nose. I kept thinking, "this guy is beautiful." At the time, I blamed my crush on the half bottle of cheap red wine inside me. Later, however, when I sobered up, and much later, when Tony and I started spending a lot of time together, this impression stayed.

Of course, some things bothered me. He took forever to make a decision on anything, such as whether to have second cup of coffee in the morning. And he told the same bad jokes over and over again. But, he loved to invent things. My favorite was the travel alarm clock velcroed to the inside of his balaclava which he wore to bed every night--nothing else would awaken him. He waved to people he didn't know while driving down the highway in his beat-up convertible Karmann Ghia. Plus, he drove a snowmachine, not a dog team--a fact I took special comfort in. I thought a person would have to try pretty hard to have control issues with an inanimate object.

Not least of all, he loved Wacko almost as much as I did. "You're a dog and a half," he'd cry, wrapping his arms around Wacko's neck. Whenever he went grocery shopping, he always bought dog treats like cow hooves or pig ears. In his cabin, next to a photo of me heavily clad in a thousand winter layers, he tacked one of him and Wacko, faces pressed together.

During a weekend in late March, Tony and I were again staying at one of the public cabins north of Fairbanks. I went for a morning ski and took Wacko with me. Fresh wolverine tracks merged with old rabbit and caribou prints on the trail, but I didn't think much of it until sometime later when I no longer heard the scuttle of Wacko's paws on the snow behind me. He had taken off once again. I backtracked and called, then skied in the direction I had been heading, constantly yelling his name. By the time I arrived back at the

cabin, an hour later, I was frantic. Wacko wasn't usually gone this long. Here, in the mountains, anything could have gotten him: moose, wolves, wolverines, rotten ice.

In the cabin, Tony was lying on his sleeping bag, reading a tool catalog. When I told him about Wacko he jumped to the floor and said, "Oh no! We have to go find him." "But he could be anywhere."

"Well, we can't just sit here," he said, pulling on his jacket.

There was a scratch at the door.

"It's him!" Tony cried and pulled on the handle. Sure enough, there stood Wacko, foam rimming his lips, his tail swaying back and forth.

"You came home," Tony cried. He grabbed the tin of chocolate chip cookies on the table and poured the entire contents on the floor. "Here, Wacko. Eat up."

As I watched Tony lovingly watch my dog inhale a mound of cookies, I thought: this is the guy for me.

Things were going so well for Tony and me that later in the summer when Wacko killed his third cat, I had to admit I worried more about telling Tony the news than I did the owner. Even though Tony adored Wacko and knew everything about his sordid past, I worried he might not be able to handle a sordidness in the present tense. Plus, the cat appeared to belong to Tony's next door neighbors, an older couple who spent a lot of time lounging on their porch and tending to their garden. I could only imagine a very pissed-off boyfriend.

It was a July evening, the thermometer pushing eighty degrees. Bushels of green leaves covered the cottonwood and birch, dragging slender branches groundwards. Everywhere was a sweet, minty scent. After chaining Wacko up, I decided to tell the owners first--get the easy part over with. But a few minutes of knocking at their door told me they were not home. So I put the cat in the bushes, where they wouldn't see it first thing when they came back, and walked the all-too-brief fifty feet home.

Tony met me in the driveway, eating a carrot. "You boss called. Where have you been?"

"At the neighbors, delivering a dead cat," I said. Tact was always the first to go

when I was nervous.

He stopped chewing. "Oh no."

"Oh yes."

"What did they say?"

"They weren't home," I said, my voice breaking a little.

Tony put an arm around my shoulder and held the carrot in front of my mouth.

"Wanna bite? It'll cheer you up."

"No!" I said, laughing and pushing it away. "You mean, you're not mad at me?"

"Mad?" There was genuine surprise in his voice. "Whatever for?"

"Well--" I started, then stopped. All of a sudden, I couldn't explain why he might have reason to be angry or why I might have reason to feel the way I did: feckless and disgraced. Wacko killed cats, yes. It was a problem, yes. But I was wrong to take so much responsibility for his behavior. I really was trying to be the best parent I knew how to be.

All that evening and the following morning, I kept checking on the neighbors. By Saturday afternoon, they still hadn't returned and I figured they had left for the weekend. This presented a problem. Their cat was not going to keep for long at eighty degrees, but I didn't want to bury it for fear that the couple, like Julia, the biologist, might want to see it one last time. With Tony's permission, I stuck the carcass in his freezer, wrapped in a plastic bag of course. On Monday evening when spying a car in the neighbor's driveway, I took a deep breath and went to deliver the bad news. The couple of course was upset, but no--they didn't want to see their pet. They said good-bye and that was that (except for the fact that I forgot about the cat and then one day in September the power went out, thawing everything in the freezer).

Over two years have passed since Wacko's last cat attack. I won't say he's cured by any means, but he is getting old and fat. His dog food bag no longer carries a picture of a charging Husky but one with a Golden Retriever, sitting, with big bags under his eyes. On our runs, Wacko rarely disappears into the woods anymore and waddles with his belly low to the ground either right in front of me or right behind. This makes me sad, and in spite of myself, I find myself yearning for the good old days when he used to disobey me.

Just this past summer, Tony and I got engaged. With our wedding just two months away, the topic of kids occasionally comes up. Though we have trouble agreeing on when to have them or how many we want or how to fit them into our careers, we do have consensus on one thing: as total pushovers, we could stand some toughening up. I think we need to get another dog to practice on. Tony's all for it. In fact, we're planning a visit to the pound next week. Wacko of course won't be able to enter the facilities, but he will be waiting in the car and get to have final say over the choice of his new sibling. I want a Chocolate Lab or a Newfoundland, a less feral species than a Husky, one whose interest in cats should in theory be friendlier than Wacko's. And this time around, I'm going to be firm. I'm going to say no and mean it. I'm going to lay down the law.

Cloudberry

I sit on a smooth log, its bottom half rotting into moss and grass. At my feet, a small fire pops and sputters and sends a smell like old leather. Spruce trees with furrowed bark and keg-wide trunks surround me. Branches touch and weave, their needles a pointillistic fog of silver and dark green.

I'm reading a story by Jack London called "The Love the Life," a wilderness soap opera, containing lines like, "back and forth across the desolation drifted the howls, weaving the very air into a fabric of menace," and just about the gamut of disasters. Two miners in the Canadian arctic get lost, run out of ammunition, and start to starve. One twists an ankle and is promptly abandoned by his partner. The injured man wanders helplessly about the tundra encountering ornery bears, ornery moose, having terrible hallucinations, and failing at finding meat to eat. Every so often, he withdraws a pouch from his knapsack and dumps a bit of gold onto the ground. It's pretty easy to see where the story is heading (even if we didn't have the title to help us): does the guy love the gold more than his life?

Just when I think London has pushed the limits of melodrama, a sick wolf enters the scene. He is wheezing and crawling after the man who by now is so weak, he is crawling and wheezing too. At this point, the man gets rid of the last of his gold. Only then does he catch sight of the Arctic Ocean and, on it, a ship. As he drags his body toward the boat, he passes a pile of human bones. They belonged to his buddy who clearly did not love life enough, as indicated by the stuffed pouch of gold lying in the grass nearby. Not far from the boat, the wolf attacks the man. A slow-motion struggle involving more wheezing and crawling ensues. The man just wins, just barely, and is soon rescued.

I consider toying the paperback into the fire when I am done. London views wilderness as the opponent, merciless and hostile, an attitude I see everywhere, in magazine articles which tout lines like "then the bear crunched into my skull," and in friends who like to do first ascents of mountains, first descents of rivers, who cultivate scars. When I spend time in the woods, I like to look for the opposite experience, for berry picking adventures and gazing for long moments at things that stay still: mountains, lichen

on boulders, a seismic tree-line.

Today, I am planning a calm hike in Tobin Valley, an area I know better than any other in Alaska's Brooks Range. Several years ago, I spent twelve months in this drainage with my boyfriend, Dave. We lived in a cabin on the north shore of Wild Lake, the largest of dozens of lakes in the valley. We had no electricity or means of communication with the rest of the world. When we weren't reading or baking bread or keeping the woodstove going, we were outside, exploring. By the end of that year, I had memorized the smallest features of the valley. One of the tiny creeks behind the cabin stayed open all winter long. Where the valley narrowed, in the middle of a broad meadow, lay the bleached ribs and leg bones of a caribou. A rock shaped like a champagne bottle marked the half-way point between the cabin and Echo Peak--one of my staple hikes.

Every August since that first year, Dave and I have come back to Tobin Valley for a week or two. This summer, Dave, unfortunately, has a new boss who doesn't seem to understand the word, vacation. So I am here alone, taking in Tobin for the both of us. Yesterday evening, the pilot dropped me off on the lake, and rather than stay at the cabin, I hiked three miles upvalley to this spot, a favorite of mine. Here, the valley closes in. Brush and spruce grow thinly, in small congregations, while muskeg takes over in a sloppy, tangled carpet. Tobin Creek at this point consists of three quiet streams; I am camped on the west fork just upstream of the trio's convergence. On my left, the creek swings my direction, then away: a boomerang of clear water running over polished rocks.

As Dave and I have done many times before, I will camp a few days at this spot, exploring upper Tobin, before finishing the rest of my vacation at the cabin. Today, I plan to hike the long, low ridge separating Tobin from Flat Creek, a place I have never been before. Rising just above tree-line, its flattened top looks made for walking. I want to catch birdly views of both Tobin and Flat Creek. Plus, I want to hike along the ridge to its furthest point and, if possible, gain a view of the next valley north, the Tinyaguk, a place I have always been enchanted with, if only for its name, which reminds me of a lullaby.

The flame has left my campfire. Now, bits of charcoal glow a soft, tricky orange like nightlights. I don't feed it--it is time to get going. I walk to the creek and wash and double wash the pot and bowl I have used for breakfast, trying to make them bear-safe.

The air is August-cool and the near-freezing water on my hands sends shivers from my tailbone to my skull. In a nook in a tree about hundred feet from camp, I stash my food and other smelly items. I check my pack for day-hike necessities--warm layers, raingear, matches, fire starter, water bottle, and lunch--then swing it onto my back and set off.

I walk along Tobin Creek, departing from its shady bank when it bends south. Almost immediately, I come to a meadow, covered in sedge and grass, everything autumn-gold. Though a lovely sight, it doesn't fool me. A certain lumpiness characterizes the field, as if it consists of hundreds of haystacks set side by side. These lumps, I know, are tussocks.

My good friend and long-time wilderness guide, Ron Yarnell, has a map of the Brooks Range on a wall in his shop. The wall is huge, the size of a small movie screen, and the map takes up every spare inch. I love that huge map because it conveys well the immensity of the Brooks Range, the band of mountains which arc across the width of Alaska from the Chukchi Sea to the Canadian Border. With black ink, Ron has dotted out routes--ones he's done, ones he would like to do, easy routes, black diamond routes. The map looks like a crazy ant trail. I have spent hours standing on the counter which sits beneath the map, planning at eye-level new trips, new adventures.

Ron has left a significant area in the middle of the map blank. This is because of one thing: tussocks. Tussocks are clumps of dirt from which grow grass and sedge and sometimes berry bushes. They are caused by permafrost--frozen soil--a common feature in northern latitudes where the temperature is sub-zero for a good part of the year. In the summer, the top few feet of permafrost melts, creating swampcountry, a zone of ecological sterility, where few if any plants can sink roots. In the winter, the swamp freezes again. Over the years, the repeated action of melting and freezing causes dirt to heave up into mounds ranging from the size and shape of upright watermelons to mega-backpacks. Because they rise a safe distance above the saturated soil, these mounds are able to support some plant life. Besides grasses and berries, they can grow wildflowers like lupine, arctic poppy, and glacier avons.

Tussocks come in fields, often vast fields, acres and acres of bumpy terrain. Hiking

across a tussock field is a test of patience. You can try to hop from hillock to hillock but tussocks are like mop heads--most of their bulk is fluffy material. More often than not, their grassy tops buckle under your weight and send you flying, often twisting an ankle. You can try to step in between each mound, but not only does the permafrost muck want to grab your foot and never let go, it also inevitably oozes up over the top of your boots, soaking your feet. Once, I stepped between two ordinary-looking tussocks and found myself waist-deep in ice cold water. Finally, lifting your legs over a succession of thigh-high obstacles is like doing a crude form of the can-can. Pretty quickly, your muscles start to burn.

Though tussocks permeate the Brooks Range, they are particularly monstrous in the central part of the chain, the area my friend Ron Yarnell has left blank, the area I am now hiking. I have cried twice in my life while backpacking, and one of these times occurred in a nearby valley after I tripped and landed for the umpteenth time with a tussock in my belly and a loaded pack on my back. Twenty years ago, at the end of a month-long hike in the Brooks Range, Ron entered Tobin Valley from the north and grew so tired of stumbling over disastrous terrain, he waded into Tobin Creek and splash-walked the six meandering miles to Wild Lake, his final destination.

The meadow I now have to cross is moderately-sized; the end is actually in sight, a half a mile away where the valley lifts upward, forming the base of the ridge I want to hike. Still, I sigh in way of a pep talk, then tighten the armstraps and belt of my backpack. The tussocks sag and slough off parts when I land on them. I wobble and flail my arms. I can't even stop to regain my balance, the tufts are so tippy. The best thing to do is keep on moving. Soon, my breath grows raspy, and my back is wet where it touches my backpack.

Finally, I begin ascending. The tussocks disappear, replaced by a mat of moss and grass and low shrubs. Though less saturated here than in the lowlands, the soil is still fairly wet and spongy, and my shins disappear into the vegetation every time I step. It feels like I'm walking on a waterbed. Blueberries, the size of grapes, dangle from low bushes. I scoop a handful and deliver it to my mouth. The berries are sweet, juicy, and offer a hint of red wine. Perfect. I pick and eat. When full, ready for more hiking, I reach for my bear spray.

It's not there. I turn a full circle then retrace my movement through the blueberry patch. The canister is nowhere. Think, I tell myself, where did you last have it? Then, I remember. I left it at camp, right by the fire.

I am not amused. The Brooks Range is the size of California, yet it has precisely one road running through it and only a handful of villages. That leaves a lot of intact wilderness for bears--both grizzly and black bear--to thrive in. According to one scientific report, the nearest grizzly to me right now is roughly one hundred and sixty miles away and the nearest black bear, very roughly, eighty. But these figures seem pretty low, making me think that bears have learned the scent of tranquilizer guns and radio collars and know when to run when the smell gets too strong. Or more likely, the study ignores that much of the Brooks Range is too rocky and devegetated to support much wildlife, and bears will concentrate in the lush valleys and ridgetops, the places I like to travel. In my experience, a forty mile trek in the Brooks Range yields at least one bear and often three or four. One extraordinary week, while on a float trip on the Alatna River, I saw twenty three bears, seven of which were grizzlies and the rest, black. Of course, our scope accounted for half these sightings. Magnified one hundred times, the bears remained fuzzy-brown dots moving against fuzzy-green backgrounds. While not doing much for my adrenalin count, they nevertheless drove home the point: the parts of the Brooks Range I visit are crawling with bears.

Though grizzly and black bear don't prey on humans and nine times out of ten will run away if encountering me, I still like to carry bear spray, which is essentially a high-powered, very caustic form of mace. I consider retrieving the canister from camp, but one look at that mulpy mess of tussocks I have just crossed and I know I don't want to recross it and then slog across it yet a third time. So, I continue on my way, up the springy slope. The sun is bright but not warm, since winter comes early to the Brooks Range. Already, yellow crescents paint the edges of willow leaves. The baby birch has turned a shimmery-pink, like a rose petal seen through a dew drop. It is my favorite color of autumn, lasting for three days before deepening to crimson.

The willows grow bushier, taller--dense enough now to hide bears. As I approach them, I stop and give a loud yell. The worst thing to do is sneak up on a bear. Frightened

bears will defend themselves, as a grizzly demonstrated a few years ago when surprised by a group of too-quiet hikers. She batted an arm at the first person she saw, then ran away. The struck man died instantly while the other two survived, unscathed.

I step on a twig and it snaps. Behind a young spruce tree comes a sudden noise, an extended, airy snort. I jump, or at least my heart jumps, I cannot tell. Three grouse fly heavily through the air and land on separate branches of the spruce. Their feathers tremble, a kaleidoscope of cream, rust, and brown.

I sigh and move on. The spruce grow taller and more populous, forcing me to slow to a geriatric pace. With each tree capable of concealing a bear, there are too many places to look. It's like trying to cross a six way intersection. My head turns right, then left, then right again.

