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North to the Frozen Sea
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NORTH TO THE FROZEN SEA

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1.

As I stumbled into the gray morning light of the Juneau airport off the exit ramp of Alaska Airlines Flight 726, I blinked like a February ground hog although it was the middle of July. Here I was, at end of the tunnels of planes, airport lounges, and other relentlessly public places I had passed through in the last 24 hours. Syracuse, Chicago, Denver, Seattle. Amazingly, they had all looked the same. I was still in shock from having been roused from sleep earlier in my room at the Seattle Holiday Inn by a synthesized imitation of a voice intoning, endlessly and mournfully, "This is your wake-up call, this is your wake-up call." It seemed to me I now understood how Wordsworth's Lucy felt, "rolled round the earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees."

But in a few moments now I would be with Leon again, at least for the ten days I could get off from work, at least for part of the month he would be spending in Alaska with his father Ted and his uncle Joe. He had been gone a week already, but I could still see him bounding into his father's brand-new Aerostar jet at the Syracuse airport, ice-axe in hand, blue eyes and red beard glistening in the sun, ready for the trip to Alaska with his father he had been dreaming of since childhood.

"Be sure to take some shots of the plane taking off," he had called back with one last irresistible grin as his father pulled the door shut. "And just put some distilled water in the car. It'll be fine."

In the last few frantic, hundred-degree days before Leon had left, I had forgotten to pay attention to the car and the water had evaporated from the battery. As we had prepared to take off for the airport that morning, the car had sputtered and sputtered before finally making a sickly start. Leon had gone into panic and I had felt a tiny moment of hope.

As I drove out of the airport in search of a drug store that had distilled water, it had seemed to me that, distressing as it always was to say goodbye to Leon, it was, as always, a relief as well.

But now the separation was over, at least for a while.

Or was it?

I looked around expectantly. No Daddy Ted. No Uncle Joe. No Leon. I searched for a philosophical stance. Well, I told myself, I wasn't really ready for Daddy Ted and Uncle Joe-- although honesty compelled me to add that I probably would never be ready. They both made me uncomfortable, in different ways. Daddy Ted because he flirted with other women right in front of his wife Edna, and because of his eyes: most of the time they were like little slits, so narrow it seemed a miracle that he could see, but every now and then they'd be wide open, just like everybody else's. He liked classical music, he was always nice to me, but still--

And Joe--well, Joe was a character. A self-taught airplane mechanic, now retired, he lived somewhere in the midwestern desert in a house he had been building himself for the last ten years. Relatives who had been to the house said that Joe didn't own any dishes, that he only ate take-out from fast food restaurants and threw the paper plates on the floor of whatever room

he happened to be eating in. A couple of times a year he would shovel them out. They also said he was wont to rebuild light plane engines in the middle of what would otherwise have been the living room. Planes were Joe's life. He flew planes, repaired planes, and built experimental aircraft which he flew at airshows. One of them, "The Silver Fly," was written up in a history of experimental aircraft which Leon had shown me one time. About sixty, large and graying, Joe had serious heart trouble and carried nitroglycerin with him everywhere he went. He'd pop a couple of nitro just before taking the annual pilot's physical, and before hopping on his BMW motorcycle. A year ago he had been rammed by a drunk driver while he was waiting at a stoplight, and his leg had been pretty badly messed up. That was all I knew about Joe, except that I had heard vague allusions to his having been married a long time ago. Some people actually said he had been married three times, but I found this really hard to believe.

If I found Daddy Ted hard to relate to, he was practically an intimate friend of mine compared with Uncle Joe, whom I had met only once, when he had shown up unexpectedly at our wedding. Since he lived so far away and had so little money, we hadn't expected him to come but, without returning the RSVP card, he had shown up the day before the wedding in a wheelchair (this was just after the motorcycle crash) with an unexplained dwarf orphan boy named Tommy. I had asked Uncle Joe a few questions about his house, which he had built himself, and the boy, and the planes. His replies were all monosyllabic. Pretty soon I noticed myself making the same trivial remarks over and over, like asking him if he was warm enough and had enough to eat or drink. When I asked him for at least the twelfth time to talk about his

house, I realized I was being downright inane. At that point I had retreated and left him to Leon, who could chat easily with him and once in a while even get him to smile.

It was cool in the Juneau airport. I shivered a bit as I sat down in the baggage claim area and waited for the bags to arrive. Most people seemed to be wearing several layers of clothing. They all looked big too, tall and strong. Moments passed. I stared at the sign on the wall: "Please claim guns and ammunition at counter 12."

My red backpack with all the warm clothes I had bought just before I left sailed down the baggage carousel, followed by the long blue bag with the camping supplies. They were a bit scuffed but otherwise OK. One, by one, the others waiting for their wandered off. I looked at my watch. It was 9:30 a.m. now. I fought back the thought that I was now a displaced person in a no man's land.

A man with a beard came toward me. It wasn't Leon. I caught myself breathing faster. A world without Leon.

Why weren't they here? It wasn't as if Leon didn't know how upset I got when he didn't meet me on time.

With trembling hands I put my luggage in a cart. Where was the FAA? They could at least tell me if a light plane had left the McCarthy airport that morning bound for Juneau.

"No, ma'am, we haven't had any flights from McCarthy today," said the FAA rep behind the counter in a not terribly friendly way. "They must be a bit late. Why don't you check back in a while?"

My stomach jumped up in the air and came back; my hands and feet went cold.

"Thank you," I said weakly.

Now what? It was unbearable to stay still.

Wasn't there a phone number for the lodge in McCarthy they had all stayed at last night on the itinerary print-out Leon had given me just before he left? In a minute I went through my pack, carefully folded clothes going in every direction. Yes, there it was, in a side pocket. A minute later I had a phone in my hand. My voice was charging a call to my home phone (amazing that this calm-sounding voice coming from the region of my throat remembered my home phone number). On a line filled with static, I heard my voice asking another, more distant voice, if Ted Sturgis was a guest at the lodge.

"They just left ten minutes ago, right after breakfast," came the answer in between the crackling noises.

I managed to get myself to a bench before I collapsed, one arm over the luggage cart clutching the bags.

Why had I agreed to come to Alaska anyway? What had possessed me? A wilderness adventure kayaking on Glacier Bay wasn't my idea of a vacation. No, I had wanted to go to Florence, to study Italian for months beforehand and read treatises on Renaissance paintings in the original, to spend mornings wandering from gallery to gallery and church to church to dine slowly and delectably at midday on pasta and hearty Tuscan wine. Ah, Italia! Repose for the soul and the body! Now *that* would have been a vacation. Well, I should have done it. I should

have done anything rather than be a tag-along to a man who couldn't even meet me at the airport after I had used up thousands of miles and hundreds of dollars to join him.

A large bear's head stared out at me from the gift shop across the way. Suddenly I realized I was hungry. No, not hungry: ravenous. I went over and bought myself the latest edition of *Newsweek*, a bag of Fritos, an orange soda and a candy bar, downing them in a few gulps each. It would take about an hour for Daddy Ted and Uncle Joe and Leon to get here from McCarthy. I settled into the magazine. The news of other people's real tragedies, however, failed to distract. Each morsel of food or news merely fueled a desire for revenge.

An hour later, Leon and Daddy Ted and Uncle Joe bounded into the airport, all of them brandishing beards longer than I remembered and huge cheerful smiles. Leon picked me up in the air and hugged me so hard I had trouble breathing. His new whiskers above his beard scratched my cheek. He was nuzzling my neck and muttering something about how he'd missed me when he noticed I wasn't responding.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

"All right? All *right*?" I could feel my heart trying to beat its way out of my chest.

"Where *were* you? I fly 3,000 miles just to be with you and you can't even be bothered to get here on time? I thought you were dead."

His calm, cheerful face shut down.

"We got up late," he said. "We got up late and had breakfast--I don't see why you have to get all bent out of shape about it."

Because I'd rather be in Europe, I wanted to say but didn't. We'd been through that numerous times before.

"I'll go help unload the plane while you calm down," he said as he put me back on the floor.

Then he was gone, and I was almost sorry.

2.

"By the way, did you give me your sleeping bag?"

Leon had just harnessed himself to the back pack full of his week's laundry as we set out into the streets of Juneau.

The question took me by surprise. The night before Leon left, he had asked me whether I wanted him to take the sleeping bag or whether I wanted to bring it myself. I remembered clearly seeing it the next morning on the dining room floor among all the other carefully wrapped equipment.

"Why?"

The suspicious note in my voice was less in reaction to the question than from a residual mistrust for having been stood up at the airport for two hours.

He shrugged as much as he could under the weight of the pack. "I didn't see it when we

unloaded the plane this morning, that's all."

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't get like that," he said automatically. "You can use mine if you want and I can use my extra one, the summer bag."

I was unconvinced. "Will that be warm enough for you?" There was an outfitter's store across the street. Far-sighted, I could see that the prices were about twice what they were back home.

"Sure," he answered. "In McCarthy it was about 80 degrees during the day and never got below 70 at night. And the sun never goes down, you know. I read until eleven after my hike."

The suspicion that Leon was just being cheap about the sleeping bag and I would freeze in Glacier Bay lingered, but I absolved myself: if one of us was to be cold the next few nights, I didn't see why it should be me.

I looked around. Juneau looked like a one-horse town. Where I had expected a city, there were ten or twelve cross-streets, one of which we were on, and a main street that led down to the sea. All the shops seemed to be on the main street. Some ships were resting in the canal: ocean liners, cruise ships. A plaque on a building praised the Filipino workers who had helped build the mines: a set of photographs in a shop window showed the miners of the 90s, hollow-eyed bearded men. No women.

"It's really quite civilized," said Leon, answering my thoughts. "There are several 3-star restaurants. Salmon and tourists are the main industries."

"It's pretty small, though."

He laughed. "Not compared to McCarthy. The mines there were among the biggest in Alaska, but that's all there was. Basically, it was the early twentieth century version of that hellhole in Brazil we saw on television."

We were at the laundromat. It was ten washers and four dryers in the steamy basement of an apartment building. Although there was no one to be seen, with the habits of city dwellers we stuffed the wash in quickly.

"Shit."

Leon was kicking the detergent vending machine.

"What is it?"

"It ate all my quarters."

"How many do we need?" I said out of habit to calm him.

"Don't know. Would you mind staying here while I go get some change?"

"Well, OK," I said without enthusiasm.

"Good." There was clear relief in Leon's voice. "I have to go look at boots too--mine hurt my feet at McCarthy and I'd rather not try to get through Glacier Bay with them."

And before I knew what had happened, he had kissed me and disappeared again.

I sat down and watched the soapy cycles of the ancient machines whirr inexorably toward their end. I could feel myself going deeper and deeper into myself. Slowly, slowly, I was getting into the mood I get in when I have to do something I really don't want to do.

All my life I have hated physical activity. I could remember the locker room of the girl's gym at P.S. 34 with loathing--the little ugly forest green jump suits, the Marine-like gym teachers. Basketball was the worst: I was the shortest girl in the whole school, and nobody wanted me to be on their team. On particularly bad days I would have asthma attacks and have to go to the nurse's office.

And as for the wilderness, I feared it. Oh yes, I had heard talk of its spiritual qualities, how it puts a person back in touch with themselves and Nature, but as far as my experience goes that's just talk. Walking through a crowd in midtown Manhattan at lunchtime is my idea of a good way to get away from myself. My memories of the few forays I had made into the wilderness were all of lying awake cold in sleeping bags with wet down, listening with terror to the far-off cries of wolves and the nearer-by rustles of unimaginable creatures in the grass.

