David Vann

Sukkwan Island
Free Novella with Bonus Material

A Novella from Legend of a Suicide
For my father,

JAMES EDWIN VANN,
1940–1980
I had a Morris Mini with your mom. It was a tiny car, like an amusement-park car, and one of the windshield wipers was busted, so I always had my arm out the window working the wipers. Your mom was wild about mustard fields then, always wanted to drive past them on sunny days, all around Davis. There were more fields then, less people. That was true everywhere in the world. And here we begin home schooling. The world was originally a great field, and the earth flat. And every beast roamed upon the field and had no name, and every bigger thing ate every smaller thing, and no one felt bad about it. Then man came, and he hunched up around the edges of the world hairy and stupid and weak, and he multiplied and grew so numerous and twisted and murderous with waiting that the edges of the world began to warp. The edges bent and curved down slowly, man and woman and child all scrambling over each other to stay on the world and clawing the fur off each other’s backs with the climbing until finally all of man was bare and naked and cold and murderous and clinging to the edge of the world.

His father paused, and Roy said, Then what.

Over time, the edges finally hit. They curled down and all came together and formed the globe, and the weight of this happening set the world spinning and man and beast stopped falling off. Then man looked at man, and since we were all so ugly with no fur and our babies looking like potato bugs, man scattered and went slaughtering and wearing the more decent hides of beasts.

Ha, Roy said. But then what.

Everything after that gets too complicated to tell. Somewhere in there was guilt, and divorce, and money, and the IRS, and it all went to hell.

You think it all went to hell when you married Mom?

His father looked at him in a way that made it clear Roy had gone too far. No, it went to hell sometime before that, I think. But it’s hard to say when.

They were new to the place and to the way of living and to each other. Roy was thirteen, the summer after seventh grade, and had come from his mother in Santa Rosa, California, where he’d had trombone lessons and soccer and movies and gone to school downtown. His father had been a dentist in Fairbanks. The place they were moving into was a small cedar A-frame, steeply pitched. It was tucked inside a fjord, a small finger inlet in southeastern Alaska off Tlevak Strait, northwest of the South Prince of Wales Wilderness and about fifty miles from Ketchikan. The only access was from the water, by seaplane or boat. There were no neighbors. A two-thousand-foot mountain rose directly behind them in a great mound and was connected by low saddles to others at the mouth of the inlet and beyond. The island they were on, Sukkwan Island, stretched several miles behind them, but they were miles of thick rain forest and no road or trail, a rich growth of fern, hemlock, spruce, cedar, fungus, and wild-flower, moss and rotting wood, home of bear, moose, deer, Dall sheep, mountain goat, and wolverine. A place like Ketchikan, where Roy had lived until age five, but wilder, and fearsome now that he was unaccustomed.

As they flew in, Roy watched the yellow plane’s reflection darting across larger reflections of green-black mountain and blue sky. He saw the trees coming closer on either side, and then they hit and the spray flew up. Roy’s father stuck his head out the side window, grinning, excited. Roy felt for a moment as if he were coming into an enchanted land, a place that couldn’t be real.

And then the work began. They had as much gear as the plane could carry. His father inflated the Zodiac with the foot pump down on one pontoon, and Roy helped the pilot lower the Johnson six-horse outboard over the transom, where it dangled, waiting, until the boat was fully inflated. Then they attached it, lowered the gas can and the extra jerry cans, and that was the first trip. His father went in alone, Roy waiting anxiously inside the plane while the pilot couldn’t stop talking.

Up near Haines, that was where I tried.

I haven’t been there, Roy said.

Well, like I was saying, you got your salmon and your fresh bear and a lot of things other people will never have,
but then that’s all you got, including no other people.
Roy didn’t answer.
It’s peculiar, is all. Most don’t bring their kids with them. And most bring some food.
They had brought food, at least for the first week or two, and then the staples they wouldn’t want to do without: flour and beans, salt and sugar, brown sugar for smoking. Some canned fruit. But mostly they were going to eat off the land. That was the plan. They would have fresh salmon, Dolly Varden, clams, crab, and whatever they hunted: deer, bear, sheep, goat, moose. They had brought two rifles and a shotgun and a pistol.
You’ll be all right, the pilot said.
Yeah, Roy said.
And I’ll come and check on you now and again.
When Roy’s father returned, he was grinning and trying not to grin, not looking directly at Roy as they loaded the radio equipment in a watertight box, then the guns in waterproof cases and the fishing gear and tools, the first of the canned goods in cases. Then it was listening to the pilot again as his father curved away, leaving a small wake behind him that was white just behind the transom but smoothed out into dark ridges, as if they could disrupt only this small part and at the edge this place would swallow itself again in moments. The water was very clear but deep enough even just this far out that Roy couldn’t see bottom. In close along shore, though, at the edges of reflection, he could make out the glassy shapes beneath of wood and rock.
His father wore a red flannel hunting shirt and gray pants. He wasn’t wearing a hat, though the air was cooler than Roy had imagined. The sun was bright on his father’s head, shining in his thin hair even from a distance. His father squinted against the morning glare, but still one side of his mouth was turned up in his grin. Roy wanted to join him, to get to land and their new home, but there were two more trips before he could go. They had packs filled with clothing in garbage bags and rain gear and boots, blankets, two lamps, more food, and books. Roy had a box of books just for school. It would be a year of home schooling: math, English, geography, social studies, history, grammar, and eighth grade science, which he didn’t know how they’d do since it had experiments and they didn’t have any of the equipment. His mother had asked his father about this, and his father had not given a clear answer. Roy missed his mother and sister suddenly and his eyes teared up, but then he saw his father pushing off the gravel beach and returning again and he made himself stop.
When he finally crawled into the boat and let go of the pontoon, the starkness hit him. It was nothing they had now, and as he watched the plane behind them taxi in a tight circle, then grind up loud and take off spraying over the water, he felt how long time might be, as if it could be made of air and could press in and stop itself.
Welcome to your new home, his father said, and put his hand on top of Roy’s head, then his shoulder.
By the time the plane was out of earshot, they had bumped the dark, rocky beach and Roy’s father was out in his hip boots pulling at the bow. Roy got out and reached back for a box.
Leave that for now, his father said. Let’s just tie off and take a look around.
Nothing will get into the boxes?
No. Come here.
They walked through shin-high grass, bright green in the sun, and up a path through a small stand of cedars to the cabin. It was weathered and gray but not very old. Its roof was steeply peaked to keep off the snow and the entire cabin and its front porch were raised six feet off the ground. It had only a narrow door and two small windows. Roy looked at the stovepipe jutting out and hoped that it was a fireplace, too.
His father didn’t take him into the cabin but skirted it on a small trail that continued farther up the hill.
The outhouse, his father said.
It was the size of a closet and raised up, with steps. It was less than a hundred feet from the cabin, but they would be using it in the cold, in winter snow. His father continued on.
There’s a nice view up here, he said.
They came to a rise through nettles and berry, the earth breaking beneath their feet, grown over since it had last been traveled. His father had come here four months earlier to see it once before buying it. Then he’d convinced Roy and Roy’s mother and the school. He’d sold his practice and his house, made his plans, and bought their gear.
The top of the hillock was overgrown to the point that Roy wasn’t tall enough for a clear view on all sides, but he could see the inlet like a shiny tooth sprung out of the rougher water outside and the extension beyond to another distant island or shore and the horizon, the air very clear and bright and the distances impossible to know. He could see the top of their roof close below him, and around the inlet the grass and lowland extending no more than a hundred feet at any point, the steepness of the mountain behind them disappearing at its very top in cloud.
No one else for miles around, his father said. Our closest neighbor as far as I know is about twenty miles from here, a small group of three cabins on a similar inlet. But they’re on a different island, and I can’t remember right now which one it is.
Roy didn’t know what to say so he didn’t say anything. He didn’t know how anything would be.

They hiked back down to the cabin then, through a sweet and bitter smell coming from one of the plants, a smell that reminded Roy of his childhood in Ketchikan. In California he had thought all the time of Ketchikan and rain forest and had formed an image in his imaginings and in his boastings to his friends of a wild and mysterious place. But put back into it, the air was colder and the plants were lush but still only plants and he wondered how they would pass the time. Everything was sharply itself and nothing else.

They clunked up onto the porch in their boots. His father opened the lock on the door, swung it wide for Roy to step in first. Roy when he went in smelled cedar and wetness and dirt and smoke and it took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust properly to see more than the windows and begin to see the beams above and how high the ceiling went and the rough look of the planks for the walls and floor with their sawed-through knot-holes but the smooth feel of them nonetheless.

It all seems new, Roy said.

It’s a well-built cabin, his father said. The wind won’t come through these walls. We’ll be comfortable enough as long as we keep wood for the stove. We have all summer to prepare things like that. We’ll put away dried and smoked salmon, too, and make some jam and salt deer. You’re not going to believe all the things we’re going to do.

They started that day by cleaning the cabin. They swept and dusted, then his father took Roy down a path with a bucket to where a small stream fed into the inlet. It ran deep through the short meadow, making three or four S-cuts in the grass before feeding out through the gravel and dumping a small fan of lighter stuff, sand and dirt and debris, into the saltwater. There were waterbugs on its surface, and mosquitoes.

Time for the bug dope, his father said.

They’re all over the place, Roy said.

All the fresh water we could ever want, his father said proudly, as if he had put the stream there himself. We’ll be drinking well.

They put repellent on their faces, wrists, and the backs of their necks, then set to wiping down everything in the cabin with bleach and water to kill all the mildew. Then they dried it with rags and began bringing in their gear.

The cabin had a front room with the windows and the stove, and it had a back or really side room with no windows and a large closet.

We’ll be sleeping out here, his father said, in the main room by the fire. We’ll put our stuff back there.

So they carried in the equipment and put it in the closet, the stuff that was most precious and most needed to stay dry. They packed in the supplies, the canned goods along the wall, the dry goods in plastic in the middle, their clothes and bedding near the door. Then they went to gather wood.

We need dead stuff, Roy’s father said. And none of it will be dry, so maybe actually we should just gather a little to take inside and then we should start building something off the back wall of the cabin.

They had brought tools, but it sounded to Roy as if his father were discovering some of this as he went along. The idea that dry wood was not something his father had thought of ahead of time frightened Roy.

We’ll need shingles, his father said. They stood side by side, both with their arms folded, and stared at the wall. Mosquitoes buzzed around them. It was cold here in the shade even though the sun was high. They might have been having a discussion about some kind of trouble Roy was in, they were so removed from what they were looking at.

We can use poles or saplings or something for the supports, his father said. But we need some kind of roof, and it has to come out a ways for when the rain or snow is blowing sideways.

It seemed impossible. All of it seemed impossible to Roy, and they seemed terribly unprepared. Any old boards lying around? he asked.

I don’t know, his father said. Why don’t you take a look up around the outhouse and I’ll poke around here.

Roy felt there was a kind of leveling. Neither knew what to do and both would have to learn. He hiked the short distance to the outhouse and could see the plants already ground down by their passing. They would wear paths in everything, everywhere they went. He circled the outhouse and stepped on one small board that had been overgrown. He pulled it out, scraped the dirt and grass and bugs off it and saw that it was rotten. He tore it apart in his hands. Inside the outhouse was a roll of toilet paper with water stains at the edges and a seat nailed onto the wooden bench and a smell different than a portable toilet because it didn’t smell like chemicals or hot plastic. It smelled like old shit and old wood and mildew and old urine and smoke. It was grimy and damp and there were cobwebs in the corners. He saw two pieces of board about two or three feet long, stacked behind the toilet, but he
didn’t want to pick them up because he couldn’t see well in the shadows and he didn’t know what they had been used for or whether they had black widows on them. One of the daughters of his father’s neighbors in Fairbanks had been bitten by a whole family of black widows when she’d put her foot into an old shoe in the attic. They had all bitten her, six or seven of them, but she hadn’t died. She’d been sick for over a month. Or maybe this was just a story. But Roy had to leave suddenly. He jumped back fast, let the door on its spring slam itself shut, and wiped his hands on the thighs of his jeans as he backed away.

Find anything up there? his father called.

No, he shouted, turning back down toward the cabin. Just two small boards maybe, but I’m not sure what they’re being used for.

How’s the outhouse? His father was grinning when Roy got to him. Is it going to be something to look forward to? The big event?

No way. It gives me the creeps in there.

Wait till you have your butt hanging out over the void.

God, Roy said.

I found a few boards under the cabin, his father said. Not in great shape, but usable. It still looks like we’re going to have to make a few boards. Ever made boards before?

No.

I’ve heard it can be done.

Great. He could see his father grinning.

The first bit of home schooling, his father said. Board-Making 101.

So they cut up what they had and looked out in the forest for support poles and a log or tree big enough and fresh enough for boards. The forest was dimly lit and very quiet except for dripping and the sounds of their own boots and breath. Some wind in the leaves above, but not steady. Moss grew thickly at the bases of the trees and over their roots, and strange flowers that Roy remembered now from Ketchikan appeared suddenly in odd places, behind trees and under ferns and then right in the middle of a small game path, red and deep purple in stalks thick as roots, waxy-looking. And fallen wood everywhere but all of it rotten, coming apart in dark reds and browns as they touched it. He remembered nettles in time not to touch the hair that looked like silk and he remembered what they had called conks on the trees, though that word seemed strange now. He remembered knocking them off with rocks and taking them home to engrave on their smooth white faces. What he remembered most was the constant sense of being watched.

He stayed close by his father on this initial trip. He was alarmed that neither of them was carrying a gun. He was looking for bear sign, half hoping for it. He had to remind himself constantly that he was supposed to be looking for wood.

We’re going to have to cut fresh, his father said. Nothing here will be new enough. The wood rot sets in too fast. Is any of this coming back to you? Are you remembering Ketchikan?

Yeah.

It’s not like Fairbanks here. Everything has a different feel. I think maybe I’ve been in the wrong place for too long. I’d forgotten how much I like being by the water, and how much I like the mountains coming right up like this and the smell of the forest. Fairbanks is all dry, and the mountains are only hills and every tree is the same as every other tree. It’s all paper birch and spruce, pretty much, endless. I used to look out my window and wish I could see some other kind of tree. I don’t know what it is, but I haven’t felt at home for years, haven’t felt a part of any place I’ve been. Something’s been missing, but I have a feeling that being here, with you, is going to fix all that. Do you know what I mean?

His father looked at him and Roy didn’t know how to talk with his father like this. Yeah, he said, but he didn’t. He didn’t know at all what his father was really saying or why he was going on like that. And what if things didn’t work out the way his father was saying they were going to work out? What then?

Are you all right? his father asked, and he put his arm around his boy’s shoulders. We’ll be all right here. Okay?

I’m just talking. Okay?

Roy nodded and stepped out of his father’s grasp to continue looking for wood.

They brought what little they had found back to the cabin, and it was clearly not much of anything, so his father took out the ax, but then looked up at the sky and changed his mind. You know, it’s getting a little late in the afternoon here, and we need food and we need to set up our bunks and stuff, so maybe this should wait.

So they got at the dry wood that was in the small box behind the cabin, which they found had an access door from the inside, and they used some of this wood to get a fire going in the stove.

It will be our heat, too, his father said. It’ll keep us toasty, and we can get it to slow-burn all night if we close off the vents.
We’ll need that, Roy said. Though he knew it wouldn’t be like Fairbanks here. Single digits and below zero would be rare. His father had promised everyone that. He had sat in their living room with his elbows on his knees and stressed how safe and easy it all would be. Roy’s mother had pointed out that his father’s predictions had rarely come true. When he had protested, she’d brought up commercial fishing, the hardware store investment, and several of his dental practices. She hadn’t mentioned either marriage, but that had been clear, also. His father had ignored all this and told them that mostly it would be above freezing.

Once they had the fire going, Roy went for cans of chili in the other room and his father asked for bread, too, to toast on top. It was dim in the cabin, even though it was still afternoon outside and the real darkness wouldn’t come until very late. He did remember this, all the evenings as a little kid he’d had to go to bed while it was still light. He wasn’t sure what the rules were now, but it seemed like all the normal ones about homework and bedtime were off. He’d never be busy and never have to get up for school. And he’d never see anyone else other than his father.

They ate their chili out on the porch, their booted feet dangling. There was no railing around the porch. They watched the calm inlet and an occasional Dolly Varden leaping. There were no salmon leaping yet, but that would come later in the summer.

When’s salmon season again?
July and August mostly, depending on the type. We might get the first run of pinks in June.

They stayed on the porch after they were done and didn’t say anything more. The sun didn’t set but sat low on the horizon for a long time. A few small birds came in and out of the bushes around them, then a bald eagle came down from behind, the sun golden on its white head, its feathers a chalky brown. It flew to the end of the point and landed in the top of a spruce tree.

You don’t see that everywhere, his father said.
No.

Finally the sun started dipping down and they went inside to arrange their sleeping bags on backpacking pads on the floor of the main room. Roy could see red in the sky outside their narrow window as he and his father undressed in darkness. Then they lay in their bags, neither one of them sleeping. The ceiling vaulted out from Roy and the floor hardened beneath him and his mind wallowed until finally he drifted off, then came back because he realized he was hearing his father weeping quietly, the sounds sucked in and hidden. The room so small and Roy didn’t know if he could pretend not to be hearing, but he pretended anyway and lay there awake another hour it seemed and his father still hadn’t stopped but finally Roy was too tired. He stopped hearing his father and slept.

In the morning his father was grilling pancakes and singing softly, “King of the Road.” He heard Roy wake, looked down at him grinning. He lifted his eyebrows up and down. Hotcakes and cream-of-mushroom? he asked.

Yeah, Roy said. That sounds great. It was like they were just camping.

His father handed down a big plate of hotcakes with cream-of-mushroom soup on top and a fork and Roy set it aside for a moment, pulled on his jeans, boots, and jacket, and they went out onto the porch together to eat.

It was late morning, a breeze already coming up the inlet and forming small ripples in the water. The surface was opaque.

Did you sleep well? his father asked.
Roy didn’t look at him. It seemed his father was asking whether he’d heard him weeping, but his father had asked as if it were a regular question. And Roy had pretended just to be sleeping, so he answered, Yeah, I slept all right.

First night in our new home, his father said.
Yeah.

Do you miss your mother and Tracy?
Yeah.

Well, you will for a while probably, until we get settled in here.
Roy didn’t believe he could get settled to the point of not missing his mother and sister. And they were going to get away periodically. That had been another of his father’s promises. They would come out every two or three months or so for a visit, two weeks at Christmas. And there was the ham radio. They could pass along messages with that if they needed to, and messages could be passed to them.

They ate in silence for a while. The pancakes were a little burned and one of them doughy inside from being too thick, but the cream-of-mushroom on them was good. The air was cool but the sun was getting stronger. This was like Little House on the Prairie or something, sitting out on a porch with no railing and their boots dangling and no one else around for miles. Or maybe not like that, maybe like gold miners. It could be a different century.

I like this, Roy said. I’d like it to stay sunny and warm like this all year.
His father grinned. Two or three months anyway. But you’re right. This is the life.

Are we gonna start fishing?
I was just thinking about that. We should start this evening, after we work on the lean-to for the wood. And we’ll build a little smoker back there, too.

They put the dishes in the small sink, and then Roy went to the outhouse. He held the door open with one foot and inspected all around the seat as best as he could, but finally he just had to use it and trust that nothing was going to take a bite out of him.

When he returned, his father grabbed the ax and saw and they went looking for board trees. As they walked through the forest, they looked at trunks, but mostly it was just hemlock in here, no thicker than four or five inches. Farther up the draw the trees shrank even more, so they turned around and went down along the shore to the point, where a larger stand of spruce grew. His father began chopping at the base of one that was farther in and partway around the point.

Don’t want to wreck our own view, he said. It occurred to Roy that maybe chopping down trees here wasn’t even legal, because it was some kind of National Forest, but he didn’t say anything. His father had been known on occasion to ignore the law when it came to hunting, fishing, and camping. He had taken Roy hunting once in suburban Santa Rosa, California, for instance. They had only the pellet gun and were going for dove or quail on some land they found beside a road that was fairly out of the way. When the owner walked down, he didn’t say anything but just watched them as they got back into the car and drove away.

Roy took over with the ax, feeling the thud each time through his arms and studying how white the chips of wood were that flung out loosely around the base.

Careful how it falls, his father said. Think about where the balance is.

Roy stopped and studied the tree, then moved halfway around it and gave the last two blows and it fell away from them, ripping down through branches and leaves, other trunks quivering under the shock and looking like a crowd of bystanders at some horrific scene, all of them trembling and thrown and an odd silence afterward.

Well, his father said, that should be good for a few boards at least.

They stripped the branches and put them in a pile to go through later for kindling and, Roy thought to himself, a possible bow and arrows. They got at each end then to carry it back to the cabin, but it was much heavier than either of them had expected, so they sawed it into sections then and there, most at about two feet but two longer sections for longer boards, for the sides of the smoker especially. Then they carried the pieces to the back of the cabin and stood around afterward looking at them.

We don’t have the right tools.

No, Roy said. We’ll have to just use the ax or saw or something. What do you usually use to make boards?

I don’t know. Some kind of tool we don’t have. I think we can stand them up on end and saw, though.

So they tried a piece like that, stood it on end and placed the saw across at about an inch from the edge and worked it through slowly, trying to keep straight.

The pieces are all going to be different sizes, Roy said.

Yep.

It turned out that it took a long time and didn’t work well and was more of a one-person job since they had only one saw, so Roy went in for the fishing gear and put their poles together on the porch. He tied a Pixie on each line, with a swivel about three feet above it, then walked around back. His father was still working on the first board.

His father didn’t look up but kept at his work. His breath was puffing out in the cold and his face looked gaunt like a bird’s—small sunken eyes, thin lips, a nose that looked almost hooked right now, and a light fringe of hair that seemed no more than a ruffle.

I have the poles ready, Roy said.

Catch us a big one, his father said and looked up for a moment. And then get your sawing hand ready. I see now this job is going to take us about the next four months.

Roy smiled. All right. I’ll be back.

The point was windier. Roy stood at the edge where the wind waves were up to two or three feet slapping into the shore and he could see whitecaps out there. He hadn’t realized how sheltered their little cove was. He walked up and down the shoreline for a few minutes, gazing at the white polished rocks and into the tree line behind that was up on a ruff of grass and dirt and root that skirted the beach everywhere and everywhere was exposed. He didn’t know how the dirt stayed there, but when he studied it up close, he saw that it was mostly moss and root. He thought of bears and looked around and saw no sign but walked back to the point, within view of the cabin, and threw his lure out across the mouth of their cove to catch the salmon tumbling in or slipping out.

He couldn’t see his lure or any fish at all, but he remembered times in the coves around Ketchikan of standing on the bow of his father’s boat and seeing the fish everywhere beneath him. They would have that here in later months, but still he hoped today he might catch an early one.
When something did hit, it was a small Dolly Varden, a white flash and tug. He pulled it up easily onto the smooth rocks, where it gasped and bled and he removed the hook and smashed its head and it died. It had been a little while since he’d caught a fish, almost a year. He bent down to look at it and watch its colors fade.

You were spawned on rocks like these, and to these rocks dost thou return, he spoke and grinned. Thou hast becometh lunch.

He built up some rocks around it to keep the eagle away, and he thought of his last English class and the plays they had done and how he wouldn’t have any of that this year. He didn’t have his friends, either, and there were no girls here.

As he trundled his lure back across the mouth again and again, he was thinking of girls in school and then of a particular girl and kissing her on the way home. He got an erection thinking about it and looked toward the cabin, then pulled in his line and went back into the trees, where he leaned against one tree with his pants open and masturbated and imagined kissing her and came. He had figured out how to masturbate less than a year before and he hadn’t been able to since he’d arrived because his father was always there.

He sat down by another tree and felt lonely and thought of all his missed opportunity.

Then, bored, he fished again, caught another the same size, and returned to his father. The afternoon was getting later by now, the light richer and the view of the mountain as he walked back very beautiful.

His father was still sawing when he came up.

There you are, his father said. Hey, looks like dinner. Dolly Varden, both of them?

Yeah.

Great. And he started singing what sounded like a sea chantey. Oh, the Dolly Varden came swimming, and up he grabbed his rod. And caught two or three and brought them back, and ate them with his grog.

His father smiled, pleased with himself. Better than radio?

Definitely, Roy said. This was an odd father he was seeing out here. I can cook them while you finish up. How’s it going?

His father pointed at his pile. Looks like ten or fifteen of the finest shingles anywhere, I’d say. And all very uniform. We know about quality control here on the ranch.

The ranch, Roy said. Looks like a pretty small spread.

The herds are farther back on the island.

Yeah, Roy said. I’ll fix some dinner. He cleaned the fish out front at the water’s edge and watched the guts just under the water, caught on the rocks and streaming back and forth with the small waves that came in. They looked like aliens. One had what looked like eyes.

He started the fire in the stove, then put the fish in a pan with butter and pepper and went back out to the porch feeling like a pioneer, feeling so good he walked around back to his father and watched him and talked until he figured the fire was hot enough and he went back in and rearranged the coals and fried up the fish.

They had the Varden out on the porch with sourdough bread and some lettuce and dressing.

Enjoy the lettuce, his father said. It won’t last more than a week, and then we’re down to canned veggies only. Are we gonna grow anything?

We could, his father said. We’d need seeds, though. I didn’t think of that. We can have Tom bring some next time he flies in.

You’ll order by radio?

His father nodded. We should try it out, anyway. The evening’s the best time, so maybe we can set it up after dinner.

They watched the sun getting lower. It was so slow they couldn’t see it dropping, but they could see the light changing on the water and on the trees, the shadow behind every leaf and ripple in the sideways light making the world three-dimensional, as if they were seeing trees through a viewfinder.

They put their plates in the sink and brought the radio gear into the main room, in the far corner. His father plugged it into two large batteries and then remembered the antenna.

We need to put this on the roof, he said. So they went out and looked and decided it was too big a project and decided to wait for the next day.

That night, late, his father wept again. He talked to himself in small whispers that sounded like whining as he cried and Roy couldn’t make out what he said or fathom what his father’s pain was or where it came from. The things his father said to himself only made him weep harder, as if he were driving himself on. He would grow quiet and then tell himself another thing and weep harder. Roy didn’t want to hear it. It frightened and disabled him and he had no way of acknowledging it, now or during the day. He couldn’t sleep until after his father had ceased and fallen away himself.
In the morning, Roy remembered the crying, and it seemed to him that this was exactly what he was not supposed to do. By some agreement he had never been witness to, he was supposed to hear it at night and then by day not only forget but somehow make it not have happened. He began to dread their nights together, though they had had only two.

His father was cheery again in the morning and cooking eggs and hash browns and bacon. Roy pretended to be sleepier than he was and having a harder time awakening because he wanted to think and he wasn’t ready yet to join in on the cheer and the forgetting.

The smell of the food cooking, though, got him up finally, and he asked, So are we doing the radio today? Sure, and the wood shed and smoker and why don’t we build a little summer cottage?
Roy laughed. It’s true there are a lot of things. More than eggs in a salmon.

They ate on the porch again, Roy thinking it would be a lot harder in bad weather, when they’d have to sit cramped in that little room inside. This morning was overcast as it was, though it was still warm enough for only a sweatshirt. He remembered it had been gray like this or drizzling most of the time in Ketchikan. He liked how it looked on the water, how the water became a molten gray, the sea heavier than anything and impossible to see into, and how the salmon and halibut rose up out of this.

After breakfast, they set about installing the antenna but could not find a way onto the roof. They didn’t have a ladder, and there was no lip at the edge, nothing to hold on to, no high rails or other walls to brace against. His father stepped away from the cabin and walked around it several times.

Well, he said, without a ladder, I guess we’re not going up there. And even then, I’m not sure how high a ladder is going to get us.

So they strung the antenna along the edge of the roof. It turned out that the antenna was only a long cord on a spool anyway, so the solution seemed fine. But when his father set up the radio and tried the reception, they couldn’t hear anything clearly. It was only static and ticking and oddwarped sounds that reminded Roy of old science fiction, of black-and-white TV, Ultraman and Flash Gordon. And this was supposed to be their only contact with anyone else.

Are we going to be able to talk with anyone? Roy asked.
I’m working on it, his father said, impatient. Hold it down for a sec.
It doesn’t seem like it’s changing at all, Roy added after another few minutes of warping.

His father turned and looked at him tight-lipped. Go do something else for a little while, okay? You can work on sawing the shingles.

Roy went around back and looked at the shingles and started in on one, but he didn’t feel in the mood, so he found an elbow in one of the larger branches that came out at forty-five degrees. He sawed about eight inches from either end of the elbow and started carving the piece down with his pocketknife to make a throwing stick. He wondered if there were any rabbits or squirrels up here. He couldn’t remember. He’d make a fish spear, too, and a bow and arrows and a rock hatchet.

He worked on the throwing stick, flattening the sides and rounding the ends, until his father came out, saying, I can’t get the damn thing to work, and then saw what Roy was doing and stopped. What’s that?
I’m making a throwing stick.

A throwing stick? His father turned away and then turned back. Okay. That’s fine. Never mind. You know, I’m losing it here already, and the whole point was to relax and find a different way of living, so fine. Let’s quit this project and just take a break.

He looked at Roy, who was wondering whether his father was really speaking to him.
Why don’t we go for a hike? he said. Get out your rifle and shells. We’re gonna take a look around today.
Roy didn’t say anything, because the whole arrangement felt too shaky. He wasn’t sure they wouldn’t have a different plan in a few more minutes. But his father went inside, and when Roy followed him, his father was in there taking his own rifle out of its case, so Roy went for his, too, and stuffed some shells in his pocket and grabbed his hat and jacket.

Better bring your canteen, too, his father said.

