

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2021

# OUT INTO THE WILDS: A GAY MARINE'S JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE

David Harris Stalling

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Stalling, David Harris, "OUT INTO THE WILDS: A GAY MARINE'S JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE" (2021). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11783.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11783>

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](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).

OUT INTO THE WILDS:

A GAY MARINE'S JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-ACCEPTANCE

By

DAVID HARRIS STALLING

A.A.S. Forestry, Paul Smith's College, Paul Smith's, New York, 1981

B.A. Journalism, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 1990

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing, Nonfiction

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May 2021

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School  
Graduate School

Judy Blunt, Chair  
Creative Writing

Christopher Dombrowski  
Creative Writing

Neva Hassanein  
Environmental Studies

Into the Bear's Den

Chairperson: Judy Blunt

**ABSTRACT:** (A segment of a book-length project.) Struggling with divorce, the death of his father and coming to terms with his sexuality, a former Force Recon Marine abandons the thought of suicide and decides, instead, to retreat to the wilds in a desperate attempt to make sense of things. Hiking by himself for more than 1,000 miles, over three months, mostly off-trail through some of the most remote and wild country left in the United States, the author writes of his encounters with wolves, grizzlies, mountain lions and, more importantly, himself. "In the wilds," the author writes, "there are no societal-created norms and expectations. Everything is what it is. A grizzly might judge me as a possible threat or feast but doesn't care who I love or sleep with." A mixture of wilderness adventure, natural history and self-discovery, the narrator takes along on his physical and emotional journey as he faces a lifetime of deceit and begins to understand and embrace his darkest secrets and authentic self.

## **FREEFALL**

For years  
I've fed illusions  
Of flying high  
Until the ground grows frighteningly close  
Terrified, I suddenly realize  
I am falling

Leaving the womb  
Like leaping from a plane  
Begins a tumultuous freefall  
There are choices:  
Remain frightened, out of control  
Or get stable, and enjoy the ride  
Until we meet the end  
(And we will)  
As sure as sky meets earth

Best to see it all now  
Long before impact  
While there is still time  
Precious time  
To enjoy an exhilarating ride  
And make the most  
Of the last 2,500 feet

So I will flare, flip and tumble  
Through clouds and clear skies  
And pretend I am flying, sometimes  
Though I know better  
But it still brings me joy

It's my jump, my journey, my fall  
I'll do it as me, not to please others  
Critics and skeptics be damned!  
Who cares what they think?  
They don't even know  
That they too  
Are falling fast

*“I had trouble with a world whose idea of vitality was anything other than the naked authenticity of living and dying.” -- Doug Peacock*

### **Prologue**

On a chilly August morning aside a remote, high-mountain meadow I lay hidden behind a downed, subalpine fir tree watching a silver-tipped sow grizzly and her two cubs about 100 yards or so upwind of me. She was lying down, resting, keeping watch of her young ones as they wrestled, rolled and chased each other in the grass. The cubs ran and pounced on their mom a few times and she nudged them away with her snout. When one cub tried to suckle, she swiftly swatted the youngster with her powerful paw, in an effortless motion, and sent the startled cub rolling. Then she got up, walked over, and licked the cub until all seemed well in the world.

I was seven weeks into a ten-week, 1,200-mile solo backpack trip through the most remote, rugged, wild country left in the continental United States – from my front porch in Missoula, Montana, to Waterton, Alberta, mostly off trail, crossing only three main roads along the way. I departed on this big, wild adventure deeply depressed, contemplating suicide, and decided instead to make yet another desperate search for solace and sanity.

When I first I retreated to the wilds of Montana years before, fresh out of a Marine Force Recon unit, I developed a particular fondness for and connection to grizzly bears. They are beautiful, fascinating, potentially dangerous animals that are gravely maligned and misunderstood. Some people hate them and many fear them because they do not know and understand them. They are bears. They want to, and should, be given respect, space and left alone to live and be themselves.

Such thoughts and more buzzed around my brain as I watched that sow and her cubs in that high-mountain meadow on that chilly August morning. Then it struck me: I had spent so much time alone in the wilds because in the wilds I could truly be myself. In nature, in the wilds, there are no societal-created norms, judgments and expectations. Everything is what it is. A grizzly might judge me as a threat or feast but does not care who I fall in love with and sleep with. I was fighting to defend and protect wildness, naturalness and the freedom of wild grizzlies while denying and suppressing my own wildness, naturalness, and freedom. Like the grizzlies, I am what I am and do what I do. I want to be (and should be) given respect, space and left alone to be myself.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." Wildlife and wild places preserve truth of reality, of life and death, and our primeval connection to this Earth. To deny that is to deny ourselves; to destroy it is self-destruction. To embrace, understand and accept it is to embrace, understand and accept our own innate nature and wildness. Everything is what it is, including us. We are part of it all. We ignore that at our own peril.

## **Introduction: The Last 2,500 Feet**

As a Force Recon Marine, I dove out of planes from altitudes as high as 28,000 feet, night and day, sometimes with full combat gear, sometimes without, sometimes right into the ocean with SCUBA gear attached, from the swamps of coastal North Carolina to the deserts of southeast California, in the scorching heat and humidity of Puerto Rico to the brutally frigid tundra of northern Norway. Or, as the Marine Corps hymn simply states, *in every clime and place*.

I would tumble, fall, and fly. At least it *feels* like flying, falling at terminal velocity, speeds of 180 miles-per-hour; a slight tilt of the right hand would turn me quickly right, the left hand would turn me that direction, or I could cuff both my hands inward to go forward, or outward to slow my descent. I could hunch up to slow down or pull hands and legs in to speed up. Place my hands and legs together for a missile-like nosedive, or do flips, or spin. By maneuvering in such a manner, a team of Marines can remain together in the sky, and even approach each other and “link up” by locking arms. I once kissed my friend Jim at 10,000-feet above the Earth.

And as the ground grew bigger and closer, I would check the altimeter on my wrist until reaching a point to “wave off” (a flagging of the hands to warn those above me that I was about to open my chute, so they could move and avoid crashing into me), move my right hand in to the “ripcord” at my chest (making a counter move in and over my head with the left hand, so as to remain in a stable fall and not spin out of control), then pull, rapidly thrusting both hands and arms out, up and forward, like a referee’s signal for

a touchdown, tightly gripping the ripcord handle that pulls out the long, thin wire that releases the nylon flaps on the pack, allowing the small spring-loaded pilot parachute to burst free, like a jack-in-the-box, catching wind and pulling the main chute out behind by a cord. The rest, if all went well, happened rapidly – the main chute blossoms open, bringing acceleration to what seems a sudden halt. It once literally jerked me out of my boots over northern Norway I got frostbitten toes after landing in socks on snow in minus-40 temperatures. And then everything would seem calm, compared to the previous rushing of wind in the ears, and I would gradually steer my way to the ground, pull down hard on toggles to flare, pause, and land, sometimes softly, sometimes hard, depending on wind and luck.

Other times, the pilot chute might get caught in the wind pocket in the small of my back, a “snivel,” we called it -- so I would bang away with my elbow until it caught wind and deployed. Or the main might malfunction, which never happened to me, but if it did, I was trained to “cut away,” or release the main and open the reserve. “No worries,” my instructor said, “if your main doesn’t open, you have the rest of your life to deploy your reserve.” It could sometimes take 1,000 feet or so for the main to open, if everything worked right, and another 1,000 or more to try and rectify things if it didn’t. For this reason, we had a general rule to pull and open our chutes at 4,000 to 3,000 feet, and always, *always* before reaching 2,500 feet; an altitude that shows on the altimeter as red, *danger zone* – like the “low on gas” signal in a car, only with more severe consequences.

Around the time I was doing lots of jumps, I had a reoccurring dream: I am freefalling, enjoying the ride, when I look at my altimeter and it’s in the red zone, 2,500



feet. I wave off, reach to pull, but I have no parachute on my back. *Nothing*. At first I am terrified, but quickly calm down. It's my last 2,500 feet, I figure, I may as well enjoy it. So I smile, and begin doing front flips, and back flips, and then I wake up to the dark silence of the night.

When I first left the Marine Corps, I lived on a friend's farm in South Carolina for a while before accepting a seasonal job with the U.S. Forest Service and moving to Montana. In the summers I worked in the Bitterroot Mountains; the rest of the year I studied at the University of Montana where I earned a degree in journalism. I met a beautiful, intelligent woman named Christine who cherished the wilds as much as I did. We got married. We had a son and named him Cory. I got a job as the conservation editor for a Bugle Magazine, the flagship publication of a nonprofit, hunter-based nonprofit wildlife conservation organization called the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. I volunteered for the Montana Wildlife Federation, an affiliate of the National Wildlife Federation, eventually became president of the organization, and won the group's Les Pengelly Professional Conservationist of the Year Award. I hunted, I fished, I spent a lot of time roaming the wilds, year-round, by foot, snowshoes, skis and mountain bike. It seemed the perfect life.

My reputation for being a sincere, honest guy was a testament to my acting ability. It worked for a while. But years of innate, internal struggles eventually burst free from my best efforts at containment, bringing on an overwhelming flood of depression. I turned to booze and nicotine. It all reached a point where I could no longer focus on the wildlife conservation work I used to love or the outdoor activities I used to enjoy.

At first, at least on the surface, I attributed my condition and behavior on the death of my father and my wife of 14-years filing for divorce. I had been the football hero, the fighter, the U.S. Marine, the hunter, the adventurer -- the full embodiment of manly manliness -- meeting and exceeding all the societal-created norms and expectations to proudly earn the title, All American Masculine Male. But deep down inside, at a level I tried to avoid at all costs, I knew I was emotionally and sexually attracted to men. That, of course, was unacceptable. I could not, would not, be one of *them!* Through various phases of suppression and denial, I approached it like one might face a diagnosis of cancer; I *knew* I could overcome and beat it, but it was a battle I had to fight alone, because no one could dare know the diagnosis. What better cure than to be the toughest, craziest, most macho and masculine man I could be, embracing and living out every myth and misconception of manhood I could muster?

I spent much of my life feeding secret shadows of shame, guilt, anger and fear until they finally loomed large, like the monsters I imagined in my closet as a kid. I lost all desire and passion to go on and thought, *maybe sometimes it's okay to quit, perhaps best to quit.* I drove late one drunken night to a trailhead a few miles from my home to the edge of the Rattlesnake Wilderness, with a shotgun I used to hunt ducks and geese. My plan was to walk a few miles in and blow my head off. Instead, I sat in my car and cried. I thought of my son, Cory, then only three, and wondered how he would turn out. I thought of my family. I thought of my friends. Then I thought of my dream, the last 2,500 feet. And I thought of my maps. *The* maps. Maps of the wild country surrounding my home.

For years I had studied the maps, intrigued by the notion that I could walk off my front porch in town and hike all the way to Alberta, Canada. It was a fantasy, a journey of the mind, until that inebriated night I drove to the trailhead with a 12-gauge. At that point I thought: *What the hell? It's the last 2,500 feet.*

## **Chapter One: North Towards Wellness**

Of course, I procrastinated my departure; far easier to get drunk and boast about the adventure than actually do it. By then I had left the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and was working for another nonprofit conservation group called Trout Unlimited, based in Arlington, Virginia, working out of my home in Missoula, to help protect wild rivers and watersheds. I confessed to my boss that I was no longer really doing the job I had once been so passionate about. I lay around most my days in bed, depressed, and it was only fair to all involved that I quit. He told me to take a leave of absence for however long it took to get my head on straight – the first few weeks I could use sick leave, the rest without pay. I took money I didn't have and bought a new backpack, tent, stove, sleeping bag and boots. I packed what I thought would be enough food to get me through the 10 days or so I estimated it would take to get to Condon, a small town in the Seeley Swan Valley, where I planned to re-supply.

I left at 2:00 pm, on Tuesday, July 5, 2005, a year from the day Chris told me she wanted a divorce. My friends and co-workers Corey and Rob saw me off, and Corey took a photo of me stepping from the covered front porch of my home, that also served as our offices, a house I bought after the divorce. Built in 1910, and situated downtown Missoula, the two-story Victorian house had been fully and beautifully restored by the previous owners. But being dangerously located within stumbling distance of 14 bars took a toll on me and the place; the house was showing the wear and tear from a year's worth of alcohol-induced neglect. I noticed, as Corey snapped the photo, a rotten spot on the steps, and noticed the porch – and whole stucco-sided house, for that matter – might be in need of a paint job. I wondered who might take on the job if I didn't come back.

My pack weighed in at 40 pounds, which seemed like 100, including tent, sleeping bag, stove, fuel, extra socks, rain gear, food and reading material.

I was in pitiful shape – a few years of booze and cigarettes had not done me any favors. I made a showy exit; backpack on, placing my right foot from rotten wood porch to solid grassy lawn, thinking of Lao Tzu’s proverb “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step,” and of Neil Armstrong’s “One small step for man,” remark. I envisioned I was George Clooney playing the role of me.

Most of my life had seemed a show, a constant quest for attention and approval, trying to be what people wanted and expected of me. I was Superman, John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Jerry Kramer, Chevy Chase, Jerry Lewis, Bozo the Clown. So I strutted down Spruce Street exuding confidence, as if I were still the Marine sergeant, boldly leading troops into battle. Inside, I was apprehensive, afraid to be alone, scared to face my demons. I didn’t like myself much, and doubted I would enjoy my company. I turned north onto Rattlesnake Drive, walked a mile or so on a well-used trail through a park along the creek, and stopped at the Rattlesnake Gardens Café for a ceremonious “last supper,” delaying as long as I could by chatting with local acquaintances. *Look at me everyone! I am hiking to Canada!*

It was a gradual transition, mentally and physically, hiking the fairly flat, six miles up the Rattlesnake from town to wilderness – from *defiled* wild, to *mild* wild to *wild* wild, as a wildlife biologist I know once put it. Rattlesnake Creek originates from high-mountain snowmelt in the Rattlesnake Wilderness and meanders like its namesake around mountains, cliffs, whitebark pine and lodgepole, down through the Doug fir and

ponderosas and finally into the Clark Fork in Missoula. It's yet a clear, pure stream in which the increasingly rare native Westslope cutthroats and bull trout still push up river to spawn. – and you can sometimes see them, like shadowy submarines, while dining at 4B's restaurant downtown, which is built over the creek like a bridge. I walked the jogging and biking trails right along the creek, surrounded by homes and parks, where people were sitting at picnic tables talking, laughing and watching their kids skip stones and turn over rocks searching for bugs. Large signs scattered through the neighborhood, put in place by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, warn people to secure their garbage and not feed or harass the black bears that often wander down in spring and fall in search of easy food.

Occasionally, there are rumors of grizzlies venturing close to town. A herd of elk winters on the grassy slopes of Mount Jumbo above the valley, and I once saw a mountain lion eating a cow elk on the hillside. Missoula is nicknamed Zoo City. Whitetail and mule deer are common -- as are mountain bikers clad in Lycra, soccer moms pushing baby joggers and bearded young environmental idealists tossing Frisbees to Labrador retrievers adorned with cute red bandanas. Missoula is *that* sort of place, where everyone appears to be an activist, whether they really are or not. It's the kind of place where even hippies hunt and fish. It's a good town, really, if not a bit irritatingly pretentious in a "boycott Walmart and Starbucks," non-conformist conformity sort of way, and very accepting, as long as you are not a Republican, logger, miner or rancher. The rest of the state refers to Zoo Town as the "People's Republic of Montana."

Along paved roads and park trails I worked my way the three miles or so from Rattlesnake Gardens to the trailhead at the Rattlesnake Recreation Area, past a locked

gate and a Forest Service bulletin board loaded with warnings and regulations; *No Camping, Shooting or Hunting Next Three Miles; Caution: You Are Entering Grizzly Bear Country.* Then up an old-dirt logging road, closed to motor vehicles, but open to hiking, mountain biking and horses. I didn't go far. I couldn't go far. I was pretty winded and out of shape. I stopped often and leaned against trees, or bent over with hands on knees, gasping for oxygen, sometimes coughing. My shoulders and back began to hurt from the heavy load. I'd shrug to lift the pack up a bit then tighten the hip-belt to try and take some weight off my sore shoulders. Then, a half-hour later, I'd loosen the hip-belt to take weight off my sore hips. I figured I'd distribute the growing pain evenly let my body suffer uniformly.

