

A true adventure of how a scared boy, orphaned at sixteen, grew to be a dad and husband of character as he fought to survive in the wilderness of Alaska, while running from the emptiness left by his childhood loss.

One Wave At A Time

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ONE WAVE AT A TIME

BY

BILLY BRYAN BROWN

Alaska Wilderness Family



Productions™

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CHAPTER ONE: From Privilege to Castaway

March the second, 1969 is where this story begins. Four months earlier I had turned sixteen years old, in a world of privilege. My dad was the president of a limousine company that covered three large Texas towns. I was given new ski boats and cars for my birthdays. I was truly the luckiest kid in town. Money wasn't all I had, oh no, I had it all...money, clothes, big ticket toys and a loving family too.

My mom's dad was a Baptist preacher and the founder of several churches in our town, all of which are full of worshippers today. On this March day he was the pastor of Metropolitan Baptist. My mom played the organ and my dad was a deacon, as well as the Sunday school teacher.

My sister was three years older than me; a prodigy, playing her first piano recital at age three. She played piano and sang in our church from my earliest memory. She made straight A's and was the Homecoming Queen. Along with playing piano in classical concerts, she was winning beauty pageants and talent contests throughout Texas.

My life at this point was so orderly and safe, that I thought the whole world lived like me. A dad that was abusive to his kids or his wife, parents that divorced or families that didn't care were things that I thought only happened on TV. My mom and dad lived their lives for my sister and me. Our family life was

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like a fairy tale, and I went to bed on March the first, living the life of a prince, with the world at my feet.

On March the second when I awoke, the sky outside was gray. Rain beat down on my window like it would never go away. My mom, dad and sister had left the day before in our private plane for South Texas. My dad was buying a ranch and about to retire at forty-three. He wanted a place with horses and open spaces for my mom, my sister and me. This was to be a short two-day trip and I chose not to go. Up until that day, we had always been together at home and in our travels. This was the first time I had stayed home alone for more than a few hours. They said they would be back home by two o'clock in the afternoon, the very next day.

That fateful day has always been in the back of my mind. All that morning, somehow, deep down inside, I could feel that something was wrong, causing me to be anxious even hours before their expected arrival time.

Two o'clock came, then three and four. Increasingly anxious by the minute, I waited, paced and watched the door. By now my adventure of staying home alone wasn't so much fun anymore.

As the gray day faded to evening, the pouring rain continued to pound at the window that framed the walkway to our house. The last thing I saw on the horizon was a mass of rolling black thunder clouds that quickly disappeared into the darkness of the night.

It was ten twenty-two that night when the phone rang in the hall. Seven minutes after noon that day God had taken my family home. The voice on the other end said "I'm so sorry...they are all gone."

Their plane had gone down in a storm over Lake Travis as they were flying back home to me.

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That first month following the accident was like the world's longest bad dream. Each morning when I awoke, I expected them to be there with me in our home, but every morning I soon found that I was still alone. My grand mom and grand dad were so upset they didn't know what day it was. The rest of our family and friends had their own lives to lead, and after the first couple of days, I guess they all thought someone else was looking out for me.

Unfortunately my parents had not yet drawn up a will and my elderly grandparents, whom everyone assumed would take care of me, were so devastated by the loss that they were emotionally incapable of providing me any support or guidance that would provide me with a future.

Things started to fall apart fast. Within a week of burying my family the sharks came thrashing in. It started with my dad's share of the company being the bait. Soon, it seemed everyone had joined the feeding frenzy.

Trusted friends of my parents, people I had known my whole life were laying claims to our family's shares in the company. Several even said they were just doing it to look out for me. They said that because I was a minor, it was the only way it could be.

Soon the courts were appointed as the executors of my parent's estate, as well as my guardian, a move arranged by the lawyers representing my dad's business partners and several of our relatives.

By the second month, I was standing in front of a judge at a custodial hearing. The shark frenzy that began earlier had now grown into a force that couldn't be stopped.

Close friends and even family now acted as if all these treasures were just laying there waiting to be taken. Another airplane, boats and houses, all free to the first one there. Stock shares and cash just waiting to be scooped up like dropped

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pennies on the ground. A Steinway piano and valuable works of art down the hall; they're free, take two or three. The only thing standing in the way was a scared and shocked sixteen year old boy and that was me.

Now, with the estate picked clean, those who had claimed to be looking out for me brought me once again to the courts and asked them to save me from myself.

As I stood there listening, the judge was staring down at me. Inside my head I could hear the rain washing the rest of my life away. That storm was back...just like the day they died...back to finish off me.

Of all the relatives and friends that had known my family, not one of them were there. I never knew if they didn't know or if they just didn't care. Even my grandparents, by now nearly incapacitated by depression and the medications they were on, had not shown up to be with me in court.

Thirty-two days ago I was a prince, and the whole world was my oyster. When the sun went down that day, I was just another juvenile ward of the court with their government issued tennis shoes on my feet.

Three days they kept me there in the juvenile hall lock up for boys. Each day they took me to a different office while their psychiatrists tried to probe my head. After three days of tests and talking, "I miss my family", was all I said.

