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WALKING HOME

A JOURNEY IN THE ALASKAN WILDERNESS

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B L O O M S B U R Y

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CHAPTER 1

I COULD BEGIN with a death, that of one James Sullivan, age forty-seven, who climbed, muttering and despondent, onto the rail of the bridge that spans the churning waters between downtown Juneau and Douglas Island. From his perch seventy-five feet in the air—closer to ninety, really, since it was low tide at the time and the tides of Southeast Alaska average fourteen feet from high to low—Sullivan could have looked south down Gastineau Channel to a breathtaking view of the blue and green mountains of the Coast Range, or to his left across the rooftops of a cluster of homes and small businesses nestled along the foot of a closer range of forested mountains.

Of course, a crowd gathered. Juneau is a small town and people care. They vote regularly, school board meetings are well attended, and every spring a large part of the population turns out to make a celebration of harvesting the litter that sprouts from beneath the receding winter snow, volunteering their time to clean the limited grid of roads that stitch Juneau to the surrounding landscape. This effort, community spirited and admirable as it is, is really no more than window dressing, an effort to impose a sense of order on what is otherwise a notably disorderly corner of the world. A small, isolated place, Juneau is composed of fewer than thirty thousand souls perched precariously amid a jumble of glaciers, ice fields, and mountains that sprawl endlessly in every direction. To seaward, a narrow archipelago of equally wild islands separates the city from the Gulf of Alaska, where files of towering gray waves throw themselves ceaselessly against the shore. The clean streets and neatly painted houses provide no more than a diaphanous, even illusory, membrane of safety between the clinging

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pocket of humanity and the enveloping wilderness, one penetrated at will by nature's whim. During spring and summer the police column in the daily newspaper is as likely to report bears ruckusing through the streets breaking into trailer houses and kicking over bird feeders as it is episodes of drunken driving or domestic violence. More significantly, a large portion of the town sits directly in the path of one of the most dangerous avalanche chutes in the world. Every winter a broad alpine funnel pointed directly at Juneau's heart waits for an accumulation of heavy, wet snow to build on top of a layer of older snow that has been scoured to an icy crust by relentless arctic winds—a combination that will someday send several thousand megatons of snow exploding at speeds of up to 180 miles an hour through the back doors of the houses below. In 1972 one avalanche blew down the mountain and screeched to a stop at the very verge of the imaginary membrane, mere yards from a densely populated neighborhood. The powder blast generated by the slide obliterated the town from view, startling the city's residents into a breathless recognition of the true nature of their town's setting. Nonetheless, they dutifully swept away the ice crystals that settled like glittering ash across the sidewalks and within a disturbingly short time began referring to the communal brush with destruction in joking tones.

Across the board, experts agree it is only a matter of when, not if, the Big One will occur, and when it does, it will be no joking matter. But no one, to my knowledge, even considered leaving town after the '72 slide, because Juneau is, after all, a genuinely great place to live. The surrounding wilderness, for all its ability to snatch through the curtain and leave nothing in our place but a vacuum, is also a treasure chest of riches. The mountains give forth deer, wolves, and mountain goats in great numbers. Tumbling streams lined with giant spruce and hemlock trees teem with trout and salmon. The channels and passages fingering in from the gulf boil with shoals of herring, which in turn provide food for whales and sea lions that swim above a seabed alive

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with shrimp and crabs. At the moment Sullivan was climbing onto the rail of the bridge, I was only a short distance away, on an outing with my nephews on my boat, trying to catch some of those crabs. Our first pot came up empty, but the second held two crabs. A lone crab had wandered into the third pot, but the fourth, only a few yards away and a fathom or so deeper, broke the surface bulging with a snapping, squirming dozen. After spilling the pot's contents onto the deck, we did a quick check with a tape measure and confirmed that all of them were legal, large enough across the carapace to satisfy even a hungry man. About then was when Sullivan jumped.

"It wasn't like the movies," said a friend who grabbed Sullivan's arm as he stepped into space. Though fit and athletic, Tom admitted, "There was no way I could hold on."