About a mile up the old logging road in the Rattlesnake Recreation area, I walked off trail about 50-yards, where no one could see me, took off my pack, laid down under a large ponderosa pine, and fell asleep. I awoke to a horsefly buzzing around my nose. I thought about walking back home. I pulled out my journal and wrote:

*I feel lonely, depressed, and still have doubts. I want to turn back. I'm scared. Scared of what's happened to me. Yet with all my heart and soul I know this is what I need; this will turn my life around. I want my life back. I need to push forth.*

I struggled another five miles up the main Rattlesnake trail to Beescove Creek, a tributary flowing down from the northwest into the Rattlesnake. I pitched camp near a little bridge close to a big swamp where I had killed a few whitetails in the past. I chatted with a passing mountain biker from Michigan who attended the university, cooked up a pot of noodles and a cup of hot chocolate, then meandered a bit through the swamp and

sat by the main branch of the river. With snow still melting from the high country, the creek was running big, cold, powerful -- white, turbulent water rushing over trees and rock, shaking the alders along the bank and rumbling like thunder. In my more energetic, healthier days I would cross such creeks without hesitation.

Once, on a long backpacking trip in a remote part of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, along the Montana-Idaho border, I tried to help my wife Chris across a wild, spring-fed creek. She lost her footing, got swept downriver and banged up on rocks, and was not so happy with me. It was a cold, rainy day and we pushed on, bushwhacking, crawling and beating our way through thick alder and menziesia brush, wet and chilled to the bone. She did not speak to me for several miles which, in that sort of country, can take several hours to get through. Then we stopped near a pile of boulders, and while she cried the sun came out, and above us we saw a mountain lion, pacing back and forth, nervous and protective of the two kittens that stood behind her.

Years before, I had asked her to marry me on a backpacking trip, on top of a treeless, boulder-strewn mountain in the Selway. I gave her a ring and she asked, "Are you serious?" I was. Then dark clouds rolled in and we got slammed by hard hail the size of ping-pong balls. We hid out in a tiny, protective cave while lightning hit around us. The hail later turned to rain that seemed to have no end in sight. We decided to head back a few days early, but I felt compelled to fish as we walked around a lake with packs on our backs with a cold, constant drizzle chilling us to the core. "One more cast," I would say, as both she and our chocolate Labrador, Scout, sat and glared at me. I continued to cast a large, silver, Blue Fox Vibrax far out into the lake, let it sink for 10 seconds or so, and slowly reel it in, catching hefty fish most every other cast. I couldn't stop. I caught a



cutthroat, fat as a football, which must have weighed five pounds. But Chris had had enough, angrily said goodbye, and took off, Scout right behind her. When I caught up to them, we were working our way down a steep mountain, where we had spooked a black bear on the way in, and she slipped and slid several yards in mud. That's when she let out a string of profanities and I said, "Come on Chris, let's enjoy this, we just got engaged." She looked at me with disdain, and shouted, "Yeah, well, I just might change my fucking mind!"

She didn't. We got married up the East Fork of the Bitterroot the following June, 1991. We had planned to have the ceremony outside, but a storm rolled in and we and our 20 or so guests retreated into a small cabin. In the midst of the nuptials, lightning hit close and the pastor stopped mid-sentence and proclaimed, "Let's hope that's a good omen!"

Another time, on a solo trip, I was cautiously crossing a cold, snowmelt filled river in the Selway, using a thick stick, about six feet long, to prod into the river bottom, on the down current side to help maintain stability and balance. I had loosened the straps on my backpack, as I do when crossing avalanche zones, in case I need to ditch it quickly. As the river got deeper, above my waist and gradually higher, the powerful current began pushing all its force against my body and backpack. I questioned my sanity and wondered if I should turn back. I looked at the stick, which I held tightly to my chest, gripping hard with both hands, with the bottom planted behind a big rock below water, using all my strength to keep myself standing. Like my arm muscles, the stick was straining from the pressure, bent like a bow, or like a fishing rod with a big bull trout hooked on the end of the line. I looked downstream at the churning whitewater violently

slamming against boulders, over a waterfall and under and over a massive jam of logs. I thought, if *this stick breaks, I am fucked.*

It broke. The current pushed me under, the cold causing an instant, stinging headache and numbing the rapid impacts against rocks, and I was swept over the falls and towards the log jam. I got my head above water and grabbed onto a log with both hands as the current pushed me under the jam. My head was barely above water and my arms were quickly giving out in a futile attempt to fight the force of the water and pull myself up. Finally, I had no choice, took a deep breath and let go, hoping I would get swept safely under and out the other side. But a pack strap got caught underneath on a branch, holding me under until my lungs felt they would burst. With little energy left, I finally freed myself from the pack straps and got swept to the other side, washing into an eddy and humbly crawling out of the river feeling like a wet, beaten puppy. I lay in the warm sun until I stopped shivering and could breathe normally. It took me several hours – lying atop the log jam and using a big stick -- to pry my pack free. I keep the watch I was wearing that day. It slammed against a rock and stopped at precisely 12:15, July 5, 1995. I remember thinking: If anyone found my body, they would know precisely when I died.

And I thought, on this particular day, years later, sitting along Rattlesnake Creek near the swamp, that it would be easier to jump in and float right back into town. Perhaps observant diners would spot the body from 4B's. Wouldn't that be a grand, notorious return! Such was my mood.

I sat there until dusk, stuck in the past thinking of that water, its wild journey from the high country where I was headed, down the Rattlesnake, into the Clark Fork,

constantly moving, sometimes fast and crazy, sometimes slow and calm, all the way to Lake Pend Oreille in Idaho, and eventually into the Columbia and the Pacific. On the way back to camp, I waded through deep, muddy pools of water in the swamp, full of algae, a stinky sulfur-like stench from decay, where black water-skeeters danced on the surface. Still water grows stagnant; moving runs clear. It was time to keep moving.

I slept outside the tent, waking frequently, gazing up at the stars. It had been a long time since I'd noticed the brilliance of the stars; so much brighter the farther you get from the diluting lights of town. I cooked oatmeal and coffee in the morning, packed up, and began the first, serious, steep ascents to the high country, stopping often to grasp onto trees, catch my breath and wallow a bit in self-pity. I craved nicotine, but left cigarettes behind; wilderness withdraws on many levels. I'd forced myself to take 20 or so slow steps up, then I'd lean against the uphill side of a tree and rest for a minute. It became a counting game . . . one, two, three . . . moving and stopping, moving and stopping . . . which occupied my mind and kept me going, but had me dwelling on better days when I could scurry like a mountain goat up such slopes. I took a nap by a waterfall, and another on a cliff overlooking Boulder Lake. The bear grass was prolific; thick clumps of tall flowers in the lily family, that shoot long stems up from the middle, adorned with a fragrant, oval-shaped conglomerate of white flowers, each individual plant only blooming once every seven years. As were the dark blue lupines and bright-red Indian paintbrush. That and the pungent odor of alpine fir, redolent of Christmas, and the soft-needled larches, and the clean air and good-tasting water lifted my spirits a bit.

I decided not to climb down to Boulder Lake. Never give up hard-earned high-country, I learned in the Marines. Instead, I left the trail, my first bushwhacking of the

trip, and pushed on higher, skirting the ridges, first north and west, then north and east, all the way to Fly Lake. It's a beautiful, clear lake, with steep cliffs along the west side, with several small, rocky islands. I spooked a bull elk grazing near the shore, with the makings of a hefty rack still in velvet. I saw a snowshoe hare, still wearing a bit of a white winter coat, and a snake I couldn't identify. Trout swam around, but I felt too lazy to fish. I was glad for the wind, for when the heavy gusts did die down, I was swarmed by mosquitoes. The wind brought in dark clouds, and it looked and smelled like impending rain, so I set up my tent, cooked up noodles and hot chocolate, and, just as the downpour began, climbed in my bag to read.

The heaviest items in my pack were my books: Several spiral notebooks to keep as journals; *The Abstract Wild*, by Jack Turner; a collection of poems called *The Enlightened Heart*, edited by Stephen Mitchell; and a big, thick "home study course" of sorts called the *Wellness Workbook: How to Achieve Enduring Health and Vitality*, by John W. Travis, M.D., and Regina Sara Ryan. I started in on the wellness book, which resonated with me immediately, coinciding with my own physical and mental journey. It would become my companion and guide over the next eight weeks, my own "tent" study course. The introduction explains that neither illness nor wellness is static, but a continuous process. A long, double-sided arrow illustrates what the authors assigned the scientific, burdensome title, "The Illness/Wellness Continuum." The left side of the arrow points toward "premature death," passing through "signs," "symptoms" and "disabilities," while the right-side points toward "high-level wellness," passing through "awareness," "education" and "growth." The state of one's health – whether good or bad – is just a tiny, visible tip of an iceberg, the book explains. To understand the causes, you

must look below the surface, the multi-levels of lifestyle and behaviors – “cultural, psychological and motivational levels,” as well as “spiritual, being and meaning-realm levels.”

Like the water pipes leading to our homes, we all take in energy, process it, and release; if we take in poison, or there are clogs in the pipes, the output is not so good. If we take in good energy, and process it well, the output from the faucet is clear, fresh and free-flowing. Like Rattlesnake Creek. Just as natural process in the wilds are constantly changing, I began seeing my backpack trip not so much a trip to Canada, but a tough, challenging journey along the wellness continuum – an arduous trek through awareness, education and growth. It’s a life-long quest, as the book explains, and it’s not *where* you are on the journey that matters, rather what direction you are headed. I had obviously been going the wrong way. It was time to turn around and go the right way; north to wellness! I decided then and there to imagine Waterton, Alberta, as a Dr. Seuss-like land called Wellnessville. If a grinch with a heart two sizes too small could find healing, peace and happiness, why not me?

Being out among clean air, clean water, whitebark pines and larches, bear grass and lupines – knowing there were deer and elk, grizzlies and pine martens, mountain lions and wolverines and all manner of life around me – was pretty good “input” to my pipes. Now to clear the clogs, clean the pipes and let it all flow clean, clear and free out the other side! Or perhaps it was the simplicity of life in the wilds – eat, hike, rest, read, think – that helped clear my mind – out here in what I consider the *real* world, away from the maddening artificiality and complexities of a modern-day, human-constructed world. Since I was a child, I had always felt most myself, most alive, when immersed in the

wilds. However, I also knew that regardless of my own somewhat radical views on such matters, the modern human world has become reality, and I needed to learn to cope, function and thrive in that world, a world so rampant with temptations, stress and confusion. Smoking, drinking, drugs, depression, and indiscriminate, meaningless sex were tips of my iceberg; it was time to dive deep below the surface to find and face the causes, the truth. Reality?

“Listen to me,” I thought. “I have no fucking clue what truth and reality is. Nobody does.”

I jotted a note in my journal: *I feel like I have left the womb for the unknown, to face an uncertain world, excited but apprehensive. I want to crawl back into the womb, where it's safe warm and comfortable. But in the words of Bob Dylan: "He not busy being born is busy dying."*

I fell asleep with visions of illness/wellness continuum graphs dancing through my head and awoke early to cold, cloudy skies and the buzzing of mosquitoes outside the tent. I ran out in my skivvies to pee, spooked two whitetails I was surprised to see at such high elevation, saw an osprey dive for fish, and several fish rising to mosquitoes, then hurried back into the tent scratching away at a dozen or so mosquito bites. No matter how rapidly I learn to jump in a tent and zip up the door, mosquitoes got in, and so I would spend ten minutes or so swatting away. But even then, when I thought I had them all, I might lie down, close my eyes or try to read, and one or two would begin buzzing around my ear, or nose or face. Sometimes, like a Venus fly trap, I would slam them between pages of my books, where tiny blood-stains and black bodies remain alongside

my highlighting, underlining and notes in the margins. With no TV, cable, internet or cell phone, my books became worn, torn, well-marked and well-used.

Every part of my body ached that morning, and it was only day two. I had a headache, and felt tired and depressed. So I snuggled back into my warm bag, read a few poems, jumped back into the Wellness Workbook and completed a “wellness index” -- a thorough, detailed self-evaluation that took two hours to complete. Twelve sections dealing with various aspects of health and wellness: self-responsibility and love; breathing; sensing; eating; moving; feeling; thinking; playing and working; communicating; sex, and finding meaning and transcending. I did not fare so well.

I was apprehensive to move on to the next part of the trip, a large swath of wildlands called the South Fork of the Jocko Primitive Area. Part of the Flathead Indian Reservation, the area is open only to members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, unless you purchase a special permit, which I hadn't thought of in my distorted state of mind before departing. Planning ahead is not one of my strengths.

Not that the permits aren't worth buying; the money helps fund good, important efforts. The tribe has one of the best wildlife and conservation programs in the nation, and have done a lot to protect open spaces, wild places and critical wildlife habitat -- particularly for grizzly bears. The headwaters of some of the streams they protect and, in some cases, have restored, are some of the last strongholds for indigenous, threatened, westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout. The South Fork of the Jocko Primitive Area and the tribal Grizzly Conservation Area, adjacent to the Mission Mountain Wilderness, are

some of the wildest places remaining in the Continental United States. The tribe has received numerous prestigious awards for their conservation efforts.

But I wasn't going to turn around. I decide to push on, and purchase the permit when, or if, I returned home. So, with a sense of guilt and trepidation, I entered the tribal area late in the day, hoping darkness would conceal my trespass.

As a Force Recon Marine, I learned to mostly move at night and hole up during the day. When we had to cross roads or open fields, considered "danger areas," we used techniques and routines based on principles of planning, reconnaissance, security and control. Whatever clime and place we patrolled, the point man would signal a "halt" by holding up his hand, call up the team leader by patting his chest with his right palm, and everyone would take a knee, or lie in the prone position, rifles at the ready. The team leader would quickly assess the situation; whisper a plan to each team member including contingency plans in case things went wrong (rally points to meet up if the team separated, how to respond to enemy contact, what to do if you turned out to be the only survivor, that sort of thing) and then two Marines would set up security on either side, and another one or two would hurry to the other side and conduct a hasty reconnaissance of the area, signal back with flashes of a red light or a green chemical light and, if all was well, the team would hurry across and keep on moving. At least that was how it was supposed to go. In reality (as with most things) we learned to take shortcuts. After all, we didn't want to spend too much time in a danger zone. But sometimes we'd be so exhausted and lazy we'd drop all caution and boldly walk right down the road, hoping not to get caught.



But I didn't anticipate roads in the tribal primitive area, and even if I were caught the consequences would likely be a monetary fine. Still, it was about 20 miles to cross and I wanted to move as rapidly as possible. So I ate a late breakfast, packed up, climbed to the ridge top that was the boundary of the Rattlesnake Wilderness, and began the steep descent down the north side. In this country, north slopes typically get less sun, so the snow lingers longer, providing more moisture to the soil, meaning north slopes tend to be more thickly vegetated with scrawny Doug firs, alder, menziesia brush, ninebark and blown-down trees to climb over, under and around -- which makes for slow, irritating, frustrating bushwhacking. I can generally tell if I'm on a north, south, east or west-facing slope by the vegetation, and try to avoid north slopes. But sometimes there's no choice. Fortunately, I found a few good elk trails that made the going a bit easier in places. I could smell elk all morning -- a unique, musky smell that's difficult to describe. Kind of like cattle, I suppose, only sweeter and more subtle. Twice I came upon fresh bear scat. Mostly, it was tough going. Yellow markings will be semicolon errors.

I like roadless, wild country, so I was disappointed at the lack of wildness, and yet a bit relieved at the ease of access when -- after I reached the bottom and crossed a tumultuous creek -- I came upon a dirt logging road. A road! In a primitive area? It didn't show on maps, giving me brief concern about possibly being off course. But I compared the terrain depicted on my topographic maps with the terrain around me -- a large mountain and saddle there, a merging of creeks here -- a technique we called "terrain association" in the Marine Corps. All of which confirmed: I was where I was and wanted to be.

The road was headed my way, north, so I followed it, which felt odd after days of off-trail hiking. It was risky, and I felt paranoid, so I hugged the downhill side of the road constantly prepared to disappear into the thickets of alpine fir on both sides of the road and hide at any hint of a vehicle. Once, I mistook the sound of an airplane for a truck and dashed into the brush, where I laid flat on my stomach and listened. Even the tumbling noise of the river would, at times, sound like a vehicle. When I stopped to rest and check my map, I moved off the road to a secure, concealed spot. But after a while, despite the road, the area seemed rather remote, and I became increasingly bold and complacent, drifting off to daydreams as I trudged along.