I yell constantly, Oh Bear! The ground becomes sidewalk-hard--a treat in the Brooks Range. This south-facing slope must be free of permafrost. The trees grow larger, their trunks as round as automobile tires, their tops way out of sight. It is dark in here, although splinters of light enter the canopy and tinsel up the willow leaves, branches, the ground. The only underbrush is equisetem--another rarity since forests this old are usually choked with alder and willow. Finger paint-green, the reed-like plants cover the forest floor like suburban lawn. They are spindley-thin and feel like feathers against my shins.

Suddenly, the trees end. So does the brush. I am totally in the open. I climb one hundred feet up a hard-packed gravel slope until it levels out and I reach the ridgetop. The view is horizontal and down. There is no up anymore. Three miles north, Tobin Valley dead-ends in a bowl. Three miles the other way lies Wild Lake, a giant blue easel. Directly below me is a broad golden field, full of steely glints--permafrost puddles, big ones, if I can see them from this altitude. Far to the west, a massive limestone dome rises from a high tundra plain. I have seen this rock a few times before and each time, I wonder about the way it lifts so suddenly from the flatness as if caught in a strong, sucking updraft. Sometimes, Dahl sheep feed on the grass at the base of the Fingernail, which is what Dave and I sometimes call it. I lift the binoculars to my eyes but no animals appear in the lens.

Out of the brush and the trees, I feel safer now. The ridgetop is level as Nevada, exposed. My line of sight has expanded by a factor of ten, at least. If a bear were up here,

I'd probably see it long before it could startle me or vice versa. A feeling like the after-thrill of jumping off the high-dive goes through me. I have taken a risk and done fine, so far. I like traveling unarmed, I decide. With bear spray, I'd be hiking boldly, not fully alert to the subtle changes in my environment. Without it, I am forced to walk carefully and to notice the microscopic things like the shake of a willow branch in a breeze, an extra-wide spruce stump, a splash of sunlight on the soil in a shadowy den of trees. It's like I have taken off my sunglasses and the world has gone from sepia-washed to Kodiak-clarity.

I follow a faint caribou trail which runs through zones of grass then gravel then grass again. The ground could not be harder. Only a few stray boulders require fancy foot work. Most of the time, I keep an eye on Flat Creek. It has the wrong name--that's for sure. I think this everytime I see it. It is full of hills, morainal formations, like many of the valleys in the southern edge of the Brooks Range, where twenty thousand years ago during the last ice age, northern glaciers fizzled out, unable to push further south into the arid climate of the interior of the state, which was the only area on the continent to remain free of ice during that period. Where they faded out, the glaciers deposited the reams of rocks they had collected over their thousands of years of scouring-travel. Flat Creek looks like goblin land with all its eskers and terraces. Lakes and ponds fill the pockets between the hills; wormy streams connect them. Dave and I have explored the valley twice, both times during the winter when the wind howled across Flat Creek's low northern shoulder, erasing our snowshoe tracks within minutes.

I crest a knoll and stop at the sight below me. The hillside is splattered orange. Cloudberries? I move closer. Sure enough, there's no mistaking these berries which look like swollen, butter-dipped raspberries. Or if you like them as much as I do, they resemble clouds, the kind you see on summer days, all piled-up and billowy, yet stained the most fantastic shades of apricot, poppy, and when really ripe crayon-orange. Though abundant in Alaska's wet, coastal regions, cloudberries are rare in the interior of the state which receives an average of ten inches of precipitation per year and thus qualifies as a desert ecosystem. I have never before seen such a large crop in one place.

I drop to my knees and bring a berry to my lips. No teeth are necessary. I crush it between my tongue and roof of my mouth. It releases a creamy, tangy taste, like baked

pippin apples covered in ice cream. Juice travels into all parts of my mouth then disappears as if absorbed by my skin.

Fifteen minutes later, my belly will not accept another berry. The hillside, however, is still full of orange. It feels like sacrilege to leave unpicked the best cloudberry patch I have ever found. I dig my water bottle out of my pack, dump the water, and fill it with berries. The day is cool anyway. If I have to, I'll rely on berry juice to quench my thirst.

I continue northward. The ridge begins sloping downward. Spurts of spongy tundra occasionally interrupt hard ground. Below me, to the west, the trees and shrubs in Tobin Creek peter out altogether, giving way to a hideous tussock-scape. Once, down there, I startled a wolverine and watched for at least ten minutes while it ran up a shallow incline with a heavy, one-two-three lope, almost as if one of its back legs was hurt. Its coat was as gorgeous as everyone raves about: a shock of brown fur with a crisp white collar in the middle of it.

At last, I make it to a pile of boulders overlooking the Tinayguk. I sit on a flat slab and enjoy my new view. Used to the smallness of Tobin and Flat Creek, I can't help thinking that everything about the Tinayguk Valley looks big: the wide, rock-strewn river, the meadows which roll on and on, even the white spruce trees clogging the river's perimeters. I root around my pack for lunch, bannock, a thick pancake with raisins thrown in. It is soggy on the inside, burnt on the outside--its usual condition when fried in a skillet over an open flame.

When I am finished, I stroll over to the west lip of the ridge to get a look into Tobin from this far-north vantage point. Two or three hundred feet down, where a patch of willow grows, is a black something. It's probably a dark opening in the shrubbery or maybe a rock, I think. But just to be sure, I look through my binoculars. The shape moves and instantly, before the snout and scuffling body come into focus, I know I'm looking at a black bear.

I'm not overly fond of black bears. Last summer, while I was backpacking with several friends in the Arrigetch Valley, a black bear stole some of our food, then wouldn't leave us alone for the next eighteen hours. He was wily, hid in the brush, and emerged whenever we turned our backs on him. As soon as we started cooking meals or reading

books or even squatting to piss, there he'd come, forcing us to throw rocks and scream bloodpumping-loud until he returned to his hiding spot. At one point, after waiting for five hours for him to reappear from behind his willow thicket, I decided he was gone for good and went to bed. Fifteen minutes later, he was strolling into camp, head-lowered, honing in on the food bags.

I don't know why people are more scared of grizzlies than black bears. True, grizzlies in the Brooks Range weigh twice as much as black bears. However, both are big enough to kill you. And in my opinion, black bears are twerps, more likely than grizzlies to mess with you. For one, they have been known to actually munch on people they kill whereas grizzlies generally just maul and run. Also, stories about black bears tend to border on the bizarre. My friend Ron Yarnell once witnessed two black bear cubs tearing his tent to pieces while the sow sat nearby and watched. Gun shots and fire crackers would not dispel the trio. The only thing Ron could think to do was act crazier than the bears. He banged on pots, hollered and shrieked and finally charged them. They did what appeared to be a double-take, then scrambled off.

A biologist I know claims my bear phobia is unsupported by science. He does offer, however, some relevant information: black bears have no defensive-aggressive responses, only predatory ones. That is, they defend themselves by running away, not by attacking. So when a black bear approaches, you know that he wants something. If attacked by a black bear, you should fight back. Playing dead does not work. Grizzlies on the other hand have both defensive-aggressive and predatory responses. That is, if frightened or unsure of the species you belong to, they often run toward you in what is known as a false charge. Usually, once they determine you are not prey, they will turn around. I've never been false-charged before, but I've heard that the bear rebounds as if hitting a wall. If a grizzly actually attacks you, it is a good idea to go as limp as is humanly possible with the claws of a six hundred pound predator on your flesh.

I keep the binoculars pressed to my eyes. As long as the bear stays put, I feel safe. I tell myself that black bears are forest dwellers and this guy has a species-driven interest in remaining where he is. But then he turns my direction, freezes briefly, and hurries uphill, disappearing into a gully. I catch my breath and jog a few feet forward, attempting to gain

an angle on him. But he's gone. Suddenly, I feel like I'm trying to breathe under water, a choking, which-way-is-up feeling. All I know is that I don't have my bear spray or so much as a stick with which to defend myself, and the bear is heading this direction. I may not be the reason for his ascent, but I swear he looked at me before vanishing into the gully. If he does top the ridge, at the worst, he'll charge me, and I'll be cornered on the dead-end of it. At best, if interested in other ridgetop pleasures, he'll block my way home. I'll be forced to descend into either Flat Creek or Tobin and hike back to camp through miles of Amazon tussocks and dense woods without bear spray.

The bottom line is that I don't like my position on the ridge. Impulsively, knowing that the worst thing to do around a predator is run, I run. I want to be on the other side of the bear if and when he summits the ridge. My feet in heavy boots feel lethargic. My pack thuds against my back. A soggy stretch of muskeg sucks at my boots and sends me stumbling onto my hands. I push myself up and run even before attaining verticality. The minutes pass and I feel like I'm making no progress. I recall a time swimming in the ocean against a strong current. Every third or so swing of my arms, I looked up to see how close the shore was. At one point, I thought I had actually lost ground. That's when I swallowed a bunch of water and felt a small dab of panic rise within me. I remember thinking that if I let panic take over, I wouldn't make it. So I stopped looking up, just plowed slowly toward shore until finally I could see ripples of sand five feet beneath me. I didn't stop swinging my arms, however, until my belly scraped beach.

Every so often, as I run, I detour to the edge of the ridge and scan below for a telling black shape. Unfortunately, the mountainside is so steep, I can see only the first ten feet of decline and then nothing for another 200 feet until the slope tapers off and leafy plants appear. The bear could be anywhere in that blind spot. In addition, a dozen willow-filled ravines run down the ridgetop like row after row of streamers. They all look identical, and I have forgotten which gully holds the bear. He could be three gullies behind me or two ahead.

I pass the cloudberry patch, ignoring the pearly orange rounds which say, "pick me," and summit a small knoll. Here, I pause, breathing hard. I am fairly certain that I am now on the right side of the bear. However, the patch has reminded me that I am carrying a

stash of berries on my back. I wonder, do bears like cloudberry? I have no idea. I know that black bears are omnivorous and eat almost anything including sedges, flowers, willow catkins, fish, rodents, and when possible, caribou and moose calves. I know they like blueberries, cranberries, bearberries, food from dumps, and even strange things like fuel and rubber rafts. In my opinion, cloudberry taste better than any of these things. It is possible that black bears think so too. In all likelihood, I am a walking honey jar.

I dig my water bottle out of my pack, unscrew the cap, and sniff. The berries don't carry a smell as far as I can tell. But then again, my nose pales in comparison to that of a bear which, I'm told, can track prey twenty miles away. One time on the Clear River, wanting to gently dismiss a grizzly who had been foraging close to my camp for thirty minutes, I decided to build a fire. Lacking spruce boughs or anything else to act as tender, I opted for the next best thing: white gas. As soon as I unscrewed the cap on the fuel bottle, the bear 100 feet away lifted his head and took a few steps in my direction. With fumbling fingers, I screwed the cap back on. "Sorry, bear," I whispered and held my breath until he apparently decided I was only temporarily nice-smelling and went back to tugging at roots.

I should probably dump these berries, I think. But, mashed-up from having bounced on my back for awhile, they have become a thick, frothy, golden stew. It's all I can do to not swipe some juice with a finger right now. I vacillate: Dump them. No. Yes. No.

I pour a bit of the mash out. It puddles into the spaces between the grass, then disappears: such a waste. I think about how good the berries would taste tomorrow morning for breakfast, zappy and sweet on my tongue, and I just can't do it. I cannot pour the remainder of my berries out. I recap my water bottle, put it back into my pack, and resume running.

The world jounces with me. Down valley, the glassy, amoebic form of Wild Lake heaves up and down like a kite tossing about in the wind. In the corner of my eye, the Fingernail vibrates as if the sucking-up current which I imagine working on it has finally loosened it from the earth. My feet land lightly on the ground. I pick up my speed. At this moment, I am a fairly safe distance from the spot where I think the black bear would summit the ridge, if he were still heading this way. So I am not sure why I am still

running. In fact, I am probably attracting more danger than less, given that there are no doubt lots of other bears in the neighborhood besides the one I imagine is on my tail who would love to give chase if they spied a one hundred pound, running creature. I suppose I just like leaping over rocks. I like feeling the cool wind against my cheeks and hearing a low, stirring whistle in my ears. I like feeling reckless, as if I've climbed aboard a raft on a swift river and am slamming into boulders, getting caught in hydraulics, running sideways over ledges, and coming through it all, soaked and hysterical with laughter.

At intervals, I check over my shoulder for any sign of the bear. Once, I see a dark shape perched on the ridge about a mile away. It could be a bear peering into Tobin Creek, searching for something, a biped perhaps. Or it could be a rock. The next time I look, I cannot find the shape.

At the southern cusp of the ridge, just before I descend into the forest, I stop. On the ground lies a caribou antler, pinkish-bronze and covered with brown flecks like the skin of a salmon. Its two slender, curving prongs join in the shape of a gaff hook. The stubby, front prong concludes in five miniature tines that curl at the tips like a seized-up hand. The back one broadens at the end and finally divides into a dozen drumstick-length, wavy tines. No teeth have touched the antler, which is remarkable since voles, rodents, and even caribou like to consume the calcium it contains. Just as exceptional, not a single blip of it has been bleached pale by the sun. My guess is, it was dropped pretty recently, this summer, which means it belonged to a female. Male caribou lose their antlers in January while females wait until June or July, after calving.

For a while now, since the year I lived in Tobin Valley, I have been looking for a caribou or moose rack, something to bring back to Fairbanks to remind me of my home in the Brooks Range. All other specimens I've encountered have been bone-white and brittle from lying in the sun or look like they've been sent through a cafeteria of famished, teenage voles. I need no convincing--this is the antler I've been holding out for. I hook it over my shoulder and descend the hard-gravel slope. As I enter the forest, it occurs to me I am tempting the bear-Gods again. Now not only do I smell of caribou, I look like one too. Worse, I resemble a mangled caribou, one with a very small body, no head or rear to speak of, and a funny gait, one which might inspire a bear to think, "mmmm, fast food." Bears

have pretty good eyesight (contrary to popular wisdom which pegs them as near blind) and I'm sure would be able to assess I was not a caribou, if given enough viewing time. However, I would hazard that the concept of "enough viewing time" probably doesn't play a big role when a bear is in the middle of a hungry charge.

For some reason, I don't care whether I may be bear-bait. More to the point, I am suddenly confident no bear will harm me, as if I'm rafting down a river which has turned theatrically wild with car-sized rapids and hulking boulders, but now instead of bashing into things, I've gained oars and am steering with uncanny precision. Water geysers up all around me but I'm not even getting wet.

Though I should be yelling, "bear" now that I've reentered the woods, I can't bring myself to disturb the quiet. Spruce trees as straight and tall as columns stud the slope. Pale green shawls of moss drape from their branches, swinging gently in some breeze that does not reach me. The light is filmy, chlorophyllic. The air smells damp, like evening. Here and there, low-lying cranberry bushes, splashed with green and red berries, grow in circular mats around the bases of trees. The red ones are pickable now but taste much better after the first deep frost, after they turn a purple-red and acquire a wrinkly, deflated look. A ring of rotting birch with broken-off tops and black, hollowed-out interiors sprout whole colonies of turkey tails. The fan-shaped, orange and brown striped fungi range from grandmother-massive to munchkin.

I leave the forest just as the sun slips behind Echo Peak. That means it's about eight pm. These days, true night with a blue-black sky and a full-spread of stars doesn't happen until midnight, so I've got plenty of time to make it back to camp. Near the bottom of the slope, I hit moguls of berry bushes and Labrador tea and sedge--incipient tussocks--and then all too soon I arrive at the valley floor where full-fledged tussocks take over. I stop for a moment to catch my breath. The mounds of grass look more gargantuan and slovenly than they did this morning, barely crossable, and I am suddenly aware of how tired I am. My thighs are sand bags and my feet feel as if my boots have shrunk a few sizes. A sharp pain digs into my back between my shoulder blades, the usual reward for carrying a backpack all day.

As is always required before making a tussock-crossing, I sigh deeply, then leap. I

land on the first wobble of grass. My pack slaps my back, throwing me off balance, and I fall into a muck hole. My boot fills with water. It is not a good start. I climb back onto a tussock and take another jump. The antler which has been steadily drilling into my collar bone for the past hour becomes unbearable. I shift it to the other shoulder. As I push on, the tines block my field of vision and more often than not my feet miss the tussocks entirely, sending me again and again into the mud. In my hobbling progress, I feel like the Hunchback of Tobin Valley.

At last, I reach hard ground where towering spruce and head-high willows appear instantly, as if a line has been drawn between the marsh and the well-drained soil. I follow the dodging course of Tobin Creek. When I reach camp, beeline for the fire pit where the bear cannister sits, ready for action, and plant myself on the fireside log. It feels so good to sit and for the next ten minutes, I sit and think about how good it feels to just sit. Luckily, this morning, I left some tender and kindling by the fire. When rested a bit, I construct a stack of twigs and hold a match beneath it. A flame climbs up the wood lattice, and I add fatter and fatter branches.