When they set off, it was still before noon. They entered the hemlock forest and followed a game trail up and down small hills until they came to spruce and cedar at the base of the mountain. The game trail they were on petered out and they were hiking then on blueberry and other low growth, trying to keep their footing in the scrub. The earth beneath was uneven, spongy and full of holes. They passed hemlocks again and rested to look out over the inlet. They were both winded, already at least five hundred feet above their cabin and the mountain above them so steep they couldn’t see its top but only the curve of its flank. The cabin below looked very small and difficult to
believe.
The other islands, his father said. You can see them much better from here.
Where’s the mainland?
A long ways behind us, past all of Prince of Wales Island and some other islands, too, I think. In the east. That’s one thing we won’t see much of, is the sunrise. We’re in shadow until midmorning.
They stayed there a while longer looking out and then grabbed their rifles and started climbing again. Small wildflowers crumpling beneath their boots and hands, moss and the blueberry that wasn’t yet in season and odd grasses. There were no animals around that Roy could see, and then he saw a chipmunk on a rock.
Hold on, Dad, he said, and his father turned. Roy reached back and flung his stick. It went wide of the chipmunk about ten feet, bounced several times, and stopped about fifty feet down the mountain.
Oh, man, he said, and he left his rifle, retrieved the stick, and returned.
I guess we won’t count on that getting dinner for a while, his father said.
As they rose higher, they started hearing more wind and a few small birds flitted past. They still weren’t on any kind of trail.
Where are we going? Roy asked.
His father kept hiking for a while and finally said, I guess we’re just going up to the top and have a look around.
Farther up, though, they hit the cloud line. They stopped and looked down. It was overcast everywhere, and no bright light, but the low areas were clear of fog and cloud, at least, and warmer. Here on the edge great fans of cloud reached down and then were blown past. Above only a few faint outlines and then everything was opaque. The wind through here was stronger and the air damp and much colder.
Well, his father said.
I don’t know, Roy said.
But they continued on higher into the clouds and cold and still there was no trail. Roy as they passed tried to make from the dim shapes around them bear and wolf and wolverine. The cloud enclosed him and his father in their own sound so that he could hear his own breath and the blood in his temples as if it were outside of him and this too increased his sense of being watched, even hunted. His father’s footsteps just ahead of him sounded enormous. The fear spread through him until he was holding his breath in tight gasps and couldn’t ask to go back.
His father kept hiking on and never turned. They climbed past the tree line and past the thick low growth to thinner moss and very short hard grasses and occasional small wildflowers showing pale beneath. They hiked over small outbreaks of rock and finally mostly rock and they climbed up steeper cairns holding the ground above with one hand, their rifles in the other, until his father stopped and they were standing at what seemed to be the very top and they could see nothing beyond the pale shapes below them disappearing after twenty feet, as if the world ended in cliff all around and nothing more could be found above. They stood there for a long time, long enough for Roy’s breath to calm and the heat to go out from him so that he felt the cold on his back and in his legs and long enough for the blood to stop in his ears so that he could hear the wind now passing over the mountaintop. It was cold, but there was a kind of comfort to this place in the way it enclosed. The gray was everywhere and they were a part of it.
Not much of a view, his father said, and he turned and they descended the way they had come and they did not speak again until they were out of the clouds.
His father looked across the low saddle extending to the next ridge and then at what they could see behind this saddle, more mountains beyond and uncertain in the gray. Maybe we should just head back down, he said. It’s not very warm or clear, and there don’t seem to be many trails.
Roy nodded and they continued down through the low growth to the small forests at the mountain’s base and along the game trail to their cabin.
When they got there, it didn’t look right. The front door was hanging slantwise on one hinge and there was trash on the porch.
What the hell, his father said, and they both jogged over and then slowed when they got up to the cabin.
Looks like bears, his father said. That’s our food on the porch.
Roy could see ripped garbage bags of dry goods and the canned goods spilling out the door over the porch and onto the grass below.
They might still be in there, his father said. Put a shell in the chamber and take the safety off, but don’t get jumpy on me, and keep the barrel down. Okay?
Okay.
So they levered in shells and walked slowly toward the cabin until his father went up and banged on the wall and yelled and then waited and nothing moved or made a sound.
Doesn’t seem like they’re here, he said, but you never know. He went up on the porch then and pushed the broken door aside with his barrel and tried to peek in. It’s dark in there, he said. And bears are dark. I hate this. But he
finally just stepped in and stepped back out again quickly and then slowly stepped in again. Roy couldn’t hear a thing, his blood was going so crazy. He imagined his father thrown out the front door with the bear after him, his gun knocked away, and Roy would shoot the bear in the eye and then in the open mouth, perfect shots the way his father had told him he would have to aim to kill a bear with a .30-.30.

His father came out again, though, unharmed, and said the bear was gone. He tore up everything, he said. Roy looked inside and it took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust but then he saw their bedding all torn up and food everywhere and the radio in pieces and parts of the stove taken apart. Everything wrecked. He didn’t see anything that was still whole, and it did not escape him that this was all they had to live on for a very long time. They had no way of calling anyone else now, either, and they had no place to sleep.

I’m going after him, his father said. What?

There’s no sense in putting everything back together if he’s still out there and can just do this again. And it might not be safe for us, either. He might come back again at night looking for more food.

But it’s late and he could be anywhere, and we have to eat and figure out what to sleep in and… Roy didn’t know how to continue. His father wasn’t making any sense.

You can stay here and put things together, his father said. And I’ll be back after I kill the bear.

I have to stay here by myself?

You’ll be all right. You have your rifle and I’m going to be following the bear, anyway.

I don’t like this, Roy said.

Neither do I. And his father took off. Roy stood on the porch watching him disappear up the path and couldn’t believe what was happening. He felt afraid and started talking out loud: How could you just leave me here? I don’t have anything to eat and I don’t know when you’re coming back.

He was terrified. He walked around the cabin like this and wanted his mother and sister and his friends and everything he had left behind, until finally he was getting cold and hungry enough that he stopped, went in, and started inspecting the sleeping bags to see if anything was usable.

His father’s bag was still almost in one piece. It had only a few small tears in it. But his own bag had been used as some kind of toy. The upper half of it had been shredded and the stuffing strewn all over the room. He could use the bottom half still, he thought, but there would be no way to repair the rest.

The food was almost all wrecked. Some of the bags of flour and white sugar and salt were still intact, but only some of them, and the brown sugar for smoking had been eaten completely. There were still some cans of food that had only been dented, but most had been punctured.

Roy put the pieces of the stove back on that had been knocked off. He started a fire in there, put the only two cans of unopened chili in a pot that wasn’t too badly dinged up, heated the chili, and sat out on the porch waiting for his father.

When it got dark and still his father wasn’t back, Roy reheated and ate the chili, both cans because he couldn’t stop. I ate your chili, he apologized out loud, as if his father could hear.

Roy stayed up that night, in his father’s sleeping bag on the porch with his rifle across his knees, and still his father didn’t return. When morning came he hadn’t slept and he was hungry and felt sick and very cold from being out on the porch, so he went inside.

The radio wasn’t hurt too badly. It had just been sat on or something, it looked like. But still it might not work anymore. Roy couldn’t tell. He wanted to be able to do something, something useful, but he just didn’t know anything about the radio. So he went back outside in his boots and his warm jacket and hat and gloves, all of which were still okay, and he started sawing shingles. He kept his rifle near him with a shell already in the chamber and the safety off and he sawed and thought about shooting his gun into the air a few times. His father would come then, but he’d also be angry, because the shots would be about nothing. He wanted his father just to return. He didn’t like this at all. He had no idea what to do.

When it was afternoon, he had made only a few shingles and had a blister on his thumb. The shingles were impossibly difficult. Something wasn’t right about how they were doing it. His father hadn’t come back and he hadn’t heard any gunshot, so he got up to write a note saying, I’ve gone looking for you. I’ll be back in a couple hours. I’m leaving in the afternoon.

He set off the way his father had gone, but he realized quickly that he had no idea which way to go. He looked at the ground and could see faintly the signs that they had walked here yesterday. Occasionally a bootprint but mostly just torn-up dirt and flattened grass. He followed this trail, though, to where the mountain started and there was no way of seeing any track in that spongy stuff and he hadn’t seen any trail heading off the main one, so he sat down against the mountain and tried to think.

His father hadn’t left him anything to go on. He hadn’t said where he’d be going or for how long. So Roy just sat
there and cried, then walked back down to the cabin. He tore up the note and sat on the porch looking out at the water, and he ate some bread and peanut butter and scooped up a little of the jam from where the jar had been smashed on the rocks below the porch. Ants and other bugs had gotten to most of it, but he saved almost a spoonful of stuff that looked okay. He got back on the porch, ate it, looked out toward the setting sun, and waited.

His father returned just after dark. Roy could hear him coming down the path and he yelled out, Dad?

Yeah, his father answered quietly and came up to the porch and stamped his boots and looked down at Roy with the rifle across his knees.

I got him, he said.

What?

I got the bear, up in a draw about two mountains over. Got him this morning. Did you hear the shots?

No.

Well, it was a ways.

Where is he? Roy asked.

Still over there. I couldn’t carry him back. And I didn’t have my knife. Just the gun. I’m sure hungry now, though. Do we have any food left? Did you catch any fish?

Roy hadn’t thought about fishing. There’s a little bit left, he said. I’ll heat something up for you.

That’d be great.

Roy went to work then on heating up a can of cream-of-chicken soup, their last can of it, with a can of corn and a can of string beans. His father had his flashlight out and was working on their lamp. He must have smelled the paraffin and given it a bat, he said.

By the time the food was warm, the lamp was operational again and they could see inside the cabin.

What did it look like? Roy asked as he set their food down on the floor.

What?

What did it look like, the bear?

Just a black bear, not very big, a small male. I saw him down below me late this morning, rooting around the bushes. I hit him in the back with the first shot, and it knocked him down but then he was thrashing around a lot and screaming. My second shot hit him high in the neck, and that killed him.

Jesus, Roy said.

It was something, his father said. Next time, we’ll have to skin one and salt and dry the meat. Any salt left, by the way?

Yeah, we have a bag of it still.

Good. We can also just leave some saltwater out in a pan and let it evaporate on a sunny day, which should come about twice every million years.

Ha, Roy said, but his father didn’t look up from his food. He seemed very tired. Roy was, too. That night he fell asleep almost immediately.

He dreamed he was chopping up bits of fish and every piece had a small pair of eyes and as he chopped, there was a moaning sound that was getting louder. It wasn’t coming from the pieces of fish or their eyes exactly, but they were watching him and waiting to see what he would do.

Roy woke to his father moving stuff around their cabin, cleaning up and sorting things out. He yawned and stretched and put his boots on.

That bear cleaned us out pretty good, his father said.

I’ll have to fix my sleeping bag, Roy said. He had slept in the bottom half of it with all his clothes on, including his jacket and hat and a small blanket his father had thrown over him.

Yeah, that and the radio and the door and my rain gear and most of our food. We’ll have to fix it right up.

Roy didn’t answer.

I’m sorry, his father said. I’m just a bit discouraged by this. He spoiled a lot of our food, and some of it could have been saved yesterday but now the bugs are all in it, so we’re going to have to just throw it out. We have freezer bags, you know, that you could have put some of this stuff into.

Sorry.

That’s all right. Just help me sort through it now.

They continued sorting, and what they had to throw out, they carried in a garbage bag a hundred yards away and buried in a pit.

If another bear comes along, maybe it will smell this first and come over here and dig and we’ll be able to shoot it before it gets over to the cabin.

Roy wasn’t real excited about shooting more bears. The last one already seemed like a waste. Do you think that
bear you got was the bear that did this? he asked.

His father stopped shoveling for a moment. Yeah. I tracked it. But it could have been a different bear possibly. I lost the trail a few times and had to pick it up again, and it is pretty odd that that bear was so far from home. So we should keep a lookout just in case.

Roy decided he wasn’t going to shoot unless the bear was attacking one of them, especially if they weren’t going to skin it and eat it. How much did it scream when you shot it?

That’s not the kind of question you ask.

When they had finished burying the wrecked food, his father walked back to the cabin and put the shovel inside. They stood on the porch then and looked out at the water, which was still and gray.

We need to get our food situation together, he said. You can start fishing and I’ll work on the smoker. We need the wood shelter, too, and we need to cut some wood, but I can’t do everything at once, and first we need to eat. If you catch anything, gut it for eggs and put out another couple of lines on the bottom with the eggs. Just tie the lines off to something and we’ll leave them there around the clock.

So Roy went to the point again and cast across the mouth. It was a long time of catching nothing. He started by staring at the water as he fished, feeling like a fish would be there any moment, as if he could wish one onto the end of his line, but then he started looking off across the channel at the islands. There were a few whitecaps farther out, and in the distance, at the edge of the horizon, a fishing boat passed. It was far away, but Roy could see how it was humped up in front and he imagined even that he could see the spreaders, but that was just imagination. And then he was daydreaming about how he’d have to shoot their flares off this beach and try to get the boat’s attention because his father had been gored by a bear and half eaten, and then a fish finally hit and he pulled it in, surfing it fast across the water, its head wagging, because it was only a small Dolly. He got it on the rocks and would normally have thrown it back, it was so small, but they needed anything they could get at this point, so he smashed its head and slit it from its asshole to its gullet to see if it had eggs. It did, which was lucky, though they were very small and not many of them. He cut them out, left the fish and his pole, and walked toward the cabin to set the bottom lines, but then he could hear the wings coming down and turned away the eagle grabbed it. It was only a small fish and when I turned away the eagle grabbed it. Roy considered the shotgun, but even maddened and feeling they were desperate for food and fearing what his father would say about losing the fish he didn’t want to think about shooting a bald eagle.

He got an extra spool and hooks from the cabin to set the bottom lines.

Get something? his father called from the back.

Yeah, I got the eggs to set the lines, but it was only a small fish and when I turned away the eagle grabbed it.

Shit.

Yeah.

Well, go catch another one.

I’m planning on it.

He put big sinkers on the bottom lines and hurled them out by hand. He hoped the water was deep enough. He set two right out in front of the cabin and tied them to roots, then walked out to the point again and threw a line into the mouth where he’d been fishing and trailed it clear back to tie off to a tree. The eagle was still sitting high up, watching him.

Then Roy picked up his gear and walked farther down the shoreline, more than half a mile of slow going over the rocks and in some cases up into the woods to get to the next small inlet. Here when he cast over the mouth and trundled in, he got something bigger right away. It pulled sideways at the line heading out to sea, the reel singing, until Roy realized his drag was just set too loose and he tightened it up and then the fish still pulled but Roy had no trouble horsing it in. It jumped twice just as it was pulled in close to the beach, two twists into the air, the head ripping back and forth trying to free itself. It was an early pink salmon, very silvery and fresh. Roy walked backward with his rod tip high to pull it up smoothly and quickly onto the rocky beach. It flopped wildly and threw the hook, but by then it was too far inland and Roy ran over to scoop it quick by the gills and throw it farther up the beach, where it lay gasping and wild-eyed and he smashed its head three times with a rock until its body arched quivering and bloody and then lay flat. Its muscles still spasmed every few seconds but it was dead.

Roy covered it in a small cairn of rocks to keep it from the eagle and then he threw his line out again. Within a few hours he had six pinks and a Dolly. He strung them on a piece of nylon rope he had brought, tied up handles so that he could carry them, and hiked back slowly to the cabin, stopping periodically to rest.

Lookin’ good, his father said when he saw him coming. Lookin’ good.

I went to the next inlet. The fishing’s a lot better over there.
I believe it, his father said and took the string of fish to look at them. Fresh pinks, he said. And the smoker’s coming along, so why don’t you go ahead and cut these into strips after you’re done cleaning them.

By the time Roy was done cleaning and cutting into strips for smoking, it was getting late. He washed all the pieces well, took them inside in a bucket and made the brine with salt and some white sugar. They were supposed to use brown sugar for brine, but the bear had eaten or scattered all of that. Then he went around back to his father.

How’s it looking? Roy asked.

It’s pretty much together.

Roy couldn’t see well, but it looked like it had four walls and a top and a gap below to put the wood chips in. Does it have racks? he asked.

I brought racks, his father said. And a pan for the bottom that has two levels to it, one for hot coals and one above that for the smoker chips. Without those things, I don’t know how I would have done it exactly.

Are we gonna smoke them now?

We’ll let ’em brine overnight and start early in the morning. It’s just too much work keeping an eye on the chips and all, especially since we don’t even know if the thing works. Why don’t you cook up the pieces you left out and I’ll finish up here.

So Roy cooked up the two large filets in a skillet with oil since they didn’t have butter anymore, and by the time his father came in, he was tired and didn’t say much and just ate the fish looking down at his plate. Roy didn’t feel any closer to his father than he had on their occasional vacations, and he wondered if this would change at all.

Good fish, his father finally said. You can’t beat salmon. And then they did the dishes together and went to bed. Late that night, after Roy had fallen asleep and awakened again, cold, his father was talking to him.

Roy? he was saying. Can you hear me?

Yeah. I’m awake now.

I don’t know how I got this way. I just feel so bad. I feel okay during the day, but it hits at night. And then I don’t know what to do, his father said, and this last part made him whine again. I’m sorry, Roy. I’m really trying. I just don’t know if I can hold on.

Roy was starting to feel now like he would cry, and he really didn’t want this.

Roy?

Yeah, I’m here. I’m sorry, Dad. I hope you feel better.

His father let out an awful swallowed sound and said, Thanks. And then they just lay there like that listening to each other’s rough breathing until finally it was morning again and Roy lay there remembering and smelling the stove, feeling the heat coming off it.

His father was already around back putting the fish in the smoker. Hey, son, he said. This is looking like it’s gonna be pretty good. He wiggled his eyebrows up and down and smiled at Roy. Then he opened up the door and Roy looked in.

The strips of fish were all laid out in there, and Roy could see the pink meat already had a glaze on it from the brine, which was good.

Just have to get the pan now, his father said. I have the coals ready in the stove.

They went inside and he pulled out coals with tongs he had brought for that purpose and laid them in the pan, then set a small grate over them that fitted down into the pan and poured a large handful of alder chips on top. Gonna be tasty, he said.

They went back outside and he slid the pan in the small door at the bottom and checked all the seams once the smoke got going inside. It leaked some smoke here and there, but his father said it would be fine and really it looked pretty good to Roy. It looked like they might be eating some smoked salmon and have some jerky to put away.

Now we need some drying racks, his father said. And it wouldn’t hurt to have a cache somehow to keep everything away from the bears.

A cache? Roy asked.

Yeah, to keep food away from bears and everything else.

Would it be a lot of work?

Yeah, I’m not saying we’re building one right now, I’m just thinking. What we need to do now are the racks and the wood shed.

So they worked on the frame for the wood shed coming off the back wall of the cabin but a few large drops came down on them and as they looked up into the dark clouds the rain came down more so then they were running around front with the tools to avoid getting soaked as it dumped on them.

They built up the fire in the stove and tried to dry off some with a towel.

Not much dry wood left, his father said. Not much at all. We should have just stored a few pieces in here for now to slowly dry out. If this rain keeps up, we won’t be happy.
They lit the paraffin lamp and got out the cards and sat on the floor playing gin rummy for the rest of the afternoon, waiting for the rain to stop. His father didn’t seem very interested in the game and looked just as glum when he won as when he lost. The rain and wind beat on the roof and outside the window, and they couldn’t see more than a hundred yards, the visibility was so poor.

After three hours or so, his father stood up. I can’t just sit here anymore, he said. I think I’ll work on my rain gear, then check the smoker. The truth is, we’re going to have a lot of rain and we just have to get used to going out and working in it.

His rain gear had some long rips in it from the bear. He laid it flat on the floor and duct-taped both sides of each tear, then went out, Roy following in his own boots and gear.

Roy stopped in front of their cabin and looked out at the water in a pale U before him that seemed connected to the sky. There was no line at all between them, no horizon. It was impossible to tell where exactly the rain and mist touched down except very close in, at the water’s edge. The trees on either side seemed hung in shreds. He walked down to the water, stepping carefully on the wet rounded stones, and heard the rain everywhere, an even sheet of sound erasing all others. It was the only smell, too. Even when it smelled of land or sea, even when Roy caught the scents of what he imagined were ferns and nettles and rotten wood, they seemed only a part of the way the rain smelled. And he was realizing that this was what it would be like, mostly. The clear days they’d had were the oddity. This dense rain, and the world enclosed by it, was what they would know. This would be their home.

Come back here, his father yelled, the yell muffled.

So he went back and helped on the wood shed. They nailed together the poles and then realized they should put the roof together first, then raise it, since they didn’t have a ladder, so they brought the poles down again. His father worked grimly at the wood, his mouth and eyes tight. He kept telling Roy exactly what to do, and Roy felt he was more in the way and more work directing than he was worth, as if his father had him out here only so that both of them would have to stand in the shitty rain.

His father nailed together the shingles overlapping, and when he had finished the roof, they put up the poles again, Roy holding while his father reached up and nailed. When the roof was finally up, they stepped back and looked at it. It was wobbly-looking, most of all, the supports knobby and smooth and rain-slicked dark brown, the shingles above not all the same size and at slightly different angles and jutting out jaggedly at the edge, some with their bark still on and some not. It looked like the frontier, like the real thing, except not as sturdy. It looked like it might keep a little rain off, but when they stood under it, it wasn’t great. It kept most the drips off their heads, and they were able to take their hoods off, but when the wind gusted they caught some rain, on their legs especially.

Well, maybe we can put some plastic over the wood, too, his father said.

That sounds good, Roy said. And it’s okay if just the bottom of the pile gets wet, right?

No. His father looked up at the roof, his jaw tight and dark from five days of stubble. But this is as good as it’s going to get for now. I should have made the shingles longer. Maybe when we take our little vacation and get our next load of supplies, I’ll bring some lumber back.

When are we going?

Don’t get too excited about it. It’s not happening for another month or two at least, and that’s if I get the radio working, although I suppose Tom’ll just drop in and check if we don’t call for too long. That’s what he’s supposed to do, anyway.

A month or two seemed impossibly long to Roy, a lifetime in a miserable place that was not home.

They checked the salmon before coming in, and it was ready. They left one tray to smoke harder into jerky, but the rest they brought inside. They put the rack on top of the stove and started eating. The outside had hardened and was sweet and salty but the pink meat inside was still moist and only delicately smoky. It wasn’t as good as with brown sugar but it was still delicious. Roy ate it with his eyes closed.

Stop humming, his father said.

Huh?

You’re humming when you eat. You always do that, and it drives me crazy. Just eat.

So Roy tried not to hum, though he hadn’t even known he’d been doing this. He wished he could just take his pieces off somewhere else and eat them alone and not worry about it.

By the time they were full, they had finished at least a third. The rest his father left out to cool, then put in freezer bags just before they went to bed.

That night, his father spoke to him again. Roy repeated, Only a month or two and then I’m out of here and I’m not coming back, over and over in his head like a mantra while his father whined and wept and confessed. I cheated on your mother, he told Roy. It was in Ketchikan, when she was pregnant with your sister. I just felt something was ending for me, I think, all my chances, and Gloria was always staying late and coming into my office and looking at me like that, and I just couldn’t help myself. God, I felt bad. I felt sick all the time. But I kept doing it. And the thing
is, even after seeing all that that did, and all it destroyed, I don’t know for sure that I’d act any differently if I had the chance again. The thing is, something about me is not right. I can’t just do the right thing and be who I’m supposed to be. Something about me won’t let me do that.

He didn’t ask Roy any questions and Roy didn’t say anything back. His father just talked and Roy had to listen and he hated to listen to this and he thought of his mother and how she and his father had fought in Ketchikan and he didn’t know how to make sense of this new accounting of things. When they had told him they were getting divorced, they had told a different story, as if it were something neither of them could do anything about, and when Roy had asked if he could help, they had told him that he couldn’t, it was just a kind of thing that happened to people.

The rain was constant outside, and their room small and dark. His father whispering to him and sniffling and making odd, frightening sounds in his despair was only a few feet away and there was nowhere else to go.

In the morning, they ate cold cereal and powdered milk and didn’t start a fire in the stove because they needed to conserve wood. The rain continued on, the same as the day before. The windowsills turned dark as they soaked through, and there were a few drips in various places down the walls. His father stood looking at each of them with his flashlight and didn’t say anything but just felt above them where the wall met the ceiling and then looked higher up into the ceiling, moving the beam of light slowly up each slat and along every timber.

Roy read a book, one in the Executioner series. What he read for especially was the woman the Executioner always got, and he tried to imagine having sex with her himself.

Okay, his father said. Time for the drying rack, and you can check the bottom lines, too.

Roy checked the lines first, relieved to get out of the cabin and away from his father. It was still raining fairly hard. He was dry in his rain gear but it was so damp and cold he felt wet, as if everything were soaking through. The lines out front had nothing, but the line at the point had a dead Dolly at the end of it that was already turning pale. Roy wondered if it would be any good still. He gutted it at arm’s length, not wanting to get too close in case the guts were rotten and exploded or something, but it looked all right. It smelled a little more, but not too much more, and the meat looked okay. It was a male, with two long sacks of sperm instead of eggs, so he went back to the cabin for some eggs he had salted and tied those onto the hook with cheesecloth and put the line back in. Then he thought to the forest and thought it would be nice to jack off since he hadn’t in so long, but he didn’t feel the energy somehow and it was all wet and cold and he had a million layers on, so he just walked back to the cabin.

His father wasn’t around, so Roy hiked back into the hemlocks and found his father finally up higher in the cedars.

Hi, he said.

Looking for poles for the racks, his father said. Try to find them about six feet long at least. Any fish?

One small Dolly that was already dead. The meat looked all right, though.

Yeah. It’s fine. But we need more. Maybe you should just keep fishing while I build this. Although we really need wood, is what we need.

He stopped then and just stood in place looking down at the moss. Hell, I don’t know. Do you feel like chopping some wood?

Sure, Roy said. And he went back for the ax. He had only chopped wood once before, for fun. He had a feeling this was going to be different.

He started with the leftover pieces from the shed project, stood them up and brought the ax down, but they just whumped and bounced against the ground and the blade jumped back and he nearly got whacked with it before he remembered that he needed a stump or something solid beneath.

He looked around for a while until his father came back and asked him what he was doing. Roy hung back resentful as his father set one of the pieces on end and put another piece on top and chopped and it fell in half in one swing. He looked at Roy and handed him the ax.

All right.

You’re going to have to show some more initiative.

Okay, Roy said, but as his father was turning away he added, I’m already doing stuff.

His father looked at him. Don’t pout, he said. This isn’t a place for babies.

His father left then, back into the trees, and Roy took up the ax and chopped and hated his father. He hated this place, too, and listening to his father crying every night. What was he talking about, babies? He felt bad then, though, because he knew the crying at night was something else, something he was afraid to belittle.

When he had finished the leftover pieces, he went into the woods with the ax looking for dead wood. He found a few pieces, but they were too rotten. Should’ve known that, he said out loud to himself. When are you going to figure out how to do things right? So he went out to the point again and chopped down another tree and stripped it
and sawed it into sections and dragged them back to the cabin. His father was there working on the racks. Good job, his father said. It looks like you’re getting the wood together.

Yeah.

You’ll get the hang of all this. Me, too.

But his father cried again that night, and it seemed then to Roy that nothing at all was going to work. He tried to ignore what his father was blubbering to him and tried to have his own conversations in his head, but he couldn’t block his father out.

There were two prostitutes in Fairbanks mainly that I went to see. One who had really soft skin and no pubic hair. She was just like a little girl, real small, and she would never look at me. Roy stuck his fingers in his ears and tried to hum just loudly enough to block his father out and not be heard, but the confessions went on and he had to hear everything. I kept seeing them, all of them, even when I knew that Rhoda knew.

Rhoda was Roy’s stepmother, his father’s second marriage and divorce, only recently ended. I got crabs from one of these prostitutes, and I passed them on to Rhoda. You remember when we were supposed to go skiing that time in California, and we didn’t?

This was rare and caught Roy by surprise. He wasn’t usually asked questions.

Yeah, he answered. He remembered waking up and it was already midmorning, much too late and something wrong. And he didn’t want to hear now that it was all because his father had been with a whore. His father had told him that he had caught the bugs from the bench in the locker room at the YMCA, and Roy had believed him, along with everything else.

That time she got unbelievably angry. She never would give me any room to explain. It was like I was just some kind of monster. Like I’d shafted her. What do you think? Do you think I’m a monster? The question came with the odd whining and gulping.

No, Dad.

Roy’s dreams started repeating themselves. In one, he was in a cramped bathroom folding red towels while more red towels kept stacking up and coming in on him, pressing from every side. In another, he was on a bus that was trapped in sand and being swept down a hillside. In another, he was hung up on hooks and he had to choose between getting shot once, which would be quick but could kill him, or being dipped in a large vat of red ants, which wouldn’t kill him but would take a very long time.

In the mornings, his father was always in a good mood, and Roy never understood this.

We’re doing all right, his father said. We have some smoked fish put away, and some wood, and it’s still early in the summer.

Then one day when it was raining hard and Roy came in from the outhouse, he found his father standing in the cabin with his pistol out. He was holding it in one hand, aimed toward the roof, and he was staring up into the darkness of the timbers, moving around like he was trying to get a bead on some big spider up there or something.

What are you doing?

Better just stay out of my way.

What?

Stay out of my way. Get in the other room or something.

What is it?

But his father wouldn’t answer again; he just squinted up and sighted the pistol at something that seemed to be moving at the top of the ceiling.

Roy stepped back into the other room and watched his father from the doorway.

His father fired then, the blast deafening. Roy put his hands to his ears but they hurt and wouldn’t stop roaring. His father fired again up into the roof, the .44 Magnum a huge pistol and ridiculous and spitting fire in the dim cabin, filling the air with sulfur.

What are you shooting at? Roy yelled but his father only fired again, and again, and again, and then he tossed the pistol down onto a pile of clothes by the door and walked outside into the rain, saying, It’s so goddamn tight in here.

Roy went to the door and watched his father standing out there looking up into the rain and getting soaked without his rain gear or hat. His hair matted flat to his scalp and his red mouth open. His eyes closing and opening and closing. Steam coming from his breath and rising off his shirt. His arms limp at his sides as if there were nothing left to do but stand and let the sky come down.

Roy waited so long for his father that finally he sat down against the stove and stared out through the doorway at the slice of gray air and water and his father soaked and making no sense. When his father started walking finally, Roy got up to see but his father kept walking on into the woods and didn’t return until after dark.
There was no light in the cabin when his father returned, and no heat. Roy was in his sleeping bag against the stove and had put cans out for the various drips and streams that came from the new holes in the ceiling. His father came over and lifted him into the other room and told him over and over how sorry he was, but Roy pretended to be asleep and wouldn’t listen and only hated and feared him.

When Roy woke in the morning, he was quiet. He grabbed some smoked salmon and crackers, walked out, and sat on the other end of the porch without a word or a look. He just stared down at his plate, though he knew his father was feeling bad about himself and wanted to talk.

His father stood up and leaned against the wall of the cabin. When Roy looked up, his father had his eyes closed and was feeling the sun.

Roy finished his breakfast and waited.

A nice day, his father finally said. Maybe we should go for a hike.

Roy considered.

Well, what do you think of that?

All right.

All right, then, let’s go hunting for a buck. We could use something other than salmon, right?

Roy was slow to get his gear together, but finally they were on the trail, his father leading. Roy didn’t want any kind of resolution. He wanted things to get bad enough that they would have to leave the island. He could make things terrible for his father, he knew, if he just didn’t say anything or respond in any way.

They cleared the low forests and climbed higher and bushwhacked their way over to a rock outcropping from which they could scan two mountainsides and the shoreline and their cabin. Roy wondered whether many deer would come on this side, this close to their cabin, but now they were here, so it looked as if they were going to just try it.

What do you think of this? his father asked.

What do I think of what?

All this. The view. Being out here. Being with your dad.

It’s nice.

His father looked out over the channel then and stared at the sun off the water. It was nowhere to look into, just glare. Roy moved around several times to different places to sit on the rock and in the brush, unable to keep still. He wasn’t looking for deer. He wondered if his father was looking for deer.

His father put his rifle down and stood and walked too close to the edge of the small cliff and fell off. It looked almost like he stepped off. And then he bounced and sprang out and hit branches, ripping through them and tumbling, and then he was out of sight but Roy could hear him and the top of his own head was rising in hot wavering streaks as he panicked.

Roy grabbed his gun and stood but there was nothing to do. His father was already down through the trees and brush, already loud whumps and it was over and there was no sound from down there. His blood was in his ears and he was afraid he would fall over too, as if his father were pulling him, but then he shouted to his father and set his gun down and ran back into the brush to where they had come through. He tried to work his way down fast but the brush was so thick and cutting at him, and he was scared he would never find his father, that he would just disappear in there and be dying.

He kept screaming as he went but there was no response. He slid down through a patch of nettles, his hands on fire from them, and then fell down through some hemlock and hit a flat spot and got up and worked his way across to find his father. He got to about where he thought he’d find him, but saw nothing. He looked up to try to see the cliff for reference, but it was too thick in here and he couldn’t see anything. He whined and turned in a circle and then got hold of himself and stopped and listened.

It was only wind and the leaves, but then he heard a moan close by and parted the growth a few feet in front of him but there was nothing. He pushed through farther, then backtracked and checked all around. He couldn’t hear the moaning anymore, and he wondered whether he had only imagined it in the first place. He started whining again and he couldn’t help it and he just kept looking. Then he had the idea to trample everything down so he’d know where he’d already looked, so he stomped all around in bigger and bigger circles, crushing the smaller stuff, and still he couldn’t find anything.