While reading that morning, I had committed to memory some of Rumi's words, and repeated them over and over again in my head as I trudged along: *I have lived on the lip/of insanity/waiting to know reasons/I knock on a door/it opens/I have been knocking from the inside.*

Then, at a sharp bend in the road where a nearby waterfall covered all other noise, a green Suburban came around the corner, tribal logo on the door. I saw it too late, about the same time the driver saw me. What else to do but walk along like I belonged there, confess if I had to, and face the consequences of trespassing? A hefty fine, I assumed.

The driver seemed as surprised to see me as I him. He pulled up alongside me, window down, and said, "Wow. I have never seen anyone out here. How'd you get here?"

"Walked," I explained. "From Missoula."

At first he didn't believe me.

He turned out to be a friendly guy, a hydrologist named Seth under contract with the tribe, working in the upper reaches of the Jocko to help protect and restore westslope cutthroats and bull trout. Part of that effort, he explained, would include the eventual obliteration of the roads to make the place more primitive and reduce erosion and sedimentation in the stream. I was happy to hear it. I confessed to not having a permit, but planned to by one when I got home; he told me not to worry about it, and said that few if any ever drove the road. So after he left, I continued on, right down the road, another 15 miles or so, never seeing another vehicle, just as Seth predicted – though I was startled at one point by an angry ruffed grouse who charged at me, hackles up and hissing, defending her chicks who lay hidden a few yards away, chirping in the brush. I reached the North Fork of the Jocko and climbed up and back onto U.S. Forest Service lands, into the Mission Mountain Wilderness, and set up camp in a grove of large Doug fir. I was exhausted, my feet hurt, as did my calves and back. I ate, climbed in my bag, and read, and learned this from my Wellness Workbook, which I wrote down in my journal, right next to the smeared corpse of a dead mosquito:

*I am responsible for my condition. I am the one who drinks, smokes, has meaningless sex, procrastinates, and has negative, self-defeating thoughts. I cannot rely on therapists, doctors, Chris, or anyone else to “cure” me; I must do it myself. I am now taking responsibility for myself, and am doing something about it. I can no longer blame others or circumstances; I can only blame myself and only I can do something about it. And I am.*

I slept well that night, for the first time in a long, long time. But the next morning I was back in low spirits – the weight of my issues burdening me even more so than my

backpack. Was I really dealing with my problems, or just running away again? Just a year before, I had gone off on a trip into the wilds of the Grand Gulch, in southern Utah, and thought I had come to terms with things – or at least come to terms with what I *thought* were my “issues.” I wondered: were these wilderness trips akin to a long hit of weed or bottle of vodka? My problems were still home waiting for me, still buried in my brain.

## Chapter Two: The War of the Shadows

*A grandfather was talking to his grandson.*

*“A fight is going on inside me,” he told the boy.*

*“It is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves.*

*One wolf is evil and ugly: He is anger, envy, war, greed, self-pity, sorrow, regret, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, selfishness and arrogance.*

*The other wolf is beautiful and good: He is friendly, joyful, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, justice, fairness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, gratitude and vision.*

*This same fight is going on inside you and inside every other human as well.”*

*The boy thought for a moment, and asked, “Grandfather, which wolf will win?”*

*The grandfather replied, “The wolf you feed.”*

*--Cherokee Legend*

Since I was pretty young, I had become adept at acting, creating an effective façade that gained me lots of attention, earning a reputation as being a bit wild and crazy, if not a bit dramatic.

My mom would often recall the night I was born, December 14, 1960, in Norwalk, Connecticut, telling me about a terrible blizzard that night and how two planes collided over New York City in one of the worst disasters of the time. I learned years later that the crash actually occurred two days after my birth, on December 16. But until I was five or so, I thought of the crash as somehow connected to my birth, and it seemed a thrilling way to come into the world. My earliest memory is falling off a dock, at the age of two, and sinking under water. I remember looking up at the surface, and seeing my mother jumping in, swimming down to grab me, and bringing me safely back to air. It's not an unpleasant memory.

I would sing, dance, make up stories and put on magic shows for family and neighbors. I'd stand in front of the mirror and make faces, to see which I liked best, and try to carry that look around with me. I'd hang out at my friend Todd's house and reenact commercials on their porch, then fall down the stairs at the end, always getting a good laugh or two. I put on his sister's Girl Scout uniform once, and went across the street to sell Girl Scout cookies in front of a grocery store.

Much of my youth was spent exploring small woodlots and salt marshes, and fishing, lots of fishing, alone and with my father, for striped-bass, bluefish, blue crabs and lobsters. My father also took me camping and hiking, and instilled in me a love for nature and all things wild. He was a staunch proponent for the protection and recovery of striped bass and their spawning and rearing estuaries, setting an example in conservation advocacy that would eventually become my career, my passion, my life. With tinges of sadness in his eyes, he would often point to places like Saugatuck Shores, where massive mansions, swimming pools and elaborate docks with large yachts line the coast, and recall how he used to sneak onto farms and orchards, now turned manicured golf courses and estates, to steal corn and apples, and head for the salt marshes to skinny dip and catch crabs and snapper blues.

I played high school football and boxed, and was awarded most dedicated athlete and voted class clown. People liked me and I liked being liked, but I also fought a lot and wrecked my first half-dozen cars before I reached 20, an age many were surprised I reached. The day I got my driver's license, at 16, my mom asked me pick up some milk. After putting a half-gallon of milk in the back seat of the white Volkswagen Bug I had paid \$250 for, my friend Terry saw me in front of the market, pulled up in his car, and

talked me into heading for the beach. He was tailing close behind as I tried to impress and outrun him . I took a turn too fast on a steep hill, overcompensated with a sharp turn of the steering wheel and hard slam to the breaks, spun out of control, went off the road, rolled a few times through a forest of maple and oak and landed upright on all four wheels with most of the roof now crunched down and all the glass broken out. The rolling felt like a slow motion scene in a movie, and I remember thinking it would end badly. Terry came dashing down the hill, scared and screaming, “Dave, are you okay?”

I put my hand on the top of my head and felt warm, sticky fluid, and knew enough even then to know that, when seriously injured and in shock, I might not feel the pain right away. “I’m bleeding,” I said, “I’m bleeding pretty bad.”

“You’re bleeding milk,” he said and laughed.

The milk had broken out everywhere, and I was just fine, but the car reeked of sour milk a week or so later when it was hauled to the junk yard.

I wrapped another car around an oak tree and drove another through a fence. A fence pole went through the window, missing my head by inches. One winter, I drove another Volkswagen off a sea wall and into Long Island Sound. After helping my frightened passenger out and to the surface I told him, “They don’t really float,” as a popular commercial in those days claimed.

I always came out fine, scratched and bruised being the worst of it, and felt invincible. I continued to take risks, feeling certain I’d be lucky and all would turn out fine, another good tale to tell. Many of my conversations started out with, “Guess what happened?” Or, “You won’t believe it . . . .” The stories were true, and friends and

family always believed me, because it was expected; another “Dave story,” they would say. Nothing surprised them.

I played dumb in classes. “He’s a smart kid,” my report cards would consistently say, “but doesn’t apply himself.” I jumped off a 125-foot highway bridge into the Saugatuck River on a dare, and I drank way too much.

I earned the rank of Eagle Scout, and spent several summers working at a Boy Scout Camp along the shores of Lake Candlewood in northwest Connecticut, where I started off digging ditches for latrines. “Ditch-Digger Dave,” they called me, and I would proudly proclaim it was “the only job where you start at the top and work your way down to the bottom.” In later years I became a lifeguard, swim instructor and aquatics director for the camp. I was also a lifeguard for the YMCA. I wanted to be a fish. Sometimes I would dive into Long Island Sound at night, by myself, and swim a mile out to Cockenoe Island and back just to see if I could.

My friend Terry and I started an “Icebreakers” club, our equivalent of the Polar Bear Club, and would make an annual dive into cold, icy waters on my birthday, December 14 -- a tradition I continued, even years later, by jumping into icy rivers in Montana. During my senior year, I got caught after stealing a Christmas tree from a farm, breaking into the school in a Santa costume, and setting up and decorating the tree. I went around the next day, still in my outfit, ringing a bell and collecting donations to pay for the fines. Sometimes I’d sneak friends into the YMCA afterhours to party in the pool and hot tub. I washed dishes at a seafood restaurant where I’d occasionally sneak lobsters out with the garbage to cook down at the beach after work. For a while I worked for a tree



service, climbing, pruning, limbing and removing big oaks, maples and ashes so as they wouldn't fall and destroy the homes of the wealthy.

My sister, three brothers and I had the usual assortment of sibling rivalry, but usually got along well. Our parents were always spending money on us that they didn't have, but we were never lacking for anything. We'd play tag, dodgeball and hide-and-seek; gather around the TV to watch Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom and Walt Disney on Sunday nights; play in the woods and salt marshes, ice skate and play hockey on local ponds, sled and race home-made go-carts on local hills. It was what most would consider a good, normal childhood in the day. We were a close-knit family, with plenty of love and support. I was lucky. Although -- being from a not-so-wealthy family in the midst of Fairfield County, one of the wealthiest parts of the nation -- I was envious of most my friends, for the money, houses and yachts their parents had. But I didn't mind going to the week-end parties at their homes, when their parents were out of town, sneaking vodka from their parent's bars and skinny dipping in their pools. Most of my friends had wonderful cars their parents bought them. I drove around in a blue, square-shaped, 1967 Chevy station wagon -- one of the few cars I didn't total, but only because it was built like a tank -- with a three-on-the-column stick shift and striped-bass stickers on both the passenger and driver's side doors. I kept my fishing rods and tackle box in the back, along with piles of empty beer cans.

We had keg parties at the beach, and had fake ID's to get into the bars. The drinking age was 18 then and there were no photos on the driver's licenses, so altering them was an easy task. My mom looked at my license once, and noticed they had my birthday wrong. "I'll have to look into that," I said. When I went out with friends to the

Old Bridge Grill, my mom would make me promise to have no more than two beers; so I would drink two pitchers, come home drunk, and assure her I only had two. For many years after that she thought I couldn't handle my booze. I would sometimes hold a pitcher up and get everyone's attention, yell "This pitcher's on me!" then pour it over my head. I regularly did a crazy, silly dance I called the "Jerry Lewis" dance, and would often dance with chairs. In crowded bars, where you could hardly move around, I invented the "face dance," rapidly moving my eyes, mouth and cheeks and trying (sometimes successfully) to get others to join me. I'd fight at the drop of a hat, and by the time I actually was drinking age I was banned from most bars in town. Waiting in a long line one evening, to get into the Pumpernickel Pub, my brother Bob showed up. I was told by the bouncer at the door that I was not allowed in, but Bob was. I took off my clothes right there, and suggested to my brother that he put on my clothes and I put on his, and they might think I was him and he was me. The bouncer found no humor in it, and of course it didn't work. I hung out constantly with my friend Terry, and would often stay at his house because his parents were more tolerant of us coming home drunk than my parents were. We were both pretty cocky, and we would often stand in front of his mirror flexing (we called ourselves "MLPH's" for "MuscuLar PHiends").

Terry would often ask me why I put on such a dumb act. "You're a smart guy," he'd say, "Why don't you let people see that?"

I loved high school, at least the socializing, but hated the academic part. I'd often skip classes to work out in the gym, or watch game films of the teams we were going to play soon. I could bench press the "whole rack" on the Universal machine, and I could do

pushups, pull-ups and run all day. I loved strutting around in my lettered jacket, blue felt with white-leather sleeves, a big “S” on the chest for Staples High School.

Sometimes, I would sneak off to the woods behind the school, by myself, up near the old NIKE missile site, and look for pheasants and deer, or sit by a pond and watch the turtles and frogs. I even got a plot in a community garden, and grew vegetables – but that was a part of me I did not share with many people. An English teacher, Mr. Decker, who justifiably perceived me as a dumb jock, took our class outside one nice spring day and we sat under a big tree. He told the class it was a sugar maple, but I politely corrected him, showed him the shape of the leaves, and told him it was a red maple. He was surprised. “How do you know that?” he asked. I felt embarrassed for having exposed a less macho side. But he seemed to like me after that. Instead of the Shakespeare the rest of our class was reading, he gave me a copy of Montana-based writer A.B. Guthrie’s “Big Sky,” about the internal struggles of a mountain man named Jim. He asked me to read and write a report on it, which I did. I grudgingly and secretly fell in love with reading and literature. I also enjoyed working in the school greenhouse, helping grow poinsettias to raise money for the school during Christmas time, but felt uneasy with it all, thinking it was not such a “manly” thing to do.

I had a few girlfriends, but nothing ever lasted. My first kiss was with a girl named Janet, leaning against a barnacle-covered rock late one night off Bedford’s Point where I had recently caught a 25-pound striper. My first few sexual experiences were usually while drunk, down at Compo or Burial Hill Beach, in the back of cars or off in secluded areas back in the bushes, and were a bit awkward, frustrating, quick and not so satisfying.

Senior Prom night I dove off the deck of the Black Duck Saloon, into the brackish Saugatuck river. I said I was checking to see if any fish were down there. My date left me and I had to pay for the rented tux I ruined. I stood up my date for the Holly Ball because there was a bright, October “striper moon,” and I went fishing instead. That prompted my oldest brother, Ed, to put together a collage for me, depicting a scantily-clad, beautiful woman looking longingly out to sea, where in the distance you could see someone fishing from a small Boston Whaler like my dad’s, with a caption that read: “Oh well. I guess he’d rather chase bass than ass.” It was true. Fishing with my father late one night when I was 18, he asked: “What are you doing out here with me? If I were still your age, I’d throw a mattress in the back of the car and be with a girl.” It was the closest we came to talking about sex.

I graduated, barely, and remember wearing a white T-shirt with a picture of a frosty beer mug and our class motto, “Raise Your Stein to ’79,” on the front. I learned to reach behind my back without looking, and could point my finger right to my name among the 250 or so classmates I graduated with listed on the back. All in all, I was a pretty happy kid, and even the teachers and authorities who were frustrated with me nevertheless liked me. I learned, at a very early age, how to be charming. I never felt completely comfortable, or fully fit in, with any one cliché; I hung out with fellow jocks and nerds, and was mostly nice to everyone. I felt *different*, and always have, for which I felt a strange, conflicting sense of pride and discomfort – feelings that only grew stronger with time.

After high school, I played football at Norwalk Community college, but failed academically, and my applications were denied at most other schools. I got accepted to a

small forestry school in the Adirondacks of northern New York, called Paul Smiths College, which required a hard hat and axe, under the condition I passed some probationary summer classes first, which I did, and so spent two years there earning an associate's degree. I pretended to be a lumber jack, chewing tobacco and competing in speed-chopping, log-rolling, cross-cut sawing and canoeing on the woodsmen team. I dated a nice woman named Mary Lou, who I neglected more than I should have, and continued my binges of drinking and fighting and excursions into the wilds. I ran down the hallway of a dorm one drunken night, thinking I was on the first floor, and intentionally dove through a window. I was on the second floor, but fortunately landed in deep snow. Consider trimming some of the wild boy stories. At this point, as the behavior continues and grows more destructive, you seem to be finding humor in it, bragging about it in a sense. By now, we get it.

I stripped naked at a bar, dancing and singing on the top of a table. I sometimes woke everyone up in the dorm and persuaded most to run out the point and dive into the lake in the middle of the night. I was officially thrown out of the school twice, but saved both times by a professor who liked me. But I had to go to AA meetings, write a paper about the dangers of alcohol, and was banned from everywhere except classrooms and the library. I had to move off campus, and lived in a converted barn with my friends Jeff, Pepe and Mark. We called ourselves the "Red Barn Boys," and we spit tobacco in an old metal milk jug we converted into a spittoon and lined the walls with whiskey bottles we emptied. One late dark night, in the midst of an intense thunder storm, Pepe and I snuck onto land owned by the former governor of New York, Hugh Carey, and stole an old aluminum rowboat that looked as if it hadn't been used for years. I painted the name

“You Carry” on the back, and told people it was in reference to what a pain in the ass it was to portage such a heavy boat. Another night, we rowed the boat along the shore of Lower Saint Regis Lake, past the school library, docked it near the back service entrance of the school pub and snuck out 12 cases of beer, then rowed across the lake -- boat barely floating with the cargo -- and hid it all under a large, dead yellow birch, where we returned frequently to enjoy our secret stash. I caught a lot of brook trout, pike and brown trout, hunted grouse and deer in the tamarack swamps, and learned to make maple syrup. I even learned a lot about forestry – though the emphasis back then was on a now outdated, anthropocentric, European model of “maximum sustained yield” timber production with little regard for notions of healthy, functioning ecosystems.

