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## Learning to Fish and Learning My Place: Joy and Power Struggles in Alaska Seasonal Work

Mary E. Chiles

Missouri State University, maryellenchiles@gmail.com

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**LEARNING TO FISH AND LEARNING MY PLACE: JOY AND POWER  
STRUGGLES IN ALASKA SEASONAL WORK**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of  
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Mary Ellen Chiles

May 2018

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STRUGGLES IN ALASKA SEASONAL WORK**

English

Missouri State University, May 2018

Master of Arts

Mary Ellen Chiles

**ABSTRACT**

This collection of essays describes the experience of working remote lodges in Alaska. These examine power dynamics among owners, guests, and employees, particularly in situations of sexual harassment. It explores punishments for bringing these cases to light in seasonal, tenuous positions. The collection also includes instances of stark wilderness, including interactions with bears and fish. These moments of beauty found in isolated surroundings contrast with the dangers of remote living.

**KEYWORDS:** essays, sexual harassment, bears, fish, seasonal, wilderness, Alaska.

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Jen Murvin, MFA  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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Approved:

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Jen Murvin, MFA

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Linda Moser, PhD

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Marianthe Karanikas, PhD

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Julie Masterson, PhD: Dean, Graduate College

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“If we fail this time, it will be for lack of imagination.” - unknown

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to Dick and Ellen Chiles, who gave advice with the caveat: “You’re going to do what you damn well please, anyway.” I do because they did.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: LEARNING TO FISH AND LEARNING MY PLACE

In his book *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera discusses existential codes as a way to understand characters. It is possible to know what is important to characters based on particular “code words” that appear regularly within stories (Kundera 29). In focusing on my non-fiction works set in remote Alaska, I will examine the following code words: *beer, alcohol, sexual harassment, drunk, wine, bears, guides, light, and father*.

*Beer* is part of the existential code of the ten fishing guides at the lodge. Although they are all above the legal drinking age of 21, “Guides weren’t allowed more than two beers a night because they have to drive boats in the morning” (Chiles 37). Yet, guides respond to the rule by simply not marking down beers. I note this but ignore it: “I tried not to pay attention when the guides topped off their beer mugs without marking it down” (Chiles 28).

At the time, I responded passively to this violation because I wanted to be accepted into both groups. I wanted the owners to like me, but I felt the rules were unnecessary and demonstrated lack of trust in employees. Ironically, employees acted dishonestly – by drinking beyond the limit, and by not paying for beer – in response. Now I see this as a key insight into an environment in which employers struggled to assert themselves.

This brings to mind Paul Ferguson’s interview with John Gardner in *The Paris Review*. Gardner discusses creating characters that have to face “the old unanswerable

philosophical questions” (Ferguson et al. 4). His purpose is to write about imperfect people who grasp insights while facing universal problems. His goal is to write fiction, not philosophy, which is similar to Kundera’s reasoning that he deciphers existential codes “in the action, in the situations” (Kundera 30).

This notion is helpful when considering *alcohol* as part of the existential code of customer service. As I stated, “When a guest walked in, I slid my to-do list into my pocket. I poured him a beer and I asked him how long he’s been fishing. I asked him about his daughter” (Chiles 57). This is how I establish a welcoming environment in which guests feel like I am fully devoted to them. I have access to alcohol and this gives me a sort of power. I can reward some people with a pour, and punish others by withholding alcohol from them if they have too much. I can be like a parent offering acceptance or betrayal, and I can do this in front of the guest’s peers, contributing to a sense of belonging or a sense of isolation.

In considering my role in these interactions it is helpful to think about Gardner’s ideas about the role of writers: “The novelist pursues questions, and pursues them thoroughly. Not only when does it rain and when doesn’t it rain, but can we tolerate rain?” (Ferguson et al. 6).

Gardner’s questions, particularly given economic disparity between clients and employees, become particularly difficult to examine after incidents of *sexual harassment*. Perhaps not surprisingly, *drunk* is part of the existential code of living in this remote lodge. During my fourth summer a father and son visit the lodge. The father, Rob, is dying of cancer, so his son, Micah brings him to Alaska for a final trip. On their last evening, “I gave them plates of steak and lobster, and fill their glasses a little higher.

When I handed Micah another glass of wine, he reached into my back pocket. He kept his hand there for a few seconds” (Chiles 71-72).

Stunned, I tell the lodge co-owner, Jason, that I had been harassed. “They’re unreasonable,” he said (Chiles 72). They had also argued with their guide about fishing regulations. The next day I call the co-owner, Cory, to discuss the incident. Cory lives in Wisconsin and visits the lodge three times each summer.

“Was he drunk?” Cory asked. “Not that that’s an excuse,” he said. Then he said that if another man grabbed at me, I should call Cory and tell the guest to talk to him (Chiles 74). But he was in Madison, Wisconsin, which was 3,500 miles away.

In determining the meaning of drunk to each character, it is helpful to consider Kundera’s thoughts on existential codes. These reveal themselves through situations (Kundera 30). So, Micah might consider “drunk” to mean an opportunity to fulfill his desires without consequences. In this case, he wanted to harass an employee, and perhaps he needed permission from alcohol-induced inhibition. This is somewhat similar to Jason’s interpretation that being drunk reduces reasoning abilities and is an excuse for impolite behavior. Although Cory states that being drunk is not an excuse for harassment, his question indicates that it is. For me, drunk becomes a state of being in which people can act without consequence. This power dynamic contributes to the unseemly nature of this exchange.

Similarly, in Tikchik I faced another powerful man – my boss, Bud – who “by five ... smiled at me with glazed eyes, asking for half portions at dinner but more wine. One or two bottles every night, the bartender whispered to me once” (Chiles 90). The head guide, Brett, drunkenly tried to dance with me many nights. Even the mechanic, a

friend, “slurred his words by 5 p.m. every night. One of those nights Joel smiled, and waved a gun at me” (Chiles 103).

Regarding the harassment from guests, at the time I said nothing else out of concern of jeopardizing my tips or upsetting the owners. I was managing many lodge operations and knew Jason and Cory were under financial pressure. The Department of Fish and Game had just ended king salmon season three weeks early due to low numbers of fish. Kings, or Chinook salmon, typically range between 20-50 pounds and provide a tremendous challenge to fishermen due to their strength. Guests, including Micah and Rob, scheduled their trip to coincide with the season prior to the unexpected closure of the Susitna Drainage, which poured into the river by the property. For Jason and Cory, this river closure meant potential loss of profits. Guests might cancel trips on short notice, meaning there wasn't time to replace them with new guests. Although last-minute cancellations might normally incur financial penalty, given circumstances Jason and Cory might not charge these fees. Heightened stress can reduce compassion, so perhaps they were emotionally unable to respond to incidents of sexual harassment.

On the other hand, I did mention the gun incident to Bud and Brett. I also had several witnesses, including a guide who took the gun away. They never mentioned it again, and Joel apologized and said I could keep the gun. I declined, knowing he'd be drunk again. But so would Bud and Brett. I told Brett to leave me alone, but he wouldn't. I couldn't tell Bud his stares made me feel uncomfortable. After all, a guide had told me that when a former housekeeper had complained of harassment by a guide, Bud told her to find another job. Jason and Cory, though, generally responded to harassment from employees. For instance, one evening a guide, Matt, enters my shack and drunkenly says,

“I just want to sleep next to a woman” (Chiles 37). I tell Jason what happened. Jason does not say how he punished Matt, but only that they had spoken, and that “If he does it again I’ll burn him to the ground.” (Chiles 37). Matt, like Micah, considered being drunk as an excuse for irresponsible actions. In this case, however, Jason’s code as an employer meant that his employee Matt did not receive the same benefits as clients: drunken actions without consequence.

In examining existential codes, Kundera doesn’t stop at traditional definitions but sometimes “sharpen(s) the definition” of words to specify their meaning for his character. He gives the example of describing Tereza’s vertigo in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Strictly speaking vertigo is caused by an inner ear issue, which affects balance and causes dizziness. But Kundera creatively describes someone – in this case, Tereza – as “drunk with weakness (and) wishes to grow even weaker ...” (Kundera 31).

*Wine* was part of my existential code at the lodge because it reflected new responsibilities and my response to them. By my second year I help with housekeeping, but I also serve meals and “poured wine into glasses, stopping the pour with a twist of my wrist” (Chiles 28). Jason and Cory tried to create a hospitable environment in which guests felt comfortable sharing stories. Because the server represented the lodge, serving alcohol was a mark of trust. In fact, the owners created a position for me so I could return to the lodge with more responsibilities, including service. Because alcohol reduces inhibition, I often played a counseling role to guests who opened up emotionally due to drinking. Sometimes I drank with the guests to cope with these conversations. If I had time off I still drank, and some evenings I sat in a lawn chair by the river, watching for wildlife while drinking wine: “I couldn’t keep my Pinot Grigio stable on the gravel, so

I just held it in one hand” (Chiles 30).

Kundera includes details on Tereza’s physical appearance in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Though generally spare in description he describes features because her body is part of her existential code, inasmuch as she remains attached to mother and so on (Kundera 35). In the same way that Kundera described Tereza physically to illustrate her relationship with her mother, I examine the word *bear* to demonstrate my relationship to the physical environment of Alaska. I encountered brown bears, which are grizzlies that live within 100 miles of a salmon source. There were also black bears, which can be extremely aggressive. Still I wait to see them, and the bears “crash through the brush, and they wander along the gravel bar across the way, 100 feet from me” (Chiles 30). At night, after going to bed, “I hear more bears huffing at each other in the woods. They pop their jaws at each other and it sounds like muffled claps. I leave the window open” (Chiles 31). These passages illustrate the physical danger and isolation of the setting, a 45-minute float plane ride from Anchorage.

For Annie Dillard, however, isolation is a welcome component of country life. She discussed her joy in watching water flow in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. The creek is “the future,” providing newness with each ripple. “If you look up the creek ... your spirit fills, and you are saying, with an exulting rise of the lungs, ‘Here it comes!’” (Dillard 114). For her water is healing and restorative. I experienced this in Alaska, finding solace while sitting on the bank watching salmon turn somersaults. Yet, this same water can destroy the landscape it sustains. Dillard describes constant rainfall, a result of then-Hurricane Agnes, that causes the river to surge and flood. The creek “splashes transparently over of a jumble of rocks; the high creek obliterates everything in flat

opacity” (Dillard 171). The author considers its power and becomes “dizzy, drawn, mauled” (173). The same element that brings her lightness of heart can also destroy her with its force.

In the fishing world, rain brings mud and silt and hides the salmon and trout. Guests wander restlessly in wooden cabins, never letting the ice melt in their cocktails. One summer at Wilderness Place Lodge it rained for 32 days straight, blowing out the river and reducing customer satisfaction. And, when the snow fell in Bettles, Alaska, the clouds prevented guests from viewing the northern lights. Potentially this increased stress for everyone, including those who depended on clear skies for their livelihood, and those who depended on it for their happiness. Expectations, of course, contribute to contentment, and this requires perspective. Dillard emphasizes the role of vision in illustrating difficulties. She describes people who have lost their vision and then receive it again through surgery. She states, “(Newly sighted people) are pleased by the sensation of color ... but the rest of seeing is tormentingly difficult” (31). She mentions a doctor who assists patients in regaining sight, and the doctor bemoans “the rapid and complete loss of that striking and wonderful serenity which is characteristic only of those who have never yet seen” (32). The sighted become aware of their visible selves and become self-conscious. Yet others delight in the newness around them. This characterizes the joy and sorrow of seeing for the first time. But, it can be painful to see something as it is. Vision provided great joy in Alaska, where I spied objects like eagles sitting in trees and stripes lining the sides of trout. Dillard says, “The lover can see, and the knowledgeable” (21). I delighted in the ripples of the evening current, and the dew drops on the daisies. During the season, my attention span expanded as I spent more time studying my surroundings. It

helped that the sun lit the sky for 20 hours a day in June, fading 6 minutes earlier each day following the solstice.

But light can be unsettling, too. Dillard mentions that “when too much light falls on everything a special terror ensues,” giving the example of water mirroring the clouds, driving boatmen mad (25). I was warned about that very thing when I kayaked Tikchik Lake. I talked about viewing northern lights in Bettles: “I scanned the float pond as more green flashes strung together ... covering me as if (the lights) were a lampshade and I was the bulb” (Chiles 86). As the corona burst and rained down color, I was awestruck, even frightened. Light can also terrify when it exposes the darker side of human nature. Dillard speaks of naming the things she sees. I could see my boss, Bud’s, eyes dulled by constant alcohol, and his son’s bitterness. I could see Jason and Cory, longtime lodge owners and friends, hide sexual harassment for the sake of protecting financial gain. In effect I name this, pushing it into the light. In response, my job offer was dissolved.

Finally, I consider the word *father*. This collection contains a handful of stories about men fishing with their dads, or remembering it. Micah and his father fish before Rob dies of cancer. The Norwegians face the same situation, albeit with grace. A guest tells me he thinks of his dad “In the form of a picture of a snapped bootlace, or in a trout’s trembling heart. When that happens, the son plunges his hand into the river and pulls up a stone” (Chiles 96). He leaves it on his father’s grave. These are wealthy men brought to their knees by grief, seeking solace in fishing with the spirits of their fathers, or preparing to do so.

Many of these memories are lovely, but many are disturbing. It is difficult to consider the ugliness in a beautiful setting. It is only that it cannot be forgotten. In his

collection, *River Teeth*, David James Duncan compares memories to fallen trees. Over time, trees decompose, and our memories lose vitality, but there remain “cross-grained, pitch-hardened masses where long-lost branches once joined the tree’s trunk. ‘Knots,’ they’re called ... ‘River teeth is what we called them as kids’” (2). In writing a memoir I find gaps in my memories. Many stories began with a blog post or journal entry, and this brings more details into my consciousness. Some moments I might recall with the benefit of emotional distance, while others conjure up the same emotions as they did when the event occurred.