This Alaska trip was going to be something to be gotten through, a vacation for the others but not for me. Maybe something would come out of it, could be gotten out of it--wisdom, forbearance, pride at having survived?--but certainly not delight, not freedom from care.

3.

We lay together in bed in a small, not-very-well-furnished room at the Fiddlesticks Hotel in downtown Juneau. As small, rhythmic snores issued at regular intervals from Leon's slightly

open mouth, I stared at the ceiling. My hand had ended up resting on his stomach, which was, as always, very smooth and very soft. I was envious of the way he could always fall asleep afterwards. I had to meditate first.

I had still been in a bad mood when we had gotten up to the room, but when he had grabbed me as soon as I had taken my sweater off, I had told myself not to be stupid. After all, wasn't it partly for this I had come more than 3,000 miles? I had to admit I was feeling better now. As he twitched a tiny bit, I stroked his stomach partly to calm him and partly because it felt nice. It always amazed me I had managed to marry a man as handsome as Leon, with his tall, well-muscled frame and his classic Midwest looks.

Suddenly, as if responding to an inaudible bell, he woke up.

"Umm," he said contentedly, and snuggled up closer.

"Leon."

I thought I'd venture it because his eyes were open.

"What?"

"I'm cold."

"Put a blanket on."

"I've put the blanket on."

He reached out an arm. "Let me hold you."

"I'm cold, Leon."

"OK," he sighed. "I'll get you a blanket."

He got up, pulled on his pants and socks and went out. I wondered what time it was. My watch said two o'clock, but that was probably 10 or 11 at night.

"What time is it?" I asked as he reappeared, one thin blanket in hand.

"Almost midnight."

"No wonder I'm sleepy," I joked.

"What have you got to read?" said Leon. He was sitting up now, wide awake.

"Oh, two New Yorkers, Braudel's book on the Mediterranean, some Jack London stories for local color."

"I'll take the Jack London," he answered, and kissed the top of my head gently. "I used to like London a lot when I was a kid. And a minute later had propped himself comfortably against the wall and lost himself in the book.

I wondered what he was thinking, what he was feeling. Sometimes I would ask, and it would never be anything I could have guessed. After five years, he was still unexplored territory.

4.

One by one, the kayaks ahead of ours pushed their way through the floes of blue ice, heading toward where the glaciers were.

The boat rocked a bit as the waves made by the boats ahead moved backward, then subsided. I could feel even these gentle waves through the canvas bottom and sides of the boat. It was a comforting sensation, being rocked back and forth. The boats were warm, too: dry and comfortable to sit in. A spray cover up to my chest kept out the occasional drops of water from the kayak paddle. If anything happened to the boat, the water was cold enough to freeze us long before we drowned, but a sense of being safe persisted.

Which ebbed each time I looked up from the floes directly ahead. In the distance was a landscape so huge, so strange, it could not possibly be real. On the left and directly ahead, huge walls of ice struck down into the sea from high mountains, higher than any I had ever seen. On the right, there was an island covered with scrub except for its tiny pebbled beach. No trees anywhere. Under a gray sky, all things had shades of gray. The sea itself was dark gray, and the ice walls white with a pale gray cast that at first I had thought was dirt, such as the snow at home would have after a few days, but that, as my eyes slowly adapted, I realized was simply an illusion of the light. Even the dark green scrub on the island had a green tinge.

I closed my eyes. Images of New York skyscrapers, tenements with people leaning out of the windows overlooking sunny crowded streets passed before me. I opened my eyes again onto the wilds of Glacier Bay: ice, bare land, soundless sea. Grayness. Only imagination could people it, had to people it: condominiums would never stand on these shores. I began to breathe slowly and deeply, retreating into the sensations of being in the kayak. I imagined the kayak as a cocoon. It would protect me. All I had to do was to be very still and very patient.

Plip-plop went the kayak blades, in and out of the wordless, soundless sea. *Plip-plop* went the slight but unremitting rain. A bird cried. The other boats were too far off for us to hear the sounds of their paddles. The quiet was like a noise, as obtrusive as any noise.

Slowly but steadily the boats moved through the water. Yet the wall of ice ahead did not seem to get any closer. The bank on the right did not seem to move either. It wasn't current, for there was no current against us. Could it be that the movement of the boats was subject to some special illusion of space? Under this gray light, assaulted by this unfillable silence, everything seemed unreal.

For some hours now I had not paddled. Before we had gotten into the boat, I had thought it would be easy. I had paddled kayaks many times before, and we had canoed together for a week's trip some years earlier.

"Why do you pause after you take the blade out of the water?" Leon had shouted at me from the back of the boat shortly after we got away from the bank.

"I've always done it that way," I shouted back.

"Well, try doing it without stopping, in a single motion."

But I couldn't. I would try for a bit and then get exhausted.

"Why can't you go slower?" I shouted. "Why can't you just follow my rhythm?"

"Because it's irregular" came the answer. "That's not the way you're supposed to paddle."

"You just want me to go faster, that's all."

"No, I just want you to paddle efficiently."

"Efficiently?" I fairly shrieked. "We're falling behind the others because you keep stopping to take pictures. If we just kept at a steady pace I could go at my irregular rhythm and we'd be able to keep up. It's not my fault."

There was a silence. And then, from the back of the boat: "I don't take photographs that much longer than the others."

From time to time Heather the tour leader, a woman in her late 30s with long straight hair and an air of the 60s about her, would look over at our boat as it made its way haltingly behind the others. It seemed to me she must know which one of us was paddling correctly; as tour leader, she should intervene. I looked pleadingly at her whenever I got the chance, but she seemed not to notice. This fit with the laissez-faire approach she had taken to the trip so far. Earlier in the day, after we had gotten out of the floatplanes that had brought us from Juneau into the interior, she had let everybody take off with only a few minutes of discussion about the kayaks and no practice paddling, no directions on how we should act as a group once we got out into the bay. It crossed my mind that perhaps it would have been better if we had a male leader who would have taken charge of the group. A thought I was immediately ashamed of.

Overhead a bird squawked loudly, then another. Then far overhead the familiar noise of a jet plane broke the silence of the rain.

"Look," cried Kay, a tall thin young woman in the boat nearest ours. "The Margerie Glacier is calving."

I looked in the direction she was pointing but I could see only ice, grayness. Yet in the

other boats everyone else seemed transfixed.

"What does 'calving' mean?" I shouted back to Leon.

"A chunk of ice just fell off the glacier. Didn't you see it?"

So that had been the noise, not a jet plane. I tried to hide my irritation. "No," I said. "I didn't." I had not felt so inept since I had been in woodworking class in seventh grade in Junior High School 145. Although in woodworking class the teacher, Mr. Kelleher, shocked to the bottom of his middle-aged male Irish soul at having little girls in his class, had looked after me and helped me with the saw and the plane.

Ahead of us the boats were circling at a beach. Heather had gotten out of her boat and was scouting through the brush.

Above, two birds appeared, cackling loudly. They circled above us, their cries growing louder and louder.

"Oystercatchers," some one shouted.

"We can't camp here," Heather announced. "They must have a nest."

Undaunted, she got back in her boat and pushed herself back out to sea.

Damn the oystercrackers, I thought. We're not going to eat their babies. So what if they have a nest. We're wet and uncomfortable and they're not.

Another half hour or so passed. I tried paddling again as we fell farther and farther behind the other boats. Soon shooting pains in my arms throbbed to the rhythm of the paddle. It struck me that this was what galley slaves must have felt like in earlier eras. Uncounted

thousands of galley slaves in uncounted boats, generation upon generation.

Finally there was a beach up ahead. In the distance, as in a dream, I saw the other boats, each after each, put in to shore.

"You hand me the plastic sacks and I'll put take them further up on the beach."

We were there. Wordlessly, I obeyed Leon's command, counting out eight plastic sacks as we had done that morning at the hotel. It seemed like a very long time ago. Slowly I crawled out of the boat. Everything hurt.

I walked over to a large rock and sat down. The light had gone down a bit. It was still possible to distinguish the ice wall across the bay--that must be the Margerie Glacier--and above it, the indifferent ridges of the mountains where the glaciers came from. I wondered if they all had names. Probably they did; but how foolish to name places where people would never live, how strange to be in a place that would never be part of human civilization.

Imaginary cities rose up again before me. I put my arms around myself for comfort. I wanted to shout into the silence, sing into it, anything to disturb it at least for a moment. I threw a rock into the water. The silence engulfed it. Only the little circles proved that anything had disturbed the surface of the sea, and these disappeared at once into the tidal motion.

Turning back to the beach, I began to walk to where I saw the others putting up tents.

Was it only last night I had been eating dinner in the Silverbow Hotel? What would I not have given to be back in downtown Juneau! Daddy Ted's condescending smiles and Uncle Joe's interminable war stories would have been a small price to pay for a dinner of baked salmon and wild rice followed by fudge pie, little cups of cappucino, and a warm bed.

While the others were beaching the kayaks, I tried to remember Joe's stories. How had they gone? It was 1952, North Korean. He and his men had gotten separated from their regiment. As the Chinese sniped at them from all sides they had walked a hundred miles through the Korean winter. Corpses everywhere, danger if you stopped before dark. Joe had kept his men walking night and day. It hadn't been easy, no, sir. But he had been right. They hadn't lost a man, not one man of them. They had been the only battalion to come out whole.

The telling of the tale had been no less curious than the tale itself. We had all been talking about something else when Joe had interrupted and refused to be deflected from his tale. I had never heard Joe talk so much before, indeed, would not have believed that Joe could talk so much. Even more amazingly, he had looked at me once in a while, shyly, out of the corner of his eye, as if he was a bit afraid of something. A huge gentle giant he had seemed to me, rotund and sad.

Daddy Ted had tried several times to get the conversation onto some other topic but in the end he had deferred to his older brother. Daddy Ted had seemed different to me too, here in Juneau. Flying all the way across the country in his new plane, being off on this adventure with

his brother and his son, far from his wife and his business, seemed to make him really happy. He had smiled more than I had ever seen him, and both eyes had been fully open.

And this morning at breakfast, neither he nor Joe had wanted to press the interminably slow waitress for the food. Yes, it was pleasant, the dining-room of the Silverbow Restaurant with its plain, comfortable, 19th century wooden furnishings and genteel wallpaper that made one feel somehow in a frontier town of the last century, far away from civilization and proud to be so. But in five minutes the van would arrive to take us to the airport to meet the floatplane for Glacier Bay.

"I think we should get the check," I said.

No one raised a hand as the waitress flew by carrying a tray of dirty dishes back to the kitchen.

"We have time," said Daddy Ted beatifically. "They'll wait, you know."

6.

"Could you help with the tent?" Leon asked.

We were in the meadow with the others. It was a few minutes after we had beached the boat.

"If you show me what to do."

A moment later, we were knee-high in damp grass. The smell of the meadow grass was reassuringly familiar. My legs were weak, but it felt good to be on land.

"There," said Leon, pointing at the ground.

I pushed tent peg after tent peg into the ground. It was as if I had suddenly gone stupid: all these things which I knew perfectly well how to do no longer made sense to me. Leon had to show me how to do them, like a child has to be taught to tie its own shoelaces.

"Are you enjoying this?"

The mildness in his tone surprised me, but I was grateful for it.

"No."

He didn't react.

"I'll be all right," I added. "You know it always takes me a few days to get used to something new."

The tent was almost finished. All over the meadow little green tents were springing up. People were starting to relax before dinner. A woman who was an anesthesiologist brushing out her long hair while her husband hammered down the tent pegs. There was also a nurse couple. She was bustling about with the tent while he scrutinized his lenses. Perhaps--I tried to be charitable--he was cleaning them.

Heather the guide walked to a place in the middle of the meadow and waved for everyone to gather round her.