After barely graduating – and since there were not a lot of job opportunities for academic underachievers who fancied themselves a mountain man and lumberjack – I enlisted in the Marine Corps. My craziness seemed appealing to them and that appealed to me. Besides, what better place for a confused young man to thoroughly test all the myths and misconceptions of manhood than the U.S. Marine Corps?

My mother and father cried when I told them over the phone. “Just wait, and let’s talk about it when you get home,” my father said. But it was too late; I had already signed the papers. My Dad had been a Marine. He had survived the horrific battles for Iwo Jima, Saipan, Okinawa and Tinian. He no longer harbored the heroic delusions of war and death. Regardless, my parents were proud of me – and it felt pretty damn good to make them proud.

I was top of my class in boot camp at Parris Island, honor graduate in Infantry Training School, and was one of a handful selected to serve in Force Recon, the Marine Corps' most elite unit. I went to reconnaissance school, Army jump school, Navy SCUBA school, Army Jumpmaster School, Military Freefall Parachutist School, Special Forces Qualification Course and Army Ranger School, and was attached to the first-ever Special Operations Capable (SOC) Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU). For a while, I truly believed Russia was the "Evil Empire," as our Commander-in-Chief Ronald Reagan called them. I became a so-called "expert" at demolitions, booby traps and improvised munitions. I was a good, proficient warrior, skilled at the art of killing, maiming and wounding. I continued drinking and fighting, but that was unofficially looked upon fondly in the Corps in those days, and I excelled at the job – traveling around the world and earning numerous awards, decorations and recognition for my skills, leadership, dedication and courage -- at least what the U.S. Marine Corps defined as courage.

I met Jim in the Marine Corps, when he arrived in the middle of a training exercise in Vieques, Puerto Rico, and was assigned to my platoon. He was from Natchez, Mississippi, and also liked to hunt and fish, and we rapidly became close friends. We hiked, camped, shot squirrels and ducks and took vacations together on our free time. We built a fire in the woods once, got drunk, slashed the palms of our right hands, shook and became "blood brothers." We were inseparable. Jim was well-read, smart, and saw through my dumb-ass façade. It was he who influenced me to leave the Corps and go to college. I also began questioning the nature of our work. What if we were on the wrong side of things while helping Contra rebels, or "Freedom Fighters" as Reagan called them, in Central America? I learned that the Reagan administration, as part of the Iran-Contra

Scandal, had sold weapons to the Hezbollah Shiite's who killed 225 of my fellow Marines in Beirut. I was rapidly outgrowing the old, "Ours is not to question why, ours is just to do and die" mode. My First Sergeant told me one day: "Stalling, you're too smart for this shit; get out!" So I did.

After a brief adjustment period at a friend's farm in South Carolina, I moved to Montana in the spring of 1986 to work a seasonal job doing stand exams for the Bitterroot National Forest out of Darby. I was 26. My first night in town I headed to a local bar, got in a fight and won. It established me as someone not to be fucked with, and despite some disdain for "Forest Service Types," I got along well with most locals. I spent my days walking through the mountains with a pacing stick, marking off random 'sample plots,' then using various tools such as an increment borer, DBH (Diameter-Breast Height) tapes and clinometers to measure the height, width, age and species of trees, the slope and aspect where they grew, and all plant life in a certain radius from plot center. The information was downloaded into Forest Service computers, plugged into formulas so that the plot samples could be used to estimate what existed on the entire forest, and used to help land managers know just how many trees could be converted into how much timber, as though the forest was a store inventory rather than a healthy watershed that not only helped sustain us but a diversity and abundance of wildlife species.

I worked four ten-hour days, and so would take my three-day weekends to backpack into the most remote, wild places I could reach. I got to know the country well, learned to hunt elk, fished a lot for trout, and fell in love with the place. When fall arrived, I enrolled in the Journalism School at the University of Montana in Missoula,



and returned again to the seasonal job on the Bitterroot National Forest the next spring. I relocated to the Sula District, south of Darby, and Jim moved out and joined me. We moved into a small cabin, more accurately described as a shed, 20-miles up the East Fork of the Bitterroot, just past where the pavement ends, with a woodstove and bunk bed. Such was the nature of my home and life that, in 1995, my father said he got “a bit nervous and concerned” when he first learned that the Unabomber was captured and had been living in a small shed in the mountains of western Montana where he wrote environmental manifestos.

Jim and I did a lot of backpacking, hunting, fishing, picked huckleberries, shot our bows and swam in the local lakes and creeks. We also spent way too much time at local bars drinking. In the fall, we’d move to an apartment in Missoula where we both attended school through the winter, returning to the cabin and the Forest Service job come spring – a pattern we kept up for several years. In the summer, when at the cabin, we drove into work early to use the small shower in the mechanic’s garage at the Ranger District office. Often, the members of the firefighting crew would be getting ready for work, stand-offish and not so friendly. I assumed they found us a bit intimidating, us being tough Force Recon Marines and all. I found out a few years later that they thought Jim and I were gay.

I made a friend in Darby named Larry, who was a logger and carpenter at the time. He was remodeling a kitchen for an older lady in town, and told me she had a beautiful granddaughter, named Christine, who would often visit. “Seems your type,” he’d said. “She loves to get out and hike and all that other shit you like to do.” He got her number, and I called her. She was going to school in Missoula, and working nights as

a cocktail waitress at the Holiday Inn, so I drove down to meet her. She had pretty blonde hair, spectacular green eyes, and seemed incredibly intelligent. I liked her right away. It wasn't long before we were dating.

The first backpack trip we took was on a hot July day, to retrieve my backcountry skis I had cached the previous winter on a 10-day solo winter trip through the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness from Darby to Elk City, Idaho. About halfway across, my ski bindings broke, so I hid them and continued the trip on snowshoes. Chris and I hiked in along the Selway River and, when we started, I decided to carry most of the gear. However, I couldn't keep up with her, so gradually gave her the tent poles, then the fuel bottle, then the food . . . until eventually she was likely carrying more than me, and I still had trouble keeping up. For the next few years we hiked all over the mountains together on some rugged adventures; she even helped me with the arduous task of packing out heavy loads of elk meat every fall. She rapidly became my best friend, and our 14-years of marriage seemed idealistically perfect to most people.

She helped me get through Journalism School, and inspired me to do good work in a productive string of jobs with a newspaper, then the Forest Service, then several non-profit wildlife conservation organizations that included the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, the National Wildlife Federation and two terms as President of the Montana Wildlife Federation. I inspired and supported her in her efforts to earn a degree in botany, and go to work for the Forest Service where she eventually landed a job as a research biologist with the Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station. We shared a passion for wildlife and wild places, conservation and preservation, and ended up in a comfortable home along Rattlesnake Creek in Missoula. In the

summer of 2000 – when Missoula was socked in with smoke from one of the biggest fire seasons in Montana’s history – she gave birth to our son Cory. When he came out of the womb and into the world I was the first to hold him, and didn’t ever want to let go.

My dad died four years later, at the age of 79, from kidney cancer. When my brother called and gave me the news, I broke down sobbing. “Daddy, what’s the matter,” Cory asked. I told him the news. “Does it hurt?” he asked. “My heart hurts,” I explained. He kissed me on the chest. “Does that make it better?”

Thinking a bit of military discipline might do me good, I had joined a Montana Army National Guard infantry unit a year or so earlier, joking with friends that it “was almost like the military.” I did like walking around with what the Army called the “Tower of Power,” wearing the jumpmaster, SCUBA and military freefall badges, along with the Ranger and Special Forces tabs. But I didn’t like the small-minded arrogance of higher-ups who covered their insecurities and lack of leadership skills by screaming and intimidating others. When my unit was preparing to deploy to Iraq, I had the option of re-enlisting or staying and going with them. It was a tough choice. So once again, I turned to the wilderness for answers, taking off on a 100-mile backpack trip by myself into the Grand Gulch of southern Utah. I returned to Chris and Cory and Montana feeling good, returning to “all the things I love,” as I stated in my journal.

I was successful at writing about conservation, natural history, wilderness adventures and hunting; I had led and won major victories to protect wildlife and wild places throughout Montana, and was considered somewhat of an authority on elk and elk hunting. I raced mountain bikes. An essay I wrote was selected for an annual anthology

called “America’s Best Nature Writing.” The Montana Wildlife Federation presented me with its prestigious “Les Pengelly Montana Professional Conservationist of the Year Award.”

All seemed perfect, but things weren’t quite right, particularly with my marriage. As Chris once put it: “It’s like we’re best friends and roommates, but something’s missing.” As usual, she was right. I was beginning to suffer more frequently from depression. I was often sad, angry and irritable.

I created and perpetuated house of cards, and it all came crashing down the day Chris asked for divorce. Need another lead in for this. You’re repeating information we already know.

I felt as if my heart had been ripped out. I fell into a rollercoaster ride of denial, depression and rage. One day, I would yell insults at Chris and the next I would call her to beg and plead for her to change her mind and give me another chance. For a while, I thought my luck would hold out, that it was merely a nightmare I would awake from, and everything would turn out okay. I spent a week in a small hotel room, getting drunk every night and sleeping most the days. My brother Ed told me about a friend of his, Charlie, who had recently gone through a tough divorce and how he attended a program called “New Warrior Training” put on by the Mankind Project. I looked it up online and was a bit cynical by the “new age” appearance of it all, but feeling desperate for help I figured it could do no harm. I enrolled, pack my bags, and headed for New Mexico.

The Mankind Project is clouded in a bit of secrecy, and attendees are asked to not reveal too much so as not to spoil the experience for others who may follow. I will say

this: The program is an odd, interesting mixture of Native American practices, military-type intimidation, and the works of Robert Bly and Carl Jung. It's designed for men struggling with various issues, providing a safe atmosphere to drop the bullshit myths and misconceptions of manhood and face one's true self. We all feed and amass shadows – defined as the things we hide, suppress and deny-- that can eventually consume us; the “new warrior” faces and goes to battle with those shadows, and drags them into the light. It certainly appealed to the Marine in me. The training weekend was held along the New Mexican and Arizona border, in an isolated facility in the mountains surrounded by ponderosa pines. When I arrived, volunteer leaders, dressed in black, pointed and directed us from place to place, rarely speaking. I would be told to stand in front of one, and he would merely point to another and say, “See that man.” So I would move in front of the other man, and he would point to another and say, “see that man,” and so on, from man to man. One man stood by a table, where I was told to empty my pockets. My gear was thoroughly searched and I was left with bare essentials. It all seemed silly, and I laughed. I told one of the men, “If you think you're being intimidating, it's not working. I served in the Marines and have been mind-fucked by the best; you're not very good at it.” He showed no expression, and merely pointed to another and said, “See that man.” It pissed me off.

I later learned that they had no intention of intimidating ; they remained expressionless and served as mirrors -- reflections of our own misconceptions, judgments and pre-conceived notions. In other words, they pissed me off because I was pissed off at myself.

We ate and slept little, and started the mornings naked, in line, walking along a sidewalk through a cold shower sprayed from a hose. It was invigorating. We sat face to face with other men and asked and answered personal questions with brutal honesty. We were encouraged to laugh, cry, pout, frown, smile and otherwise express – not hide – our true thoughts and feelings. After the first day the masks began to shed, and it was the first time I had been among men willing to expose their *real* selves. It was a place where everyone was accepted, and anything and everything could be openly and honestly discussed.

We did visualization exercises, in which we would lie on our backs, relax, close our eyes, and drift off into a world described by the soft, soothing voice of an instructor.

In one, I was told to imagine hiking along and meeting a little boy in a meadow, and discover that it was me as a little boy, and to ask that little boy who was me what he wanted. “Love and acceptance,” the boy in me answered. “The freedom and support to be who I am.” I suddenly became overwhelmed with grief and started crying uncontrollably. Some of the other men hugged me and gave me comfort.

In another exercise I was asked to imagine this: There’s a big white castle in a beautiful meadow, where there lived a king, a queen and a little boy. The place is surrounded by a large, dark, mysterious forest where knights kept disappearing. A brave hero volunteers to investigate, and returns days later to report that he discovered a wild man-beast living in pond in the forest. So all the men go out with buckets, bail out the pond, reveal and capture the wild man, bring the beast back and lock him in a cage. One day, the little boy – innocent, happy and content – is out throwing a yellow ball up in the

air and catching it, but the ball rolls into the cage with the wild man. The boy asks for it back, but the beast says no, unless the boy will sneak into the castle, steal the keys from under his mother's pillow, and set him free. So the boy does it, but has difficulty opening the cage and cuts his hand while trying. The blood running down his arm helps lubricate the lock, and he finally lets the wild man free. Scared of getting in trouble, he climbs on the beast's shoulder and they walk to the edge of the dark forest. There, the boy looks back at the castle and realizes that nothing would ever again be the same.

In yet another exercise I was asked to draw – with my non-writing hand – how I envisioned a special meadow, my vision of the world as I think it should be, and me interacting within it. The drawing I produced is child-like, like something my son would have drawn at the age of three and I'd hang on the refrigerator. It depicts a field surrounded by steep mountains and trees, encircled by cycles of winter, spring, summer and fall, as well as fire, rain, lightning and blizzards. To the side are stick figures – me, my former wife and son – with me pointing at and describing the scene. In the margins, I wrote my vision: “Accept the world for all it is—good, bad, happy, and sad – yet recognize the beauty and balance of it all.” Then I quickly jotted this in my journal:

“It's important to recognize and express feelings of gladness, sadness, sorrow, fear and shame – they are all part of me. But these emotions seem out of whack, out of balance. In pursuit of happiness, I suppress anger, guilt, shame and sorrow. Like water accumulating for years behind a dam, such emotions eventually break free, in catastrophic floods that are not natural or healthy. So how do I deal with and express my emotions in healthy ways? By being more open and honest? Stop being what you think

others expect you to be! Don't deny your real self; let the world know who you are. Be honest. Tell the truth."

We gathered in small groups, afterwards, to discuss our visualizations and drawings, and were asked to come up with a brief mission for ourselves. Mine was this: "I create a world of acceptance by sharing my passions and beliefs." Then we were asked, one at a time, to get in front of the group and imitate our favorite animal, and see if others could guess what it was. I, of course, got on my hands and knees, threw my head back, and bugled like a bull elk. This led to a naming ceremony, during which I was at first called "Bugling Bull Elk." But then one man stepped forward and said, "I don't think that's right. You seem strong, a bit intimidating at times, with occasional bursts of anger. You seem to have a good, kind heart. You seem full of energy, passion and life. You remind me more of a bear. A grizzly!" I was flattered. And thus I became known, within the world of the Mankind project, as "Wild Grizzly."

On the final night—the anxiously awaited grand finale-- we headed for the "Magic Carpet," where we "New Warriors" were to confront our shadows in an "epic battle." My initial skepticism wavered as I watched man after man boldly head to the carpet, surrounded by the group, to face their demons with the help of several trained guides. Men revealed a variety of internal struggles and deep sources of shame, guilt and sorrow: Divorce, past sexual abuse, death of loved ones, alcohol and drug problems. They were led through emotional exercises, sometimes role-playing, where, for example, a guide might pretend to be an abusive father, and the man was encouraged to confront him, say what he always wanted to say, and get it out of his system. One man had crashed his car, driving drunk, in which both his wife and two kids had died. On the "Magic



Carpet” he was able to talk to them, telling them things that had built up in him for years. The room was filled with tears, heartbreak, empathy compassion. When my turn arrived, I thought it would be easy. I felt my problems were nothing compared to others. I assumed I’d talk about my feelings regarding the death of my father and divorce and be done with it. But as I learned in the Marine Corps, real battles rarely go as planned.

It started off simple enough. “I am sad, have regrets, a sense of guilt and shame about some things. My father died, I loved him and miss him. My wife left me; I love her and miss her. I wasn’t such a great husband. I hate and regret some of the things I did in the Marine Corps. I’ve hurt people and regret that. I drink too much. I want my son to grow up in a normal family, but he won’t . . .” I even shed a few tears, for authenticity. That should do it, I thought. But the guides weren’t buying it. “What are you hiding?” they asked. “Hmm . . . let’s see . . . oh, I’ve run up some crazy credit card debts,” I replied. They got in my face, “What are you hiding?” I got sarcastically defensive. “Sometimes, when nobody’s watching, I sing and dance in my underwear.” They got more aggressive. “What are you hiding?”

They asked me to describe my feelings of sorrow, guilt, and shame -- where is it located? What color is it? What shape is it?” I decided to take it more seriously, and did the best I could. “It’s in my gut, right here (I put both hands on my stomach). It’s a red and orange ball of flame . . . no . . . it’s a big black ball, I think, growing larger by the minute, burning my insides, consuming me. It hurts.” Then real tears began to shed. I surprised myself, and felt a bit embarrassed, said I had had enough of the bullshit, and started to leave the carpet. “So you are going to walk away from it, like you always have?” they asked. “Be a real man, face it.”