When the fire is big enough, I settle back onto the log. My body feels like grains of sand falling through water. I exhale slowly, and more granules drift downward. By now, the sky is full of evening, all dusty purple with a few big stars out. Everything around me--the trees, the tent, the antler--is an inky silhouette. Tobin Creek covers the repertoire of water sounds, glugging and chiming and splashing. The fire feels warm and sloppy on my body, and my mind starts drifting. I think about this afternoon when I tripped trying to run away the bear that may or may not have been on my tail. At that point, I was ready to concede that maybe London was right: wilderness was dramatic and full of menace. But I did lots of things I wasn't supposed to do all day long. I walked unarmed in bear country. I ran when I should not have run. I refused to shout for bears when descending through the forest. If I were a character in one of London's stories, he would have killed me off for sure, for committing any one of these errors. Yet, here I am, with my tired feet and achey back and a champagne warmth inside, feeling the very opposite of dead.

I pull my pack to me and grab my cloudberry. I just want to see how they have fared after a day of locomotion. I uncap the water bottle and lean close to the fire for light.

Inside the container is a thick, golden-orange syrup. I swish my finger in the juice and give a lick. The berries taste even more remarkable now than they did this afternoon on the ridge, richer and tangier, as if all the shaking they have gone through has somehow expunged their impurities and left only a frothy essence. I take another finger dip and then another. Before I know it, the bottle is half-gone. I consider saving the rest for the morning to go with my oatmeal breakfast but cannot resist that goldenness. I tip the container to my lips and drink. The berries go down in a jolt of honey and citrus and whipped cream. I feel like I'm drinking some Tolkien nectar, which I have found in a secret underground pantry only after holding an ancient map up to the moonlight to expose the lunar ink words describing the berries' precise location. In no time, only a few orange strands cling to the inside of the waterbottle. I lick the back of my hand which has a bit of stickiness on it. Then, it's all gone.

Herring Days

No one had gotten much sleep last night, I could tell. The three men sat at the galley table, slumped over steaming coffee mugs, unusually quiet. Their hair stuck out in wild tufts, and bed creases were etched into their faces. Tony eventually rose, toasted some English muffins, and offered the breakfast platter around. Dale shook his head, no.

“I can’t do it either, man,” Lars said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. “Can’t eat before an opening. Too nervous.”

He finished off the mug in one easy swallow, climbed the ladder to the wheelhouse, and turned on the engine. It gave a raspy shriek, like a blender amplified a dozen times and then settled to a bulldozer-decibel hum. Tony and Dale quickly dumped their coffee in the sink and hurried out the door to the deck. I joined Lars in the wheelhouse who stood at the controls, gazing intently out the front window as if watching a television set. When Tony and Dale reached the bow, they flashed a thumbs-up sign. Lars pushed a lever, and the anchor chain wound around a spool, clattering over the thrum of the engine like a jack hammer. With a final boat-echoing knock, the anchor landed on deck, wrapped by streamers of kelp which the men hacked off with their knives. After they locked and tied the anchor in place, they signaled okay to Lars, and trouped to the wheelhouse.

It was seven am. At nine o’clock, herring season would begin for the Raven crew: Lars Isaac, Tony D’Aoust, and Dale Caufield. A three hour opening would take place this morning and another would follow this afternoon, after Alaska Fish and Game officials counted the morning’s catch to make sure the quota had not been reached. If by some stroke of luck, the fleet didn’t top the quota by the end of today, there would be an opening or two tomorrow. After Kodiak, later in the month, there would be fisheries in Cook Inlet and Togiak, as soon as the herring in each location got ready to spawn. And that-- amounting to roughly 24 hours of fishing--would be it for the Raven crew until next year.

I was on the boat at the invitation of Tony, my boyfriend of two years, who was trying to talk me into becoming a fishing team with him. I was a wilderness guide in the

Brooks Range of northern Alaska, a job I loved but one I would have to give up soon since it paid next to nothing. Fishing, with its outdoorsy, adventure-full qualities, especially with Tony whom I wanted to marry, struck me as a great possibility. Also, there was no way I would pass up the opportunity to get a look at the Alaska Peninsula, along which we would travel after we finished with Kodiak, and which was extremely difficult to get to. Far off the road system, plagued by demented winds and rain and snow all days of the year, it attracted few visitors-- no tourist enterprises for sure--only fishermen. And it was supposed to be extraordinarily beautiful. The whole thing, all five hundred miles of it, was covered in volcanoes, many rising 10,000 feet from the sea, and choked with glaciers, snowfields, and outrageous spectacles of rock.

We were on the west side of Kodiak Island, deep inside Uganik Bay where it split into three long triangles. A steady breeze blew. The water was choppy and full of white caps which looked from a distance like handkerchiefs strewn about. In the nearby bay were at least fifty other seine boats. Most had second-story wheelhouses like ours and decks the size of volleyball courts. Massive booms stuck out from the backs of the wheelhouses, sloping upwards, dangling power blocks as big as car engines. There were secondary, skinnier booms and masts on which rested crow's nests and radar boxes. Rigging went everywhere, from the main booms to the masts, from the crow's nests to the bows of the boats, and from the secondary booms to the masts. On the back halves of the decks were great piles of black web, worth two Volkswagon busses as least. Small aluminum skiffs towed behind each seiner.

"Let's take the west arm," Lars said, "I have a good feeling about it." We motored into the narrowest of the three triangles. The land rose gently from the water, saturated with spruce and fir and occasional bunches of cottonwood. More hills lay beyond the first set, the tallest ones capped in snow. Way on back, past glimpses and shadows of hills, rock and snow took over. Three thousand feet high, but full of crazy angles, they struck me as much taller.

We drove slowly, sticking close to shore. Our job for the next two hours until the opening began was to find the biggest patch of herring in the bay and keep on it while fending off all the other boats whose goals were identical to ours. Tony and Dale stood

behind Lars, their eyes glued to the sonar. Every so often, one of them would exclaim, “what’s that?” and Lars would turn to study the screen. “Rock,” they would all decide together, disappointment underscoring their voices.

Several miles south, the bay necked in and the water grew too shallow for the Raven. We made a hairpin turn and cruised up the opposite shoreline. About a dozen or so other boats shared the inlet with us. They moved slowly, often backing up and circling certain areas, and I was reminded of prowling sharks.

After an hour, the spotter pilot, Craig, contacted us on the radio. I was surprised. I hadn’t heard a plane. After scanning the sky, I finally found it, extremely high, a flea lost in the blue.

“How are you doing, Lars?” Craig had a quiet, rhythmic voice, the kind of voice you would expect to find on meditation tapes, not from a man who did what he did during openings--pilot a Supercub while keeping one eye on the fish, one eye on the boats, and whatever was left on the forty other planes sharing his air space.

“There’s no fish,” Lars said.

“Hmm, I see a big pocket of something right across the bay from you,” he said. “It’s just off the bow of that black boat there. Why don’t you go check it out.”

Lars pulled on the throttle. The engine grew loud and shrill like an airplane revving just before take-off. We sped across the water, bouncing on the chop.

When we approached the black boat with the name, Misty Bay, written on its side, Craig spoke up. “Turn a little to your right. Now a little more.”

Suddenly, the Raven stopped. The binoculars and compass and pens on the chart table tumbled to the floor. I slipped off the bunk and landed on my hands in a squat.

“Bingo,” Lars said, looking at the sonar. He glanced at the Misty Bay, fifteen feet away, and lifted an eyebrow. In his early forties, Lars had fished for over twenty years in Alaska and had experience in almost every single fishery--crab, black cod, shrimp, pollock, herring of course, and salmon. He was a large man with a chest the size of a kiddie wading pool and veiny, swollen biceps that always looked ready to deflate or as if they might hurt. His straight brown hair cut in the shape of a bowl and his chubby cheeks made him look young for his age. He looked, especially when he smiled his crooked smile,

like an overgrown teenager. He was a wild man, it was said. And I had seen some of this wildness in the town of Kodiak, where for the last two weeks the crew had prepared the boat for herring season. One night in a bar, only a little looped, he had approached a total stranger, stuck both hands inside a hole in the thigh of this man's jeans, and tore the pant leg all the way down to the bottom. The stranger who was maybe a thumb shorter than Lars, looked down at the rip, up at Lars, and asked, "what'd you do that for?" Lars' wife often remarked it was a wonder he had never been beaten up. If I were the crew of the Misty Bay, the recipient of a lifted eyebrow from Lars, I'd be worried.

"Forty minutes left," Craig said. "You guys try to stay on this fish. It looks like a fifty tonner--definitely the biggest batch I've seen today. I'll be back right before the opening."

Craig had two other boats to spot for: the Order of Magnitude and the Stickine. Both belonged to our combine which was a quasi-communistic arrangement whose members shared a spotter pilot, trade secrets, and most importantly the profits. These days, with the voluminous nets and spotter planes and sonar equipment, seine boats either caught hundreds of tons of herring in one swoop or nothing at all. To compensate for those inevitable miss seasons, most seiners belonged to combines.

Lars drove the boat in a slow, wide circle, his eyes fixed to the sonar screen. If we went too fast, the fish were likely to sound and/or disperse. This was one of the reasons we patrolled the shallows: in deeper waters, they could dive far out of the reach of the net. The Misty Bay shuttled behind us. Once, however, it accelerated, coming tailgating-close to our rear, apparently trying to pass us. Lars growled, jammed the throttle, and the Raven surged ahead. After that, the Misty Sea kept its distance.

The clock read twenty minutes to nine. Lars suddenly muttered, "Damn. Where'd they go?"

The Raven zig-zagged between to the deeper waters where our net wouldn't reach bottom and the shallows, each lap growing in length as the fish remained elusive. A few times, we came so close to shore, I could see bird tracks on the wet sand. Once, we motored several feet from a porous boulder nubbing out of the water like the tip of an iceberg, and I half-expected to hear the scrape of aluminum against rock.

“They’re gone,” he said, sounding mystified.

“Try upbay,” Dale said. “That’s where the current’s going.”

We drove north, continuing to weave wildly, as if drunk. At ten minutes to nine, Tony and Dale donned their rain jackets and took their positions outside--Dale in the skiff and Tony on deck at the hitch which released the skiff. As I understood it, seining worked like this: the net was shaped like a long rectangle. One of the short ends was attached to the Raven; the other, to the skiff. At the appropriate moment when the herring were in position, the Raven and the skiff would separate. Both boats would drive in opposite directions in a circle around the fish.

One of the long sides of the net was made of lead and sunk when it entered the water. The other long side was threaded with big beads of foam and floated. When the Raven and the skiff reunited, the net underwater took the shape of a circular wall. Along the lead line, strung through big metal hoops, was a bright pink line, called the purse line. As soon as possible after reuniting with the skiff, the Raven crew would reel in this line. This in turn would cinch up the bottom of the net, producing a giant underwater sack, hopefully containing fish.

I hunkered down as low as I could on the bunk, while still allowing myself enough eye-room to check out the action. The Misty Bay headed to the other side of the inlet, giving up apparently.

Lars revved the engine. “Dammit. Where’d they go?”

Just then, Craig’s calm voice came on the radio. “You’re at the tail end of them, Lars. They’re in a long streak to the right of the boat.” Coming from above, disseminating the exact information we needed, his voice appeared like the word of god.

Lars steered the boat closer to shore. He looked at the sonar screen and said, “Ahhh.”

I glanced out the window. Three nearby boats lifted their bows out of the water and began speeding toward us, churning up fat wings of water.

“Don’t worry about those guys coming at you,” Craig said. “They’re too far. Just thirty seconds more.”

The boats seemed pretty damn close to me. I closed one eye, unsure if I could

watch. Craig started counting down from ten. A boat edged in front of us. Not good.

“Two. One.”

“Go!” Lars called to the guys on deck.

Tony yanked on the catch, releasing the skiff. The Raven surged forward while the net unfolded with astonishing speed, thumping and clacking over the roar of the engine. I raced to the deck, careful not to step on the wrong side of the many lines. Get a foot caught and you'd be long gone.

The skiff quickly became small as the corkline between us grew, an endless string of white beads. Everywhere I looked, seiners were spitting out cork as if little production factories.

On the radio, Craig yelled, unusually agitated, “Close her up. No wait, wait, wait. Okay, close her up now!”

The net ran out with a heavy clunk. With maddening slowness, the Raven and the skiff drew close and finally met. Our corkline now formed a misshapen ring. All over the bay, circles of corkline bobbed on quakey waves. They looked giant pearl necklaces, a whole fleet of them, as if on display against a fabric of ocean blue.

Dale in the skiff handed his end of the net and purse-line to Tony who hung over the rail, waiting for him. He then drove the skiff to the opposite side of the boat. Here came my one and only assignment. When he got close enough, I threw him a short line which he caught and looped around a bit on the skiff. The Raven couldn't run its propellers for fear of shredding the net, so Dale's job was to tow us away from the beach and other seiners.

Lars rushed down the stairs to the deck. Tony messed with a tangle of lines while Lars started and stopped the hydraulics and shouted things like, “Whoa. Go. Stop. Go. Try the other one!”

Finally, Tony cried, “Okay!” Lars pulled a lever. Purse rings rose out of the water and collected on a long rod, landing with the force of a trap being sprung. Finally, the last ring clanged onboard. The fish, if they were there, couldn't get away now. Everyone went to the gunwale and peered overboard.

We waited. Nothing came to view. Often, the herring stayed deep, below the sunlit stratum of the water. Still, if they were there, we should have been able to see a few black

swimming shapes. We waited some more: nothing.

Lars returned to the valves and turned on the power block. The net lifted slowly out of the water. Tony, and I stacked it as it came down onto the deck. Kelp and star fish and cold gushes of water spilled onto our heads. I was drenched by the time we were done.

“Water haul,” said Tony. “Oh well.”

Dale threw me the tow line and returned the skiff to its spot behind the Raven. Craig had left to help the other combine members. For the remainder of the opening, we had to sleuth out the herring by ourselves. Back and forth across the bay we drove, passing boats in various stages of making a set. A few cozied up to tenders, large boats with refrigerated holds which transported the herring to processing plants. You could judge how much fish a boat had caught by how long it stayed by a tender. Dale and Tony took turns peering through binoculars.

“The Hooki Luau’s still pumping,” Dale announced and looked at his watch. “Man, they’ve been there for almost a hour.”

Every once in a while, Lars thought he saw a blotch of herring on the screen, and Dale and Tony took their positions. Most turned out to be false alarms--rocks or fish too deep to bother with--but some looked promising enough to warrant making a set. By twelve o’clock, the end of the opening, the Raven had made four exciting water hauls.

In a small cove, we dropped anchor. Lars turned the engine off. The sudden quiet was lovely. Water lapped at the hull, clinking softly like an icecube hitting the inside of a glass. It was warm for mid-april, near t-shirt weather, and we all ate outside on the web pile. With the pressure off for the moment, the crew was back to their usual buffoonery.

“The fish will come. Do not lose hope, Men,” Lars said, putting on a John Wayne accent.

Dale snorted and said, “who hired the cheerleader?”

“The fish will come. They talked to me in my dreams last night. They called me Excellent One and said that they longed to fill my net.”

“Pul--lease,” Dale said. “You’re making me sick.”

“All they asked was for a small human sacrifice.” Lars looked slyly at Dale. “Our oldest and weakest crew member.”

“That would be you, I think.”

“Perhaps, but I look younger than you.”

“Na---aaa.”

“Marie, who looks the youngest?” Lars pushed his face close to Dale’s and fluttered his eye lids.

Dale shoved Lars’ shoulder and said, “Go away.” Then he turned to me, shook his head, and said, “You see what I have to put up with?”

Dale and Lars were old friends. In his late thirties, Dale was short and had curly brown hair cropped close to his head. He looked a little like Richard Simmons except he had a dense beard and these aqua-blue bedroom eyes which made me imagine he had been quite a seducer in his single days. Instead of the usual fisherman outfit of grubby sweat pants and shirts, he wore Patagonia-everything and smelled like a men’s magazine. In the mornings after he perfumed himself, the other men would cough and tell him he was poisoning the taste of their coffee, to which he would say, “good,” as if glad for the chance to be a brat. He had fished for almost as long as Lars in just as many fisheries, and he loved to talk about the glory days of the Alaska fishing scene during the early eighties when men could make forty thousand dollars in a three month salmon season and where towns like Kodiak and Dutch Harbor teemed with drugs and alcohol and men shnoekered on both. “Kodiak’s dead,” he inevitably ended his reminiscences.

Mid-way through lunch, the radio blurted out a ream of static, then a man’s voice called for the Raven, and Lars rushed upstairs to the wheelhouse. A few minutes later, he poked his head out the door to report that the Order of Magnitude had just caught sixty tons.

“Great,” Tony called up. Most years, a sixty ton catch ranked a tad better than okay. One hundred tons was like getting a fat Christmas bonus from the boss--excellent but not totally extraordinary. Two hundred tons was akin to buying an old coat from the Goodwill and finding a diamond ring in the pocket. And a three hundred ton catch, which occasionally happened, approximated clinking champagne glasses with god.