"Is everyone OK with the tents?" I was predisposed to like her but this bit of jargon

grated on my ears. As I observed her more closely, much calmer than I had been at any earlier point in the day, I could see the truth of the observation Leon had made immediately on meeting her that she had been through a lot.

"I'm going to put the toilet paper here." Heather placed a plastic bag on a rock. She seemed hesitant about something. "But, you know, it's really better to use moss. If you must use this stuff," and I thought I read disgust on her face, "be sure to burn it afterwards."

There was silence. Somehow I did not think it was a silence of assent. Were there others who, like me, were silently thinking that nothing on earth--if we were still on the earth--would persuade them to use moss?

The group broke up. Heather approached us. We exchanged a few pleasantries about the tent, how it was like and unlike the tent we had back home.

"Hey, look," she said, "how about if tomorrow each of you paddled with someone else? You know, it's usually not a good idea for couples to paddle together. Lots of times it's easier to coordinate with someone else."

That did it.

"I came here to be with Leon," I roared. "We want to be able to talk about the things we see when we see them." I wasn't about to tell her that we hadn't talked the entire time we had been in the kayak except to quarrel.

Her face kept a neutral expression. I could feel myself getting nasty. "That's what I paid the \$300 for," I added.

"Well, OK. Let's see how things go tomorrow. If you can keep up with the other boats and so on."

I could see she was thinking about how to handle me the way I do when I have to deal with difficult people in my work. " With a charming smile, she retreated.

But the threat was clear. I would have cried if I hadn't felt numb. Yes, seeing things together with Leon, having experiences together was what I had come for but so far nothing had worked out as I had hoped. For all the closeness we had up to this point, we might as well have kayaked in separate boats. Yet to do so would be to concede defeat.

7.

Yes, they all were there in the small cove on the stony beach. Heather was making spaghetti on the most sophisticated camping stove I had ever seen. Kay her assistant was chopping vegetables and unwrapping plates and utensils from plastic bags. One half of the nurse couple, Jane, a large-boned, plain woman who had seemed friendly enough when we had met her the night before at the orientation, was asking Heather if there was anything she could do to help. Her husband Ron had wandered off to one side and appeared to be playing with the lenses of his cameras, of which he had several. The night before, when Heather had asked each of us to introduce ourselves, Ron's eyes had been unable to look anyone in the eye as he spoke. He was a

cardiac nurse, he said. Jane was an emergency room nurse. They were from the Midwest.

Jane sat down on the rocks next to the two young women in identical dark green rainsuits who were chopping onions and celery for spaghetti sauce and began to open cans of tomatoes Heather had given her and poured them into two huge aluminum pots.

"Hi, I'm Jane," she said cheerily. "That's my husband Ron over there next to Heather. We're from Santa Fe. Is this your first time in the wilderness?"

"No," said the dark-haired young woman. "We went to Yellowstone last summer on an Outward Bound adventure."

I shuddered. If there was anything worse than a wilderness trip, it would have to be a wilderness trip where all you had with you were a Swiss Army knife, a sleeping bag, some matches, and string.

"How was it?" Jane asked.

The dark-haired woman glanced sideways at her friend. Both of them seemed to be about to break into giggles.

"Well, I thought it was great," said the dark-haired woman, but Karen didn't like it so much."

"That's why we thought we'd do this year." Karen had a pleasant face, but it showed signs of strain. "We've been touring around Alaska for a month now. This is the end of the trip."

"Are you enjoying it?" Jane had finished with the tomatoes and had settled on to the rocks in a full lotus position. She looked as if she really cared about the answer. It struck me

that she was probably a pretty good nurse.

Karen thought on it a moment as if it was a question she hadn't had time to give any thought to before.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I think I could do something like this again."

An expression of relief passed briefly over her friend's face and was gone, leaving only the same neutral, mousy look she had before.

"We've been planning this trip all year," she announced to no one in particular.

"No, Jan," Karen corrected her firmly, "you've been planning this trip. I didn't do any of the work."

"Karen's a med student," said Jan proudly. They smiled at each other with a private smile.

"Speaking of work, what kind of work do you do?" Jane continued as the conversation threatened to die.

"I'm a recreational therapist."

"Oh, great." Jane sounded enthusiastic. "We're both nurses--Ron is ICU and I do Emergency."

"What's recreational therapy?" I couldn't help but ask. It was starting to look like it might be a lonely trip for us nonmedical people.

"It's working with kids to show them there are alternatives to drugs, like basketball and soccer and cooking and reading books."

"Sounds interesting," I said politely.

Jan took it for a compliment. "It is, really. It's hard to get kids off drugs--"

"But somebody has to do it," Jane finished, and they all laughed. Then she turned to me:

"Are you and your husband in medicine too?"

It seemed like a logical question.

"No," I answered, feeling I was confessing publicly to some kind of sin. "Is everyone else?"

"I think so. The couple over by Ron are both anesthesiologists, Felicia and Brewster. She does babies and he does adults.

I could see them a few feet away from us. Heather and her helper Kay were setting up stoves while Brewster and Ron and Leon were studying one of the many lenses Ron had around his neck. Ron was giving a learned disquisition on the uses and misuses of zoom lenses. Names like Minor White and Steichen were being bandied about. Meanwhile Felicia was watching Leon intently out of the corner of her eye as her hands shredded the lettuce leaf by leaf.

"Did everyone see the puffins by the Marjerie Glacier?" asked Felicia innocently. I was pretty sure I knew whom she wanted to answer.

"Oh, yes," Jane answered excitedly. "Do you know which kind they were? I thought they might be tufted puffins, but I wasn't sure."

"I thought they were horned puffins. What did you think, Brewster?"

There followed a long discourse on puffins in Glacier Bay, the types of puffins, the other

kinds of bird life we had seen, and the habits of oystercatchers. Oystercatchers were the most common bird next to puffins; they didn't catch oysters, however. I wanted to ask how they got their name, but something stopped me. The question felt as out of place as I did. Why should I display my etymological passions? It seemed unlikely anyone would be sympathetic to them, much less share them.

It was an unaccustomed sensation, to feel inferior in knowledge and capability to everyone around me. Wanting to hide my resentment, I gnawed on strand after strand of spaghetti and tried unsuccessfully to think of things to say.

Glacier Bay, I learned, had not existed for very long in its present form. There was no mention of it on the maps made by fur traders and other explorers who had passed through the region since the 1700s. Late in the nineteenth century, John Muir had ventured into Glacier Bay, having heard about it from some of his guides. He had been the first non-native American to come here.

Glacier Bay had continued to fascinate. Even today, the advances and retreats of the glaciers were not well understood by scientists. So Glacier Bay was a mystery as well as a wilderness. What looked so static, so primeval, was in fact in constant change; and its future could not be predicted with any certainty. Was this why the silence was so strange, so absolutely beyond any silence I had ever known?

I looked around for Leon. Where had he gone while I had been trying to decipher our fellow-adventurers?

He was talking with Felicia.

"Gee," he was saying enthusiastically, "I've always wanted to canoe around those islands off the coast of Baja. That must have been terrific. How long were you there?"

Her face was fairly shining with pleasure as she answered. I walked slowly--but not too slowly--over to where they were standing.

"Hi," I said. Leon looked annoyed and a tad guilty.

"This is my wife," he said.

Felicia gave me a frigid smile.

Dinner passed in a blur of other overheard, half-understood conversations. I was trying not to remember all those other gazelle-like, physically active women Leon had known before me. The ballerina who liked to go sky diving and later became an FBI agent. The lawyer who liked that sport we had seen in the winter Olympics that was like tobogganing only at twice the speed. I had never met any of them, but in my mind's eyes they all had the glossy dark hair, fresh complexion, and the wide eyes of Felicia set in faces yet to be troubled by ideas.

At the end of the evening, just before we all headed off to our tents, Kay the assistant guide described an earlier trip she had made to the region where one night she had made a foray to a nearby island to find strawberries. I could see her doing that—a Diana of the glaciers, paddling in the weak sun of the Arctic midnight, around a small, scrub-laden island. The strawberries waited hidden among the green scrub. Tiny berries, not like the huge juicy ones in our garden back home: found jewel-like treasures with a delicate wild taste.

I tried not to be filled with awe, but I was. I was sure I would never be able to paddle a kayak alone, much less around an island at midnight.

8.

After dinner everyone wanted to go hiking. Gratefully, I crawled into the tent. Soon the others had diminished to a dotted line of colors on the other side of the ravine. I could hardly make out their identities.

I had meant to read a novel set in Argentina that Leon had just finished and given me. He had said I would like it, and he was hardly ever wrong about things like that. Yet as soon as I was alone, a lethargy overcame me. I had left one end of the tent open, and I lay down in one of the sleeping bags so I could see out of the flap. Warm and protected, I found I could look out at Glacier Bay with equanimity. For the moment, it looked a bit like Colorado, just much bigger.

A wind came up, shaking the sides of the tent and assaulting me in the face. I let it. It was a strong breeze, but not cold. It seemed to me that as it blew through the tent it was taking my fear with it. After a while, I felt almost triumphant. I had survived a whole day of Glacier Bay. All I had to do was get through two more days. And for the rest of today, nothing more

would happen to me.

There was a rustling noise in the grass outside that wasn't the wind. Jane's head appeared at the other end of the tent.

"May I come in? I started on the hike but I got tired and our tent's not up yet."

"Sure."

She had been easy to talk to, so if I had to give up my solitude for any of the strangers in the group, well, she was as good as any.

She had been friendly to us, Jane had, from the very start of the trip. We had already talked a bit when we had come over on the same floatplane. She was as talkative and friendly as her husband Ron was taciturn. At the moment they had just quit their jobs in South Dakota and were traveling around for a while before settling, probably somewhere in the Southwest, she said. Ron didn't like the winter, and they thought (somehow I heard this as "I thought") he would like Arizona or New Mexico a lot better.

They had done quite a bit of camping, she said, although this was the first real wilderness adventure they had ever had. In fact, they had decided to pay for an outfitters' tour for the same reason we had--because they were not quite sure they could negotiate Glacier Bay on their own.

She told me a long story about two women friends of theirs who had begged them to take them on a hike in Yellowstone. They were older women, whose outdoors experience had so far consisted of day hikes in the Colorado Mountains. Against their better judgments, the Jane and Ron had agreed to take them. Showing up in tennis shoes and carrying day packs containing

plastic tube tents, the women had been cheerful and enthusiastic. Two days later, in a hailstorm in Yellowstone, they had all turned back so that Jane and Ron wouldn't have to use their nursing skills.

She laughed, and I laughed with her. I had told her about various camping trips we had made but failed to mention that I had done them all kicking and screaming, as part of the Great Compromise that makes marriage possible. I certainly wasn't going to admit to a stranger how completely out of my element I was here.

She kept on talking, but there was no real warmth between us. She was lonely, that was all, and she would rather be rattling away to a stranger than solitary in her tent.

"You know," she said, "I think Alaska must be an awful place to live in all year round. The winter nights, I mean."

I nodded.

"I hear they have only three or four hours of daylight in the winter, so that if you're indoors working during the day you would miss it completely," I said.

"It's no wonder they have such a problem with alcoholism and suicide. You know,"--and she leaned toward me--"Ron has pretty severe depression. His doctor thought it might help him to be in a warmer, sunnier climate. That's why we moved from Colorado to Santa Fe. And you know, it really has. He's a lot better now than he used to be."

I was glad I hadn't met him before they moved.

"So it worked out, then," I said.

"Yes, but our jobs are pretty hard, what with all the shift work, and we're thinking now we've saved up a bit we might quit for a while and travel. That's one of the reasons we came up here for a month, to see how we liked just traveling around."