That pissed me off. So I went back to confront the guides.

They told me to calm down. They asked me to close my eyes. I did. They told me to focus again on the pain in my gut. I did. They told me to think of it as being like bad food, or too much booze, or poison, and work to get rid of it. To imagine I were puking it all up into an imaginary bucket. I played along, and it started feeling more real than I was comfortable with.

Suddenly I screamed out loud, with rage, and puked my imaginary puke of poison into the imaginary bucket but it felt so real I thought I could smell it. Then I was asked to pretend I was a knight, or a King, with a sword, and to dip the tip of my sword in the imaginary vomit of poison, sorrow, shame and guilt and stir it up good, and hold it up high. With that sword, they said, I should be able to slice and cut into anything – even a brick wall if I had to – boldly facing and confronting anything with the sword of truth and courage.

I felt strangely better, until one of the guides got back in my face and shouted, “So what are you hiding?” I shoved him away, told him to back off. Four of them rapidly ganged up on me, pushed me to the floor, and put all their collective weight on me. I tried to fight, but was overpowered. I ran out of energy quickly. Finally—after what must have been several minutes of futile struggle – lying face down on the floor, exhausted, livid, pinned down, I began to cry -- a deep, raw, sobbing from the gut. “What are you hiding?” they asked, over and over, again and again, “What are you hiding? . . . until I finally said, “fuck it, fuck you . . . I am attracted to men. I like men. I have sex with men. I think I am gay.”

All went silent. They backed off. The weight was lifted. I continued sobbing, and hid my face for a while. Then I got up, embarrassed, wishing I could retract the statement. But everyone, all the men around me, were smiling. They patted me on my back, they shook my hand, they hugged me and congratulated me. The guides had me face the circle of men around me, shake each of their hands, look them in the eye, one at a time, and tell them my truth, my darkest of secrets. "I'm gay." I said it over and over, and every man in the room smiled and said congratulations. I was led to the "King's chair," where New Warriors go after the battle. Someone brought me a glass of water, and I sat there on that throne watching while the next man entered the Magic Carpet and faced his shadows. I felt pretty damned good.

That night, I penned in my journal my first ever attempt at poetry:

*I cast desires into darkness*  
*Hide, suppress, deny*  
*My true self, my true heart*  
*The void fills and builds*  
*With anger, fear and shame*  
*A potent mass of blackness*  
*About to burst in a flood of pain*  
*Until I confront it*  
*Fight it*  
*Let it out*  
*Accept it*  
*I am free*

When I left, I drove to Jemez Springs northwest of Albuquerque and checked into a funky motel called the Laughing Lizard. I walked through the small town to the Jemez Bath House and treated myself to a half-hour massage from a decent-looking guy, letting go of all apprehensions and pretense, simply relaxing and enjoying the soothing touch of another man. Later that night, I drove up the road to a trailhead and hiked several miles in the dark up a steep mountain to a natural, undeveloped hot springs. I had the place to myself, at first, and sat naked in the warm water gazing up at a brilliant full moon and sky full of stars, partially covered by fast-moving clouds. I thought of the wild man, and I stood up several times, screaming as loud as I could to the trees, mountains and sky. "I'm gay, damnit!" I climbed under a waterfall and squeezed into a small cave, about the length of my body and perhaps three-feet high. At first, I felt a bit claustrophobic, but then I curled up in the fetal position in that small, dark space and imagined I was in my mother's womb. After a while, I felt comfortable and secure, then I crawled back out, emerging from the cave and the waterfall back out under the moonlight. I looked at the stars, and the clouds, and the mountains, and rocks and ponderosa pines around me and felt an odd sense of seeing it all for the first time, with a mixture of fear and elation, curiosity and apprehension, facing a whole new world, embarking on a new life, as if I was reborn. And like the little boy on the wild man's shoulders, glancing back at the white castle, I realized, right then, that nothing would ever be the same again.

Later that night, I heard voices and laughter in the distance, and spotted the bobbing beams of flashlights coming up the trail. A young couple arrived, surprised to see me, and shyly asked if I minded them climbing in naked. "I have no problem with it,"

I replied. So they joined me, and it was good to have company. They told me about their lives and I told them about mine and, after a bit, the guy loaded and starting smoking a bowl and asked if I wanted a hit. I said no, I've never smoked the stuff. He laughed and said, "You're 44 and you've never smoked weed?" Nope. "We'll maybe it's time you did." Good point.

I've heard that some people don't get stoned the first time they smoke weed. I did. Very stoned. And when they left, I climbed out of the springs and wandered around in the woods a bit, looking up at the tops of the tall ponderosas reaching high towards the moon and stars like they were all friends having a party. I held my hands out wide like an evangelical preacher, smiling and shouting nonsensical blabberings to the trees and mountains. I got a bit turned around but didn't care, it was a warm night, so I eventually lay down on a bed of pine needles and fell asleep naked, like a beast, and awoke a few hours later with the sun already up, feeling a bit chilled but happy.

When I returned home to Montana, I invited Chris over for a talk. She sat across from me at my kitchen counter while I closed my eyes, envisioned holding my sword dipped in vomit, and built up the courage to just spit it out. I told her everything, even the sexual encounters I had had with men while we were still married. It was a long, emotional night mixed with anger, empathy, laughter and honesty. For her, it explained so many things she never understood, and everything suddenly made sense.

Another night, in my living room, I told my friend Paul, with whom I had served in the Marine Reserves, and had gone on many wilderness adventures . "Holy shit Dave," he replied. "I'm more gay than you are and I'm not!" He gave me a hug, told me

he didn't care, and said he loved me no matter what. On a work-related trip to D.C., I also told my boss. We sat in a bar, chain-smoking cigarettes, when, at one point, I told him there was more going on in my life than just divorce. He sarcastically said, "What, are you going to tell me you're gay or something?" That was my chance. "Well, as a matter of fact, yeah," I replied. He was surprised, but didn't care.

Not long after, back in Montana, a young, smart, competent guy Corey, who was familiar with my conservation work and writing, stopped by my house seeking an internship. I persuaded my boss to hire him, and we quickly became friends. Corey knew I was struggling through divorce, and while drinking a few beers at a bar one night he bluntly asked, "Do you mind me asking you something? Are you gay?" I was a bit shocked and defensive. "Why do you ask?" He explained that his father is gay and had left his mother and came out late in life, when Corey was a teenager, and he noticed similarities. His dad has a partner, and Corey loves them both unconditionally. Corey came into my life at just the right time and helped me to begin accepting things. I told my friend Jason, I told my old boss and friend Dan. They didn't care. Dan wrote me a note stating that he could "only imagine what it must have been like to live with such a secret, to deny one's real self for so long," and he congratulated me for my new-found "courage and honesty."

But the deep emotional and psychological effects of growing up in a place and time where being gay was considered a disgusting, sinful, disease -- and as unmanly as a pink tutu -- aren't so easily cast aside. Aside from meaning "happy," I never even heard the use of the word gay to describe homosexuality while growing up. I heard the terms

“light in the loafers” and “effeminate.” But I never had loafers. And if I did, they would have been as heavy and tough as a sledge hammer. I certainly wasn’t “effeminate.” No way! Liberace and Elton John weren’t even out when I was young. Everyone suspected they owned light loafers, but I knew I wasn’t anything like them. There was absolutely no way I could be gay. It didn’t make sense. I started to think those men at the Mankind project had brainwashed me. Sure, I might feel gay cruising a gay bar in the gay district of Washington D.C. while drunk, but I certainly didn’t feel gay sitting on a barstool in Darby, Montana.

So I began retreating back into the closet, keeping the door slightly ajar. I hooked up with a woman on an internet site called Adult Friend Finder, where my profile listed me as straight. After a passionless attempt at sex, she asked, “Are you gay or something?” Then one night, on the same hook-up site, an attractive guy chatted me up and wrote, “Too bad you are straight; you look cute.” I replied back: “Well . . . it doesn’t mean we can’t chat.” It wasn’t long before I was telling him I had been known to “experiment” with guys, and he came over for a visit. The sex was amazing. Still, I didn’t *want* to be gay; I still felt like a freak. If I were indeed gay, I didn’t want to be. I began smoking weed every day, and rapidly relapsed back into heavy drinking and depression. Shadows are powerful foes; battles are won and lost, but the war lasts a lifetime.

That’s why I drove to the trailhead one night with my shotgun. That’s why I remembered my maps. That’s why I decided to hike to Canada.

### **Chapter Three: The Angel's Bathing Pool**

Entering the Mission Mountain Wilderness was a bit like returning home, as I knew the country well from previous adventures. Winter was stubbornly hanging on, and I grew exhausted post-holing through knee-deep snow and battling through alder and menziesia on the north slopes. It rained hard for several days. In the lower draws and valleys, along the creeks and lakes between precipitous mountains, below the receding snowline where everything seemed wet, the mosquitoes were brutal, swarming around my head like storm clouds – drawing blood from every inch of exposed skin. I spent several days at Grey Wolf Lake, camped under several big spruce trees alongside a cliff near a waterfall at the outlet of the lake. I spent a lot of time in my tent, reading and relaxing, but ventured out a few times to catch trout for dinner. When the sun finally came out, I dove into the icy-cold lake with all my clothes on, took them off, scrubbed them with a small rock, set up a line of parachute cord between two trees, and hung them out to dry. Then I climbed the cliffs above camp, where there was enough of a breeze to keep the mosquitoes at bay, and lay naked, on a big flat rock, sleeping until dark when I awoke shivering from the cold. I climbed back down, put my now-dry clothes back on, and – since the cooler air seemed to run off the mosquitoes – moved my sleeping bag and pad down by the shore and fell asleep again, looking up at a bright sky of stars. Living in a house, in the middle of a town, I had forgotten how magnificent and mysterious the night sky can be.

I was glad for the trout, supplementing an otherwise simple, tiresome menu: two packages of instant oatmeal and hot chocolate mixed with coffee in the



mornings; one or two Cliff or Luna bars in the afternoons, and a rice or noodle dish (just boil and simmer) with hot chocolate in the evenings. As for the trout, I'd jab them with a stick, cook them over a fire and eat them with a dash or three of lemon pepper. I carried a small stove, no bigger than my fist, fueled by a small cylindrical-shaped canister of white gas. I'd boil water in a titanium pot, add oatmeal, rice or noodles, and eat with a metal spoon from a tin cup. Afterwards, I'd swipe the pot and cup with my finger, lick clean, add coffee, hot chocolate or both, and add more hot water. Every few days or so I would use a handful of gravel from a creek bottom to scrub the dishes, rinse them, and place them in a sunny spot to dry. I doubt it would pass OSHA inspection, but it works for me.

Against common wisdom and advice, I don't carry soap in the wilds. I bathe in lakes and rivers. I do dishes with clear, cold water and gravel. I drink right from springs and creeks, and don't use filters or iodine tablets. I am well aware of the risks, I know all about giardia, but I take my chances. I like feeling a part of the wilds, like I belong, not separate and distinct. I suppose that's partly why I hunt, why I enjoy eating bloody rare elk meat I kill and cut up myself. I half joke with friends that I hope to be consumed by a grizzly someday, so I can travel through a digestive system and fertilize the grasses and forbs the elk eat. Seems only fair; seems only natural. When I left my job at the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a co-worker named Jan gave me a sealed mason jar full of bear shit as a farewell gift, mixed with pieces of a flannel shirt and buttons and a labeled: "Here are the remains of Dave Stalling, who died as he wanted. Please disperse in a remote, wild place where he can feed the elk he so loved." Even my son Cory, when asked what Daddy's dream is replies: "To be grizzly poop." I am aware of the hypocrisy. I carry an expensive tent, sleeping bag and parka made of the best in

waterproof, breathable, lightweight synthetic materials, along with the latest technological gadgetry in backpack, stove, fuel bottles, sleeping pad, packable fishing rod and reel, spinning lures and digital camera. I carry pure spring water in a Nalgene bottle. But as Walt Whitman put it: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes!”

I was craving companionship. I wanted badly to be able to share such adventures with someone I loved, someone I cared about, someone who loved and cared about me, someone with whom to share our deepest thoughts, strongest desires, most intimate feelings. Could I ever have that with another man? I doubted it. Until I resolved my issues, I knew I needed this time alone – time to learn to love myself before I could expect anyone else to love me, or for me to love anyone else. I sank in and out of depression with tortuous thoughts and questions racing through my mind. I pushed myself to dig deeper.

The Wellness book quotes Alfred North Whitehead: “This generation has all the answers. It’s the questions that we seek.” But I felt overburdened with questions. I wanted answers, and I wanted them now. I wanted instant rebirth. So I delved into my journal and Wellness Workbook in earnest. The book describes wellness as a continuous, life-long journey; a process not an answer. This adventure was just a tiny slice of life, a small part of a much bigger, longer journey. A statement in my book read, “You don’t trust what you don’t know.” I didn’t trust myself; I needed to cut through the bullshit and expose the real me. But what if I don’t like the real me? A few other quotes from the book stood out: “It’s hard to love when you feel guilt and shame . . . only the body-mind

heals itself. . . healing occurs from within, but only when you are ready to heal.” And two words in particular hit home: an effort towards wellness, the authors wrote, required “patience and compassion” with oneself – two traits I was notoriously lacking. I couldn’t help but compare what I read and learned and thought about to the very wilds around me. Caterpillars, nymphs, tadpoles and pine seeds – all transform into something else, and the change comes from within, from what they already contain inside, yet the environment around them influences the change. Nothing in nature is static. Wildfire, flood, blizzard and avalanches can seem frightening, even catastrophic, at times, but they are part of the process, and eventually things green up, the sun comes out, and forest, rivers, streams and wildlife are better off for it. Maybe our bodies are the same, like micro-ecosystems, and storms of depression, guilt, shame, trouble and illness are the fire and floods that make us stronger and healthier in the long run. If we survive.

Like a child trying to find Waldo in a picture book, I was seeking the real me in the vast, wild landscape between Missoula and Waterton -- a search and rescue mission, of sorts. A game of hide and seek. *Dave, where are you? Come out come out wherever you are.* It wasn’t easy. Sitting up against a spruce near Grey Wolf Lake, I wrote this:

“I do too much to impress others. Much of my life is an act. A show. I like attention. I like drama. Even, to some extent, I write in this journal with the thought in mind that someone else will read it, and so I want to write what I think they will want to read, to impress them, to get attention. And I tend to write what I think might someday be a good book, instead of working on me, focusing on me. This is not about a book, not about roughing it or being a tough, macho guy. This is about me. About getting better.”

Enough! My mind was driving me insane. I felt I was doing too much reading, writing and thinking, and just needed to relax, let go, and enjoy myself. I threw my books in the tent and hiked up a ridge where I knew I would be able to look down the other side towards Whelp Lake. I saw a blue tent down there. There was a time when if I saw such a site I would angrily pack my own tent and move on, further into the wilds, to get away from everyone. No more. I had become more of a social loner, seeking and enjoying solitude, but gladly visiting the neighbors when I could. So I hiked on down to say hi. They were great guys, Josh and Paul, both environmental study students at the University of Montana . Paul gave me a chunk of Lifeline Cheese and we sat by the lake for an hour or more talking about the environment, hunting, fishing and elk -- a typical Montana conversation.

They were intrigued by my adventure and took a photo of me, and I took a photo of them, and then I remembered: I had thrown my digital camera in my pack but realized, several days into the trip, that the memory card only held about a dozen shots, which I had already used up. I asked Josh and Paul if, when they returned to Missoula in a few days, they wouldn't mind buying me a new memory card, one that could hold 100 photos or so, and mail it to my friend Bud Moore's cabin in the Seeley Swan where I planned to stop for a visit in another week. Gladly, they said. So I ran back to my camp, dug out my checkbook then back to the blue tent, giving them a blank check and writing down Bud's address. In the good-ole' US of A, even in the midst of wilderness, commerce and shopping must go on! I returned to my own camp feeling a bit lonely. I drifted off to sleep thinking how nice it would be to be warmly snuggled in that Blue Tent between Josh and Paul, and the thought barely troubled me. I slept well.