The fourth day I was in front of the judge again, he was glaring down at me. "Your tests are good." he said to me. "Your age is the only enemy; the orphanage can't take you...there simply isn't room. I'll have to send you to a juvenile center until you turn eighteen."

In that minute I knew inside my head that the destruction was now complete. No one was going to save me and my family was really dead. While he spoke, all these things completely filled my head. I would never be the same. The life I once knew

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was gone forever. As I stood there, in that minute, I realized I was all alone.

To try to tell you how I felt is a hard thing to do. Every emotion a person could have was racing through me. The aching emptiness that filled me was so vast it was hard to breathe. Complete destruction was what it was; destruction of the life that had once been mine.

“Are you alright?” I heard the judge say, his face still staring and cold. I remember tears swelling in my eyes, but I wouldn’t let them see me cry. I’m not saying I didn’t, but when I did...I was always alone. Then slowly a smile came over his face as he shook his head. “Do you know about the minor’s release?” he asked.

He explained to me that in extreme circumstances he could make a decree that would mean that I would be responsible for me. He then gave me a list of things I must do before he could give it to me.

Two weeks later I stood before him again with a GED in my hand, which was the last thing on his list I had to do. The judge shook my hand and signed my paper, in less than an hour. I gave them back their shoes.

Over the next year my dad's company was swallowed up by a mega company, sold out by my mom and dad's friends and family. Our cars, boats and planes were now at home in their driveways or garaged on their fancy farms. Even the home I grew up in was sold, furniture and all.

I was, as the judge said, "an emancipated minor", which I thought was probably a big word for broke, homeless and on my own.

I must have worked several dozen jobs that year, most only a week or two. I lived in the back seat of my car, each night I would find a place where I would be left alone. I would park

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and jump into the back seat, climb under a blanket, and that was now my home.

Over the next few years I tried to do what everyone did, to work and make something of my life. I tried and tried to be like everyone else, but something deep inside always stopped me. The emptiness I had would not leave me alone. I wasn't content with anything, and I kept looking for something unknown. Most of the jobs I did were construction, because they didn't care that I was so young. As long as I could work hard all day, we always got along.

I would save enough money from time to time to get an apartment for a month or two, but most of the time I was so broke the back of the car had to do. Most people my age at that time were full of hopes and dreams. My life was like a dark tunnel rapidly spiraling down, with a growing urge to find something, anything... somewhere. What or where... I didn't know.

Then one morning in the early fall I couldn't take it anymore. The emptiness in me was all I could feel; it consumed all the other emotions that I had. The only other thing that came through was the urge to find whatever I was missing... that something, somewhere. I started to take my car, but two things stopped me there. One, I didn't have money for gas and two, the car went to fast. What if I passed the thing I sought?

So, I took a small pack from the back seat, and put in one shirt and a pair of pants. After stuffing my blanket in the bag, I walked out by the road. That short walk began a three and a half year journey that went everywhere and lead to nowhere.

I hitchhiked across the country more times than I know, from Canada all the way to the bottom of Old Mexico. I built a thatched roof house from palm trees on a beach in Vera Cruz and I lived in a commune in Taos, New Mexico with people whose names were Quail and Blue. I worked in a carnival sweeping up and was paid with free hot dogs.

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Years went by as I walked. Things around me changed, but nothing inside of me. Everything there was just the same. I was still longing to find that "something", yet still didn't know what it could be. The churning emptiness inside me was like a bottomless pit, and nothing I did would still it or fill it.

After years away from my home town and finding nothing to fill that hollow, dark cavern, I decided to head back to where my journey began.

I hitched a ride with a trucker who was going through my home town. For two days we rolled along. I just stared out the window and barely made a sound. When we reached my town he pulled the rig over, and I thanked him and started to climb down. I remember well when he stopped me. "Wait boy." he said as he reached inside his pocket. Leaning across the truck he handed fifty dollars to me. "I have a boy at home," he said, "about the age of you. I thank God he's home and safe and not out here too." Those fifty dollars were a gift from God to me...the first of many.

I got a room that night in a roach motel and had money left over to eat. The very next day I got a job with a large plumbing company. I cleaned out sewers for my pay, from morning to night. I cleaned them every day. The job was perfect for someone like me. I didn't have a car or house, so from the first day on the job, I never really left. In the evening when the plumbing trucks came in and everyone went home, I would walk around the block like I was going home. Then I would sneak back into the yard to bathe with a hose and get some sleep in their truck. For over a month no one knew that I didn't have a home. As a matter of fact, the boss was quite impressed with me. I was always the first one there and the last to leave.

At twenty-two, I left that company and started one of my own in a small town just outside of the city I once called my home. I "had it made" is what most folks would say. Just keep

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doing what I was doing for another twenty years and I'd have the American Dream. From the outside looking in, I guess it looked okay, but there was something in me, something I couldn't shake.

I knew too much...my young eyes had seen all of this before. Deep inside the emptiness, I was aware of a truth that only those of much more age can know. The family is what's important; nothing else matters at all. It's a simple fact, one we all learn, but unfortunately and all too often, not until we near the end of life's road.