Duncan has this to say about it:

“Some parts of human past that resist the natural cycle: there are hard, cross grained whorls of memory that remain inexplicably lodged in us long after the straight-grained narrative material that housed them has washed away. Most of these whorls are not stories, exactly: more often they’re self-contained moments of shock or of inordinate empathy ...” (4)

These stories reflect my own “river teeth.” After 15 months living in these remote spots in Alaska, I have thousands of memories, many I could still access if triggered by a word or image. Why these? I wanted to contrast the beauty of the remote Alaska landscape and supportive community with the isolating experiences of sexual harassment and power struggles. “Those are our ‘river teeth; - the time-defying knots of experience that remain in us after most of our autobiographies are gone” (Duncan 4) These are the ones that stuck. Still, many of these experiences are joyous, while others disheartening. After experiencing harassment and watching alcohol abuse, it begs the question: why stay and put up with it all? Perhaps like so many others I excused the power dynamic for the sake of making money. I adapted to these unique environments by learning to act like those around me. I benefited from excusing poor behavior, and when I pointed it out

I was punished.

It raises questions about adaptation into environments where safety is a concern: financial and physical. Adaptation is a key component in one of Duncan's works from the same collection. In the story "Red Coats," he explores the coat as a code word. The narrator, a child, shops with his family at Christmas and holds onto his mother's "bright red winter coat" (Duncan 8). Then he sees another family with the same number of siblings – minus him – and tries to tell his mother. He looks up at the woman he's holding onto "and something's happened to her face" (Duncan 9).

The author uses the red coat to describe a mother, a pillar of strength for the child. The word "red" conjures up love, and connection, that parents might share with offspring. The coat symbolizes the mother's warmth in that relationship. Red can also symbolize safety, like a stop sign.

The child is shocked and frightened at losing hold of his mother. He sees his family and tries to run across a busy street to them. But this woman – this imposter – grabs him and saves him from the oncoming traffic. Immediately, the boy loves his "changed red-coated mother despite her sudden difference" (Duncan 10). The coat remains a symbol of continuity and security. He is suddenly convinced that he will happily join her family. In other words, he will adapt.

In *The Paris Review* interview, Gardner argues for a straightforward writing style that provides emotional resonance, and avoids excessive allegory or symbolism (Ferguson et al. 8). This is why I give straightforward details about *guides*, which is the final code word I examine. I offered context to lodge life by describing arriving on a river in an 8-seat float plane, meeting a fishing guide who "grabbed the rope and steadied the

plane so I could climb into an aluminum drift boat” (Chiles 17). I describe guides who fish with clients at 6 a.m., and “tied flies and clipped lines wrapped in logs” (Chiles 17). I included this to show the patience guides have with clients. They also assisted me: “At first, I didn’t know what a rainbow trout looked like. But the guides showed me how to catch one so I can see the colors for myself” (Chiles 18). This shows the guides’ professionalism with both colleagues and clients.

In conclusion, I chose these words because they represent the experience of living in a remote Alaska fishing lodge. Words like *bear* and *guides* conjure up images of beauty and strength, while *drunk* excuses *sexual harassment*. This brings to mind Gardner’s ideas about the goal of writing persuasive characters. “The book succeeds,” he says, “... if focal characters, in their fight for life, have won honestly or, if they lose, are tragic in their loss, not just tiresome or pitiful” (Ferguson et al. 6). This is why I include examples that indicate complexities in the characters. Micah harassed me while drinking to deal with the impending loss of his father. Jason stood up for me unless it concerned profits. I was aware of pressure caused by the river closure. Cory was concerned about harassment but offered unrealistic solutions. The guides showed kindness to clients but still took beer from the employers. The lights provided unsettling, but joyous experiences of natural wonder. Men showed great love to their fathers in knee-buckling grief. And, bears roamed because they were bears.

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## **WILDERNESS PLACE LODGE, 80 MILES NORTHWEST OF ANCHORAGE**

When we were 11, Sondra and I sang together in choir camp in Alexandria, Minnesota, 100 miles northwest of Minneapolis and St. Paul, or, as locals called it, “The Cities.” We performed in “Rescue in the Night.” It was the story of Daniel in the lions’ den. We were both part of the chorus. Choir camp was only one week each summer. The rest of the time it was just a camp for families. Mine stayed for six weeks. Sondra’s family visited for one week each year. Mostly, we all ran around on a bright green field chasing soccer balls before jumping into Lake Carlos. When we became teenagers, I scrubbed dishes after breakfast and dinner. She watched kids swim. In our 20s, we both moved to St. Paul, Minnesota.

Sondra told me she had met someone online, on eHarmony.com, she said. Jason grew up in Minnesota, in Ely, on the shores of Lake Superior near the Canadian Border. Now he lived in Anchorage, Alaska. I didn’t know why she was interested in someone so far away, but I didn’t mention it. He visited in St. Paul in March, and I met them for coffee. I told him I planned to teach English in Slovakia that fall. He said he owned a fishing lodge in Alaska. My dad bicycled from Missouri to Alaska in his 20s, but I never even thought about going. I didn’t know how I would. Jason took Sondra to spring training the next week. She didn’t really follow baseball.

\*\*\*

In June I met up with Sondra again. We lounged in plastic chairs at her cousin’s apartment complex in the suburbs. I’d just fought with my housemates about my job prospects. I didn’t think I had any. They suggested Jimmy John’s, a sandwich shop. I decided to move out and her cousin took me in for a few days. I swam laps. Jason called

Sondra. She snapped the sunscreen bottle shut. She grinned, ear still pressed against the phone. The housekeeper broke her ankle and he needed a replacement at his fishing lodge. Sondra said I'd be good for the job, that she'd known me a long time. I hadn't fished for ten years, when I caught a sunny on Table Rock Lake in southern Missouri.

## **RUST'S FLYING CIRCUS**

Six days later I flew into Anchorage. I threw my arms around Jason and he gamely hugged me back. He wore khaki pants and a grey shirt that said Wisconsin Stevens Point Baseball. He used to play there. He wore and a navy cap with the lodge name spelled out: Wilderness Place Lodge, est. 1986. I wore clothes that could dry quickly, a shirt and pants I'd picked up in a North Face store in Minneapolis two days before. I didn't bring any jeans because they took up too much space in my bag. He asked me if I was thirsty, and I said for something non-alcoholic. He said that was obvious. He had coffee and I had ginger tea. When he saw I wasn't holding a wallet, he sighed and paid for us both. I'd left it in my carryon in the car.

He drove a Subaru on a side road next to Ted Stevens Airport, named after the Alaska Senator who'd survived one plane crash and wouldn't survive the next one. We parked in the gravel driveway of Rust's Flying Service. Jason called it Rust's Flying Circus and said he brought the employees cups of coffee sometimes because theirs was no good.

## **VIRGIL, A PILOT**

I stepped on plastic floats and climbed up a metal ladder, ducking my head as I slid onto a brown leather seat. The red plane held 8, but it was just me, Jason, and the pilot, a guy with blondish-reddish hair named Virgil. I strapped on a seat belt, thin canvas bands, and slid an olive-green headset over my ears and told the pilot I was from Springfield, Missouri, the buckle of the Bible Belt. We soared to 2000 feet. I gazed out of the dusty glass windows, scanning the panes for handprints of terrified passengers. I noticed that the door opened with a tiny turn of a simple handle, which rested a few inches from my hand. Rivers coiled like snakes, dozens of cottonmouth cut into the ground below. Virgil pointed out a massive brown bird with a bright white head and yellow beak, a bird that swooped toward me at eye level. He pointed out a moose walking underneath our shadow. As we coasted onto the river, I braced myself for the impact of floats crashing into the icy water below. I closed my eyes.

## SCARY MARY

A guide smiled at me as he grabbed the rope and steadied the plane so I could climb into an aluminum drift boat. He wore a black and yellow life jacket and held my hand to help me sit on a middle metal seat. He handed me an orange lifejacket to place over my neck, like an ox hitched to a wagon. Noah, I learned.

I lived in a little shack made of plywood. The guides shared six other shacks next to mine. I lived with a chef: the only other woman on staff. At 5 a.m. the guides made coffee and ate scrambled eggs, hitting the water with clients by 6 to get the best spots on the river. They stood in the sun, wearing grey Simms waders and wading boots, olive green shirts. They tied flies and clipped lines wrapped in logs. But after dinner they stood in a circle by the shacks, spitting tobacco juice into the sand. They asked me what they should say to their impatient girlfriends back in Michigan. They called me Scary Mary. I wrote my first name on a piece of masking tape and stuck it to a plastic cup so I knew it was mine. Someone else wrote "Scary" on another piece of tape and added it. I never took it off.

## BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER WHY

When a client caught a fish, his guide bonked it with a rock, killing it. After returning to the lodge the guide filleted the salmon on the cutting board, teasing out the red flesh with the knife, then throwing the skeleton into the river where it floated to the sandy river floor. The guides called it the graveyard.

At first, I didn't know what a rainbow trout looked like. But the guides showed me how to catch one so I could see the colors for myself. All summer I cleaned six little cabins, carrying laundry baskets on my hip. A guide, Chris, loaned me a book about fly-fishing: fly rods are 10 feet and very light and strong. Spey rods are 16-foot-long and take two hands. Spin fishing is okay for beginners and catching king salmon. No one should use bait. Chris said I must read David James Duncan's book *The River Why* if I wanted to understand the guides. I asked to borrow it a few times but a guide was always reading it.

## ONE-CAST WONDER

I went out fishing with our two chefs and a guide. Rain poured down on the lodge all day, slowing to a trickle after dinner. We took the boat out to a spot where seagulls echoed. We sat on soaked seat cushions and watched our fishing lines fade into the water. The rain began to fall again.

I was sure that fishing was a spiritual exercise, like meditation, the benefits of which arrived eventually. I cast and waited for a salmon to bite onto my hook. Once it took, I had to crank the reel as fast as I could, then release the line so the fish didn't break away. I didn't understand. I tried again. A week later I joined all three chefs and a guide, Sam, who steered us around the rocks piled up in the water. Nearby rivers were closed to help the salmon population replenish. We could only keep one king per day, five for a month-long season. Sam guided us up the river, dropping the anchor near a gravel bar. We stepped into the water. I stomped around the rocks in boots two sizes too big. My wool socks were already damp. I wore waterproof waders over two rain jackets.

I crossed my arms and hunched my shoulders to keep warm. Sam added a lure and a pinch of lead weight to the line and handed it to me. I trudged into the water, too cold to wade past my ankles, even though my boots keep out the water and wind.

With a sigh, I flipped the metal bail and flung the line into the river. I felt the lead tugging slightly in the current as I tensed my shoulders.

The link jerked, and I cranked the reel. I saw a flash of a silver belly contorting in the air. I backpedaled into the gravel bar, tripping over my boots. I had to land this king. Within a minute, I did. I hit my limit, and my night was done after a single cast. I decided to keep my salmon and gave it to the chefs to grill. Sam grabbed a rock and slammed it

against the fish's skull. He tossed the king into the boat, where it twitched against the spine of the drift boat all the way home.

## **ED AND SHELIA**

I rush to cabin two: my favorite one of six. A couple of quick turns of the sheets on two queen beds and I'm done. No bathroom to scrub. These guests use the shower house attached to the laundry room and receive ten percent off for the trouble of walking along the river for 40 feet.

Jason hangs a South African flag from the support beam. Ed and Shelia are 80 years old and operate a bakery in Cape Town seven days a week. They visit the lodge every June so they can fish for kings with 16-foot spey rods. Ed will die from the effects of a blocked colon. He won't bother to go to the doctor because he's busy. Later this summer I'll spend two nights in Central Peninsula Hospital with the same issue. I'll be camping on the Kenai Peninsula during the mid-season break and the lodge chef I'm dating will make me go to the emergency room in nearby Soldotna. A guide, Matt, will ask for my leftover Vicodin.

## RIVER QUEEN

When it's cold I hobble on one foot and then the other and kick off my shoes outside the cabin door. I don't like to track in last night's rain. My shoelaces are worn and frayed after too many mornings trudging through puddles. I don't bother to tie the laces. I prefer wearing flip-flops to work.

My head feels foggy, so I stop and stare at the river. I grip a cloudy plastic spray bottle full of pale green cleaning chemicals mixed with water from a well. I watch the water sweep over the piles of rocks in the middle of the river, then curve into a channel that roars alongside the grassy bank. This grass shimmers with morning dew, and it chills my bare toes. In the river the spawning salmon splash upstream, flashes of silver sparkling in the sunlight. I put the bottle down.

## WIFFLE BALL

After I left the hospital I picked up a plastic yellow Wiffle bat. I carried it, tossing balls into the air and hitting them to the guides. I looked at the boats lined diagonally, at the aluminum sides catching the falling rays from the midnight sun. Above them, the clouds snuggled like marshmallows on a stick. I turned toward Guideville, the collection of cabins that make up home for the fishing guides and chefs, and me. Here guides take a rest from the river, from demanding clients who want kings, big kings in June, and now silvers and sockeyes to carry home in clear plastic bags. They also want pinks to cook along the shore by lunchtime. Here in Guideville, we take turns swinging the Wiffle bat, cracking white holey baseballs into the tree line. Sometimes we lose the ball amongst stinging nettles. Our hands burn as we wait in the gravel outfield. Lefties tend to knock the ball underneath the dull red tractor. My feet slide in my flip-flops as I kick the squishy mud. I am right-handed, and the guides are surprised by my bat speed.

## HENRY HUGGINS: AN IMITATION

A king salmon, you say? Underneath the boat? Haven't you ever read Henry Huggins? It's always been a dream of mine to catch a salmon with my bare hands like Henry did.

I stepped onto the boat, catching my balance when I climbed over two rows of seats and lay down on the third. The aluminum burned my stomach. I looked into the river. I saw it! It was indeed a king salmon, a couple of feet long, resting in the shadows. I watched the fish for a couple of minutes, and then scooted toward the edge of the boat. I reached my fingers into the cold water.

Blast! It was too far. I stood up. I emptied my pockets – tiny Moleskin notebook, tube of Burt's Bees chapstick and a bright red pen – and tossed them on the seat. I climbed out of the boat, and stepped onto the shore.