"And do you?"

"Oh yes," she answered with the enthusiasm that was her response to almost everything, and I could not help but be touched. Warm-hearted as she was, not at all pretty, but with a somewhat pathetic charm, she took care of him--was, I thought, perhaps afraid she could do no better.

As I heard the others returning, I was neither relieved nor irritated. The conversation could have been broken off at any time, and it had gone on long enough that I think she felt all right again. I had my moments of meditation before she had arrived, and between that and the interest of studying a fellow human being at close range, I felt better too.

9.

In the morning we woke to a gray coldness. Across the bay loomed the flat huge wall of the glacier. At this distance, it was impossible to distinguish the crags, off-white and irregular, that we had seen on our way in the day before. Little white flecks, looking ever so much like

pieces of glass, bobbed up and down in the bay between. Those were the ice floes we would have to traverse to get to our next campsite.

We were standing on the small stony beach as we ate breakfast, huddled around the camp stove for warmth. The wind nipped at the boats.

"It'll burn off." Heather said with a confidence I hoped was real. "We'll see sun by midday if not before."

Leon hugged me briefly.

"At least it's not raining," he said. "Here, eat more. Drink some hot chocolate. Your body needs energy if you're going to paddle."

Sure enough, everyone was eating. There was Kay, munching a celery stick laced with peanut butter. In the morning light I noticed she had acne and a look of general ill-health about her. How could she eat peanut butter at this time of the morning?

"You won't gain weight if you eat," said Leon, reading my thoughts. "Your body will just burn it all up the way it does when we go snorkeling." He handed me a cup of hot chocolate and a granola bar.

"I'm not hungry." There was a note of defiance in my voice.

Leon gave me a stern look.

"Do you want Heather to separate us for the rest of the trip?"

Swiftly I tore the granola bar from its wrapper. In that moment it seemed unlikely we would ever return to the world where I was always trying to be thinner.

10.

Two hours later, we were maneuvering the boat near the bird rookery just past the Marjerie Glacier.

Moving the kayak blades just enough to keep from being swayed by the tides, we were within a foot or two of the cliff wall. In each cranny we could see, there was a nest, and a bird, or two or three. The cliff was honeycombed with crannies. Tiny heads poked themselves out of tiny nests. Parent birds hopped here and there; flew out to sea; returned. And to think: they did this all day long, they were doing this all day long while we were sitting in our offices thousands of miles away worrying about whatever it was people in civilization worried about.

Neither the click of Leon's camera nor the sound of the kayak blades seemed to trouble them. We tried whispering; when they showed no reaction, we talked in normal voices. They observed us with interest, with curiosity even, but with no fear. They accepted our being there as readily as if we ourselves had been wild creatures too, oversize sea otters perhaps or small, blue, two-headed whales.

So this was the wilderness, a place where there was no longer anything special about being human, where we were just living beings among other living beings, all of whom communicated with one another in some fashion. It was scary, the wilderness, but only in the

way any really new experience is.

I looked at my watch. We had been here almost an hour, yet I had not noticed any time passing.

I took off my gloves and passed the binoculars back to Leon.

"May I have a candy bar, please?" I asked sweetly.

"Certainly," he answered. I felt something soft and familiar brush my hand as my fingers closed over a Mars bar. I turned around as far as I could without destabilizing the boat. Our eyes met. Leon kissed my hand again, this time more slowly.

As we pushed the boat backwards with our paddles, the largest wave we had felt yet rocked the boat. At the other end of the inlet, an ocean liner so far away it looked like a miniature boat for a child's bath was making its way toward the glacier. Presumably it was one of the tourist boats that came up from Juneau for the day, cruising around the region and then returning its passengers to the safety of their hotels. As it got closer, we could hear the loud noise of its muzak and an indecipherable voice making indecipherable noises over a loudspeaker. Part of me wished I was on it, headed back towards the world of warm beds and hot baths, but only part of me.

None of the passengers on that boat would ever know what it felt like to be a wild creature in Glacier Bay.

11.

In the middle of the afternoon I figured out what was wrong with the kayak blades. At the start of the trip Heather had explained briefly that there were two ways to put the halves of a kayak blade together. If you put them together so that the blades were parallel, that was called a plain paddle. If the blades were at a 45-degree angle to each other, that was what was called a feathered paddle. Heather had always used plain paddles. Plain paddles were easy: all you had to do, she said, was to think of a windmill: the kayak blades should churn through the water like windmill blades through the air.

But with a feathered paddle, you had to pause. You had to turn the paddle so that the blade you were about to put in the water was at the correct angle. Otherwise, the blade would simply glaze off the water and fly up in the air. As we wended our way through the ice floes, I remembered now that many years earlier when I had kayaked in the narrow rivers of southern Virginia in a tiny inflatable boat, it had been with a with a feathered paddle.

"Feathered paddle, feathered paddle," I shouted to Leon over the roar of the glacier we happened to be passing. "I've always used feathered paddles before, that's why I kept pausing in the middle."

There was no answer. I turned my head to see if Leon had heard.

"So?" He raised his eyebrows. "You want a feathered paddle? Is that it?"

"No," I shouted back despairingly into the watery roar. "That's not it. What I want is for

this boat to have a noiseless, nonpolluting, environmentally friendly engine."

12.

While we paddled through the ice floes, I relaxed enough to be reflective. While I had been studying the other members of the group, I had also been observing myself. It was a far different self from my usual one. This was a self fundamentally uninterested in the others and unwilling to participate any more than necessary in the communal activities of mealtimes and gear-stowing. There were moments when I did not even want to talk to any of them or even look them in the eye. Everything was an effort. Kayaking was an effort and monitoring my blood sugar so that I ate enough was an effort and being a team player was way beyond any effort I had in me. I noticed myself clinging to Leon, more than content to be an appendage.

Something in this was familiar. It reminded me of a management problem I had the past winter. One of the women on my staff had refused to relate to anyone except one other person. In staff meetings, she would look at and talk to only that other person. Outside meetings, she would speak to the others only when absolutely necessary, and then in a way that invited no response. All my attempts to get her to relate to the others had failed. She persisted in this one exclusive relationship, which meant rejecting everyone else. For some time I had seen her behavior as stubbornness, and it had frustrated and angered me.

Now I wondered if she too did not feel everything to be too much of an effort. Could it be that, tired of a job she had long since mastered and cynical about an organization that gave people reason to be cynical, she had adopted this behavior as a protection? Perhaps she too spent her days wishing everyone would just go away and leave her alone, or that she could get herself to somewhere more comfortable.

I played with this notion a bit, tested my memories of the woman and the situation against my observations of myself in Glacier Bay. The more I reflected, the more exact the correspondence seemed.

How sad if I were right. And how little I or anyone could do to change her if in truth she contended daily with sensations of strangeness and assault like those I was having to contend with on Glacier Bay.

13.

There was bright sun as we approached the cove by Johns Hopkins Inlet where Heather had said we would camp. It was almost seven o'clock. I had managed to eat enough to make it through the day, although the last granola bar had less effect than I had expected. I had discovered that periodic infusions of chocolate or nuts kept me going for about 2 hours. While we hadn't exactly kept up with the others, we hadn't fallen too badly behind either. We had come

14 miles, 5 miles more than the preceding day. In fact, if I hadn't been about at the point of total collapse, I would have been quite proud of myself.

On the beach directly ahead I could see two brand new kayaks, perfectly enameled. They made our faded blue canvas kayaks seem downright dingy. Maybe, I thought, we would meet some interesting, compatible people tonight. We usually did in our travels. It was one of the routine parts of our other travel experiences—at least our normal travel experiences.

But the sight of the kayaks made Heather distraught.

"Gosh," she said, "I didn't think there would be any other people here. It may be we'll have to keep on going."

I turned to Leon.

"What's the matter with her? It's a big beach. They stay at one end, we stay at the other. Since when does the first person at a campsite have the right to the whole site? Just think what national parks would look like if we went by that rule. There'd be miles and miles of car back-ups waiting to enter the parks. Alaska is one of the states, isn't it? Seems to me I remember something about that from elementary school."

Hoping Heather would change her mind and ready to put up a fight if she didn't, I extricated myself from the kayak. An altercation was in full swing on the beach.

A large, fat woman somewhere in her 40s with short clipped hair and nails wearing a beige paramilitary uniform was standing over Heather.

"Yes, well, I understand that it's late and you're all very tired and the next site is 12 miles

away." (Twelve miles. I could have cried.) "But the fact is we were here first and we have been exceedingly careful about bears for the last two days. Exceedingly careful. There is certainly a question in my mind as to whether you would exercise the same caution. We don't want any trouble here, you understand.

"We also never sleep in the clothes we cook and eat in and"--her face hardened beyond what a minute earlier I would have thought possible--"we carry a gun. If we allow you to stay, we would insist that you take the same precautions."

Heather looked like she wanted to get angry but thought the better of it.

"Well, we're already doing everything you just mentioned except change clothes before we go in our tents," she said mildly. "And I don't think, you know, that all that is really necessary. I've been leading tours in this area for fifteen years and I've never once had a problem with a bear."

To someone who did not know Heather it might well have seemed merely matter-of-fact, even respectful. But I knew she was lying. She did have a problem with a bear once. She had told us about it at lunch that day. She had been on a large island much more accessible to campers than Glacier Bay. At about four in the morning, a bear had torn through the campsite. Heather had scared it off with a bear horn but an hour later it had come back. The second time she had roused everybody and had made them pack at once and leave. This story had frightened me more because I hate being awakened out of a deep sleep than because I really thought a bear might appear. The wilderness seemed so quiet, so uninhabited except for the birds and an

occasional seal that I could not believe there were bears in it.

"Maybe you were just lucky."

"Maybe so, but I think you should consider that most of these people are not experienced in wilderness survival and they've already come a long way today. I don't think it would be at all wise for us to go any farther without a night's rest. How about we camp as far away from you as we can--say, over there in the ravine"--Heather gestured toward a pleasant-looking woods just off the beach--"just for one night. We respect your rights for having been here first. Can't we make some kind of accommodation?"

"This is ridiculous," I said under my breath to Leon.

"It sure is," he whispered back.

But I was glad to see the fat woman's face soften into uncertainty. She looked down at the ground for a moment.

"All right," she said grudgingly. "But if we find any of you violating our rules, we will insist that you leave at once."

"Of course," said Heather sweetly.

For the first time, I really respected her. Her negotiations skills were way beyond anything I could have done.

At once we beached the canoes and began to set up camp. Leon picked an even, dry, soft camp site and told me to loft the sleeping bags. This should have been easy, but I couldn't seem to do it. I pulled one of the bags from its stuff sack and watched it fall on the moss.

"What's wrong?" Leon was fastening the tent pegs.

"I don't know. I don't seem to be functional."

He looked up at me.

"Your face is all white. I think you better lie down for a while."

I lay down on the unlofted down and watched the sun set behind the mountain at the end of the ravine. The trees were beautiful to look at--very small and bushy. It struck me that they were the first green we have seen since we had left Juneau.

"What happened?"

I asked Leon a while later when I found him kneeling beside me.

"Exhaustion. Overexertion. Here, take this."

He handed me what smelled like a cup of vegetable bouillon.

"But I am doing it."

I would have taken back the words if I could. I hated hearing myself beg for reinforcement like that. But they were out.

He helped me sit up.

"It's just that your form could be better, that's all."

The soup tasted good.

"Please, Leon. Give me a break. I've just kayaked fourteen miles for the first time in my life and I'm worn out. Can't you be glad I got through the fourteen miles?"

I could see him rethinking his position.

"You did just great." He smiled a real smile. "I'm proud of you."

"Just wait until you see me tomorrow," I said cheerily.