I didn't care about the boats and planes. What good is a house if it is not a home? I wanted my family back, and to me that was all that mattered. Do you think by then I cared if we were rich or poor? These thoughts...these truths kept coming up again and again, but the loss made them hurt, and I would try to stuff them back.

Sometime later I started my day like every other day. I can truly say I was a hollow man going through my life, each day just like the day before. That emptiness kept eating at me, even in my sleep, and that urge to find that something -- what I didn't know -- was constantly on my mind.

On this day I had a job out in the sticks, the real back country of country you could say. I knew in the area I was going to, it was hard for folks to pay. Dust bowl farms, their top soil gone, most of these people were fighting just to keep their homes. For them it was almost a luxury, and if they managed to keep them, it was usually considered a miracle. They were so grateful if they were able to put enough food on the table and get those badly needed shoes for their kids in the same week. I had worked in the area a few times before.

In the city, people wanted thirty days to pay me, and a rich man's check always worried me. But these back country folks always wanted to pay me before they let me leave. Sometimes they paid me out of a sock or a box hidden in the

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barn. Sometimes I knew it was the most they had, but they paid it with a smile. I even bartered for a chicken or two, and fried chicken was always fine with me.

Today I was going farther than I had gone before. As I turned to go into the driveway, I could tell it was one of those. Let me stop here a moment and explain to you what "one of those" means. It means that at a glance you know these folks can't afford the bill. So, I knew these people had the money to pay or they wouldn't have called me there that day. I also knew that paying my bill was going to hurt them, although they would never let on or say.

I had tried to work for free before, but these type folks wouldn't hear of that. Country folks are tried and true, and they don't like charity. So with some of them, I would make up a reason why I couldn't give them the bill that day. I would tell them I would mail it in just a day or two, and when I never mailed it there wasn't anything they could do. This job was one of "those".

Up the driveway was a trailer house that needed a little care. Around it were failed attempts at the building of pens and sheds, an unfinished add-on in the back, and a yard with grass up to my knees.

The man of the house had long been gone, and now the mom was doing all she could. The four kids that lived there were trying to hold their own and make it through each day.

That was where it happened...in farmland USA!

Of all the places I had been, and all the miles that I had gone looking for something, not knowing what, and now...there it was standing in front of me less than twenty miles from my childhood home.

I only saw her at a glance, and never had I seen her before, but there she was, and I recognized her instantly. The moment I caught sight of her, most of the emptiness seemed to

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have gotten up and left. She was born in Chicago, and then moved to the farm when she was a little girl, and here today, she was the most beautiful young woman I had ever met.

Time passed quickly from that love at first sight moment and soon we were married and set out on our own. I am not sure back then that all that emptiness was gone, but I know from that first day up to today, I rarely felt it with Ami standing by my side.

Surely now, you would think this story was almost through, but no, even with what I now had, it just wouldn't do. I tried to do what I thought was right, I went to work everyday. With a wife like mine, my life was already better than most of the people I knew, but still I had that unsettled urge to find something more, whenever I was at work, and away from her.

I couldn't yet understand. *What was wrong with me?* I would think. *I should be happy through and through. Why do I still have this urge inside and what is there I could do?* I finally told Ami what was bothering me. Much to my surprise, I found out she had it too, just as she had for most of her life.

A few months later, we were on the road. We left nearly everything behind. If that unknown thing that we felt we were missing was out there, it was something we were determined to find.

From the Mississippi, west we traveled, on every road that would take us through a small town. Somewhere around Idaho we ran out of money, but that didn't slow us down. By now I was used to not having money. I had lived out there lost and alone, but I had Ami with me now and I just knew I could do anything as long as I had her there when I came home.

Money never bothered Ami because all her life she had been so poor she hardly knew what money was. I would work a week, get my check, and we were on the road again.

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At one point we were living on a horse ranch, and working for our room and board. They gave us a nice clean trailer to live in and a freezer full of meat. We stayed there a few months, resting from the road. By then we knew what we were searching for wasn't to be found, at least not in any of these cities or towns.

For several years we had joked about going to Alaska and leaving this life behind. I don't think we ever thought we would really do it until it just happened.

But soon, the road north began to call to me, beckoning me to follow. When I told Ami I wanted to go up north I thought she would talk me out of it and tell me how crazy that thought would be. To my surprise she said she wanted to go too, and she was ready to follow me.

After selling our old truck and nearly everything else we had, we walked onto the ferry heading to Alaska. We slept in chairs around the deck, because we couldn't afford a stateroom.

Looking back, I see now how very naive we both were. On that ferry we didn't know that with every mile we traveled north, the whole world was really changing all around us. We didn't notice when the lights from homes, businesses and cars on shore gave way to the forests where the roads could no longer go. Like a time machine, that ship took us into a land that was like someplace in the distant past.

It was two or three in the morning when we stepped off of the ship in Wrangell, Alaska. We were so tired I just pitched our tent in a clump of grass near the dock and we quickly went to bed. As I lay there waiting for sleep to come, I looked around me and reality began to set in. Somehow, in our travels, we had started a family.