I gasped as I waded into the water. The sand sunk below my toes as I inched my way into the creek. It was freezing, but after a few minutes I couldn't feel a thing. I kept my eyes on the fish. There it was! I cracked my knuckles. I stepped toward it. Slow down, I thought. I dipped my hands into the water and reached forward. Six more inches ... five. Now four. Three. I held my breath. Reach. I closed my hands around it. The king wriggled its tail like a puppy and shot away. Surprised, I stood up and waited. Within minutes, the fish returned. Strange: fish typically swim away from captors. It's like it wanted a friend. I reached my hands through the water. I felt its tail! Again, the fish escaped to safety.

I clapped my hands in frustration. A motorboat sped by, ripping through the water and driving waves toward the shore. I shook the water off my hands and glared at the

driver's back. But my salmon paid no mind to either of us, still content to rest in the cool of the shade. I sighed. By now my sleeves dripped with creek water. The sun warmed my face, but I couldn't feel my legs. I reached toward my fish.

## **WILLY, A CONFEDERATE**

Willy wears an Atlanta Braves baseball cap most days. The day he spoke to me, he wore a navy-blue stocking cap with the familiar “A” gracing the front. The guides tell me he’s a convict, hiding from drug charges in the Alaska bush. Or murder. He doesn’t know my name yet. But he knows my face. He glanced at me as I rode by the other day. I knew him by the Confederate flag on his boat. At first Willy just looked at me. But then he opened his mouth and squawked like an eagle.

Today, I was told, he dressed as a Confederate soldier, wool overcoat over his gray uniform. He carried a sword. I asked the caretaker what that sound meant, the one Willy made the other day. He said it was an eagle mating call.

## WINDOW SEAT

My old pal Virgil waved at me. I reminded him of my name. I hadn't seen him for a couple of months. Back in June he flew a 10-passenger floatplane loaded down with food, supplies, a boss, and a brand-new housekeeper. I got used to this fishing lodge, but it was late August and the season was over. I was the only passenger on this flight back to Anchorage.

I took the co-pilot's seat and slid the headphones over my ears. "Can you see the mountain today?" I asked casually, adjusting the mouthpiece with my fingers.

"Yep, we saw it for about 30 minutes on the way in," he said. "We'll swing around and take a quick look before we head back to Anchorage," he told me. I searched the horizon, straining against my seatbelt to look out of the smudged window pane. Within 30 seconds I saw a white stone triangle hovering above the clouds. *Is that it?* I whispered under my breath. I leaned toward the window. It seemed smaller than I remembered, even close up.

He shifted the plane to the right. I gasped. Bright white mountains blanketed in the summer snow and embraced by clouds, peaks jutting into sky. You really have to sit in a co-pilot's seat in a 10-seat floatplane and press your head against a thick, dusty window. That way you can hear the propellers roar and cut through the wind. Or you could climb it.

That night I boarded a flight at midnight for Seattle. As we flew east, the stewardess took the mic: "On your left you can see aurora borealis." I asked a woman with a window seat if I could look. She gave me her seat for ten minutes, and a black cloth to block out the cabin light so I could see the green waves shimmering in the night.

## **“WELCOME HOME”**

Jason wanted me to work for him again the next year, and the next, and the next.

“Welcome home,” he liked to say when I arrived.

So I kept cleaning. I washed the dishes. I set tables. I poured wine into glasses, stopping the pour with a twist of my wrist. I tried not to pay attention when the guides topped off their beer mugs without marking it down. When I had a minute, I stood in the grass by the river, scanning the trees for bald eagles in branches. Sometimes, the salmon flipped in the air, turning somersaults in flashes of silver chrome. Then I carried baskets of sheets to cabins and switched out rolls of toilet paper, folding the edge into a triangle. I took photos while the towels dried and the guests fished. I edited my favorite photos and gave them to Jason, who gave them to Cory.

Cory owned the lodge, too. He lived in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife. He paid for the lodge’s steaks and pillows with his consulting job. He loved to draw. Each year he spent a weekend in a cabin in northern Wisconsin and sketched.

He met Jason in college in Fairbanks. They worked at the lodge as guides, and in school they wrote a business plan for a class project. Soon after the lodge owner’s wife had a stroke. Jason and Cory bought the lodge. Jason was 22. Cory was 21.

Cory visited the lodge for a few weeks each summer, usually scheduling his flights a day in advance. In Alaska, he called his Madison office constantly, and he wrote 60 emails each morning, even when he couldn’t send them. Our guests quickly used up our weekly allotment of bandwidth, so we often went without Internet for three or four days at a time.

Cory took photographs, and I did, too. We walked through the cabins and the

lodge, discussing what showed Alaska in the best light. We hung a close-up photograph of a dandelion above the bar. When Jason built the seventh cabin, Cory and I picked a photo of Denali I had taken. Jason made the frame. We placed the photo above the king-sized bed.

Cory once told me his favorite place to sit was where the river cut into the bank. He said no one could see him there, and that was necessary in a small place like this. I guess he never told the other staff, because I sat there every chance I got, and no one ever bothered me.

## BEAR WATCHING

When guests were happy, and I had time, I pulled a lawn chair to the water where the boats were kept. I couldn't keep my Pinot Grigio stable on the gravel, so I just held it in one hand. I held a Swisher Sweets cigarillo in the other. I bought them at Fireweed Lodge down the river: \$10 for a pack of 5. When I waited long enough bears crashed through the brush, and they wandered along the gravel bar across the way, 100 feet from me.

Grizzlies were called brown bears when they lived within 100 miles of a salmon source. They had a hump on their back. Black bears walked through, too. Sometimes they had cinnamon-colored or blonde fur. They squinted at me when they walked into the water, and sniffed.

Jason told me that I should play dead if a brown bear attacked me, but if a black bear hurt me, I better fight back.

“Once they start, they don't stop,” he said.

Once, the caretaker, whose name was Gary and who grew a beard like ZZ Top, told me he met a woman in the spring in the 1980s. Then she had a bear encounter.

“When I saw her again, she didn't have any arms,” he said.

## HOW MUCH IS THAT BEAR IN THE WINDOW

A guide swore he saw something in the burn pit. I heard a rustle behind my cabin: heavy feet – paws – trampling swaths of overgrown ferns along the slough trail. I stomped on my Swisher. The guide crept toward the boats, then he ran back.

“There’s a big grizzly at the fish cleaning table!” he screamed.

“Why are you running?” I asked.

“I wanted to tell you!” he said.

I followed him to the water. The brown bear had scurried into the woods. But three black bears - a sow and two tiny cubs - walked along the sandbar, just across the narrow river. The twins stood on their hind legs, scuffling. The sow smacked one across the head with the back of her paw. After they wandered into the brush, I went back to bed. It wasn’t long before I heard more bears huffing at each other in the woods. They popped their jaws at each other and it sounded like muffled claps. I left the window open.

## **MATT, A GUIDE**

Matt was blonde with blue eyes, and he had the smoothest cast of the guides. They all said so. He lived in Michigan and hadn't finished college because his father gambled away his savings. Sometimes we would take a boat into the still water of the slough, and we'd sit and talk. He had a tobacco holder that looked exactly like a cigarette, but metal, and filled with pot. Shortly after we met he got angry at me for throwing out the porno magazines the German guests had left. I'd found the magazines in the loft over my bed and burned them.

## THE POLYGAMIST

The first guests I met were Conor and Paul, and Jim. Conor was 13 and spent most of his days sleeping in his cabin, drinking Coke and watching DVDs. He always requested Kraft macaroni and cheese at the dinner table, but the others ate steak and lobster. He wore band shirts like AC/DC and Kiss: bands his dad had taken him to see in LA. Paul was 50 and owned a business there and called his wife - Conor's mom - every night.

When I met Jim he was 60 or so. He was 6-1, with graying temples and dark brown hair. Jim managed estates in Los Angeles. He once described Britney Spears as a very sweet girl. Very Southern. Too nice. They had met in a hotel bar. He didn't say why. His guide, Matt, told me that Jim had a couple of wives, a couple of households, a couple of bank accounts. Matt smiled sweetly, but smoked pot just about every day so I wasn't sure.

"He's open about it," Matt said.

I sat on the couch one morning, resting my heels on a coffee table and reading *Outside* magazine. Jim would leave this morning. I would change his sheets, and everyone else's, in the next hour. He walked into the lodge.

"So, I understand you're a polygamist," I said.

"Oh, yeah," he answered, and settled into a chair. "Well, I was. It wasn't a ménage a trois or anything."

"I think it makes sense to fall in love with two people at once," I told him. "I mean, it happens." I'd read about it.

"Well, my first wife is very quiet and reserved," he told me. "She's a real

homebody.”

“Oh, whatever makes her happy,” I said.

“But it doesn’t make me happy! I like to travel, and my second wife is more outgoing, more adventurous. It works really well.”

I wondered aloud how they met. He smiled and shrugged. He called her Wife Number 2.

“She was my dance partner for many years, so we were friends, and it evolved naturally,” he said. “My wife’s very open.”

But after a while his second wife struggled with the arrangement. She wanted more time with her husband of six years. He recently filed for divorce from Wife Number 2, forming quotation marks with his fingers at the word “divorce.” He didn’t explain the legalities, and I didn’t ask. Like any recent divorcee, he told me he wouldn’t marry again. Besides, Jim and his first wife celebrated their 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. I asked what he would think if either wife had married a second man. He tilted his head to the right and folded his arms.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve never thought about it until just now.”

## **JIM, A GUEST**

I remember the last time I saw Jim, because his eyebrows had gone white and his eyes looked sad when he smiled. He visited with Paul and Conor again. The year before Jim had told me he was a little in love with me, but that I was too young for him. I was 26 then. He told me he hoped I'd find someone. I asked him how his year went. He told me his nephew had disappeared that spring while hiking in the mountains in Southern California.

“I was walking there, in the San Bernardino mountains. We used to go hiking there. I just knew my nephew was out there. ‘Anthony! Anthony!’ I’d say. Then I found his body. He’d passed away. But I just talked to him like he was still there. ‘Hi Anthony,’ I said.”

“I haven’t even told Paul that,” he said softly.

## TANGLED UP AND BLUE

I rocked back and forth in my wading boots, kicking up drops of cold river water. And I threaded a dry fly through tiny loops of line. Fishing wasn't fun. Catching might have been. Instead, I stepped on gray rocks encircled with white lines, pushing them further into the sand. I stared at bright green ferns growing along the edge of the water. I rolled the fly between my finger and my thumb. I pricked the edge of my nail with the tiny hook. The wind skidded across the top of the river. I held the line in my teeth. I suppose I could have cut the line with my molars. But I spent 20 minutes untying it instead. I didn't finish. I had to get back to the lodge for dinner. So, I hiked along the muddy river, cutting through brush on matted, grassy paths. My waders clung to me as I walked through pools, water reaching my waist. Back at the lodge, I asked a guide, Noah, to help.

“I never untangle line,” he said, and he reached into his pocket for tiny clippers.

## HARASSMENT: A COLLEAGUE

Matt knocked on my door carrying cans of Miller Lite as an offering. Guides weren't allowed more than two beers a night because they had to drive boats in the morning. He walked toward my twin bed, just a thin mattress on a plywood frame.

"I just want to sleep next to a woman," he said.

"Get out," I shouted. I said it until he did.

In the morning, he knocked on my door and mumbled that he was sorry. But after breakfast, when he was gone, I looked for Jason and told him to walk outside with me. When I spoke my voice cracked, and I began to cry.

"What is it?" he said, tilting his head.

I choked on my words, angry with myself for crying when it was only a guide. A few hours later Jason walked up to me and said I didn't need to worry. He'd talked to Matt.

"If he does it again, I'll burn him to the ground," he said.

I forgave Matt. I wanted to get along with everyone on our little piece of land. He took me fishing sometimes. Jason never mentioned the incident, and neither did I.

## DENALI

We had a 5-day break after king salmon season ended. I had heard of Denali, a mountain 20,310 feet tall and surrounded by six million acres of wilderness. So, I flew to Anchorage in a 10-seat Otter floatplane operated by Rust's Flying Service. The pilot landed at Lake Hood and I took a shuttle to downtown. Carrying a backpack full of food and clothing, I walked to the city museum and I boarded the Park Connection bus to the national park.

The bus driver asked if we wanted facts, or a quiet ride. The silent types didn't speak up, naturally, so he noted landmarks: There was Sarah Palin's lake house, and road honoring 1994 Olympian skier Tommy Moe. Once a pickup truck swerved into our lane, slowing us down. He vroomed away and flipped us off. "That's Wasilla," the bus driver said.

If we stalled in the area, we could get a lift from Happy Hooker Towing. We passed Astro turf fields at middle schools – paid for by oil money – and fences that kept moose off the highway. As we headed north I saw a gleaming white pyramid on the horizon. A woman grabbed her camera and pressed it against the cloudy, smudged windowpane. She wiped away tears.

We stopped for a minute at the Talkeetna Lodge, where climbers often stay before they attempt to climb the mountain. We stood on the deck, watching the mountain glistening. I didn't expect to see it again, but it was okay. I heard that 70% of the people who visit the park never see the mountain because it's clouded over. They might see the base if they're lucky.

I stayed at Denali Mountain Morning Hostel, sharing a dorm room with five

people. I woke up to snores and camped out in the hallway next to the bathroom, shivering under a sleeping bag. I smiled at people when they stepped over me.

The next day I took a shuttle to the park. After watching a video on bear safety – stay 300 yards from them – I boarded a green park bus for the 85-mile journey to Wonder Lake campground. It was the closest campground to the mountain, 26 miles, and provided 28 spots to pitch a tent.

On the way, the driver stopped occasionally for hikers who had obtained permits to hike in the backcountry. Hikers can't reserve permits in advance, and must show up at the park headquarters to apply for them. They meet with a ranger to discuss the itinerary and fill out emergency forms.

The park bus stopped at Eielson, 66 miles into the park, and I walked around for 45 minutes, scanning the horizon for peaks of the Alaska Range. 19 miles later, we stopped at Wonder Lake. I departed the bus and pitched my tent. At the lodge, a guide, whom we called Sasquatch because of his long hair and boisterous manner, had shown me how to set it up. He refused to help when I struggled with ropes and poles, saying I needed to learn. He was spending the break fishing on the Kenai Peninsula in south central Alaska. Sasquatch would meet a girl that week, and after returning to the lodge he would announce that she carried his child. She was the one, he knew, and this proved it. Sasquatch would call his dad and tell him he would be a grandfather. He decided he would give up guiding so he could provide more stability. But the woman would have an abortion. I slammed the stakes into the ground with a flat rock and wiped the dust off my hands.