The problem was that herring this year was selling for an abysmal \$200 a ton, down from last year’s \$800. All the herring caught in the Pacific Northwest went to Japan

who was interested in not the meat of the fish but the eggs. Herring roe was a delicacy there, often exchanged as gift packages among corporate executives. The word among the fleet was that Japan had a surplus of eggs from last year.

Unfortunately, all three members of the Raven crew were struggling financially. Their main trade was not actually herring but salmon fishing, lately a flailing industry. Ten years ago, when farmed salmon from Chile and elsewhere hit the market, wild Alaska salmon prices fell. Since then, the farmed fish industry had tripled in size, and wild salmon prices had continued a steady dismal descent. Whereas a season of salmon fishing used to support a fisherman and his family for an entire year, these days it hardly qualified as a decent summer job.

In the past, herring had acted as a happy supplement to the salmon income, but now it was an absolutely necessary way to make up for those absent dollars. At this year's \$200 a ton, however, even if the Raven crew managed to catch an average amount of fish, they would barely cover operating expenses. All they could hope for, really, was that they would find themselves standing next to the great glass-clinker herself or himself when the bubbly was being poured.

At three o'clock, we listened to the Fish and Game report. About 60% of the quota for Uganik Bay had been caught. A two hour opening would begin at four o'clock. Lars slugged the last of his coffee and turned on the engine. Thus began a repeat of the morning. Boats as slow and relentless as sharks cruised the bay. Our sonar detected nothing.

Craig showed up. "I see them," he said. "But they're all hanging off the ledge in deeper water."

I had to admit, I was impressed. Despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars of sonar equipment and flying machines and special nets and hydraulic systems and high speed skiffs not to mention the thousands of hours of man power invested in this fishery, the fish still eluded us. Right now, they were king.

Fifteen minutes before four. Craig suddenly came on the radio, excited. "There's a big streak of fish on the other side of the bay. Big one--it looks like a hundred tons. There's only one boat on them. Go get 'em."

"Fuck ya," Lars said and jammed the throttle. The engine gave a heavy, rattling

howl which made the sides of my skull tingle. I imagined I could hear the grind and push of every single nut and bolt and cog in the motor. We streaked across the water and slowed only slightly upon approaching the other vessel, an all-aluminum seiner with the word, Lynx, scrawled in cursive on its hull. There was a sense of desperation in the wheelhouse which I hadn't felt this morning. I looked at Tony who winked and mouthed, "it's okay."

Tony and Dale rushed to take their positions. The crew of the Lynx kept glancing at us, as if nervous. Five minutes to go. With a punch of speed, the Raven moved just ahead of the Lynx.

"Hold it right there. You're perfect." Craig said.

Three minutes to go. Suddenly, action erupted on the Lynx. The skiff broke loose from the boat, trailing a string of corks. Their net flew overboard, flop after flop.

"I can't believe it," Craig said. "He skunked you."

On deck, Tony's mouth hung open. Dale had a scowl on his face that suggested he was suppressing demons. Lars wordlessly navigated the Raven around the bow of the Lynx and gave the engine a good charge when directly above the school of fish. Under normal circumstances, this was considered poor etiquette, but right now it was entirely appropriate.

A mile or so away, a small boat skimmed motorcycle-speed toward us, enveloped by a geyser of spray.

"Good." Lars said. "That's Fish and Game. They're busted."

When Fish and Game neared the Lynx, the skipper emerged from the wheelhouse and made a big show of looking at his watch.

"Ya right," Lars said. The skipper had no excuse. At intervals before an opening, the time was announced on the radio.

"Is there a big fine?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

This was small consolation for the lost opportunity to catch one hundred tons of fish. Craig had flown off to help the other combine boats. There was nothing to do but keep puttering around the bay. We left the Lynx as it was beginning to backhaul its net. The skipper hung his head while a Fish and Game official scribbled on a pad.

Within minutes, Bruce, the skipper of the *Stickine*, was on the radio, announcing that he had, he guessed, fifty tons of fish in his net and was waiting for a tender to show up. Much later, with fifteen minutes remaining in the opening, he again came on the radio and reported a forty ton catch--this time without the pilot's help.

"Just got fuckin' lucky," he said, sounding ecstatic. "I was driving fast and Jesus Christ! all of a sudden, I hit a big wad of 'em. Right there in the middle of the fuckin' bay. We went for it and, I couldn't believe it, we nailed 'em." Bruce's recent discovery of religion had apparently not gone far toward cleaning up his language.

"That's great," Lars said, his voice strained. "Looks like I've got some catching up to do."

"Shit. A bunch of pros like you guys?" Bruce said. "You'll get your turn."

When he got off the radio, Lars tapped his fingers on the dashboard and muttered something about "intra-combine competition."

For dinner, we broke into a box of chillable red wine, and everyone got sleepy early. Tony and I stepped outside to brush our teeth. A slight, warm breeze blew. The wind had died down and the sea was smooth and black, a pool of obsidian. The stars hung in the sky like a million little claps of light. We decided to sleep outside on the deck.

"So what do you think of fishing so far," Tony asked as he slipped into our zipped-together sleeping bags.

"Exciting," I said, "I'm surprised you guys don't melt from the stress."

"You'd be a great fisherwomen, Marie. You like being outdoors, and you're used to roughing it." I had heard this a few times before, but Tony never seemed to tire of saying it again.

"We'll see." I said. "What's it like when you make a big set?"

Tony launched into an animated description of how the corks started jiggling like mad under the weight of the captured fish and someone would zoom around in the inflatable *Zodiac* clipping buoys onto the corkline and how the boat leaned over perilously far if the set was really huge and how every once in awhile the whole boat tipped over. "You'll see," he said, his voice trailing off. Tony had the enviable dog-like quality of being able to fall asleep as soon as his body touched a soft surface. "I'm--glad--you're--here,"

he slurred, and then repeated himself, as if his brain wasn't quite sure he had uttered the first phrase.

"Me too," I said, but he was sleep-twitching by now. In the dim light of the boat lamp, he looked much younger than thirty-one, although he generally looked young--his skin was smooth and always a little flushed--and I liked to call him my jail bait boyfriend. He lay with his head resting on a straight arm, facing me. His bangs were jagged at the ends where he had cut with his Swiss army knife the other day in a fit of frustration at not being to see what he was doing in the engine room. Since the rest of his hair was long and wavy, he now had Prince Valiant sort of look that was taking me awhile to get used to. He muttered a word which I didn't quite catch but sounded like, "purse line."

Tony had been fishing for ten years now, mostly for salmon although he had worked on a few halibut boats. He had joined Lars and Dale herring fishing two years ago in hopes of getting in on the big money that often came with herring. Unfortunately, last year had been one of those miss-seasons for the Raven crew. If this season, already almost one-third over, didn't improve significantly, the men on the Raven would be close to folding. Since Tony's only monetary obligation was making payments on a small parcel of swampy low-land he had bought in Fairbanks not too long ago, he could probably hold out for two or three more years before cashing in on a fishing career. Dale and Lars, however, had families to support and owned lavish homes they had bought when salmon was doing well. They also owned their own salmon boats and permits, both of which were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and whose payments were even more costly than those of their homes. They could not wait much longer for fishing to turn around. Lars' salmon boat, in fact, was tentatively up for sale. So was his house in Port Townsend, Washington. Dale had not yet resorted to such drastic measures. However, his favorite activity was perusing the classified section of Pacific Fishing Magazine and announcing how far boat and permit prices had dropped. The record was a Bristol Bay gillnet permit that had dropped to one quarter of its price eight years ago. The average was one-third that of eight years ago.

At nine am the next morning, Fish and Game reported that the quota for the Kodiak

fishery had been caught and it was now closed. For a few minutes, no one spoke.

“We might as well head for Kamishak Bay,” Lars said. “It’s a good day to cross Shelikov.”

Kamishak Bay, part of the Cook Inlet fishery, was a twenty four hour drive from where we were. To get there, we had to cross Shelikov Strait where high winds and strong tides not only prevailed but often met head-on, producing roller-coaster, unpredictable waves. I sighed when I heard Lars’ news. During the twelve-hour cruise from the town of Kodiak on the east side of the island to Uganik Bay, I had swiftly learned that traveling on a boat for extended periods of time was not fun. The drone of the engine was so loud, you had to shout to have any kind of conversation. The repetitive rocking, back and forth, back and forth, wore on your nerves. After just a few hours outside Kodiak, I had felt trapped and a little psycho.

We hunted down one of the tenders and filled up on fuel and water and fresh vegetables. Then we headed up Uganik Bay. When we reached the mouth, the waves grew clumsy. Forty miles away, across the strait, was the north tip of the Alaska Peninsula. From this distance, rock was not visible, only ice and snow, an unbelievable stretch of whiteness jaggging up and down like a seismic reading against the blue of the sky. It looked like some fantastic alabastered city.

Dale pointed behind us and said, “summer,” then pointed ahead and said, “winter.”

Half way across the Strait, the waves grew extremely rough. The Raven heaved one way, then the other, once throwing me off my feet. Green white-streaked water filled the portholes downstairs. I began to feel queasy and sat down, my head immediately going to the table. Tony came downstairs.

“Try these,” he said, holding sea bands. They were bracelets made out of stretchy material, each one invested with a bead which was supposed to press into a spot on the inside of my wrist. According to acupressure theory, this spot supervised my stomach and subtle pressure there would alleviate the nausea.

“No thanks,” I said. I had tried the bracelets on the drive to Uganik Bay and was not a believer.

“Dramamine then?” he asked, drawing a package out of his jacket pocket. Tony

had the most amazing ability to withdraw from one of his many pockets whatever you needed at that precise moment: a knife, chord, vice-grips, chocolate, you name it.

I considered the benefits of being dramamined. "Better not," I decided. The Alaska Peninsula was approaching and I didn't want to miss any of it. Instead, I lay down in my bunk for a few minutes, horizontal being the best position for sea-sickness. Who knows how much later, Tony woke me up. We were approaching Mount Douglas on the Peninsula, he said. I had to see it. In the twenty years they had been fishing, Dale and Lars had never seen such a clear day.

I tried to swallow my nausea which seemed to have traveled to my upper throat and dragged myself upstairs. According to the map, I was viewing one giant volcano. However, everywhere I glanced were false summits and spires and valleys and saddles and arretes, and the whole thing looked like three or four mountains all chopped up, blended, and then thrown back together. The rock was crumbly and dark and had the quality of cement rubble. The snow was smooth and utterly white as if someone had taken a paintbrush to it. Cornices hung hugely over lips, casting magnified undershadows. Ice falls dropped for hundreds of feet and looked like melted candles, the way the water froze over itself in long drippings. Glaciers, creepy blue and clogged with chewed-up ice, riverred down the mountain sides. I tried to imagine hiking up one of the gentler slopes and gave up. The place looked utterly untouchable.

Along the shore, a band of snow had melted, exposing long brown blades of grass. They were flattened in swirly patterns like a Van Gogh painting. Patches of willows added swabs of red to the whorls. There were no trees. The Alaska Peninsula was as treeless as Kodiak was be-treed, which was baffling to me since both places lived close together and were subject to the same weather patterns. When I asked the crew why this might be, no one knew.

Cook Inlet turned out to be a bust. A storm hit Kamishak Bay on the first day of the opening. Along with a handful of other boats, the Raven retreated to the only nearby sheltered place--the mouth of the McNeil River, which went dry during low tide and left the boats leaning in the mud like old, wind-hammered shacks. But this was a better option than trying to brave the weather in the main bay like the rest of the fleet. During the fiercest part

of the storm, someone's skiff sank. Every day, we listened to the weather report and every day we heard the same dismal news. A few times, when the storm temporarily relented, during high tide, the crew took the Zodiac raft to shore and explored the narrow spit protecting our cove. The rest of the time, the four of us moped on board, trying not to bump into each other and trying not to look at the clock. I went through several of the dozen books I had brought. However, used to being physically active, I went downhill fast.

"I can't handle sitting on my butt all day long," I told Tony at one point.

Later I asked, "Are any of these tenders going back to Kodiak before the next opening?"

"Why?" Tony asked. "You want to go home?"

"I got to get off this boat."

"Does this mean you don't like fishing?" he joked.

Overhearing, Lars looked up from his magazine entitled *Yachts and Boats*. "What's wrong with you Marie? Isn't this fun?"

"I was under the impression that fishing was a little more active."

"This is herring fishing," Lars said. "Wait, wait, wait wait, then bust your ass."

"But we were going to have a beautiful life together fishing," Tony said, only half-joking.

"Well, I haven't given up on salmon. But I think this is it for me for herring."

"Oh crap, Tony. You're trying to talk her into salmon fishing?" Lars turned to me. "There's no money in salmon anymore. The last good season I had was eight years ago. Don't listen to your boyfriend!"

"Getting a little riled there, Isaac," Tony said.

"I am riled. Every minute of the day I'm thinking about ways to get out of fishing. I'd love to have someone call me up right now and offer to buy my boat and permit, but prices are so bad right now, I'd lose my shirt."

"Ya hear that?" Tony said to me. "It's a good time to buy in."

I laughed. "Looks like you've got a buyer right here, Lars."

Lars was in no mood to joke. He wagged a finger in Tony's direction. "Don't be stupid. Look around you. You've got two reasons not to buy in: me and Dale. You want to

be like us in ten years? You want to have families to support while trying to figure out what the hell you can be in life besides a fisherman? I'll tell you what: you don't."

No one spoke for a few minutes. Then Tony said a little weakly, "salmon's going to get better."

"Pshhaa," Lars shook his head, as if greatly disgusted, and returned to the magazine.

Unfortunately, I couldn't get off the boat. When the storm finally quit after a week, the fish in Togiak Bay were getting ready to spawn. Togiak lay on the north of Bristol Bay, a five day's boat ride away, if we didn't stop at all. The fish in Cook Inlet should have been as ready as it gets but no one had seen skin or fin of them since the storm. It could take days for the sea to settle and the herring to regroup. The combine decided to split up: the Stickine would stay in Cook Inlet while we and the Order of Magnitude would leave as soon as possible for Togiak.

After we located a tender and stock up on fuel and water and vegetables, we headed west and slightly south along the Alaska Peninsula. Volcano followed volcano. Some conformed perfectly to the classical conical shape. Most however looked like your average mountain with a complexity of winding valleys and zig-zagging arms. Unlike peaks in a regular mountain chain, each volcano stood independently of the rest. One 9,000 foot peak had a slope so gentle, I imagined I could walk to the summit in my tennis shoes, hop on a sled, and slide all the way down to the sea. On another, pillars of gobby rock looking like sandcastle drippings shot out of a snowy bluff and disappeared into low clouds. A gray wisp clung to the tip of a third peak. At first, we thought it was a detached scrap of the general cloud cover, but after a long while, noticing that it still hovered above the summit, we decided the volcano was puffing. All had Russian names like Veniaminof, Pavlof, and Isanotski.

We entered the island zone. There were so plentiful and some were so big, I often couldn't tell which rise of earth was the mainland. The smaller islands impressed me the most. They literally bolted out of the sea, straight as a math equation, reaching heights of 1,000 feet. Many in fact were taller than they were wide. Waves heaved against the cliffs and exploded into mist. Often, I contemplated the possibility of landing on them,

somewhere, if we had to. In most cases, I decided, the odds were not good.

On the third day of traveling, I became a bitch. The din and constant wher-when rhythm of the twin engines invaded my brain so that I felt thought-less, a zombie. I read constantly, not speaking to anyone for hours at a time. If someone sat next to me and tried to strike up a conversation, I felt a strange intense anger, as if he were being rude. When the conversation lasted too long, I answered in monosyllables and reasserted my face in my book.

Finally, we reached Togiak. The land here was as flat as the Alaska Peninsula was flamboyant. Long, narrow spits dragged their flat bodies into the sea like nematodes. Beaches of golden sand stretched on and on. Trackless, without a scrap of trash or even driftwood, molded into ripples by the waves, they looked embryonic. Nothing higher than my knee grew anywhere.

This fishery was the most cutthroat of all. Since no permit was required here, sometimes as many as four hundred boats showed up. To prevent overharvest, Fish and Game limited each opening to thirty, sometimes only fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes allowed one set, basically. After each opening, Fish and Game counted the fish and then scheduled another thirty minute opening, if the quota permitted it. One year, Togiak fishermen caught the limit within the first fifteen minutes.

