



Alaska



IT IS JULY 1997. I am driving around Anchorage, Alaska, with three women. We are on a mission, looking for a sex shop in which we can buy a small, *um*, dildo to which we will attach a colorful fly, just one of the trinkets we hope to present to deserving guides at our destination, a fishing lodge on Lake Nunavaugaluk, near Dillingham. But we are hopelessly lost in this sprawling city of 250,000, which comprises half of Alaska's entire population. The city girl in our group, Jane, adamantly states that even if we find the store called "The Look," she will most certainly not be entering "The Look" with us.

Dazed by stuffy plane interiors and the accumulated buzz of continental travel after rigorous flights from the East Coast, we unwind during our automobile tour of Anchorage's confusing grid of strip malls and low buildings. We hoot and holler as we wheel around and around the one-way streets, happily interrupting each other and singing along with the radio. No longer mommies, no longer diligent daughters caring for elderly parents, at least for the time being.

I raise my eyes above the frontier utilitarian kitsch that provides the pepper between the sophisticated, salty, neon glow pronouncing Anchorage a hotbed of social activity. Scribing wild profiles on three sides of this capitol town like encircling shark's teeth, the mountain ranges jut sharply in dark, serrated silhouettes into the clouds above the garish signs that hawk lube jobs, subs, auto centers, fast food joints, RV centers, motels, and cocktail lounges.

When we see a store called "Swinger Books" with blacked-out windows, Gwenn swerves into the other lane. Jane puts her foot down. "NO. You're not going into a store like that. I'm sorry. I'm all for ...you know. But my girls are not going in there."

Uptown girl meets "this tacky mess." We laugh and laugh.

After three hours of aimless driving, we locate "The Look." Jane sits in the car. The sex shop turns out to be a tame

head shop selling funky clothing (amongst stiletto heels, G strings, and pot pipes) to mothers and daughters on the first floor with a discreet corner upstairs devoted to sex toys and aids. Unbelievably, we locate a cheerily packaged fishing lure with the little pink *um*, dildo, impaled on it (it must be a funny Alaskan staple at parties around here). “We’re having a party for boys,” we announce brightly to the salesgirl with the purple hair. She smiles warily. Is this at all unusual up here in male Frontierland?

Upon returning to the hotel, Calamity Jane breaks in her new Stetson, a dandy idea since it resembles a park ranger’s chapeau perched stiffly on her head. After three Bloody Marys on the hotel’s terrace followed by a three-hour nap, we assemble again for drinks overlooking Lake Hood, the float plane capitol of Anchorage. It is my 44th birthday. At 8:15 at night, the sun is still in an early afternoon position in the sky; the mild breeze tempers the surprising heat of this Alaska day. Then it really sinks in: the sun does not go down up here. We are still wearing sunglasses at 9:30 p.m., shielding our eyes from the glare with raised arms and feeling a slow sunburn on our cheeks.

Our small group is composed of Gwenn Perkins, the plucky fly fisher/pilot and co-founder of Casting for Recovery who has organized this ten-women fishing trip to Alaska; Kay, the dryly funny Vermont innkeeper who has never fished before; Jane, the sophisticated New Yorker who changes for dinner and owns six fly rods; and me, who filed for divorce just last week and weeps at the drop of a hat.

We have a full day to explore Anchorage before heading out to the fishing lodge tomorrow and decide to check out Earthquake Park where, in the 1960s, the west side of Anchorage dropped into the sea and the harbor drained in seconds. But at the Park, we find no museum, no signage, only the low expanses of mud flats below sharp cliffs that were created by the land shift, and, far beyond, on the other side of the inlet, the Chigmit Mountain range. To the Alaskan initiate, the mountains look at first like hallucinatory clouds, so high do they poke into the sky and blend their snowy flanks with white drifts of clouds.

“Just you wait,” Gwenn says knowingly with a smug smile. “This is nothing.”

That was a summer of unprecedented warmth. Daytime temperatures stayed in the 90s and one brilliant day the porch thermometer at the lodge read nearly 100 degrees. In Alaska! The side channels of the powerful, wild rivers had become rocky, sandy roadways and the streams had shrunk to Vermont meadow-size. Yet the crimson Sockeye and giant King (Chinook) salmon still forged their way up the shallow rivers from the ocean to spawn, driven by irresistible ancient instincts, with dorsal fins gliding above water like pink sail triangles.