I'd brought Ramen noodles, bread, peanut butter, granola bars, and trail mix to the

campground. I packed them, along with my toothpaste and deodorant, in a bag and placed it in the bear-proof food lockers. There was potable water at the campground, which is safe to drink without boiling, and bathrooms.

I was fixing a peanut butter sandwich near the food lockers when a stranger approached me and told me my forehead was flat. He said it meant I was analytical.

“Are you skilled in math, science, art, or music?” he asked.

“Well, I guess art out of those,” I said.

“But was math easy for you?” he asked.

“I could do it, but I’d get anxious and that made it harder,” I told him.

A stranger was surmising my life story from the tilt of my skull, and I was letting him.

But I had to eat dinner near the lockers so I wouldn’t attract bears prone to sniffing around tents.

The man asked me if I had a stove, which I didn’t, even though I brought dry noodles. He walked away, but returned with two blue cups and a bowl. “Do you prefer chocolate or coffee?” he asked. Chocolate. I sat down at a table with him, his girlfriend, and a couple from New Jersey via Eastern Europe. Their daughter, who was 5, who tossed her mosquito net aside to drink tea. I drank chocolate blended with powdered milk and water. The adults told me to save 10 percent of my income and travel now. The Jersey couple had recently spent 18 months moving around the world with their daughter. “Our friends said we were crazy,” one said, “but when we returned no one had gotten ahead.”

The first stranger – who asked about my forehead – finally introduced himself as

Robert Burns. I mentioned the poet but he didn't recognize the name. This Burns said he worked at a hot air balloon company and wanted to start a life coaching business. He handed me a business card printed on recycled paper. I told him I needed a nap. So, I slept in my tent, worrying about bears until my stomach hurt. I heard other campers chatting about neighbors. "I haven't seen her leave," someone said.

Still, after a while I didn't feel like lounging in my tent, edges billowing up from the wind. I stood outside and watched the rain trickle down the mountains. The same thing happened the next day, but a few times I wandered on trails, anxiously scanning the mud for bear prints.

I talked to a photographer wearing a watch measuring barometric pressure, and he told me the skies wouldn't clear until the following afternoon. I was planning to depart by mid-morning and couldn't stay longer. At 10 p.m. or so, and still light in July, the clouds had somewhere else to go. So did I. "Bears are out now," I heard. "Moose, too." Who spoke? "Do it now!" I didn't know either voice.

But I'd heard about a reflection pond, and I hurried up the road, alone, glancing back at the pink and blue clouds hanging from sharp peaks. I pierced the wind with whistles so I wouldn't upset bears. I walked a mile and a half, but the sun fell below the horizon. The clouds can shroud the mountain so quickly.

I didn't see a soul, and as dusk fell, I realized why the first voice urged me. A hush fell over the valley. There was no one. No one could scare bears and moose besides me. I hurried back down the hill, shoes slapping the dirt and whistling through the wind. There was only a mountain to watch over me.

I woke up for no reason and found my watch in the corner of my tent, lodged

under crumbled leaves. 1:47 a.m. I hoped the clouds might finally slide away during the night. I pulled on the zipper of the orange and yellow walls.

I stepped outside, scraping my bare feet in the dirt. Every peak of the Alaska Range was exposed: rock and snow, white against a dark blue sky. And there was me.

I carried my sleeping bag and my shoes and I sat on a picnic table by the bear-proof food lockers. The wind rushed through my hair, and mosquitoes bit me over and over again. I tried to scan the whole horizon so I wouldn't tire of the giant mountain in the middle, but I kept looking at Denali.

I stayed on the picnic table, wrapped in a sleeping bag, for an hour. And another one. And another one. I stretched out my legs as the sky lightened to pale blue. I didn't want to look at orange and yellow walls when I could look at this. But after three hours, I went back to bed, and I set my alarm for 6:30.

The next day I woke up and saw the mountain was still out, so I hiked with strangers to look again. Wonder Lake stretched beneath us. My camera battery was dying but I managed to get a photo. Happy, I walked back to the campground and packed up my tent. As I walked to the bus stop, Robert Burns and his girlfriend accompanied me. They told me humans need a certain number of hugs to survive, but to become a genius you need 40 hugs each day.

His girlfriend hugged me twice.

"You can cheat," Burns said, pulling me toward him and pumping his body against mine.

He counted aloud to 38.

The bus pulled up. I hurried up the steps and settled in for the 85-mile trip back to

the park headquarters. We stopped to pick up a hiker named Scotty, whose bear safety hiking bells jingled as he walked down the aisle to find a seat.

After arriving at the headquarters, I became faint, and stumbled to the Denali Visitor Center nearby. After underestimating caloric needs for spending two nights in the park, I scarfed down a ham and cheese panini and a Coke. Then I took the shuttle back to the Denali Mountain Morning Hostel. But this time, instead of contending with snoring strangers in a dorm room, I selected a wall tent by the river.

## A GUINNESS WITH HIS DAUGHTER

Back at the lodge I welcomed guests fishing for four kinds of salmon: sockeye, silvers, pinks, and chums. They could also hook northern pike in a nearby lake, or grayling and rainbow trout in the streams.

An old Brit visited this week. He lived partway between Liverpool and Manchester but didn't root for either football club. I poured him a cup of coffee because he said his shoulders hurt. "Hauling kings?" I asked.

"I'm 72, and a few years ago I hurt my shoulder racing a 16-year-old footballer. I did all right until I fell," he said.

He grinned when he mentioned his daughter, and his favorite pub to spend a winter afternoon drinking Guinness. But his daughter can't go in and thinks they should allow women, and her father agrees. "I think it's terrible," he said. I said things change when women visit this lodge. People sit up straight and don't curse loudly. The man thought others might behave better at his pub if women were allowed. But they weren't.

"The Irish curse a lot, even though they're Catholics," he said. "I think they rebel. Of course, there are a lot of problems with the church in Ireland."

"My experience has been that a lot of religious leaders are compassionate and sincere, and some are just hiding out," I said. "But you can't always tell at first."

"But the Church of England allows women to preach now, and they seem to really care," he said.

"Women can be compassionate in different ways," I told him.

"Yes, that's it," he said.

Then I hugged him goodbye because his boat was leaving.

## BONES

A collection of plywood shacks makes up Guideville, where fishing guides, chefs, and I spend summers. Just beyond it lies a trail that leads to a slough – backwater from the Yentna River, 80 miles northwest of Anchorage. I took the trail, stepping around puddles. I wouldn't guess that it would rain for 32 days straight. Thanks to that, the lime green ferns would reach over my head in August but in June they only reached my knees. I stayed on the trail but someone cut paths into the woods, trampling ferns and leaving paw prints in the mud. Last year the guides saw black bears at the edge of this trail, the section near the cabins. I never thought I'd see them during the day. When I told the caretaker, Gary, that, he laughed.

The trail curved for a quarter mile before arriving at the water. I began to hear voices before that. My feet sank into the wet sand and I saw a skeleton of a fish. It was a foot long, cleaned of muscle and fat. Maybe the killer was a 40-pound beaver. I saw them here all the time. A few inches away, a stretch of intestines sprawled in the sand. A couple of fishermen chatted from their boats. They couldn't see me for the trees.

“You seen some bears lately?”

“Not many.”

I looked down at the bones, perfectly ordered and pale white. Beavers. 40 pounds. Or something else. And I hurried back down the trail to home: a collection of plywood shacks.

## FIRST SALMON ON A FLY

The hot water ran out while I washed dishes, so I packed coolers full of chips and drinks. The guides would add turkey and ham sandwiches in the morning, after scarfing down eggs and chugging coffee at 5 a.m. One guide, Casey – 6-4 with dirty-blonde hair and a degree in wildlife and fisheries from Michigan State – helped with dishes once the water came back. Finally done an hour later than I hoped, I collapsed on the lodge couch, tapping my stainless steel water bottle. I dropped the bottle on the gravel bars sometimes, leaving craters on the sides. “You want to go fishing?” Casey asked. “No waders.” Usually I slipped Gore-Tex overalls over layers of clothes, and slid moon boots on my feet.

It had been raining for ten days straight but stopped for a little while as we cast. Casey parked the boat near a tree that resembled an upside-down rake. A bald eagle watched us from above. I’ve been practicing fly-fishing this summer, casting loops of green line in figure eights in the air while standing on the gravel between shacks in Guideville.

“Open your shoulder up more,” Casey said. I looked at my arm and caught the eagle’s eye as he unfolded his right wing. Three river otters hurried down the current as if glued together, hissing and baring their tiny white teeth.

Fly rods only weigh a few ounces, so you know when a fish is on. But you can’t just reel it in. You have to let it run until it tires out. I cast the line into the water, and stripped the line absentmindedly. Then, I felt a tug, and I landed a pink salmon. My first salmon on a fly rod. But Jason and the guides don’t like eating pinks unless they can cook them over a fire on a gravel bar. I let my first salmon go.

## A GUIDE TO ATTRACTING BEARS

The rain returned one night and my shirt stuck to my forearms. The fog hugged the wooden cabins and the empty Adirondack chairs along the river. I walked along the water and cut toward Guideville.

I wanted to see bears. Up close. So, Casey walked with me toward the river's edge, where guides parked boats and flung the anchors into the grass. I'd seen a brown bear and two cubs at the lodge down the river. Every couple of days two guides grabbed white 5-gallon buckets full of potatoes and orange peels and flung them into a boat. They sped through the channels of Lake Creek and to the Yentna River, where the air temperature dropped 10 degrees. They shook out the buckets and drove off, shrieking seagulls giving chase before dive-bombing for scraps bobbing in the water. This kept bears off the property, for the most part.

Our neighbors, King Point Lodge, kept their scraps in the same kinds of buckets. But they dumped their breadcrumbs and chicken bones in front of their main building. Their guests liked to see bears up close. I saw a mother and two cubs toddling in front of camera lenses. But then the bears sprinted through the ferns along the river.

I'd seen many tracks in the mud each morning, and dusty paw prints on the outdoor food pantry. A hole ripped out of the trash container. Jason nailed a piece of plywood on the pantry, adding dozens of nails with the sharp side pointed out.

Casey and I watched the water. I bet those bears are just waiting in the bushes, I thought to myself. I gazed at the boats, and yawned. Casey grabbed my arm, and pointed.

We stared at the cleaning table.

A brown bear stood on her hind legs and stared back.

Two cubs, mostly grown, stood by her. Watching us. We were all speechless.

“Hey, get outta here!” Casey finally yelled.

They ran into the bushes. We ran into our plywood shacks.

The next morning, I walked ten feet, knelt down, and traced my fingers around tracks, where claws dragged through the mud.

## THE NEW YORKER

I had a bit of time to rest on Friday afternoons. No chasing pink feathers with the corners of a broom, materials dropped by guides tying flies. I liked to admire the floor for a minute while it was clean, before someone grabbed the doorframe to steady himself, and slipped muddy plastic covers over wading boots. I gathered mugs from the bar and glanced at the coffee table in the middle of the room. Once a week or so we got a copy of the *Anchorage Daily News*, pages strewn over the table and three days old, a parting gift a guest picked up at his hotel lobby. Jason brought *Sports Illustrated* back with the mail, but I'd read each page two or three times. I hadn't finished *Salmon Trout Steelheader; Fly Rod & Reel, or Fly Fisherman*. I couldn't look into the eyes of men grinning and pointing dead salmon into the camera lens, holding the fish in front of them so the catch looked more impressive at first glance.

I skimmed *Sports Afield*, a journal of big-game hunting that recently featured a cover story on tramping through the fields of the "Dark Continent." I kept a sticker of the president on the top of my laptop: a half-Kenyan man who wanted to raise taxes on the kind of people who could spend a week in Alaska and take a cruise afterward. No one said a word but I worried they took it out of my tip. Then I saw a copy of the *New Yorker*. I ran toward my beloved, but the subscriber's name was gone. It must have been an angel. I carried the magazine to my shack, settling into a green plastic chair outside my screen door. I read a story about a politician, Mike Huckabee, who confused Christians with the Republican party. He ran for a while, both in distance and for the governor's mansion, and because I neither jogged nor joined the school board I couldn't say much. He even kind of liked the poor. I carried groceries to peoples' cars once a year,

at Christmas, if I didn't oversleep. I paid no attention to the shouts of guides chopping wood, and carefully read each word again and again. The generator hummed, and a yellow Labrador retriever barked.

## OEDIFISH COMPLEX

I climbed on a boulder and cast the fly into the river as it flowed by. My feet fell asleep in my boots. I watched the line drift. I felt a tug. I reeled for a few seconds, bringing the catch closer, and a silver fish with a red stripe flung his body toward my hand. I stared at the fish, which was perhaps 6 inches long. He watched me out of one eye, staring at my blurry figure. His other eye was punctured. I asked a friend to draw the hook out carefully, to leave the eye in its socket. But the fish longed for home, and writhed out of my fingertips, leaving an eyeball clinging to the hook.

I brushed my hand into the water, washing off scales. I wanted to say I hadn't meant to hurt it, but only to catch it and let it go. I did release it, but not all at once. I sensed a reassuring voice say it was ok, that these things happen. I followed the rule of catch and release every time I hooked a trout. The guides didn't let the fish leave the water when we took photos. I picked up this little trout because I'd punctured his eye, blinding him and weakening him for life. My Oedifish complex.

## TO KILL, SELECT SCREWDRIVER

A guide, Adam, with a penchant for sour candy and a national championship ring in lacrosse, drove the boat upriver, water edged by trees and ferns, and punctuated by sandbars.

“Can we see Denali?” I asked, since the clouds had shifted. Adam kept driving for another twenty minutes.

“Can you see it?” he asked, and pointed. The top of the mountain shimmered.