By now it had been at least half an hour, so he hiked back up to try to find the base of the cliff. That was hard to find, too, and when he found it he wasn’t sure it was the right one, but he searched below and he found, finally, a recently broken branch. He worked his way down from this to more branches and then a spot in the nettles and flowers and moss that had been crushed. A few feet farther on, he found his father.

His father wasn’t moving or making any sound. He was curled on his side with an arm flung out behind, and the
eye Roy could see was shut. He came up slowly and knelt down and leaned in close, not wanting to, and listened for breathing or anything, and he did think he heard something but he couldn’t separate it from his own breath and told himself it might be just because he wanted to find something. But then he leaned in closer and put his ear to his father’s mouth and did feel and hear breath and he said, Dad, and then he was shouting it and trying to make his father wake up. He wanted to shake him but he didn’t know whether he should. So he just sat there and tried to talk his father awake.

You fell off the cliff, he said. You fell down here and you hurt yourself but you’re all right. Now wake up.

His father’s face was swollen and turning purplish already with red streaks where he’d been scraped. His hand was cut up and bloody.

Oh God, Roy said, and he wished he knew what to do or that there could at least be someone else around to help him. His father wasn’t waking, and finally he couldn’t think of what to do except grab his father under the armpits and start dragging him down the hill to the cabin. There was no trail, but they didn’t have to go across anything else and there were no more cliffs that he could remember. So he pulled him down through the undergrowth, trying not to trip but tripping and falling backward occasionally anyway and trying not to drop his father or move him too much but dropping him anyway, dropping his head and seeing it bounce and loll around in the spongy moss, and still his father didn’t wake or say anything to him but still he was breathing. And then the sun went down and it was darker but not completely dark when they cleared the last stand of hemlocks. He dragged his father over the grass, past the outhouse and down to the porch of the cabin, where he had to rest after each porch step before pulling his father up onto the next, and finally he had him inside the cabin.

He laid him in the main room on a blanket and put the other blankets and sleeping bags over him. He propped his head up on a pillow and he got wood for the fire. It was still fairly wet and it smoked too much but finally dried itself out in the stove after repeated lightings and then they had some warmth at least.

His father looked very pale. Roy put his hand next to his father’s cheek to see the difference in their color. He was breathing, but only shallowly. Roy wanted to give his father some water but didn’t know if he should. He wanted to put an ice pack on his head but there was no ice and he didn’t know if that was the right idea anyway. He didn’t know anything. He just sat back against the wall with his jacket over him and waited and watched for any changes as the light disappeared outside and the cabin grew smaller. The wind came up and the cabin creaked and let out a low howl occasionally and still his father lay there like a wax figure pale with his mouth open and red streaks on his face that didn’t look real, as if he’d been painted. Even the hair didn’t look right, and then the lamp went out and Roy was somehow too afraid to get up and find the paraffin in the dark so he only waited there seeing nothing, listening for hours until finally he fell asleep.

Waking in daylight he didn’t know what had happened, couldn’t make sense of his father lying in front of him like that, then he remembered. He went over to feel his father’s face and his skin was still warm and he was breathing.


Not a twitch from his father. Roy got the fire going again and the cabin slowly warmed. He stood in the doorway and looked out at the water, where there was no one, not a single boat. He came back in and shut the door, refilled the lamp and waited. Still his father hadn’t moved. He wondered if a body could be dead and still breathing, and this thought was so creepy that he got up to fix breakfast.

Hotcakes coming right up, he called back over his shoulder as he mixed up the Krusteaz with water. He put some of the powdered milk in the mix as a special treat, got the pan hot and oiled and started making pancakes with an intense concentration on the bubbles as they formed, worrying constantly about whether they were cooking too much on the underside, afraid also that he might flip too early before they had browned. He took his time with each one and waited until he had a perfect stack before he turned around and saw his father lying there with his eyes open watching him.

Roy yelled and dropped the plate. His father’s head moved slightly, the eyes on him. Dad, he said then, and he rushed over and his father said, in a whisper he could barely hear, Water.

Roy brought him water and helped him drink some of it, held the cup to his lips. His father threw up the water and then drank again.

Sorry, his father said, and then he closed his eyes and slept the rest of the day, Roy fearing all the time that he might fall back into a sleep that he wouldn’t wake from. He wondered whether he should run out to the point with flares and try to signal someone, but he was afraid to leave his father for that long, and he didn’t know, anyway, whether his father wanted him to set off the flares. He whispered it twice, Should I go set off the flares, Dad? But there was no response.

When his father woke again, it was near sunset and Roy had been on the verge of falling asleep but had opened his eyes for just a second and saw his father looking at him.
You’re awake, he said. How are you doing?
His father didn’t answer for a long time. Okay, he finally said. Some food. Water.
What kind of food?
His father considered for a while. Soup. Do we have?
You can’t breathe, can you? Roy said. You can’t say anything. Maybe I should go set off the flares, all right? I’ll try and get some help.
No, his father said. No. Soup.
So Roy heated up the cream-of-mushroom he had planned for the pancakes. It was one of the last cans of anything because of the bear. He brought it to his father and fed him slowly with a spoon.
His father could eat only a few bites before he said, Enough for now.
What about the cuts and stuff? Roy asked. I didn’t know what to do.
It’s okay.
Roy brought him more water, lit the lamp and stoked the stove, and they waited together, not saying anything, until his father called for more soup and then more water and then rested and then fell asleep again.
In the morning, when Roy awoke, his father had pulled his arms from beneath the blankets to rest them on top. Only one was cut up, and it had scabbed over by now.
I should go light the flares, Roy said. You still can’t get up. You might have something really wrong.
Listen, his father said. If we leave now, we won’t come back. And I don’t want to give this up yet. You have to give me another chance. I won’t let anything stupid like that happen again. I promise.
I thought you were going to die, Roy said.
I know. I’m sorry. You don’t have to worry about it anymore.
It looked like you just stepped off.
I got too close to the edge. It’s all right.
So they waited. Roy fed him soup and water again, and then his father had to go to the bathroom.
I have to go, he said. And I can’t get up by myself. Grab some TP and come help me up.
Roy grabbed the toilet paper and got behind his father to pull him up under his armpits. His father was able to help some with his legs, then with a hand on the table, and so they were able to stand and then make it to the door, where they rested.
It doesn’t seem like you broke anything, Roy said.
No, it doesn’t, his father said. I was really lucky.
They rested against the door for a few more minutes while his father looked out at the cove. Then they moved along the outside wall and out to the steps and took them one at a time, Roy going first, his father leaning on him.
This is gonna work, his father said. We’ll be fine. I’m just a little sore and stiff, but it won’t last.
They rested at the bottom of the steps.
The outhouse might actually be easier, his father said. Even though it’s farther away.
I can try to carry you, Roy said.
I think I can walk if you help me.
So his father hung on him. They stepped slowly toward the outhouse, resting every ten or twenty feet, and then it started drizzling faintly but they decided to keep going and made it to the outhouse, where his father got help turning around and sitting and then Roy stepped outside to wait.
Roy standing there in the drizzle felt things he could not make sense of. His enormous fear had mostly lifted, but a part of him that he did not understand well wanted his father to have died in the fall so that there would have been a kind of relief and everything could be clear and he could simply return to his life. But he was afraid to think this, as if it were a kind of jinx, and the thought that he could have lost his father made his eyes well up suddenly so that when his father called out from inside that he was done, Roy was trying not to cry, trying to fight it down in his throat and eyes.
His father extended a hand when Roy opened the door. Help me up, he said. But he still had his pants down and Roy couldn’t help looking at his penis hanging there and the hair on his thighs. Then he was embarrassed and tried to look away as if he hadn’t looked.
His father didn’t say anything. When he was standing, still holding on to Roy’s hand, he pulled up his pants with the other, then turned to lean against the doorjamb so that he’d have both hands to button. Then they went on to the cabin, where his father lay back down, ate and drank a little bit, and slept the rest of the day.
Over the next week, his father strengthened. He became limber again, enough to walk himself to the outhouse and then walk around out front slowly and then finally walk out to the point and back. Soon after, he announced himself fully well.
Back from the grave, he said. Lungs never felt better. And I’m not gonna let anything like that happen again, I
promise you.

Roy wanted to ask again whether his father had stepped off on purpose, because that was the way it had looked, but he didn’t.

They hunted and shot deer, the first from the pass behind the cabin shooting down the other side. His father let Roy take the shot and he hit it in the neck. He had been aiming low behind the shoulder and so was way off, but he let it seem afterward that he had intended the neck.

They found it sprawled in the blueberries, its tongue hanging out and eyes still clear.

Good deal, his father said. This will be good meat. He un-slung his rifle and got out his Buck knife. He slit up the stomach, pulled out the entrails, bled the neck, cut off the balls and everything else down there, and then slotted the hind legs and pushed the forelegs through to make a kind of backpack.

Normally I’d carry it, he said. But my back and side are still a bit sore, if you don’t mind.

So while his father carried both rifles, Roy put the hooked hind legs over his shoulders, the deer’s butt behind his head, and carried him that way up the side of the mountain and down the other side, the antlers banging his ankles.

They hung the buck and stripped off the hide, punching down between meat and hide with their fists. Then they cut most of the meat into strips and dried them on the rack or smoked them.

The rack’s not going to be great, his father said. Not enough sun and too many flies. But we’ll smoke most of it.

They stretched the hide just as it was getting dark, then salted it and turned in.

His father did not cry that night, nor had he since the fall. Roy listened and waited, tense and unable to sleep, but the crying simply never came, and after a few more nights, he got used to this and learned to sleep.

They set about stocking up for winter more seriously now. When his father was strong enough to work again, they dug a huge pit a hundred yards from the cabin, back in a small stand of hemlock. They dug with shovels until his father was shoulder deep and Roy in over his head. Then they widened it until it was over ten feet on every side, a huge square cut into the hillside, and after that they deepened it some more and used their homemade ladder to get in and out. When they hit a large stone, they dug around and beneath until it was free and then hauled it out by rope. They stopped when they hit solid rock and there was nowhere left to go.

The hole was to be their cache, but once the hole was dug, his father had second thoughts. I don’t know, he said. I don’t know how it doesn’t mold, or how bugs don’t get to it. And I don’t know how to make it easy for us to get to stuff inside without it being easy for bears to get inside. And this whole place is going to be covered in snow, too.

Roy listened and looked down into the huge pit they had dug for a week. He didn’t know, either. He had just assumed his father knew more about this.

They stood there some more until his father said, Well, let’s think this thing out. We can put the food in plastic bags. It may mold, but it can’t get wet or get bugs in it.

Are we supposed to build some kind of shed or something in there? Roy asked. Or do we just bury it all?

The pictures I’ve seen, they’re made out of logs, whether they’re in the ground or up in the air.

Okay, Roy said.

Let’s sleep on it, his father said.

So they fished out on the point as the day drizzled and faded and then cooked salmon again for dinner and turned in.

Roy had trouble sleeping and lay awake for a long time. Hours later, he heard his father begin to cry.

In the morning, Roy remembered and stayed in his sleeping bag and did not get up until late. His father was already gone, and when Roy walked up to the pit, his father was standing down inside it with his arms folded, staring at the walls.

Let’s think this thing out, his father said. We’ve dug a pit. We have a big pit here now. And we need to store our food in it. We need a low cabin-like thing, I think, and a door that we can get into but a bear can’t. The door could be on the top or it could be on a side with an entrance that slants down to it. I’m thinking the door should be on top and nailed shut and buried. What do you think?

His father looked up at him then. Roy was thinking, you’re not any better. Nothing has gotten better. You could decide just to bury yourself in there or something. But what he said was, How do we get to the food?

Good question, his father said. I’ve been thinking about this, and I think that a cache is what you save for late in the winter. You stock up in the cabin and just don’t leave it. You keep your rifles ready and you shoot any bears that come by. And then when you finally run out, you still have something left. You come up here and dig and take it all and you’re ready to go again. Or maybe you come up twice, but not more than that. So we don’t have to have any easy access. And the reason the food keeps is that it’s all frozen in addition to being smoked or dried and salted.

That sounds right, Roy said.

Voilà, his father said, raising his arms. I’m good for something, huh?
Maybe.
His father laughed. Maybe, huh? My boy’s getting a sense of humor. Starting to feel at home out here, are you?
Roy smiled. A little bit, I guess.
All right.
They celebrated then by cutting down a bunch of trees and cutting them into posts for the walls of the cache. That took all day. By nightfall, they had the posts hauled to the edge of the pit.
We’ll put them in tomorrow, his father said. Happen to have about a mile of twine on you?
No.
Well, we’ll think of something. We don’t have enough nails, either. But we’ll think of something.
That night, Roy stayed awake again waiting for the crying, needing to know if it was every night, but then he woke in the morning and wondered whether it had not happened or he had simply not stayed awake long enough. It was hard to know. His father was hiding from him now, and Roy had to pretend he didn’t know this.
They shoveled enough dirt back in to bury the posts side by side. They weren’t attached in any other way, just buried next to one another.
I think they’ll stay like that, his father said. Just the pressure of everything on the inside against everything on the outside.
What about when we take the food out, Roy asked, or when a bear digs down and tries to take it apart?
His father looked at him, considering. He looked at him more plainly than Roy was used to, so that Roy avoided his eyes and looked at the light beard his father had now and the hair longer on the sides and flattened against his skull from not being washed. He didn’t look anything like a dentist anymore, or really even like his father. He looked like some other man who maybe didn’t have much.
You’re thinking, his father said. This is good. We can talk about what we’re doing. I’ve been thinking about the same things, and it seems to me that we have to bury it deep enough and put enough stuff on top that a bear can’t dig down, because if he does get down there, no way of putting the cache together will keep him out.
Roy nodded. He didn’t know if it would work, but it made sense at least.
And when we take stuff out, finally, late in February maybe, the ground will be so frozen that nothing will move. It won’t be able to cave in even if we take the wood away completely, which we may need to do for our stove.
Roy smiled. That sounds good.
All right.
They placed the rest of the posts, like the walls of a small fort town only a few feet high, and then sat back to look at it.
It needs a roof, Roy said.
And a door. We’ll cut long poles that go clear across, and we’ll figure out the door in the roof. Probably just a big hole with a second roof over it.
We don’t have the food to go into it yet, Roy said.
Right you are. And we won’t put it in until it snows. Until then, we have to keep it from caving.
We should have waited to dig it until a few months from now, huh?
Yeah. We dug it too early. But that’s okay. We didn’t know.
Over the next two days, in the rain, they cut the poles for a roof and a smaller second roof. They sawed the lengths and stripped off the branches with a hatchet, Roy watching this father with his grim unshaven face when he worked, the cold rain dripping off the end of his nose. He seemed as solid then as a figure carved from stone, and all his thoughts as immutable, and Roy could not reconcile this father with the other, the one who wept and despaired and had nothing about him that could last. Though Roy had memory, it seemed nonetheless that whatever father he was with at the time was the only father that could be, as if each in its time could burn away the others completely.
When they had finished cutting the poles for both roofs, they placed them all carefully and stood back to see. The sides were already washing in around the posts and caving the roof, rivulets of mud everywhere in the unceasing rain.
Some of the posts are soft, his father said. They’re getting washed out. Oh well.
How can we stop it from caving in?
I don’t know. We don’t have enough tarp. Maybe I screwed up. Maybe it was too early. We should just be storing up now, I guess.
That night, Roy did not have to wait long to hear his father weep. It came within only a few minutes, and his father wasn’t trying to hide it anymore.
Sorry, his father said. It’s not the cache or anything like that.
It’s other things.
What is it?
Well, my head hurts all the time, but that’s not it. 
Your head hurts?
Yeah. It has for years. You didn’t know that?
No.
Well.
Why does it hurt?
It’s just sinuses, and I’m supposed to have them cleared out, but I haven’t bothered. It doesn’t always work anyway, and it’s an awful operation. But that’s not the problem. That’s just what makes me feel weak and makes it easy to cry and keeps me tired. The bigger thing is that I just can’t seem to be alone.
And his father started crying again. I know I’m not alone, he whimpered. I know you’re here. But I’m still too alone. I can’t explain it.
Roy waited for more, but his father only cried then and it went on for a long time, Roy not knowing how it was that he could be right here and still, for his father, it was as if he wasn’t here at all.
The rain continued and the cache washed in further. Roy and his father stood at the edge looking down at the fallen posts and thinking and not saying anything until finally his father said, Well, let’s pull all the wood out and we’ll try it again when it first snows.
Roy didn’t believe they’d still be here when it first snowed, but he nodded as his father climbed down in and then he took the pieces his father handed him and carried them back to the cabin. Roy knew that somehow this disappointment was worse for his father than the other disappointments had been. If Roy spoke now, he doubted he’d be heard. And he understood this about his father, that he was often gone into his own thoughts and couldn’t be reached, and that none of this time spent alone thinking was good for him, that he always sank lower when he went in there.
They stacked the wood against a side wall, and when they were done, they looked again at the pit, at the mud deepening and the walls caving, and both looked into the sky, into the grayness that had no depth or end, and then they went inside.
When the plane came a few days later, Roy was fishing several miles up the coast. He thought he heard it, then thought he must have made it up, but stopped and listened and heard it again. He pulled in his line, grabbed the two salmon he had caught, and started running. He was far enough off, though, and blocked by so many small points along the way, that he couldn’t see it fly into the mouth of their cove. He ran over the rocky beach and, when he had to, up into the trees and down again, becoming more and more afraid that he would miss it. He assumed his father was there cutting wood, but what if he had hiked back over the ridge for some reason and no one was there? The pilot might not come back again for a long time, might just leave a note saying, Call me on the radio if you need anything. And there was another thing, too, that Roy didn’t like to admit. Even if his father was there, what would he say? Was there a chance he would just say everything was fine and send the pilot away and not have him come back? It didn’t seem impossible, and Roy needed to leave here, he needed to get away. Roy dropped the fish and his pole and ran faster.
He was only a few hundred yards from the final point when he heard the drone of it again and stopped to see it rush out of the mouth, tilt free of its own spray, and lift precariously over the channel. He stood there then, looking at where it had finally disappeared and breathing hard and feeling that something terrible had happened.
He left, he said out loud. I missed him.
He went back then for his pole and the salmon and walked on to the cabin.
His father was back at the woodpile. Tom came by, he said when Roy walked up.
I heard.
Oh. Well he was just here a minute but I ordered the supplies we need and he’ll be back with them next week on his way to Juneau. Though not really on his way exactly, I suppose. And his father grinned then, pleased at how in the middle of nowhere they were.
Roy took his salmon down to the water and gutted them. He scaled them quickly and cut off their heads and fins and tails. He wanted out of here. He didn’t care what his father thought about it; he was just going to go.
You want to leave? his father asked when he told him at dinner.
Roy didn’t say it again but just ate. He felt terrible, as if he were killing his father.
We’re not doing so bad, are we? his father asked.
Roy refused to cave in. He didn’t say anything.
I don’t understand, his father said. We’re finally getting somewhere. We’re getting ready for winter.
Why? Roy thought to himself. Just so we can survive winter? But he didn’t say anything.
Look, his father said. You’re gonna have to talk to me about this, otherwise you’re just staying and that’s that.
Okay, Roy said.

Why do you have to go?

I want my friends again, and my real life. I don’t want to just try to survive winter.

Fair enough. But what about me? You told me you’d stay out here a year, and I made my plans. I quit my job and bought this place. What am I supposed to do if you just leave?

I don’t know.

You haven’t thought about that, have you?

No. Roy felt awful. I’m sorry, he said.

That’s all right, his father said. If you need to go, then you need to go. I won’t stop you.

Roy wanted to say right then that he’d stay, but he couldn’t. He knew terrible things were going to happen to him out here if he stayed. He did the dishes and then they went to bed.

You know, his father said that night as they lay not sleeping, it’s too out of control here. You’re right. It takes a man to get through this. I shouldn’t have brought a boy.

Roy couldn’t believe his father was saying these things to him. He didn’t sleep that night. He wanted to leave. He wanted to get out of here. But as the night went on, he knew that he’d be staying. He kept imagining his father out here alone, and he knew his father needed him. By the morning, Roy felt so bad he fixed pancakes and told his father, I’ve thought more about it and I don’t think I really want to go.

Really? his father said, and he came up and put an arm around his boy’s shoulders. Now we’re talking, he said, beaming. We’ll have fresh supplies and we’ll put away enough fish and meat and I have a new idea for the roof of the cache. I was thinking…

And his father went on and on, excited, but Roy stopped hearing him. He didn’t believe anymore in exciting plans. He felt he had just put himself in a kind of prison, and it was too late to back out.

That day they began picking blueberries. They had been out here over a month, late July now, and though it was still a bit early for berry season, the berries would be fine for making jam. They picked into freezer bags, Roy remembering Ketchikan and his red coat with the hood and all the times they had hiked onto the hill behind the house to pick blueberries. They had churned homemade ice cream, soupy and rich, and stirred the berries in. He remembered the smoky smell of the air, too, and all the fall colors. It wasn’t only the trees that turned in Alaska, it was everything, all the growth, and it began turning in early August. Still too early here, but it was coming soon. In more northern parts, in Fairbanks, where his father had lived, it would begin turning very soon, perhaps even now, and by September fifteenth, nearly all the tiny leaves on the blueberry bushes would have fallen and most of the leaves on the trees, also, the end of fall and beginning of the snows. Here it would be later, but not much later. One summer in Ketchikan, he remembered, it had snowed in August. He had ridden his tricycle out into it and tried to catch the flakes on his tongue.

Later in the day, they stood on the point and caught salmon every few casts. The schools were coming in finally, not just a few isolated salmon anymore. They could see them in thick beneath the clear water, dark shapes in rows undulating slowly and in time, another thing Roy remembered. They had pulled into small coves like this one in the cabin cruiser and Roy had stood on the bow with his father and looked at all of them gathered below him and he had come to believe that all waters were like this, that all waters were so populated. The Pixies bright in among them now, just as before, Roy dragging his across their noses until one rushed forward and took it, then flashed silver as Roy yanked to set the hook. He whooped like his father did whenever he caught one, and it seemed then not so bad that they would stay out here. Roy gutted his fish when he had caught five, then ran rope through the gills.

When we really get going, his father said, we’ll be dragging twenty or thirty salmon a day back to the cabin. We’ll be so busy we’ll wish we had a second smoker.

The plane returned the next week with their supplies: more baggies, plywood, seeds, canned goods and staples, huge bags of brown sugar and salt, a new radio and batteries, Louis L’Amour Westerns for his father, a new sleeping bag and surprise tub of chocolate ice cream for Roy. The arrival of the plane made it seem they weren’t really that far away, as if a town and other people like Tom were maybe just around the point. Roy felt relaxed and happy and safe and didn’t realize until the plane started up again and was taxiing out that that feeling wasn’t going to stay. As he watched it go, he realized he was starting over, that now it would again be a month or two, or maybe longer, and he remembered, too, that they had planned to get away for at least a week at the end of summer, which was now. That had been the plan, and somehow it had not happened.

But he didn’t have much time to dwell on this. He and his father grew busier and busier in their preparations. They were up early and still working often past dusk. The mountains changing quickly then, turning purple and yellow and red, seeming to soften more in the late light, the air colder and cleaner and thinning each day, Roy and his father bundled now in their jackets and hats as they pulled in the salmon, as they cut more wood and stacked it
behind the plywood walls. The time easy between them, busy and unthinking, working together to store up. Roy slept. If his father cried, he didn’t know, and for a while, at least, he didn’t care much, perhaps because he knew now that he couldn’t get away, that he had committed himself and would stay here with his father whether his father were sick or well.

They began the home schooling in the evenings, just two or three evenings that first week. Roy read *Moby Dick* and his father read Louis L’Amour. Roy wrote down answers to detailed and picky and seemingly insignificant questions about plot and theme and his father said, Now that was a real Western. After a week of this, they realized they just didn’t have time for it with all the other preparations, so they put it off and went back to cutting wood and smoking fish and hunting full time.

They hunted anything now, anything they came across that they could smoke. They killed a cow moose several miles away in a marshy flat where a stream gathered before spilling into the ocean. She was alone and looking at them, chewing, her shaggy hide dark and dripping and they both fired and she went down immediately, as if she had been crushed by a great stone. His father carried the carcass back one haunch at a time while Roy guarded the rest, a shell in the chamber, looking all around him as it grew dark, watching for the red eyes of bears and whatever else his imagination could think of to fear.

They harvested salmon as his father had promised, in long strings that they dragged back to the cabin, the open mouths still gasping, the bodies reddish late in the season and trembling on land. They caught as many as they had time to clean and cut up and smoke, the pink and red and white meat of chinook, sockeye, humpies, and chum.

They shot a mountain goat that had come down to the shoreline, Roy wondering at how red the blood looked at first against the white hair, and then how black. By this time it was cold enough that the animal steamed as they gutted it. The mountains the next morning had snow all along their tops, as if the spirit of the white animal had somehow fled into them, and within the week, the snow had lowered halfway down toward the cabin and sat still and windless and bright throughout the afternoon.

They set to work again on the cache. It had become rounded in all its corners and the earth around it had slumped. They dug it out shovelful by shovelful and sharpened its edges and deepened it again to the base rock and then Roy handed down the posts to his father, the posts lashed this time with twine and the corners nailed. Then they set the poles across the top and lashed them as well and nailed them along their edges with ten-inch nails deep into the posts and then they lashed together a small second roof and placed it over the uneven hole in the top and stood back and admired their work.

It looks right, Roy said.

It’s ready for the goods.

The spare room in the cabin by this time was full with dried and smoked fish and meat carefully packaged in freezer bags then larger garbage bags. They began early one morning so that they’d be finished burying by dark and not have to keep watch over it during the night. His father placed all of the bags inside along with a large pile of canned goods that had been flown in, in case all the smoked fish and meat spoiled for some reason, and then he nailed down the second roof.

Hope it stays good, he said.

It better, Roy said, and his father grinned.

Let’s bury it and forget about it.

So they threw in a deep layer of cold ash they had saved from the stove to mask the smell, and then a layer of rocks, then the dirt and they heaped it up high so that when it settled it would be level, and then they put more rocks on top of that and another layer of ash.

I don’t know if any of this is right, his father said, but it seems like it should work.

They continued to catch the last of the salmon and also a few Dolly Varden and some small bottom fish. The original plan had been to go out in the inflatable for halibut, too, but his father had decided to save the boat and all of its gasoline for any kind of emergency that might come up. They shot another mountain goat. The smoker was going around the clock still, even as the first snows came down to the cabin, and the inside of the cabin seemed a smokehouse also with strips of salmon and Dolly Varden and sculpin and lingcod and deer and goat everywhere cooling and waiting to be bagged, the baggies and garbage bags that had already been filled piling up in the spare room.

They went to bed each night exhausted, and there was no time left awake to listen for his father, and so Roy managed on some nights even to forget that his father was not well. He began, even, to assume that his father was fine, in that he didn’t think about his father one way or the other. He was simply living each day filled with activity and then sleeping and then rising again, and since he was working alongside his father, he assumed his father was feeling all the same things. If he had been asked how his father was feeling, he would have been annoyed at the question and considered the matter too far away to pay attention to.
Most of the snows were light and did not stick for long down close to the water or even for a ways up behind the cabin. They did not cover the cache consistently. Roy asked his father if the weather would stay like this, because it seemed like it might be the case. His father had to tip his head back to remember.

They didn’t stick long, most of the snows in Ketchikan. But then I remember skiing around, and snowbanks, and shoveling snow and all the slush I had to drive through, so I guess the snow did stick and build up sometimes. Isn’t that funny, though, that I can’t really remember?

They went up to the cache several times a day and looked for bear tracks or any other tracks, but nothing ever came. The constant checking began to seem odd to both of them, as if they had developed some inexplicable fear of this one small piece of ground, so they decided to check less often and just trust that it would be all right, especially since it was growing colder and the days shorter. They came in earlier each evening from their work at the woodpile and the smoker and began reading again and sometimes played cards. They played two-handed pinochle, which technically could not be played, and his father rambled.

Remember what I told you about the world originally being a great field, and the earth flat?

Yeah, Roy said. How everything went to hell after you met Mom.

Whoa, his father said. That’s not exactly what I said. But anyway, I’ve been thinking about that again, and it’s got me thinking about what I’m missing and why I don’t have religion but need it anyway.

What? Roy asked.

I’m screwed, basically. I need the world animated, and I need it to refer to me. I need to know that when a glacier shifts or a bear farts, it has something to do with me. But I also can’t believe any of that crap, even though I need to.

What does that have to do with Mom?

I don’t know. You’re getting me sidetracked.

So they finished the hand and went to bed. But Roy kept thinking of his father’s ramblings, and it seemed to him a strange father out here. It was his tone of voice more than anything, as if the creation of the world had amounted to the Big Screw. But Roy didn’t think too much about it. He really wanted only to sleep.

The snow stuck lower and they quit fishing and smoking and chopping wood.

We have enough anyway, his father said. It’s time now to settle in and relax. That should last about two weeks before I go insane.

What?

I’m just kidding, his father said. That was a joke.

They read by the light of the paraffin lamps and kept the stove stoked. Roy had as much trouble concentrating on his homework here as he had anywhere else, so he spent most of his long hours studying the wavering shadows on the plank walls and waiting for the next meal. It was the most delicious and anticipated food he had ever eaten, all the smoked fish and meat with rice and canned vegetables. His father read and sighed and sacked out for long naps.

They took hikes still, and brought their rifles, but as the snow built up thicker this became too difficult, so as Roy studied, his father began making snowshoes. He used fresh branches and strips of the moose hide they had salted and let dry. As it snowed and blew outside and occasionally rained, he bent over the shoes like the dentist he was, sewing them up carefully and inspecting them with prodding fingers. Red-eye, he finally said, his way of saying ready. They’re finished. We’re going into the snow, my son.

But it just rained, Roy reminded him.

Yeah, that’s right. Okay, we’ll wait until there’s snow again, and then we go. But in the meantime, I have to go for a hike before I decay into some kind of marshmallow in here.

Me, too, Roy said, so they went for a hike along the water. It was overcast and drizzling, the waves indistinct, the waters shifting, surging. They walked along the steeper coast that they rarely hiked along, around the opposite point and on farther to the next in silence until his father said, I don’t think I can live without women. I’m not saying it isn’t great being out here with you, but I just miss women all the time. I can’t stop thinking about them. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know how it is that something is so thoroughly missing when they’re not around. It’s like we have the ocean here and a mountain and trees, but actually the trees aren’t here unless I’m fucking some woman.

Huh, Roy said.

Sorry, his father said. I’m just thinking out loud. I’m also thinking we can’t leave our food for this long. If another bear comes, we’re screwed.

So his father went back but Roy decided to hike on for a while, and though he thought he would try to think about what his father had said, he only looked at the water and at the smooth rocks beneath his boots and he didn’t think anything.

When he returned, his father was listening to the new ham radio. There was a clicking sound over and over and then a voice gave the standard universal time and a storm report for the South Pacific, gale-force winds everywhere it seemed. Then another channel and warping sounds with a guy far in the background talking about his great ham
equipment, which was all anyone ever talked about on ham radio, pretty much, and his father turned it off and began cooking some rice.

Tom should be here again soon, his father said.

Yeah?

Yeah. And I was thinking. I want us to stay here longer, but I know it’s not fun to hear me talk about things like I talked about today, so if you want to go back to your mom and Tracy, you can. That would be okay.

We have to quit talking about that, Roy said. I already said I’m staying.

His father didn’t turn and look at Roy during any of this, and Roy knew his allegiance was being tested, that it was being gauged, so he added, I don’t want to go. I’m staying here until next summer.