My nephews and I recovered the body. As we were urged on by the yells of the crowd on the bridge, it took only a quick calculation of the current's set and drift and a search pattern of expanding squares to motor up on what from a distance looked like a scrap of rag, then, as we drew closer, became a T-shirt ballooning with captured air. Two boot heels stuck up from the water. In the roiling current, it took me two or three tries with the boat hook to snag Sullivan's belt. Then there was a burst of frantic activity as would-be rescuers in the form of two strikingly young Coast Guard personnel roared alongside and jerked the corpse from our grip onto their bright orange, overpowered emergency response craft and began a fumbling, wide-eyed CPR before zooming away to a waiting ambulance. They were trying their damndest, but the light was already gone from Sullivan's eyes.

After we returned to the dock and cleaned our catch, I loaded the butchered crabs into a plastic cooler. My oldest nephew helped me carry the heavy cooler up the dock. Then I dropped my nephews off at home and headed out the road. For several years I had been living in a one-room cabin twenty-five miles north of Juneau, on a small, quiet cove more than halfway out the only highway that runs any distance

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from the mountain-corralled town. Go fifteen miles farther and the road dead-ends at a point of nowhere that serves best to remind Juneau's residents that though we may be physically attached to North America and its five hundred million or so other human inhabitants by the bedrock of the continent, we are in essence an island community, accessible only by airplane or ship.

On the day of Sullivan's suicide the twenty-five miles to the cabin was far enough for me to have time to think over the day's events. As I drove, I realized I found them neither particularly disturbing nor traumatic, probably because during my forty years in Alaska I have known death to reach up from the water, out of the trees, down from the peaks, and out of the noise and violence of avalanches, car wrecks, and bear attacks with what some might consider unsettling frequency. I am neither callous nor inured, but in trade for the vast, beautiful heartache of its landscape and other treasures, Alaska often exacts a shocking tithe. Hikers get lost and die within sight of downtown Juneau. Climbers slip and fall. Simple fishing jaunts turn tragic when a boat overturns.

Still, I mulled over what might push a man to leap off a bridge instead of simply waiting for time to throw its dark shadow over him and relieve him of his burdens. A vision of Sullivan floating with his feet slightly spread, arms at his sides, and face gray with lack of life drifted across the windshield of my truck. I saw new leather work boots with no sign of wear; unstained denim pants and a nice belt; a decent shirt; and a full head of hair only slightly in need of cutting. Not a poor man or a street person addled with drugs. So why? A savage divorce? A bankruptcy? The loss of a child?

I could not know. So I let it go and started wondering if I had any beer at the cabin to go with the crab.

The next morning I had to go back to town, a quick run to pick up building supplies for a house I had been laboring on for more than a

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year. After nearly three decades of living on boats and in rustic cabins, even in tents, I had finally decided to “swallow the anchor,” as old-time sailors said, and settle down. The previous summer there had been a brief, explosive courtship with a woman of great charm and breathtaking beauty, and when an opportunity had arisen to build our own home near the cabin, I had decided to do as much as I could with my own hands. Half Filipino, half Chinese, slender, athletic, and exotic, she had come to me with a glitter in her eyes and open arms. “A fifty-year-old bachelor,” laughed a friend familiar with my reclusive ways. “You never had a chance.”

Our wedding took place amid bales of lumber and rolls of tar paper. The wedding feast was laid out on planks and sawhorses. Ed, the eighty-two-year-old owner of the cabin I was living in, gave the bride away. Ed had come to Alaska when it was still a territory, in 1946,* after training to fly torpedo bombers during World War II. Ten years later, after graduating from college in Fairbanks on the GI Bill and joining one of the earliest expeditions to put a man on top of 20,300-foot Mount Denali, he had acquired the land I was building on through a government program that gave veterans preference. He and his wife, Marjory, built their own home a few miles closer to town, rowing in every morning from a nearby island that had been homesteaded by a family named Weshenfelder in the early 1920s. The two worked from first light to last, digging a basement by hand, mixing concrete with a shovel, and moving twenty-four-foot timbers into their roadless home-site with a wheelbarrow. Marjory sprouted a seedling from a maple tree grown on the island by the Weshenfelders and planted it next to their new house. She and Ed watched it grow for forty years, while making plans to someday build a second, smaller home near the cabin. When Marjory passed away unexpectedly, Ed decided to sell the land to me, and he came around on a daily basis after I started building to keep an

* Alaska did not become a state until 1959.

eye on my progress. One day he arrived with a clutch of thumb-sized seedlings sprouted from Marjory's maple.