We headed back down the river and found a spot. We saw a couple of guys haul in a king nearby and figured they were done, and we could take their spot. They hit their daily limit but kept hauling in fish. Adam pulled up to a gravel bar and tossed the anchor. I braced myself in hip-deep water, waders clinging to my legs. I imagined a king darting past me, a mass with rows of teeth, roaring up the current.

I stumbled backward to ankle-deep water, muscles clenching as I walked toward a gravel bar where the boat was parked. When I cast I snagged my line on trees and bushes. Adam hooked a salmon. I threw my rod onto the gravel and grabbed a net from the boat, splashing through the river water toward Adam.

“I’ve never netted a fish before,” I yelled, squinting at the river for flashes of silver. The fisherman ran toward us.

“You want me to get my net,” the fisherman asked, in a thick German accent.

“Yes!” I yelled.

The fisherman scooped the fish with his net. I stood back.

“You have a bonker?” he asked.

“It’s in the boat,” Adam said.

I started to wade, but the boat was now 50 yards up river.

“No, no!” the fisherman told us, and he grabbed a set of pliers from his waders.

I stumbled in my boots and scanned the trees for bald eagles, suddenly nauseous. But after we returned to the lodge, I hauled my waders back to the tackle shop. And I couldn't wait to find another king.

## THE DEATH OF A SENATOR

We only got NPR on the radio, and the journalists focused on the famous person who died in the float plane crash. The guy with the Anchorage airport named after him. Senator Ted Stevens. They were going to a fishing camp like ours, but near Dillingham, a little town in Bristol Bay I'd never heard of. But a pilot we knew, Virgil, lost his wife and stepdaughter in the crash. 16 years old. Honor student. Bad weather. I was concerned about Virgil, who flew me a little closer to Denali so I could see the peak after I left the lodge last year.

“He may never fly again,” Jason said.

After I flew in after the season ended with some pilot I didn't know. I walked up to the desk of Rust's Flying Service. I asked how Virgil was. No one had seen him. No one had heard from him. He wouldn't return phone calls. Willis managed Rust's and didn't know where Virgil was now. “Can you give him this?” I asked. I handed Willis a pale white business envelope.

I had torn a piece of paper out of a college ruled notebook. I am sorry. Thank you for flying me to the mountain. You have a light in you. Please remember it. I am thinking of you.

He never wrote back.

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A year later I walked into the waiting room at Rust's. Virgil smiled, and he threw his arms around me. He said he spent his summers in Alaska and his winters in Hawaii. He used the pronoun “we.” He was flying again.

## RAINBOW TROUT

The river cleared up and dropped along the banks. I only had one salmon to bring home, a silver fillet gutted and wrapped in swaddling plastic. But then one guide gave me one, and another gave me two more fillets. So, Adam and I fished for rainbow trout instead, beautiful silver fish stamped with red and yellow stripes and under orders to release back into the river.

“Grab a 6-weight, or 7,” Adam told me, because I'm still new to fly fishing.

The sun lit up the water, and pink salmon hovered in front of my feet. They're bloated and dying along the shore, eyes gouged out by ferocious seagulls. It's August, and we will all be leaving in a couple of weeks.

I cast my line into the river and felt a fish grab the fly. I thought it was a silver salmon, maybe 12 or 15 pounds. Then the fish catapulted above the water, glittering in the sun. A giant salmon now that kings have left the area, a couple of feet long when contorting. Then I saw the bright red stripe running along its side.

I didn't understand. I drew the reel toward my side, keeping tension on the line, hoping the fish wouldn't pop off the hook. I reeled, then let it swim, then reeled again, guiding the fish toward the shore. Adam grabbed the net.

I grabbed the green line with my left hand. That little hook.

“Oh no!” Adam said, as the line lightened in my hands.

I knelt in the river, water pulling at my waders and pebbles under my boots. I covered my face.

“You all right?” he asked.

I didn't speak.

“Scary! That's the biggest rainbow I've ever seen!” he yelled.

I knew. I'd seen one just like it mounted on the wall of the lodge.

## HOW TO MANAGE

My fourth year I got my own 6-weight fly rod for a good price because the guide manager used his pro deal and bought it for me. But I didn't have much time to fish anymore. I didn't live in a plywood shack next to everyone else. I lived in a room above the lodge, above the bar. That way I could be ready to answer the phone and send emails. Our guests wouldn't worry about a thing. When Jason went to Anchorage, I managed the lodge. He wouldn't say it. But he'd mention it in emails when he was gone.

When a guest walked in, I slid my to-do list into my pocket. I poured him a beer and I asked him how long he'd been fishing. I asked him about his daughter. He told me he worked in oil because his father had, and he didn't know what else to do. He said it paid for tuition and football helmets, dance lessons and fishing trips. He was going through a divorce.

## CHOLULA

An old man stopped by every afternoon to drink coffee. Every day for a week. He wasn't catching fish like he wanted to. He sat in a lawn chair in the middle of the boat. His friend did the same. They woke up to kings lurching on the lines. I snuck through the kitchen to stack plates and pick up boxes of wine. Mindful of numbers and comment cards, and tips. I can sit behind the bar and watch the sun through the windows, and see crumpled paper towels and bottles of Windex. One man told me what life was for.

"You can save me some time," I joked, when he said he knew.

"You don't know how much you love someone until you lose them," he said quietly.

38 years of marriage and he didn't know it until she died.

"But if you do find someone again, it's different. You appreciate it."

He's getting married again next month. She'll join him in Arizona. He worried about "wetbacks," as he called them, invading his hunting grounds. He asked his guide, Adam, how much a tag might cost. Because after Mexicans attacked him in a bar in his 20s, he said he started killing every wetback he saw. But he grabbed his neighbor's hands and thanked God for his food. He asked for Cholula hot sauce three times a day. Made in Mexico.

## ROE NIGHT

Shawna, a rafting guide, held a bowl of roe. She was in her late 30s, a former kickboxer with an abusive first marriage behind her. She met her boyfriend, an Australian named Scotty, while guiding in Mongolia. She hugged Jason and Cory when she met them, but she shook my hand.

“I should get rid of this,” she said, staring at fluorescent pink eggs resembling tapioca pudding.

Five Japanese guests appeared in the kitchen at once. I sat at an oak table, writing and drinking Swiss Miss chocolate and cinnamon mixed into hot water. They stirred the eggs in a silver bowl filled with cool water. I stepped into the kitchen. One guest removed the skin from tiny, pink eggs. Two guests from Quebec leaned against counters, holding pints of IPA.

One Japanese guest showed Shawna how to roll sushi so it resembled roses. Another put the eggs in hot water: “for short time,” they said, before rinsing them in a colander. I helped pull specks of blood off the roe. A few guides, and a guest from Brooklyn, peered through the bar window. The Japanese guests added the eggs to a bowl of ice and water. One tipped the bowl over the sink. His friend removed the ice, a cube at a time. They doused the roe with Kikkoman soy sauce.

“Let it soak for 2 or 3 hours,” they explained.

But it was midnight, so they poured a teaspoonful into my hands. I split the eggs with my teeth. They poured roe over rice, and distributed bowls to all. They plated sushi. And they poured instant miso mixes into white coffee mugs. “10 kinds,” they said, and passed them around.

## **SALES**

Cory asked me to keep a blog for the website. I talked about the blooming fireweed and the sockeye run. I called the rain “expected” for Alaska, and when the fish weren’t biting I talked about brown bears padding through the ferns. The cottonwood blossoms floated through the air, but I never mentioned the allergies they inspired. I gave Cory more photographs for advertising. One was black and white. It was a guide netting a king salmon. He posted it on the employment opportunities page.

## **HOW TO FILLET A FISH**

I brought Diet Cokes to guests as they watched their guide fillet their king.

“I should learn that,” I thought.

That night I caught a king. I wrapped my arms around the fish and hooked its mouth on the hanging scale. It was 28 pounds after bleeding for an hour. Shawna showed me how to cut out the meat, drawing the knife around it until I scraped the skeleton. I tossed the skull and intestines into the river. I gave the fillets to the chefs, who leaned over the fish, drawing out slim bones with tweezers. They added oil and lemon and served the salmon to guests. I sprayed the wooden cleaning table until the blood stains faded. I scrubbed Dawn soap into my jacket until I couldn't smell the fish anymore. It took two days to dry and never kept the rain out again.

## GENERATOR

Most nights I waited at the bar, wiping the wood with Simple Green and refilling pint glasses with Alaska Amber and Alaska IPA. I waited until guests decided they wanted to sleep before waking up at 5 a.m. to swing flies for silvers. One night a guide held a client, John, upright so John wouldn't collapse into the smoldering fire ring while walking to his cabin.

I carried glasses smeared with fingerprints and beer suds and placed them upside down in a blue plastic tray. I pressed the start button and looked around. I scooted the barstools back under the long wooden bar top. I locked the windows. Once the washer had sprayed the dishes clean, I checked the kitchen door and flipped the breakers in the pantry. Carrying a flashlight, I opened the front door and walked down the wooden steps of the deck. I began to whistle. I held the flashlight under my bicep so I could clap my hands.

“Hey Bear,” I said.

I walked up three steps and pulled open a door. Here was the generator. I pushed two levers, and flipped three switches down. In the dark, I opened the door, letting it slam behind me in case the bears had crept out of the woods in the seconds after the sound stopped. Then I walked back to my little room above the lodge, pulling the door shut so nothing could follow me.

## A SON

“I want to go back to a river with my dad,” a guest told me.

He crinkled his forehead. He didn't know where or when, he added. Or he couldn't say it yet. He wasn't ready to be home alone, like a child unlocking his front door and sitting at a walnut table that cooled under his fingertips. The clock tick, tick, ticking in the hallway as the child folded his arms and draws them toward his heart.

The man spoke again:

“I want to go fishing with my dad one last time,” he said.

He couldn't gather ashes lost in the wind and cold rain, once he let go.

## FLY-CASTING

I worried I'd forgotten how to fly-fish, or that it'd take half the season to relearn how to cast. I pinched the line against the rod, then let green thread slip between my fingers. I walked along a bank, then in. Water scurried past me. Pebbles gave way beneath my feet. And rainbow trout lined up over there, by that log, I'm sure. With my left hand, I pulled swatches of line out of the reel.

Imagine your hand motion on a clock, and move between 10 and 2. No, I think of a symphony.

I waved the rod in the air, back and forth, green line sailing through the breeze. The fish will bite, someone had said. But a bald eagle stared me down from the air. I smiled at rocks covered by moss. I remembered that the sun wouldn't set today, not really. I slipped line between the crook of my fingers, and waited.

## **DIET COKE, PLEASE**

I walked outside to pick up cans of soda for the fridge behind the bar. Our Mormon guests only drank Diet Coke. When other guests refused IPA and Merlot, I wonder when it started. but when other people say no, I wonder. I splashed through muddy puddles and opened a plywood door to the pantry.

I stacked 14 sodas in a flimsy cardboard tray, knocking a couple of cans to the gravel. They'd already made it through a float plane ride, and a boat trip. I pushed the door shut with the tray, stabbing a can with a nail. Two years earlier Jason had hammered dozens of nails into a plywood rectangle, and attached it to the pantry door. Bears left dusty paw prints on the walls that summer.

Now, Diet Coke soaked my fingertips. I laughed and drank half of it. And then I went inside, and I stocked the fridge. But it was nearly full to begin with.

## THE SLOUGH TRAIL

Each morning I gobble down hot, greasy bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs and soft pancakes. I wash it down with some Tang and head to the laundry room. I toss sheets and towels into the washing machine, then gather my cleaning supplies and trudge to a cabin.

Today the fog is here, a grey veil settling around the bushes and cabins. I walk toward Guideville and took photos of the little shacks. I set my bright red water bottle on the ground, next the propane tanks at the edge of the woods. When the sun shines I lace up my tennis shoes and jog up and down the trail, swatting mosquitoes that bite my face.

The cold still pricks my skin. I wrap my red scarf around my neck and tug on my knitted hat. I wear hiking boots that slid up and down my heels with every step. I carry my camera in my right hand and pointed it down the trail. I try to capture the fireweed in my LCD screen, but the bright purple blossoms exploded out of the frame. The lime green ferns shine with morning dew. The mud clumps on my boots as I step into the clearing. The river appears, softly rushing by.

The fog cloaks the river in an eerie stillness. The pink salmon do pirouettes just above the surface, leaving ripples in their playground. I look to the opposite bank, where sand piled up and trees loomed, perhaps 200 feet away. The British are fly-fishing. They hook pinks and the occasional silver. One seems to catch a fish every two casts or so.

I walk along my bank and watched the pinks shooting through the water. They swim together in schools ten feet across. The closest salmon are six feet away from where I stand in the grass. I walk to my left, where the beach is 20 feet wide. I take off my boots and wool socks, and roll up my corduroy pants to just below my knees. I walk into the

morning river. My muscles clench up almost immediately. I step into the sand that ripples below my feet in tiny wave patterns.

I walk toward the ripples. I stop and stand still, but for the shivering. I wait for the fish to return. The Brits asked if I intend to tickle a salmon's stomach if it got that close. I intended to snatch a fish with my bare hands. The current swept bits of gritty sand against my calves. I can't feel my toes.

After a few minutes, I look back toward the shore. My pants cling to my legs, soaked six inches above the knee. The fish return, rushing through the shallow water right next to the sand, where I used to stand. I think they notice me. These fish seem skittish, not nearly as foolish as the king that slipped through my fingers once.

I can't wait all day. There is too much to do. So, I step out of the water and pick up my boots. Waving to the fishermen I walk back up the trail. I can't feel the ground below my feet, except when the tire tracks raised the mud under my soles. Back at my cabin, I plug in my camera charger and slip on my flip-flops. I go to work.

## ON LOSS

A father and son lived in Norway, and dreamed of catching kings in Alaska. Years later, the son moved to London. They picked us. They booked their flights. And then the Department of Fish and Game shut down king season three weeks early. Perhaps another year. But there might not be another year for the father, ill with cancer. So, they visited us. Full of joy.