Tomorrow was the last day.

14.

At about six the next morning, with the sun already high in the sky, we loaded the boat. The female anesthesiologist had continued to ogle Leon at breakfast whenever her good-looking but semi-articulate husband wasn't watching, but I hadn't noticed Leon reciprocating.

I handed Leon the gear in my hands, and he took it. A light-heartedness overcame me: it felt like the most natural thing in the world to be loading the boat together, as if we were cooking different parts of a meal in the same kitchen, or talking over the day's events before a cheerful fire. I reached out again; again he was there.

Who was this woman, who was so happy to be pushing a kayak off a beach 60 miles by floatplane from the nearest telephone and 60 miles from the nearest floatplane?

It certainly couldn't be me.

15.

As we waited for the floatplane to come and lift us out of Glacier Bay, it was warm and sunny. For the first time I took off two of the layers of wool I was wearing.

The wilderness adventure was almost over. We had eaten our last lunch together an hour or so ago. Everyone had looked more cheerful than I had ever seen them. Ron and Jane had made quite a fuss about being sure to get everyone's name and address. They had also taken a group picture and promised to send copies. Apparently this was a traditional way to end a trip of this kind. Everyone let themselves be rounded up for the picture but then dispersed even before Ron had dismantled his complicated photo equipment. Shortly thereafter the first two of the three floatplanes that were to take us out arrived, and people piled into them without so much as a goodbye. The new arrivals disgorged onto the shore had a more than slight resemblance to our own group. With glazed, neutral looks on their faces, they walked off the plane stiffly, not talking to each other. Their leader, a black-haired, well-muscled fellow about 30, gathered them firmly and ordered them into the kayaks, which were resting quietly where we had beached them only a while ago.

"OK, folks," he said cheerily. "First we're going to have a little kayak practice and then we'll eat lunch."

Lying on my pack and looking out over the sunlit cove, I was completely warm and happy. On the beach there were numerous icebergs left behind by the tide. It was surreal to see whole icebergs rather than the little tips of them we had seen all day long as we had kayaked

through the ice floes. I got up and walked around them. They looked very much like Henry Moore sculptures made of ice. One looked to me like "Woman Reclining." Another one, a big square block, I named "Sheep At Rest."

Leon too was gleeful.

"Wouldn't it be great to stay a whole week?" he mused excitedly. "I could definitely come back here some other time, couldn't you? But without an outfitter next time. Just us."

He darted around the icebergs like a hummingbird around flowers.

"Over my dead body," I said wearily. "Better yet--with my dead body. You could strap me to the back of the sled. The dogs would hardly notice the extra weight."

He gave me one of his "I know that's how you feel now but we'll see who wins this one" grins.

We settled the gear and Leon offered Heather some of his bourbon. She looked relaxed for the first time during the trip. Within a few minutes we were all chattering as if we had known each other for years.

She was born and raised in Alaska, she told us. Her father had been captain of a mail boat between Juneau and Ketchikan, and she and her brothers and sisters had grown up on the boat. Her mother would have preferred a more settled life style (I could see her mother: medium-tall and spare, like Heather, with graying hair pulled back in a bun, and a gaunt look to her face). The kids had loved it as much as their father.

Heather herself had married young--left school in fact--and had several kids right away.

She hadn't realized raising kids was hard, she said. Doing diaper load after diaper load and no one to talk to for hours except squalling infants and toddlers, well--it had been hard. So there had been a divorce, and since then things had been harder. Keeping enough wood in the house in the winter meant keeping the car running, and keeping the car running meant having money, and there was never enough, never. Her kids were all teen-agers now, three boys, and fine kids they were too. Luckily, they liked Bob, her boyfriend, who lived in the town we were going to next. He was a good man, Bob, only he kept on insisting that next spring they should get married. It scared her, the thought of getting married again (she took another sip), but she'd probably do it. He had been sick all last winter with an injured leg and she had taken care of him, spending as much time at his place as in Juneau. It had been all right.

To give her courage, we told her about our own wedding after many years of living together and how glad we were to have done it. She brightened at the anecdotes we told her of me backing the car into our fence the day before the wedding and the minister getting Leon's name wrong right at the start of the ceremony. She seemed surprised at our being so down to earth, big city folks as we were.

After a while the tiny yellow floatplane appeared on the horizon and touched down along the water as gracefully as if it had been a pelican. I was as glad to see it as Leon was sorry. A minute later we were high over the mountains and islands of Glacier Bay. Heather answered Leon's questions and gave a running commentary on the scene below. Even I delighted in it. At this distance the emerald green of the scrub and the shifting blue-grays of the tidal waters, too far

away to pose a threat, looked merely beautiful.

By the time we left Heather at the airport, we felt like old friends. Leon kissed her goodbye, and I shook hands with her and Bob, a lanky, somewhat grizzled fellow with an old-fashioned counterculture beard and kind, lively eyes. He seemed eager to take care of her.

We gave her our address and phone number, and she promised to visit if ever she came East. I was sure that if we had said we planned to come back to Juneau next spring, she would have invited us to the wedding. Bob had his truck radio tuned to National Public Radio and, more than anything else, the familiar voice convinced me that we really had returned to the world where things would be familiar.

II

1.

When I was a small child, I was allowed to wash my hair only once a week. I can remember clearly the white towel, not terribly fluffy, that my mother would wrap around my head and rub again and again to get as much water out as possible. I remember too the pale green-handled hair dryer she would use to dry it, much stronger than hair dryers are now. After days of brushing perfume or dusting powder through my grimy hair, the sense of cleanliness was intensified by the contrast. Even the final rinsing with icy cold water, alleged to get all the soap out of the hair, was welcome. And in those days, since we had no shower, only a large white porcelain bathtub kept off the floor by four clawlike feet, we had to wash each other's hair. As we reclined our necks over the bathtub's edge and closed our eyes delightedly we had a sense, however transient or illusory, of being taken care of.

Such a sensation overwhelmed me the minute I saw the Gustavus Inn.

It had been a farmhouse in the last century, an old rambling clapboard house, now freshly painted white with blue trim and several bicycles resting on the front lawn. The house spoke of scrubbing and mending and hard work that had produced what it had been meant to produce. In the back there was a large, orderly vegetable garden of the kind I was used to seeing in Europe-- neat rows of cabbages and carrots. Someone inventive had interspersed marigolds among the green leafy tops of the vegetables so that the effect was of a wild but still orderly gaiety.

"Bugs," Leon explained as I remarked on the marigolds. "Marigolds are good against

bugs."

Inside, the house was warm and clean and decorated unexpectedly with modern Eskimo paintings. Colorful villagers set out in boats and hunted whales. Children in sealskin coats played with their fur-coated mothers. Everyone looked cheerful and happy.

As happy and cheerful, in fact, as Uncle Joe and Daddy Ted, whom we found ensconced by a fire with two pleasant-looking women of their generation and a teen-aged boy.

Ted hugged us, and we shook Joe's hand.

"This is Christine and Victoria, and Christine's son Bill," said Daddy Ted with one of the warmest smiles I had ever seen from him. "They're traveling around Alaska for a while just like we are."

"We can hardly wait to hear about your adventures," said Victoria. "Ted's told us so much about you in the last three days."

As we sat down, Leon began at once to tell what I realized at once would be the Tale of Glacier Bay. Leon has a talent for talking about his trips so that they are the most marvelous experiences you can possibly imagine. In his official version, all the frustrations and momentary terrors that I remember disappear. Depending on the audience, this talent can make him envied or seriously disliked. Here, clearly, from the looks on Christine and Victoria's faces, it was having the former effect. Only Bill, who seemed about 15 or so, looked bored, but I expected that might well be as much from being stuck with his mother and her friends as from anything else.

"How's your leg now, Joe?" said Victoria as soon as there was a lull in the conversation.

"Did that dressing I put on it help a bit?"

Joe brightened up. In fact, he positively beamed. It surprised me to see Joe respond so positively to a woman's care.

"Yep," he said. "Feels much better."

"Have you noticed," said Daddy Ted proudly, "he hasn't had to use his wheelchair once since we've been in Alaska?"

It was true. Joe had huffed and puffed quite a bit in getting from one place to another but he had done it all on his own steam.

Slowly it became clear that Victoria, who was a nurse, was quite fond of Joe. She insisted on writing down the saline solution she had used to take care of his wound and explained slowly and carefully to Daddy Ted all the things Joe should do if he was going to get better.

It interested me how she assumed that Daddy Ted, not Joe, was responsible for taking care of Joe. From little things he had let slip about the motorcycle accident that had put him in the wheelchair and how he had cared for himself afterwards, I thought her intuition was correct. While she talked, Daddy Ted nodded his head sagely, but I was skeptical if he was really willing to do all this for his brother.

At dinner Ted addressed most of his remarks to Christine, who helped him tell us about the 40-pound salmon he had caught the day before. Victoria asked Joe gentle, clever questions about himself that elicited tiny smiles along with the one-sentence replies.

Christine's son ordered a beer and sulked when his mother sent it back. He had a different last name, which led me to assume she had been divorced. This fit too with my impressions of her: more fastidious in her dress and coiffure than her sister, she also had a harder edge that showed itself in her being more quiet and restrained. Where Victoria kept the conversation going with a friendly remark or question, Christine added her assent to what someone else was already saying.

I had wondered about their husbands until I overheard the waitress address Victoria as "Mrs. R-----." It was the name of one of the wealthiest families in America, at least one of the oldest, best known, wealthy families in America. That explained the manners and perhaps also the fact that they were traveling alone. Their husbands, no doubt CEOs, would hardly have time for a long vacation. If one were Mrs. R---- and wanted an adventure or an extended rest, one would have to take it alone or with one's sister. Realizing we were being sociable with two members of America's first families, so far above us in money and social class that in our normal lives we would all certainly never have met, gave the entire experience a slight surrealistic tinge.

"Well," said Daddy Ted as, sated on salmon with mousseline sauce followed by chocolate mint pie, we all prepared to adjourn, "I think I'll go read that book by Taylor Caldwell

a bit so I finish it before I leave. It's quite good."

"Do you think she's a good novelist, Taylor Caldwell?" asked Victoria sweetly.

Ted looked nonplussed.

Victoria laughed. "You wouldn't have started it if you'd known Taylor Caldwell was a woman, would you?"

"Probably not," Daddy Ted conceded.

3.

When we got back to our room, I went in the shower and let twenty minutes of hot water pour over me. Afterwards I lay contentedly on the nineteenth century four-poster bed. Pulling the white eiderdown embroidered coverlet up to my shoulders, I closed my eyes.

"What are you doing?" said Leon with alarm.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

We glared at each other in the pale light of the bedside lamp.

"But we have to re-pack before we leave tomorrow. And do the wash."

I groaned. Tomorrow we would be off again, this time to a mountain range north of Fairbanks. Tomorrow I would have to fly in *the plane*.

"I'll get up early and repack in the morning," I said, closing my eyes in what I hoped was

a definitive way.

"Well, I'm going to do it now," said Leon defiantly.

I turned over.

"You'll have to get up pretty early." I thought I heard the beginnings of a snarl.

"I will," I answered and closed my eyes. And when I woke up at 2 a.m. and saw Leon still sorting clothes on the floor, I turned over again and with great determination crawled back into sleep.

4.

Leon snored contentedly under the huge down coverlet as I repacked in the morning sunlight. Birds were chirping outside the room--normal-sounding birds, not oystercatchers. The house was still.

It was the time of the morning when, once, I would have been up to go over my class notes for the last time and prepare myself for the first performance of the teaching day. It was always the best time of the day, a wakefulness filled with anticipation of delightful toil, not the toil that numbs the mind and closes off the heart. Such a wakefulness I had as I got up and repacked; such had I not had in many a year.