I pickaxed four holes into the stony ground on the hill below the half-framed house and watched contentedly as my new bride knelt to gently pack a mixture of potting soil, sand, and compost around the tender shoots while admonishing them in a singsong voice to grow strong. When they grew tall enough to drop seeds of their own, I thought, we would sprout some and pass them on to her two grown daughters from a previous marriage, who would in turn pass seeds to their own children someday.

Shortly after the walls were up and the roof was on, however, the marriage started to slide. Immediately after the wedding my wife had begun a new career in a field for which she had great talent, and as word of her abilities spread, she landed first one position, then another and another; by the time the windows were installed, she had not been to the building site for months. Three of the seedlings had died, and after putting out a few nickel-sized leaves, the fourth had been nipped by a porcupine. I had been glad to see a tiny new bud starting out of the gnawed stump that morning and had meant to mention it to her, thinking the news might provide a positive point to help offset a note of friction that had been building between us lately, but she had left in a rush while I was making out a list of supplies. Now, an electrician was coming by in the afternoon to help me lay out the wiring, and I had to put my worries over the troubled marriage aside.

On the way into town I swung onto a side road that curved toward the beach and bumped past an empty campground before parking under a towering spruce tree and clattering down a steep flight of stairs to a friend's home on the waterfront. Luisa had spent the last fourteen years battling breast cancer and was in slow recovery from her third round of chemical and radiological insults to her body. She was also one of those rare, naturally gracious spirits who will inevitably brush aside their own hammering misfortune to quiz a visitor on his or her own well-being.

“Was this you?” she asked, knowing the answer even as she held out the morning paper, where a photo of my boat, the *Wilderness Swift*, and the Coast Guard response boat covered half the front page. “That must have been horrible for you.”

“It wasn’t,” I replied. What I was feeling, I realized, was something like anger. How dare Sullivan give up so easily, while someone like Luisa—breast-lopped, bald, chemical-burned, and shaky, her voice weak with tribulation—was struggling to keep the flame alive?

“It pisses me off,” I said, dropping the paper on the table. “There’s people like you, trying so hard, and he . . .” I did not *want* to feel any empathy. I didn’t *want* to understand why someone would waste his own life. Luisa sighed, exhausted, and curved her spine into the enveloping softness of the couch before glancing out the window at a flock of goldeneyes paddling close to shore. “It’s just so hard for some people . . .”

“How’s your appetite?” I asked, rising to leave.

Luisa lifted her chin and smiled. There was something beatific in her eyes. “I eat like a horse,” she laughed, then stifled a choking cough. I bent down to brush my cheek against hers—her skin was as soft as a baby’s—then looked around the living room at the mementos she and her husband had gathered while traveling around the world making natural history films. An antique engraving of polar bears purchased in England after a trip to the Norwegian Arctic adorned the fireplace mantle. There was a photo of a much younger Luisa with a colorfully dressed African tribesman, and the massive horns of an argali sheep from the mountains of Mongolia, where two years of intense effort and genuine deprivation had made them the first people ever to film a snow leopard in the wild. For two decades Joel and Luisa had been what I think of as “burning building” friends, because I suspected that either one of them would rush into a burning building if I needed them. This may have been hyperbole, but I knew without question that they would come if I called in the middle of the night and would stand up for me if a time ever came when I could not stand up for

myself. We didn't touch each other often or say certain things out loud, but they were family without the benefit of blood or genes.

"I'll check back in a couple of days," I said, retrieving my hat from the table. "See how you're doing."

"How's the house coming?" she asked, keeping her voice low to avoid another coughing fit.

I blew out a sigh, not wanting to set loose the litany of careless subcontractors and soaring costs that seemed to boil on my lips these days. It seemed petty to even consider such things in front of someone whose every thought must be of the looming possibility of losing her own life.

She read me like a book. She and Joel had been through the same frustrations a few years earlier during the construction of their own home. "Don't worry. In another year this will all be over," she said.