Okay, his father said, and still he didn’t turn around.

Tom came again and told them it was going to start snowing more. He was standing on one pontoon and they were standing on shore, about fifteen feet away, as if in a different world, unapproachable from the water. I won’t always be able to fly in, Tom said, when the weather’s bad, and I won’t just be checking in on my way to other places anymore, so if you need anything, you need to call me on the radio.

Okay, Roy’s father said. That’s fine.

Is the radio working okay?

Yeah.

You have a VHF too, and you should be able to hail anyone passing through on that, and they can pass a message on to me. In case you have any more bears over for dinner. Tom grinned then. He was freshly shaven and showered and his clothes clean and he was starting to get cold out on the pontoon. Roy realized he had some kind of heater in the plane.

All right, Tom said. Enjoy.

He climbed up into the plane and started the engine and taxied around. They waved and then he roared away and was gone.

We’re here now, his father said. That we are. And the two gone into the wilderness knew not the excesses of mankind and lived in purity.

You sound like the Bible, Dad.

We shall trot through snow like horses and know more winter than Jack Frost. The lichen and the high reaches shall cleanse our souls.

I don’t even know what that sounds like.

It’s poetry. Your father is one of the undiscovered minor geniuses.

Roy laughed, and then he realized it had been a while. Then he followed his father inside.

It did begin snowing a few days later, as Tom had predicted, and they tried out the snowshoes. Though the shoes felt unwieldy tied onto their boots, they actually worked well. Roy and his father rose high on the mountain with what seemed to Roy more ease than before, since the earth was no longer pitted and they didn’t have to tear through the undergrowth or look carefully to see what would support them and what wouldn’t. With the shoes, they sank no more than a few inches with each step, and everywhere the path was clear. It was cold, but they had many layers on and, as they climbed, they began shedding layers. It was clear and sunny. They could see past the near islands to other horizons beyond, farther than they had seen before.

This is what most people never see, his father said. Most never see this place in winter, and certainly not from their own mountain on a sunny day. What we are is lucky.

They climbed to the very top and stood on the rocks and it was still clear. They saw their entire island behind and no other sign of humanity on it, only white mountains and the darker trees spreading below.

His father spread his arms and yelped.

I am so happy to be alive, his father said.

Since it was still early in the day, they continued partway down the other side and hiked on to the next ridge and up to the next peak. Another glorious view, and a different one.

Down there in that valley is where I killed the bear, his father said.

Wow. That’s a long ways.

It was.

They walked around the top, taking in all the different views.

If you could have anything you wanted, his father said, what would it be?

I don’t know, Roy said.

You’re not giving the question any time to seep into your bones, me boy. What would it be? What’s your dream?

Roy thought and couldn’t come up with anything. It seemed to him he was just trying to get through this one
dream of his father’s. But finally he said, A big boat, that I could sail to Hawaii on, and then maybe around the world.

Ah, his father said. That is a good one.

What about you?

What about me. What about me. So many things. I think a good marriage and not to have broken up the two I had, and not to have been a dentist, and not to have the IRS after me, and after that, maybe a son like you and maybe a big boat.

He gave Roy a hug then, which took Roy completely by surprise. He felt embarrassed when his father finally let go of him. His father was going to cry, he knew.

But then luckily his father turned and headed back down the slope. They continued on without talking, and by the time they were descending to the cabin, the awful locked-in feeling had gone away and Roy said, Who’s been eating my porridge? Who’s been sleeping in my bed?

His father laughed. It would be time for the cache, all right.

When they had their shoes off and were inside with the stove going, his father said, You know, I’ve been thinking about what you said about already having said that you’re staying, and you’re right. I don’t have to feel bad and apologetic after everything I say. I can just trust that you can handle a few things. After all, I’m never going to be perfect or without troubles, and I want to be able to talk with you and want you to know me, so I’m not going to keep apologizing like that.

I think that’s good, Roy said.

I appreciate it, his father said.

Roy read from his history book then, thinking he never had weird talks like this with his mother and then missing her. She and his sister would be having dinner now, listening to the same classical music, whatever it was, that they always listened to, and his mom asking Tracy all about everything and Tracy getting to talk to her. But then his father seemed to be doing better, too, and this wasn’t so bad, so he read on about the guillotine and tried to forget about home.

A few other things, too, his father said. I’ve been thinking about Rhoda and thinking that maybe things could still work with her. I’m having a more positive attitude. I think I could be more attentive like she wants, and make good on my promises and not lie to her. I think I could do those things now. I don’t mean to make them sound like merit badges, like little tasks I can just check off, but I think I could do better now. I might call the operator on the shortwave.

Sounds good, Roy said. And he kept reading. The people ran in terror of each other like a band of criminals caught, each wondering who would speak and betray the other, as if each had a knife at the other’s back. It seemed like he was getting very little actual information in this book. It was supposed to be a history book.

Weren’t there supposed to be facts?

They played cards again late in the evening, and his father won every hand.

My luck’s a-changing, he said. I am a new man grown out of the ashes. My wings are of the eagle and I shall fly far above.

God, Roy said.

His father laughed. Okay, that was a bit much.

They continued to explore more of the island by snowshoe, only on clear days at first but then on overcast and even snowy days as well. They traveled farther and farther until one afternoon they lost all visibility and were still at least four or five hours’ hike from the cabin.

Huh, his father said. He was standing only a few feet from Roy and still it was hard for Roy to see his father’s jacket and hood and the scarf wrapped around his face. He seemed a shadow that could be there but might not be there. His father said something else, but Roy couldn’t hear it clearly over the wind. He yelled to his father that he couldn’t hear.

I said I think I screwed up, his father yelled.

Great, Roy said, but only loud enough for himself to hear.

His father came closer, leaning against him. We can do several things. Can you hear me?

Yeah.

We can hike back and try to find it and try to make it before dark, but we might not and we might get tired and cold and get stuck. Or we can use what’s left of daylight and our energy and build a snow cave and hope it’s better tomorrow. We won’t have much to eat that way, but we might be safer.

The snow cave sounds fun, Roy yelled.

This isn’t about fun, his father said.
I know, Roy yelled.
Oh. Sorry. And his father turned away then and Roy had to follow close not to lose him. They went to a stand of cedars, and up against a bank behind the trees where the snow was thick they began tunneling into the side of it. They were out of the wind already, and now Roy could hear his father’s hard breathing.

What if it collapses? Roy asked.
Let’s hope it doesn’t. I’ve never dug one of these before, but I know people do use them from time to time.
They dug until they hit ground and then they continued enlarging from inside, but the angles were all wrong.
We’ll never be able to sleep in here, his father said.

So they moved over a bit and dug a smaller entrance down lower and his father went in on his stomach to dig out from the inside until the roof collapsed on him and only his feet stuck out. Roy threw himself on the pile and dug wildly at it to un-bury his father until his father finally backed out and stood up and said, Damnit.

They stood there like that, breathing hard, listening to the wind and feeling it get colder.

Got any ideas? his father asked.
You don’t know how to make one?
That’s why I’m asking.
Maybe we need deeper snow, Roy said. Maybe we can’t dig a snow cave with what we have here.

His father thought about that for a while. You know, he finally said, you might be right. I guess we’re hiking back to the cabin. As much as that’s a stupid idea, I can’t think of anything else. Can you?
No.

So they set off up the ridge, exposed again to the wind. Roy fought to keep up, to not lose his father. He knew that if he lost sight of him even for a minute, his father would never hear him yell and he’d be lost and never find his way back. Watching the dark shadow moving before him, it seemed as if this were what he had felt for a long time, that his father was something insubstantial before him and that if he were to look away for an instant or forget or not follow fast enough and will him to be there, he might vanish, as if it were only Roy’s will that kept him there. Roy became more and more afraid, and tired, with a sense that he could not continue on, and he began to feel sorry for himself, telling himself, It’s too much for me to have to do.

When his father stopped, finally, Roy bumped into his back.

We’re over the ridge now. I think we go along this and have one more before the cabin. I wish I knew what time it was. It seems like it’s still daylight, but it’s impossible to tell how much of it is left.

They stood and rested a moment and then his father asked, Are you doing all right?
I’m tired, Roy said, and I’m starting to shiver.

His father unwrapped his scarf and Roy thought he was going to give it to him, but he only tied it around Roy’s arm and then to his own. That’s hypothermia, his father said. We have to keep moving. You can’t give in to the tiredness and you can’t sleep. We have to keep moving.

So they hiked on, and Roy’s footsteps became softer and it seemed a longer time between them. He remembered riding in the back of his father’s Suburban from Fairbanks to Anchorage, the sleeping bags piled in there and the road lolling him back and forth. His sister had been back there in a sleeping bag, too, and they had stopped at a log cabin that had giant hamburgers and pancakes bigger than any Roy had seen.

Roy was dimly aware of darkness and later of day and hitting hard and waking and then the rocking again and then, when he awoke, he was in their cabin in a sleeping bag in the dark and his father was behind him and he could tell they were both naked, could feel the hair from his father’s chest and legs on the back of him. He was afraid to move but he got up and found a flashlight and shone it on his father, who lay curled on his side in the bag, the end of his nose dark, something wrong with the skin. Roy put on some dry clothes fast because it was so cold. He put more wood in the stove, got it going, and pushed the sleeping bag closer around his father, then found his own bag and got into it and rubbed his hands and feet together until he was warm enough and fell asleep again.

When he woke next it was light and it was warm from the stove and his father was sitting up in a chair watching him.

How do you feel? he asked.
I’m thirsty and really hungry, Roy said.
It’s been two days, his father said.
What?
Two days. We didn’t get back here until the next day, and then we slept through last night, too. I have food hot for you on the stove.

It was soup, split pea, and Roy could eat only a small bowl of it with a few crackers before he felt full, though he knew he was still hungry.

Your appetite will come back, his father said. Just wait a little while.
What happened to your face?

Just a little frostbite, I guess. It got a little burned. The end of my nose doesn’t feel much.

Roy thought that over for a while, wondering whether his father’s face would get completely better but afraid to ask, and finally he said, We came close to not making it, huh?

That’s right, his father said. I cut it way too close. I almost got us both killed.

Roy didn’t say anything more and neither did his father. They went through the day eating and stoking the stove and reading. They both went to bed early, and as Roy waited for sleep, he felt none of the elation he had always imagined people felt when they came close to death and narrowly escaped. He felt only very tired and a little sad, as if they had lost something out there.

In the morning, his father spent over an hour at the radio before he was finally able to place a telephone call to Rhoda, but what he got was only an answering machine.

Oh, he said into the mike. I was hoping I would get to talk with you. This is going to sound stupid into a machine, but I’m just thinking that maybe I’ve changed some out here and maybe I could be better now. That’s all. I wanted to talk with you. I’ll try again some other time.

When he turned the radio off, Roy asked, If you talked with her and she wanted you to, would you leave here right away to go be with her?

His father shook his head. I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m just missing her.

They spent another day in the cabin reading and eating and staying warm and not talking much. Finally they played hearts with a dummy hand, which didn’t work well.

I’ve been thinking about Rhoda, his father said. You may find some woman someday who isn’t exactly nice to you but somehow reminds you of who you are. She just isn’t fooled, you know?

Roy, of course, didn’t know at all. He’d never even had a girlfriend except for Paige Cummings, maybe, whom he had liked for three years, and Charlotte, whom he had kissed once, but it seemed like he knew girls in porno magazines better than he knew any real girls.

His father tried the radio again that evening when they were done playing cards, as Roy was washing the dishes. He got through this time.

What are you thinking, Jim? Rhoda said. You’ve been away from everyone now for a few months and you think you can be different, but what’s it going to be like when you’re back in the same situations, with the same people?

Roy was getting embarrassed. There was no privacy to the radio. So he dried off his hands, put on his boots, his father stalling for time, saying, I, uh, waiting for Roy to get out of there.

And then Roy was out of the cabin for the first time in four days, sinking past his boots into the snow and heading for the shoreline. There was no ice or snow down close to the water. It wasn’t cold enough there, Roy supposed, or else the salt melted everything away. He picked rocks out of the snow and hurled them at thin panes of ice farther up along the creek, cracking and shattering them like car windows. He didn’t know how long he needed to stall out here, but he imagined it would be a while. He walked past the creek mouth and out to the low point, staying close along the edge, out of the deep snow, and wondered whether there were any fish in the cove now. He supposed there had to be, since there was nowhere else for them to go, but he had no idea how they survived. He wondered what he and his father were doing here in the winter. It seemed pretty dumb.

When his father had asked his mother whether Roy could come here, his mother had not answered or let Roy take the phone. She hung up and told him his father’s request and asked him to think about it. Then she waited for several days and asked him at dinner whether he wanted to go. Roy remembered how she had looked then, with her hair pulled back and apron still on. It had felt like a kind of ceremony, attended with a greater seriousness than he was used to. Even his younger sister Tracy had been silent, watching them. He cherished this part of it, even now. He had felt he was deciding his future, even though he knew that she wanted him to say no and knew also that he would say no.

And that was the answer he gave that night.

Why? she asked.

I don’t want to leave here and my friends.

She continued spooning her soup. She nodded slightly but that was it.

What do you think? Roy asked.

I think you’re answering the way you think I want you to answer. I’d like you to think about it again, and if the answer again is no, that’s fine and of course you know I want you here and Tracy and I will miss you if you go. I want you to make the best decision, though, and I don’t think you’ve thought about it enough yet. Whatever you decide, know that it was the best you could have decided now, no matter what happens later.

She didn’t look at him as she said this. She spoke as if she knew of events coming later, as if she could see the future, and the future Roy saw then was his father killing himself, alone in Fairbanks, and Roy having abandoned
him.

Don’t go, Tracy said. I don’t want you to go. And then she ran back to her room and cried until their mother went to her.

Roy thought for the next several days. He saw himself helping his father, making him smile, the two of them hiking and fishing and wandering over glaciers in brilliant sunlight. He already missed his mother and sister and friends, but he felt there was an inevitability to all of this, that in fact there was no choice at all.

When his mother asked him again at dinner several nights later, he said yes, he would like to go.

His mother didn’t answer. She put down her fork and then breathed deeply several times. He could see that her hand was trembling. His sister ran back to her room again and his mother had to follow. It was as if there had been some kind of death, he felt then. Certainly if he had known as much then as he knew now he would not have come. But he blamed his mother for this, not his father. She had arranged it. He had originally wanted to say no.

The clouds were high and thin and there were huge white circles around the moon. The air was white and seemed almost smoky even out over the channel. There was no wind and almost no sound, so Roy stepped hard into the rocks and snow to hear his boots. Then he was getting cold and hiked slowly back.

When he reentered, his father was sitting on the floor by the radio, though it wasn’t on anymore and he was just staring down at the floor.

Well? Roy asked, then regretted it.

She’s with a guy named Steve, his father said. They’re moving in together.

I’m sorry.

That’s all right. It’s my fault anyway.

How is it your fault?

I cheated and lied and was selfish and blind and stupid and took her for granted and, let’s see, there must be some other things, just general disappointment, I suppose, and now I’m going to get shafted and it’s my fault. The big thing, though, I think, is that I wasn’t there for her when she went through all the stuff with her parents. It just seemed like too much, I guess. And I suppose I left her alone to deal with all that. I mean, I thought she had her family to help, you know.

Rhoda had lost her parents to a murder-suicide ten months earlier. Roy had not heard much about it except that her mother used a shotgun on her husband and then a pistol on herself, and afterward Rhoda found out that her mother had cut her out of the will. Roy didn’t really understand how this last part worked, but it was all part of something too awful to think about.

She felt I abandoned her then, his father said.

Maybe things will change, Roy said, just to be saying something.

That’s what I’m hoping, his father said.

A big storm set in the next day. It sounded as if water were hitting the roof and walls in sheets, a great river rather than just windblown, it hit so heavily. They couldn’t see anything through the windows except the rain and hail and occasionally snow hitting them from angles that kept shifting. They kept the stove going constantly and his father ran out for a few minutes to bring in more wood. He returned three times cold and swearing and piled the wood with the food in the extra room, then stood by the stove to dry off and get warm again.

Blowing like there’s no tomorrow, his father said. As if it could wipe time clear off the calendar.

The whole cabin shook occasionally and the walls seemed to move.

It couldn’t actually blow off the roof or something, could it? Roy said.

No, his father said. Your dad wouldn’t buy a cabin with a detachable roof.

Good, Roy said.

His father tried the radio again, saying, I’ll make it quick. I just have a few things to say to her. You won’t have to go outside or anything, of course.

But he couldn’t get any kind of signal in the storm and finally he gave up.

This is one of those things she’s not going to believe, he said. I tried to call her but the storm kept me from doing it. But when the tally is made, I didn’t get through to her, and the storm doesn’t count.

Maybe it’s not like that, Roy said.

What do you mean?

I don’t know.

Listen, his father said. Man is only an appendage to woman. Woman is whole by herself and doesn’t need man. But man needs her. So she gets to call the shots. That’s why the rules don’t make any sense, and why they keep changing. They’re not being decided on by both sides.

I don’t know if that’s true, Roy said.
This is because you’re growing up with your mother and sister, without me around. You’re so used to women’s rules you think they make sense. That will make it easy for you in some ways, but it also means maybe you won’t see some things as clearly.

It’s not like I got to choose.

See? That’s one of them. I was trying to make a point, and you turned it around to make me feel bad, to make me feel like I haven’t done my duty according to the rules and haven’t been a good father.

Well, maybe you haven’t. Roy was starting to cry now, and wishing he weren’t.

See? his father said. You only know a woman’s way to argue. Cry your fucking eyes out.

Jesus, Roy said.

Never mind, his father said. I have to get out of here. Even if it is a fucking hurricane. I’m going for a hike.

As he pulled on his gear, Roy was facing the wall trying to make himself stop crying, but it all seemed so enormously unfair and from out of nowhere that he couldn’t stop. He was still crying after his father had gone, and then he started talking out loud. Fuck him, he said. Goddamn it, fuck you, Dad. Fuck you. And then he cried harder and made a weird squealing sound from trying to hold it back. Quit fucking crying, he said.

Finally he did stop, and he washed off his face and stoked the stove and got in his sleeping bag and read. When his father came back, it was several hours later. He stomped his boots out on the porch, then came inside and took off his gear and went to the stove and cooked dinner.

Roy listened to the kitchen sounds and to the howling outside and the rain thrown against the walls in gusts. It seemed to him they could just go on like this, not speaking, and it seemed even that this might be easier.

Here, his father said when he put the plates on the card table in the middle of the room. Roy got up and they ate without looking at one another or saying anything. Just chewing away at the Tuna Helper with sculpin in it and listening to the walls. Then his father said, You can do the dishes.

Okay.

And I’m not going to apologize, his father said. I do that too much.

Okay.

The storm continued for another five days, days of waiting and not talking much and feeling cooped up. Occasionally Roy or his father went for a short hike or brought in wood, but the rest of the time was just reading and eating and waiting and his father trying to reach Rhoda on the shortwave or the VHF but this never worked.

You’d think I could get through for just a few minutes, his father said. What good is all this shit if we can’t use it in bad weather? Are we supposed to have emergencies just on good days?

Roy considered saying, Good thing we haven’t needed it, as a way of getting talking again, but he was afraid this would be interpreted as some kind of comment about his father’s need for Rhoda, so he kept quiet.

When his father did finally get through again, the storm had mostly died. Roy went out into light drizzle and ground so soaked it was like walking on sponges. The trees were dripping everywhere, big drops on the hood and shoulders of his rain gear. He wondered who Rhoda really was. He had spent a lot of time with her, of course, when she and his father had been married. But his memories were all a kid’s memories, of how she threatened to stab their elbows with her fork if they left them on the table at dinner, for instance, and a peek of her once in the bathroom through the crack in the door. A few arguments between her and his father, but nothing distinct. They had divorced only one year ago, when he’d been twelve, but somehow everything was different now, all his perceptions. As if thirteen were a different life than twelve. He couldn’t remember how he’d thought then, how his brain had worked, because back then he hadn’t thought about his brain working, so he couldn’t now make sense of anything from that time, as if he had someone else’s memories. So Rhoda could have been anyone. All she meant to him now was this thing his father had to have, a craving as if for pornography, a need that made his father sick, though Roy knew it was wrong, incorrect, to think she actually made him sick. He knew it was his father doing it to himself.

Around the point, Roy sat on a large piece of driftwood that was soaked through and cold. He watched his breath fogging out and looked at the water and actually saw a small boat pass, about a mile away. An extremely rare event. A small cabin cruiser out fishing or camping, with extra jerry cans of gasoline tied along the bow rails. Roy stood up and waved but he was too far even to see if there was a response. He could see the dark patch inside where there was a person or several people but could not make out anything more distinct.

He wondered whether this thing his dad had with Rhoda would ever happen to him. Though he hoped not, he knew somehow ahead of time that it probably would. But by now he was just thinking to be doing something and wished he were back in the cabin where it was warm. It was just too cold out here. It was a miserable place.

When he returned, he was still too early, but he didn’t go back outside. He figured he had stayed out long enough. I know that, his father said. That’s not what I’m saying. Roy’s here now, by the way. He was outside.

Rhoda’s voice came in unclear, warped by the radio. Jim, Roy’s not the only one hearing this. Anyone with a ham
radio is getting to hear everything.

You’re right, his father said. But I don’t care. This is too important.

What’s important, Jim?

That we talk, that we work things out.

And how are things going to work out?

I want us to be together.

They listened to the static then for at least half a minute before Rhoda came back on.

I’m sorry I’m having to say this in front of Roy and everyone else, Jim, but we’re never going to be together again. We’ve already tried that, many times. You have to listen to me, to what I’ve been saying. I’ve found someone else, Jim, and I’m going to marry him, I hope. And anyway, it doesn’t matter about him. We still wouldn’t be together. Sometimes things just end, and we have to let them end.

Roy pretended to be reading while his father sat bowed before the radio.

Fucking radio, his father said to Rhoda. If we could be together now, in person, face to face, this would be different. And then he turned the radio off.

Roy looked up. His father was hunched over with his forearms on his knees and his head down. He began rubbing his forehead. He just sat there like that for a long time. There was nothing Roy could think of to say, so he didn’t say anything. But he wondered why they were here at all, when everything important to his father was somewhere else.

It didn’t make sense to Roy that his father had come out here. It was beginning to seem that maybe he just hadn’t been able to think of any other way of living that might be better. So this was just a big fallback plan, and Roy, too, was part of a large despair that lived everywhere his father went.

There were no good times after this. His father sank into himself and Roy felt alone. His father read when the weather was miserable and went for hikes alone when it was only bad. They talked only to say things like, Maybe we should fix dinner soon, or Have you seen my gloves? Roy watched his father all the time and could discover no crack in the shell of his despair. His father had become impervious.

And then Roy came in one day from a hike alone and found his father sitting at the radio set with his pistol in his hand. It was oddly quiet, with only a few small humming and chirping sounds from the radio.

Jim? Rhoda said over the radio. Don’t do this to me, you asshole.

His father turned off the radio and stood. He stood looking at Roy in the doorway and then looked around the room as if he were embarrassed by some small thing and searching for something to say. But he didn’t say anything. He walked over to Roy and handed him the pistol, then put on his coat and boots and went out.

Roy watched him go until he’d disappeared into the trees, then he looked at the pistol in his hand. The hammer was back and he could see the copper shell in there. He eased the hammer down with the pistol pointed away from him and then he pulled the hammer back again, raised the barrel to his head, and fired.
Jim in the trees heard the shot and didn’t know what it was about. He wondered for a moment whether he had really heard it, but then he figured he had. Roy was making some kind of scene. He was going to shoot up their cabin because he needed to be taken care of now. Jim hiked on. He hoped Roy would hit the radio.

It was drizzling and the fog was in close. The trees had become ghosted and the entire island seemed uninhabitable. Jim hiked on, hearing his breathing the only rhythm, the only moving thing. He couldn’t think about Rhoda. She had become a sense now, a part of him that he couldn’t differentiate enough to think about. She was a longing and regret in him like a growth. And she was really doing it, really leaving him. Jim could feel himself on the edge of crying again, so he hiked on faster and counted his steps in rhythm, onetwothreefour in a group, fivesixseventeeneight, over and over. He hiked on until he stopped because he was tired and then he turned around and hiked back, but he didn’t like the thought of arriving, of having to find the next thing to do to fill his time. The days were so long.

When he neared the cabin, he saw the door was still partway open, which pissed him off. It was like Roy to storm off on his own little hike and not close the door but just let them freeze.

And then he got to the door and looked down and saw his son. His son’s body and not really his son because the head was missing. Torn and rough, red, with dark slicked hair along the edge and blood splattered everywhere. He stepped back because looking straight down he saw that he was stepping on a piece that had come free, a piece of his son’s head. A piece of bone.

He stood there rocking and looking and breathing. He glanced around the rest of the room but there was nothing else to see, and then he had to sit down and he sat down in the doorway, a few feet from Roy, and as soon as he heard this name in his head, he started to shake and it seemed that he was crying but he wasn’t crying or letting out any sound. What’s happening here? he asked out loud.

He touched Roy’s jacket then, and shook Roy’s shoulder gently. Then he looked at the blood on his hand and back at the stump for a head that was all Roy had now and then from inside him he began to howl.

And howling did nothing but fill itself and he was like an actor in his own pain, not knowing who he was or what part now to play. He shook his hands oddly in the air and slapped them against his thighs. He pushed himself back farther away from Roy but this was phony, another act, and still he didn’t know what to do. No one was watching. And though it couldn’t be his son there, it kept being his son there.

Some of the inside was white. He kept waiting for it all to turn red, but it wouldn’t. And soon there were small flies, gnats and no-see-ums, landing there inside his son’s head and crawling and hopping around. He swished them away, but he didn’t want to actually touch the head and they kept landing again. He leaned in close and blew on them and could smell the stink of blood and then he grabbed Roy’s jacket and pulled him onto his lap, the stump with part of a face showing now, a jaw and cheek and one eye that had been hidden against the floor. He looked at this and kept looking and shook him there and looked when he could see and wasn’t blinded by the heaving and all he could think was why? Because there was no sense to it at all. He was the one who’d been afraid he might do this. Roy had been fine, had always been fine.

No, he kept saying out loud, even though he knew this was a stupid thing to say. He kept trying to think because whenever he stopped thinking for a moment he was crying terribly. And yet even this he was aware of. It was as if he couldn’t reenter the world to act unconsciously. As if every thought and feeling and word and everything he saw were artificial, even his mutilated son. As if even his son dead before him weren’t real enough.

He put Roy back down on the floor and looked at all the blood on his hands and jacket and jeans, blood everywhere so he got up and went down to the water and waded in. He gasped from the cold and already his legs were numb. They were stumps, and then the terror ripped through him again from that word, stumps, and he was sobbing hideously. He walked around and around in the shallows and slipped and went under and came back up and walked out, shaking now from the cold also, and went back to Roy, who still lay there dead, who hadn’t moved. He had just seen Roy alive. It hadn’t been more than an hour ago, and Roy had been fine.
smoked salmon that lay open on the table, then kicked over the table, but then he stopped, standing in the middle of the room, because only a few more minutes had gone by, if even that, and all this destruction had not helped. He wasn’t even interested in it. It had seemed like living but now it seemed like nothing.

Jim sat beside Roy again and watched him. He was still the same, still exactly the same. He picked up the .44 Magnum from where it had bounced a few feet away. He put the barrel to his own head but then put it down and laughed savagely. You can’t even kill yourself, he said to himself out loud. You can only play at killing yourself. You get to be awake and thinking about this every minute for the next fifty years. That’s what you get.

And then he cried, as much from self-pity as for Roy. He knew this and despised himself for it, but he stripped out of his wet clothing, put on his warmest clothes, and cried this time for hours and there was no break, no end to it, and he wondered only whether it would ever stop.

But it did stop, of course, in the evening and Roy still there on the floor and Jim didn’t know what to do with him. He realized now that he would have to do something with him, that he couldn’t just leave him there on the floor. So he went around back and found a shovel. It was past sunset already, getting dark, but he went off a hundred feet or so behind the cabin and started digging, then realized this was too close to the latrine and he didn’t like that, so he went farther into the trees, toward the point, and then he started digging again, but there were roots, so he went back for the ax and chopped and dug his way through until he had a pit about four feet deep and longer than Roy’s body, and then this idea, Roy’s body, sent him crying again and when he finally stopped and returned to the cabin it was the middle of the night.

Roy was in the doorway, blocking it. He still hadn’t moved. Jim knelt down to pick him up but what was left of his head lolled wet and cold against Jim’s face and Jim threw up and dropped him and then walked around in circles outside saying Jesus.

He went back in and picked up Roy again and carried him this time fast out to the grave, and he tried to set Roy carefully into it but ended up dropping him and then howled and hit himself and jumped up and down at the edge of the grave because he had dropped his son.

And then it occurred to him that he couldn’t do this, that he couldn’t just bury Roy out here. His mother would want to see him. And the thought of having to tell her twisted him up again and he was off in the woods stumbling around again and feeling sorry for himself and by the time he got back it was already getting lighter, even through the trees.

I fucked up, he said. He was squatting beside the pit and rocking. I really fucked up this time. And then he remembered Roy’s mother again, Elizabeth. He would have to tell her. He would have to tell her and everyone else, but he wouldn’t be able to tell them everything, he knew. He wouldn’t tell about handing Roy the pistol. And then he was sobbing uncontrollably again, like some other force ripping through his body, and he wanted it to end but also didn’t want it to end since it at least filled time, but after a while, after it was fully light out, the crying did stop abruptly and he was left there again by the pit looking down at Roy and wondering what to do. Roy’s mother would have to see him. He couldn’t just bury him out here. She would want to have a funeral and she’d have to know what had happened. He’d have to tell her. And Tracy.

Oh God, he said. He would have to tell Tracy that her big brother was dead. She would have to see him too. He wondered for a moment if there’d be some way of putting Roy’s face back together a little, but then he saw right away that that was crazy.

He reached down into the pit and pulled Roy out, then hefted him up again and carried him back to the cabin. He was heavy and cold and stiff, bent up weirdly now from being in the pit, and he was covered with dirt. There was dirt all in the head part. He didn’t want to look at it, but he kept glancing over and worrying. None of this would look good.

Jim laid his son back down in the cabin, in the main room, then sat against the far wall and watched him. He didn’t know what to do. He knew he had to do something soon, but he had no idea what.

Okay, he finally said. I have to tell them. I have to let his mother know. And he went to the radio but then saw that he had destroyed it and remembered that he had destroyed the VHF as well. Goddamn it, he yelled at the top of his voice and kicked the set again. And then he started crying again, mid-yell. It could start any time, had a will of its own, and it didn’t make him feel any better, as crying is supposed to. It was a terrible kind of crying that only hurt and made everything seem increasingly unbearable and though it filled time it seemed each time that it might not end. It was to be avoided, so when he could get his eyes clear enough to see he went out to the boat, which they had tied behind the cabin, and went back in for the pump and the outboard and life jackets, flares, oars, horn, bilge pump, spare gas can, everything, and carried it all out onto the beach and carried the boat out too and pumped it up there and mounted the engine and put all the stuff in. Then he went back for Roy.

Roy was still propped oddly against the wall, still stiff. The side that had his face was showing, but the skin was all yellow and bluish like a bloated fish and Jim threw up again and had to walk around outside, wishing he could
just never go back into the cabin, saying, That’s my son in there.

When he returned, he looked again at Roy and looked away and wondered how he’d carry him. He couldn’t just dump him in the boat like that. He thought of garbage bags but then was weeping and shouting again, He’s not fucking garbage. So when he calmed again he laid out a sleeping bag and rolled Roy onto it and zipped it up and drew the drawstring at the top. He picked Roy up over his shoulder and carried him out to the boat.