It was partly the inn itself. The high-Victorian wallpaper with pink flowers, the fourposter bed with the eiderdown coverlet--everything was designed for good European

bourgeois comfort. It brought back memories of other worlds of space and time.

I finished packing. Leon was clearly good for another hour's sleep at least, his limbs in a state of fixation. Like a child sneaking out of the house without permission, I unlatched the bedroom door and tiptoed down the well-carpeted stairs. A moment later I was in the garden.

At one particular period of my life, long before Leon, I had spent many hours traveling from one place in Europe to another by train. As the train would slow down for one or another of its many stops, I would see people waiting patiently by the gate--women and children and old people, some on huge black bicycles. Behind them the rows of vegetables stretched out to the horizon, where a concrete vertical slab of an apartment building or a brand-new smoke-belching factory rose out of the empty land.

I had liked the sight of the cabbages, the rows of celeriac and endives and that great watery vegetable the kohlrabi, edible, and then barely, only with nutmeg and cream sauce. The sprouting of cabbages in their bed by the railway tracks was always one of the first signs of the end of the long European winter during which one did not see the sun for weeks at a time.

The sight now of the orderly cabbages under a morning sun comforted me a great deal. They were messengers from a familiar world, a world where days had routine, and achievement came through patience and hard work. Somebody had planted these cabbages, watered them, tended them, watched them grow. Somebody had enough discipline, too, not to eat them when they were small. This was the sort of human activity I was used to, felt comfortable with.

In my view of things, it took a certain courage to grow cabbages.

5.

Over breakfast Daddy Ted told us he had stayed up late to call home. From what he reported of the conversation, it seemed to me that Edna was growing more furious as the days went by.

"I do miss that gal," he announced, a look of sadness crossing his face.

For a minute I almost forgot that he had refused to bring her. Joe was sad, too, which I thought had something to do with leaving Victoria.

Changing the subject, Victoria told us that at one point in her life, she too had done quite a bit of kayaking. We explained that the kind of kayaking we had done on Glacier Bay was sea kayaking, and that this was a different thing altogether from ordinary kayaking. A sea kayak is one of the most stable of boats. Not only does a sea kayaker not have to learn the trick of "rolling" one's kayak--righting the boat after it has turned over and put the kayaker firmly into the water at a 90 degree angle to the surface--sea kayaks can't be rolled. If they turn over, the kayaker has to crawl out of the boat and swim.

"Well, that certainly would be easier." Victoria grinned ruefully. "It took me six months to learn to roll and I swallowed so much chlorine from pool water while I was learning that I was afraid my lungs would be permanently damaged. I had a great teacher, though." She looked

thoughtful between mouthfuls of Swedish pancakes with homemade lingonberry sauce.

"Why was he great?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Because he wouldn't let me give up," she answered.

While the others talked, I ate prodigious quantities of cereal and toast and eggs and cranberry-applesauce-walnut bread. God only knew when I would get real food like this again.

Leon got up to pay the bill. The smell of fresh-baked farm bread drifting out from the old-fashioned white porcelain kitchen rooted me to my chair like a sorcerer's spell.

"Come."

Leon nodded at me as he folded the credit card stub in half and putting it in his wallet.

I blinked back the tears that were forming and got up.

III

1.

When first I flew in planes, they had been small planes in upstate New York, prop planes that took off from and landed in small airports, and much to my own amazement, I had enjoyed them very much. It was magical to watch the roads and farms and buildings one passed every day get smaller and smaller under one's feet until they looked like a well-made doll's house. On sunny days you could see the earth throughout the whole flight and at that distance, it was easy to forget its imperfections.

The Aerostar was the first small plane I had been on in many years and I was secretly hoping that flying in it would be as wonderful as those memories. And it was. Whether because I expected it to be, or because it was a sunny day as soon as Glacier Bay disappeared below us, giving way to the mountain ranges that had loomed far above only two days before, I knew it would be all right.

Now we could see the stretches of white, the ice fields that led us up pass after pass, black snow-touched crags on either side. We played among the mountains as a bird might have played. Yet no bird would ever go here, no bird could fly so high.

"Would you like a salmon sandwich?" said Daddy Ted, handing me a little brown sack.
"I got these back at the inn."

I was sitting next to him in the co-pilot's seat. Since this was my first time in the plane, I was being treated as the guest of honor. Behind me was Leon, and behind Leon, Joe. Daddy Ted was talking to me through his headset. We were all wearing headsets so we could hear Daddy Ted when he was communicating with the radio towers in pilot code.

"Thank you," I said sincerely as I took the sandwich from his hand.

Leon was navigating, and Joe sat quietly, looking out the window. I couldn't discern any expression on his face, but his bearing made it clear he was in his element. The few laconic remarks he allowed himself were all by way of being additions, clarifications, to things Leon and Ted were saying. It was nice to see him so peaceful.

As we left Juneau airspace and moved into Fairbanks airspace, Daddy Ted announced to the tower that he was going to fly over Mount McKinley.

"Flight path negative, Hotel Romeo," said the voice of the Fairbanks control tower.

"Hotel Romeo" was pilot code for the letters "HR" which were part of the code number of the plane. "Direct route over McKinley prohibited."

"Flight plan was approved by Juneau Control," said Daddy Ted mildly.

"Still negative," was the answer. "Proceed with caution into Fairbanks airspace. Observe Prohibited Area at 85 degrees."

"What's a prohibited area?" I asked between munches.

"A military zone," said Daddy Ted off-handedly.

A map appeared in my hands.

"The military zones are marked in red lines," said Leon from behind me.

I looked at it carefully. There were quite a few military zones. The notion that all this amazing space, which looked so free, was really precisely divided into different known, possessed areas just like earth was disturbing.

"Would they shoot us if we wandered into a military zone by mistake?"

"Don't worry," said Leon. "We won't go into one by mistake. That's what all these controls in front of you are for. And they'd ask first anyway."

I wasn't entirely convinced. Suddenly a small camera appeared on top of the map. "Would you mind taking some pictures of McKinley with this? You'll be able to get some better views from where you are than I can."

"Sure," I said, and as we circled McKinley all of us including Daddy Ted clicked away.

"Wow," said Leon. "Just look at those ice fields."

Well, they were big. And McKinley was big, so big we couldn't see all around it at any one time, and so big we couldn't see the bottom of it either for the cloud layer below. It hung there in the air space, blue otherwise for miles around, like a mirage.

Yet much as I tried to feel something, it moved me less than flying through the mountain passes had done earlier. What excited the men--its bigness--bored me. There was nothing to hold onto. I listened to what the control tower was saying over the headset, happy enough to have something to do. It was something again about the flight plan, and Daddy Ted answered it but since it was all in pilots' code, I wasn't sure I had deciphered it right.

Not long afterward, we started to descend, and a few minutes later, we were on the ground at Fairbanks.

"How long was the flight?" I asked Daddy Ted as I got out of the plane.

"Three hours fifty-six minutes," he answered with pilot-like precision.

I was stunned. It had seemed like about an hour at most.

"Well," Joe said to me as we waited for Daddy Ted to unlock the baggage compartment, "did you enjoy it?"

"Yes, I did."

I found myself smiling as I realized we really were on the ground. Joe grimaced a little in response to my smile. It occurred to me for the first time that maybe I had enjoyed it also because Leon and I were together. If the Aerostar had gone down over the ice fields, I wouldn't ever again have to fear being back home, alone forever.

"Yup," said Joe in response to nothing at all. And in what I took for a black joke, he added: "Safer than driving, too."

2.

"Could you close your side of the windows?" I said to Leon as I drove north from Fairbanks in the rented car. I could see the smoke up ahead from the forest fires we had heard

about on the radio.

Leon had reclined in the passenger seat as far as it went and was lying on top of it, eyes closed. I hated to disturb him but I didn't have any confidence that I would pull the right electronic lever to close his windows. I had already tried to turn on the windshield wipers only to feel my own seat move slowly but inexorably backwards.

He half sat up, fussed with the panel of levers next to him, and eventually found the right one. He yawned but kept his eyes open.

"Did you understand what was going on with the control tower as we passed by McKinley"? I asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Was your father defying the control tower while saying that he was complying with its instructions?"

Leon looked a little embarrassed.

"Yup," he said.

"Does he do that a lot?" I thought of various people I had known over the years who did things like that and how I had felt about them.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I reflected on what it might do to a child, to have a father who got his way by half-truths and stubbornness.

"It worked, didn't it?" he said defensively. We got to see McKinley closer than the tower

would have let us. And nothing happened. It was perfectly safe."

Clouds of white smoke wafted by. Underneath, the road had turned to gravel. At least half an hour had passed since we had seen any sign of life. Occasionally a car would pass us from the opposite direction.

"Why don't they drop stuff on the fire?" I asked. "You know, like chemicals?"

"They don't do that up here. They just let it burn. Forest fires are perfectly natural, you know. They're a way nature has of taking care of itself."

"And it's only because we have less nature and more people that we put them out back in the States." It felt funny to say "the States," but I couldn't think of how else to put it. "*Back home*"? "*Outside the wilderness*"?

Leon was changing the radio channels. Each one had a different evangelist.

"I know I asked you before, but I don't remember the answer. Why are we going to Circle Hot Springs by car instead of driving with your father? Circle Hot Springs was the name of the lodge 90 miles north of Fairbanks where we were all going to meet up this evening.

"Because the runway's too short. My father was afraid the plane wouldn't be able to take off with all of us and all the gear. That was what happened at McCarthy."

"What do you mean, that was what happened at McCarthy?"

"The runway was too short. We spent a whole hour putting black tape over some parts of the plane so that the gravel wouldn't injure the props when we took off, and then my father had to gun the engine at the last minute. We barely cleared the trees."

So their lateness in meeting me at Juneau hadn't just been insensitivity.

I thought of all the things I had said in the airport.

"Why didn't you tell me that when you met me in the airport?"

Leon looked sheepish.

"I didn't want you to worry," he said.

I grabbed his hand and kissed it.

"Are you hungry?" he said cheerfully. "How about the rest of your sandwich and a piece of the rhubarb cake? That stuff sure is good."

"Sure," I replied. "It was nice of your father to buy us all lunch."

"Buy?" Leon looked puzzled. "A box lunch was included in the price."

"That's funny," I mused. "Your father gave me the distinct impression he had bought us lunch. I must have misunderstood."

I drove through the smoke a while in silence. The next time I looked down, Leon had closed his eyes again. Loud rhythmic snores were coming out of his open mouth.

I turned off the radio. Leon's snores were better than music to drive to. It comforted me to know that he too could wear himself out. It equalized things for the time being; it made me feel more the way I did in the world where we both took care of each other.

Circle Hot Springs turned out to be a large old hotel with the first gas station we had seen for miles. The face of the Libertarian candidate for President beamed down at us from a poster in the lobby.

"He's my favorite," the hotel clerk confided. She was a middle-aged lady with tightly curled hair of a red color never seen in nature. "Although I don't know as I hold with seceding from the Union. In my opinion we're a mite too close to Russia to do that. But otherwise, I think they're on the right track."

She offered us a hand, which I took.

"My name's Betty. Would you like some literature on the Libertarian party?"

A color TV in the lounge was the only sign of the modern world. Moose heads looked down on us from the walls, and the equally overstuffed furniture reminded me of Teddy Roosevelt's summer home, Sagamore, or at least what my 10-year-old mind had remembered of Sagamore Hill. An antique Scrabble set lay out on a table, pieces scattered here and there. I spied some equally ancient well-thumbed detective novels on a bookshelf. At the moment the TV was broadcasting the flight weather forecast for this part of Alaska. This was followed by "Pilot Tips," an instructional program for novice pilots. An old Alaska curmudgeon on the sofa sat entranced on the sofa. It was Joe.