During the first opening, when Craig was helping the Order of Magnitude, we caught our first batch of fish. It was a lucky break. We were racing along a long spit. Lars happened to see a herring-looking blotch on the sonar screen, called out to the guys in the rear to "let's go!" and the Raven made a quick, flawless set. While we waited for the tender to show up, I sat on the gunwale rail and studied our babies. Dozens of herring shuttled back and forth on the water's surface, their skins shifting into silver when struck right by the sun. It didn't look like we had caught much, but when I peered into the depths and waited for my eyes to adjust, a shadowy mass began to breath and then differentiate into hundreds of slow-moving fish. A moment later, another deeper chamber of drifting fish appeared. All those layers of all those languidly-swimming fish made me feel very sleepy.

The tender, outsizing our boat by five times at least, drove up and dropped into our

net a hose big enough to suck me up. The thing began to roar and the herring each trembled slightly before disappearing. Whoosh. Soon, fish spilled out of the other end of the hose and into the one-ton bin on the tender. Excited, I whooped every time the box filled up and the tender guy yanked on the latch and the bin door opened and a stew of inky fish spilled into the hold. The rest of the Raven crew watched dejectedly; they predicted thirty tons. Tony kept nudging me and saying, “this is nothing to get excited about, Marie.”

The catch turned out to be forty tons. “Hardly enough to salvage our ego,” Dale said.

That afternoon, during the second opening, we caught another fifteen tons. The Order of Magnitude caught forty. The Stickine showed up in the evening, having flailed and failed in Cook Inlet. Fish and Game announced that there would be one final opening the following day.

We went to bed after a wordless dinner, punctuated by the clinking of silverware against plates and the setting down of mugs on the formica table top. In the middle of the night, I woke. From my bunk, I could look up the ladder into the wheelhouse. Lars was sitting on his bunk, fingering his mustache, staring out the window.

At six am the next morning, a good three hours before the opening, we tramped to the wheelhouse and went into patrol mode with a capitol P. Whenever someone spied the tiniest blip on the sonar screen, he'd cry, “there!” with the urgency of calling, “fire!” or “dial 911!” Even if Lars thought the blip was a rock, he would circle the area anyway just to be extra safe. According to our sonar and Craig's observations, most of the herring were inside a small cove on the inside of Asigyukpak Spit. And so, of course, an half an hour before the opening, that's where the majority of the fleet ended up as well. As we jetted from one side of the cove to the other, heeding Craig's constantly-changing instructions, boats all around us accelerated and turned sharply and bounced on waves made choppy by so many desperate motors. Some boats drove so close to us, I could read the deckhands' sweatshirts. High above, a swarm of planes circled and dove.

“We might die,” I told Tony.

He laughed. “Pretty intense, huh?”

With ten minutes to go, Craig directed us to a school of fish. “It's not much,” he

said, “but it’s as good as it gets at this point.”

A black boat with a purple stripe called the Juniper cut in front of us.

“Shit,” Lars said. He revved the engine and lurchingly maneuvered the Raven slightly ahead and on the inside of the black boat. A small seiner, the Juniper easily cut in front of us into the prime spot. We tried to regain the better position but the Juniper skirted around us like a gypsy0000 .

“She’s got us,” Lars said.

With two minutes remaining, Craig said, “okay forget this batch. Let the black boat have it. There’s another streak building 100 yards to your left. Go!”

The Raven leaned rollercoaster-sideways as we went into a long turn. Downstairs, dishes clattered to the floor. I looked out the back window. Tony embraced the capstan and Dale crouched in the skiff. The Juniper shot ahead us.

“What’s he doing?” Lars cried, incredulous. “I just gave him that last batch.”

“Time’s up. Let’s go!” yelled Craig.

Tony released the skiff and the Raven looped toward the beach. Fifty feet away, on our inside, the Juniper produced a smile of corkline. Just as I was thinking that the shoreline seemed rather close, we stopped short, the engine making a sock-caught-in-throat sound.

“Shit!” Lars slammed a fist on the dashboard. He shoved the gear in reverse but the boat wouldn’t budge. He tried to move forward but the gravelly, strangling sound only grew louder.

“Shit!” Lars pummeled the dashboard. “Shit, shit, shit.”

Meanwhile, all around us, boats were closing up their sets. Garlands of cork littered the bay like flowers thrown on stage after a performance. While Dale in the skiff towed the Raven out of the sand, one hundred yards away, the Stickine caught sixty tons. The corkline danced from the weight of the fish, and a deckhand raced around the circumference of the net in a Zodiac, adding buoys. The Order of Magnitude hit the jackpot with an eighty ton catch. Our one consolation was that the Juniper didn’t catch anything.

“I should have known that the Juniper would have pulled a move like that,” Craig told us later on the radio. “That skipper’s so broke, he’ll do anything.”

After the opening, the combine boats tied up together to take a brief respite before they headed back to Kodiak. Earlier I had heard that Craig was flying to Anchorage with an empty seat. I did not want to make the five day boat ride again, remarkable scenery notwithstanding. Craig said yes when I asked if I could join him. Without much ado, I said good-bye to Lars and Dale and thanked them for letting me fish with them.

Recovered from his outburst, Lars said, "Well, this season was such a success, I'm sure we'll be seeing you next year."

Tony walked me to the plane. He said he wished I'd keep him company on the way back to Kodiak, but he understood why I wanted to get off the boat.

"Fishing isn't always like this, you know," he said.

I nodded, not really convinced. "Thanks for letting me come on the boat."

"You still have to try salmon," he insisted.

I laughed and kissed him. His perseverance was admirable. "Try me in a month or two. Maybe I'll be more amenable then."

We said goodbye and I climbed into the plane. Craig started the engine, a high-pitched, kind-of cute sound compared to the low rumble of the Raven's motor, and we took off among a scattering of seiners. I sighed, a good, long unraveling sigh. Thank god I was off the boat. I felt sorry for the crew, for the hellish boat ride they were about to make, and for their mediocre season. Though the combine had done slightly better than the fleet average, with this year's feeble prices, their take-home salary would not amount to much, perhaps \$1500 for Tony and Dale and twice as much for Lars. I didn't know it then, but it would be the last time the guys would fish for herring together. That summer would be the last season of salmon fishing for Tony and Dale. Lars is still giving it a go.

The plane climbed. The cloudless, pale blue sky looked washed out, as if overfull of sun. Soon, the boats became puny, harmless-looking things, minnows against a sapphire palette. Craig pointed out some streaks of herring, the ones that had escaped this year's thrashing. There were lots of them in Togiak Bay. Murky brown and huge, they resembled thunder clouds building above a prairie floor. From this distance, catching them looked like a breeze.

Open Spaces

When I was a kid, my parents used to take me to the hill behind our house. Cow hill, my siblings and I called it because of all the steers that grazed on its tough-smelling grass. We lived in the land of a thousand suburbs, and this hill was one of the few undeveloped acres left. My mom and dad called it open space which made sense to me since only a few old oaks punched at the sky and the rest was all grass.

After dinner, we used to climb to the top of the hill and sit and look at all the city lights. There were millions of them, and they filled up the entire night except for one big dark oval in the middle, which I knew to be the San Francisco Bay. I liked this blank spot a lot. If I closed my eyes, I could see a whole countryside without lights, a huge blackness like a huge San Francisco Bay. This is what I loved to do most: imagine what it all looked like before the lights had come.

On our hikes, I would trail behind everyone, eyes to the ground, obsessed with the idea that I might be the first person ever to step where I was stepping. Every pebble and twig underwent close scrutiny. The lush the environment, the taller and clingier the grass, the more I was certain: no one, no cow, no skunk, no panther had touched this fleck of earth (I was a tad confused about the dinosaurs, however. They had lived so long ago, I couldn't really verify their presence today. Also, they had really big feet.).

During college, I stopped out a lot. At Stanford where it was nearly impossible to get an F or a D, that's what we called dropping out. I would attend school for a quarter, then take off a quarter to pursue what I considered my real education. One fall, I backpacked all over the Rocky Mountains. The next spring, I taught environmental education at an elementary school in New Hampshire. After spring, I lived at home and worked at a local day care center. As a finale, I worked for Outward Bound in Maine, leading pissed-off teenagers on three week long backpack and canoe trips.

During this time, following the tradition of many ex-presidents, Ronald Reagan decided to have a library built in his name at Stanford. It was one of the few universities of

appropriate prestige left in the country that didn't already have a presidential library. Apart from the fact that eighteen libraries already graced the Stanford campus, there was a problem, as Reagan soon discovered. The majority of Stanford students and Bay Area residents were monied liberals, like Joan Baez who owned a mansion in woodsy Portola Valley and often hosted benefits for kids with cancer. No one liked too much the idea of honoring one of the most anti-populist presidents America had lately seen.

Worse, smack center in the land of a thousand suburbs, Stanford had little open space to spare. The only place the library could go was Cow Hill. My family members weren't the only ones who loved this hill, which Stanford students referred to as the Dish after the four-story satellite dish that crowned its highest point. Families dressed in pastels strolled the pathways on weekends and holidays. During lunch hours or after work, men and women ran in sweaty cliques trailing perfume and words like "co-efficient," "cross-analysis," and "fast-track." Upon learning of the intended library site, residents protested immediately. They held rallies, circulated petitions, and stood on street corners in their jogging whites, waving witty signs. They wrote scathing letters to the editor suggesting things that the library could display, such as: all the treaties Reagan had signed and broken, his college report card consisting of mostly D's and C's, Nancy's china tea-set, and a plateful of ketchup in tribute to Reagan's short-lived proposal that ketchup satisfy the vegetable requirement of the national school lunch program.

I joined the league of protesters, which far outnumbered supporters. After six months, Reagan quietly withdrew his proposal and took it to the University of Southern California where people less guiltily loved their money.

Despite all the backpacking I had done in the Rockies and the East Coast, I had yet to experience a sense of true wilderness. I wanted to find hills where I could sit at night and not have to imagine a lightless view. I wanted to hike in places where I could feel pretty confident few people--and ideally no one--had ever been before. After college, I decided to move to Alaska. At my parents' home, I applied for several jobs, including a fundraising position at the Northern Alaska Environmental Center, a small activist organization in Fairbanks, whose "mission statement" as it appeared in the job advertisement was "to

ensure wise management and protection of Alaska's sub-arctic resources." Inspired by the success of the Reagan library campaign, I wanted to do more activist work.

Three weeks after I sent my resume, the environmental center's executive director called, identifying himself as Rex. The reception was full of static, and when I said, "I'm fine. How are you?" my voice echoed a second later. Moving promptly into interview mode, Rex had a blunt way about him and asked questions like, "you haven't ever fundraised before, have you?"

"Not really but . . ." I answered more than once.

At one point he said, "You realize that the pay is horrible, don't you?"

"Oh gosh," I answered, surprised by his directness. "Who does this kind of work for money?"

He chuckled slightly and for the first time I thought I may have said the right thing. "That's the kind of answer we like to hear, Marie," he said. "The environmental movement depends on dedicated folks like you."

"I'm pretty dedicated," I said, encouraged by his sudden warmth. Given my lack of experience in the environmental field, I felt that my biggest selling point was my abundance of dedication.

"Is that so?" he asked.

"You bet," I answered and went on to describe just how dedicated I was, starting with kid-experiences on Cow Hill and ending up with the Reagan Library. I was on a roll and ended with a line I had written the night before in my journal: "I believe there had got be some places on this planet where people do not have top priority."

Rex laughed, although this time, it went on too long. "What a speech," he said. "We might as well just end on that note. If I have any other questions, I'll call back."

After we hung up, his laughter hung in my mind, and I burned. I regretted that I had revealed my whole life story. As the days progressed with no word from him, I consoled myself with the thought that at least I hadn't brought up the dinosaurs.

After a month, I gave up on my Alaska plans. Then Rex phoned. "Sorry we took so long getting back to you," he said, cracks of static in the background.

"That's okay." I waited, nervous.

“Well, we’ve decided to hire you,” he said. He sounded doubtful, using a tone like “Now, I’ve seen everything.”

We talked some more, mostly logistics: how soon could I come, how much was the rent in Fairbanks, did I own a computer? Finally, wrapping up the conversation, Rex said, “You’re going to love Alaska. It’s like a different planet up here.”

Two weeks later, I remembered his words as my plane flew north, forty miles shy of Fairbanks. Since Seattle, we had flown above a thick mat of clouds, which occasionally allowed glimpses of glaciers or ocean or forest below. Now the clouds were thin enough to provide far-flung views of the countryside. All I could see tree after tree after tree--an impossible jungle. Nothing of human manufacture--no farms, no factories, no homes, no powerlines, no clearcuts, no railroad tracks, no roads, nothing interrupted the treescape below me.

As far as I could remember, I had never flown over a speck of America that didn’t contain some human sign. At the very least, there was always a road, high-up on some denuded mountain. Now, not trusting my eyes, I looked carefully below, trying to find something altered. The minutes passed, and the forest swept on. The only time I had felt this kind of escape was flying over across the Atlantic Ocean.

When I landed, one of the Center’s boardmembers, Marty, dressed in a jumper dress and birkenstock clogs, waited. “How was your flight?” she asked.

“A little overwhelming. Alaska’s so... wild.”

She laughed. “That it is.”

Marty took me home, fed me, and showed me to the couch she had sheeted and pillowed. Surprised by how early we were going to bed, I checked my watch, which had two hands on twelve. The dusky light suggested it was no later than seven. I crawled between the sheets and spent two hours trying to convince myself it was bedtime, after which I gave up and simply gazed outside the window at the dim swirl of pink and blue. An rhythmic succession of soft cracks filled the night. It sounded like two people playing tennis: a long lob, then a smack at the net, then a desperate return lunge. I had grown up

playing tennis and had friends whose backyards sported tennis courts. Why would people being playing this late, I wondered.

In the morning, the area under my eyes feeling heavy, I asked Marty about the midnight tennis match.

“Tennis?” She frowned.

“Well, I heard some strange noises: poof...poofpoofpoof...poof. They sounded people playing tennis.”

She laughed. “Those were people target shooting!”

“Around here?” I was surprised. Out the window, amid the riot of spruce and brush, I could see a couple of roofs and a child’s swing set. “That’s legal around here?”

She shrugged. “Probably not, but this is Fairbanks.”

After breakfast, I borrowed Marty’s bike and newspaper and went house-searching. Most of the affordable places existed outside town, and by the end of the day I had peddled over forty miles and visited only five homes, if you could call them that. All were one room log cabins and lacked indoor plumbing. The more modern ones had refrigerators, phone hook-ups, and oil-drip stoves. Those of the more rustic bent eschewed electricity and had woodstoves made out of barrels. The last cabin reminded me of a line in an old Monty Python skit: “We used to live in a shoebox in the middle of the road.” Warped plywood scraps covered the outside of a trailer. Several windows lacked glass. The owner, a round-faced, balding man with specks of sawdust on his scalp, assured me that he wasn’t finished yet and the place would be a dream--soon, very soon, at the latest by fall. As I wearily returned to my bike, he mentioned that he owned a small Cessna and would love to take me flying someday, since I was new to Fairbanks and all. I declined and rode off, speculating wildly about the condition of his plane.

Two days later, I started work. Marty dropped me off at the environmental center at seven am--she had to attend an early morning staff meeting. Located in the middle of a residential area downtown, the small, green house carried a sign which read: “the environmental voice of northern Alaska.” The lights were out inside; I assumed the staff wouldn’t arrive for awhile yet. I let the front door bang behind me. Then a bump occurred

upstairs, feet pounded down the stairs, and a man in his mid-thirties appeared in the front room. He wore torn-up jeans, a stained t-shirt, and no shoes, revealing rated R toenails. A broth of curls ringed his head and merged with a mangy beard. Upon seeing me, he stopped short and said, "oh."

I took a breath. "I'm Marie," I said. "Marie Beaver, the new fundraiser."

"Of course. I'm sorry. I was expecting someone else. I'm Larry. My official title, I guess, is arctic specialist."

We shook hands. He gave me a quick tour of the building. On the first floor were three office rooms, full of desks, towering file cabinets, old bulky computers, and shelves stacked high with papers and books. Posters of caribou and muskox hung on the walls. Floral-printed curtains bordered the windows. It had a comfortable but busy look.

There was a small kitchen and bathroom with a shower.

"For all of us who don't have running water," Larry said, flicking on a light switch on in the bathroom.

"Does everyone live without?" I asked, surprised. In my search for a place to live, I was still holding out for indoor plumbing.

"Everyone except Rex," Larry said. It was hard to say, but I thought I detected a note of derision in his voice.

To conclude the tour, he led me upstairs to his office. It was the smallest yet--and the messiest. Stacks of paper overflowed from the shelves onto the floor. Clothes hung from the bannister; they looked in need of a wash. A pile of bread crumbs lay on a desk.

"Wow," I said.

"We don't take visitors up here, if we can help it," he said.

I laughed. A sleeping bag lay underneath the desk with the crumbs. It occurred to me that Larry had appeared somewhat groggy when greeting me this morning.

"Did you spend the night?" I asked.

"Yep."

"How come?"

"Lots of work to do."