Okay, he said. This is going to work. We’re going to find someone, and they’re going to help us. He went back to the cabin for some food and water but when he got there he couldn’t remember what he had come for, so he just closed the door and returned to the boat.

He had inflated the boat too far away from the water, so he unloaded Roy and the gas cans and then dragged the boat to the edge of the water, then reloaded the cans and Roy. When he finally pushed off, it was afternoon, not very smart, he realized now, but he pulled the starter cord and pushed the choke back in when it coughed to life and then he put it in gear and they were heading out. The water was very calm in their inlet and the sky gray, the air heavy and wet. He tried to get up on a plane, but they were too loaded down, so he throttled back to a slow five or six knots as they cleared the point, Jim shivering a bit in the wind and his son wrapped up in the sleeping bag.

They were exposed beyond the point to a cold breeze up the channel and small wind waves that splashed a little into the boat.

This isn’t real good, Jim said to his son. We’re not doing the smartest thing here. But he kept going and then began to wonder where he was going. I don’t know, he said aloud. Maybe to wherever those houses are. But that’s twenty miles or something. That’s not close. We need a boat to find us.

And then he was thinking again of Roy’s mother, of her face when she would hear about this and her face when she’d heard about all the other things, when he told her he was sleeping with Gloria, for instance. After they moved and tried to make things work and he had been what she’d wanted for a whole month, thirty days exactly of being considerate and affectionate and trying not to think of other women, she came to him in bed smiling and happy and he wanted only for her never to touch him again. He told her he’d just been acting the past month, that it wasn’t him, and her face then and her face when they told their children they were getting divorced, and now this. This couldn’t even be compared to the other things. This isn’t just a thing, he said out loud, sobbing, and then he couldn’t see to steer and they curved all over the channel and lurched and took on water until he could get himself under control again.

And Tracy. She would hate him. All her life. Along with her mother. Everyone. And they’d be right. And what would Rhoda say? She would know exactly whose fault this all was.

The boat steered badly and the current was pushing them sideways. Jim tried again to get on a plane, but the nose only pushed into the air and wouldn’t come down, so he throttled back again. Everything was gray and cold and completely empty. There were no other boats, no houses, anywhere. By the time he was halfway across the channel to the next island, it was late in the afternoon and he was shivering uncontrollably and worrying about running out of gas and worrying what Roy would look like when he finally got there and whom he’d have to talk with first.

He stopped twice to pump out the water and continued on toward the shore, wanting finally only to make that and not worrying if they went farther today. He was so cold he was numb and had trouble thinking. He’d think, I wonder how far, and then his brain would stop for a while and then he’d wonder again how far to the shore and finally he realized this was hypothermia setting in, that if he didn’t get to shore and get warm he would be in trouble. And he wondered why he hadn’t brought more clothing and something to sleep in and some food. He was hungry.

When he made shore, it was close to sunset and Roy was soaked and they still hadn’t seen anyone. Jim went for wood while Roy stayed with the boat and Jim wanted to make a fire and he piled up the sticks he had found but all the wood was wet and he didn’t have any matches, so he cried. Then he went back to the boat and said Sorry to Roy as he dumped him out of the sleeping bag onto the beach and got into the wet bag himself and tried to get warm and woke again in darkness and was still cold but also somehow still alive. I got lucky, he thought, but then he thought of Roy and got out of the bag to go find him, frightened now that Roy had been picked at or even dragged away by something, but when he found him nearby he still seemed pretty much like how he’d been, though it was hard to tell for sure because he didn’t have a flashlight and Roy only had half a head. That sounded funny and Jim laughed for a second, then started weeping again. Oh Roy, he said. What are we gonna do?

Jim slept again and in the morning Roy definitely had been picked at. The seagulls were still milling nearby and Jim went after them with rocks, chasing them so far along the beach that by the time he returned the others were back at Roy again, stealing away little pieces of him.

Jim put him back in the sleeping bag and tied it up again and reloaded the boat. This time, Jim said. This time we find someone.

Under way, he was hungry and cold and had trouble staying awake. He saw no cabins or boats of any kind, but he kept going into the waves and trying to look around and trying not to think but thinking anyway of what he was
and there he was. There was no sign, no indication. He hadn’t imagined he could do this kind of thing. But then he lost it again because there really hadn’t been any sign and he really hadn’t imagined Roy could do this. Roy had always been stable, and sure they had argued a little, but things hadn’t been bad, and there was no reason to do this. Damn you, he said out loud. It doesn’t make any fucking sense.

As he rounded another point, he saw a boat far away, heading into the next channel. He stopped the engine and fumbled with one of the flares, finally got it lit and then held it high over his head smoking orange and burning and stinking of sulfur, but the boat, something big, some kind of huge yacht with a hundred fucking passengers, one of whom must be looking this way, just passed on and disappeared behind another coastline.

So Jim continued along the island at a slow five knots maybe and against the current again and wondered how well he knew this area. He wondered if he could just keep going along this and other islands and run out of gas and never find anyone. It seemed possible. It wasn’t exactly everyone living out here. But then late afternoon, after he’d poured in the spare gas and was sure he was just going to run out and have to drift around forever, he saw a cabin cruiser crossing on the other side, back toward the island he and Roy lived on, where they’d come from. They could have hailed it from there. Jim got out another flare and struck the end with the cap and nothing happened, so he struck again and looked up at the boat going fast and passing away from them now. He grabbed the last flare and struck it and it ignited and he held it high and the boat swerved slightly toward him and he was sure it must have seen him. But then it swerved back the other way, just avoiding a log or something in the water, and the flare went out and the boat was only a speck receding into the gray.

Jim yelled, over and over, growling at the shoreline and the water and air and sky and everything and hurled the burned-out torch and just sat there looking at the sleeping bag that held Roy and then at his hands on his knees. The boat was rocking and drifting and cold water was lapping onto his lower back and down his seat.

Jim continued on and, coming around a small point, happened to look over just in time to see a small cabin disappearing back into the trees. He turned the boat around and motored back and saw it was bigger, actually, than that, a home it looked like, a summer house, and he landed the boat on the small gravel beach before it and left Roy to go up and investigate.

It was hidden behind a stand of spruce and he’d been lucky to see it at all, though it wasn’t far from shore. There was a path leading to it and when he got up close he saw it was a log cabin but big enough to be someone’s house, with several rooms and storm boards on all the windows, locked up for the winter.

Hello, he said. Then he walked up onto the porch, which had debris all over it from the storm, and he knew no one would be around. Hey, he yelled, I happen to have my dead son with me. Maybe we could come in and chat and have dinner and spend the night, what do you say?

There was no answer. He went back to the boat and Roy and tried to think. It was late in the day and he hadn’t seen anything else. He was on his reserve gasoline already. It wouldn’t last long, and he was still shivering and starving and dizzy and they might have left something in their house for him to eat. And maybe a radio. They would certainly have some kind of blanket, and a fireplace and some wood. He had seen the chimney. And he had been lucky to warm up enough last night. He hadn’t been sure he would in a wet sleeping bag, and it might not work out as well a second time, because he was much weaker now. He had to deliver Roy, he knew, but the truth was, the kid didn’t look all that great anyway. Jim laughed grimly. You’re a card, he said out loud. You’re a hell of a father and you’re a comic, too.

Wait right here, he said to Roy, and he went back to the cabin again and this time continued around back. He was looking for a way in. The windows all had storm boards fitted and probably locked from inside. The front door had a big padlock and, as it turned out, so did the back door. He looked all around and there was nothing left open, no glass to break, even.

Okay, he said. It was quiet, only a few drips from the trees. And it was getting on toward sunset. He had no flashlight, no food. He continued farther and found the wood shed. The door was padlocked but looked weak enough, so he found a good-sized rock and threw it at the door and it made a crunching sound, then bounced back at him so he had to jump out of the way. Goddamnit, he said. He ran to the door and slammed himself against it, fell down and got up and did it again. He was breathing hard now. He kicked with his boot at the center of it and could feel it bend each time, but it wouldn’t give, so he walked back down to the boat.

He saw the sleeping bag propped up there with Roy in it and realized he had forgotten about Roy for a few minutes. The thought that he could do that seemed terribly sad, but he didn’t stop and indulge himself. He had work to do before dark. He loosened the engine from its mount and carried it stiffly up to the cabin, set it down on the porch. The thing weighed at least fifty pounds, all metal.

Jim went to the shed again for the rock and came back to the cabin. He had hoped to find an ax or a saw or something in the shed, but he decided now to just work on the cabin directly. He pounded at each door and storm
board with the rock in his hand until he found one over the kitchen window that seemed to give a little more. It was because the window was bigger, he thought. So he carried the outboard around and then he grabbed the housing with both hands and rammed the prop end into the board and it only scraped a little on the prop and knocked him off balance so that he almost fell with the engine on top of him.

He was beyond swearing or yelling. He felt only a cold, murderous hatred and wanted to destroy this cabin. He picked up the outboard, this time by the lighter, skinnier shaft end, and could get the other, heavier end to lift only by turning like a shot-putter, so he turned a couple of circles like that and hurled the motor at the storm board and jumped back.

The crash was monstrously loud and the engine fell back onto the porch with a smashed housing.

Of course, Jim said. The housing was only plastic. He un-latched it and lifted it off twisted and crushed and now he had steel motor sticking out, the engine head, and he swung the motor around again and hurled it, screaming, and it bounced back again and almost got him but this time it had crushed part of the storm board. He picked it up and hurled it two more times and by then had destroyed his engine but also had shattered the storm board and the glass behind it and had a way in.

The cabin was dark inside and there was no electricity, no light to switch on. Fumbling around in the kitchen in the dark, he finally found matches and then a paraffin lamp that cast weird shadows everywhere as he hunted around from room to room. He found a wood stove in the kitchen and then another for heat in the living room. Beside this one there was still a stack of dry wood. There was a bedroom off this and it had been stripped, the mattress bare, without blankets. The whole place had been stripped, winterized. But he kept looking in every closet and shelf and drawer and under the bed and couch, and finally in a dresser drawer he found two sets of sheets and a blanket.

Okay, he said. Now, where’s the food? You don’t bring everything every time. You must leave something here. Some canned goods or something. Where is it?

He looked in the kitchen and found it surprisingly bare. He did find a few cans of soup in the cupboard, though, and then another cupboard with canned vegetables.

Not enough, he said. Not enough. I’ve got a growing boy with me, a strapping young lad. You must have a cellar. Your own little indoor cache in a fancy place like this. He stomped on the floor all around the kitchen and looked for latches and looked in the living room, pulling back the small piece of carpet, and looked in the bedroom, and then, giving up, on his way back into the kitchen followed by his own paraffin shadow like a nimble doppelgänger, he saw a latch in the passageway from living room to kitchen.

Open sesame, he said and lifted it and found the cellar, a hundred cans and jars and bottles and freeze-dried packets of Alpine Minestrone and vanilla ice cream and in a large bag even vacuum-sealed packets of smoked salmon. Okay, he said.

Roy was still in the bag. He lifted him over a shoulder and pushed him through the kitchen window, trying not to tear the bag on the bits of glass on the sill but tearing it some anyway. Then he climbed in himself.

Time to get to work, he said. We need to make this place home. He dragged Roy back to the bedroom, where he’d stay cold and out of the way. Then he started a fire in the kitchen stove and decided not to light the one in the living room, to conserve wood. He’d just sleep in here in the kitchen. And that would help Roy keep cooler, also.

He opened a can of ravioli and put the can right on the burner, then decided he wouldn’t be such a slob and put it in a small pot. He heated canned milk in another pot and made himself some hot chocolate. A treat, he said. He ate there in the kitchen in the lamplight and was looking all around trying to find something to focus on, something to read. He kept thinking about Roy and Roy’s mother and he didn’t want to do this, so he looked all around the cabin for reading material and couldn’t find any but finally found some family pictures in the bedroom and brought them back to the kitchen and stared at them while he ate.

This family was not good-looking. They had a parrot-faced daughter and a son with big ears and eyes too close together and a mouth that twisted up oddly. The parents were no lookers, either, the man stocky and a nerd and his wife trying to look surprised for the camera. They went for vacations everywhere, apparently. Camels and tropical fish and Big Ben. Jim disliked them and felt fine about eating their food. Fuck you, he said to the pictures as he slurped up their ravioli. But this lasted only so long and then he was sitting there at the table in lamplight with nothing to focus on. Time, he said.

He went back out to the boat, though it was dark now and very cold, and brought all of the gear up to the porch, then dragged the boat around back and left it and lifted his stuff through the window. Then he carried it all into the back room with Roy, who still was just there in the sleeping bag, not doing anything, not participating, just like a junior high kid. Fine, Jim said to Roy. Then he returned to the kitchen and made his bed on the floor.

That night he kept waking, paranoid that something awful had happened, and then he’d remember Roy and cry and then, because he was so exhausted, fall asleep again. He had no dreams and saw nothing. It was fear he woke to each time, his breath tight and blood pounding, and a sense that the sky was bearing down on him. And in the
morning, when it had been light out for hours and he finally got up off the floor, the sense had not completely gone away.

He stoked the stove and wanted to boil water to cook Malt-O-Meal but no water came out of the tap. Okay, you fuckers, he said, you parrots, where’s the water switch? He searched the kitchen and the cellar and then walked around the back of the cabin and searched for faucets but found nothing. He hiked up to the shed and still nothing so he searched the entire hill behind the house for two or three hours, foot by foot, and finally found a pipe buried partly in the dirt and then covered with bark. He went along it on his hands and knees feeling for fixtures until he found the faucet. He turned it and went back inside, found water and air sputtering out of the tap.

Okay, he said, give me a steady stream, and as if all things followed his spoken will, the tap stopped sputtering and emitted a solid stream of clear, cold water.

He made the Malt-O-Meal, put brown sugar in, and sat down to it but again needed something to look at and didn’t have anything. So he went back and dragged Roy out, still in the sleeping bag, and tried to prop him up in the other chair in the kitchen, but he wouldn’t bend right. The blue sleeping bag was terribly stained now, still wet and dark all around the top.

Okay, he said. If you’re not going to sit right. He looked in the drawers until he found string and scissors and he wrapped Roy, then tied him to a rafter and a leg of the table and a hook that came out of the wall for hanging pots or something, and so Roy was standing there in his sleeping bag and Jim could sit down and eat.

Your father’s becoming pretty weird, he told Roy. And it’s not like you haven’t had a part in that. And yet, the truth is, do you want to know the truth? Well, in some ways I feel better now. I don’t know why that is.

Jim concentrated on his eating then and when he was through he did the dishes. Then he wiped his hands on his jeans and turned to Roy. Okay, big boy, he said, time to go back in the cooler. And he untied Roy and carried him back to the bedroom, then felt so lost all of a sudden he lay down on the bare wooden floor in the bedroom and just moaned for the rest of the day, no idea at all in his head as to what he was doing or why. The room was cold and dim and seemed to stretch on forever, and he a tiny speck lost in the middle of it.

At dinner, after dark, Jim ate alone. I don’t feel like company, he said aloud. Then he went for a walk in the woods.

Jim, Jim, Jim, he spoke out loud, you have to do something. You can’t just leave your son tied up in the sleeping bag and cooling in the bedroom. Roy needs a funeral. He needs to be buried. His mother and sister need to see him.

He hiked on some more, not bothering to duck much and getting scraped up a lot by small branches, one of his hands on fire from nettles. There was no moon or anything out, and he couldn’t see a damned thing.

As he talked, he imagined he was in a great room, at a trial, and these words were being spoken to him. He was sitting at a heavy desk and listening and couldn’t speak.

How was he tied up? someone was asking. Why did you tie up your son at the table? Did that make any sense at all? And what about the sleeping bag? Was that your idea, too? Have you been planning this for some time? Was that really what this whole trip was about? It could have been suicide, sure, but it could also have been murder.

This idea stopped him. He stood in place in the woods breathing hard and hearing nothing else and thinking that they could think that. How could he ever prove that he hadn’t shot his son himself? And now he’d run away, too, and broken into someone else’s place and was hiding out with the body. How could he possibly explain any of this?

Jim was scared now for himself, and turned around to hike back to the cabin, but he wasn’t sure which way it was. He hiked for over an hour, it seemed, and much farther than he had come, he was sure, and still he couldn’t see the cabin or anything familiar or really anything at all. He had just hiked out into the dark and not bothered to pay any attention to where he was going.

The ground was uneven and occasionally he fell through where the dead wood and undergrowth had built up and he was scraped from the sides and above. He had his arms out and head turned away and was walking sideways hoping just to find his way somehow and listening but hearing only himself and starting to feel very afraid of the woods, as if all he had done wrong had somehow gathered here and was out to get him. He knew that didn’t make any sense and that scared him more, because it felt so real anyway. He seemed impossibly small and about to be broken.

He stopped periodically and tried to stand still and be quiet and listen. He was trying to hear what way to go, or because that didn’t make any sense, maybe trying to hear what was after him. Up through the trees, he could see a few faint stars much later, after the sky had cleared some. He was cold and shivering and his heart still going, and the fear had sunk deeper into a sense that he was doomed, that he would never find his way back to safety or be able to run fast enough to escape. The forest was impossibly loud, even over his pulse. There were branches breaking, and twigs and every leaf moving in the breeze and things everywhere running through the undergrowth and larger crashings beyond that he couldn’t be sure whether or not he had simply imagined. The air in the forest had bulk and
weight and was part of the darkness, as if they were the same thing, and rushed toward him from every side.

I’ve been afraid like this all my life, he thought. This is who I am. But then he told himself to shut up. You’re only thinking this stuff because you’re lost out here, he said.

It was impossible that it was taking him this long to find the cabin. He’d never been lost in the forest in his life, and he had been in forests all the time, hunting and fishing. But once you take that first wrong step, he told himself, because he knew that after that it was possible to never find your way again, because you couldn’t know where you were coming from and so wouldn’t have any firm basis for any direction. And that seemed appropriate for more in his life, too, especially with women. Things had become so twisted early on that it had been impossible to know what was good, and now, with Roy dead, there was absolutely nothing left to go on. It wouldn’t matter if he perished out in the forest tonight, if he just gave up and lay down and froze.

But he continued on anyway, until the sky lightened finally and then it was dawn and he had found the shore by going consistently downhill. It wasn’t the shore in front of the cabin, and he didn’t know in which direction to follow it, but it was a shore, and he went the way that seemed right, hiking along it and waiting for the cabin.

It was a sunny day, cold and bright, the first clear day they’d had in a long time. He was very hungry and tired and sore but grateful for the sun. He didn’t find the cabin after several hours, so he turned and walked back the other way, but even this seemed all right. At what must have been about noon, the sun overhead, he passed the point where he’d started and continued on for another hour or so before he arrived at the beach in front of the cabin. He stopped and stood there and just looked at it for a while, then he went in.

Everything was where he had left it, and Roy still in the back room. Jim ate a can of soup straight out of the can, without heating it, and then he lay down on the floor wrapped in the blanket and slept.

When he woke, he was very cold and it was night. He found the lamp and then got a fire going in the stove. I’m going to be more careful now, he told himself as he was pushing more wood in. And I’m going to take care of things. I’m going to find someone on this island and let Roy’s mother know and give Roy a decent burial. I’ll go today.

He ate another can of soup and then some instant mashed potatoes and went back to sleep for a few hours and woke in the morning. Okay, he said as soon as he’d opened his eyes, I’m going.

He restoked the stove and fixed some breakfast. As he was eating, he realized he’d have to leave a note. If anyone came here and found this, found the broken cabin and Roy in the back room and saw he’d been living in here, they’d think the wrong things. And he’d have to close up the kitchen window, too, so nothing got in to eat his food or get at Roy.

Jim looked in drawers until he found a pen and an envelope that he could write on. I’ve gone for help, he wrote. My son killed himself and is in the back room. I didn’t have any way of contacting anyone. I couldn’t go farther in the boat. I’m hiking around the island now trying to find some help and I will be back. He reread it several times and couldn’t think of anything better, so he signed it and then got some food together and packed the blanket in a garbage bag in case he had to sleep out there.

The window was a problem. He didn’t have a hammer or nails or even good boards. So he carried the busted outboard to the shed and used it to bash in the shed door, the same as he’d done to the kitchen window. When he had broken through, he rested until his breath calmed and then he pulled away the pieces of splintered wood and went back for the lamp to search the shed.

All the tools were here: ax, shovel, saws, hammer, nails, even a sander and chain saw and chains and a ratchet and screwdrivers, wrenches, all just sitting in here rusting away. Jim chopped off a big piece of the door with the ax and then brought it over to the kitchen window to hammer it up. Before he did this, though, he went in to say good-bye to Roy and let him know what he was doing. I’m taking care of things now, he said, standing in the bedroom doorway. I’m sorry things have gone so badly so far, but I’m getting it together now. Then he brought out his bag of food and the blanket and the note and nailed up the board and nailed the note to it and started hiking.

It was already very late morning. He should have had an earlier start. But at least I’m going, he told himself. He hiked up the shoreline past where he had been the day before. He kept going, moving at a fast pace, keeping an eye out for boats or cabins or any sign of a trail that people might be using. The visibility was good enough he might be able to signal a boat. The air wasn’t too cold, either, and the only clouds were thin and high up.

This coastline of banded rock and deadfall and dark sand seemed ancient to Jim, prehistoric. As he hiked along it quietly for hours, hearing only the sound of his boots and an occasional bird and the wind and small waves coming in, it seemed as if he might be the only man, come out to see what was in the world. He mused on this and walked more cat-like, hopping from stone to stone, and he longed for this simplicity, this innocence. He wanted not to have been who he was and not to find anyone. If he found someone, he would have to tell his story, which, he admitted to himself now, could only sound terrible.

He hiked on around point after point and so imagined he must be curving around the island, though he could not
wanted a woman, any woman. Landscape meant nothing to him if he had to see it alone. To be uncomfortable and couldn’t stand to be alone. Every moment of every day now he wanted to see someone. He was it about the frontier that made him feel nothing else was really living? It made no sense, because he didn’t like and blankets hung to make a bedroom. Bear rugs on the floor and walls. What was the magic in those places? What known a few families who lived in them, had visited their one-room cabins built by hand with homemade dressers and blankets hung to make a bedroom. Bear rugs on the floor and walls. What was the magic in those places? What
to have had to listen to Roy. He would have had to notice him while he was still alive. And that was what simply could not have happened. Jim had been thinking of Rhoda, and of other women.

If Roy were still alive, and Jim could take him somewhere now, he would take him sailing around the world. That was something Roy had actually wanted to do. He had said so himself. And it was something Jim could have arranged just as easily as homesteading. He had the money for a boat, he knew how to sail, he had the time. But for that to have been possible, he would have had to listen to Roy. He would have had to notice him while he was still alive. And that was what simply could not have happened. Jim had been thinking of Rhoda, and of other women.

Jim tried to sleep then, lay back on the moss in his blanket and kept his food close to his belly. He didn’t care if a bear did come; he wasn’t giving up his food.

But he couldn’t sleep. He looked for stars, kept looking even though there were none, kept his eyes open though there was no light and nothing to see. He imagined what sailing through the South Pacific might have been like. He had seen pictures of Bora-Bora. Dark-green jungle and black rock, light-blue water and white sand. It would have been warm always, and comfortable, and they could have snorkeled. They could even have learned to scuba. Why spend any part of a life in a cold place? It didn’t make sense to him.

Jim didn’t feel tired, couldn’t imagine sleeping, so he rose again, put his blanket in his bag with the food, and hiked carefully back down to the shore.

The night was dark, without stars or moon. He couldn’t see anything, though his eyes had had hours now to adjust. He put out one foot at a time and felt around with it before putting weight on. He moved slowly step by step this way along the shore until he came too close to the water’s edge and slipped on seaweed and went down hard onto wet rock. He got back up fast and fell again, then groaned from the pain in his elbow and hip and found his bag and crawled up onto the dry rocks on hands and knees until he could stand safely. He continued on into the woods, his hurt leg trembling, and lay down with the blanket over him and rested and woke in the morning to find he had fallen asleep.

This second day he made good progress, though he was sore from the falls. His elbow ached as if he had bruised the bone and his leg felt badly attached, but this didn’t matter to him much. He kept alert for boats and cabins and reassured himself as he walked that he would find someone. But then he wondered whether this might be Prince of Wales Island, the big one. It wasn’t so far from where he had come from, it looked just like everything else around it, and it was almost more remote than Sukkwan just because it was so big. Long stretches of its shoreline were uninhabited. And he supposed there could be more problems with bears on the big island, too. There would be no way of knowing for sure whether this was a smaller island until he had circumnavigated it, but he was still going along this shore, with the sunset to his left.

At midday he rested and ate. He sat in the shade, though the sun shone only weakly through haze. He saw no boats. He had seen no boats at all at any point. It was remarkable to him how remote this place was. He had come into nowhere and had thought somehow that that would be a good thing; when he had originally looked on a chart, he had thought his cabin too close to Prince of Wales Island and the few towns along its southwestern coast, but now he wished he could remember those towns and the other small enclaves scattered on neighboring islands. Colonies, really, just two or three houses, with almost no roads. The kinds of places he had always romanticized. He had known a few families who lived in them, had visited their one-room cabins built by hand with homemade dressers and blankets hung to make a bedroom. Bear rugs on the floor and walls. What was the magic in those places? What was it about the frontier that made him feel nothing else was really living? It made no sense, because he didn’t like to be uncomfortable and couldn’t stand to be alone. Every moment of every day now he wanted to see someone. He wanted a woman, any woman. Landscape meant nothing to him if he had to see it alone.

He packed up and continued on. Within the next hour, the coastline fell back sharply to the right and he felt
certain now that this was not the big island. When the sunset came, he could see pink in the clouds above to the east but the west was blocked by forest.

Still no one, he said. I might be spending the entire winter here.

It was getting colder again each night. He had been lucky to have this warm spell over the past week, but now the snow and rain would set in again, he knew. He had only his warm clothes and the one blanket with him. This had been enough so far, but he knew he needed to find someone soon or else get back to the cabin where he had left Roy before it became too cold.

That night he woke shivering several times and was never warm enough. He dreamed of hiking around and around in circles with something after him. In the morning, a dusting of snow on the trees, which the drizzle melted away by noon. He had a waterproof jacket but still felt soaked and cold. He ate his lunch sitting on a log at the water’s edge and thinking. If no one else were on this island, he would have to stay here and wait. There would be almost no boat traffic now until the late spring, until May probably or even June, and the people whose cabin he was in would not come back until July or August. And he had wrecked the outboard and radios. So he could be here a long time. He wondered whether his food would hold out. It didn’t seem that it would, and he had not brought his rifle or fishing gear with him. There was no way of going back, either, to all that food he and Roy had stored up.

It was crazy how much food they had stored up. Enough to feed a small colony through the winter. But that was what the trip had become for him. Instead of relaxing and getting to know his son, he had worried only about survival. And when it had finally been time to stop putting food away, that was when he had become terrified; he’d had no idea how to pass the time, how to get through the winter. So he had started calling Rhoda on the radio. Within a month, he would have left, he said. He wouldn’t have been able to stay. But Roy had believed they were staying.

Jim was crying again. Roy had wanted to go, and he hadn’t let him. He had trapped him. But Jim made himself stop crying and got up. He continued on until dusk and by then realized he hadn’t been looking for hours, had only been hiking along non-stop and not looking at all for boats or cabins. He didn’t believe anyone else was here.

This night was so cold he couldn’t sleep and instead tried to make some kind of shelter. It was black again, no light, so he could only feel around in the darkness for enough branches and ferns and such to make a pile that he could sleep in. He mound it all up the length of his body and slid in carefully, trying not to disturb it. This was much warmer but he fell asleep thinking of all the bugs and things in his pile that must be working their way through his clothing right now.

The days continued like this and became indistinguishable. It was a monstrously long island. If he had been certain he could find his cabin, he would simply have hiked across the island and returned, because by now he knew no one else lived here, but he didn’t know how wide the island was and he wasn’t sure he’d recognize coastline on the other side even if it was coastline he had seen before. So he continued on, hiking the full length of the short days and then waiting through each night, waking more than sleeping.

He was thinking of Roy these nights, remembering him as a child, riding the toy green tractor in Ketchikan, wearing a chef’s hat at three and standing up on a stool to reach the mixing bowl. He remembered Roy picking blueberries in his red jacket and knocking down icicles and finding the antlers Jim had thrown behind the fence. Jim had thrown them there because they were small, but Roy discovered them and treasured them as if they were artifacts of another people. They seemed mysterious and wonderful to him. Jim didn’t know how these times became the last years with Roy, didn’t understand any of the transformations, and remembering, Jim realized he was gone for years of Roy’s life, even in Ketchikan when they all still lived together, because Jim was thinking then of women, scheming, beginning to cheat. He had fallen into his secret life with other women and not known anyone or anything else. After the divorce, he still didn’t wake up, but continued after women. And so he could not say who Roy was in the end. He was missing too many of the years leading up to him.

Jim reflected on all of this more calmly now, as if he couldn’t afford the expenditure of crying when he was trying just to stay warm and survive each of these nights. It was not a time for extravagance. He would have to conserve if he was to survive until spring.

During the day, he tried to cover ground but his hiking became slower and slower. He had run out of food nearly a week before and was surviving now on seaweed and mushrooms and small crabs he caught at low tide. He drank from the occasional streams he crossed but was thirsty sometimes for days on end.

The crabs were very good, actually, and he looked forward to them. They were only three or four inches wide, but he cleaned them as he would have a larger crab, grabbing all their flexing legs from behind, underneath the shell, and then smashing the face onto a sharp rock until the top of the shell flew off. Then he broke the crab in half and shook once to get rid of the guts. He rinsed in seawater and sucked out the tender clear meat. He did this throughout the day, eating four or five crabs at a time. The only hard part, really, was when he couldn’t find enough fresh water for a few days and his lips became swollen and his throat sore. But sucking on the needles of the spruce trees in the
mornings gave him some relief, and there was often rain. No snow, luckily. He was getting very lucky with the weather.

He daydreamed about the South Pacific, drinking water from large strange leaves, eating fruit that grew everywhere. Mangoes, guavas, coconuts, and wild fruits he had never seen. These new fruits he imagined to be purplish and very sweet. The sun would be out constantly, and he would bathe under waterfalls.

And then one evening he saw the edge of the sunset to the west and knew he had come around the southern tip of the island. He was on his way home now. He continued on to the point and sat in the trees watching the thin line of sunset devoured in watery gray clouds. Then he scraped up enough small stuff to make a mound, pushed his way in, and slept.

It was five more days before he reached the cabin. He arrived fairly early in the morning, had slept the night before less than a mile from it. Shit, he said. It’s right here. He stood on the beach and looked at it for a while, through the trees.

As he walked up to it, up onto the porch, he could tell that no one had come. Everything was just as he had left it. The note had streaked and faded from the rain, but that was the only change. He went around back for the hammer. The deflated boat was still there, the broken door on the shed, no changes.

Jim pulled the nails from the boards he had placed over the kitchen window, starting to smell Roy even before the first board was fully removed. When he stepped inside, the stench was a thing with weight and heft. He threw up right there on the kitchen floor, threw up his few precious crabs and mushrooms and the fresh water he had sucked yesterday from dew. It seemed a terrible waste, even though he knew he would have better food and water now.

He cleaned himself up at the sink, rinsed out his mouth. The smell was overpowering. He could see well enough in the kitchen, but the back rooms would be dark, so he lit the paraffin lamp and walked back as if against a strong wind into the smell.