"When I get the porch built, we'll sit on it and have a beer," I promised. On the way out I prayed she would still be around when the time had passed.

Two-by-fours, a box of screws, a case of silicone window caulking in tubes—one by one I checked things off my scrawled list until the truck was full and then spun out of the building yard, hurrying to get back out the road. At the last second I cranked the wheel right instead of left, deciding to head for a supermarket a half mile away. Sullivan's suicide was nagging at me, and I could grab a newspaper there, maybe learn something that would explain his jump and help lay him to rest. It seemed like a variety of death's swords and scythes had been punching holes in the backdrop of my life for months, and all morning it had been hard to stop thinking about them. Only a few weeks earlier I had found one of my neighbors, an older woman who had lived alone on a beautifully manicured piece of ground she and her long-passed husband had carved from the rocky coast back in the 1950s, dead in her bedroom, after a concerned friend had called and told me she was not

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answering her phone. When I found her, a medical encyclopedia lay open on a dresser by her bed, bookmarked to a section on the symptoms of heart attacks. And earlier that spring a lifelong friend had died from the effects of nearly thirty years spent trying to lighten the weight of two tours in Vietnam with alcohol. All around me, it seemed, people I knew were being picked off with increasing frequency as accidents, disease, and old age closed in. Sometimes I cried and sometimes I didn't, but the sum of it all was disturbing.

At the market I hopped out of the truck and strode for the door, still intent on getting back to the building site as quickly as possible. It was the height of summer, the days were long, and a lot could get done if I moved fast and worked hard. I kept telling myself that the sooner my wife and I could move into the house, the sooner some of those bumps in our marriage would smooth out. Hurrying, I looked up just in time to catch a reflection in the market window of an older fellow moving toward the door and stopped, unbalanced for a moment by the realization that the reflection was me.

Puzzled, I stepped closer for a better look at the pale figure looking back at me. Silver, brush-cut hair ringed his balding scalp. Unshaven whiskers glittered on his cheeks. There was slack in his chin and something thin about his neck. Bags of exhaustion drooped under his eyes. He was a grizzled old coot and he was me.

"My god," I wondered out loud. "How'd I get so old?"

What I meant was that I'd thought I was younger.

What I really meant was that I'd thought I had more time.

After picking up the newspaper, I sat in the parking lot to read it. Sullivan had been despondent over his lack of insurance to cover the treatment of a spreading cancer.

Back out the road, with the truck unloaded, I took stock as I rushed up and down a ladder, boring holes and pulling wire. The auger bucked in

my hands, and the way the bit chewed through the studs felt good, as did feeding the thick yellow cables through the holes and knitting them together into the complex web of a modern electric home. It was good work, satisfying in the way that things that have a clear purpose and a definite end often are, but I had to admit I was tired. I had been working hard, going eight, ten, sometimes eleven or twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for over a year, and my body was a catalog of aches and pains. Still, the realization that I had somehow drifted into middle age without noticing was a shock and a surprise. True, my knees hurt more or less all the time from the kneeling and crawling, the constant lifting and bending kept a permanent knot in my back, an accident with an excavator when I'd first started clearing the site had left me with a pinched nerve in my neck that had prevented me from sleeping well for months, and the fatigue often left me cranky, but these were things I felt would ease up after the house was finished and I could sit back and relax. And yet, sitting back—or rather its corollary, getting up again—had come to require a grunt of exertion and the use of my hands. So what was next? Grousing with the other old duffers about the size of my prostate? One of those pillboxes with compartments lettered for the days of the week like the ones Luisa jokingly referred to as her “Sun City castanets”?

In all probability, yes. The body is a Judas, and mine was starting to consider turning me in for the silver. I unbuckled my heavy tool belt and let it drop to the floor. Then I walked out the door and down the stairs. The site my wife and I had chosen to build our home on provides a fine view of what I consider heaven. To the east the forested humps and curves of the Herbert and Eagle river drainages wind out of a gash in the northern Coast Range. Both rivers spill from blue and white glaciers in the alpine. To the west is Lynn Canal, the world's longest fjord, where the passage of humpback whales, sea lions, and orcas is a daily occurrence. The far side of Lynn Canal is picketed by a series of 5,000-foot peaks. Beyond these lies one of the world's premier