"Wow." I was enthralled by this man who apparently sacrificed material comforts

like nice clothes, a warm bed, and clean surroundings for his environmental beliefs. A far-cry from the well-dressed, well-housed activists I had met in my Reagan Library days, he struck me as the real thing.

“Do you spend the night here often?” I asked.

“Quite often. I live outside town and usually it’s easier to stay here than ride my bike all the way home and then back again in the morning.”

“You don’t own a car?” I asked, really dazzled now.

“Never. The oil industry isn’t going to have my support.”

Soon, the three other staff members showed up. Though more conventionally-dressed and cleaner-looking than Larry, they still possessed his no-nonsense air. All gave me a warm hello and went straight to work. Then Rex arrived. Wearing a tropical shirt and straw hat, he strolled into the front office and pumped my hand.

“Howdi,” he said. “Follow me to my office.”

“I’m taking off for a fiddle contest in Florida this afternoon, so we’ve got a lot to cover,” he said over his shoulder.

I sat in a chair facing his desk. He

“You’re our first fundraiser. We received a grant from a local foundation to fund you for six months. If you do well, you can stay longer.” He handed me two binders. “Everything you need to know about your job is in those books. Take good care of them.”

“Now, let me fill you on the issues,” he continued. “For the past fifteen years, the oil industry has been trying to develop the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge which sits in the middle of hundreds of square miles of real wilderness--no roads, no trails, plenty of bear, caribou, wolverine, and water you can drink--not what they call wilderness down there in the lower 48. Oilies have failed so far because of grassroots organizations like us. It’s one of those issues we at the Center are willing to fight to the death for.”

“Death?” I asked.

“Truth be told, I have had death threats,” Rex said, nodding.

A voice from the other room called, “From his girlfriend, he means.” Then Larry poked his mane of a head inside the doorway and grinned.

“Shut up,” Rex said. When Larry withdrew, he yelled, “Brush your hair sometime, will you?” Then he turned to me. “Seriously, death threats happen. If you do get one, call the police immediately. Where were we? Oh yes. Attacks on northern Alaska’s wildlands.”

The list was long. Major oil development went on at Prudhoe Bay, on the northern coast of Alaska. Exploratory wells were scattered all over the Beaufort Sea. The north-west plains, a vast wetlands area, had a lot of coal underneath it. The only thing saving it was that Congress had designated it as the National Petroleum Reserve and so far no one had found oil there. Far to the west of Fairbanks, Red Dog Mine was currently leveling its third valley in acquisition of silver, zinc, and copper. Not far south of Fairbanks, Healy Coal’s pit mine now reached the size of a city block and was still growing. Gold mines called placer mines riddled the river systems of interior Alaska.

But by far the biggest problem, Rex said, waving a pencil in the air, was Alaskans’ attitude problem. The population was so small and there was so much wilderness, people acted like spoiled children, as if the land was limitless and existed solely for their use and abuse. Also, they worshipped the frontier days, especially the fierce independence of that era, and took pride in cultivating a similar I’m-gonna-do-what-I-want-dammit approach to things. In Fairbanks bars, Rex said, I’d find signs claiming the right to refuse service to a whole list of villainous characters right down to government employees. The Alaska Independent Party’s sole mission was that Alaska secede from the United States and form its own country. This was no peripheral group, I should know. The current governor, Wally Hickle, had run and won as an Independent.

Finally, there was the economic reality that oil owned Alaska. Lacking a sales tax and an income tax, the Alaskan government received 80% of its money from oil revenues. In addition, every year, the oil industry divvied up a portion of its profits and sent a fat check to every single Alaskan citizen. No kidding--Rex wagged his pencil in my direction--this check was faa-aat, sometimes totaling \$1,200. To oppose the oil industry or any other form of development was close to blasphemy for most Alaskans.

When Rex finished, I said, “gosh, everything looked so pristine when I was flying over.”

He nodded. "That's because you're from California where wilderness is a joke. You don't know any better."

He sent me upstairs where I was supposed to share an office with Larry. I appropriated the desk that did not straddle the sleeping bag and sat down to study the binders Rex had given me. Later, Rex called from the bottom of the stairs, "Good luck. I'll see you in two weeks." As the front door banged shut, it occurred to me that he had told me nothing about my fundraising responsibilities. But, it was my first job out of college, and I thought it entirely plausible that the real world worked this way--there would be no hand-holding.

As the week progressed, inspired by Larry and the other hard-working staff, I threw myself into my job. The binders provided enough information to get me started on writing a fund appeal--a biannual letter sent to members, asking for donations in addition to their annual dues. Based on past fund appeals, I was supposed to write a somewhat passionate account of an issue the Center was working on and end with the line, "please donate \$10, \$20--however much you can afford to give." I focused on a placer mining project, spending many hours reworking phrases like "opportunity of a lifetime" and "before it's too late." Also, the fundraising files were a mess; I devoted a few days to reorganizing them. Then, Rex called--he had forgotten to tell me that a foundation grant proposal was due soon. "Don't worry, though," he said, "the Alaska Conservation Foundation is a shoe-in. We'd have to really mess up to not get money from them. Look at past examples in the binder. Ask for \$4,000 for the Refuge issue."

"Uh sure," I said, flipping through the binders and finding only a few sample proposals. They looked complicated--at least ten pages long and divided into sections entitled "mission statement", "techniques", "methods of evaluation", and "budget". Before I could ask for more information, Rex hung up. I stared dismally at a particularly detailed budget with a scattering of five digit figures and had a horrible picture of myself as the first staff member ever to wreck relations with the shoe-in foundation.

Rex returned from Florida, tanned and wearing beach shorts. He looked over the grant proposal I had written in his absence and handed it back thoroughly marked with red ink. "Not bad for your first one, but your presentation of the Refuge issue is elementary

and way too long,” he wrote at the top.

I hurriedly cranked out another proposal. It was due the following day, but this version was unacceptable as well. Rex gave it back, unsmiling, and said, “We’ll team-write it.” For the next four hours, he stood over my shoulder and gave a yea or new over each sentence typed on the computer. Finally, at ten pm, we finished. When the proposal, cover letter, application form, and other appendices were finally sealed in a large envelope, Rex clapped me on the back and said, “you need a beer.”

Before, I could refuse, he peeled the tab from a Bud-Light and handed me the can. I had the same kind of dismayed, disgusted feeling as when a cop hands you a \$70 speeding ticket and then says, “Have a nice day.” On the other hand, I was grateful I still had a job, which an hour ago had seemed rather tenuous. So I said, “thanks,” and took small sips until Rex downed his and left for the evening. When absolutely sure he wasn’t coming back, I poured the beer down the sink.

Eventually, I rented a clean log room on the outskirts of town. Three big windows helped brighten the interior, and a doorless outhouse leaned just a dash away. Though going carless intrigued me, I decided giving up running water would be a big enough step for me. Plus, my new home lay eight road miles away from the office--I couldn’t imagine peddling for two hours every day and then taking an hour to run--which was my big passion. So I bought a gray Toyota Corolla for \$700 with my graduation money and plastered it with what I considered were politically brilliant messages such as “Keep Your Laws off My Body” and “Give Peas a Chance.”

Now the owner of a car, relatively settled into a job and home, I was ready to explore Alaska. One day at work, I asked Larry, who only allowed himself time-off from work to go backpacking or canoeing, about nearby hiking trails.

He shrugged. “Good luck.”

“What do you mean, good luck? This is Alaska, land of wilderness opportunities.”

“Wilderness yes, but not recreational.”

“Huh?” I didn’t see the difference. Every national park, state park, BLM and wilderness area I had visited in the lower 48 catered to the recreationalist. Not only did all

boast an abundance of well-marked hiking trails, but pocket sized books were often available which described the trails, ranked them on difficulty and beauty, showed maps on how to access the trails, and even listed good cafes and other curiosities you could find en route to the trailhead.

“You’ve seen how swampy this country is. I can think of about three trails in interior Alaska, and the closest one is fifty miles away.”

I nodded. In my constant quest for good places to jog, I had already discovered that all the trails around Fairbanks devolved quickly into muddy, wet slogs. Apparently, it was so cold for most of the year, that the soil froze solid in many areas, especially in the lowlands--a phenomenon known as permafrost. During the summer, the top few feet of permafrost thawed, swamping up whole valleys, allowing only the toughest willows and the scraggiest black spruce to take root.

“Where do you go hiking?” I thought to ask.

“In the summer? Denali National Park. But that’s pretty far from here. Besides, you need to get a permit to go hiking, and then to get into the park, you need to take a bus--they don’t allow cars. It’s too time-consuming for a weekend get-away.”

I didn’t know what to say. A national park that didn’t allow cars and demanded hiking permits was almost inconceivable to me. With its acres of parking lots, three-story motels, assortment of restaurants, and over-priced tourist shops, Yosemite came to mind.

He gave me a sideways look, as if sizing me up, then added. “Besides, there aren’t any trails in the park.”

This was the final stunner. I had done some off-trail hiking while working for Outward Bound but more as an exercise in let’s-see-how-good-our-map-reading-skills-are than out of pure need.

“I don’t need no stinking trail,” I said weakly.

Larry laughed. “Ya maybe.”

Later, not yet willing to accept defeat, I purchased a map of Alaska. With Dave, an intern at the Northern Center who was also new to the state, I scoured it for potential off-trail hikes. Our plan was to drive along the highway, park the car somewhere, and just start walking. Aware that swamp and brush dominated in low, wide valleys, we searched the

map for some mountainous pockets, where narrow valleys and steep slopes promised drier, more solid footing. According to the atlas, however, only two highways linked Anchorage and Fairbanks. A road stretched north from Fairbanks to the Arctic Ocean, and a few cursory roads extended out of landlocked towns like Juneau, the state capitol. In fact, the entire road system resembled a simple Japanese character and could have taken less than a minute to scribble. It didn't take much map-perusing to see that the few pockets of what looked like good hiking in interior Alaska lay too far off the road system to access by foot.

"I don't know what to do," I said at last, frustrated.

"Let's just drive to the top of Murphy Dome," Dave suggested.

Murphy Dome was an old radar station that sat at the end of a dirt road, twenty or so miles outside town. We drove there that night, shared a bottle of wine, and gazed at the valley to the north, an area known as Minto Flats. The map showed two rivers weaving west, but I couldn't distinguish them from the thousands of ponds glittering up the dusky light. It was one in the morning and the sun was just setting, a red-orange ball leaking pastel tails across a dark sky. Far, far to the north, a pack of toothy peaks rose out of the flats--the Ray Mountains, according to the map. It occurred to me that here I was sitting on a hill again, just like the old days on Cow Hill, and for the first time, I didn't have to close my eyes and imagine wildness. It was an exciting thought. However, as I looked out over the thousands of winking blue ponds, where I wanted to be hiking, I couldn't ignore the irony that now it was wilderness that was keeping me out of wilderness.

Later that summer, I arrived at work one morning and found Larry sitting at his desk, staring out the window, unusually idle.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You haven't heard?" he said, handing me the newspaper. In big bold across the top of the front page was the headline, "Iraq invades Kuwait."

"Hmm, maybe we should all move to Canada," I said, thinking about impending war.

"You don't understand," he said. "If this issue heats up, we can kiss the Arctic Refuge good-bye."

“How so?” I asked.

“Kuwait’s got a lot of oil that America depends on. If Iraq doesn’t get out of Kuwait soon, oil prices will rise, and oil advocates will pounce on the opportunity to scare Americans and Congress into opening the Refuge to development. Even though the amount of oil that may or may not lie under the Refuge is a fraction of a percentage of all the oil that exists around the world, they’ll make it sound like opening the Refuge is a matter of national security. They’ll say we need to wean ourselves of foreign oil, that sort of thing.”

“You sure?”

“You watch.”

Sure enough, within weeks, the media was warning of soaring gas prices and long lines at the gas stations, just like the oil shortage days of the 1970s. Alaska’s three congressmen appeared on television and radio, declaring that the nation was in a major crisis and our security hinged on drilling for oil in the Arctic Refuge. Full-page ads paid for by a brand new group called Arctic Power appeared in newspapers nation-wide, calling for Americans to wean themselves of foreign oil. A bill proposing to open the Refuge to development was introduced in Congress. After a few months, congressmen who had formerly supported wilderness protection for the Refuge began wavering.

The Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and other national environmental groups joined the cause. Unimaginably, everyone at the Northern Center increased their hours. Larry literally moved into the Northern Center. On Monday mornings, I’d find his desk covered with dirty bowls and plates he hadn’t gotten around to cleaning over the weekend. Members of the Center donated bigger and bigger sums, some their entire oil checks. Volunteers showed up after work, on weekends, and spent hours on the phone, calling our “activist list” and asking people to write letters to or phone Congress, testify at public hearings, and pace the sidewalks with “Save Alaska” signs.

Phones rang almost constantly, so much so that Rex, the director, ruled that no one answer the phones until after eleven a.m.. Every day the news from Washington D.C. changed. Senator Cranston from California was on the fence. The next day, he was still with us--false alarm. Newspaper reporters phoned, requesting quotes “from anyone.” Television crews periodically took over the front office, cameras whirring while Rex or

Larry recited phrases they had scribbled out minutes before.

I turned into a grant proposal factory, writing up to ten hours a day, and drove home late at night, my brain full of words, usurped by words. In bed, as I was drifting asleep, passages like “cumulative impacts,” “short-sighted economic gain,” and “relatively intact ecosystems” flitted through my mind, jarring me awake. In the middle of the night, I often woke from dreams in which I was struggling to rewrite a line that troubled me earlier that day. Small grants trickled in. Then one day, Ed Skloot from the Surdna Foundation called, asking for a Ms. Beaver. I got on the phone, my voice shaking, “hello.” After a little small talk, he said, “well, I know you requested only \$10,000 from us but how would you feel, Ms. Beaver, if I told you that we wanted to give you guys \$40,000?” My attempt at a professional reply along the lines of, “thank you sir, we’ll use the money wisely” quickly turned into: “oh my god, you’re kidding, oh my god.” After I hung up, I shrieked so loudly, Rex actually overcame his revulsion of Larry’s and my mess of an office, and ran upstairs, thinking I had hurt myself.

As relations with Iraq worsened, the development bill continued to gain support in Congress. The day after wilderness advocates lost an important vote in a House subcommittee, one of the staff members, Sarah, started weeping, presumably over a misplaced filing cabinet, took off in her car, and didn’t show up the rest of the day. Another time, Larry and I got in a yelling match over the only comfortable chair in our office.

“You always get to use it,” I yelled.

“I’ve been here longer than you.”

The argument devolved to me shouting so loudly my throat hurt: “Just say you’re sorry!”

“No!” Larry roared.

Six months after the invasion, the United States went to war with Iraq and within two weeks “won,” whatever that means. The United States got their friendly oil nation back, and gas prices returned to normal (not that they had ever reached the cataclysmic heights originally predicted). Without an international crisis to recommend Refuge development, oil advocates began to lose ground. Months passed. One morning, I walked into the office and Dave was sitting in the front room, a newspaper in his lap, as if he had

just dropped it.

“Guess what?” he said. “We won last night in the House. By three votes.”

“Shut up.”

He shoved the paper into my hand. The top headline read, “Major Upset.”

I looked up. “Why? I mean, how? What happened?”

He shrugged. “Miracle.”

Everyone at the Northern Center shared the same expression: exhausted bewilderment. Though the battle was not over yet--in a month the Senate would vote on the bill--it was the first real demonstration that the tide was changing. Later that month, the Senate voted to kill the bill: 58 to 42. It wasn't even that close. The Fairbanks newspaper hailed the vote as a major grassroots victory. Rex gave everyone the day off, but no one listened, just milled around the office as if lost.

That night, while environmentalists all over the country celebrated, Rex held a party at his house. Families of staff, volunteers, long-time environmentalists, anyone who had any affiliation with the Refuge showed up. Larry wore a suit that was a little on the tight side and had combed his raucous curls flat--a remarkable feat, I thought. All night long, inspired perhaps by the cake and champagne inside me, I kept asking him, “how'd you make your hair do that?” Marty, my first friend in Fairbanks, arrived late, and after she hung up her coat, I saw her search the room and then smile when spying me. She came over and gave me an enormous hug. “We did it,” she said. Toward the end of the evening, thoroughly champagned, Rex stood up and gave a short speech, thanking the world. People cheered and clapped; some wiped tears from their eyes. I leaned against wall, feeling warm and a little weak-kneed. It had been such a grueling year. I had never worked so hard or been so consumed by anything in my life. And we had succeeded. I felt like I had found my place in life.