Roy was not as stiff as before. The sleeping bag was on the floor now and wet and had white fuzz growing even on the outside. Jim tried to grab the end of the bag but couldn’t and stepped back again. I’m sorry, Roy, he said, weeping now for the first time in a while. And he knew he would have to bury him now. He had tried to find someone, had tried to find a way to show Roy to his mother and sister and give him a funeral, but now he would have to settle for burial on this island. There was no other choice. He couldn’t live with this smell, couldn’t let his son just rot here.

He had to go back outside first to breathe. He waited until he had stopped crying, too, then he went back inside quickly, grabbed the wet bag, and dragged it out to the window. When he hefted it through the window, the contents inside mushed together and some of Roy leaked out through the tears in the bag. Jim was making sounds, disgusted. He couldn’t believe he was having to do this.

He grabbed a shovel and dragged Roy far into the trees. He didn’t want to be close to the cabin, didn’t want Roy’s grave so near that these people might want to move it. So he went far enough into the trees that he didn’t think Roy would be found, and then he stopped and began digging. The earth was hard for the first foot, then it was loose for another foot at most before he started hitting rock and root and sand; it was very hard to dig. He labored all day at the grave, stabbing and cutting roots, digging around rocks, smashing his way through with the tip of the shovel.

He had to rest often, and each time he would walk away from the pit and the awful smell of his son rotting. He would sit in the trees a few hundred feet away and think of how he would tell all of this. He wasn’t sure the story could make any sense. Each thing had made the next thing necessary, but the things themselves did not look good. Though he couldn’t admit it completely, part of him wished he would never be found. If no one ever returned to this cabin or noticed them missing from their own, then he would not have to try to tell anyone. He felt he could live now with what had happened if he didn’t have to face anyone else. His son had killed himself and this was Jim’s fault and now he was burying his son. He could believe this. But he didn’t want anyone else to know.

He dug until late afternoon, near the end of the day, and then decided it would have to be good enough because he couldn’t do this in darkness, so he dragged Roy and the sleeping bag into the pit, not wanting to try to empty him out of the bag, and then stood there wondering how he could have a kind of funeral in just a few minutes before heaping the dirt and getting back to the cabin.

I didn’t mean to rush this, he told his son. I know this is your burial. It should be something special and your mother should be here, but I just can’t do anything about all that. I just…and here he stopped and didn’t know what to say. All he could think was I love you, you’re my son, but this bent him so that he couldn’t speak, so he wept and shoveled in the dirt and mounded it and packed it and walked back to the cabin in near darkness, not caring much anymore whether he lost his way.

The smell of Roy was still in the cabin that night and the next day and continued in traces for over a week. After that, Jim still thought he could smell it, but it had become faint enough to be indistinguishable from imagination. On cold days when it seemed to have gone, he walked around the rooms trying to remember it. Outside, too, during
hikes through the forest he would sometimes smell it and stop and think of his son. He told himself that these had become the only times he would think of his son, as if only this one kind of memory were strong enough, but of course this was a lie. He was always thinking of Roy in one way or another. There was very little else to do. He had settled in for the winter, was waiting now.

It seemed to Jim that he hadn’t understood Roy well. It seemed that Roy had been more dangerous than Jim had thought. As if all those years he had been ready to kill himself but waiting for the right time. This didn’t seem quite accurate, but Jim followed it for a while. What if suicide had been in Roy’s nature all along? What then? It would change responsibility, at the very least. And why was it that anyone ever killed himself? What had made Jim so sure that he himself could do it? It was difficult to understand now. It was hard to make the idea seem plausible. Jim didn’t believe that he had ever really felt suicidal, even when he had decided to step off the cliff. Even then he had felt only self-pity, nothing more.

This thought made Jim pause. He hadn’t thought about the cliff for a while. He wondered what Roy had thought of that, wondered whether Roy had known that he had done it on purpose. He had never really admitted to Roy that it had been on purpose. If he had, it would have been harder to make Roy stay. But Roy must have suspected something odd.

To get away from these thoughts, Jim tried to think of other things. He invented diversions. He tried to imagine who would find him, and how, and what they would say. The homely couple coming up the path with their children lagging behind. They would stop and watch him and consider him dangerous. They might run. They might arrive and leave before he’d even seen them, and he wouldn’t know until the authorities arrived later. But he believed they would walk right up and be indignant. They were the owners and they were otherwise ignored by everyone, he was sure, so about this they would be fierce. They would come and drag him out and attack him with their parrot beaks and twisted eyes and peck and tear at him until they had stolen little pieces away. So then he was thinking of Roy on the beach and the seagulls and in this way he tortured himself each day and night under the guise of trying to fill his time and survive.

He still looked for boats occasionally, on good days. The rare ones he did see were too far away. He had no flares. It had occurred to him that he could try to light a giant forest fire on one end of the island and this would bring spotter planes at the least, but he didn’t know how long they would take or whether he would end up dying in the fire. His own death seemed likely if he set a huge forest fire on an island. He would be in the water at the end, trying to find air. And he didn’t like the idea of the firefighters shoveling at the dirt where Roy lay.

Then it occurred to him to set some other island on fire, if he could find a small one nearby that was uninhabited. He could row over there, get it going with the little bit of gasoline he had left, then row back or even just stay out on the water where they could see him.

Not a bad idea, he told himself. That could work.

But he didn’t do it. Rowing in these channels wouldn’t be easy, and he wasn’t ready to face anyone yet. So he waited in his cabin and schemed and saw the flames everywhere and imagined himself rescued and tried to remember what Roy had looked like before he had blown off half his face. It was terrible that Roy had left Jim with that image. Jim couldn’t remember the face before, the way his son had looked. It was as if his son had been born into the world mutilated.

At least no one else would have to see him that way. Enough time had passed now that no one else would have to see anything at all. This relieved him somewhat. He couldn’t explain why the sight would have seemed such a personal embarrassment. But it would have. What he wanted now was to come up with some way of telling things that made it all seem sad but somehow unavoidable. Something along the lines that things had been hard, but he hadn’t realized quite how hard for Roy because Roy hadn’t said anything. If only Jim had known, they would have left immediately, but he’d had no way of knowing.

But then these thoughts disgusted Jim. He had no patience for his own mind.

Mid-January and still no one had come. It was remarkable, really. It seemed the world had forgotten them, though they were probably less than ten miles from where they were supposed to be. Jim assumed that their cabin had been found by now with the blood on the floor and the smashed radios and the boat gone. The sheriff or someone must have searched the area after that, but he had not heard a single helicopter or plane, nor had he seen a boat for weeks, and never a boat close enough.

Jim’s food was running low and he had lost weight trying to conserve. He had only one meal a day now, with a few light snacks at other times. He figured his food would last at this rate another month or two at most and then he’d be eating seaweed or starving.

He slept all through the night now and even sometimes part of the day. It was the easiest thing to do and didn’t use food or even wood for the fire. He had cut several large pieces from the inflatable boat to lay on top of his
blanket and sheets and he was wearing an extra sweater he had found as well as the clothes he had arrived in. He hadn’t bathed in nearly three months. He had begun to smell almost clean again, as far as he could tell.

He tried not to think during this time. When it would start, he’d look at something, a board in the ceiling or even just the darkness, and try to lose himself in it and not let the thoughts get going, though he couldn’t avoid them always. They were repetitive and insistent. Roy saying he wanted to go. He saw that scene over and over, couldn’t get it out of his mind. Another repetitive one was about his neighbor in Ketchikan, Kathleen, the woman he had first wanted to cheat with. He kept seeing the gray afternoon when he’d stood out on their side porch chatting with her and asked her if she’d like to come inside, since Elizabeth wasn’t home. The look of disgust on her face. She knew exactly what he meant. Elizabeth was in the hospital, pregnant with Tracy. Not the best timing, he saw now. He thought about food, too. Milkhakes, especially. That was what he most wanted. And barbecued ribs. He thought mostly about Roy, and he visited him when the weather was calm and he was feeling restless.

The mound had caved in with the rain; the grave was now a shallow depression grown over with mushroom and fern. At first he had torn out the mushrooms that grew there, considering them obscene, but as they kept growing back, he finally left them, gray-white bulbs and sharper, smaller cones like tepees. He wondered how long it would take for a nylon sleeping bag to decompose, and he imagined it must be a very long time.

You’re still alive, he told Roy one day. I’ve been thinking about this. You don’t get to experience anything anymore; your life stopped for you when you died. But things are going to keep happening to me because of this, and that makes you still alive, in a way. And because no one else knows, because your mother doesn’t know, you aren’t even completely dead yet. You’ll die again when she hears, and then she’ll keep you alive for a long time after that. And even after all of us die, someone’s going to dig up that sleeping bag and find you again. Though I guess they might be digging you up earlier than that. They’ll probably want to make sure it’s you. They’re not likely to take my word on anything after all this.

He liked talking out loud to Roy, so he made a habit of it. Unless the weather was terrible, he went out and chatted for a while each afternoon. He chatted about being rescued, and about the weather, and he confessed things from time to time. I was impatient, he told Roy. I know that. I should have relaxed a little. I just felt responsible. He talked with Roy about little things that were bothering him. The day I walked in on you, he said. When you were jacking off in the outhouse. I still feel bad about that. I don’t think I handled it well. I should have said something, talked with Roy about little things that were bothering him. The day I walked in on you, he said. When you were jacking off in the outhouse. I still feel bad about that. I don’t think I handled it well. I should have said something, but I just didn’t know what to say.

In the first part of March, Jim scrabbled around at the water’s edge trying to catch crabs. They were still here, even in winter, but they seemed faster now. Each time he reached out, they retreated sideways into a crevice and disappeared. It took him a long time to realize that the crabs had not actually gotten faster but he had slowed. He hadn’t eaten a regular meal in almost a week. He’d had mostly seaweed and water. And for several months before that, he’d been conserving. He saw now that this had been a mistake. He had made himself too weak. He went back to the cabin and tried to outthink the crabs.

The next day, he went after their babies. He overturned rocks and, sure enough, just as he had hoped, occasionally he found small colonies of baby crabs that were too small to get away from him. He picked them up by the handful and didn’t see how he was going to be able to clean them in his usual way, so he just ate them whole and crunched them down, shells and guts and all.

I’ll be shitting shell necklaces, he told them. It’s going to be real pretty. He chewed well so that the pieces wouldn’t come out too big.

At Roy’s grave, he spent a long time talking about Roy’s mother and how they had met and what had gone wrong. She was only my second serious girlfriend, really, he told Roy. My brother thinks that was a mistake, to settle down with only the second one, and I think he’s probably right. The thing is, the first one had dumped me, and I think I was mostly scared when I went out with your mother. And there were things that were never right with her. Her parents, for instance. They didn’t like me, thought I was too much a country boy, because they had money. Your grandfather, especially, I didn’t get along with. The man was a bastard. Your mom didn’t want to be critical of him, but he had been hitting his wife and doing other terrible stuff all along. So we couldn’t talk about that. And then, generally, she wanted me to talk more, to entertain her more. She told me about a year into our marriage that she had just expected that eventually I’d have interesting things to say. That wasn’t real nice to hear. I don’t think she thought much about what she said sometimes. Anyway.

It was while Jim was out talking to Roy that he heard the boat go by close and slow down. He got to his feet and trotted as fast as he could toward the beach, but then he stopped. He could hear it out there, at low revs, probably checking out the cabin, but he couldn’t decide whether to run the rest of the way and flag them down. That seemed like too much for this particular day. He didn’t feel ready yet. So he hid in the trees and waited, unsure, and then he heard the engines rev up again and the boat was gone.

Jim went back to the grave. Oh God, he said. I can’t believe I just did that. Something’s wrong. I’m not ready yet
to tell people about you.

He lay in bed that night under all of his covers wondering what was coming next. He couldn’t stay out here and starve, yet that was what he had chosen just this afternoon. He couldn’t hide Roy forever. Roy’s mother and sister had to know. Jim felt so confused that he cried for the first time in weeks. I just don’t know, he kept saying out loud to the ceiling.

The next day, he stayed in bed and didn’t go to the grave. He didn’t go hunting for crabs, either, or have any other kind of food. He kept wanting to get up, but it was cold out and he was preoccupied by daydreams that he kept extending, closing his eyes until finally it was night again and he was still in bed.

He was thinking about Lakeport, about high school, and how he had worked so many hours at Safeway. He had hated that, had known that it was all a waste, that his time there amounted to nothing since he’d eventually do some other kind of work. And killing mosquitoes in the spring. He remembered how they’d oil the ponds and spray insecticides to keep the mosquitoes down. Big tanks of chemicals. He wondered now what had been in them. It couldn’t have been good.

His sinus troubles had begun back then. Persistent infections and then the headaches. They were back now, the headaches. This was what had taken him closest to killing himself, just the pain in his head. It was impossible to get away from, impossible to sleep through. He’d been an insomniac most of the time for probably twenty years now. He should have gotten an operation, but he didn’t like the idea of an operation. He’d worked on too many patients in his dentistry. He knew how brutal surgery was, and the terrible risks.

Another memory from even earlier was the boat they’d had on the lake, an old converted Navy cruiser from the 1920s. They replanked the hull and took it out on warm summer nights, sang out there on the water. That was what he wanted now, he realized, and what he hadn’t had in decades: a community of people and a particular place and a sense that he belonged. What had happened to that?

The next day he rose and went looking for crabs. It was low tide and there was quite a lot to choose from. He found some kind of small rockfish hiding in one pool and finally killed it with a stick. It was spiny, but he cleaned it right there on the rocks with his pocketknife and ate it raw. Then he sat back in the rare bit of sunshine and smacked his lips. That was damn good, he said. Now that was a meal.

He finished off with a bit of seaweed and went back to the cabin for a drink of water, then went out to visit with Roy. Haven’t been thinking about you as much, he told Roy. Been thinking about myself when I was your age. How I used to hunt ducks right in front of the house. Crappies and bluegill and catfish at night on the pier with a lantern. I’ve been thinking about all of that, too. It seems to me that one life is actually many lives, and that they add up to something surprisingly long. My life then was nothing like my life now. I was someone else. But what makes me sad, I guess, and the reason I bring all of this up, is that you won’t be getting any other lives. You had two or three at most. Early childhood in Ketchikan, then living with your mother in California after the divorce. That would be two. Maybe being out here with me was the beginning of the third. But you know, you killed yourself, I didn’t kill you, so that’s what you get.

The rest of the afternoon, Jim poked around the shed, looking at all the rusting tools and odd projects. He was getting more active, mostly because it was a weirdly warm spell. Normally he wouldn’t stay outside this long. But really, winter in Southeast was not that big a deal. He had been too freaked out with that cache and everything. It wasn’t that hard to survive here.

And then Jim went through a time when he didn’t seem to have any thoughts or memories at all. He stayed in bed and stared at the ceiling. When he went out, he stared at the trees or at the waves. The water was calm, no whitecaps. A surge more than waves at times, the water gray and opaque and thick-looking. He sat with Roy sometimes, but he was through talking. He was ready to get back to his life, to get back to other people.

But he stayed. A storm came through for over a week and he had nothing to eat. He didn’t want to go outside. It seemed the cabin might collapse under the strain. Hail pelting the windows, rain, snow, outrageous winds, dark all the time. He hated this place. He wanted a hot tub.

When the storm finally ended, he was so desperate and starved he decided to set the fire. Everything was soaked, but he walked out into the trees with his spare gas can and a box of matches, resting several times along the way. He found a spot with a lot of deadfall and trees packed in close and he doused as much wood as he could with the gasoline, then struck a match to it and stepped back as it flared up. He started yelling, excited, as the flames devoured the deadfall and licked up the sides of the small trees. The heat was a beautiful thing. Truly warm for what seemed like the first time since summer, Jim stayed as close to it as possible, close enough that he could feel his face too hot and probably burning. The smoke obliterated the tops of the trees and the evening sky, and the sound of the fire overcame everything else. Jim danced around at the edges of it, telling it to consume everything. Grow, he yelled. Grow.

And it did grow, quickly. It took over the entire area where Roy was buried, burned all the way to the water’s
edge, and moved along the shoreline toward the cabin. Jim hoped it was spreading in other directions, too. The wind was coming this way, though, toward the cabin, so this was its main movement. He thought for a moment that he should have set it on the other side, so that the cabin would have been upwind, but then he didn’t care. Let it all burn, he thought, and then let them come for me. I can’t spend the rest of my life out here like this.

The fire grew over the next hour, through sunset, and reached the cabin just as it started to rain. Jim raged at the skies, threatened to punish the rain, but it kept coming. The fire burned part of the roof and one wall of the cabin, then drowned and smoked and finally only smelled. It was the middle of the night. He went into the bedroom, which had been spared and now smelled of smoke rather than of Roy, and he slept.

He woke to the roof collapsing in the kitchen under the weight of all the rain. The crash was monstrously loud, but he knew what it was and he didn’t get up. He went back to sleep and woke again at midday wet and shivering. Though the section of roof above him was still good, the rain was blowing sideways into the room and drenching him.

You better find me, he said. You better find me now.

He hiked through the charred forest later that day to Roy’s grave. The rain had ceased. He wasn’t completely sure he was in the right place, but the depression was still there and the charred trunks in roughly the right places, so he sat down shivering in the wet black ash and visited for a while.

I don’t know, he answered Roy. Could be they’ll see it, could be they’ll see it and not care. It’s not burning anymore, after all. It’s not a fire now.

He went to the unburned section of the forest and was stripping bark to eat when he heard the helicopter pass overhead and then come back and hover just offshore from the cabin. He walked out as fast as he could to meet it, but he was very slow and had to rest several times. It was still there, however, when he cleared the tree line and waved.


They weren’t able to set down anywhere, he assumed, because they only hovered. It was a sheriff’s helicopter, but it didn’t have pontoons. He could see their faces, the two of them with their earphones and caps and glasses. He waved and rubbed his arms to make it clear he was freezing, and they waved in return. Their machine seemed a modern wonder to Jim. They stayed there hovering for probably five minutes before they came on over the loudspeaker.

We’ve radioed for a float plane, they told him. You’ll be picked up in an hour or two. If you are James Edwin Fenn, please raise your right arm to confirm.

Jim raised his right arm. Then they rose and turned and flew off. Jim was excited. He was ready to have a normal life again.

An hour or two later, after he had gone back to the cabin, dug out the stove, and started a fire in it to warm himself, afraid now of hypothermia, a float plane came up the channel, banked, and landed hard in the small chop out from his beach. Jim waved and stood at the edge of his beach waiting. They taxied up until their pontoons hit the gravel and then they cut their engine and two men in uniform came down onto the pontoons while the pilot stayed inside.

Howdy, the lead man shouted.

Jim waved. I’m glad you’re here, he said. I was over on Sukkwan with my son.

We found that, the man said. Been looking for you and your son. Sheriff Coos.

They shook hands.

We’ve been worried about you. Had a missing persons out for both of you for almost two months now.

Well, I’ve been right here. Look, my son died. He killed himself. So I went looking for help and I didn’t find any. I ended up here and I had to survive the winter. I pretty much wrecked these people’s place but I’ll pay for it; I had to do what I did to survive. I buried my son out in the woods.

Whoa, Coos said. Slow down. Your son killed himself?

Yeah.

Okay, Coos said. Let Leroy here take your statement. He has to write all this down.

So Jim waited and then gave a slower, more complete version, though still not the whole story. They said they’d take a more complete statement when they got back to town. But for now, they took the basic story and then wanted to see where he’d buried Roy.

The men were close behind him. Jim tried to walk faster but he couldn’t. And then he got confused and was having trouble finding Roy. Hold on a second, he said. It’s somewhere around here. It’s hard to find now because of the fire. I came out here and talked to him earlier today, but I can’t find it now.

They only stood close and didn’t say anything. He knew this looked bad, that it looked like he was trying not to find Roy, and that panicked him and made it harder still. Every charred bit of forest was starting to look the same. I
can’t do this, he said. I’m sorry, but I just can’t find him today.

He turned to face Coos. Jim knew he could be reasonable. I haven’t seen anyone in so long, he said.

I’m sorry for your troubles, Coos said. And we’ll get you home today. But you need to find your son.

So Jim kept looking until he was standing in one spot and looked down to see that he was in a small depression and saw his prints from earlier in the day and realized this was the grave. He started crying without meaning to and told them, This is it.

Jim backed away from the grave and sat down while the men inspected the depression and Leroy took pictures of it and then went back to the plane for a shovel.

I’m sorry, the sheriff said. But we can’t leave the body here. You understand.

Sure, Jim said. He lay down on his side to watch them. The smell of smoke was so strong close to the ground that it was difficult to breathe, but he felt he was safer lying down here and had no intention of getting up. He would watch and then soon he’d see Roy buried decently. And then if they tried to charge him with anything, he’d get a good lawyer and get out of this. He hadn’t done anything wrong. His son had killed himself, and though Jim had broken a lot of laws after that, it had all been necessary for survival. Jim felt an enormous pity for himself and hated the sheriff and Leroy, unreasonably he knew. They were just doing their jobs, and they hadn’t even accused him of anything.

They were careful. And they took pictures. When they came to the sleeping bag finally, they took many pictures of that, from the first glimpse of it to fully uncovered, and then Leroy opened it and threw up.

Coos took over and got the bag open, and they took flash pictures of what was inside but didn’t empty it out. They closed it up again and then Leroy went to the plane for a big clear plastic bag. They put the sleeping bag and Roy in this and duct-taped it shut.

I’m placing you under arrest, Coos told Jim. And then he read Jim his rights.

What? Jim asked, but they didn’t answer. The two of them pulled him to his feet and Leroy held his arm as they walked back over ash and rock and beach to the water’s edge.

They loaded Roy in the back and then put Jim in one of the aft seats. The pilot taxied, then gunned the engines and the plane lifted free. Jim was dizzy during the flight and fell asleep until they landed in water again.

When they got out, Jim was surprised to see that they were in Ketchikan. He had lived here with Elizabeth and Roy, and Tracy had been born here just before everything had fallen apart.

We’ve called the boy’s mother, Coos said. And we’re taking you to the hospital so they can take a look at you.

Thanks, Jim said.

No problem. But I have to tell you, if you’ve killed your son, and I think you did, I’ll see you put in prison, and if you ever get out, I’ll kill you myself.

Jesus, Jim said.

The doctor examined him quickly and said all he needed was lots of food, water, and rest. He looked at the end of Jim’s nose and said he had lost a little piece to frostbite but there was nothing he could do about that. Then Jim was taken to the sheriff’s office to give a longer statement. For the rest of the day, they made him give his statement over and over. They kept coming back to why his son would have wanted to kill himself.

I wanted to kill myself, and I came close to doing it. I was on the radio with Rhoda, and I intended to do it. Roy had been having to listen to a lot of that for a while. Not just on the radio, but when I would talk with him about it and when he’d have to hear me crying and such.

Jim shook his head. He was having trouble continuing, trouble breathing. His lungs were getting all gluey. So I was there with the pistol to my head and ready. I’d been like that for a while and hadn’t been able to actually pull the trigger. I kept thinking, What if I’m wrong. But Roy walks in and sees this and the way he looked at me I didn’t know what to do, so I turned off the radio and handed him the pistol and walked out. I didn’t mean anything by that. I had no idea what he might do.

Tell us what happened then, Jim.

Well, I was out walking and I heard the shot, and even then I didn’t figure out what had happened, so I kept walking around like a dumbass for a while longer and then I got back and found him.

What did you see when you found him?

Jesus. How much do you want? It was him lying there. He’d blown off his head. You know what that looks like.

No, I don’t.

Don’t you? Well, he only had half his face and parts of him were everywhere, and there was nothing I could do to put him back together.

What did you do after with the body?

I buried him. But then I realized he needed a burial with his mother and sister to see it, so I dug him up and then I guess I went looking for a boat or cabin or someone with a radio.
What happened to your own radios?
I broke them.
When?
Right after he killed himself. I don’t know why I did it.
You broke the radios right after your son’s death. Was this so no one would be able to contact you? Did you have something to hide?
Stop it, Jim said. Stop being idiots. I just broke them and then went looking and couldn’t find anyone and had to break into that cabin to survive while I waited. It took you forever to find me, and that was only after I set half the island on fire. Otherwise I’d still be rotting out there.
Who was rotting?
Shut up, you fucker.
Mr. Fenn, let me remind you. We have you on many charges, not only murder. You need to cooperate with us and answer our questions.
I’m a dentist. This is outrageous. I didn’t kill my son.
That may be.

This was only the first of many sessions. They had him tell the story over and over, all the details, trying to find pieces that didn’t fit. Why Roy was in the sleeping bag. Where the pistol was, which was something Jim honestly could not answer. Where had he put it? He had no memory of putting it anywhere. The last he remembered it had been on the floor, but they hadn’t found anything. So apparently he had done something else with it.

Breaking the radios was another thing they went back to again and again. And the time he’d stepped off the small cliff. And handing Roy the pistol. All of these things over and over until Jim could not be completely sure whether any of it had happened exactly as he remembered. It began to seem almost like someone else’s history.

They kept him in jail for several days and didn’t let him make any calls. No one except the doctor knew he was there until finally they sent in a lawyer. But this man wouldn’t say much. He only paced back and forth in front of Jim’s cell, then said, You want your own private lawyer, right? Is that what you’re asking me right now?
Sure, Jim said.
Okay, the man said. I’ll go call one and he’ll be in today.
The man left then. Much later in the day, another man in a suit and tie came in.
Name’s Norman, the man said. Be happy to have me. It sounds like you’re in trouble. But first I need to know whether you can afford me.
I need to get out of here, Jim said. On bail or something.
That’s all. I don’t care what it costs me.
Okay, Norman said. I can work with that.

It was almost a week before they held the arraignment and Jim was able to leave. He wanted to fly to California to see Elizabeth and Tracy and Rhoda and try to explain, but the terms of his bail were that he couldn’t leave Ketchikan, so he took a taxi downtown to a hotel, a crappy little place called the Royal Executive Suites. When Jim had lived here in Ketchikan eight years before, he had befriended the owner of this hotel, who at that time had been only a young guy fresh off the ferry. The man had been moving here, and though he was a Mormon and Jim was not, Jim had taken him fishing and let him stay at the house and helped him to find work. The man’s name was Kirk, and he didn’t have time for Jim now, but he did let Jim buy a room for twice what it was worth.

Jim stayed in his room with the heat on and made phone calls. He called Roy’s mother, Elizabeth, but only got the answering machine. After the beep, he stood there with the receiver in his hand and had no idea what to say. He finally just said, Sorry, and hung up. Then he thought about calling Rhoda, but he didn’t feel ready for that yet. He didn’t feel ready to talk with anyone, really, so he gave up on the phone calls.

He spent the rest of the day sitting in a chair by the window, looking out at the water and not thinking anything coherent. He daydreamed that Roy had been shot and he had killed the men who had done it, picking them off one by one from around the cabin with the rifle, and then he carried Roy to the inflatable and sped over to the next island, where he found a fishing boat and got Roy aboard. They laid him on the deck with the red salmon and Jim pumped at his chest to keep him alive until a helicopter came and lifted him away. Jim tried to hold on to this last image of Roy spinning slowly above him on the stretcher, being lifted into safety. He felt his love for Roy hard in his chest and was overwhelmed by the grief of having saved his son.

But he couldn’t hold the daydream forever, and soon he was just sitting in a chair by the window and it was another overcast day with the heater going. He looked down at his feet in socks on the clean beige carpet and looked at the cream walls and spackled ceiling and back down to the bad watercolor of a gillnetter pulling in its catch. He
wanted to talk to his brother or Rhoda, but he also couldn’t imagine calling. When he was too hungry to sit there any longer, he bundled himself up and prepared to face the good folk of Ketchikan.

Jim walked through the lobby without looking at anyone and crossed the street to a restaurant that served fish and chips. He sat himself in a corner booth and stared down at his own clenched hands. The waitress when she finally came over didn’t seem to recognize him, though he had seen her here years before. He didn’t seem to be famous yet for what had happened out in the islands, either. He had imagined the whole event might attract more attention.

Jim drummed his fingers on the red Formica and waited and sipped his water and wondered how it was he had ended up without friends. No one was flying up here to visit him or to help him wait this thing out. John Lampson in Williams and Tom Kalfsbeck in Lower Lake: he hadn’t called them yet, so they couldn’t know, but even if he did call, he was pretty sure they wouldn’t come. And this was because of women, too. It was because of his obsession with Rhoda over these past years that he had lost touch with his friends in California and not made new ones in Fairbanks. He had done his work and bought things and talked on the phone and seen prostitutes and had dinner a few times with other dentists or orthodontists and their wives, but that was about it. It was no wonder to him now that he had fallen so low. He had cut himself off from everyone and had nursed what he thought was love but was only longing, a kind of sickness inside him that had nothing to do with Rhoda at all. And it had taken this to get him out of it, to get him to see it. His son had had to kill himself so that Jim could get his life back. And yet that wasn’t going to work, either, because it wasn’t just that his son had killed himself.

Jim held back his sobbing as well as he could for fear that someone might notice and he might seem like a guilty man, though they couldn’t possibly know the crimes he had actually committed. None of the obvious ones like murder, but all of the more important ones.

The waitress set his food before him finally and he ate though it was tasteless to him and he could think only of Roy.

That evening, late, he went back out and walked along the waterfront. He walked past the downtown area where he had practiced and on to the old red-light district, preserved now as a kind of monument and converted to small tourist shops. The small wooden buildings hung precariously along the banks of the narrow river. He stood at the bridge and stared at them, trying to imagine life here before he’d been born. But this was what he’d never been able to do, send his life into another’s.

In the morning, he heard knocking at his door and he opened it to Elizabeth and his daughter Tracy.

Whoa, he said. God, I didn’t expect you.

Oh Jim, Elizabeth said, and she wrapped her arms around him for the first time in years. It felt unbelievably good.

Then Jim bent down and hugged Tracy. She had been crying and looked exhausted. Jim didn’t know what to say.

Come in, he said. They followed him in and sat down on the couch.

Tracy started crying. Elizabeth held her and kissed the top of her head, then looked at Jim and asked, What happened out there, Jim?

I don’t know, Jim said. I honestly don’t know.

Try a little harder? But then she started crying, and Tracy was crying, and they went away, Elizabeth promising they’d be back later in the day.

So Jim waited, in a chair facing the door to his hotel room, unable to believe they were here in town. He had been gone so long, and it was harder still to understand that they were all here in Ketchikan, all together, except Roy of course, and then his mind stopped again. It was all too much to take in. He felt very afraid, and yet had no idea what in particular was frightening him.

When Elizabeth and Tracy returned, it was past dinnertime, but they weren’t hungry, so they sat in the room not talking and Jim wanted this family and this life back, and he kept fantasizing that Roy might just walk in.

Did you kill him? Elizabeth asked, and then she was lost in loud, awful, ugly sobs that got Tracy going again, too. Jim wasn’t crying; he was calculating, trying to figure a way to get them back, but he couldn’t see how.

I’m sorry, he said. I was afraid all the time I was going to kill myself. He was taking care of me. Then he surprised me and ended up killing himself.

What happened, Jim?

I handed him the pistol as I walked out the door. I didn’t mean for him to use it.

You handed him the pistol?

Jim could see this had been the wrong thing to tell her. I didn’t mean anything by it, he said.

You handed him the pistol? And then Elizabeth was up and crossing the room and hitting him, hard, and he was looking at Tracy, who had this terrible frozen look on her face and was just watching, and then they were gone and he waited that night for them to return, and the next morning and still they hadn’t, so he started walking around town, searching, and finally found their hotel but they had checked out. He searched until night and then realized he could call the airlines but he could only get a recording so he had to wait until morning, when he found out they had
flown back to California, and with Roy’s remains.