"Hi, Joe," said Leon cheerily and shook his hand. "How was the flight up?"

"Just fine," Joe replied. He had retreated to his most impassive self. "Runway was fine."

"Where's Dad?"

"Swimming pool." I recalled a sign at the entrance: "Pool open 24 hours a day."

"How is it?"

Joe shook his hand slowly in assent. "Good. Helps my leg." He chuckled. "It's about 110 degrees in that thing."

I felt stupid. So this was why it was called "Circle Hot Springs."

"Cook's just quit," Joe added unexpectedly. "They're trying to get him to change his mind. Some lady gave him a hard time at breakfast. Said his pancakes tasted like rubber. Food's not very good, but I reckon it'd be a lot worse without the cook." He chuckled again.

We excused ourselves to go upstairs and get washed up. It was a narrow hall, with small, narrow rooms. Across the way from our room, the door was open. I could see a strange sort of two- piece sofa: a large cushioned chair with another huge cushion in front of it.

"You know, I think this place used to be a brothel," I said.

Leon had stretched out on the bed with his shoes off.

"You always have such a good imagination," he yawned.

"No, really. Come here and look at this sofa. Nobody could sit on it."

I could see by his expression he thought I was right, but a "well, maybe," was the most he would concede.

4.

It was almost midnight. All four of us were lying in the hot springs swimming pool. The sun was low in the sky. It was warm, ninety or so, almost as warm as it had been during the day. We were floating on inner tubes, not talking. The past was disappearing in a yellow haze of memories.

Life was so strange, I thought reflectively as I dabbled my hand in the pool. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined myself in a huge hot tub on the Arctic Circle with my husband, my father-in-law, and my father-in-law's eccentric brother, having flown over Mount McKinley the same day in my father-in-law's private plane. It occurred to me for the first time that, looked at that way, it was all really rather exciting.

"Dad," Leon was paddling in his inner tube nearer to Ted. "Did you ever smoke cigarettes?"

Daddy Ted gave one of his closed-eye smiles.

"Oh my, yes," he said. "But only for a short while. It was when I was in the orphanage. They let us out to go to church on Sundays but the church was about a 2-mile walk and they didn't have enough people to supervise us the whole time. Some of the boys used to get cigarettes--I don't know how--and one day somebody offered me one. Well, I tried it." He laughed. It was almost a giggle. "I don't think I had ever been so sick in my whole life. I got halfway through it and then threw it on the ground. It fell on the snow and another boy picked it

up and lit it. You would have thought I would have learned my lesson, but, no, next week I bought one with money I had made sweeping porches and smoked the whole thing. I was just as sick but in a couple of weeks I could smoke right along with the best of them." He giggled outright. "The worst of them, I guess I should say."

"Why did you stop?" I asked, curious. I remembered Leon's stories of having been banished from the family table for having been suspected of smoking.

"I lost my job sweeping porches." Even at the memory Daddy Ted looked disconsolate.

I had known that Daddy Ted had spent part of his childhood in an orphanage, but I had never heard Daddy Ted refer to it before. I also knew that his mother had gotten him and several of his younger brothers out of the orphanage some years later when she had remarried. They had all lived in a chicken coop, which was all her new husband could afford, until Daddy Ted had gotten a scholarship to the state university.

"Do you remember your father, Dad?"

"No. Just my step-dad, later."

"And how long were you in the orphanage, Joe?" Leon asked.

"Oh, he was never in the orphanage," said Daddy Ted, I thought a bit enviously.

"Yup," said Joe. "I run away as soon as I heard we was supposed to go to the orphanage. My daddy used to beat me before he died--in fact, I can't say I remember him much at all except the times he was hittin' me for one thing or another, and I figured the orphanage wouldn't be any better. I had a bicycle, see, so I got on it and didn't stop till I hit Chicago. We had cousins in

Chicago, and I lived with them till I got on my feet."

"How old were you then?" Leon had a serious look on his face.

Joe thought another minute. He was in another era. "Fifteen, I reckon. Fourteen maybe."

"When did you go into the Army?"

"At seventeen." Joe made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a laugh.

"And that's where you learned to build planes?"

"Yup." Joe smiled a very small, very proud smile. "Taught myself how to fix'em and fly'em and build'em. Never did go to school. Closest I got was one time they found out I didn't have any training so they sent me all the way to Fort Worth to Mechanic School. Cost the taxpayer a bunch of money, too, sending me all that way." His brow furrowed. "First thing I got there they gave me a test to see what I knew." Joe made a noise somewhere between a "Ha!" and a "Hrumph." "Turned out I knew more than the instructor. I kept on asking questions he couldn't answer and first thing I knew I was teaching that class. Teaching it." He smiled again.

I smiled back. I could not help but be touched. In fact, for the moment, I downright liked Joe.

5.

I sat up and put one arm under Leon's head. As I had hoped, he curled up next to me and

petted my arm gently in his sleep.

When we were first together, he had often screamed in his sleep. Once I woke to a bloodcurdling yell and the sight of Leon sailing through the air over me, followed immediately by a loud crash, which was Leon landing on the hardwood floor. Another time, convinced that I was being attacked by monsters, he had tried to drag me out of bed to protect me.

“Let me go,” I screamed as he mumbled unintelligibly.

In the last few years, the screams have subsided to an occasional nonsensical chatter and now sometimes I wake to being nuzzled by a totally unconscious Leon.

It was this Leon who was curled up beside me at Circle Hot springs and it was in his arms that finally I fell asleep.

7.

When we got into Anchorage the next day it was raining a bit and cool.

For me the trip was almost over; all that was left was a day and a half in Anchorage. As soon as we landed, Ted bustled about, ordering some work done on the plane. Joe was his usual taciturn self. But I thought they both looked a bit down-at-the-mouth, too, maybe let down after McKinley and the wilds of Circle Hot Springs.

Leon had arranged for us all to stay in the apartment of a woman colleague who was out

of town at the moment. She had promised to leave the key for us under the flowerpot. He had also made reservations for Ted and Joe at a hotel just in case the apartment turned out to be too small for four.

Which it was. Otherwise, it was a pleasant enough apartment, more a small house really than an apartment and located in a quiet corner of the town. I walked around the rooms, trying to get a sense of the person who lived there. Books were standard-issue with a strong feminist cast, one entire shelf devoted to well-worn classics like Friedan and de Beauvoir. The kitchen was set up just about exactly the way I would have set it up, with whole grains neatly organized in glass jars, and cookbooks, including several of my favorites, readily at hand in a wire rack. The bathroom had exactly the same kind of European shower I had insisted in putting in our house, and a sign taped to the wall of the shower admonished users to examine their breasts every month for cancer. Altogether, I had the impression of a woman with a strong personality and an ideological bent.

"Who is this woman again?" I had meant to sound merely curious but it came out suspicious.

Leon had already set out the piece of salmon he had bought that morning just before we left Circle Hot Springs for dinner and was opening a bottle of white wine with the corkscrew on his Swiss Army knife.

"I *told* you. Her name is Sarah Dorn, she's an urban planner for the City of Anchorage, I've met her at lots of conferences, and she doesn't do anything for me. What's

eating you anyway?"

I decided to be off-handed, this time more successfully. "Oh, I don't know."

"Well, then, how about helping with dinner?"

But I wanted to go to a restaurant. I wanted to stay in a nice, new, comfortable, hotel room with inch-deep carpet and a sparkling clean bathroom with no signs. I wanted to watch L.A. Law on color TV, leaf through the latest copy of Vogue magazine, and paint my nails Red Dragon Red.

Happy as a lark, Leon was preparing the salmon for baking.

"Leon," I said, "couldn't we go to hotel? I'd be much more comfortable in a hotel."

"No dice," said Leon firmly. "There's nothing wrong with this place. It's nice and besides it's free. And I want a home-cooked meal. I haven't had a home-cooked meal in two weeks."

So it was no go. I felt an unutterable loathing for the place well up inside me. Furiously I chopped onions and threw them in a pan with some olive oil and rice.

Anyone else would have said it was a fine dinner. Joe and Ted both had a little wine for the first time in the course of the trip, the salmon and rice and salad were as good as anything we had eaten at any of the inns, and Leon found a classical station on the radio so we had Brahms to eat by.

But I was not reconciled, and after Ted and Joe left to go to the hotel, I sat on one of the two couches in the living room and buried myself in the Argentinian novel Leon had lent me.

Leon sat on the other couch and read newspapers.

"What's the matter?" Leon said finally as he put down the third newspaper. "What's eating you?"

"I told you, I don't like this place. I don't feel comfortable. It feels strange to me to be in someone else's home, especially the home of someone I've never met."

"Well"--and he spoke calmly--"what do you want me to do about it? My father took the car back to his hotel. We don't have a hotel reservation. It's eleven o'clock at night. Do you expect me to pack up, call a cab, and go off to some unknown hotel where we'll probably have to pay a hundred dollars for what's left of the night?"

"Yes," I said.

He glared back. "Be reasonable. You know we're not going to do that. Why ask?"

"Because it's what I want. I spent years of my life living in rented rooms, and I don't like living with someone else's personal effects, especially not on the next-to-last day of my vacation. What is it--you want me to say I like something if I don't? I don't like being told to shut up."

To my surprise, he looked thoughtful rather than angry.

"I didn't mean to tell you to shut up," he said. "That's what my family was always telling me to do. I spent years running away because of it."

He got up and came over to the couch I was sitting on and put an arm around me.

"Kick me if I do that again, OK?"

"Sure," I answered, and kissed him. I felt as happy as if he had given me a feathered

paddle.

Hey," I added, "I really like this book you lent me. What did you think of the part where he gets invited to dinner at the headmaster's house, drinks too much sangria, seduces the maid in full view of the priest, and gets expelled from school?"

I had meant it as a ploy after the tension of the last few minutes, but Leon took it seriously.

"He was just acting-out," he answered. "Teen-age guys are like that."

"But why did he do it? It seems stupid to me."

Leon shook his head solemnly. "He had to. I can't explain it any better than that."

8.

The next morning we agreed to go separate ways from Joe and Ted and meet up in the evening for a last festive dinner out. Joe hoped to meet his friend, Leon and I wanted to go to the Anchorage Art Museum, and Ted had made arrangements to go to a one-day seminar on tort law which was going to help him write off part of his trip.

It was another gray day. As we drove through the city, the shopping centers and developments alternated so regularly and looked so much alike it was hard to remember them. Here too, as in Juneau, people looked taller, bigger, and had a harder edge to them than back

home. The "For Sale" signs on many of the houses--sometimes as many as three or four within a minute's glance-- seemed at odds with the newness of the town. They hinted at an underlying doom, a premature decay, or perhaps the earthquake fault far, far below.

But doom was the last thing I felt. I was listening to what sounded like a Mozart vocal piece on the radio and chattering with Leon about the bicycle paths--the city was filled with them, crisscrossing its flat grids. I was following the route on the map and stroking Leon on the shoulder. Back in my element, no more was I the frightened, quiet creature of Glacier Bay.

And remained cheerful so for the rest of the day, through the hunt for smoked salmon to take back (successful); the quest for a not-terribly-expensive gallery of native American art (unsuccessful); and the Anchorage Art Museum. Now that the unfamiliar had receded, the habits of a life together flowed back to fill the void. Nothing could have been more comfortable, or more familiar, than sitting across from each other over a second breakfast of bran muffins and cappuccino in the museum cafeteria. Leon was once again the Leon I could no longer imagine being without, his thoughtful expression ready at any minute to give way to the nervous energy that was always just beneath the surface.