During that first winter, while immersed in my work, I managed to take off one weekend and make a second attempt at exploring Alaska. My chances were better this time, I knew. Since November when the swamps and rivers had frozen solid, interior Alaska had become as travelable as it had been impenetrable during the summer. A network of trails

appeared around Fairbanks, covering double and probably triple the number of road miles. Though the temperature often averaged ten below zero, many people, I learned, had gravitated to interior Alaska precisely for its winter-time recreational opportunities. The trails were full of skiers, dog mushers, and even bikers, many of whom commuted to town, preferring the direct, safe travel of trails over Fairbanks' icy, infrequently plowed roads.

One Saturday morning in February, Dave and I threw seven dogs in the back of his truck, a sled on top, and drove to the summit of Murphy Dome, where we had shared a bottle of wine earlier that year while gazing at the lakey wilderness below. Our plan was to descend the trail that twisted down the hill's north face, turn east when hitting the untraveled Chatanika River, and forge as far as the day would allow into the Minto Flats area.

From the beginning, the day was a failure. We parked the car in a turn-out, about a mile downhill from the trailhead. As we hooked the dogs to the sled, they lunged and yelped in their usual frenzy to get going. The anchor, a heavy metal claw, broke loose from the thin road ice. Even though I was at best an amateur dog-musher, I had already learned the golden rule: never let go of the sled, no matter what, even if it flipped and the dogs dragged your belly for miles along brushy trails. Dog teams knew GO, not STOP. Trails in town often intersected roads, and loose teams could get hit by a car as they charged across. More probable, the dogs or the sled would get caught on a branch and stop suddenly, possibly breaking shoulder bones. Without a human chaperone, they'd tangle their lines and, anxious to be free, end up fighting. Dogs had been known to kill each other that way.

Our team charged up the road, as if a voice ahead called, "freeeedom." Dave ran after them, yelling "hey." I stared wildly at the gap that was increasing between chaser and chasees, then jumped in the car, intending to punch the accelerator, but couldn't find the car keys. Luckily, the team flew past the trailhead and wound up, confused, at the bermed-up dead-end of Murphy Dome Road. I finally located the keys under the passenger-side floor mat and somewhat ingloriously sped away, reaching the team just as Dave was grabbing the sled handlebars. Together, we straightened the dogs who whined and bellowed and

jumped against their lines. As soon as the dogs were untangled, Dave ran to the back of the sled, yelled, "let's go," and flew down the road and turned so sharply onto the trail, his legs left the runners and whipped through the air. A few hundred feet down the trail, he stopped the team, standing full-weight on the brake and jamming the anchor into the snow which was soft and deep and therefore better able to hold the claw.

I hurriedly parked the car and raced back to the sled, panting and sweating in my fifteen pound outfit which was better suited for standing on a dog sled at ten below, enduring a small wind chill than for even the smallest exertion. I took one runner. Dave took the other. He unhooked the anchor and off we sailed. The trail stayed on the ridgetop for a few miles. For fifteen lovely minutes, the dogs trotted like circus stars, their twenty-eight paws punching the trail in a snappy rhythm. Willows half-submerged in the snow sailed by. When the trail began to descend, however, we quickly learned it was not meant for beginners. At times, it flung straight down, making only perfunctory attempts at switch-backing. Often, when traversing the mountain for any length of time, it maintained the same forty-five degree angle as the slope. Although, we stopped the team and wrapped the runners with rough-locks, metal chains, our descent still terrified. Once, the trail disappeared completely, buried beneath a steep wind-pack. As the dogs cut across the slope, the back of sled slid downhill. Dave fell off. I jumped on the uphill runner and leaned into the hill, trying to keep the sled upright. Still, the sled slid further downhill, dragging the dogs with it. A tin of cookies catapulted out of the sled bag and Tai, the lead husky, pounced at it as it bounced downhill. That was the final straw. The sled flipped-over, and all of us-- me, the sled, the seven dogs, and a scramble of legs--slid in a line down the snow-face. When we finally came to a rest, hundreds of feet below the trail, Dave tumbled in pursuit, calling, "Are you okay?"

It took us a good half hour to re-group on the trail. By then, the waning light forced us to admit that we were not going to reach the Chatanika River by nightfall. We camped at the first level trailside we could find. As I stomped through the snow in my snowshoes, gathering wood, a wall of alders blocked our view of Minto Flats. That night in our sleeping bags, Dave joked that at least we were two miles closer to wilderness than our last visit to Murphy Dome. I was in no mood to joke, feeling defeated by the very wilderness

that had originally lured me to Alaska.

During my second summer in Fairbanks, when the Refuge debate was nearing an end, my parents decided to visit me. Before they arrived, I struggled over ways to entertain them. Few tourist attractions existed in Fairbanks. I could take them to an old mining dredge, which, half-submerged in the watery pit it had once created, looked like a metal brontosaurus. Or we could spend four days on a bus, traveling five hundred miles north to the Arctic Ocean, stopping for few minutes, and then repeating the 500 mile adventure south. We could go to Alaska Land, an imitation frontier town with a few amusement park rides. In the end, I decided to visit Denali National Park and booked two rooms at the Kantishna Road House, one of the three quasi-hotels in the park. The Road House sat at the end of a ninety mile gravel road, the only road in the park, which was closed to all traffic except the park buses. Stopping often to let people take pictures of scenery, or more often, wildlife, these buses crawled, often taking four hours to complete the ninety mile distance.

We arrived at the park entrance early one August morning. Snow already dusted the lowest peaks. Straight from ninety-degree Palo Alto, my parents looked dressed for a polar expedition, my dad in his red parka, thick scarf, and wool hat with ear flaps, my mom in fuzzy-red ear muffs and insulated boots. We boarded the bus. My parents, I could tell, were dreading the long drive. I had mixed feelings. I was looking forward to the wildlife we would see along the way, which was supposed to be spectacular. Cynical Larry had once speculated that the bus tour guides baited the animals. However, as an Alaskan resident and environmental activist to boot, I considered myself above sitting on a bus all day with a bunch of gee-whiz tourists.

A khaki-garbed woman identified herself as our tour guide, Jenny, and the bus lurched forward. Five minutes into the trip, we stopped for a family of red fox in the middle of the road. Three pups tumbled and nipped at each other, flashing piranha teeth. Everyone on the bus went “aw.” Cameras clicked; video cameras purred. My mom nudged my dad. “Bill, do you see that?”

The road followed the McKinley River, a swarm of channels that snaked and

intersected and forked through a wide swath of gravel. Originating from the glaciers on Mount Denali, the water was ash-blue and made white chevrons when it went around boulders. The valley was miles wide and completely red from the willows and berries already full of autumn. Heavy, grey clouds hung low in the sky, chopping off the tops of the foothills of the Alaska Range far to the south. Soon, by a scattering of signs, which read, "Danger. Watch for Grizzly Bears," the bus again paused.

"To your right, about a mile away, you'll see three grizzlies. If people want to step outside to get a better look, please feel free."

The doors hissed open, and I followed a group of people outside. The bears foraged on plants Jenny called Eskimo Potato, their heads jerking with each bite. Every once in a while, they glanced our way. At one point, one ambled closer, his pace surprisingly fast, a bear-amble. Though he was far away, I caught my breath and looked nervously at the man next to me who kept his video camera rolling. Minutes later, Jenny serenely invited everyone to re-enter the bus. Seated again next to my parents, I gloated. I had seen my first non-television, non-zoo grizzly.

Four hours, several hundred caribou, three Dahl sheep, and a moose later, we disembarked at the Kantishna Road House, a collection of log cabins, with communal bathroom and shower facilities, and a big dining area with long tables and benches and an old-fashioned cook stove. A cheerful staff informed us that dinner would be served in a few hours. While my mom and dad rested, I hiked up a small hill and sat and soaked in the view, trying my best to ignore the ramble of buildings directly below. Instead, I focused on the valley which dipped gently and everlastingly to the south, finally ending with some brown mountains topped by a thick gray sky. Occasional noises, reminding me of the grizzlies I had seen earlier that day, compelled me to look over my shoulder. After the third sad head-twist, I had to conclude that I was indeed no better than a tourist, unfamiliar with and even scared of nature and nature's creatures. Wilderness was much bigger and stranger and unfriendlier than I had ever imagined it to be. I must have been deluded when before moving to Alaska I said I wanted to find places without electric lights, where no human had ever stepped foot.

In the dining hall, my parents and I joined one hundred other guests sitting at long, wooden tables with benches. A small, energetic blond dressed in overalls, introduced herself as Roberta, the owner of Kantishna Lodge.

“I’m happy to have y’all here,” she chirped. “This here is my favorite place in the entire world, and I just want y’all to have a good time. Okay?”

The room grew noisy as the first course, a leafy salad garnished with tomato wedges and carrot sticks, was served. The main course consisted of baked potatoes and prime rib, followed by blueberry pie for dessert. Everything tasted fresh and well-prepared. Throughout the dinner, a half a dozen young men and women, dressed in aprons, bustled around the dining room, picking up plates, refilling water and wine glasses, and bringing in the new courses. A large unglazed window offered a view of the kitchen where at least five white clad cooks worked purposefully. It was a major operation, this lodge, especially considering how far off the road system we were. I couldn’t help worrying about how much food and fuel the Lodge consumed, the effort that went into getting it all here, where the water supply came from, and where the garbage and waste water went.

After dinner, as my parents and I were leaving the room, we passed Roberta who sat in a lounge chair, chatting with a few guests.

“How was your dinner,” she asked.

“Great dessert,” my dad, always a lover of sweets, answered.

“I’m Marie,” I said, offering a hand. A friend, Chris, whom I had recently met at one of the environmental center’s monthly potlucks, had encouraged me to introduce myself to Roberta, if I had the chance. “She’s kind of a friend of mine,” he had said.

“I believe we have some mutual friends,” I continued.

“Oh,” she said, smiling broadly. “Who might that be?”

“Well, Chris Barston,” I answered and when her face didn’t show recognition, I continued to list some other people who were at the party, some bigwigs in the environmental movement, people whom I thought she would know. “Celia Hunter, Ginny Wood, Rex Blazer..”

Roberta immediately lost her smile. “Celia and Ginny are no friends of mine,” she

said coldly. "And you are no friend of mine."

While I stared, tears formed in Roberta's eyes. "You work at the environmental center?"

"Yes."

"How long have you lived in Alaska?" Before I could answer, she continued, her voice rising. "You guys put me and my thirteen best friends out of business. Me and my best friends were mining right here, doing everything right, reclamation, settling ponds, all that. The water was so clear, you could drink it. Then you guys told the courts that we were messing up the park, and some judge put an injunction on our mines."

I looked at Roberta's guests. Most stared at their laps. Some frowned, their heads pulled slightly back, as if watching an offensive scene on film.

"We'd been mining for twenty years. Twenty years. How's an ol' guy like Ed gonna switch jobs after twenty years?"

She paused. Tears were streaming down her face.

"I'm sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say. I actually was unaware of the specific event she was talking about, although I had written in many of my grant proposals that "the Northern Center has been instrumental in watch-dogging placer mining operations around interior Alaska."

"Ed's still out of a job, if you really care, been unemployed ever since it happened ten years ago. I was the lucky one, got to run the Kantishna Lodge. But you think what we do here--catering up to one hundred guests, every day, all summer long, dealing with their waste, feeding them, washing all those sheets--is better for the environment than those thirteen mines?" She paused, opened her mouth as if to speak again, then shook her head. "No way."

The whole dining room was silent. If there was one lesson my parents had taught me growing up, it was tolerance of people, or empathy with people, or something like that. This rule was never articulated or written down; it was something that my mom and dad lived by, every minute of the day, and I learned it as if by breathing. Ethnic jokes, even the more innocent ones that start, "three men were in a plane..", never entered the house. My parents rarely had an unkind word to say about anyone--friend or colleague or acquaintance

or politician. They practically adopted my two cousins, Stevie and Andy, both of whom had Downs Syndrome, taking them to Disney Land, pancake breakfasts, and other places my aunt and now-senile uncle couldn't afford. They never forgot to send a birthday check to any of my twenty-five cousins, although some were now in their forties. I could think of only a few shocking times when my mom and dad had raised their voices at each other.

This made me a sap, at a very young age. If there was a reason to feel sorry for someone, I would. Bad guys on television were "lonely." Once, I burst into tears when I saw Paul, the slow man who sold popcorn at basketball games, jogging. That's all he was doing--jogging along a busy street. He was probably having a great time. Even my parents were surprised.

"For goodness sakes, what's wrong, Marie?"

"Paul," was all I could say.

In junior high, the mean years, I caught my friends making fun of me. "Wolfie's really a nice guy deep down," one of them said, in a mimicking voice, referring to one of the resident "math geeks," a smelly kid with greasy hair whom I had defended the day before.

"Shpt," the other friend said, noticing me in the doorway.

Now, here was this woman, losing it in front of her clients. Though she was obviously crazy, she brought up some good points. Having sat through the one hundred-head, three-course dinner, I could see that this lodge was high-impact. I didn't know how faithful Roberta and her miner buddies had been to environmental regulations (most miners, according to Rex, weren't), but I could easily believe their thirteen small mines might have been less damaging to the environment than this lodge. Plus, these miners were small-fry, not like the oil industry or Ronald Reagan, who were easy opponents: greedy, loaded with money, selfish. In previous environmental battles, I had been buoyed by a sense of righteousness. The environmentalists were the good guys. But now, I hated to think that we had put an old guy named Ed out of business. Once I had asked Rex why we focused on the small placer mines, instead of Red Dog Mine, one of the largest silver mines in the country.

"Because we can," he said in his usual blunt way.

My face must have expressed dismay because he hurriedly elaborated. “Cumulative impacts. Together, those miners make a helluva impact. Go down the Forty-Mile, a Wild and Scenic River, and you’ll be amazed at the devastation.”

At the time, I had nodded, convinced. But now, I felt like the bad guy.

Feeling one hundred pairs of eyes on me, I said in a low voice, “Sorry again,” and left the building as quickly as I could. The rest of the stay was of course ruined for me and my parents. Later, back in Fairbanks, when I told Chris what had happened, he apologized and said he knew Roberta only from kayaking and was not aware of her hostility toward environmentalists.

Later the following winter, one dark, forty below afternoon in November, working in my office, I heard a woman’s shrill voice downstairs. I couldn’t catch specific words, but she went on and on, barely pausing. Every so often, I heard Rex’s low-voice. After a while, I couldn’t concentrate and went downstairs to see what the commotion was all about.

A young, pale blond woman in an oversized green parka patched with quadrangles of duct tape stood in the front room. Two children with stringy hair and wan skin, smaller, skinnier, more versions of the woman, hung onto her side. They looked scared. The woman talked in a bitter, spitting way about “the environmental center taking jobs away from the good people of Alaska.”

“We’re not--” Rex tried to intervene but she railed on, “You all are a bunch of rich Outsiders. You’ve never known what it’s like to go hungry. My husband’s having a hard time putting bread and butter on the table, these days, cuz of you folks. Lay off us miners will you?”

“The present environmental regulations aren’t demanding,” Rex said. “Be thankful you don’t live in any other state in the country where the mining regulations are much stricter and actually enforced.”

He wasn’t getting anywhere, I could tell. The woman scrunched up her near translucent face and said, “Thankful? You tell that to my kids here. They need milk, new boots, a warm house.” She looked about to cry.

“Look,” Rex said, apparently unaffected by her quivering face. “If your husband can’t make a profit complying with environmental regulations, then he shouldn’t be mining. It’s as simple as that. We have to think about wilderness too.”

“Wilderness! That’s all there is in Alaska. And you people want to lock it up. You’re, you’re....” She exhaled heavily. “Just lay off us, you hear.” With that, she grabbed her children’s hands and dragged them out the door.

I could almost hear a collective sigh come from the staff members who had gravitated to the scene. “Those miners have got to stop using mercury,” Rex said, as everyone dispersed, repeating a well-worn joke among environmentalists that miners acted so crazily because they used mercury in their operations--a traditional but now illegal practice--and therefore suffered from mercury poisoning. No one laughed.

I returned to my office, somewhat shaken. Though the woman repeated charges often leveled at environmentalists--we were wealthy Outsiders, uncaring about the real people who were just trying to get by--something about her words struck home this time. Maybe it was because she and her children looked so malnourished and needy. Maybe it was because Rex, wearing a brand new Patagonia parka, had been so unsympathetic. Though none of us got paid oodles of money here at the Center--my hourly wage was \$6.50--it was true that many of us came from upper middle-class backgrounds and were able to live on such small incomes because of family support. Both the intern, Dave, and Rex had trust funds. All the nice things I possessed--my car, my computer and printer, my down parka, my college degree--came from my parents. I couldn’t help agreeing with this woman that it was rather inappropriate for environmentalists--the haves--to limit the have-nots.