I spent half the next day in my tent; reading, writing, daydreaming, sleeping, bored, depressed. I did pushups, sit ups, plucked the grey hair from my chest, jerked off, and got a Waylon Jennings song stuck in my head (“The only two things in life that make it worth living . . . ) I made a game of catching and squishing mosquitoes from mid-air with just my thumb and forefinger. I must have killed a hundred. I wondered why their lives seem less valuable than, say, a mountain goat or elk or grizzly. Because they bite, sting, suck my blood and cause me discomfort? Because they are tiny? I squashed them, like an avalanche might squash me. Or like a grizzly bear might maul me under the right circumstances. If a boar grizzly killed me, I wondered, would he think about it later?

I felt trapped in my tent and trapped in my head. With hundreds of miles of wilderness to roam, you would think I’d feel free. But there are probably prisoners who feel freer than I did, because they allow themselves to feel free.

“Freedom is in the mind. Your mind must free you. Let your mind expand and be as big and wild as the wilderness. Create the world you want, the world you desire. But there are limits. My mind can’t make me straight, can’t make you attracted to women (I already tried that). My mind can’t make me young again (though I can feel young). There are limits. Accept the limits. Accept yourself. Stop fighting. I dwell on the past too much, too many regrets. I think, ponder and analyze too much. Let it go. Learn to live in the moment, enjoy the here and now.”

I still occasionally considered suicide, but knew I would never follow through. Partly because of my son. Not so much because I thought he needed me—plenty of kinds....plenty of kids grow up just fine without fathers. It was more selfish than that; I

want to know what he will grow into. I don't want to miss anything. And, I suppose, there is also some fear of the unknown. Sure, my future is unknown but not as much a mystery as death. I will die eventually anyway, so I may as well hang in there and see what happens. I should just look at the next 30 to 40 years or so I might have left as the last 2,500 feet and enjoy. Physically and mentally, I have always hungered for adventure. The mysterious uncertainties of wilderness appeal to me – taking my body and mind into the unknown -- traveling through reluctance, apprehension, fear, excitement, a sense of accomplishment and, in the end, I always feel better. It's a mental journey as much as a physical journey. It's why I don't like signs, trail guides and conventional rules and advice on safety. People love the wilds and wildlife, while rendering much of it an abstract; taming and controlling it to suit their needs and ensure their safety. We want to get a feel of it, too lightly touch it and experience it, but on our terms. My advice is this: At least once, get out and hike into the unknown, off trail, alone, into some remote, wild rugged place. Don't look at the maps. Don't read a guide book. Don't tell anyone where you are going or when you will be back. Don't bring a compass or GPS unit, or food or water or a water filter or extra clothes or a camera. Just go. Wander awhile and enjoy the mystery, enjoy the freedom -- the excitement, nervousness, apprehension, fear and joy. Maybe you will die. But at least you will have lived before you do, even if just for a moment.

Up until Grey Wolf Lake I had been taking anti-depressants prescribed by a therapist assigned to me by the Veteran's Administration. When I told her I was gay, she said she doubted it, that I was just confused and struggling with a lot of tough issues. She wanted me to focus on my Marine Corps days, convinced it was the source of all my

problems. I guess it was the topic she had most knowledge, understanding and experience with, and was more comfortable territory for her. I stopped seeing her. I began wondering if my drugs were a Band-Aid approach, merely treating the symptoms at the tip of my iceberg without treating the issues below the surface. I smiled at the thought of a grizzly eating me while my blood contained anti-depressants. Former Idaho Congresswoman Chenoweth in opposition to a proposed grizzly reintroduction in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness, once described grizzlies as “manic, depressive animals that don’t belong in Idaho.” So if they ate me, with my body full of drugs, would it help them? I decided that would be too much meddling with nature. I buried my remaining pills in a hole I dug beneath a rotten log and decided to move on without them – north, to Wellnessville, or grizzly shit; either outcome seemed fine at the time.

By my best guess, it was a Sunday, and studying my map, I decided my next stop would be a lake named the Angel’s Bathing Pool. I could use spiritual uplifting, and, if nothing else, I was in need of a bath. I packed up and headed that way. If you stick to the high country in the Missions, you need to negotiate around treacherous cliffs. Head for the low country, and you enter dense thickets of alder, menziesia and blowdown. Either way is tough, slow going. I did a bit of both. It was cloudy, cold and even snowed a little. I sang a part of John Denver’s *Seasons* over and over: format single space

“It’s cold, and it’s getting colder,  
It’s grey and cloudy winter all around.  
And oh, I must be getting older,  
For all this snow is trying to get me down.  
There’s a fire in the corner slowly dying, away,  
Sometimes I just don’t feel like going on, going on.  
But still I know it’s more than worth the waiting, away,  
For another chance to see that summer sun,

Come on shine on me!”

The Angel’s Bathing pool was surrounded by my favorite sort of country – steep cliffs and ledges, subalpine fir and larch, talus slopes where fat yellow-bellied marmots stand guard and let out high-pitched whistles to warn of approaching . Mountain goat country! The lake was small, roundish, the length and width of a football field, and nearly turquoise in color. As far as I could see, there were no fish, no trails, no fire rings, chopped trees or litter or other signs of people. It’s a spectacular place, and aptly named. I sat awhile on a large flat rock by the lake and drank from the clear water. I felt high, happy and energetic. In the rare moments of my life when I have felt any sense of spiritual connectedness, it’s in places like this, where everything makes sense and seems so, well, so connected – predator, prey, cold, rain, sun, life, death, a constant flow and cycling of energy; connectivity at its most basic, obvious, most visible level, where I can see it, feel it, touch it, smell it and *be* it. If there is a God this *is* it.

I found a dense rock the size of a shot-put, and did curls and overhead presses with each arm, then some push-ups, sit-ups and stretches. Then I stripped down and dove in – a quick, in and out, bath and baptism in one – invigorating, but cold. But even after climbing out and putting on all my clothes, including a fleece jacket, the chills wouldn’t stop. I hated to leave, but figured I should throw on my pack and climb the next mountain to warm up. Perhaps such places should be visited briefly, like a church. I left feeling pretty clear-headed, content and focused; or, as my dad used to put it, “highly serensified.”



A gradual climb up and around ledges to a ridge top and down a steep, talus chute on the other side, made for fairly quick time to Park Lake. Along the way, I stepped on a loose rock, fell hard, and cut open the palm of my right hand. It bled a lot, hurt, and made it tough to write for the next few days. Summarizing the injury, rather than making this a part of the ongoing narrative. I fished the creek below High Park – a series of cascading waterfalls and large, deep pools -- and caught several 15-inch cuttbows, a Dr. Frankenstein-like, human-created hybrid between cutthroats and rainbow trout, stocked in high-mountain lakes for the amusement of anglers; more meddling with nature to suit our desires. I killed the fish and ate them for dinner. I had not felt like fishing for months, but enjoyed it that day. I enjoyed the entire day! And that evening, while eating fish with my hands in front of a warm fire, it hit me: I hadn't even thought about being gay all day, which had constantly and obsessively occupied my mind for the past few months. Who cares? I had hiked, fished, swam and ate. Sex and sexuality was not on the agenda. The Angel's Bathing Pool had been good for me.

The cold kept mosquitoes away so I fell asleep with my tent door open, but withing hours it began to rain. By the time I got the flap down, a large puddle.....then it started raining and a large puddle formed at the entrance at my feet. I got wet, and chilly, and laid awake most the night working on my wellness workbook by the light of my headlamp. When I did sleep, I had a strange dream in which I could only remember bits and pieces:

*I had locked myself out of a store and was running through the streets of a city, in the middle of the night, wet and naked. I found a towel, dried off, and wrapped it around my waist. I ran into some vagrants in an alley who confronted me, intimidated me and*

*asked for money. I told them I had nothing; just a towel. Someone shined a bright flashlight in my eyes, asking if I knew w a good place to sleep. We were in a junkyard. I ran away to my mother's house and asked for help.*

It was still partly cloudy in the morning, but the sun poked through enough that I was able to hang things out to dry. I worked more on my journal and Wellness Workbook, and tackled the topics of shame, guilt, sorrow and regrets. I was stubbornly hanging onto the past (I have trouble letting go) --grieving the loss of the “old” me (whatever that was), my “old” way of life with Chris, and feeling sorrow and regrets for not having lived more true to myself and treating others better. I wanted so badly to start over, to live it all again, but differently. I didn't want to grow old; I wanted to be young again. But I knew I couldn't.

I needed to give myself time and space; forgive myself for my past; accept myself for whom I am; develop more compassion and love for myself; accept what I could not change (my age, my sexuality, my past) and change what I could. As an exercise in the book, I made a list of things I *do* love about myself: I am smart and curious; I am passionate; I am different; I am open to new ideas; I am willing to change; I am healthy and active; I am a good writer and decent public speaker; I reach out and help others; I have a good sense of humor; I have had a diverse and interesting life; I have experience in a variety of things; I have compassion for other people and wildlife. Positive affirmations, they're called – like Al Franken's Saturday Night Live character, Stuart Smalley, looking in the mirror and saying, “I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!” And they work. I am a happy, energetic, productive person, and I am as sexy as George Clooney, and I decided if I said it over and over, I just might

start believing it. If all the world's a stage, and we're all merely players, why not pretend to be something good?

I hiked to Lost Lake that afternoon, taking my time, carefully picking my way up and through the cliffs, keeping to the high ground first north, then northeast and east, then north again. I set up camp along the creek flowing out of Lost Lake and, since the sun had come out, I did laundry, hung my clothes, and bathed in a deep, cool pool. I waded downstream fishing, naked, and caught a cutthroat that flapped around when I lifted it from the water, treble hooks stuck deep in its jaws, spraying blood all over me. Standing waist deep in the current, surrounded by mountains and trees, naked with fish blood on my hands, chest and stomach, I felt like the Wildman. I cleaned up, put on a fresh T-shirt and underwear, and climbed out on a log jam at the end of the lake where I caught three huge fish – 18-inches or so and fat – and prepared a hearty feast. Lost Lake, I decided, was good for the lost soul.

Missoula seemed a month or more behind me, yet it had been only a week. Already, I felt energetic, in good physical shape, and more knowledgeable about myself. I spent several long, tough days continuing north in the Missions, climbing along, up, down and around ledges and cliffs. I got “cliffed in” several times, coming to dead ends too steep and challenging to jump off or climb, so I would have to backtrack, and find another way around – sometimes being forced to drop to the low country and beat my way through the thickets and blowdown. I slept by several lakes with no names, and gradually worked my way towards Condon. I ran out of oatmeal, rice and noodles, and

got tired of eating trout. Each day became a comfortable routine of hiking, napping, battling mosquitoes, bathing, fishing, eating, reading, writing and sleeping. And each day I felt better, healthier, and more alive. One day, while hiking through some snow atop a ridge, I was thinking about how a month or so earlier I had driven to the trailhead with my shotgun.

I was pleased, if not amazed, at my rapid change in attitude. Once again, I was beginning to love and embrace life. Then I stepped on a patch of ice, lost my footing, and slid fast towards the edge of a cliff. I desperately grabbed onto a thin whitebark pine, only four or five feet high, nearly yanking my arms out of their sockets in the a sudden, painful halt, thankful the roots had held. That little tree was the only thing between life and death, and I thought of the irony: If anyone were to find my body out here, or even if they never did, friends and family would assume I had killed myself. They would never know how happy I was becoming.

Still, at night, snuggled up in my cocoon-like bag in my little tent, I would feel lonely and sad, falling back into my dwelling. My mind tortures me most in the blackness of the night. I thought a lot about Chris and Cory and the life we had together. I loved living with her. I missed her smile and laugh. I missed talking to her, holding her, and lifting her up and hugging her, drinking wine and eating good meals with her. *I wondered if I really loved her or if I just loved the companionship, attention, lifestyle. I loved her like a friend, but I couldn't sort out if I was also sexually attracted to her. Maybe I was bisexual instead of gay?*

If I were gay, I didn't want to be. One night, I had a dream in which Jim was lying beside me in my tent, snoring away in his sleeping bag (as he had so many times for real, on numerous wilderness trips together) and I put my arm around him and held him tight, and felt warm and secure. Then he turned into Chris. Such was my confusion.

From the day I met Jim, when he was assigned to my platoon during training exercise in Puerto Rico, I was drawn to him in a powerfully confusing way. Dark hair, brown eyes, contagious smile, toned body. He is strikingly handsome and smart. I loved his southern accent, and liked that he didn't speak a lot but when he did he had something to say. I'd catch myself watching him in his shorts, coming out of the ocean with water glistening from his lean, tanned body, or sometimes catch a glimpse of him in the shower, and would want so bad to touch him. I felt like a freak, and knew it was a dangerous way to feel, but couldn't fully control or contain it. I helped him to his bunk late one night, returning from a heavy night of drinking, and he passed out in his clothes. I removed his shoes, pants and shirt, none of which woke him up, and was ready to throw the covers over him when, instead, stopped, kneeled by the bed and stared. I touched his hair, put a hand on his chest, and still he didn't wake or budge. I wanted to kiss him, but even in my drunken state I knew better. I ran my hand down his chest and felt his stomach, admiring his toned abs, both fearful and excited at taking such a risk. It was as if I were seeing a beautiful work of art at a museum where the signs said "Please Don't Touch," and couldn't help but touch. Then I carefully, reluctantly, placed my hand atop his white Fruit-of-the-Looms, lightly feeling what lay below that thin layer of cotton. I wanted so badly to slide my hand underneath. Aroused yet frightened, I stopped. This was

Forbidden. Sick and twisted. I went into the bathroom and jerked off, then lay in my own bunk and cried for an hour or so. I hated myself. I and I knew that if anyone found out, they would hate me too.

In the mornings, when we lived in a small cabin in Montana, I would sometimes wake up in the bottom bunk and wait for him to awake and climb down from the top, feet first, then calves and legs, followed by his white skivvies showing a slight, morning bulge, then stomach, chest and neck . . . and I would close my eyes before his face appeared and pretend I was asleep. At a hot springs once, while he was drying his hair and face, I snapped a few photos of him naked, without him knowing, and kept them hidden away for years in a manila folder in the back of a small file cabinet. I would dig them out at times, when alone, and dream things were different. Women were drawn to him, and I was jealous when he went on dates.

While in college, he went on several dates with a woman I worked at the school newspaper with. "She's a bitch," I'd tell him. "Stay away from her." He left me alone at a bar one night to go home with her, and I worked myself into a drunken rage. I drove to her house, pounded on the door, and confronted them. "This is fucked up," I yelled at Jim. "I thought we were going to hang out tonight, and you left me alone for her?" It made no sense, to them or me, and he thought I was jealous because I wanted her. It was more than physical; I admired him for his intelligence, his honesty, his integrity, and his moral beliefs and courage. He's all I thought and talked about. I told him I loved him, and he told me he loved me, but we were talking about different kinds of love.

When he left Montana, to move back South, I cried when he hugged me goodbye. He was surprised by my reaction, saying, "Dave, come on, I'll be coming out

to backpack with you a lot.” I cried on and off for weeks. When he met, dated and then married his wife Tia, I was jealous. When I came out years later, almost everyone who knows me figured it out. “Wow, and you are in love with Jim, huh?” was a common response. “That explains a lot.” He figured it out too, and was not comfortable with it. It put a strain on our friendship that may never be fully healed. I told him the standard cliché that gays are pretty much taught to say when coming out to friends and family: “I’m the same person you’ve always known.”

“But you’re not,” he replied, “this is something you kept hidden, kept secret, and so I didn’t really know you.” He’s right. I’ve never talked to him in honest detail about it and, even now, as I write this, I fear that if and when he reads it he will never speak to me again. I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t, but I hope I am wrong; I hope he will forgive and understand. I couldn’t help myself. I loved him. I still do.

My last night in the Missions, I camped between two lakes in a rocky area below some turbulent waterfalls where a pleasant breeze kept the mosquitoes off me. I felt exhausted, weak and nauseous. I had taken a lot of risks that day, climbing up and down cliffs I had no business being on, and decided I needed to slow down and be more careful. I felt my mind was pushing my body more than it could handle. I had to force myself to eat . I ate a half dozen small trout then threw up. I found a large, flat-topped boulder, extending six or eight feet above the lower lake, with a nice, slight curve that was perfect for lying down on. I watched an osprey glide down, without even moving his wings, and crash hard into the water, making quite a splash, resurfacing, lifting back into the air, and flying right over me with a flapping fish dangling from his talons. I took off

my clothes, dove into the water, climbed back up and slept on my back naked under the warm sun for most of the afternoon. I awoke to a dark red sunset and a silver sliver of a moon hanging above the lake and mountains. I went back to camp, cooked up my last package of hot chocolate, then climbed into my tent and bag. I awoke late, restless, left the tent and lay awhile on a nearby rock in my underwear, gazing up at the moon, stars and the Milky Way, spying several shooting stars. I got cold, retreated back to my bag and tent, and was finally getting back to sleep when I heard a noise; the clacking of hooves on rock? I looked outside and, on the very same rock I had been lying on, stood a large, white, mountain goat, with massive black horns, perhaps 20 yards away, silhouetted against a backdrop of mountains, moon and stars. It seemed an apparition, and I wondered if it was all a dream.