The quest to find this thing unknown had consumed us so that we hardly slowed down to have our first son. Three years ago in a campground Ami woke me from a dead sleep, "It's time

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to go.” she said. She had the baby, and then rested for two days and we were gone again

A year and a half later we did it again and had our second son. Those who say a baby will slow you down have never met my wife. From the first day on, the babies seemed so natural to us. They just simply fit right into our life. The most natural thing I’ve ever done was when I tucked them in.

So here I was, in Alaska, in the middle of fall with my wife of six years, three year old Matthew and Joshua, who was only a year old. We also had our 2 big black dogs, ages seven and three...and certainly I couldn't forget about the cat sleeping on our legs.

I had thirteen dollars in my pocket and a fresh new land to explore outside. As I dozed off to sleep, again I felt like the world was once again my oyster and the future was bright.

We had only been asleep a few hours when someone woke us. “Hey! You! Inside!” I heard someone say. “Wake up, you can’t camp here.”

I crawled outside to meet a State Trooper staring down at me. As I stood up, I thought to myself, *We came this far just to have him tell me we couldn't camp in Alaska.*

“You can’t camp here,” he told me, “this is the ferry parking lot. Camp anywhere else you want to. There are some good places just the other side of town.”

As he drove off I stood there dumbfounded by his attitude. He saw the kids were warm and comfortable, he didn’t care they were in a tent. He didn’t want my dog's license or feel he had to run a check on me. He wasn’t suspicious because we were new. He was nice and polite, told us the rules, and then left us alone.

The first day there, we noticed some long haired bikers and red neck old men, just hanging out together on a porch, like a reunion of old friends that hadn't seen each other for years. As we

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passed by them, they all nodded their heads, smiled and said hello to us.

The whole town was like that, just real friendly, warm and helpful. No one seemed to care where we lived, or what we did or didn't do. Everyone took you for what you were and how you treated them.

We made our camp on the edge of town in the forest by the beach. We had been a lot of places, but never before, a place like this.

All around, you could feel the difference in the air and in the sound. This land was wild and free like nowhere else around. Down south people might see a squirrel in their yard, here it was wolves and bears. To hear of someone being eaten was a fairly common thing to hear. Everyone knows how to shoot a gun from nine to ninety-two. If you were being eaten and your gun was in the house, you had better hope you taught your kids what to do.

Wrangell is an island forty miles long or more, black rock beaches make up its shore. As you look out from the beach, you see other islands are scattered around. All these islands have majestic mountains, covered with trees as thick as grass, jutting up from the sea. The Pacific Ocean around these islands is the cleanest water in the world. But looks can be deceiving and with all its beauty, the waters of Alaska are some of the most dangerous waters man has ever known. In the winter the sea can be dead calm, not a ripple or a wave. In thirty minutes or less, there can be twenty foot waves, roaring in, one after the other, thrashing everything in their way.

I walked into town each morning trying to find some work. In every store and shop they soon knew my name. Each day people would greet me with "Good-morning!" and "How's your day?", but soon that changed to, "Are you staying the winter or are you going away?"

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I couldn't figure out why they kept asking this, more and more every day. *It's just another winter. How bad could it be?*

We had only been there about a week when I met Joe Edgington. I was walking to town one morning when he passed me in his truck. Seeing me, he stopped, backed up and hung his head out of the window to ask if I needed some work.

Joe was a man about six feet tall, and I would guess he weighed about two-hundred pounds. He was a man of fifty, with a rock solid frame from years of hard work. His face and arms showed a lot of scars where knives had torn his skin. His nose was smashed down on his face, and kind of twisted on the end. It was plain to see it had been broken so many times that it had lost its shape.

He was a bona fide patch-wearing Hell's Angel from a place called Castle Rock, but he wasn't just a member. For over ten years he had been their Road Captain, one of the toughest of them all. When he wasn't here in Wrangell, pouring concrete, he was riding that beloved hog up those narrow mountain roads, and back to the bay. Leather jacket with patch on back, weathered and worn, biker boots and Harley chain belt -- that's what he wore each day.

I admit that at first he was a scary man to look at. Back home if he came down the street, you would have grabbed your kids and ran. But here he fit right in. No one asked why he came up here so many years ago, and surely never did they ask why he never left. It seems that in the early days of Alaska, no one asked about the past. It was something you just didn't do.

Wrangell was a fishing town with more boats than houses. When Joe first came to Wrangell, the main street was dirt and mud. It was his skill with concrete that paved the road, making him a hero there. I worked with him for a while, putting curb and gutter in.

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A lot of families lived on their boats. It was like a community. Walking by the harbor as you looked across the bay, large fishing boats would be in a row; kids playing on the decks. The massive booms on the decks of the boats, used for hauling fish totes aboard, had been made into elaborate swing sets. Kids swinging in the back, mom and dad barbequing on the boat deck made life in Wrangell look a little like something from an early Norman Rockwell painting.

Two months had passed since our first night in Alaska. It was now late fall and it seemed everyone was now more direct, greeting me with “Are you getting ready for winter to come?” They seemed to be so serious. Wrangell's weather was the best I had ever seen, beautiful days of sunshine, clear skies and an ocean breeze. With weather like this, when winter comes, how bad could it be?

I hadn't seen Joe for a while. We were both off on separate jobs. That day when I did see him he again, he was very serious, just like everyone else. “What are you doing about winter?” was one of the first things he said to me. “Your family won't make the winter,” he said, “if you're not inside”. Find a house, find one now because October is almost here.”