The father was still strong, though he didn't clean his plate. They requested glasses with ice each night. We kept the generator on until their lights dimmed at 1:30 a.m. One day, they fished alone, to discuss matters. Or perhaps to simply fish. That night they beamed at each other at the bar. The father told me that "Life can change quickly." That night his daughter called from Norway. Another grandchild. We shared glasses of cognac with ice, and hugs. They did not cry in my presence. But I did in theirs.

## A CHILD

A channel flowed down the rocks beside me. It swept along the curves of the banks and cut into the rocks piled within it. I watched it as it swept up the broken driftwood and carried it to a new place of rest. When I was little, I dragged a pillow onto the boardwalk outside on my house. I covered up my legs with an old red Scottish blanket and tucked my hands behind my head. Maybe someone threw a bucket of paint on the ceiling of the world that day. Bright blue splotches dripped into my eyes. The sun glittered against the canvas. The sky had never been that blue before. I was convinced of that.

I'm beginning to think like a 10-year-old again. The other day the skies poured down on our little place in the Alaskan wilderness. I watched the mud collecting on my toes. Now the flowers are bright purple and pure white, and the peppermint grows in a little garden beside the kitchen. I looked up again. That old sky followed me here, bold and vibrant as a child.

## KING CLOSURE

One Friday afternoon a stranger called. He'd heard we couldn't catch king salmon in our river anymore. He said there weren't enough spawning anymore, and we had to let them go so the population would grow again.

"No, I haven't heard that," I said. "We can fish for kings until July 14."

It was only June 22.

My first year I could keep five kings. The third year I could keep two. This season I could keep one. Now, the Department of Fish and Game said, starting Monday, June 25, we couldn't keep any.

Outside of Alaska, people called them Chinook. When I'd fished for them I'd borrowed a pair of waders and felt the water rush past my hips. I'd cast a line 50 feet away, then let the hook slide down the current. I'd cast for salmon for hours, knowing that their shadowy figures, 40 or 50 pounds, were slinking right next to me. Once, I hooked one, and he took off for 200 yards and just kept going. I lost my fishing line and my king. I laughed because everyone else did, but I didn't feel like casting anymore.

## HARASSMENT: A GUEST

Most people didn't care about the river closure. They could still fish for northern pike in the lakes nearby, and rainbow and grayling trout in the river. Still, I told them I was sorry about the fish. I poured them glasses of wine and gave them extra desserts. They said they dreamed about going to Alaska for years before going. I thought that maybe, if they couldn't land a king, it reminded them of dropping a pass in the 1989 Class 3A state title game. Here, they couldn't even play.

A father and his son flew in from Michigan. The son, Micah, was perhaps 32, and blonde, and muscular. He paid for the trip with earnings as a financial analyst. His father, Rob, was 55. His cheeks were hollow and his eyes were dark. He was ill with cancer, and they flew to Alaska to carry a king salmon home before Micah had to carry Rob.

They asked if they could fish for 16-inch rainbow trout with line strong enough to land a 50-pound salmon. They asked their guide, Austin. But red helicopters droned over the rivers, and when the pilots landed on sandbars they carried tickets and gave heavy fines for rule violations: \$250 for skipping a page in a logbook.

Austin had never worked as a fishing guide before. He drove a forklift. He liked to strum his guitar in the lodge, but he sang just above a whisper. His girlfriend sent him text message every couple of hours to remind him there were wildfires back home in Colorado, where they shared an apartment in Fort Collins.

Micah and Rob stayed for a few days, and they never landed a king. Their final night I told them I was sorry, that I knew what it meant. I didn't really know. So I gave them plates of steak and lobster, and filled their wine glasses a little higher. When I handed Micah another glass of wine, he reached into my back pocket. He kept his hand

there.

I pretended I didn't feel a thing. I said I was needed back in the kitchen. I smiled at the chef, and I told him he wouldn't believe what had just happened. He didn't laugh. He said I'd better tell.

"It already happened," I said. "It's over now. He can't do anything."

But the chef said I ought to try anyway. I ought to tell Jason so he could tell Micah, that he couldn't just grab me. I walked out of the kitchen and headed toward his cabin. Austin was already there, arguing with Jason that Micah and Rob were still angry with him for not letting them fish for kings. I had to interrupt. I had to clear plates in a minute.

"Micah grabbed my butt while I was serving," I blurted out.

Jason stared at me. He just stared at me.

"They're unreasonable," he said.

With that he turned to Austin, because they had to find a way to peace. I walked back into the lodge. I had to wash pint glasses so we would have enough for the night. I put them back in the freezer so they'd get cold.

The next morning Micah didn't look at me. I couldn't look at Jason. I needed to print invoices and remind guests to tip, and upload their photos to our computer for the guestbook. They wanted hats. Time to call the plane and ask if they were running on time. Say goodbye.

I could say something to Jason again. Bring it up casually. Maybe he didn't hear me. Maybe he was stressed. He would do something. But I already told him once. I couldn't tell him again. What if he didn't hear me again? I still had two months on my

contract. I didn't want to go back to my parents' with no money and no job. Besides, Casey – my best friend on staff – said to take it as a compliment.

They're gone now. I've got to sweep the deck and vacuum rugs and make coffee and clean the fly-tying table. The guides bring guests soon. They'll need fishing licenses, and beer with lunch, so I need to learn their names so I can charge them. They'll tell me once. I can't forget. I can't make them uncomfortable.

## HARRASSMENT: A RESPONSE

That afternoon I dialed Cory's number. He'd said to call anytime and he would be available. I told him what happened. I told him Jason was stressed about other things. But Micah grabbed me and I thought he should know.

"Was he drunk?" Cory asked.

Was he drunk? I said I guess he was.

"Not that that's an excuse," Cory said.

I decided that maybe he had been drunk. He was stressed about his father's illness. Drank too much. Meant to apologize today but too self-conscious to do so.

"Most guys' bark is bigger than their bite. So, if it happens again, just call me and I'll talk him down," Cory assured me.

Cory was in Wisconsin.

A few weeks earlier, when he was visiting the lodge, Cory told me that every time he saw a man fighting with a woman, he would interrupt the man and ask if they needed to settle things outside. He never knew these couples. His wife hated this but he did it anyway.

"I don't know," he said, "it's like a switch flips. Maybe it's because I have sisters."

I told Noah, the guide manager, about the harassment. He was 5-5, an inch shorter than me, and taught science to 8<sup>th</sup> graders in Colorado during the off-season. He only dated between November and March, after hunting season and before the steelhead run. He said he would stay in the lodge with me until guests left at night, if I felt unsafe. If he couldn't another guide would.

I lived in a small room upstairs, above the bar in the lodge. I locked my door with a chain when guests leered at me. Usually I left the chain dangling, unlatched, so I could be reached if someone needed me. Maybe they needed a size L navy blue long-sleeve shirt right this minute. Maybe they wouldn't want to spend the money in the morning.

That summer, when a guest named John smoked pot in his cabin, then drank until he couldn't walk, kept talking about women's butts. I asked him to stop. He assured me that I was "cute, too." When the doctor explained all the things he knew about women, I smiled and kept tossing horseshoes. When he told a guide, Justin, he planned to hit that – meaning me – I walked away and turned off the generator so he'd lose power and go to bed.

I had to order 20 pounds of salmon for each guest, a peace offering for the low run that summer. I had to answer the phone. I drank three cups of coffee while pouring glasses of wine tonight. My heart kept trembling.

I'd been dreaming of Paris, wondering about Argentina, and researching South Africa. Missing Washington, where I used to be. The water's been sweeping around the rocks again, though I hadn't seen an eagle for two weeks. Four seagulls hopped along a gravel bar, digging into the flesh of a pink salmon. Right in front of me, if you can imagine.

## LEAVING

By September the river had flooded out. I packed my bags and watched episodes of *Modern Family* to make the days go by faster. I catalogued all of the merchandise. Jason said I'd saved them thousands of dollars. I threw my bags into the boat, then I boarded a small red plane and took off. And that was my summer, watching swirls of rivers beneath my feet. I waited with Casey in his car, drinking bottles of beer and saying goodbye. I picked up my box of frozen fish in a cardboard coffin and flew home to Missouri.

## THE POLICY

Cory wrote me an email on Christmas Eve, asking me to commit to return. His parents were eating sugar cookies in the kitchen, he said.

In September, we had sat around a wooden table in the lodge while the guides were outside cleaning the boats. He and Jason and I had sat and drank black coffee, and talked about the king salmon closure. They planned to float down the river, scouting fishing spots, the two of them. I wanted to mention sexual harassment, make a statement. Say it again. But I'd already said it, so I offered to loan them my camera instead. It was waterproof so it wouldn't get damaged.

One night the lodge's 19-year-old housekeeper had let a guest upstairs to the room we shared. I made him leave. I imagined a lawyer from Northern California would bring a daughter to Alaska, and she would want to work at the lodge some summer. If someone touched her maybe they'd sue. Maybe Jason and Cory would listen to guests. I wanted the lodge to survive.

Cory wrote me back a little after Christmas, and he said their policy was that if something happened again, tell him or Jason. I said that I had followed that policy even though I had never heard a word of it. No one had. It was Jason who didn't respond when it happened.

Still, I said I'd be back. I wanted to tie some more flies. I wanted to see the aging South African guests. I wanted to tell the guides that I had just bought my own waders and wading boots. I wanted them to show me how to land a salmon with a 16-foot spey rod. I didn't know what else to do. I made \$8500 with no expenses in three months.

I buried anger underneath my acceptance. What if it happened again? I sat in a

coffee shop, and wrote them an email. Just write a policy, I told them. Keep the business safe. I asked my twin brother to read the email before I sent it. I didn't sound too angry or passive-aggressive. He said I didn't.

In January, the night after I turned 29, I opened an email from Jason and Cory.

*We appreciate your loyalty. It's been four years. We know you have goals, other things to do. We don't have a job for you.*

They told me they had decided to restructure their staff. They wanted someone with other skills, medical skills. They rescinded the job offer. I told them they wouldn't fire me over an email after four years. We talked on the phone, the three of us. They wanted two people now. He would have medical training and she could do my job. They wanted to hire a couple.

I had to register a complaint with the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission within 180 days. I thought that meant six months after the June incident. It had been 200. I didn't want to deal with the paperwork. I didn't want to hurt the business. That's why I brought it up in the first place. They didn't just punish me, did they? Maybe I was too flirtatious, anyway. They knew me. They were supposed to be friends. I was the best employee. They left me in charge. I had to find a new job.

A few months later, I wrote them notes. I made a postcard from a photo I'd taken, the same photo that Cory and I hung in the new cabin. Jason made the photo frame and the building.

Jason, thanks for giving me a chance before you even knew me. I'm glad you are marrying my friend. Thanks for buying me organic Teddy Grahams when you shopped for groceries for my mid-season break at Denali. You bought me better things than I ever

bought myself. Thanks for saving *Sports Illustrated* for me.

Say hello to your dad, Cory. I remember when we all smoked cigars and drank brandy together. Thanks for taking me on a boat ride that one night when I was angry with a co-worker. You carried a shotgun when we walked around the cabins at night, just in case we startled a bear. I always admired how you stood up for women in abusive situations. I don't know anyone who does that.

I'll miss you, I told them. Good luck this season.

I did it because I didn't know who else I could ask to write me a character reference.

No one else knew me quite so well.

## HOW TO TRAVEL

I sat on a carpeted motel hallway, navy blue American passport in my pocket. The walls rattled with earthquake aftershocks. 180 people died that day in New Zealand in 2011. I didn't. I stopped writing for 8 months, and my hands shook when drivers passed me on city roads. I was certain they would swerve into me and I would be killed.

I also drank some chocolate and walked in the grass. I listened to Tom Petty sing "Wildflowers," eyes filled with tears because I still got to hear that old song on the radio.

A couple of years later, in 2013, I got rid of my things so no one else had to. I sorted through my boxes of belongings at my parents' house. A shirt from a lodge where I used to work. Books I never intended to read again. I filled four white 13-gallon garbage bags and threw them in the back of my parents' silver Prius. I handed them to a man at the Salvation Army.

I drove my parents' car back to their house, where I stayed in a spare bedroom. I added up my income from tips and salaries and waited for my tax refund to arrive. That same day a friend called me and asked how I found jobs in Alaska. I said I met people, that I was lucky, but that there were websites advertising seasonal work. I clicked on links, just curious. I had a job that summer after all. A summer fishing lodge. Just nothing now.

*Housekeeper. Waitress. We need an extra pair of hands for peak northern light viewing. Bettles. Foothills of the Brooks Range. Very remote.*

I applied, then drank NyQuil all weekend to stave off a sinus infection. I woke up after dreaming of brown bears baring their teeth in my face. Still sick, I lived on

scrambled eggs for four days, propping myself up in a chair to interview with the lodge owner, Jamie. But I got the job almost immediately and flew to Fairbanks, Alaska, three days later.

I calculated an exit strategy as I packed. My ticket cost \$1300. If I made \$2500 a month, as promised, I could leave in two weeks and crash with my brother and his three roommates in Portland. I planned to spend three weeks in Washington in April, anyway. My dad asked why I didn't plan for the best.

Six months earlier I had moved to Germany to work as an au pair for an American family. I assumed the best. But my host struggled with severe anxiety and refused to take her medication. "I'm not going to accuse you of sleeping with my husband," she told me the morning after I arrived. "I don't know why you took this job if you don't like kids," she said a few days later. I burst into tears. I flew to a few countries in Europe and back home in time to work as judge at an election polling place. Barack Obama was re-elected.

This time I boarded each plane – Springfield, Missouri; Dallas, Seattle – as slowly as I could, trudging to my seat and avoiding eye contact. After arriving in Fairbanks at midnight, I stayed in a motel with cookies at the front desk and a bull moose over the fireplace. I flew to Bettles the next morning. The plane held 10 passengers. The pilot wrote his number on a scrap of paper and handed it to me, promising Fairbanks IceDogs hockey games and free sightseeing flights in the mountain ranges. Anything I wanted. I think he asked my name. When he visited the lodge weeks later he asked why I hadn't called. I'd forgotten his name.