I started my morning off with an invigorating dive into the lake, then sat on a rock singing a part of Kenny Loggins' *Danny's Song*, over and over: "And in the morning when I rise/ You bring a tear of joy to my eyes/ And tell me everything is gonna be alright." I felt my senses had heightened, and I wandered around a bit wanting to touch, see, smell and taste everything – water, rock, trees, dirt, flowers, pine needles and elk shit. I went back to my tent and wrote:

*Suddenly away from cars, trains and people,*

*The silence seems terrifying*

*Until I realize, there is no silence.*

*I hear water, wind, birds and the buzzing of mosquitoes.*

*When I close my eyes and really listen,*



*I hear my heart.*

*Listen!*

From a ridge near Turquoise and Lace Lakes I could see Lindbergh Lake and the Seeley-Swan Valley in the distance, and the rugged mountains of the Bob Marshall Wilderness behind on the other side where I'd be heading after a resupply stop in town. From such a distance, it seemed a bit intimidating and overwhelming. I hit trails that day, and was thankful for easy hiking. I had mixed feelings dropping down from the high, alpine country into dark stands of Doug fir, spruce closer to town. I was reluctant to leave the wilds just yet, but looking forward to buying more food and visiting my friend Bud Moore. As I approached Glacier Lake I could hear kids laughing and playing in the water. When I could finally see them, running around in the shallows and splashing each other, it reminded me of a time, years earlier in the Anaconda Pintler Wilderness, when I had watched a group of six elk calves chasing each other in the shallows of a lake, splashing away, while the cows stood nearby watching. I stopped to swim at Glacier Lake, said hello to the kids and their parents, and could tell I was getting close to civilization; there was a bridge over the outlet, and several roped off areas near the lake with signs that read: "Reclamation Area: Please Don't Camp," "Heavy Use Area: No Camping Near Lake." I hiked a well-worn trail a few more miles to a trailhead where I met two women and a group of kids changing a flat tire on a min-van. They were part of the Seeley-Swan YMCA Camp, and after I helped them change the flat they gave me a ride to a store in Condon. Once there, it seemed odd, and irritatingly difficult, to suddenly be around people, diesel trucks and traffic. It was a small store, but I was able to find

what I needed for the next leg of the trip: oatmeal, rice, noodles, hot chocolate and coffee. It was a lot, as I figured my next segment of wild country would take 20 days or more. I paid with one of my checks, used a pay phone to call Bud, and ate M&Ms with peanuts on the front porch of the store while waiting for him to come get me. We ate cheeseburgers and fries at the Hungry Bear restaurant, and headed back to his place. I looked forward to taking a shower and sleeping in a bed. A drink or two and a cigarette even sounded pretty damn good.

## Chapter Four: A Visit with the Guru

I first met Bud Moore in 1996 soon after his book was published; *The Lochsa Story: Land Ethics in the Bitterroot Mountains* was published, in 1996. A pleasant mix of memoir, local history and critique of land management policies in the Lochsa country of Idaho, the book summarizes Bud's long life as a trapper, hunter, logger, cabin builder, wildlands firefighter and a forest service employee, and now writer and historian. I was particularly moved by a passage in the book in which he describes standing on a mountain top, looking down at the once wild country he so loved, now laced with logging roads and clearcuts, and asks, "What have we done?" By then, he had worked his way up in the Forest Service to a district ranger and then chief of fire management and air operations for the Northern Region. With his formal education ending at the eighth grade, Bud was one of the last people to enter and climb the professional ranks of the Forest Service based on just his knowledge, skills and experience from the woods and mountains. In the 1950s, an outbreak of spruce bark beetles in the Lochsa country created public pressure to cut the dying trees, and so the Forest Service did—bulldozing roads in and clearcutting the countryside. "None of us had the wisdom to foresee the consequences of the program we devised," Bud wrote, "That we were moving too fast and with too little knowledge seemed obvious, but the bugs wouldn't wait and we couldn't either." With the roads and removal of forests came sedimentation and erosion into the rivers and streams, increased, easy access for people, and severe consequences for salmon, steelhead, cutthroats, bears, mountain goats, pine martens and other wildlife "Sometimes the land was hurt by loggers and rangers alike because we did not

understand the consequences of our acts,” Bud reflects. “Surely the people of America can forgive those scars on the earth. But it is not easy to forgive actions defiling the land when we all knew better. It seemed to me that such logging severed all ties with the natural history of the land and heralded a new era of domination by humans and machines. . . Mistakes were caused by the illusion we knew more than we did.” Indeed, what *have* we done?

In his book, Bud humbly acknowledges past mistakes while suggesting better, more sustainable management for the future. Even while still with the Forest Service, he was one of the first to recognize the natural, ecological importance of wildfire in western forests and pushed for policies to let fires burn, particularly in remote places.

I liked what he wrote, was working as the conservation editor for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation’s Bugle magazine at the time, and so met with him to conduct an interview and get permission to run excerpts from his book. We met at a Starbucks within a Barnes and Noble in Missoula, and hit it off right away. He reminded me of my father; down-to-earth, laid-back, smart, a somewhat corny sense of humor, loves to tell stories. He seemed content. Bud, too, had been a Marine, long before even my dad enlisted. They wouldn’t let him in, at first, because running chainsaws had rendered his hearing unacceptable. Instead, he went to California to participate in a secret effort called the Emergency Rubber Project. With Japan in control of the most the world’s rubber trees, the United States was suffering a shortage. Bud was among 1,000 or so scientists and technicians (including Japanese-American scientists from internment camps) who worked to plant 32,000 acres of Guayule plants, native to Mexico, and convert them to rubber by chopping them up and mixing them with ethanol and zinc sulfate, after which

latex would float to the top. While there, Bud got to know some Marines out of Camp Pendleton and, with persistence, they eventually let him join the Corps. He fought in the earliest battles of the Pacific Theatre, including New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Guadalcanal. When I took my father up to Bud's place to meet him, the two swapped stories for hours – about the Marine Corps, fishing, wilderness and wildlands – while I explored the woods around Bud's home. They exchanged occasional letters until my father's death.

Bud grew up in the Bitterroots, and by the age of 14 was venturing off on extended solo trips, running trap lines, hunting and exploring the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness long before it was designated a "wilderness," when grizzly bears still roamed the country. Persistent rumors credit Bud as killing the last grizzly in the Bitterroots in the early 1950s. When I asked him about it, he laughed. "Someone had reported a dead moose shot and left in a downed thicket of spruce up Cold Creek," he said. "When I went to investigate, I ran into a big, aggressive black bear and had to shoot it. Somehow, over the years, the story got twisted into me killing the last grizzly." I asked if the rumors bothered him. He laughed again. "No, it's a good story. Let folks tell it. I know the truth, and don't care what others think."

I had recently attended a public meeting in Missoula regarding a controversial proposal to reintroduce grizzlies into the Bitterroots. A lot of ignorant, angry people stood up to say it would make the country dangerous, people would be mauled, nobody would be able to safely hike, hunt, fish or pick huckleberries. They stopped just short of claiming our women and children would disappear and the monsters would take over the world. Bud stood up and asked if anyone else in the room had roamed the Bitterroots

back in the day when there were still plenty of grizzlies. No one else had. “Well, I have,” he said. “I roamed all over that country by myself and ran into them often -- and they never bothered me.”

I never told Bud about my struggles with being gay – it never came up in conversation, and I was too uncomfortable to bring it up, just as I never told my own father. We talked about lots of other things. He told me how, after he retired, he had purchased this property in 1974 and built the cabin, with help from a few college students, using logs from his own land. He told me about his first marriage, his son and daughter, his divorce, and his second wife, Janet, who had died a few years earlier from breast cancer. When my dad and visited Bud, Janet was still alive, lying in a bed they had moved into the living room so Bud could better care for her in the last days of her life. A remarkable person, she had been the first woman to hold a professional position in the Forest Service. Spunky, smart, beautiful, ambitious; Janet reminded me of Chris. I asked Bud how he had dealt with what I am sure must have been stressful, depressing times. “I’ve never been too stressed or depressed,” he said. “When I feel overworked or in over my head, I just do the best I can.” And every year, even still, he takes what he describes as “relaxed, stress-free, wild trips” by himself into the wilderness. “You have to go alone, and take your time,” he said. “It’s a different sort of trip when you go with others, not so self-reflective. You have to go alone, take your time, and think and write.”

His humble log home sits about five miles out of Condon, on the west side of the valley, close to the Mission Mountain Wilderness boundary, reached by an old gravel logging road, and is surrounded by a guest house, work shed, small sawmill and about 80 acres of Doug fir, grand fir and spruce his wife named “Coyote Forest.” At 87,

he still looks and seems healthy. Tall, lean, gray hair, he most always wears a baseball cap, flannel shirts, loose tan pants with orange suspenders and logging boots. He looks like an older lumberjack, which he sort of is. Though his teeth are worn and yellowed – like an old bull elk – his eyes are bright and beam from behind his gold-rimmed glasses with exuberance for life. I took a picture of him sitting in a chair on his porch, and if it were a black and white photo you'd think it was taken in the 1940s. A visit with Bud seems a trip into the past, at first, until he speaks with such enthusiasm about Coyote Forest. The place serves as a model, a demonstration site, for modern sustainable “light on the land” forestry. “I want to learn how to best take care of this land,” he says. “How to use it right, get some lumber out of it, make a little money, without harming the forest, water, soil or wildlife who share the place with me. Before I ever cut a tree, I always ask the land some questions, and always consider first what I must leave, rather than what I can take.” In other words, he follows the advice from his book; he walks the talk. College students, agency folks and neighbors often visit to learn along with Bud.

One of his neighbors is a grizzly bear. He sees the tracks and scat every now and then, and sometimes gets a glimpse of him. The year before, while hunting, he surprised the big bruin just behind his cabin. “He just looked at me for a bit, then just walked around me,” Bud said. “He knows this forest better than me, and I am sure he knows me – knows my smell and my habits – and I think he knows that I would never hurt him. He’s used to me, has learned to tolerate and live with me, and so I am learning to live with him. We share this place.” He had recently been approached by some wildlife biologist with the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks, who were studying the movements and habits of grizzlies so as to better protect critical migratory corridors and

habitat in the valley. They wanted to place radio collars on some of the bears, so they could track their movements and behaviors, and wanted Bud's permission to try and capture bears on his land. After some thought, he decided not to. "I support what they do," he said, "and would gladly help them do it elsewhere. But not in my neighborhood. This bear knows me and trusts me, I think, and I don't want to change that relationship. If I did, who knows, our next encounter might be different."

Like me, Bud relishes in the mysteries and uncertainties of the wild. When he was younger, he did a lot of canoeing and exploring of rivers, and would sometimes read guidebooks ahead of time. Once, he had considered writing his own guide book then thought, "What the hell am I doing? I am going to write a book that will diminish the very thing I enjoy. Let people discover things on their own, like I did." He, too, drank right from the rivers and creeks. "I've done it since I was a child," he says. "I never got giardia and never knew anyone who did. But the giardia was there, it was always there, it's natural. Maybe we built up immunities to it in those days. People were more natural then. Now we are so detached, so separate from nature."

I told him a bit about the thoughts I had a few days earlier, back in the Missions, about the seemingly contradictory notion of wanting to be part of the wilds while relying on modern, light-weight technology in tents, sleeping bag, stoves and other gear. "But what else to do?" he asked. "Bring a hatchet, build shelters and make beds of pine needles like I did when I was young? What if everyone did that? There's a lot of people now. Those things help reduce our impacts to the wilderness. The world is changing and continues to change, we need to adapt, compromise, find balance, and do what's best for



the land while still using and enjoying it.” Maybe, I thought, as I often have throughout my life, I was born in the wrong time.

I envied Bud, a bit, not just for his past, but his ongoing zest for life. His attitude. He doesn't dwell on the past, but looks to the future. I think he forgets how old he is. Recently, when asked to testify before Congress regarding a proposal to keep a portion of the Bitterroot National Forest roadless and wild, he snowshoed into the place for a few days in the middle of the winter, to remind himself what the country “looks, feels and tastes” like. He says he is going to revisit – hike, camp and explore – places he worked as long as 70 years ago, and examine how the forests have changed. He says he wants to keep doing the “Bud thing,” as he calls it, writing and traveling around speaking about forest health, sustainable management, and Forest Service history. “I’m one of the only guys left that can look back very far,” he says. Yes, indeed, and one the few who continues to look forward as well.

Bud remembered he had received a package for me and retrieved it from his porch. It was my camera card, ordered in the wilds from Paul and Josh with a brief note that said, simply, “Good luck! Look us up when you return.” Bud went to bed early, and I retreated to his guest cabin, which had all the amenities of a modern home. I took a shower, did laundry, and called my mother and then Chris. Chris decided she'd drive up from Missoula the next day with Cory for a quick visit. I wrote a few letters to friends and family which Bud had said he'd put in the mail for me. Then I looked through his collection of books and surprisingly found an old, worn paperback that was, unfortunately, very familiar to me.

*“Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex”, Explained by David Reuben, M.D., \*But Were Afraid to Ask*, was first published in 1969, when I was nine years old. When I was sure no one was looking, I would sneak the book into the bathroom and read through the question-answer format. In hindsight, I am sure now my parents – like most parents at the time – left it on the shelf on purpose, to avoid the awkwardness of explaining such things in person. I remember, for example, worrying that if I masturbated too much I might run out of sperm and not be able to have kids. Dr. Reuben showed me the folly of such thoughts. Browsing through the book while home alone once, I came upon the subject of homosexuality, a word I had never even heard of until then. The only thing that stuck in my head, for years afterwards, was this: homosexuality is not a good thing; Warning: do NOT be a homosexual! That night, in Bud’s guest house, I re-read some of those passages: “If a homosexual who wants to renounce homosexuality finds a psychiatrist who knows how to cure homosexuality, he has every chance of becoming a happy, well-adjusted heterosexual.” Homosexuals, Dr. Reuben explains, “have as many as five sexual experiences in one evening—all with different partners. He rarely knows their names—he is unlikely to see any of them again. Besides, few homosexuals use their real names. They generally go by aliases, choosing first names with a sexual connotation. Harry, Dick, Peter are the most favored.” When homosexuals want more than just mutual masturbation, Dr. Reuben writes, they must purchase an “artificial vagina built into a pair of flesh-colored nylon stretch panties—one size fits all.” Homosexuals claim they want sexual gratification and love, Dr. Reuben says, “But they eliminate, right from the start, the most obvious source of love and gratification—woman. He is the sexual Diogenes, always looking for the penis that

pleases. That is the reason he must change partners endlessly. He tries each phallus in succession, then turns away remorsefully. ‘No, that’s not the one!’ He is in a difficult position—condemned eternally to search after what does not exist—after what never existed.” But what about the homosexuals who live together happily for years?, is one of the questions, which Dr. Reuben gladly answers: “What about them? They are mighty rare birds among the homosexual flock. Moreover, the ‘happy’ part remains to be seen. The bitterest argument between husband and wife is a passionate love sonnet by comparison with a dialogue between a butch and his queen. Live together? Yes. Happily? Hardly.” I put the book back on Bud’s shelf, and fell asleep thinking far different thoughts than I had as a kid: *As many as five sexual experiences in one evening? All with different partners?* Sounds kind of fun.

In the morning, Bud cooked up a hearty breakfast of pancakes, eggs and sausage. I found myself becoming a bit impatient (as I often did with my Dad) about how long it took. I was equally impatient when he gave me a ride to the Holland Lake Lodge, thinking I could walk there faster. But why the hurry? I felt guilt for my impatience. On the way, Bud told me a bit about the history of the lodge. Situated on the west side of the valley, near the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness (“The Bob,” as locals call it), at end of a long gravel road, it was built in the 1940s by a group of wealthy Missoulians who used it as a hunting retreat. Now it was an “historic” lodge and restaurant, popularly used as a retreat for people wanting to get away from the city and relax on the shores of a large, spectacular emerald-colored lake. When Bud dropped me off and said goodbye, there was a wedding going on, and I was fortunate there was still a vacant room. Chris and Cory planned to meet me here, along with Chris’ cousin Ginger who was visiting

from Arkansas. I decided to spend the night – a bit reluctant, I suppose, to be alone in the wilds again. I had also looked forward to meeting Christian, the owner of the lodge. We had chatted the previous month on gay.com, and I told him I would be coming through. I wanted to talk to him about being gay, and had also considered writing an article about the lodge. When I arrived, I was told he was in Missoula buying supplies. When he returned late that night, he knocked on my door to say hi, but was not too friendly. He’s a good looking guy – tall, lean, dark hair, and a gym-built body. But he struck me as arrogant.