“There isn't a house around that's available.” I told him. “I've looked everywhere and found nothing”.

He shook his head reluctantly, like he was going to say something he'd rather not. “I know of a place,” he said, “it's not much, but you'll be inside. It's an old trapper's cabin where my friends and I used to spend time. We would hunt and party for a week or two, then come back to town. No one has been there for years now, so I am sure you can stay there if you want.” “The only thing,” he said, “it's kind of remote. You'll have to go prepared.”

“Who owns this place?” I asked him. “What would I say if they stopped in?”

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“No one owns it,” he laughed, “it’s in the bush, you’ll be alone. The cabin is just sitting there, move in and make it home.”

He kept talking, warning me of this and that, but I wasn’t listening to him. All I heard in my head was, *Move in and make it home. We now have a cabin in the bush of Alaska*, and although I didn’t know what “in the bush” meant, it sounded really good.

“Bill,” he said, breaking into my thoughts with his voice loud and gruff, “are you listening to what I’m telling you? It’s important you understand.”

“Sure, sure!” I told him.

“Alright,” he said, “if you’re really sure, come to the harbor in the morning and a friend of mine will take you there.”

As I walked off, I felt really good. I almost ran back to Ami and the boys to tell them the news. I remember Ami asking, “How will we get supplies?”

“I’ll work it out!” I told her. “It’s a cabin in the bush!”

“What’s the bush?” she asked me.

“I don’t know,” I told her, “but it sounded so great for me to be able to say, “Ami we have a cabin in the bush of Alaska. It’s not a tent or lean to and we can even lean back on the walls! A cabin Ami,” I told her, “a place that’s dry and warm!”

I can admit it now that I didn’t think about supplies, the excitement about having a home was just too strong. I was just blinded, wanting my young family to have a place to call their own. Ami had followed me halfway around the world with a baby in each arm. She cooked on a Coleman, kept us clean and dry, so I owed her and the boys this home. I knew we needed to get supplies and that the cabin might need some work. I could fix all those things, because deep inside, I still felt that if I had Ami beside me, there was nothing I couldn’t do.

The morning was cloudy, great white clouds drifted over the harbor as we walked to the boat. She was a trolling boat named the “Storm King”, built to fish far out in the sea. As I

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stood on the dock the bow went up ten or twelve feet above me. The skipper's name was Arlin Neiman, or Slimin' Neiman to his friends. I didn't know then, but he was a pirate through and through. If you wanted cargo moved with no questions asked, he was the man for you.

There wasn't much introduction, any fanfare and no long good-byes. Joe simply shook my hand and walked away. As the skipper started the engine, we climbed onto the deck, and in minutes we were on our way.

The ocean around us was as smooth as glass, the boat glided effortlessly. The great white clouds above us reflected in the water below, where the sky and sea met, you couldn't tell.

On the islands in the distance, great mountains rose from the water, the tops were tipped with snow. I think that's when it hit me, *I was in Alaska*, until then, I guess I was too busy to stop and look around. Wrangell had been, to me, like any small town, but my, oh my, when I looked around me now, I was somewhere like I had never been. You see it in a movie or a nature show on TV; that just didn't compare to what was closing in on us now, in the open sea.

Soon the town behind us had completely disappeared. It was swallowed up by reflection of mountains, sea and sky. The only thing constant in this vast new world was the wake the "Storm King" left. All that day we traveled, never stopping or slowing down. One large island after another would come and go, disappearing in the distant blue behind us. By evening the islands were thinning out, there was more water, hardly any land.

Dixon Entrance lay in front of us, no islands, only sea. The water was still, smooth and clear like it had been throughout the day, but every now and then you could feel the boat go up and down. I didn't know then what I was feeling, but I soon learned that it was ground swells from the open sea, the

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movement of the ocean itself, an ongoing movement of the ocean, totally separate from the motion of the waves.

It was late evening when I first saw Mosman Island.

“Come up here!” the skipper yelled to me. “Your home is up ahead.” I climbed the stairs to the wheelhouse and quickly looked around. The skipper was driving with a wooden wheel that looked like it was about four feet across. Radios and radar machines were mounted all around. “Look,” he said, “so you will know exactly where you are.”

He might as well have been speaking a different language. I couldn't understand a word he said. Then he turned around and pointed through the window. What my eyes saw, my mind couldn't see. I don't know if I can even accurately picture this for you. There was no movie or “Land of the Lost” scene that could even touch the view in front of me.

The outside of the island was sheer black rock cliffs. The ground swells and the waves, when they hit the shore, turned the bottom white. Above the cliffs were forests so thick that they looked like night.

It took another hour to go around the island and it looked like the sun would soon be gone. The back side of the island was blocked from the ocean. There was a small island in the back, two or three miles long. This made a bay in between the two that, according to our Skipper, was always calm.

As we pulled in, the “Storm King” slowed down, reefs were everywhere. The back side of the island was nothing like the front; there were no cliffs at all. The forest simply sloped right to the water's edge. If at that moment a **B**igfoot had come out of that forest riding a full grown T-Rex, it wouldn't have surprised me at all.