Though I would never admit this to my colleagues, I was also beginning to agree with her other charge that Alaska had enough wilderness to spare. For Christ sake, there was so much wilderness, I had yet to get beyond the view of a road or building or trail, some human artifact. But the Northern Center only knew the word, “no.” For example, when the city of Nenana wanted to build a new dumpsite, the environmental center immediately protested, claiming the existing dumpsite was big enough and Nenana was just trying to get funding from the state in order to provide jobs for locals. It seemed to me,

however, that even if the Center's accusations were right, worse things could happen to the environment than a dump site. In the interest of public relations alone, we would have benefited from giving the project at least a curmudgeonly "okay, but we're watching you" sort of answer. Another time, the Bureau of Land Management wanted to add several hundred miles and a bunch of cabins to the White Mountains trail and public cabin system. Everyone I knew used and loved this area. But as usual, the environmental center was dead-set against it, claiming that expansion was unnecessary and would irreparably injure the habitat.

I understood the impetus behind all the naysaying. A "yes" here and a "yes" there over the years added up to a hell of a lot of loss. Yet at the same time, I thought it unrealistic and unthinking of us to stamp an indiscriminate "no" on every development proposal that came our way.

In early January, Dave, a few other friends, and I spent a week in the White Mountains. The trails were perfectly groomed, and we traveled no more than sixteen miles a day. This amounted to a three hour jaunt for the dog mushers and a little longer workout for me, the skier of the crowd. Every night, we stayed in one of the one-room log cabins maintained by the Bureau of Land Management. These cabins had lots of bunks (some even came with mattresses) and were well-stocked with wood to heat the place, saws, axes, cook stoves, lights, and matches. All we had to do was bring our own white gas for the cooking and the lights, and of course our own food.

Vacation mode set in quickly. Pretty soon, we were rising with the sun at ten a.m.. We lingered over breakfasts of coffee and bacon and fried biscuits, reading out loud journal entries from the log books. Our good friend William Walters' slanted, curly handwriting made an appearance every two months or so. He always ended his entries thanking the BLM and his six "hardworking dogs: Rhiannon, Charlie, Brownie, Lacey, Buster, and Yukon". At one point, someone else wrote in, "does William Walters live here or what?" The biggest source of entertainment was a dog musher named Brad who love life we were able to trace through the various women he had showed with over the years: Shelley, then Susan, then Mary, then Shelly again, before moving onto Dana.

By the end of the week, we weren't getting on the trails until well after one pm, which left us at most two hours of seamy light to travel by. So we spent a lot of time in the dark, which was okay with us. Most Alaskans I knew owned headlamps that weighed ten pounds and blasted a beam comparable to a car headlight. Plus, all week, the temperature had averaged zero. This was very warm for January, cloudless weather and allowed us to actually stop for minutes at a time and gaze above at the stars or the green spastic swirl of the northern lights without getting too cold.

One night toward the end of the week, I found myself alone on the trail, the mushers somewhere in front of me. By now, being the slowest of the group, I was used to going solo and enjoyed the quiet and the rhythmic motion of gliding and kicking. My headlamp pushed a sepia oval along the trail before me. Beyond the oval, all I could distinguish in the dark were hints of shadows. In time, I grew frustrated with my limited view and stopped and turned off my headlight. The stars popped out of the blackness, a million of them, all fiery and sharp like sparks. A wisp of furry green hung in the far northern sky--a growing or fading aurora. Soon, the jaggedy shapes of spruce trees individuated out of the darkness. To the east and west, long, rounded ridges emerged. The snow reflected enough light so that I could see the general direction of the trail. It occurred to me that I could probably ski without my lamp. For the rest of the evening, starting shakily but quickly finding the motion, I skied in the dark which I knew.

Later at the end of January, I took off for two weeks to visit a friend in New Mexico and loaned my Toyota Corolla with the excellent bumper stickers to a new intern at the Northern Center who reminded me of Olive Oil, tall and wobbly on her feet, possessing big teeth. By the time I returned from my travels, the car had been in impoundment for twenty days. I had forgotten to tell the intern that my unregistered car owned a number of unpaid tickets and there were certain areas around town where she simply couldn't park. At eighteen dollars a day, the sum I owed added up to more than the car was worth. In addition, the rear-wheel drive, front-engined vehicle was a death wish on Fairbanks' poorly-plowed roads. At all times during the winter, I carried two hundred pounds of sand in the trunk and applied pressure to the brakes well before all stop signs and lights. At one

particularly icy though innocuous-looking corner, I had slid three times off the road into a ditch and had become proficient at flagging down other cars, especially the four wheel drive monster trucks.

I decided to leave the car in impoundment. It was time, I thought, to try the carless thing, like Larry and others at the environmental center. I took my mountain bike to the sports shop to get it lubed with winter grease and generally tuned-up. After I paid the bike guys one hundred and forty bucks and rode to work one day bundled up in so many layers, I felt like I was wearing a sleeping bag, I officially joined the league of winter bikers in Fairbanks, who were an elite, unsmiling bunch, I had to admit. They shooshed across the grocery stores in their nylon, super-insulated, soft-sole boots and bought dried fruit and grains--things that wouldn't receive damage from freezing when they peddled home. They had their pictures taken in the newspaper, close-ups of their faces in cold-weather grimace, every strand of hair coated in a tube of ice, with captions that read, "Robert says that winter biking isn't for everyone." At parties, they showed up late, breathing hard, cursing the snowplowers who pushed piles of snow into the bike lanes, disrupting their travel.

Within a week at most, I learned to hate winter biking. The route I chose to get to work used the back streets of Fairbanks, happily avoiding cars, but it was long and took me over an hour. If I needed to detour to the grocery store or the library, I spent two hours getting to work. When friends called at the last minute inviting me to the movies or dinner, I had to refuse; by the time I suited up in my biking clothes and peddled to their place, dessert would be long gobbled up. The windchill aspect of biking downhill required that I wear so many layers, I always sweated like a pig in a sauna on the flats or uphill--even at forty below zero. But peddling to the nearest laundromat with a load of laundry on my back proved to be so grueling, I went weeks without washing my clothes. I had a constant grubby, greasy feeling. It seemed that all I did was bike and work, bike and work. If the environment was any better off for my non-consumption of fossil fuels, I could not see it. All around me, hundreds of people sat warm and squeaky-clean in their smog-making cars. I was getting no kudos from my colleagues at work for having joined the winter biking club. Instead, Larry scolded me one day for the seditious act of turning the thermometer to seventy, up from the standard sixty which probably translated to an ambient temperature of

fifty five within the Northern Center's old, thin walls and necessitated that I wear several layers of sweaters and a pair of wool gloves while sitting at my desk. What's more, used to jogging, I did not feel in any better shape than before. Winter biking was a thankless, joyless pastime, I decided. I began saving up for a new car.

Every summer, a local wilderness guide named Ron Yarnell donated the proceeds of one of his raft trips to the Northern Center. To save expenses and increase our profit, instead of hiring his own guides to run the trip, Ron used environmental center staff members as volunteer guides. We, the staff, liked this arrangement as well because it transported us to places only accessible by expensive-to-charter bush plane. This year, the Northern Center benefit trip went down the Canning River, a calm run of clear blue water which originated in some of the tallest mountains of the Brooks Range, cut north through the very same coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that had elicited so much attention a year before, and finally flowed into the Arctic Ocean. Having devoted so much time and energy to the Refuge issue, I longed to see the place first hand. A month before the trip, in May, I lobbied hard to be volunteer guide. After some debate, Rex decided that he, I, and the Northern Center board president, June Weinstock would be the lucky three to run the trip.

On July First I found myself setting up camp on a snow-covered sand bar on a bend of the Canning River. Apparently, an unseasonably cold storm had just passed through the mountains. An icy wind blew. I wore every single layer I had brought and wished I had listened to June when she had warned me that temperatures could be as high as ninety or as low as twenty in July in the Brooks Range. Post-storm wisps of clouds still clung to the mountain sides, some of which were blown clear of snow, exposing crumbling grey rock. No trees, only head-high willows with silver-green leaves, grew. Here and there, bright pink flowers, which June called Spring Beauty, surfaced above the snow. I felt satisfactorily and wonderfully far away. Adding to this spirit was the day-long sequence of plane rides required to get here. At eight this morning, June, Rex, and I, and the nine clients had boarded a small fifteen-seater plane in Fairbanks and flew three hours over lakey tundra and occasional congregations of mountains to the small Athabaskan

Indian settlement of Arctic Village, just south of the Brooks Range. From there, a Cessna 185 toted us by threes to this bend of the river, weaving through a maze of narrow valleys filled with house-sized chunks of ice and squeezing through windy passes that made the plane drop and my stomach seize. Sometimes we flew high enough to offer a top view of the peaks which continued unstoppably in all directions as if the whole world were made of mountains. The landing astonished me the most as the plane suddenly dipped and touched wheels on a strip of rocks, none smaller than footballs. "We're not landing here!" I had cried out loud, my voice overwhelmed by the din of the engine.

Unfortunately, this marked the last of my good feeling. Though one of my best friends and owning a heart of gold, June came across as odd to people who didn't know her. In her forties and single, she had a poor sense of timing when speaking and tended to either interrupt conversations or pause too long before voicing her thoughts. She was also super smart, had a double masters degree in chemistry and physics, and couldn't make small talk if her life depended on it. While the clients milled around the kitchen area during mealtimes, she attempted to introduce topics like Format's Last Theorem or corrected them when they mispronounced words like, 'forte.' Rex, it turned out, was no better with the masses and could only engage in conversation having to do with environmental subjects. Before the trip, the wilderness guide Ron had coached me in the importance of mingling with the clients for whom the trip was largely social and who often felt so wide-eyed at being so removed from civilization they often needed a little reassuring tete a tete with the guides. After a few days with June and Rex talking politics together while the others chatted among themselves, I began to worry about client unrest.

In addition, the temperature stayed sub-freezing for the first few days of the trip, which not only made sitting in a rubber raft extremely cold but slowed the snow melt so much that the river level dropped several feet. In some sections of the river, the water was four or five inches deep. When this happened as we floated downstream, the boats grounded to halt and all crew members had to climb out and drag them to deeper water. For many of the clients who were not usually active and who had signed up for a float trip expressly because it implied relaxation, getting in and out of the heavily-loaded boats and yanking them across grabby gravel was hard work. Sometimes the rafts got so stuck, Rex,

June and I had to yell “one-two-three-yank” to our crews and thereby move the rigs in puny increments. At the end of the day, the clients ate their dinner in exhausted silence and retired to their tents as soon possible. When they grumbled that “this wasn’t the kind of trip we signed up for,” June apologized in her nervous sort of way and promised fairer travel ahead, which probably exacerbated their discontent. After seven years of guiding, I have learned that leadership is everything. If a guide accepts responsibility for things she has no control over like the weather then the clients, in their discomfort from being too wet or too cold or too grungy without their daily showers, will jump at the chance to scapegoat her. When complaints arise over the “cheap” coffee or the “kind-of bumpy-isn’t-it” camp site, a guide’s best strategy is to say (as cheerfully as possible), “this is camping in the arctic, for you.”

Another problem was that all the boat-dragging seriously slowed our pace. By the fourth day we lagged far behind schedule. On the morning of the fifth day, June announced to the group that we might not make it to the final airstrip and would possibly have to cut our route in half, where the only other airstrip on the river was located. Again, in hindsight, this was a goof. A guide should never admit defeat unless absolutely necessary. This bad news, in the wake of all the cold weather and hard work, put the clients in such a mutinous mood that the next day they sent a delegation to June and Rex, demanding that they get to the final airstrip or else they wanted a portion of their money back. June became so flustered that while hurrying to prepare breakfast she tripped over an untied shoelace, landed on the cook stove, and spilled boiling water all over her thigh. She screamed and then whimpered while I stripped off her pants and poured gallons of cold water on the pink, blistering oval of a burn. Within hours, it turned into a bloody, pussy, full-thigh mess which rivaled those disgustingly gory rubber wounds you can buy in costume stores around Halloween. In fact, had she been a client, we would have tried to radio-phone one of the jets flying via the north pole route to Europe and asked it to send over a helicopter.

June was determined to tough it out for the rest of the week though she must have been in excruciating pain. She was, however, confined to sitting on her rear with her bandaged leg stuck straight out. Luckily, Sheri, one of the nice clients, had boating experience and took over her captaining position on the raft. We got a late start that

morning. However, sometime early in the afternoon, we passed the Marsh Fork, a fairly large tributary which added a decent rush of water to the river. By evening, we had traveled almost three times further than the previous day. That night, in an unprecedented gesture, Rex offered to make dinner. In all my years at the Northern Center, I had never seen him bring to work a home-cooked lunch. I worried about leaving him to his own devices but wanted to help Sheri, who was also an EMT, check and bathe June's leg. Plus, the menu for the evening was Kraft macaroni and cheese--a meal impossible, I thought, to ruin. Two hours later, I found myself holding a cup of orangeish soup with a bunch of overcooked noodles swimming on top. Also floating around were some unidentifiable brown twisty things. "What's this?" I asked as politely as possible, holding one up. "Ham," Rex said. "To spruce up the meal." I nodded and spooned some broth into my mouth. A tooth-hard crunch told me that he had neglected to hydrate the ham. Worse, it tasted strange, not like meat at all but tangy and sweet. It took my synapses a moment to locate the problem: Rex had mistaken the dried apricots for the ham. I didn't say anything, hoping the clients' palates would prove less discerning than mine, but no such luck. First, someone snickered, then as if waiting for the cue, all burst out laughing. "Good god, man," Ralph, the elder of the group said. "What have you done to our dinner?" Rex's tact seemed to be the opposite of June's readily apologetic approach because he just shrugged and said, "tastes good to me."

The next day the mosquitoes arrived, making me wish for cold weather again. I had heard that the bugs in the arctic were so fierce, they actually killed caribou calves. Sure enough, so many hundreds buzzed around my body, the world looked like a pointillism painting. I couldn't venture forth from the tent without complete protection: dete, a head net, and proboscis-proof clothes covering as much of my body as possible--although the temperature was now eighty. Even more disquieting, the mosquitoes dive-bombed into the hot food, so that a pot of oatmeal or soup or pasta acquired dozens of dead floating flaccid things during the course of its cooking. As full-time cook now that Rex had failed his one-time stint and June was out of commission, I tried to hide the bug parts by stirring them into the broth, but it didn't matter. As soon as the food transferred to an open bowl and into the hands of a client, dozens more mosquitoes plunged. Many people returned half-eaten

meals.

On the eighth day, the river left the mountains and entered the grassy, rolling coastal plain which fanned all the way to the Beaufort Sea. It also grew multi-braided, making navigation tricky. If you took the wrong channel, it could divide into two or three more channels, each of which might divide further, and you could find yourself stuck in a trickle of water barely deep enough to float a duck. Early in the morning, Rex, June, and I had held a meeting, the sole agenda being the importance of taking the right channel in order to maintain the spirits of the clients, who having endured more boat dragging than they ever cared to in their lives would probably not take lightly the prospect of more. The best strategy, according to Rex, was to take the channel with the most water. But once on the river, I quickly found that this wasn't always so easy. More often than not, the two branches looked identical, or the last minute the one you thought was the smallest was actually the biggest. At one point, the channel I chose led us through a series of narrowing channels until finally dwindling to a standing puddle .

"Nice work, Marie," Rex said and made a grimace as he and his crew waded through the water past me. "Why'd you take this channel?"

Slightly angry, I didn't answer. I didn't know much about guiding, but I thought it was probably a breach of etiquette to publicly criticize the other guides. Plus, I couldn't help remembering that I had kept my mouth shut during Rex's macaroni and cheese experiment.

Thankfully, the stretch of shallow water did not last long, and soon the rafts were rocking along along a swift current once again. I decided to lag behind Rex and let him choose the correct channel. At the next juncture in the river, however, I was surprised to see that he in fact hung back and waited while poor June actually stood up in her raft to scope out the river and then pointed toward the fork we needed to take.

"Is he really that much of a coward?" I thought.

At the next branch, Rex again stayed a tad behind June. This time when she made a decision, he said, "Are you sure?"

"Of course not," she replied.

Throughout the day, at every braid in the river, Rex took the same tactic. He let

June or me lead the way and then either disputed our decision immediately or waited until the channel withered to a dead-end before making some sort of "I told you so" comment.

By evening, I had lost all respect for Rex, never to be regained. I finally saw him as the cowardly manipulator he truly was, the kind of boss who takes off for two weeks to play his fiddle, abandons the new employee, and then covers his butt by making threats like "you'd have to be a total screw-up to not get this..." By the end of the trip I could barely look at Rex. When we returned to Fairbanks, I gave my notice at work. I was, I realized, fed up with the entire environmental movement. If it could cultivate, breed, or even tolerate guys like Rex as well as righteous winter bikers while putting good people out of work, it just didn't make sense. Plus, that first evening in the Brooks Range when I had walked through new snow and felt cool, calm air in my lungs, I had become convinced that it was time to move on. I was done with the fast-paced office experience. I was ready for more walks in valleys, as many more as I could get.