Chris, Cory and Ginger arrived that afternoon and we hung out on the big lawn between the lodge and the lake. Cory and I played “Bison Fight,” a game he invented on a trip we took together once to Yellowstone National Park, where we watched two bull bison battling each other. We both get on our hands and knees, grunt and butt heads, until I eventually collapse. Then he pretends to be a grizzly and eats me, a grizzly who laughs a lot. We skipped stones on the lake, swam briefly in the cold water, and he asked me several times, “Daddy, when are you coming home?” It was nice to see Chris, yet difficult to see her in her new, seemingly happy life without me. Over dinner at the lodge, I told Ginger about my trip and my struggles, and she told me how she had suffered through deep depression for more than three years, and eventually pulled out of it with counseling, medications and hard work.

I had difficulty sleeping that night, partly from the noise of cars, boats and people talking and laughing; mostly because my mind was haunting and taunting me. There was a bookcase in the room full of paperbacks, and I picked one off the shelf called “When All the Laughter Died in Sorrow,” an autobiography by a former professional

football player who was twice arrested and pleaded guilty for exposing himself to young girls. He called his “problem” a “psychological flaw.” He talked about how the “flaw” affected his image in Dallas, where he had previously been a hero, but was now treated as if he were a “pimp or homosexual.” I tossed the book in the garbage. I considered calling a guy I had hooked up with a few times in Missoula, and seeing if he wanted to drive up and spend the night; but it was getting late, and I knew it would worsen my mood in the long run.

I had a crazy dream: I went into an adult bookstore, like Fantasy in Missoula – a place I used to sometimes sneak into while still married, usually when drunk, where you can watch porn in one of a dozen or so private booths in the back, with holes drilled between some of the booths, just large enough to slip a hard dick through to get or receive a blowjob, or watch another guy, or be watched, or single to another guy to come over and join you in your booth. Then you sneak out the back door, hoping nobody would ever find out. In my dream, three young attractive guys asked if they could join me in my booth. We undressed, touched each other, and started jerking off together. I woke up with a hard on, overwhelmed with shame and guilt, and cried until I fell back asleep.

I was awakened by weed eaters, lawnmowers and motor boats. It was time to get back into the wilds. I ate eggs and bacon at the Lodge, paid my bill, loaded my pack and headed out. As I was leaving, I stopped awhile to watch a young guy cutting the lawn, and two others running weed eaters, all shirtless. Christian hired handsome help. When I finally got earshot away from all the irritating noises and started up a mountain, three big ravens began squawking away and I felt a bit better. It was a long, steep climb up, on a trail with lots of sharp switchbacks. From the top I had a spectacular view of the

Seeley-Swan Valley and the snowy peaks of the Missions on the other side. The beargrass, paintbrush, fireweed, thimble berry, yellow aster and daisies colored the hills around me in white, orange, reds and lavender. I passed an old wooden fire lookout, dropped down to the Necklace Lakes, then deserted the trail and started bushwhacking north towards Woodward Lake. I had planned to have an easy day, but always managed to turn easy days into brutal days. It was tough going, a very hot, dry day, with lots of cliffs to work around and thickets to beat through. When I saw Woodward Lake below me, I started heading down, broke out of the thick brush onto a dangerously steep chute of loose rock. I picked my way down, slipping and falling, and then slipped and fell a lot, then, more than halfway down, the chute turned into cliffs. There was no way down from this side, and I had no choice but to climb back up the way I had come. I was exhausted, thirsty, irritated and I lost it; I just started cussing out loud. *Jesus fucking Christ! What the fuck am I doing? What the fuck is wrong with me? Why the fuck couldn't I just keep it simple, easy, stayed on the fucking trail and camped at Necklace Lakes Why do I do this? FUCK!!!* And so on. I climbed back up, went around, and climbed down another way, plowing through thick brush all the way down. When I finally got to the lake, there were steep, rocky banks all around, thick alder and menzeisia brush everywhere, and nowhere to pitch camp. The black flies, horseflies and mosquitoes were swarming all around. I climbed back up through the brush and continued north another hour or so, more tough going, towards the Terrace Lakes. When I reached the lower of the two lakes, I was tired and livid. I set up camp on high spot and lay down to rest, but it turned out to be a bad spot; red ants invaded my tent and up my pants, stinging hard. Then the wind picked up and nearly blew the tent down. So I moved camp, down closer the lake on the leeward

side of a boulder, took a quick swim, ate noodles and hot chocolate, and lay down again. I felt a little better. I had seen several elk that day, and found a spot where a grizzly had recently turned over large boulders and dug beneath, likely in search of a meal of marmots.

I had come out of the Missions feeling pretty good, naively thinking I was cured. Now I lay in my tent crying, struggling for answers. I scribbled random thoughts in my journal. I wanted so badly to have a normal life with Chris and Cory. I wanted so badly to be normal. I didn't want to have this sickness that apparently put me in the same category as pedophiles and former football players who expose themselves to young girls. Who, as Dr. Reuben put it, could hardly ever be happy. I wanted to be happy like Bud. I had hoped Christian would like me. Seeing Christian and the guys caring for his lawn made me self-conscious about my body. I wished I looked like them; I wished I were young like them. I wanted to be what I had tried so hard pretending to be. I had spent more than I should have at the lodge (\$225.00 for food and a room). The noise had gotten to me, the cars and boats and jet skis, as did the wealthy lodge guests seeking solitude and nearby campers in their motor homes – bringing civilization into the mountains,

Dark clouds rolled in and it started raining. I compared it to my brain, a constant storm of conflicting emotions and chaotic, erratic thoughts flashing through my mind like lightening. Maybe I shouldn't be alone, I thought. Maybe this trip was a huge mistake. Perhaps I should have stayed on my medication. Perhaps I needed professional help. This was starting to seem a bit more than a "do it yourself" project; I could no more

fix myself than I could rebuild a car engine, and I have enough difficulty just changing my own oil.

The Wellness Workbook says to be patient, loving, to not be so hard on oneself. So I tried to focus on the positive. I did not drink or smoke while in town; I had wonderful discussions with Bud; I felt happy and alive playing with my son; I did not succumb to calling my hook-up buddy in Missoula; I did a lot of thinking, reading and writing, and I certainly got a lot of vigorous exercise that day

Perhaps the brief stop in town had done some good; if nothing else, it revealed just how far I still had to go. Return to two paragraphs before, dark clouds rolled in... An intense thunder storm rolled in, *As the storm intensified*, my tent shook violently from the wind, and I worried if it would hold up. Lightening bounced off the cliffs around me and my hair stood up from the electricity. Again I compared the storm outside to the storm in my head, and thought more about nature, the wilds, and ecosystems being analogies to myself, to all of us, to life. I knew the storm would pass, the sun would eventually shine, and calm days lay ahead. I obviously had a long way to go to Wellnessville, and the going would be tough at times, but I would get here. I thought of a passage from Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, in which he describes his reasons for seeking "dual solitude" on a river trip with a friend:

" . . . To renew our affection for ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass. And in what other way is it possible for those for those not saints? And who wants to be a saint? Are saints human? Cutting the bloody cord. That's what we feel. The delirious exhilaration of independence, a rebirth



backward in time and into the primordial liberty, into freedom in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word, the only meaning that really counts.”

## Chapter Five: The Eagle and the Bull Trout

Sex is usually the last thing on my mind while out in the wilds. I'm usually too busy with the day-to-day tasks of eating, hiking, fishing, breaking and setting up camp, reading, writing and sleeping. Besides, if I were a character in Brokeback Mountain, I would actually focus on the fishing – and tell any guy who came along to leave me alone while I fish. But I did have a strange dream my first night out from my stay at the Holland Lake Lodge:

See page 90. Repeats. I went into a sex shop – like Fantasy for Adults in Missoula, a gay-cruising spot with private booths in the back where a person can watch porn, use the “glory holes” between booths to swap oral sex, or invite another guy into your booth for anonymous sex. While there, three young, attractive guys joined me in the small booth and we were all jerking off and touching each other. Then I woke up. Hard. I felt guilty, ashamed, dirty. I do NOT WANT TO BE GAY, I wrote in my journal. I want to be the person I thought I was, who I pretended and tried to be. I feel so much shame, guilt, anger. I am NOT a good person. To top it all off, dark clouds were rolling in fast.

It was a rough day, and I spent most of it in my sleeping bag wallowing in self-pity. I no longer felt like living, and worried about being alone. Perhaps I could no more fix myself than I could, say, fix a car engine see page 90. Repeats: this was not a “do-it-yourself” project. I needed professional help.

It rained all night, and at some point I was awakened by the intense sonic-like boom of thunder seemingly right above me, along with the associated bright flash and crack of lightening. My ears hurt, and my hair stood up a bit – I could feel the

electricity, and I felt invigorated. Such times make me feel alive. Nature's version of electric shock therapy? It worked for a brief time.

The storm passed, the rain stopped, but the sky remained cloudy and the wind picked up. I climbed above camp and sat on a rock where the breeze kept the bugs off. I needed to learn to be more comfortable alone, I thought, to listen more, and not talk and think so much. I decided to give it a shot – to pack up and hike without journaling, without reading the Wellness Workbook, without over-analyzing everything – to hike and be free and happy. So I packed up and headed for Big Salmon Lake.

The few miles from the Terrace Lakes to the trail near the Salmon River was tough bushwhacking through brush higher than my head and so thick it was difficult to see the ground. I tripped over rocks something something but managed to keep my cool...., mostly down steep slopes through thick brush, taller than me. The brush was so thick it was difficult to see the ground, which was very rocky and uneven. I fell a lot. But I managed to keep my cool, though was relieved when I finally hit the trail. Then it started raining again, and rained hard the rest of the day; I hiked in full rain suit. The trail was heavily used by horses, and muddy. At one point, I stepped off trail on the downhill side to let a pack string of a dozen horses and half a dozen people ride by – an outfitter on his way into the backcountry with clients. During the course of the day, I dropped from the high-elevation forests down through lodgepole pine, and into ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and spruce. When I finally reached Big Salmon Lake, I came upon a nice, clear place to camp under some large Doug firs and so pitched my tent and got in out of the rain for a while. Until I got hungry. I had to hike back up the trail a ways to get water from a creek, as this part of the lake is surrounded by willows and swamp and not very

accessible. I cooked up a satisfying feast of noodles, hung my food, and climbed back in my tent . I had intended to read and write but I fell asleep, and awoke later in the dark not having any clue as to what time it was. The rain had stopped, but all my gear was soaked. I hoped for sun the next day, to dry things out, as I did not look forward to packing up wet gear and putting on wet socks, boots and clothes. I still felt a bit lonely and sad, but felt glad to be continuing my journey. I checked my maps, and hoped to be to the South Fork of the Flathead by the next night, where I planned to take a day off to fish and relax. I fell asleep listening to the eerie, lonely cries of loons.

Late the next morning, awakened by the heat of the sun warming my tent, I hung everything out to dry and, on a whim, decided to push through the willows, wade through the swamp where the grass was chest high and the mud several feet deep in spots, to check out where a stream empties into the lake. Sitting on a log on a gravel bar at the inlet, I heard an apparently anxious bald eagle screech at me from her nest 40 yards or so away, and I could hear her eaglets chirping away. I found a fresh pile of grizzly shit full of thimbleberry seeds on the gravel near the willows, and watched several large cutthroats in the deep water near the end of the gravel bar, occasionally darting out into the current, or up to the surface, to snatch up whatever morsels the river carried out to them. I went back to my tent, put together my four-piece rod, attached the spinning reel, grabbed my box of lures, and returned. The fish were only interested in insects, it seemed, and mostly ignored my spinners. It was one of those times I would have had more luck catching dinner with a fly rod, drifting imitation mayflies or nymphs. But I was hungry, and those fish looked appetizing.

I took off my clothes, waded out up to my chest, and cast a heavy silver Blue Fox Vibrax out as far as I could and let it sink, with the hopes a fat trout lay out there somewhere wanting to eat something more substantial than a bug. I retrieved the spinner slowly, holding my rod up high, varying the speeds so the lure might drop and rise and flutter a bit, looking like a wounded minnow. Then it stopped, and I quickly pulled the rod back to set the hook, hooking into something, but nothing moved. Damn, I thought, I must have snagged a log or rock. With only a handful of lures in my box, I have a personal policy that when I snag bottom, and exhaust all other means of freeing it, I put the rod down, dive in, follow the line and retrieve the spinner, no matter how deep or cold. It had clouded up again, and I didn't want to swim. But I didn't have to. What I thought was a log began to move, stripping line from my reel and my rod doubled over. This fish was big. There's a strange adrenaline high to fighting a fish, even more for the fish, I suppose, since it's the only one actually fighting for its life. You become singly, intensely focused on the moment, which is partly why fishing is so popular, and why big fish usually make for better tales. It's even more exhilarating to hook into a big fish naked, in the midst of wild country, where there's the highly unlikeable but fun-to-think about chance a grizzly might charge out of the willows and make a meal of me before I was able to eat whatever was on the other end of my line. I'd put up a bit of a fight, I suppose, flap around in the shallow water as the bear dragged me up onto the gravel, suffering perhaps as much pain as I was causing this fish, and the griz would gut me, eat me and brag to his buddies, holding his paws out as wide as he could, "He was this big!" No one would believe him. When I finally worked the fish to where he was flapping

around in the shallow water, he was indeed big – 20” or more – and a bull trout. My excitement turned to guilt.

It’s illegal to kill and eat bull trout, and illegal to intentionally catch them; they are listed and protected under federal law as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. If you catch one, you need to release it. More conscientious anglers, or those fishing for fun not food, use barbless, single hooks to cause less damage and ensure the fish survive; my treble hooks were barbed. I didn’t want to treat fish like yoyos, for my personal amusement; I wanted to eat them. I reached into the water, held the tired fish, carefully removed the hooks, then held him lightly with both hands, his face into the current, until he gained back enough oxygen, strength and energy to give a push or two with his big tail and swim away on his own. But he didn’t go far. He floated to the surface, where the current started taking him back out into the lake, flapped around a bit, went under, then back to the surface again, then down, then back up, several more times until finally he floated belly up dead. By then he was a good 50 yards or so out to where I could barely see him. I had killed a threatened species! What else to do but hide the evidence by running it through my digestive system? I dove in and swam, a modified freestyle stroke, keeping my head up above water like when I was a lifeguard so as to not lose sight of the victim. About half way, as cold as the water was, I began wondering if I would soon be belly up myself, and again I thought of the irony that if my body were found people would think I killed myself. I should write a letter, I thought, a sort of non-suicide note, and leave it in my tent: “I did not kill myself. I died, as friends always suspected I would, from my own bullheaded stupidity. Please submit my story for a Darwin Award.” When I was about five yards or so from the dead fish, I felt a sudden

rush of wind above my head and everything darkened around me. Wings, giant wings, and talons, sharp talons, right above my head, close enough to touch, moving fast, impressive, intimidating, a rare sight generally reserved for the last few seconds in the lives of unfortunate rabbits, grouse, ducks and other small prey. The eagle rushed past and crashed into the water just ahead of me, the spray from the splash hitting my face. She sank her talons into the fish and began flapping her wings, up and down a few times, flapping harder, having difficulty getting off the water with such a heavy load, but she finally did it, gained ever more momentum, lifted from the lake, fish secure in her grip, and I watched her circle around and deliver what was going to be *my* supper to her fledglings in the nest by the gravel bar. In killing a threatened species I had fed another; and so it was noodles yet again for me.

I barely made it back to shore, drained of energy and chilled to near hypothermia. I put on my clothes, hurried back to the tent, and climbed into my sleeping bag. When warmth returned, I laughed out loud, and random thoughts danced through my head. Like this: Sometimes I will shake willows along lakes and streams and watch trout eat the bugs that fall of the branches. When a grizzly walks through the brush, alongside lakes and creeks, he unwittingly knocks bugs into the water that feed the trout he may eventually eat. Or, perhaps, help fatten up some bull trout for eaglets