Jim called and kept calling Elizabeth, and finally one day she answered. He tried to explain himself, but she wouldn’t listen.

I don’t understand this, Jim, she said. I will never understand this. How my son became the boy who did that to himself. What you did to him to make him that way. And then she hung up and didn’t answer for days and then changed her phone number with no new number listed and he couldn’t leave Ketchikan or reach anyone he knew who would tell him her new number. Everyone, even his own brother and friends, was against him. The only person he didn’t call was Rhoda. He couldn’t call her, because in a way she had killed Roy, too.

Jim tried to discover how to spend his days. He would have to reenter his life at some point. He couldn’t spend the next fifty years sitting here aching. But the truth was, he was scared now. He wasn’t sure how he could prove he hadn’t murdered his son.

Sometime after two a.m., Jim realized it had been almost a year since he’d been with a woman. So he bundled up and went looking for a prostitute.

The streets were wet, the fog down close. Sound carried oddly from the waterfront and from the road. Fishing bells, fog bells, seagulls, and the hiss of tires on asphalt. He walked downtown to his old office.

They had redone the front of the building. It looked more modern now and was a dark green. Gold lettering on the window with the dentists’ names, two of them.

I could have stayed here, he said. If I had not cheated and broken everything up. If I had been able to stand my wife. If salmon had flown like birds through the streets.

He wasn’t sure what to do with this office. He turned away from it, finally, crossed the street and headed down the other side toward the canneries.

The canneries were packed in summer with college students, but now, in the spring, they were deserted. He passed an old man sitting on a bench in front of a cannery and they ignored each other. He continued on past all of the canneries but couldn’t find any prostitutes. He went to the old red-light district along the river just for the hell of it, knowing he wouldn’t find any there, and he didn’t. He stood at the wooden railing looking down into green-black water moving swiftly out to sea and he gave up.

But instead of walking back to the hotel, he walked in the opposite direction, away from town. Past the canneries, along the highway, he walked in fog and drizzle, the only walker on the road. It was a pleasure to walk, and a pleasure to be alone outside. He couldn’t stay much longer in that hotel.

The forest on either side of the road loomed roughly out of the fog. It had been better out on the island, he saw now. He had still believed in his rescue then, and he had been able to go talk with Roy. Now Roy was fifteen hundred miles away.

A dark-green pickup came out of the fog quickly and swerved to avoid Jim. It stopped about a hundred feet past him and the two men looked back at him through the rear window. They looked for a long time; Jim stood in place and stared back at them until they moved on. He was scared, though, that they would come back with others. He had been stupid to stay here. It was too great a risk. Then he realized this was only paranoia, since no one could possibly know who he was.

Jim hurried back anyway, walking on the side of the road and hiding himself in bushes whenever he heard a car coming. It was a long way to town. He hadn’t realized how far he had gone. Curve after curve and the shoreline appearing twice through the fog, calm gray water lit by a shrouded moon.

He reached the canneries finally and stopped hiding from cars. He passed the old red-light district and the tourist area and then downtown and continued around the point to his hotel. It was nearly dark but he grabbed the few things he had: a change of clothes in a plastic bag, his razor and shampoo, his wallet, his boots. He threw everything in the bag, left a note to Kirk saying, Thanks for ripping me off, and walked out into the evening toward the ferry that could take him across to the airport.

The ferry terminal was over three miles away, past Jackson Street, at the end of town. He was tired when he got there, and hungry, and there was nowhere to eat. He looked at the schedule, then found out this wasn’t the right terminal for the ferries that went across to the airport. This terminal was for the big Alaska Marine Highway ferries that went clear up to Haines and down to Washington.

He decided he didn’t need to fly. He just needed to leave, and a ferry was leaving for Haines early in the morning. He would sleep on one of the benches.

On the ferry, he ordered a hotdog and a mini-pizza and some frozen yogurt. The constant vibration and sound of the engines beneath the floors were a comfort. It occurred to him that if his whole life had been spent under way, he might have been a lot happier. These ferries were heavy and solid and almost never rolled or pounded at all, but as he sat there eating, he did feel different, anyway. And then he got to thinking again about sailing away to the South
Pacific. If he got through all of this okay, he might try that. He felt like telling this to someone, felt like talking about it with someone to find out how it sounded.

Jim looked around but everyone was sitting in groups. He chewed on through the rest of his food, then walked around the upper deck looking for someone standing alone at the railing, but this boat, at least on deck, seemed to be Noah’s Ark, everyone in pairs.

Though he didn’t drink, he went to the bar, because that seemed a likely place, even though it was morning. And he did find a woman sitting alone at one of the tables. Dark hair and an unhappy look, or perhaps just bored. She looked a few years younger than he was. She didn’t look as if she were waiting for anyone.

Mind if I join you? he asked.

That’s okay, I guess, she said, but this sounded so bad, so bored, he hesitated. She just watched him.

Okay, he said, and sat down.

It’s not like you’re doing me a favor, she said.

Jim got up and walked away. He stood on the stern and stared at the wake. He had wanted to tell that woman about Roy. He wanted just one person he could tell the whole story to, to work it out. Because when he left it alone, it just seemed more and more like he had killed Roy.

Jim couldn’t think about this well. He stared at the wake. Though it trailed away and spread and dissipated, it remained exactly the same from his viewpoint. It would never catch up with the boat nor would it ever be lost. It seemed like this might mean something, but then Jim was only wondering what his life was now, and not knowing. One thing had happened after another, but it seemed to him random and odd that things had worked out the way they had.

Jim could smell the diesel exhaust back here. It made him nostalgic for the Osprey, his fishing boat. He had failed at that, finally, and had to sell the boat, but really it hadn’t been a failure. He had spent all that time with his brother Gary pulling in albacore and then halibut; he had gotten to know the fishing fleet, all the Norwegians, even though he had not really talked to them. He had listened to them on the radio, their check-ins every morning and evening, their reports on the fishing, their evening entertainment. They had taken turns singing old songs and playing harmonica and even accordion. It had been an amazing time, really, though he and his brother had been outcasts. The Tin Can, they had called his boat, for the raw aluminum. They had older wooden boats, most of them. Some of them were fiberglass. He’d hear them mention him occasionally, but it was never an invitation to come on the radio and join in. He missed that life. He wished it had worked out. Roy could have worked on the boat in the summers.

One night, the Norwegians lost one of their boats. They came on in the morning, checking in, and no one knew where that one boat was. Most of it was in Norwegian, but there was enough said in English that Jim and Gary knew what was happening. They had slipped anchor themselves once when their sea parachute collapsed. The water was far too deep for bottom anchors, so the whole fleet put out sea parachutes off their bows and stayed anchored together that way, but the night their parachute collapsed, Jim and Gary awoke far from the fleet, no fishing boats around and right in the shipping lanes. So this was what must have happened to this Norwegian boat, they figured, and nothing was heard from it again.

In Haines, Jim called his brother Gary. Hey, he said, it’s me, and then there was silence. He waited.

Well, Gary said. Some people are looking for you.

Looking for me?

You jumped bail, didn’t you?

No.

Another pause. There might be a difference of opinion here, Gary said. And you might think about trying to make amends somehow, since I think the sheriff’s opinion wins.

Why are we talking about this? Jim said. I called you to talk about other things. I wanted to talk to my brother. I’ve been thinking a lot about our time on the Osprey, thinking that it’s too bad that didn’t work out. I wish we were still doing it. And I was thinking it would have been nice if Roy could have worked on the boat in the summers.

Jim, where are you?

I’m in Haines.

Look, you have to turn yourself in. You can’t run from them, and you’re just going to make yourself look bad in front of a jury.

Are you listening to me? Jim asked. I wanted to talk about other things. Do you think about the Osprey, or about living out there?

Jim waited then. He could hear his brother breathing.

Yeah, I do, Gary finally said. I think about those times. And though it was hard then, I’m glad we did it. It was an adventure. I wouldn’t do it again, though.
No?
No.
That’s too bad, Jim said. You know, I’ve been a little lonely in all this since I’ve been back. I haven’t had anyone to talk to. No one’s come to visit me or help me.
No one can now, Gary said. They’d be an accessory or something. Harboring a fugitive. I don’t know what they’d call it, but they’d call it something.
I don’t have any chance of beating this, do I? Jim said. He paused, and Gary didn’t say anything, and Jim realized finally that this was true. He was just waiting around for his own fall. He realized also that he needed not to tell his brother anything more. I need to go now, he said.
Okay, Gary said. I wish I could help you. I really do. I should have come to see you while you were still in Ketchikan.
That’s all right.
Jim walked straight into town looking for his bank. They had to have a branch here. He found several other banks and got toward what appeared to be the end of the small town and started panicking, but then he saw it. He walked in with his checkbook and ID in his hand, waited in line, and then was ushered to a side desk because of the amount of his withdrawal, almost $115,000 in cash. He intended to clean out what was left of this savings account completely, though the sheriff had probably already frozen it. Coos knew about it because he’d already taken over $200,000 for bail and fees and a few thousand for living expenses in Ketchikan.
The financial officer assisting him didn’t really want to assist him. This is a very large and unusual withdrawal, she said. Especially in cash. I have to let you know that we’ll have to report this. We have to report any large deposit or withdrawal such as this.
That’s okay, Jim said.
May I ask what the withdrawal is for?
To buy a house, Jim said.
We can have a cashier’s check made out for that.
Nope, it has to be cash.
A cashier’s check is cash.
Cash cash.
The woman frowned.
Look, Jim said, is it my money or is it not?
It is, of course, the woman said. I’m not sure we have that much cash on hand, though. In fact, I’m sure we don’t.
How much do you have?
What?
I’ll take whatever you have.
Jim left with $27,500 in cash. He knew he had been ripped off, that they had more cash than that, but it was enough. He didn’t need to buy his own boat. He could find some fishing boat that had just finished the March opening and was waiting around. They’d need money.
Jim went to the bigger boats first. It was hard to find anyone around. He asked people, though, and got phone numbers and addresses of homes and bars. Then he found one guy cleaning up on one of the smaller gillnetters.
Howdy, Jim said, but the man only looked at him, then went back to work. He was so much what one would expect he was laughable. A beard and battered old cap, a pathetic alcoholic.
I’d like a ride down the coast to Mexico. I’m paying fifteen thousand. Interested?
The man looked at him then. Just kill somebody? he asked.
Only my own life, Jim said.
Let me just go down to the sheriff and ask around, then we can talk about it.
Is this your boat?
No. But I know the captain.
Why don’t we skip the sheriff’s office and make it twenty thousand.
The man took off his cap and scratched his head. Will we be skipping the Coast Guard, too? And maybe offering a crew list in Mexico that might be a name short?
That would be the deal.
Well, let me talk to Chuck. There obviously ain’t much else going on for us.
The man went inside the cabin house then and was gone a long time. Jim couldn’t hear voices or anything. The boat was a piece of crap, rusted out and held together with wire. But it would get him down the coast. It was hell coming up the coast, but going down was easy enough.
The man returned with Chuck, who was in his sixties and seemed to be the captain and owner. He was a fiercely
ugly man, liver spots on the bald top of his head fringed by a dark and greasy mane. He stared at Jim with such hatred that Jim knew immediately not to trust him, and yet what choice did he have? He had nothing left. He needed to go and these were the only guys around.

What kind of trouble you in? Chuck asked.

Jim didn’t answer but only waited. Finally Chuck said, All right. I suppose you’ll be wanting to leave right away. That’s right.

We need to provision, get diesel, get some spare filters and such. The engine has a few problems. It’s not going to be a fast or a glamorous ride. But the price is twenty-five.

I don’t have twenty-five. I’m not trying to bargain or save up. I just don’t have it.

All right, Chuck said. We’ll need about three or four hours, and ten up front. And I want to see the other ten, too, just to see that you have it.

So Jim went aboard, handed over ten thousand and showed the other ten. And he stayed right there while they went out and provisioned. He wasn’t going to let them slip out without him. Nine hours later, in the evening, they were on their way.

The wind was up and cold, the chop enough to put a little spray over the bow. It was clear out, though. Standing on the stern, Jim could see all the lights in Haines and a few scattered lights along the shoreline beyond and fishing boats out on the water rafted together, waiting. Beyond them, abandoned land and waters among the land, the boundary between them dark and changing. Boating in a strange place at night you could believe almost anything, he knew, any direction, any depth, so sure of innate fears you could distrust your compass and depth finder right up until you hit the rocks. He hoped Chuck and Ned were competent.

They motored through the rest of the night toward Juneau, slipping past darkened land barely perceptible against the darkened sky. He felt a stranger. He had lived in this land much of his life, but the land had not softened or become familiar in that time. It felt as hostile as when he had first entered it. He felt that if he were to let himself sleep, he would be destroyed. Chuck would be drunk at the wheel, currents would carry them, slip them sideways until the bottom rose to meet the hull and they would tip and fill with seawater and drown. It was just a fact that this was always waiting in close. They would be much safer far from land. He was thinking of this as a way of thinking about Roy. Roy had been hostile to him also. They had never known one another, never softened. He had not been wary enough of Roy. He had lost himself in his own problems and not seen Roy for the threat he was. He had let himself sleep.

The next day came slowly. A thin line of gray, or perhaps a blue less dark, and then the peaks outlined as if by their own emanation, and then a faster lightening above them until their edges curled in fire and suddenly everywhere was white and the orange sun ticked upward in thin, segmented lines between two peaks to grow heavy and yellow and merge into the world too hot to look at. All became blind. The water and mountains and air all the same brightness, glaring. Jim couldn’t make out boats or waves or land, could not see a thing for nearly half an hour until the day filled out and land became land again, waves had distance, and he could see boats upon them everywhere. The surface still opaque, gray-white, a solid membrane. The boat wallowing slowly through at eight or nine knots, Haines in the distance now or gone, too far to see.

By eight o’clock, as Ned relieved Chuck and dug into an entire box of jelly doughnuts, they passed what Jim at first had thought was Juneau but was only Point Bridget State Park, he saw on the chart, connected to Juneau by a small highway.

If you know how to read a chart, you can take a turn at the helm, Ned said.

Fair enough, Jim said. I’ll be next.

Soon after, Jim had his best chance of seeing Juneau down Favorite Channel. Then, a little later, down Saginaw Channel, but he really didn’t see anything. They weren’t very close and it didn’t look like much. By noon Jim was at the wheel, exhausted, and they were around Couverden Island, heading west out Icy Strait.

He grinned when he hit Icy Strait because it was indeed suddenly a lot colder. It was a kind of joke. You could tell even from inside the pilot house, through the small cracks and vents.

The channel was huge—at least five miles across—but there was a lot of traffic. A few cabin cruisers and two sailboats but many other commercial salmon and halibut boats and some tugs with loads far behind them. Those were the ones he had to anticipate. He wasn’t used to being so slow. He just couldn’t get out of the way quickly in this thing. And he didn’t turn on the VHF, because he didn’t want attention.

They passed Pleasant Island around three o’clock, then Point Gustavus, and the wind howled down from Glacier Bay to the north, down through the Sitakaday Narrows.

As they passed the next small bay, Dundas Bay, a bit later, he saw a Coast Guard cruiser, one of the big ones, passing on the other side of the Inian Islands, and he felt panicked. If they came over to board him, to inspect for
safety equipment and drugs, as they routinely did, he would be caught. He had no faith in Chuck or Ned to stand by
him. He was afraid even to sleep, although he could hardly keep awake at this point. But the cutter passed far on the
other side of the northernmost island and went into the next bay. Jim stayed as far out of the way as possible,
ducking slightly into Taylor Bay as he passed. Brady Glacier looked enormous, a thing from another time, on a
different scale that denied anything now, as if Jim could not possibly be Jim because the thought was too small,
immediate as the glare. The glacier dwarfed mountains.

The wind tore down off the glacier in gusts that set the boat rocking, but this was good because it kept him alert.

And then he was out. He passed Cape Spencer by eight o’clock and was heading out to sea, free of the coast, free
of the islands and southeast Alaska. On the chart, he was out of U.S. waters in less than an hour. He would cross
them again because of the way the lines were drawn, but only briefly. Within another night and day, he’d be far
enough offshore that no one would know to find him or care. He would be entering another life.

Again he thought of Roy. He couldn’t seem not to. He would be thinking along and not expecting the shift, and
then he’d see the pistol, handing it to Roy, or he’d come in after and find him there on the floor, or what was left of
him. And then he was thinking of the sleeping bag and wondered what had happened to it. They had taken it away in
the clear plastic bag with Roy’s body, and they had not wanted to try to pour him out. It was too much to think of
him that way, but then what could they have done? They must have done that at some point before they had buried
him. But who? Who had poured him out? And what had Elizabeth seen? What had his daughter Tracy seen? He
might not see her again. He had lost her, too.

The Gulf of Alaska was very cold. The wind blew hard and the waves were large now and confused, wind waves
and swells, breaking around him and soaking the foredeck, occasionally coming over the side. Chuck came up to
relieve him at four. Get some sleep, he said.

How far out are we going? Jim asked. I’d like to be at least a hundred out all the way down.

We can do that, Chuck said. Though we’re gonna have to stop for fuel somewhere. Oregon, probably.

Jim went below and sacked out in a tiny bunk that smelled terribly of Chuck’s old sweat and alcohol. He was
hungry, but he was too tired, so he tried just to sleep.

A boat under way is a noisy thing. He had known that. But this boat’s walls creaked and popped in a way that
couldn’t be good. And her diesel was extremely uneven, dropping low in revs and then racing, not only because of
the swells and cavitation. Jim lay curled up in fear and exhaustion and waited for it to pass, waited for sleep, but
waiting and fearing like that he thought too much about everything. He thought about the IRS, the sheriff, the Coast
Guard, his brother, Elizabeth, Tracy, Rhoda, Roy. He imagined a long conversation with Rhoda trying to convince
her he hadn’t killed Roy. He pointed out that Roy was thirteen, that he had a mind of his own, that he could do
things that were his own choice.

His own choice? Rhoda asked.

It wasn’t my doing, Jim said. It was never my idea that he kill himself.

Never your idea, Jim?

No, he’d tell Rhoda. But then he confessed one more detail. He told about the time shooting up into the ceiling.

And what was that about?

I don’t know. I was just shooting.

Just shooting?

Shut up, Jim said aloud in the dark, but he could hardly hear himself, it was so damn loud. And then he worried
about what course they were on. How would he know if the boat swung around, if Chuck decided to head back? And
what about islands? It was an old, irrational fear of his when under way. He was always afraid of hitting islands that
weren’t on the chart, even in mid-ocean.

He couldn’t keep his head still. That was why he wasn’t sleeping. No matter how he wedged it in between a few
shirts and the lee cloth, he couldn’t get it not to rock when the boat rocked. He couldn’t relax his neck. And the
whiskers along his jaw scraped against the shirts every time his head moved. Roy hadn’t gotten to the point where
he’d had whiskers. He was starting to get peach fuzz. They talked about shaving one day, Roy worried about cutting
himself, not realizing the blade head swiveled. Jim grinned. Then he was crying again and hating how weak he was.

He saw himself in Mexico and maybe someday in the South Pacific, down there in all the nice weather with warm,
beautiful blue water and the green mountains, and he saw that he would still be alone. Roy would never catch up to
him. And he wondered what Roy’s grave looked like. He realized he’d never get to see it now.

Jim looked across to the other side to see if Ned was awake, too, but apparently he wasn’t.

Jim lay there against the lee cloth with his eyes closed and couldn’t find anything. It was just windblown space
inside him, a vacuum. He didn’t care about anything, and it would have been better just to kill himself, but Roy had
done that, and now he couldn’t. Roy had killed himself instead, in a clear trade, and this was why Jim was
responsible for killing Roy. It was not the way things were supposed to have been, but because Jim had been
cowardly, because he hadn’t had the courage just to kill himself before Roy returned, he had missed that moment, the one moment he had to make things right, and he forfeited that moment forever and handed over the pistol to Roy and asked that he fix things in the way that he could, even though it was not the right way.

And Roy had done it. Roy wasn’t cowardly and didn’t flinch, and he put the barrel up and pulled the trigger and blew off half his head. And Jim did not recognize what had happened when he heard the shot. He didn’t know enough to recognize the sacrifice at the time it was made.

Jim still hadn’t believed what had happened even after he saw Roy’s body lying there in the doorway with his blood and brain and bone everywhere. He still had not believed or seen anything, even as the proof lay before him. And now here he was escaping, thinking he could run off and evade the law and his punishment and have his perfect life somewhere eating mangoes and coconuts like Robinson Crusoe, as if nothing had happened, as if his son had done nothing and he had played no part in it. But that was not the way things could be, he knew now, and he knew also what he had to do.

Jim got up out of his lee cloth and went into the pilot house. Chuck was tilted back in his captain’s chair, looking at a porno magazine. He raised his eyes from the page for a minute and said, What do you want?

We have to go back, Jim said. I can’t run from this. I’m turning myself in.

Chuck looked at him steadily, and Jim had no idea what he was thinking. You’re gonna turn yourself in, Chuck finally said.

Yeah.

And where does that leave us? We helped you get out of town, remember?

Jim wasn’t sure what to do. Okay, you’re right, he said. You’ll get your full payment and I’ll wait a few days until you’re gone before I do anything.

Chuck went back to his porno. All right, he said. Go ahead and wake Ned up for the next watch before you sack out again.

Jim woke Ned, who complained that it was early. Jim lay down again and tried to sleep. He was practicing his confession as he drifted off. I, Jim Fenn, murdered my son, Roy Fenn, back in the fall, probably nine months ago. I killed him by shooting him in the head at close range with my pistol, a Ruger .44 Magnum, which was recovered, I think, by the sheriff. I was suicidal and had been talking on the radio with my ex-wife Rhoda, who said she didn’t want to get back together with me and was planning to marry another man, and I couldn’t stand it any more and I was too cowardly to kill myself so I killed my son.

That wasn’t quite right. He went back to his motivations, because they would ask about those, he knew. He went over each incriminating detail, over and over, the pistol, the radios, using everything. He was so exhausted he couldn’t keep it straight. His mind had stopped and his body felt tiny, as if he were an infant. He was a tiny golden infant shrunken inside himself with strings reaching out to each part of this larger body, pulling in. He was vanishing.

Jim woke with a rope around his neck yanking him from his bunk. He tried to scream but he couldn’t. He was on the floor, hit a bulkhead, was struggling, then saw Ned with a wooden bat hitting him across the legs. He fell, was dragged along, got a glimpse of Chuck at the other end of the rope and knew he should have seen this coming. It should have been so obvious. Then he blacked out.

When he hit the water, it was so cold he woke and wanted them to find him and rescue him. Wanted Chuck and Ned to come get him. He struggled with the rope at his neck, freed it easily, but he was in his clothes, sinking, weighted down, and he didn’t have a life jacket. He felt enormously sorry for himself. The open ocean was an awesome sight. Peaks forming everywhere, tossing and disappearing, hillsides rolling past. It was impossible to believe it was just water, impossible to believe, also, how far it extended beneath him. He struggled for what seemed forever and might have been ten minutes before he numbed and tired and began swallowing water. He thought of Roy, who had had no chance to feel this terror, whose death had been instant. He threw up water involuntarily and swallowed and breathed it in again like the end it was, cold and hard and unnecessary, and he knew then that Roy had loved him and that that should have been enough. He just hadn’t understood anything in time.
PRAISE
FOR LEGEND OF A SUICIDE

“The reportorial relentlessness of Vann’s imagination often makes his fiction seem less written than chiseled. A small, lovely book has been written out of his large and evident pain. ‘A father, after all,’ Vann writes, ‘is a lot for a thing to be.’ A son is also a lot for a thing to be; so is an artist. With Legend of a Suicide, David Vann proves himself a fine example of both.”

—Tom Bissell, New York Times Book Review

“As the title suggests, the stories in Legend of a Suicide approach a private mythos, revisiting, reinvestigating, and reinventing one family’s broken past. They also transport us to wild, un-charted places on the Alaskan coast and in the American soul. Throughout, David Vann is a generous, sure-handed guide in some very dangerous territory.”

—Stewart O’Nan, author of Songs for the Missing

“Headlong narrative pacing, a memorable train-wreck father who gives Richard Russo’s characters a run for their money, and a sure, sharp, inviting voice. So hard to put down that I am thinking of suing David Vann for several hours of lost sleep.”

—Lionel Shriver, author of So Much for That

“His legend is at once the truest memoir and the purest fiction…. Nothing quite like this book has been written before.”

—Alexander Linklater, Observer (London)

“Brilliant…. Vann’s prose follows the sinews of Cormac McCarthy and Hemingway, yet has its own nimble flex.”

—The Times (London)

“Vengeful yet sorrowing and empathetic, plausible yet dreamlike, and completely absorbing.”

—Christopher Tayler, The Guardian (London)

“As primal and unforgiving as the Alaskan wilds where it’s set.”

—Bret Anthony Johnston, Men’s Journal

“David Vann’s extraordinary and inventive set of fictional variations on his father’s death will surely become an American classic.”

—The Times Literary Supplement (London)

“A reckoning…. A very difficult book for the very best reasons: it is written with great honesty and journeys unflinchingly into darkness…. A message of profound sympathy and sadness, anger and regret, Legend of a Suicide is the melting away of one man’s past and the reshaping of tragedy into art.”

—Greg Schutz, Fiction Writers Review

“A powerful new voice has emerged in fiction.”

—The Sunday Times (London)

“A piece of relentless, heartbreaking brilliance that bears comparison with Cormac McCarthy’s Road.”
“In his portrayal of a young son’s love for his lost father, David Vann has created a stunning work of fiction: surprising, beautiful, and intensely moving.”
—Nadeem Aslam, author of Maps for Lost Lovers and The Wasted Vigil

“The most powerful, and pure, piece of writing I have read for a very long time. This book squeezes more life out of the first 100 pages than most books could manage in 1000, which is pretty impressive, considering it’s a book about death.”
—Ross Raisin, author of Out Backward

“This is my ‘One to watch.’…It’s stunning, beautifully written, with genuine surprises and a complexity that makes you retrace your steps, wonder what really happened, and ponder over the whole scenario for days. I loved it. It’s Richard Yates, Annie Proulx territory, and highly recommended.”
—Sarah Broadhurst, Bookseller (London)

“David Vann’s dark and strange book twists through natural forces and compressed emotions toward an extraordinary and dreamlike conclusion. One of the most gripping debuts I’ve ever read.”
—Philip Hoare, author of Leviathan; or, The Whale

“A truly great writer.”
—The Irish Sunday Independent (Ireland)

“For the imagery alone and for the sentences, the book would be a treasure.”
—Colm Tóibín

“Extraordinary…. Reminiscent of Tobias Wolff, Vann’s prose is as pure as a gulp of water from an Alaskan stream.”
—Financial Times
Other Books by DAVID VANN

NONFICTION

A Mile Down: The True Story of a Disastrous Career at Sea
Credits

Cover illustration by Dan Funderburgh
Continue reading for an excerpt
from David Vann’s new book

Caribou Island

On Sale January 18, 2011

The prize-winning author of Legend of a Suicide delivers his highly anticipated debut as a novelist—a noir tale of a marriage unraveling under the forces of rage and regret, set against the backdrop of the unforgiving Alaskan wilderness.

On a small island in a glacier-fed lake on Alaska’s Kenai Peninsula, a marriage is unraveling. Gary, driven by 30 years of diverted plans, and Irene, haunted by a tragedy in her past, are trying to rebuild their life together. Following the outline of Gary’s old dream, they’re hauling logs to Caribou Island in good weather and in terrible storms, in sickness and in health, to build the kind of cabin that drew them to Alaska in the first place.

But this island is not right for Irene. They are building without plans or advice, and when winter comes early, the overwhelming desolation of the prehistoric wilderness threatens to push them, and their marriage, to the edge. Caught in the maelstrom is their daughter, Rhoda, who is wrestling with the hopes and disappointments of her own life. Devoted to her parents, she watches helplessly as they drift further apart.

Brilliantly drawn and fiercely honest, Caribou Island is rooted in a world of profound violence and regret—a novel of marriage and exile, set against the isolation of Alaska’s primal landscape.
CARIBOU ISLAND

a novel

David Vann
Chapter 1

My mother was not real. She was an early dream, a hope. She was a place. Snowy, like here, and cold. A wooden house on a hill above a river. An overcast day, the old white paint of the buildings made brighter somehow by the trapped light, and I was coming home from school. Ten years old, walking by myself, walking through dirty patches of snow in the yard, walking up to the narrow porch. I can’t remember how my thoughts went then, can’t remember who I was or what I felt like. All of that is gone, erased. I opened our front door and found my mother hanging from the rafters. I’m sorry, I said, and I stepped back and closed the door. I was outside on the porch again.

You said that? Rhoda asked. You said you were sorry?

Yes.

Oh, Mom.

It was long ago, Irene said. And it was something I couldn’t see even at the time, so I can’t see it now. I don’t know what she looked like hanging there. I don’t remember any of it, only that it was.

Rhoda scooted closer on the couch and put her arm around her mother, pulled her close. They both looked at the fire. A metal screen in front, small hexagons, and the longer Rhoda looked, the more these hexagons seemed like the back wall of the fireplace, made golden by flame. As if the back wall, black with soot, could be revealed or transmuted by fire. Then her eyes would shift and it would be only a screen again. I wish I had known her, Rhoda said.

Me too, Irene said. She patted Rhoda’s knee. I need to get to sleep. Busy day tomorrow.

I’ll miss this place.

It was a good home. But your father wants to leave me, and the first step is to make us move out to that island. To make it seem he gave it a try.

That’s not true, Mom.

We all have rules, Rhoda. And your father’s main rule is that he can never seem like the bad guy.

He loves you, Mom.

Irene stood and hugged her daughter. Goodnight, Rhoda.

In the morning, Irene carried her end of log after log, from the truck to the boat. These are never going to fit together, she said to her husband, Gary.

I’ll have to plane them down a bit, he said, tight-lipped.

Irene laughed.

Thanks, Gary said. He already had that grim, worried look that accompanied all his impossible projects.

Why not build a cabin with boards? Irene asked. Why does it have to be a log cabin?

But Gary wasn’t answering.

Suit yourself, she said. But these aren’t even logs. None of them is bigger than six inches. It’s going to look like a hovel made out of sticks.

They were at the upper campground on Skilak Lake, the water a pale jade green from glacial runoff. Flaky from silt, and because of its depth, never warmed much, even in late summer. The wind across it chill and constant, and the mountains rising from its eastern shore still had pockets of snow. From their tops, Irene had often seen, on clear days, the white volcanic peaks of Mount Redoubt and Mount Iliamna across the Cook Inlet and, in the foreground, the broad pan of the Kenai Peninsula: spongy green and red-purple moss, the stunted trees rimming wetlands and smaller lakes, and the one highway snaking silver in sunlight as a river. Mostly public land. Their house and their son Mark’s house the only buildings along the shore of Skilak, and even they were tucked back into trees so the lake still could seem prehistoric, wild. But it wasn’t enough to be on the shore. They were moving out, now, to Caribou Island.

Gary had backed his pickup close to where the boat sat on the beach with an open bow, a ramp for loading cargo. With each log, he stepped onto the boat and walked its length. A wobbly walk, because the stern was in the water and bobbing.

Lincoln logs, Irene said.

I’ve heard about enough, Gary said.

Fine.

Gary pulled another small log. Irene took her end. The sky darkened a bit, and the water went from light jade to a blue-gray. Irene looked up toward the mountain and could see one flank whitened. Rain, she said. Coming this way.
We’ll just keep loading, Gary said. Put on your jacket if you want.

Gary wearing a flannel work shirt, long-sleeved, over his T-shirt. Jeans and boots. His uniform. He looked like a younger man, still fit for his mid-fifties. Irene still liked how he looked. Unshaven, unshowered at the moment, but real.