One morning, the flight from the lodge out to a small, privately leased world-class river to fish for ocean-fresh Kings in a refurbished Sikorsky helicopter felt like we were being transported through the air in a floating living room. The floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the seats put you smack into the landscape that passed below you or smack into the mountains that rose above the helicopter’s rotor blades.

At the sight of the untrammelled majesty of the Togiak National Wildlife Refuge and its miles of bouncy tundra, meandering streams, and rock-pocked mountain slopes, tears began to roll again down my cheeks. I wept uncontrollably that day at the magnificence of the natural world, and then again, helplessly, many other times during our aerial forays over southwest Alaska.

I wondered why such powerful, transcendent beauty affected me so, and also why 5,000 miles away from the source, I felt closer to my pain than the previous week when I signed the legal separation papers. Perhaps because the child-rearing responsibilities that had framed my domestic nuclear meltdown were far enough distant that I was free to explore heretofore off-limit emotions. Wiping away annoying tears, I say *enough of that! I can do this!*

But still. How can a human heart contain at once all these impossibly indescribable feelings of awe, gratitude, and sorrow while experiencing vast, pure, wild landscapes of such glory and power?

I have been since told that humans often react with tears when encountering divinity.



The young grizzly limped grotesquely along the edge of the Agulowak River, his right front foot obviously fractured at the ankle. He was alarmingly scrawny and moved forward with halting agony on his useless, dangling paw. Those of us in the canoe, safely on the river and downwind of his nose and invisible to his dim eyes, gasped in compassion. Despite his injury, he was ready for some recreational activity. First came a long scratching session on a pine tree accompanied by a few muted woofs of pleasure. Then he limped over to a crude log bench along the riverbank. It toppled over as he snuffled around underneath.

Then it was the grizzly's lunchtime. With the Alaskan salmon moving upstream to spawn and then dying slowly along the banks, the salmon rivers at that time of the year are like slow-moving cafeteria conveyer belts for grizzlies. The adolescent bear hobbled confidently into the water and, relieved of gravity, shed his disability. After floating gently for a few moments, he plunged his head underwater to search for fish with only his round, golden ears visible. We held our breaths with him until he finally burst up with a wriggling salmon in his mouth. He shook out a spray of sparkling water droplets from his spiky blond fur, rolled over on his back, and used his crippled paw as a plate while he nibbled with surprising delicacy on the fish.

After lunch, he lumbered out of the water, gave a few full shakes of his bony body, and then moving another few yards upstream discovered a giant set of discarded elk horns to maul.



Sometimes, in Alaska, you can walk a riverbank, winding through the willows and the brilliant fireweed, and imagine eyes upon you, the dim-sighted gaze of the grizzlies who suddenly crash through the brush or the keener vision of a Tundra Swan or that of a piebald, immature Bald Eagle or else the omniscient eyes of the invisible god who has granted this splendid outpost of the North American continent somewhat of a reprieve from the plunge into human domination embodied by much of the rest of our country's landscape.

Sometimes you can follow the quite-fresh prints of a grizzly sow and her cubs that are ambling down the stream looking, without much hunger this plentiful summer, for a juicy Pacific salmon meal.

Sometimes you can choose to laughingly believe a lanky, strong fishing guide with amazing bone structure when he admires your fly-fishing prowess and tells you he'll protect you against everything, even grizzlies.

Sometimes you can lie down in the grass, pull your hat over your face, and brush softly the blades nearest your fingertips to remind you that you really are alive and napping on the Alaskan tundra just inches away from your Jimmy Stewart guide.

Sometimes there are no mosquitoes.

Sometimes back at the lodge, when the music plays real loud, you have to climb up on the bar and just dance (with your clothes on).

Sometimes you can walk upstream on the gravel in the wildlife refuge and turn the bend and there is revealed before you a mountain range and valley of such staggering beauty that you want to fall to your knees and weep or pray, if you knew who to. And if you didn't have to march back down the stream with your hunky guide, the two of you Lewis & Clark explorers, in order to meet the others at the float plane in time to make it to the lodge for dinner, you two might just keep going, walking into your halcyon vision, never to be seen again.

Sometimes, when it gets hard to be a human being, you just have to put your foot right into a grizzly bear's paw print, the one embedded deeply in the mud on a riverbank in Alaska.