## **BETTLES, 35 MILES NORTH OF THE ARCTIC CIRCLE**

The town of Bettles was located 35 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Twelve residents. A park office, and the highest paid weather station in the country. I met a girl named Anna, and she showed me around the place. There was an old lodge with extra bedrooms, and a basement full of crates of soda and powdered milk. The main lodge had a kitchen, dining room, and a sitting room with a fireplace. Off the dining room were about a dozen rooms for guests, plus a closet for coats and gloves rated for -60 temperatures. I noticed baskets of hand warmers near the fireplace. There were two dollars each, but when guests left the packages unopened I took them.

That night I stood by a bonfire, drinking a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon the lodge manager, Hazel, tossed to me. Sven, a dog musher from Switzerland, had returned from Fairbanks with cartons of cigarettes and cases of Miler the staff had requested. We stood by the fire, kicking snow off our boots. Anna played chords on her guitar while two Kiwi volunteers tried to remember the words to "Wagon Wheel." Our 20 guests, all Japanese tourists, huddled in the lodge until the aurora showed. Thin strips of green light began to flare up across the sky, creating a band that pulsed overhead.

Each day I folded sheets into perfect hospital corners, and I scrubbed toilets. Anna helped me find matching pairs of bath slippers to place in the rooms. The slippers arrived wrapped in plastic, and after use we washed them and gave them to new arrivals.

Anna was about 23 and lived in Portland. She had a baby with a friend but slept on benches and kept drinking. The father's parents watched the kid, and when they asked to adopt him Anna said it made sense. She used to be religious but her friends deserted her, so she stopped.

I carried plates of eggs and toast to visitors, and asked them what time they saw the lights last night. 12, 4, who knows. I asked the cook, Roger, what he thought, and he told me that curiosity killed the cat. He was in his late 50s and we talked about Van Morrison. He said I was okay because I always cleaned the sinks.

Two French sisters volunteered for a couple of weeks, and right before they boarded the plane to leave Roger grabbed one and kissed her. She gagged and spit on the ground. I told her I was sorry. Roger just laughed.

He didn't smile much until we heard we'd have guests into mid-April, an extra two weeks of checks and tips. Then he made plans to visit an old girlfriend in North Carolina and see what happened. Before I left, he offered to smoke pot with me if I could keep my hands off him. I said no, thanks.

I stayed in a house with Anna, George, and a second maintenance guy, Keith. Roger had a side room with a separate entrance, and the volunteers that stayed for two weeks had another room.

Sometimes Anna and George opened the door and yelled that the lights were out. I pulled on long underwear, pants, snow pants, wool shirts, vests, coats, hats. Sometimes the lights faded by the time I got dressed and ran out the door. So, I set my clock for a time that sounded right to me, and I woke to check on the lights. I wandered around the town, breathing in the arctic chill and waving when I saw the red light glowing from a guest's camera.

There were more dogs than people in Bettles. During the day, I wandered to the next village, and a pup, Sierra, joined me immediately. We played fetch with a frozen stick broken from a fir tree. She belonged to a guy named Chris, who worked at the weather station.

Chris died two years later walking home from a Christmas party. Someone hit him with a car on a quiet neighborhood street at 2 a.m. in Anchorage.

Little Anna was the only kid in the village. She was 10 and had a litter of 4-month-old puppies. She was homeschooled by her parents and spent a lot of time in the lodge selling crafts she made. Jamie fed the puppies and shipped them to a rescue in Fairbanks because Little Anna's parents couldn't feed them. The parents drank and smoked, but they weren't unkind.

Sven took care of the sled dogs. He was 35, and had bright blue eyes and a history of sleeping with Jamie. He used to work in finance in Switzerland but decided to try to find a job in mushing in the United States. He completed four Iditarod Tours and took guests on mushing trips. When I went mushing he said my coat wouldn't do, and loaned me a second one to wear over it.

After I'd worked at the lodge for a week or so I got a new assignment. Each night at midnight, I collected guests and drove a white ten-passenger van, nicknamed Winston, two miles down an ice road. We arrived at a cabin on a lake. Here there were no flashing red lights from the airstrip, or lightbulbs hanging from the lodge. We sat in a wooden cabin warmed to forty degrees by propane heater, eating brownies and waiting for the lights to show.

I screwed my camera into a bendable plastic tripod and packed the tripod into a

snowbank. I carried a spare battery and held it against my stomach so it wouldn't freeze and shut down.

We needed wood for these bonfires. During the day, I hopped in the truck with a maintenance guy, George, and drove along the Ice Road. It goes from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay and is used to transport supplies for six weeks each spring. We got our oven in March. George and I waded through the snow. We chopped white spruce and tossed it in the back of the truck. I stopped to take photos, tearing off my wet gloves and tossing them in the truck. I held my camera and my fingers began to burn. Later I picked up hot bowls of split pea soup and cracked bottles of Alaska Amber beer, but I couldn't grip either one. My fingers began to turn white and waxy when I touched my fingertips together. Sven said it was frostbite.

Still, I scrubbed baked beans off yellow and blue plates and slid the dishes into the washer. I tossed the scrubber into the sink and watched pink light glimmering in the creases of the Brooks Range.

As the days lengthened closer to spring, I still set my camera out on the packed snow. I clicked the shutter, diving into a snowdrift so I wouldn't cast a shadow under the full moon.

I began to cross-country ski through the woods, keeping an eye out for wolves and moose. I skied to the lake cabin, and I skied across the frozen airstrip where the pilots landed every few days.

One local, Mike, worked at the weather station. He was about 50 and had six kids. Anna, my colleague, told me he used to have a wife until he threw her across the room during a fight. She took the kids. Mike said one son helped him with construction

projects in Oregon. The son smoked too much pot, but Mike said he son shaped up when he realized he had to eat.

On Easter we had a potluck. My co-workers and I hunted for beers packed in the snow. Once you found a Budweiser everyone cheered as you shot-gunned it. The golden egg was a 12-pack of Michelob Ultra. If you found it you kept it. I didn't want to chug a beer so soon after Easter dinner, but Sven cut it open with a pocket knife anyway. I tossed it away, leaving streaks of alcohol in the snow. After that I pretended I didn't see silver cans of Bud lying around, glinting in the late March sun.

Most days natives from a nearby village rode snow machines to pick up Bud and Jack Daniels. They lived in dry villages, so they drank a few beers at the lodge. They finished the rest on the 70-mile journey back home.

One night I drove the guests to the cabin and wondered why I was there at all. I struggled to capture the lights, but still I waited, boots sinking into the snow. It was -30 and almost 2 a.m. I capped my camera and stood up to go to the cabin, to make cocoa for the guests, to help them feel better.

And then, a voice from somewhere:

“Don't leave. You might not see this again.”

I stared at the thin green lights combing the horizon, leaving trails in the pale sky. But then the lights began to pool with others. I scanned the float pond as more green flashes strung together. And then lights began to expand and turn purple, red and blue. The lights began to drizzle over me, covering me as if they were the lampshade and I was the bulb. I knelt in the snow, yelling at guests to see what I saw. But they never noticed.

That voice again. It might as well have been within me, it was so quiet and

earnest.

“That’s why you’re here,” I heard.

## TIKCHIK, BRISTOL BAY

I walked down the aisle, scanning for the right one. 8C. A man looked at me, and at his ticket.

“You must be my co-worker,” he said.

He was the head fishing guide, Brett, from Minneapolis. He had reddish hair and a 2-day beard. He was about 40, with a wife and 2-year-old son living in Mexico, where he guided during the winter. He gave me a piece of gum.

I asked Brett how many gates the Dillingham airport had. He laughed and said none. We walked through a building to meet another guide - who doubled as a driver - and headed back inside to fight 60 people for luggage and boxes. Seasonal workers, packing fish or catching them.

“Mary Ellen Chiles!” I heard.

It was a friend from Washington. He spent the summer in Dillingham to help pay for college. The day before I’d written that I wished I could find a friend on this trip. The guide drove us to a lake. I stood on a rock, waiting for our plane.

## MY BOSS, AN ALCOHOLIC

When I first saw the lodge from the window of the floatplane, I saw the brown buildings dotting an island and thought of visiting Alcatraz for an afternoon. Here I'd stay for three months, at a lodge adjacent to Wood-Tikchik State Park in Bristol Bay. The pilot skidded toward the dock, pushing water toward the shore. I got off of the plane and shook hands with the people lining along the shore. There were 22 people. There were three women.

When I climbed down the ladder leading from the float plane I walked along the row of employees and shook their hands. A man in his 60s, with brown hair and grey eyes, smiled down at me and withheld his hand. He said he was Bud, and he had a cold and didn't want to share his germs. He'd owned the lodge for 27 years. That evening, after eating bratwurst in the lodge with the guides, we carried chairs from the dining room to the living room and sat in a wide circle. Bud asked the bartender for a glass of vodka for his cold symptoms, and he began to talk.

That was the first time that summer that he talked about the loon that crashed through the windshield of his float plane. He flew a Cessna 206 that could hold three passengers. The bird smashed through the windshield, spraying glass on the co-pilot's leather seat. Every time he repeated the story to guests he said he was certain any passenger would have died. He was fine. He cruised toward the water, dipping the floats into the lake and steering toward the lodge. He said he walked to the bar and said, "I need a drink."

Most mornings Bud carried three or four plastic cups from his room in the attic of the lodge, climbing down a narrow flight of stairs and silently placing the cups on the

kitchen counter. I rinsed each cup, carefully scrubbing the red wine out of the plastic. He flew guests to Bristol Bay tributaries each morning. Guides lived in wall tents near cold rivers and helped guests hook silver salmon and Dolly Varden trout each day. After flying each morning Bud trudged up the concrete sidewalk in jeans and brown waders that reached to his hips. He sat in his office with dust on the windowsills, making calls. He flew back to the rivers in afternoon to pick up guests and call in their drink orders on the plane radio.

By five, though, he smiled at me with glazed eyes, asking for half portions at dinner but more wine. One or two bottles every night, the bartender whispered to me once. Tequila for weeks after his wife cancelled a visit. She visited once that summer, which was one more visit than the summer before. She was a psychiatric nurse, and Bud said she took care of him. He laughed when he said it. She did not. They had a nine-year-old son. He had two kids 20 years older. He loaned me his wife's waders and wading boots. He had written her name with black Sharpie on the tag. I let the boots and waders dry in my cabin for a day, dusting the sand and dirt off before walking up the steps and returning them. I left them outside his door.

After drinking he often stared at my chest, particularly when I wore tight-fitting shirts, the woolen kind made in New Zealand and designed for layering during ski expeditions. I'd bought some in the US, but I'd picked up the blue one in the Auckland airport after spending five months backpacking alone in the country. When I bought it I was still shaken from a 6.3 earthquake that killed 185 in Christchurch two days before. It hit the city when I was supposed to be there, but I'd switched flights so I could catch the last seat on a boat ride further south.

Besides, a week before that I'd already spent a day in Christchurch. I hadn't planned it, but I'd woken up with a sore neck and couldn't catch my bus. I walked around the city, watching a play in the park about rugby, and wandering the art museum. Stayed a while. After the quake, I wanted something soft against my skin, so I bought a wool shirt. I never wore low-cut shirts around Bud. I zipped a vest over my clothes when I didn't want to deal with his stares.

In the morning, after dropping off wine cups, Bud would say he could do any job at the lodge. To demonstrate this, he would flip two eggs on a tiny black frying pan because he didn't need the chefs to stop their work to feed him breakfast. He didn't cook eggs for anyone besides himself. He didn't offer and no one asked.

## **REPLACEABLE**

For three months, I ironed wine tablecloths and fetched bottles of Decoy wine for the guests. Usually the wine ended up on the tablecloths, and I'd spray it with bleach water and hope the hospitality manager, a Kiwi named Carol, would clean it better.

On Saturdays planes circled at 2:15, and floated to the dock. I stood in the drizzle until the guests hopped down from the aircraft. I showed a father and son to their home for the week, a cabin called Coho. I recited someone else's welcome speech: about sauna towels, and life jacket sizes, and dinner at 7.

I don't fill out fishing licenses here. Or sell you merchandise, or answer your questions, or order your fish, or pour your drinks, or process your invoices, or organize your photos, or check on your planes.

I didn't add photos to these cabin walls, or posts to the website. I didn't train the housekeeper. I became one. Back to where I started. I can't tell someone to sweep the deck when I've got better things to do. Here, if this owner's gone, I'm not left in charge. Instead, I do your laundry and clean your room, and take your breakfast orders and serve your dinner, and wash your dishes. I'm replaceable again.

## THE KIND OF PEOPLE

Each week, a new group of twenty people flew in and caught fish: five kinds of salmon – chum, king, pink, sockeye, silver – and arctic char, Dolly Varden, northern pike, and rainbow trout. One guest had created the concept of payday loans and turned it into a business. He later joined Bill Clinton’s Cabinet. Another guest worked on Reagan’s Cabinet, and later served on the board of *The New York Times*. He said he could get me into the Wharton School of Business at the University of Chicago. He was on that board, too. One guest played a doctor on *Grey’s Anatomy*. He visited with a buddy whose dad had invested in the lodge. They offered me a drink of Jameson on their porch. We talked about watching the northern lights, and Scotland. When he got divorced three years later, I wasn’t surprised.

Each guest paid \$7700 a week, plus tips. Each member of the staff expected to take \$400-500 home/week in tips alone. I was paid hourly – \$7.75, plus overtime. I normally worked 50 hours a week. The guides were paid salaries and given a plane ticket. I bought my own. The guides mainly stayed in wall tents at different fishing sites. After dinner, I stood next to the ice machine along the cages of pots and pans and Uncle Ben’s rice, near the bathroom shelves lined with VHS tapes. I wrote baseball scores in blue ink and threw them in Ziploc bags on top of plastic-wrapped sandwiches and bags of Fritos, to keep water out, since sometimes the pilots stored the coolers in the floats. As the planes cruised into the water the guides grabbed ropes dangling off of the wings and pulled the planes toward the shore to offload clients. At 4 p.m. the pilot picked them up. The guides stayed in the tents, returning every few weeks to check email and call girlfriends.