Shouldn’t take much longer, Gary said.

They were going to build their cabin from scratch. No foundation, even. And no plans, no experience, no permits, no advice welcome. Gary wanted to just do it, as if the two of them were the first to come upon this wilderness.

So they kept loading, and the rain came toward them a white shadow over the water. A kind of curtain, the squall line, but the first drops and wind always hit just before, invisible, working ahead of what she could see, and this always came as a surprise to Irene. Those last moments taken away. And then the wind kicked up, the squall line hit, and the drops came down large and heavy, insistent.

Irene grabbed her end of another log, walked toward the boat with her face turned away from the wind. The rain blowing sideways now, hitting hard. She wore no hat, no gloves. Her hair matting, drips off her nose, and she felt that first chill as the rain soaked through her shirt to her arms, one shoulder, her upper back and neck. She hunched away from it as she walked, placed her log, and then walked back hunched the other way, her other side soaking through now, and she shivered.

Gary walking ahead of her, hunched also, his upper body turned away from the rain as if it wanted to disobey his legs, take off in its own direction. He grabbed the end of another log, pulled it out, stepping backward, and then the rain hit harder. The wind gusted, and the air was filled with water, white even in close. The lake disappeared, the waves gone, the transition to shore become speculative. Irene grabbed the log and followed Gary into oblivion.

The wind and rain formed a roar, against which Irene could hear no other sound. She walked mute, found the bow, placed her log, turned and walked back, no longer hunched. There was no dry part left to save. She was soaked through.

Gary walking past her a kind of bird man, his arms curved out like wings first opening. Trying to keep his wet shirt away from his skin? Or some instinctive first response to battle, readying his arms? When he stopped at the truck bed, water streamed off the end of his nose. His eyes hard and small, focused.

Irene moved in close. Should we stop? she yelled over the roar.

We have to get this load out to the island, he yelled back, and then he pulled another log, so Irene followed, though she knew she was being punished. Gary could never do this directly. He relied on the rain, the wind, the apparent necessity of the project. It would be a day of punishment. He would follow it, extend it for hours, drive them on, a grim determination, like fate. A form of pleasure to him.

Irene followed because once she had endured she could punish. Her turn would come. And this is what they had done to each other for decades now, irresistibly. Fine, she would think. Fine. And that meant, just wait.

Another half an hour of loading logs in the rain. Irene was going to get sick from this, chilled through. They should have been wearing rain gear, which they had in the cab of the truck, but their stubbornness toward each other had prevented that. If she had gone for her jacket when Gary suggested it, that would have interrupted the work, slowed them down, and it would have been noted, held against her, a small shake of the head, perhaps even a sigh, but removed by long enough he could pretend it wasn’t about that. Above all else, Gary was an impatient man: impatient with the larger shape of his life, with who he was and what he’d done and become, impatient with his wife and children, and then, of course, impatient with all the little things, any action not done correctly, any moment of weather that was uncooperative. A general and abiding impatience she had lived in for over thirty years, an element she had breathed.

The last log loaded, finally, and Gary and Irene swung the bow ramp into place. It was not heavy, not reassuring. Black rubber where it met the side plates of the boat, forming a seal. This would be their only way back and forth from the island.

I’ll park the truck, Gary said, and stomped off through the rocks. The rain still coming down, though not as blown now. Enough visibility to know direction, though not enough to see the island from here, a couple miles out. Irene wondered what would happen when they were in the middle. Would they see any of the shore, or only white all around them? No GPS on the boat, no radar, no depth finder. It’s a lake, Gary had said at the dealership. It’s only a lake.

There’s water in the boat, Irene said when Gary returned. It was pooling under the logs, gathered especially in the stern, almost a foot deep from all the rain.

We’ll take care of it once we’re out, Gary said. I don’t want to use the battery for the bilge pump without the engine on.

So what’s the plan? Irene asked. She didn’t know how they would push the boat off the beach, weighed down with the logs.
You know, I’m not the only one who wanted this, Gary said. It’s not just my plan. It’s our plan.

This was a lie, but too big a lie to address right here, right now, in the rain. Fine, Irene said. How do we get the boat off the beach?

Gary looked at the boat for a few moments. Then he bent down and gave the bow a push. It didn’t budge.

The front half of the boat was on land, and Irene was guessing that meant hundreds of pounds at this point, fully loaded. Gary hadn’t thought of this, obviously. He was making it up as he went along.

Gary walked around to one side and then the other. He climbed over logs to the stern, to the outboard engine, leaned against this and pushed hard, trying to rock the boat, but it might as well have been made of lead. No movement whatsoever.

So Gary crawled forward, hopped ashore, looked at the boat for a while. Help me push, he finally said. Irene lined up beside him, he counted one, two, three, and they both pushed at the bow. Their feet slipped in the black pebbles, but no other movement.

It can never be easy, Gary said. Not a single thing. It can never just work out.

As if to prove what he was saying, the rain came down heavier again, the wind increasing, cold off the glacier. If you wanted to be a fool and test the limits of how bad things could get, this was a good place for it. Irene knew Gary wouldn’t appreciate any comments, though. She tried to be supportive. Maybe we could come back tomorrow, she said. The weather’s supposed to improve a bit. We could unload and push it out, then load again.

No, Gary said. I don’t feel like doing it tomorrow. I’m taking this load out today.

Irene held her tongue.

Gary stomped off to the truck. Irene stood in the rain, soaked and wanting to be warm and dry. Their house very close, a few minutes away. Hot bath, start a fire.

Gary drove the truck onto the beach, curving up toward the trees, then down to the boat until he had the bumper close to the bow. Let me know how close, he yelled out the window.

So Irene walked over and told him, and he eased forward until the bumper was touching.

Okay, Irene said.

Gary gave it a little gas, and pebbles flew out behind his rear wheels. The boat didn’t budge. He shifted to low four-wheel drive, gave it more gas, all four tires digging in, pebbles slamming the underside of the truck body. The boat started to slip, then went back fast into the water, drifting away in a curve.

Grab the bow line! Gary yelled out his window. Irene rushed forward to grab the line that was loose on the beach. She caught it and dug in her heels, lay back on the beach pulling hard until the pressure eased. Then she just lay there, looking up into the dark white sky. She could see the rain as streaks before it hit her face. No gloves, her hands cold and the nylon line rough. The pebbles and larger stones hard against the back of her head. Her clothing a wet and cold outer shell.

She heard Gary drive the truck up to the parking area, and then heard his boots on the way back, large determined strides.

Okay, he said, standing over her. Let’s go.

What she wished was that he would just lie down beside her. The two of them on this beach. They would give up, let the rope go, let the boat drift away, forget about the cabin, forget about all that hadn’t gone right over the years and just go back to their house and warm up and start over. It didn’t seem impossible. If they both decided to do it, they could.

But instead, they walked into the cold water, the waves breaking over their boots up to their knees, and climbed into the boat. Irene grabbed on to the logs and swung her legs in, wondering why she was doing this. The momentum of who she had become with Gary, the momentum of who she had become in Alaska, the momentum that made it somehow impossible to just stop right now and go back to the house. How had that happened?

Gary at the motor squeezed the bulb for the gas line, pulled the choke out, pulled back hard on the starter cord. And the engine caught right away, ran smooth, spit out its stream of cooling water and not as much smoke as Irene was used to. A four-stroke, a nice engine, ridiculously expensive, but at least it was reliable. The last thing she wanted was to be adrift in a storm in the middle of the lake.

Gary had the bilge pump running, a thick stream of water over the side, and all seemed briefly manageable. Then Irene saw the bend in the bow. From where Gary had pushed with the truck, the front of the boat had a bend to it. Not extreme, but Irene shifted forward to examine the seal where the gate met side plate, and she could see a trickle of water coming in. They were loaded down so heavy, part of the ramp was underwater.

Gary, she said, but he was already backing away in a half-circle, then shifting the engine into forward. He was focused, not paying any attention to her. Gary! she yelled out, and waved an arm.

He shifted into neutral and came forward to look. He made a growling sound, his teeth clamped tight. But then he returned to the engine and put it in gear. Not a word, no discussion of whether they should go on or have it repaired
Gary didn’t go fast, no more than five or ten miles per hour, but this was straight into wind waves with a flat front, and every wave was a hard blast of spray that drenched them entirely.

Irene turned away from the waves, facing back toward Gary, but he was looking backward, also, steering by reference to the shore they had left, slowly receding into the distance. The truck still visible through patchy trees. No one else parked in the campground. Usually a few boats and campers were here, but today, if anything happened, it was just them, the thud and blast of water every few seconds, the logs humped up dark and soaked, the gun-wales low, the steady stream from the bilge pump. A new kind of covered wagon, almost, heading to a new land, the making of a new home.
Chapter 2

Rhoda’s beaten-up Datsun B210 didn’t belong off pavement. She was careful to keep momentum up hills but could feel her tires slipping in the mud. And she couldn’t see a thing, just the rain hitting her windshield hard, blur of green trees beyond, the brown dirt and gravel road curving away. She’d been in dealerships for years now looking for the right new truck but never seemed to have enough money when they sat down to make it all final. What she wanted, anyway, was an SUV, not a truck. And since she was expecting a raise, and expecting also to marry a dentist, she didn’t think she’d have to wait very long.

Which put Rhoda in mind of Jim, who probably was eating pancakes right now for dinner, his usual, wondering where she was. Pulling peach halves from a can to put on these pancakes, and clicking the sides of the can unnecessarily with his fork. But Rhoda was feeling a good mood come over her and didn’t want to wreck it by thinking of Jim.

By the time she pulled up to her parents’ house, she could see the truck was gone. She was late to help them move logs. She got out anyway and ran past the flower beds to the door.

Rhoda’s parents lived in a small, one-story wooden house that had been added on to in several places over the years so that it bulged oddly now and the parts did not all match. Rhoda’s father had been dreaming of frontier life and mountain men when he moved up from California in his mid-twenties, and by now he had all the Alaskan accoutrements. Antlers of elk, moose, caribou, deer, mountain goats, and Dall’s rams hung from nails along the edge of the roof and along the outside walls. The raised flower bed to the right of the door featured an old hand pump, a small sluice, and various other rusted pans, picks, pails, old boards and such from the mining days, dragged down mostly from the Hatcher Pass Mine northeast of Anchorage but purchased also from other collectors and the odd garage sale. Farther down the wall to the left, he had stacked wood for the fireplace and the antique cast-iron and nickel stove, and between the wood stack and the door, an old dogsled, its hide straps and wood rotting away a little more each year in all the rain, snow, wind, and occasional sun. The place had always seemed a junkyard and an embarrassment to Rhoda. What she did like were the flowers and the moss garden. Twelve kinds of moss and all the varieties of Alaskan wildflowers, even the rare ones. Whole beds of chocolate lilies and every color of fireweed and lupine, from white and pink to the deepest purple-blues, though only the fireweed was in bloom now.

Rhoda banged on the door again, but they were gone. She drove on toward the campground and launch ramp. Maybe she’d catch them there, though she had no idea why they’d persist on a day like this. Why not stay home? Her tires slid a bit coming down the hill to the campground. She saw their truck parked, drove to the ramp at the water’s edge. No boat. No one around. Her parents were nuts to go out in this. Why not wait for a better day? Even if it was the cabin to end all cabins, the dream of a lifetime and all that crap. What Rhoda didn’t understand at all was why her mother would allow this.

Whatever, she said, and headed back to town.

Rhoda and Jim lived in a large peaked house overlooking the mouth of the Kenai River. One of the pluses about being with Jim. The steeply pitched A-frame roof reminded her of Wienschnitzel franchises but shed snow easily and created a twenty-foot vaulted ceiling in the living room out front and the master bedroom in back. The double-paned windows, nearly fifteen feet high, caught sunsets over the Cook Inlet, and the exposed beams were stained dark as a mead hall’s, the furniture all Scandinavian wood and leather. It was the kind of house Rhoda had once dreamed of.

And now I just live here, she was thinking as she stood at the kitchen counter and squeezed small samples of beagle poop into glass vials for testing.

I wish you wouldn’t do that while I’m eating, Jim said. He was having his pancakes and canned peaches on the other side of the counter.

Get over it, Rhoda said. It’s just dog shit.

Jim laughed. You’re the best.

No, you, Rhoda said. They had only been living together a year, so what the hell. Rhoda’s former boyfriend had been a different story, a fisherman who whined and complained daily about the forces of nature, industry, and government, all equally inscrutable and heartless. The price for halibut was too low one year, licensing fees too high to enter another fishery the next year, the sea out to get him personally every year. Boring to listen to, and the payoff had been a small trailer home with a few free halibut steaks. Whereas with Jim she had unlimited canned peaches and all the Krusteaz pancake mix anyone could ever want.
Rhoda smiled. She was happy, she realized. Or happy enough, anyway. She put down the plastic syringe, circled behind Jim, and breathed a little in his ear.

On the shore of Skilak Lake, less than a mile from where his parents were slamming into waves with their load of logs, Mark was just taking off his clothes with his partner Karen and a couple friends from the Coffee Bus. He stoked the fire and they all hopped into the sauna, then banged the door shut behind them. The sauna was right at the edge of the lake with a narrow pier straight out the door, and it was hot and dark, windowless, insulated with tar paper behind the wood, the sitting bench and foot bench so high his head brushed the ceiling and taller people had to duck. Mark always brought along a branch or two of hemlock with the leaves still on for whipping, and as soon as they had broken a good sweat and the steam was so thick that in the red light they could see each other only faintly, Karen bent over with her head between her knees and her arms locked around her calves and Mark started whipping her. This was to bring the blood to the surface and get the circulation going. It woke a person up, too, and seemed faintly medicinal and purifying. It made a loud rustling slapping sound and left Mark in a deep sweat, Karen in pain, both of them gasping.

Then it was Mark’s turn to bend over. His skin so slick and salty now he couldn’t grab his calves or grip his hands together, so he held on to the boards beneath his feet as Karen began whipping. She got a rhythm going, swining as hard as she could, and incorporated her voice, too, after a while, until she was yelling deep from her gut with every whip. She grabbed the back of his neck with her other hand and whipped him hard until most the leaves and side branches had been ripped off and she collapsed on him and he was whimpering.

Then Carl and Monique wanted to try. Mark stumbled out for some new branches and offered to whip Monique when he returned, but she grabbed one of the branches and said, in her low, sexy voice, No, I want to do Carl. So Carl bent over, perhaps a little hesitantly, and Monique whipped him once hard and he yelped.

Hey, he said. That really fucking hurts.

Bend over, Monique said. Grab your ankles. Then she started with a few soft slaps and worked up gradually to the harder ones. In the end, Mark assisted at Monique’s request by holding Carl’s head down until Monique said, God, I can’t breathe, and dropped the tattered whip and stumbled out the door and down the pier, where she dove headfirst into the lake.

The others ignored him and swam out a few hundred feet, remarking on the beauty of the heavy rain, the constant wind, and the mountain towering invisibly above them.

I’m alive, Monique said. Even the most stupid things are true. I don’t want to be dead ever again.

But then they all had to get out of the water or they would in fact die. They had already gone numb. They piled back into the sauna and decided to get high before the second round.

Best weed in the world, Mark said, exhaling finally. Highest THC content.

Karen went semi-catatonic, her usual. She had been raised on much weaker pot, and the Alaskan stuff hit her hard. So Mark felt free to check out Monique as much as he liked. She was tall and had short dark hair in a kind of European-looking bob, like the woman who modeled for Clinique. This got Mark hard, the fact that this woman beside him, her nipples hard and skin deserving of comparisons to alabaster and marble and such, looked like a model. He reached out to touch her neck.

Yeah, she said, pushing his hand away. You’re a prince.

Hey, Carl said.

Shut up, Monique said. We don’t need a male thing now. I’m enjoying this.

I’m so high, Karen said, raising her arms and falling back against the wall, her head thumping.

So Mark helped her sit up again, threw water on the hot rocks, and in an explosion of steam, they began the second of three rounds of Scandinavian custom.
Irene shivered, her teeth chattering, her wet clothing a kind of wick, something to chill and guide the wind, nothing more. And the water was very nearly freezing, a new shock every time it hit.

Their property came into view, three-quarters of an acre of waterfront looking toward the mountain and head of the lake, where the Kenai River fed from the glacier. Forest at the back of the property but also smaller growth in front, blueberry and alder thickets, wildflowers and grasses.

Gary aimed for the rocky shore. No beach, no sand or small pebbles. Big rounded rocks. Snags of wood on either side, waves breaking, and Gary didn’t slow at all, came in at full speed. Irene yelled out for him to slow down, but then she just held on, braced a foot against the ramp, and they hit. The logs on top slid forward and Irene moved her foot just in time. Jesus, Gary, she said.

But Gary wasn’t paying her any attention. He tilted the engine up, climbed forward over logs, and hopped into shallow water, about ten feet from shore. Help me lower the gate, he said. The rain and wind dying down, so at least she could hear. She climbed over the front, sank to her knees, over the tops of her boots, cold water, the rocks very slick beneath, and helped him undo the latches.

As she released the final one, the gate sprung at them, under pressure from the logs. Whoa, Gary said, but neither of them was hurt and they caught the ramp and lowered it, the waves breaking against their thighs and flooding the boat now from the open bow. They weren’t far enough onto the shore.

We have to unload fast, Gary said, and I need to get the engine running for the bilge pump. So he climbed over logs to the stern, tilted the motor down, pulled the cord, switched on the pump. Time to hustle, he said, as he rushed to the bow. He grabbed a log and walked backward. Just grab your own log and drag it ashore.

So Irene grabbed a log and pulled hard. Her feet cold in the water and her entire body chilled, her stomach starting to hurt from being cold and then going to work.

The boat’s already sinking, she yelled to Gary. The bilge pump wasn’t keeping up. The boat was flooding too quickly from the bow, slogging back and forth in the waves.

Shit, Gary said. Let’s put the gate up.

They latched the gate in a hurry, then he hopped aboard, the back end sitting very low, every third or fourth breaking wave dumping in some water from its crest, and he gunned the motor full throttle to jam the boat closer to shore. Irene could hear the bow scrape over rocks. It moved about a foot and then stopped. The stern tipped lower, though, too, because of the angle, and more water came in. Damn it, Gary yelled, and he grabbed the bailing bucket, throwing fast to get ahead of the waves, bending and springing up and bending again, throwing gallons at a time. Irene didn’t know what to do except watch. No second bucket or room enough back there. But she climbed onto the bow, in case her weight in front might help tip the boat forward.

Gary dark and drenched, breathing hard and yelling out on the full buckets from the strain. The smoke from the outboard blowing over him, bilge pump spitting, waves breaking over the back. Irene knew he was frightened now, and she wanted to help him, but she could see, also, that he was making it, that the stern was rising higher, the waves dumping less water each time. You’re doing it, Gary, she yelled. The stern’s coming up. You’re going to make it.

He was exhausted, she knew. The bucketfuls slowing, and sometimes his throw was short and some would land in the boat. I can take a turn, she yelled, but he just shook his head and kept dipping the bucket and throwing until finally the waves were slapping against the transom but not breaking over. He stopped then, dropped the bucket and bent over the outboard to vomit into the lake.

Gary, Irene said, and she wanted to comfort him but didn’t want to add weight to the stern. The bilge pump clearing out the remaining water but taking some time. Gary, she said again, are you all right, honey?

I’m okay, he finally said. I’m sorry. This was a stupid idea.

It’s okay, she said. We’ll be okay. We’ll just unload the rest of these and then go home.

Gary slumped over the motor a while, then turned the engine and pump off, climbed forward slowly, and kneeled on logs next to her in the bow. She gave him a hug and they stayed like that a few minutes, holding each other as the wind picked up and rain came down heavier again. They had not held each other like this for a very long time.

I love you, Gary said.

I love you too.

Well, Gary said, meaning time to move on. Irene had hoped the moment might extend. She didn’t know how everything had changed. In the beginning, she had slept with an arm and a leg over him, every night. They had spent Sundays in bed. They had hunted together, footsteps in sync, bows held ready, listening for moose, watching for
movement. The forest a living presence then, and they a part of it, never alone. But Gary had stopped bowhunting. Too worried about money, using the weekends to work, no more Sundays in bed. In the beginning, Irene thought. There is no such thing as in the beginning.

They left the gate latched and each grabbed another log, pulled it over the bow. The wind accelerating, coming in blasts, the rain spiking into their eyes if they looked toward the lake. Irene sneezed, then blew her nose by holding a finger to one nostril, wiped off with the back of her hand. Getting sick already.

A long time to finish the logs, moving slowly now, both tired. Gary dragged some of Irene’s logs a bit farther from the water. But finally the boat was unloaded and light enough they could pull it ashore. They leaned against the bow, their backs to the wind and lake, and looked at their land.

We should have done this thirty years ago, Gary said. Should have moved out here.

We were on the shore, Irene said. On the lake, and easier to get to town, easier for the kids and school. It wouldn’t be possible to have kids out here.

It would have been possible, Gary said. But whatever.

Gary was a champion at regret. Every day there was something, and this was perhaps what Irene liked least. Their entire lives second-guessed. The regret a living thing, a pool inside him.

Well, we’re out here now, Irene said. We’ve brought the logs, and we’ll be building the cabin.

My point is that we could have been here thirty years ago.

I get your point, Irene said.

Well, Gary said. His lips tight, and he was staring ahead into an alder thicket, stuck in there, unable to work his way out of the sense that his life could have been something else, and Irene knew she was a part of this great regret.

Irene tried to rise above, tried not to get caught in this. She looked at the property, and it really was beautiful. Slender white birch along the back portion, bigger Sitka spruce, a cottonwood and several aspen. The land had some contour, several rises, and she could see where the cabin would go. They’d put a deck out front, and on nice evenings, they’d watch the sun set on the mountain, golden light. This could all work out.

We can do this, Irene said. We can build a nice cabin here.

Yeah, Gary finally said. Then he turned away from the property, looked into the wind and rain. Let’s push off.

So they pushed the boat free and climbed over the bow. Gary at the engine and Irene in the bottom of the boat, hugging her knees, trying to get warm. The way back not as bad, the waves behind them, the square gate in the bow above the waterline now, the boat no longer a barge. They rolled a bit on each wave, but no slamming, no spray. Irene’s teeth chattering again.

A long way from the island to the campground. Gary going slow, the bilge pump working. The campground and truck came into view finally and he cut the motor, landed on the beach beside the ramp. The waves pushing the stern up and down and slewing it to the side.

We could skip the trailer, Gary said. The waves are too big here. It’ll be a nightmare. We could just pull the boat onto the beach a ways and tie it to a tree.

So they did that and were home in minutes. So close, and they’d been freezing for so long. Pointless, Irene thought.

Gary took a quick hot shower, and then Irene ran a hot bath. Painful to sit down into it, her fingers and toes, especially, gone partially numb. The heat delicious, though, surrounding her. She sank into it and closed her eyes, found herself crying carefully, without sound, her mouth underwater. Stupid, she told herself. You can’t have what no longer exists.
Chapter 4

On his way back to the office after lunch, Jim swung by the Coffee Bus for a sticky bun. Brown sugar, honey, and nuts, and it meant supporting Rhoda’s brother, too, who might be in need of that kind of thing. Loiterers out front, as usual, but this time, one of them was so beautiful he didn’t realize he was staring until too late, which made him feel like an ass, of course, which then pissed him off. Probably little more than half his age, but her gaze made him feel like his willie was standing out in the breeze for everyone to look at.

Jim gave his customary grunt and half-smile in her direction. This was rarely loud enough for anyone to hear, and many in Soldotna who didn’t know him well considered him a misanthrope because of it, he knew, but this amazed him. To him, this muffled greeting sounded like a full and cheery, if soft-spoken and not overly aggressive, hello.

The woman, leaning against the side of the bus, nodded to him in return, pulled her old down coat tighter, and Jim walked stiff-legged and awkward up the wooden steps to the window, trying not to look at her. She was only a few feet away now, and he was embarrassed. Desperate, also. Desperation reached like a cold hand through his genitals into his lower back.

Hey Jim, said Karen. Sticky bun?

That would be the item.

Mark came to the window and stuck his hand out.

Jim shook it. How are you?

Meet a friend of mine, Mark said. Jim, this is Monique. Monique, this is Jim. Jim’s a dentist, fastest drill in the west. Monique’s a visitor to our fair state, come to see the wild lands.

Monique put a hand out, and Jim reached down to shake it.

Hi, Jim said. Having a good trip?

I am, she said. Mark and Karen are taking good care of me. Then she waited as he stared. She seemed, to Jim, not just to have time but to be the one behind it. Like the Wizard of Oz, maybe, in his little booth.

Maybe you could tell me, Monique said. You’re a dentist. I have a tooth that feels cold sometimes and hurts a little if I’ve been in the cold. It hurts today, for instance. She rocked her jaw a bit, feeling it. Is that a cavity, or just something else?

Could be, Jim said. I’d have to take a look to know for sure. Jim checked his watch. One thirty-five. Actually, I could take a quick look now before two if you’re free.

Huh, Monique said. Then she shrugged. Okay.

So Jim drove her to the office. No one else back from lunch yet. He flipped on the lights and took her to one of the chairs in the back. Oh, maybe I should have given you a tour first.

That’s all right, Monique said, sitting back in the chair. Lovely ducks on your ceiling. Jim had glued the undersides of rubber ducks up there, webbed orange feet paddling around midair as if the office were underwater.

For the kids, Jim said.

For the hunters.

Yeah, maybe so, Jim said, trying to chuckle lightly, not sure whether or not she was throwing him in with the hunters here.

Jim turned the light on then, asked her to open her mouth wide, and probed around her teeth and gums for a while. Just the small beginnings of one, he said. We should take a couple films, and if we need to, we can do a quick job on it, preventative mostly.

Uh, she said, and he pulled his fingers out so she could talk. I’m concerned about cost.

It’s on me, Jim said. And he waited until the others arrived, had the X rays done, and put a small filling in right then, though it shot his afternoon schedule all to hell.

Don’t tell anyone, he said after he had finished and was bringing up the chair. She was taking off her bib. He leaned in close over her and smiled a little as he said this, trying to imply, and feel, all kinds of secrets between them. He had heard a man say once, Now she’s a breeder, and as ugly and psycho as this line was, and distasteful to him, it occurred to him now that this was nonetheless true. Here was the woman he wanted to make babies with. He couldn’t imagine her changing diapers or even being pregnant, but he could see his strong, tall, beautiful children in a portrait some day, all devoid of any type of insecurity or struggle. She managed to eliminate the possibility of any other woman and seemed to imply wealth, also, though she was dressed like a hippie and probably couldn’t have afforded this filling if he had asked her to pay.

I won’t, she said.
He looked at her blankly. He had no idea what she was saying.
I won’t tell anyone, she said.
Oh, he said. Hey, could I make you dinner sometime? I have a view of the sunset over the Cook Inlet. I could fix salmon or halibut or whatever you like, just to give you a taste of Alaska while you’re here. This had come out surprisingly well, with a nice little tag at the end, even. He hadn’t stiffened or looked suddenly frightened.
She looked at him, considering. He felt his spine collapsing, his shoulder blades folding down into his stomach. Okay, she said.

Monique spent the rest of the afternoon and evening reading at the confluence of two rivers, looking up occasionally to watch Carl not catch any red salmon. He was lined up with hundreds of other tourist fishermen, men and women, from all over the world. The river not that large, fifty yards across, but these fishermen stood at five-foot intervals along both its banks for half a mile. The best fishing was reputedly on the far side of this particular bend, where the water ran deeper and faster along a steep gravel bank.

Carl was on the shallow, near side, however, out twenty feet or so from shore in hip waders, using a fly, yanking it along the bottom, where red salmon were swimming peacefully in place against the current. Monique could see them as shadows in the dappled light, imagined their mouths opening and closing, taking in water, contemplating with a wary eye the rows of evenly spaced green boots growing in pairs and the large red flies cruising around everywhere.

The fishermen were all so earnest. To Monique, the best part about this place was the scenery: the high, lush mountains close along either side of the river, the short valleys dotted with wildflowers, the swampy areas dense with skunk cabbage, ferns, mosquitoes, and moose. But not one of the fishermen looked up from the water, ever, even for a moment. The mood along the riverbanks was like the mood in a casino.

Monique was reading a book of short stories by T. Coraghessan Boyle. They were funny, and she often laughed out loud. In one, Lassie goes after a coyote, forbidden love. This appealed to her especially. She had always hated Lassie.

Monique was lucky enough to look up in time to see Carl huck his pole into the river. This stopped a few fishermen. Their lines stalled for a moment along the bottom, so then several were whipping their poles back and forth trying to free snags.

Carl came splashing through the water in his waders, slipping a bit on the smooth stones and fish entrails and whatever else was down there. He came right up to Monique, who closed her book.

Fishing not good? she asked.
Carl grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her hard. God, I feel better, he said.

Monique smiled and grabbed him for another kiss. This was one of the things she liked about Carl. Given enough time, he could recognize shit. And unlike most men, he didn’t persist in stupidity just because someone was watching.

Rhoda came home to find Jim with a drink on the coffee table beside him. Facing the windows, drinking and looking out to sea. Very strange, since Jim almost never drank at all, and certainly never alone. Rhoda began noticing the random things she noticed during tragedies: the refrigerator clicked on only briefly then clicked back off; sunlight reflected off the dark wood of the coffee table but wasn’t hitting his drink; the house seemed unusually warm, also, almost humid, claustrophobic. She set down the grocery bags and walked over to him.

What’s wrong? she asked in a voice that sounded to her like fear. She touched his shoulder lightly as she said this.
Hey, he said, perhaps a bit flushed as he turned to her, but not drunk, his speech fine. How was your day?
What is this? Why are you sitting here drinking?
Just having a little sherry, Jim said, and he picked up his glass and swirled the ice around. Enjoying the view.
Something’s up. I thought someone had died or something. Why the sudden change in behavior?
Can’t a man have a drink? Jesus, you’d think I was burning down the house or writing on the walls with crayons or something. But I’m forty-one years old, a dentist, I’m in my own house, and I’m having a glass of Harveys after work.
Okay, okay.
Lighten up.
Okay, Rhoda said. I’m sorry, all right? I picked up some chicken. I was thinking maybe we’d have lemon chicken.

Sounds good. Which reminds me, by the way. I may have found a new partner for the practice. A dentist out of Juneau, named Jacobsen, and I was thinking I’d have him over for dinner tomorrow to talk about specifics. So I’m wondering whether you’d be willing to make other plans for just a few hours in the evening. Would that be okay?
Sure. That’s fine. I’ll have dinner with my parents. I’ll call Mark tonight to let Mom know.

Great, Jim said. Thanks. Then he looked out to the inlet again and the mountains beyond, the snow on Mount Redoubt, and he thought how clever he was, and how deserving.
**About the Author**

**DAVID VANN** is a professor at the University of San Francisco. He is a contributor to *Esquire, The Atlantic, Men's Journal, National Geographic Adventure, The Sunday Times* (London), and *Outside*, and the author of the bestselling memoir *A Mile Down: The True Story of a Disastrous Career at Sea* and *Last Day on Earth: A Portrait of the NIU School Shooter, Steve Kazmierczak*, winner of the AWP Nonfiction Prize. He is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and Wallace Stegner Fellowship. His website is www.DavidVann.com.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.
About the Publisher

Australia
HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia
http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au

Canada
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
55 Avenue Road, Suite 2900
Toronto, ON, M5R, 3L2, Canada
http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca

New Zealand
HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
http://www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
77-85 Fulham Palace Road
London, W6 8JB, UK
http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk

United States
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
10 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com