We slowly made our way through the bay about a mile and a half to an even smaller bay at the end. A float was anchored

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by the shore that measured about ten feet square. He parked that big boat next to it like he didn't have a care.

"I don't know how long it's been," the skipper said, "since someone has lived here, but there used to be a small boat hidden under some bushes, up in the woods somewhere. A lot of things have been left here, you'll find them, scattered all around."

I jumped from the boat onto the float and unloaded everything we owned. By the time Ami and the boys got on it, the float was starting to sink. As we noticed the water around our knees, we heard the skipper yell, "The tide's going out, I have to leave or I'll go aground!" Three minutes later, he was pulling around the corner of that little island, leaving us behind.

We quickly shuttled things to shore with a four foot raft that was there. The cabin wasn't what we had expected. In fact, it wasn't a cabin at all, but simply an old run down shack. Ami and I were in utter shock as we walked in the door. I don't really know for sure how long the shock lasted. For the first few days we tried not to think about how bad it was.

I won't admit it to Ami, but I'll tell you, if it hadn't been for Ami I would have gone insane in just a week or two. The cabin, I will call it, was really just one run-down room. It was about ten feet wide and maybe fifteen feet long. A porcupine had been living there and it was plain to see that something big had been eating, while on the bed.

We never found out what happened to the trapper that built this place so many years ago. We didn't know if he made it out or not and I don't think we really wanted to know.

The first few days we mainly stayed inside. We cleaned and patched up holes. The thin beach logs that covered our walls were the only security we had between us and the thick black forest which was only a few feet away. We knew there were things out there, some things big enough and bad enough to take us or our kids away.

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I had ventured out by the beach to look around a bit, but never out of the cabin's sight. The tides in Alaska are extremely big in the winter. In a blow they can be twenty feet or more. Low tide gave you a beach to walk on, so you could stay out in the clear. Without knowing it, I was already learning to live outside like a hunted deer. My eyes were always on the forest, watching for a twig or a blade of grass to move.

We didn't need to leave the cabin at first, because we had brought a several six gallon jugs of water, some tea, sugar and a lot of pop. Ami couldn't live without her Pepsi. That was where she drew the line! We also had four or five large boxes of beans and canned goods. We thought that as far as food, we were doing fine. The boat would be back any day, so we would hitch a ride back and tell Joe, we had changed our mind.

Every day we woke up thinking, *today for sure*. The weather's nice, there is no wind at all, and the boat will be here today. After about two weeks of waiting there, Ami's Pepsi supply was getting low. As we sat there looking out at the sea, the seriousness of being here in this place came creeping in. Ami and I were both thinking it, but neither would dare say it out loud.

As the night closed in around us, we seemed to know the boat wasn't coming back. We began to accept that they had forgotten about us, and once again, we were left alone.

It felt good to finally say it out loud, just how stupid I had been. I let this urge inside me to find that something I didn't understand, drive my family to the end of the earth, and now we would probably be eaten or something even worse. I could blame the pirate that dropped us there, who then sailed off to parts unknown, but it was me that asked him to take us. It was me that put my family on this deserted island, risking their very lives.

I remember Ami telling me in her wifely way, "It doesn't matter who put us here, and everything will be okay. We both still feel the urge inside of us that has brought us to this place."

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Then calmly she got the boys ready for bed like it was just another day. Maybe by now you're starting to see why I felt the way I did. As long as I had this woman by my side, I really felt there wasn't anything I couldn't do.

The next day we took inventory to see just what we had. I learned in the movies when I was a kid, an inventory of supplies, that's what they always did. The problem was that when we checked ours, it looked really bad. We would have to find whatever we could on the land and water around if we wanted to make it through the winter.

I found the boat the skipper talked about at low tide, just down the beach. It was a thirteen foot long Boston Whaler with two foot hunks torn from the bow. It was about three feet wide with foot and a half sides. This boat was too old to even guess its age. To me it looked like a little slab of fiberglass someone had thrown away, but when the tide came up I took it home that day.

Between what we had brought with us and what we found after we got there, we had one axe, two flat files, four oil lamps, one gallon of lamp oil, miscellaneous rope, some net, two good knives, a whet rock, a small AM/FM radio with one six volt battery, and a 30/30 lever action rifle with three shells.

When I realized we only had three shells, I couldn't believe how deep my stupidity must run. I never brought the box of shells that we had bought. These three just happened to be in my coat.

We also had a rod and reel Joe had given us, a Penn Sea Reel, but it was old and rusted. The gears were stuck, wouldn't work, but at least it held the line. I hadn't seen fit to buy hooks or lures, all I had were two Buzz Bombs the skipper had given me. He said if there was a fish around, that lure would bring "the big 'uns" home to me. We also had two Bic lighters and one of those Boy Scout pieces of flint, and that was about it.

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Our food supply wasn't any better. We had enough beans to hold us for another week or two. We would save the canned veggies and fruit for the boys, but there were only a few. Ami was down to about eight cans of Pepsi now, saving them by sipping on one for one or two days, trying to stretch them out.

After our inventory, we went to work on what we thought was step two. Everyone, after they checked their inventory, seemed to set up a signal so they could somehow be rescued.