We were talking about the major exhibit in the museum, an anthropological exhibit that was a visual history of Alaska. What I had got from it was that Alaska was a land conquered by tribe after tribe, from Asians crossing the land bridge to fur traders to the American workers who built the oil pipeline. Yet none had left a mark.

There were also some paintings by a native American artist who had lived the traditional

tribal life of his ancestors. One in particular drew me: a hunter plunging the knife again and again into the struggling whale; three fat, kerchiefed Eskimo women dancing in a ring, all smiles--the same configuration as the medieval paintings of the Three Graces. Children, playing by the sea. And all in the bright, clear colors of primitive art: reds and blues and yellows. Yet it was no relic from a foreign, prettified past: if I walked a bit closer, I thought I'd be on the ice beside them.

Why do we think, I asked myself, that those who lived before us, even long before us, were any less real, any less complicated, any less passionate than we ourselves?

9.

It was after 2 when we left the museum, almost 3 by the time we started looking for a place to eat lunch. Everything was closed: snack bars, Italian eateries, fancy restaurants with neon cocktail glasses in the windows. With ever more frantic pace, we drove around the decaying, small-town like downtown of the city. At nearly 4, we found it on the main street, sighted it after several passes: a sushi bar, open noon to ten.

"Don't you think we should keep on looking until we find a snack bar?" I asked anxiously as we parked. "We're supposed to pick your father and Joe up at 6 for dinner. Will you be able to eat?"

"Sure." Leon was studying the menu over an Asahi beer. "I want to stop at the Portage Glacier on the way down, anyway."

I tried again. "Seems to me Joe and your father will be hungry."

"Relax," he said perfunctorily. And then, to the waitress, "I'll have a tempura, a maki sushi, and a California roll."

"Isn't that a lot to eat?" I wanted to say, but his glance made me ask myself what I would be doing if I said it.

He was happy, I was happy, we were both hungry--Joe and Ted were Leon's relatives anyway. Why was I worrying about their welfare? I put down the menu.

"Same for me, only without the tempura," I said firmly.

We downed our Asahis together.

10.

It was about 6:30 when we arrived at the hotel to pick Joe and Ted up. The hotel turned out to be a dive--beer cans falling out of the trash bins, pathetic drunk Eskimos in the nearby streets, and the sounds of sordid fights going on in other rooms. Joe was lying on the couch in pajamas when we arrived, his bad leg up on the coffee table. Dan Rather beamed at us from the color TV by the window. His cheerful smile made a strong contrast with the cheap gloomy room

and the sad old man inhabiting it. It turned out Joe's friend had been too busy with his jewelry repair business to see him and he had spent the whole day in the room watching television. While Joe got dressed, Leon regaled him with anecdotes about the exhibits we had seen in the museum. Slowly, Joe came alive again. By the time he was dressed he was his old sturdy, impassive self.

This was a relief; Joe after a day of solitude was in a state of unhealthiness beyond what I wanted to contemplate. We helped Joe down the stairs (his leg seemed to have gotten worse in the last day) and headed for where we were to meet Ted, who had wanted to go off on his own to buy a present he hoped would placate Edna on his return. And then all of us were heading down something called the Ternigan Arm towards a restaurant Sarah Dorn had recommended to Leon.

It was a beautiful drive. The light gave the impression of sunset as the mountain ranges around Anchorage now hid the sun from our view, now let it reappear. The road curved along the edge of a bay, and on the other side black snow-capped mountains came down directly into the sea. A ways out from shore, we could see wind surfers in wetsuits and the bright sails of catamarans, pink and black and yellow.

"What a great view!" Leon said as a particularly dramatic inlet sped by. The big car swerved off the road.

"I'm going to take a few pictures," he said, untangling his camera and leaping out of the car.

"Did you eat lunch?" Ted asked Joe as soon as Leon had gotten out. They were both in

the back seat.

"Yup," Joe answered. "I heated up one of those cans of soup you bought yesterday."

There was a pause.

"You?" said Joe.

I could see Ted's eyes in their half-closed state in the rear-view mirror.

"Beef stew and mashed potatoes and strawberry jello. Of course that was at twelve o'clock."

It was eight now.

Suddenly I had a great desire to get out of the car. I was filled with by guilt at having eaten enough sushi to hold me till ten at least.

Leon was clicking away.

"They're hungry," I said as soon as I reached him.

"Who?" he answered absently. "Oh. They didn't say so to me."

"No, not to you. But they talked about it as soon as you left."

"Oh." But he wasn't moved.

"Are you sure you don't mind stopping at the Portage glacier on the way to dinner?" Leon asked as soon as we were back in the car. The road was becoming narrower and more curvy the farther we got from Anchorage. "We don't have to."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Ted easily. "It's on the way, isn't it?"

11.

We were sitting in a booth of the restaurant eating fried potato skins. Next to us were two men who seemed afflicted with gigantism. From their conversation they were members of a small theater group that was having financial difficulties. While they talked, they were eating huge pieces of steak smothered in some kind of brown sauce, which congealed in lumps off their forks.

"What's that?" I said to Leon, who was studying the menu.

He looked up briefly, then scanned the "meat" section of the list. "Must be steak bearnaise," he answered.

And indeed, it was the strangest interpretation of French cuisine I had ever seen as cheerful young waitresses bustled through the crowded rooms carrying French food for giants on silver trays. I thought of a restaurant in Arles that had wonderful fish soup. I thought of tiny portions of rabbit in mustard sauce with prunes in the inn north of Montreal. What would we have eaten in Tuscany, I wondered. Wild boar with truffles? Saffron risotto? A salad of aragula and fresh thyme?

But the thought of actually eating any food, much less a great deal of it, was decidedly lacking in appeal. For a moment I was glad it was the last night of the trip. More self-indulgence would feel even more wrong than it did now. Although, it was also true that only

now was I beginning to relax, to enjoy traveling with Leon. Now would have been a good time to start a much longer trip.

"Here's your drinks," said the waitress as she placed half-liter size mugs in front of us.

"Cheers," said Leon, and we all raised our glasses.

12.

It was club soda in the mug. I had ordered tonic water. Without a moment's hesitation, I set the mug down and raised my hand to summon the waitress.

"Well, I don't know if we have any tonic water," she said crossly. "We ran out of it about half an hour ago."

Ten minutes passed while we ate potato skins. Finally another mug arrived, this one too containing club soda.

I motioned to the maitre'd, a young fellow not much older than the waitress. Daddy Ted glowered. He'd been glowering ever since I had started making a fuss.

But I didn't care. By now this was an old routine, me being assertive and Daddy Ted looking disapproving. In another minute he'd have reached his tolerance level again and be smiling.

"Yes ma'am, we're so sorry ma'am," said the maitre'd. A minute later a mug of tonic

water arrived.

"Well, Joe," said Daddy Ted, "are you going to your daughter's wedding now or not?"

I did recollect having overheard earlier some mention of the daughter, but Ted and Joe had hushed up as soon as they had realized I was listening.

"No, sir," said Joe feelingly. "No way am I going to if her mother's there and she says her mother will be there. Her mother--"

"She was a beautiful woman, Joe's wife," said Daddy Ted to us, as if Joe wasn't there.

"Mexican, half-blood. Beautiful, passionate woman, Juanita."

"Yup," said Joe. "But when I was in the Army, over there in Korea, she did a terrible thing to my children. I could forgive her what she did to me maybe but not to my children. She told my children their daddy wasn't ever coming home from the war and she had to find a new daddy for them. And then she brought these men, see, she would bring these men home and sleep with them. And the children, they didn't understand but they knew something wasn't right. Yep, they knew it."

He paused. None of us said anything.

"And when I come home from Korea, she disappeared. She knew what I would do to her if I found her. She was right, too."

Joe looked straight ahead of him into the past.

"And I guess she found one, that husband of hers she has now, he was one of them. He gave her a big house out in Texas, that's where she wants my daughter to have her wedding, but

if she does, I won't be there, no sir. He's just another fool, her husband.

"I don't care if my daughter does want me to go. I won't and that's the end of it."

Joe was looking straight at us now.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"Yup," said Joe. "She was no good, that was all."

12.

Next morning when we got to the airport, Ted and Joe wanted to park the car and come wait with me in the lounge. Some of the worst moments of my life have been saying goodbye to people in airports, however, so I thanked them for their kindness but insisted that I'd rather say good-bye at the car.

"Well," said Joe even more brusquely than usual, "that's up to Leon." Joe opened his door and, grunting a bit, swung his legs over the side. By the time I had gotten out and around to the back of the car where Leon was unloading the suitcases, Joe was standing by his door, blinking in the cool gray morning.

"We'll say goodbye here," said Leon firmly.

I looked at Joe. I wanted to say, Goodbye Joe, it's been nice traveling with you and getting to know you better. But I didn't get it out in time. As I opened my mouth, Joe said, to nobody in particular, "If Leon says so." He disappeared back into the car and shut the door.

"Aren't you glad now we went to Glacier Bay?" said Leon.

I could feel Leon squeeze me through my five layers of wool sweaters and jackets.

I nodded. Really, I was glad. Not only so we would have a common memory of his trip but for myself. To have been that close to wildness, to the ur-human state from which, billions of years ago, our ancestors had come. To be able to tell tales to my friends when I got back. Just to have done it.

Leon kissed me goodbye and I kissed him back. Before I realized I hadn't said goodbye to Daddy Ted, the car was speeding off into the airport traffic.

I was pretty sure Daddy Ted wouldn't mind that I hadn't said a formal goodbye, but it felt odd not to say goodbye to Joe. Only God knew when I would see him again. It made me angry that he couldn't accept that I was a full person in my own right, not an appendage of Leon. "If Leon says so"—with those four little words, Joe had wiped me off the map. I was angry as much for his having done that as because I had gotten to feel sorry for him, to like him, even.

I was still upset by the time I got to the ticket counter, but when they told me that my plane was overbooked and I might not get a seat, I simply refused to accept that this might happen. I waited in the lounge for my name to be called, confident that it would be.

And it was, it was, and for a window seat in the first class cabin, where the stewardess called me by my first name, and where a breakfast of shirred eggs with chicken livers, muffins and jam, real orange juice and coffee was followed some hours later by creamed chicken in pate shell, green salad, white wine, and four kinds of cake. It was like being in heaven. From

Anchorage to Seattle and Seattle to LA, I read John Muir's account of his voyage to Glacier Bay, an espionage novel set in Europe just after the Second World War, and slept a peaceful sleep.

It wasn't until the next plane, the midnight special out of LA via Cincinnati, wedged into a seat about the right size for a twelve-year-old child, that I began to think about Joe. An old-fashioned phrase came to mind: not to let the sun go down on your anger. Thirty-odd years of bitterness had hurt Joe a lot more than it had hurt his ex-wife. It seemed to me he should go to his daughter's wedding, if not speak to his wife. But I was equally sure that wasn't going to happen.

I could think of some obvious parallels to things in my own life, or at least some things I wouldn't want to be reminded of. But somewhere between LA and Cincinnati, I gave it up. I didn't really know Joe well enough to turn his life into a cautionary tale. I might be making wildly incorrect deductions from what he had said. Maybe his wife had been right to leave him; or maybe she had been as cruel and unjustified as he believed. There was no way for me to know. Yet it was a terrible thing, to live frozen inside one's own bitterness like that for the rest of his life.

The cold air was pouring down from the air vent above, and all the available blankets had already been taken by other passengers. I dozed fitfully.

As I slept, the plane continued to fly over the darkened vast Midwest. Space and time were changing. Neither with my will nor against it, I was being borne forward. Unforeseeable realms of experience lay ahead; unknown, uncharted varieties of wilderness.