## A DAY OFF

One client, Richard, owned part of the lodge, and he brought up his son, three grandchildren, and three friends. He used to write early episodes of *Gunsmoke*. I gave him some pieces about the 2011 World Series, though first he warned me I could lose a friend by asking his opinion. He'd told a writer he'd better stick to painting and said the guy became successful that way. Richard said I could write well, and that I didn't need to think about it so much.

Earlier that week I had planned to hop on a plane. I had the day off and the chance to fish with clients, which the hospitality staff and I could do if there was room. But Bud had to drop his clients – Richard's son, Brian, a friend, Maurice, and Maurice's son, also named Brian – then pick up 800 pounds of gear in Anchorage, so I couldn't go with them. Livid, I hopped into a kayak and paddled into the waves for an hour, hurrying back to the lodge as the waves got higher, lake water splashing my face.

I stopped by the lodge to let Carol know I had returned safely.

“You going fishing with us?” the older Brian said.

The fog turned the flight around, so they were going out on boat instead. There was room for one more. I grabbed a turkey sandwich, added bacon, and picked up my fly rod.

“You need a cigar?” he asked. I nodded and smiled.

A guide, Dan, drove us to a sandy point. I borrowed a 9-weight rod, which could handle bigger fish. I landed seven northern pike by lunchtime. We ate sandwiches while sitting in the sand. I shared sunscreen and chocolate with sea salt and almonds. They gave me a Cuban cigar. We took the boat to another spot and fished for more pike. Brian and I

chatted about sustainability and movies. I waded in the sand, sinking in the mud, soaking my clothes. I left my shoes on the shore and cast under the bluffs. I caught three more pike as I smoked my cigar.

Brian's two sons and daughter, and her friend, stopped by with a wakeboard and a tube. Older Brian, and the younger one, and Dan, took off their shirts and jumped into the water. Fully clothed, I jumped in, too.

On the boat ride home, Maurice and I chatted about marriage. I forget how it came up. He said if both people want to make it work, they will, and assured me that everyone has issues in marriages. He said he respected me for my friendships with these guys – all of whom had tried, he was sure. He was certain of that.

A few days later, I extended an elbow to Richard and walked him down the dock to planes. He slept most of the week and hadn't been able to fish with us. He mumbled about the Cardinals. St. Louis. Texas Rangers. The teams I'd written about in the papers I gave him. I met eyes with his son, Brian, who looked worried and sad. Richard asked me to kiss him goodbye.

“Just aim for the mouth and miss,” Brian said. I kissed Richard on the cheek.

“You'll never make it in Hollywood,” Richard said. “People kiss each other there.”

## A STONE

He drank vodka. I drank tonic and club soda.

He paid to fish at a lodge in Bristol Bay. I earned money washing his dishes and bringing him food.

He told me his father had died near my home. A semi crossed a median on the highway, crashing into the father's truck as he traveled to fish a Missouri river.

But the son was sorry. He hadn't meant to bring it up. They've placed barriers between the lanes now, anyway.

We could still talk about football if I wanted to. That's how the conversation started. It's just that I mentioned my home, so he mentioned his.

He and his dad used to walk through rivers, tossing flies and reeling trout. They always let the fish go.

The son still wades through rivers to catch fish.

Sometimes his father comes to mind, in the form of a picture of a snapped bootlace, or in a trout's trembling heart.

When that happens, the son plunges his hand into the river and pulls up a stone. "It's a Jewish custom," he tells me. "I'll leave the rock on his grave."

## CHIP

Most guests met each other once they got here. But one group met when they boarded a LearJet and flew to Dillingham. They all lost \$250,000 gambling at Caesar's Palace and the casino paid for their trip. They stopped in Lake Tahoe to gamble on the way to the lodge so Caesar's could make up the cost. Before the week the guides talked about them, and I assumed they would disembark the plane wearing charcoal suits and black silk ties, smiling like George Clooney.

I stood along the water in khaki shorts and a peach shirt, waiting to show guests to their cabins. The cabins were named after fish: sockeye, grayling, etc. I introduced myself to a guest as we walked from the dock. His name was George and he was from my mother's hometown of Washington, Missouri. He asked why we didn't have locks on our doors. No one else ever asked.

The first night Bud stopped by the kitchen to inspect the hors d'oeuvres the chefs prepared for the guests, who drank scotch and vodka and complimented the lake view from the deck. Bud carried a glass of wine into the kitchen and peered at a tray of cold salmon. "These still have bones!" he cried, and asked for tweezers. He pulled out tiny slivers of bone so the guests wouldn't catch them in their throat. "These guys have been drinking all day," he insisted. He walked down the hall to his office and closed the door.

They only fished for a few hours a day instead of eight or ten that everyone else did, but requested bottles of vodka in their lunch coolers instead. I said I wouldn't gamble with them, that I wouldn't take their money. A couple of lodge girls won \$200 playing Texas hold 'em on Monday night. The next afternoon I paddled on a cold lake that mirrored the bursts of clouds overhead and I cried, knowing people who are addicted and

feeling like I'd let them down if I played cards. I wouldn't do it.

But that night one man spoke with a smoky Alabama drawl, and he bought me vodka. He said his name was Chip, just like the fishing guide. He was at least 35 years older than me, with dirty blonde hair and stubble. He said he was from Birmingham. He didn't say what he did. "I made so much money I lost my sense of purpose and I got kinda depressed," Chip said. I needed to take his breakfast order at 6 a.m. the next day. But I stayed and waited for him to speak, thinking if I pretended to like him he might tip me better. He liked attending Alabama football games.

"I went to the Sugar Bowl in the Caesar's box and just started throwing money on people below," he said. Chip smiled at the bartender. I looked at the bartender. We all liked football.

"I thought for the national championship game I'd get, like, \$3000 in ones and do the same thing," Chip said.

He looked at the water lapping on the shore. We all arrived on those little float planes. He wasn't much of a planner, he told me, so he didn't have ones to throw at people. He just threw what he had. "1s and 20s and 100s all look the same coming down," he said. "They were so excited." I stared at my glass, half-full of club soda and bitters. Maybe I could help.

"Want to play cards?" he asked. "Count me in," I said.

We sat at a round table made of cedar. Four others gathered, too. Chip paid for my \$500 buy-in and said it was mine if I didn't lose it. Then he sat down next to me. The game was simple: Acey duecey. The dealer dealt two cards to a player at a time, and if the card numbers varied by a wide margin the player might bet. For example, I might be

dealt a 3 and a jack. Good odds. I'd bet two that the third card would be between 4 and 10. If correct, I'd win two chips. If not, I'd lose two. If dealt a 3 or jack, I'd lose four: double the pot. Each chip was worth \$25.

One of the gamblers called himself Lucky because he won a million dollars at a casino once. His wife wore most of it on her chest, formed of silicon and plastic. He kept showing me pictures of her. She was back home in Minnesota.

I shuffled cards when it was my turn. Chip won a few thousand on a hand, then grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek. A few minutes later, Lucky got mad when I showed cards too early. It didn't matter because he won two thousand about 60 seconds later. But he kept saying I showed cards too early. No one else cared. I thought if I could keep playing, they'd all toss me a few poker chips, so I decided to stay until the game ended at midnight. I felt lucky, I suppose. Chip won big at 11:45 and slipped me another \$300 in chips. One gambler said I was all right, that I was smart. They all asked if I needed anything to drink, and I said my glass was full when it was empty, so they kept asking. I ran my fingers through my hair.

"You know, I want to sleep with you – not to sleep with you – but to see if your hair really looks like that when you wake up in the morning," Lucky said. I paused. It was almost midnight. I turned to Lucky, and I smiled gently.

"You don't have enough chips," I said.

## CASTING COMPETITION

“Ladies can cast, too,” Brett said, walking past me as I folded up an ironing board.

“Damn right!” I said.

He meant in the fly casting competition, he explained. I took off my apron. I had 12 fishing guides to beat. The hospitality manager, Carol didn't think I should, that it was a guide thing. But Brett, the head guide, said it was okay. When he was drunk Brett tried to dance with me and insisted I flirted with him. But I didn't have to compete with the women on staff. They didn't try. They didn't kayak and they didn't fish. The Caesar's group and Bud put up cash to fund the event. I pieced together a 6-weight fly rod, which was all I had. I walked toward Tikchik Lake to practice my cast. A guide stopped me with advice: Get something else. Alex, who ran the tackle shop, loaned me a 9-weight Sage rod. It was heavier so I could cast farther.

I stood on gravel and cast at a ring of rocks along the water. But that's not where the competition would be. So, I stepped on a dock to cast toward the cabins. I didn't know if I could cast as far as the guides. I had to hit a spot between two cabins, some 80 feet away. I might catch my feet in fly line in the eyes of 20 guests and 20 co-workers. I'd catch a sympathetic smile. I wouldn't win \$1500, the top prize. But maybe I'd win consolation prizes, \$100 bills from the gamblers. Then I wouldn't care how they smiled at me anymore. I didn't have to beat these guides who'd been fishing for 20 years. No one expected me to win. I decided I would. I picked up plates and Lucky turned to me.

“I don't doubt you have many abilities, but I'm not sure casting is one of them,” he said, and laughed.

I said I doubted him, and carried his wine bottle away.

I changed out of the black pants and polo I served in, and into corduroy pants and

wool shirts. I chugged a few ounces from a Maker's Mark bottle I'd found in a guest room on a July turnover day.

A guide dug his fingers into the bowl, searching for names on a white piece of paper. He said mine. I fumbled for the borrowed rod. We had three casts to hit a circle in the middle of a white square in the courtyard, perhaps 150 feet away. The circle was the size of a golf ball. If I cast over the water and fell short I would be disqualified. I have never cast that far. I could also aim to the grass on the left, 50-60 feet away, though it meant a harder path on the next casts. I landed the pink yarn in the gravel on the left. The guides tried the longer route. Most crossed the barrier and set themselves up for shorter casts. A few fell short. I beat them.

A guide suggested I try my second cast left-handed so I wouldn't catch the line in the awning of a cabin to my right. I hoped I wouldn't catch the awning behind me, either. But I wasn't going to change technique now, not when Bud told me I would do just fine. He gave casting demonstrations every week. My line skimmed the first cabin, before the yarn fell safely to the grass. It was short, but still within 50-60 feet, and a straight shot. The others cast closer and closer. I ignored them and stared at the target. I grabbed a rod. I saw a flash of green; a piece of yarn on the hook. It wasn't the right rod. It wasn't the rod I had borrowed. But it was my turn. I tried, hurrying to make extra false casts, so I'd get a feel for this rod I'd never used. I let the line go. It fell hopelessly short. I dropped to my knees in the grass as someone pointed out the other rod, which someone else had used and left 40 feet away.

I received consolation, but no prize. Lucky changed his mind about my abilities. Still, I fumed for hours over beer and cards and conversation. I had never expected to lose, after all.

## FLYING

Omar, a pilot whose real name was Richard, flew planes. His nickname came from his dad, a Norwegian. Omar invited guides over to his cabin for espresso at 6 a.m. most mornings, where he played classical music. One afternoon Omar asked if I wanted to leave the rock. This island. My home. For now. I wanted to read May issues of *Rolling Stone* in a coffee shop, and burn my tongue on \$4 lattes. I always worked when Omar served espresso. But coffee is free here. The fuel, however, is not. He had to pick it up 40 minutes away. I decided to go.

I picked up my camera. I climbed a silver ladder. I tightened my seat belt. I slid the window open. My ear drums throttled. But I felt more at peace without earplugs. I wear them every night to drown out the generator, and voices carrying from the sauna next door. Omar poured black tea into his thermos cap and handed it to me. I drank it and looked below, watching our plane's shadow dart between pine trees.

He nudged me, and closed his hands into fists. Take the controls, he meant. He pushed the yoke toward me. I pulled up, then pushed down, trying to keep the plane even. I peered at the mountain range through the blur of the propeller. He took the controls and floated to the landing. He picked up fuel and I played with a stranger's dog. It was the only time I saw cars in three months.

## A GUN

Bud cuddled with his yellow Labrador retriever, Major. The other dog was a golden retriever named Shelby. We played fetch with a football. Sometimes I tossed sticks into the lake the dogs leapt for them. Shelby's owner was a mechanic, Joel, kept the planes running. When I hopped into a kayak and scraped the lake bottom, I'd ask and he'd give the boat a shove, launching me into deeper water so I could paddle. During the winter he made wire metal fish and sold them online. They were all over the lodge that were all over the lodge and he sold them online and to guests. He slurred his words by 5 p.m. every night.

One of those nights Joel smiled, and waved a gun at me. It was a Derringer, a little pistol. It wouldn't do much to bears, but they had thicker skin than me. I called for a guide but Joel just handed me the gun, pleased.

"Look!" he said.

I held it and handed it to guide and he took it away.

"I'm sorry," Joel said.

I didn't have anything to say to him, so he left. I told another waitress what happened. She managed a yoga retreat in Hawaii and had told me the lava rocks spoke to people, causing them to stumble when they disrespected the rocks. I said maybe they didn't know the terrain. She couldn't believe Joel would wave a gun in the lodge, in front of all of these people, in front of these guests.

"No one needs to see that," she said, and took a sip of a cocktail some guest had bought her.

"I don't need to get shot," I said.

## A PADDLE

I dried the final knife. I picked up my coat and walked to my room. The dryer thumped my walls. I walked back up the broken concrete path to the lodge. I asked for club soda and tonic, and stepped onto the deck. I asked a guest about his day, and his cough rattled his throat.

I scanned the lake so we'd both have space. I said I ought to kayak, as calm as it was, though I'd already paddled for two hours that afternoon. I left and slipped into a kayaking skirt. I carried the boat to the lake, then gently dropped it on the gravel. I set the paddle in the water, hopped into the kayak, and secured the skirt around the seat. I grabbed the paddle and shoved off, heading along the edges of land. Usually I paddled over a mirror image of the clouds. Whenever I couldn't see the reflection I rushed back to shore, racing the quickening wind and the rolling waves. Tonight it was calm. I paddled through the narrows and around a bend. I floated over fishing lines. When I'm tired, I like to stay close to shore. But I'm afraid of bears, so I paddled straight toward the point, a little island. Three loons ducked. Maybe the tree trunks turned into brown bears in my eyes. I could see if I got close enough.