Now, I don't know who writes those movies, but I'm here to say, they have it right. While we looked over what little we had, we knew we really needed to be rescued, and that a signal had to be step two. But, we also knew, after seeing the shoreline on the way in that we would have to go around to the front of the island, the side with the cliffs and raging sea.

The next day as the tide went out, we prepared for our trip. Ami and I both had a knife. I carried the gun loaded with our three shells. Even the dogs stayed on the beach, walking real close to us. The feel of the wild around us was pretty uncomfortable at first, but I watched the forest at our side, and kept us moving straight ahead, while she watched the tide.

Our great plan didn't really start to unfold, until we lost sight of the cabin that day. We knew with all the things living in the darkness around us, the day would surely come, when a monster would come to eat us and there wouldn't be anywhere to run. Thinking and talking about that, we kept walking a little faster, and the plan began to unfold.

Our dogs were loyal and faithful, we knew they wouldn't run. So they would be our first defense. While the dogs held out as long as they could, all of us would run. If our dogs didn't fill the monster's belly and it needed more to eat, I would stop and use my three shells and anything else I could do to give Ami time to get the boys away. If that didn't do it, or if they got me, all that was left between the monster and our boys, were mom and a

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knife. But we were hoping by then the monster might be full. I know it sounds crazy, but that was our plan.

As we walked the beach that day, low tide left the beach like a sidewalk to wherever you wanted to go. An unnamed island only a half of a mile long that seemed only a short distance away, was something we could walk to today. Early in our stay, we learned that we had to watch the water closely, because the tide came in real fast. It could easily strand you on a small peak or close the beach road back home.

After climbing over wet rocks and kelp we finally could see the other side. Inside, our bay was calm and smooth, nothing like what we saw over those rocks. A storm was brewing far out at sea. Dark clouds covered the skies. You could see other islands in the distance, but even the closest was far too many miles away. No towns, no boats, no people, just more of where we were, deep in the bush of Alaska, something not even most Alaskans had seen.

When we got back to the cabin that day, it no longer seemed to be just a shack. We began to see it as dry and warm, a place we could be with our family, safe from the world outside. No, it was no shack we came back to that day, it was now our home. We knew that night our rescue signal was something we couldn't do. There was no one there to see it, and if they did, they probably needed to be rescued too.

The boys were playing on the floor with small crabs they had found that day. I was sitting in my beach plank chair watching them. Ami sat down beside me, "Don't worry," she said again, "just get the things we need to live. It will be okay." That simple statement made sense to me and that's just what we did. We figured out exactly what we needed to live each day, one day at a time.

Three things were at the top of this list, three things so we wouldn't die, everything else was nothing but a luxury.

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Wood, water and meat, were the three things we had to have every single day. At first gathering wood was easy. There were dead logs and limbs were everywhere. For water, there was a spring about a hundred yards behind the house. I found it at low tide, clear, clean and good water, from a hole right there in the ground.

Meat was the one that worried me. With only three shells I couldn't hunt. Even if I shot three deer, that would soon run out and our shells would all be gone. We both knew we had to save those shells for the day the monster would surely come. That left only the sea and while I had fished a lot growing up, it was only in rivers and lakes. Somehow I felt that the waters of Alaska would be far different.

First I spent a whole day, and into the night fixing that old Penn reel that had been left outside, probably for a good many years. I cleaned the rust off of the gears, and oiled the spring inside. After two or three times of trying to put it back together, I finally got it right, and that old Penn worked like a brand new one.

Next, I took a piece of plank and made myself an oar. The first few days I fished, as I rowed around in our small bay. Not a bite, no fish in sight and by now even the bean supply was getting tight. In a week or less, we were going to run out of food.

I felt pretty bad rowing home that night, but I knew what I had to do. The bay was too shallow; the fish were too small, and they couldn't even bite my hook. I had to go further out in the ocean. There had to be fish out there.

The next morning I got enough wood and water to last at least two days. I left the gun with Ami. We all said our good-byes, and I headed down to that raggedy old boat.

As I rowed away from the cabin that day, I had a fear like I had never known. *Anything could happen to them before I made*

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it home, and if anything happened to me or I didn't find any food, what would happen to them?

So I told myself I would be real careful, and not take any chances out there on the open ocean on this, my first day. The skipper had said our bay was a mile and a half long. It took a while to row that far, my arms were hurting, and my back was stiff by the time I reached the other end. When I reached the thin opening where the "Storm King" slowed down to avoid the reefs, I could see pretty clearly now into the crystal clear waters below.

As I squinted to see how deep into the waters the reefs did go, I suddenly realized what I was actually seeing wasn't just a reef, but actually the tip of an underwater mountain that disappeared into the darkness below. Here I am, in the middle of no-where, in a 13 foot, crippled up, old fiberglass boat, on the ocean, in water that is deep enough to swallow up a whole mountain!

For the first time in my life, I actually asked myself, *What am I doing?* There was no answer.

Quickly I quit leaning over the side and sat right in the middle of that little boat, and looked straight ahead, looking no lower than the surface of the water.

I picked a spot with my eye I thought was far enough from shore. I kept my eye on that spot and started to row. I didn't stop or look away until I was there. Then I stopped and looked around and what I saw almost took my breath away. The spot I rowed to was actually much further than it looked from the opening by the shore.

I could see a lot of the island from here, at least the entire side and most of the front. Looking all around me it was plain for me to see that this was not somewhere I wanted to be. Small waves hit the side of the boat as the swells raised me up and down. I grabbed my rod and started letting down the line. Eighty pound test, so I knew that if a fish bit, it wouldn't get away.

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There was so much line on that big reel it seemed to let out for hours.

The package on the Buzz Bomb said to let it down, then jig it up. So I did just what the package said. About the third time I did as it told me to do, my rod tip hit the water, and I had one on the line! I did all I knew to do to get that fish onboard, but it seemed like it took forever to reel it in. I had the rod propped on the side of the boat and I just kept reeling, reeling and reeling! When that fish was finally in the bottom of the boat, I was the happiest man alive...in that boat, at least.

As fast as I could, I put the line back down and waited. Nothing. Again and again I tried, not a bite, not a nibble. By now the tide had taken me far from the spot where I first caught the fish. I hadn't noticed how fast I was moving away from shore. There was a small, but still controllable panic in me as I started to row. I had only made one oar, so I had to row on one side, and then change over to the other. The waves were coming straight at me now. Each time I changed sides, I would loose the ground I had made.

My hands were so sore from rowing all day; they were now blistered and wouldn't bend. The salt water dripping down the oar burned when it hit my skin. I realized if I stopped to rest for even a minute or two, the tide and waves would take me and I'd never get back to them.

After rowing as hard as I could for what seemed like hours, I looked up and realized I was almost back to the spot where I caught the fish. *Should I stop?* I thought. I had one fish, a pretty good one. If I didn't stop, I could be back in the calm, smooth bay in ten minutes or so, but I hadn't caught fish anywhere else. *What if this was the spot they stayed in?*, I wondered.

Still rowing as fast and hard as I could, I looked down at my fish. He really wasn't that big, only about a foot and a half

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long and not real thick. When I reached the spot again, without even thinking, I grabbed the rod and reel and started putting down the line. When it finally hit the bottom I rolled two reels up and jiggered. Boom! Rod tip in the water, another fish was hooked! This time I watched the island, while I reeled as fast as I could.

When I got him up and out of the frigid waters, I threw him and the rod and reel in the bottom of the boat, grabbed the oar and I dug in! I don't know how long it took to get back, but I knew I couldn't do it again. This time when I reached the spot, I didn't slow down at all. The ten minutes I thought it would take me to reach the bay, turned into over an hour.

I had never been so tired before. My hands were raw, my arms were burning, and my back hurt deep inside. *Only a mile and a half to go...only a mile and a half to go*, I was thinking. All the way back the tide pushed hard against me. *Never again would I go anywhere without timing it with the tide*, I reminded myself as I continued to slam that oar into the frigid waters faster and pulled harder and harder as I neared the side of the island where my family waited.

I must say, I thanked the Good Lord when I rowed around that final bend and saw the cabin up ahead.

That night the boys played while Ami and I laughed. The day ended really well, it was true. With nothing more than wood, water and meat, we would be okay, this we knew. As Ami put the boys to bed I looked over at the fish. The bones were picked clean. There was not a crumb left in sight. It made me feel good inside knowing what I did that day. When we went to bed I was so worn out and sore I could barely even lie down. Just as I faded off to sleep, the thought came in my head, *Somehow I did it today, but tomorrow...I have to do it all over again*.

About three weeks passed with me doing just that almost every single day. I learned to travel and fish with the tide, so it didn't carry me away. I learned that fish aren't scattered all

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through the ocean, but that there are places they like to hang around.

Just when we were doing alright, everything seemed to hit us at once. The nights had been getting colder since the first night we stayed there, and now the days were colder, too. We were using a lot more wood, and our trusted Coleman stove that we had used for so long, finally ran out of fuel. Ami had to cook with the barrel stove, which meant we used more wood.

The beach wood we gathered from around the cabin and bay burned hot and long, but by now, most of it was gone. The bigger logs, I had to axe so they would fit inside the stove. Water was still no problem. There was plenty and I carried it sometimes twice a day. But our lamp oil was getting really low. We were down to one lamp now, and only had about two inches of oil in the gallon jug.

Food supplies were almost gone. Ami's last Pepsi was one of the few things left on the shelf. We were living almost entirely on fish. The days were getting shorter, and a calm day to fish was getting rarer to find. It seemed like as we got better, everything around us got worse. Then one morning we found out just how much harder it could be.

When we woke up that morning it was cold, colder than ever before. When I looked outside my eyes grew wide, I wondered then, *would this ever end*. It seemed this land was throwing all it had at us, like it was testing to see how strong we could be. Most of the bay outside was frozen, everything was covered in white. Our little boat was frozen solid in the water; our wood was frozen to the ground.

The winter that everyone had warned us about had arrived... in just one night!

A true adventure of how a scared boy, orphaned at sixteen, grew to be a dad and husband of character as he fought to survive in the wilderness of Alaska, while running from the emptiness left by his childhood loss.

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