

Tanana

Far from the world in Alaska

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p 30-37

No one had warned me about the mosquitoes. Millions and millions and millions of mosquitoes. I swat like crazy. Apparently it's even worse in the backcountry. I could do with one of those fly masks you see horses wearing, so as to gaze at the raven and the river through wire mesh. I spend a sleepless night on the threshold. In the morning, my face ravaged by mosquito bites, I pump up the tyres of my bike, eager to explore Tanana by daylight.

There's a lot of activity in the village. Children walk past the church and go into the nearby school. Gravel crunches under the thick tyres of the water truck, driven by a man in sunglasses. I find out later that he's called Herbie. He gives me a friendly wave, shouts 'Hello!' and goes on spraying the gravel roads to keep the dust down. I decide to cycle down Tanana's main street: 1st Ave, which everybody here calls 'Front Street'. The road that runs alongside the river.

Tanana lies on the northern bank of the Yukon. The little village stretches out, as if it wanted to follow the river for as long as it could. It has three parallel streets – 1st Ave, 2nd Ave and 3rd Ave – each set a little further back from the river. On the left, as you look at the map, the village ends at the care home, not far from the church where I'm staying. On the right, Front Street narrows as it passes the last houses, tapering to a gravel track that stops at the foot of Mission Hill. The hill, which doubles as a cemetery, marks the other end of the village. So life is hemmed in by death – sandwiched between a care home and a cemetery – while in the middle of Front Street stand the three buildings that keep life supplied with fuel: the post office, the grocery store and the liquor store.

Tanana is slowly dying. The local school has a mere twenty or so pupils, and the population is so small that every birth is an event. Only 150 people still live here, though some say it's closer to 120, mostly Natives, but also a fair number of white residents. Back in the day Tanana boasted 600 inhabitants. Now the care home's down to two occupants. You must have a good reason to want to live here.

Even the authorities are withdrawing from this shrinking settlement; the office of the Village Public Safety Officer – a kind of local constable in the absence of State Troopers – stands empty. The patrol car languishes outside, gathering dust and seed fluff in the window seams. If some drunk guy starts waving a gun around, no one's going to answer the phone here. When things get really serious,

troopers fly in from Fairbanks, generally too late to do more than survey the damage they couldn't prevent.

On Front Street I cycle upstream, from left to right on the map, from the care home to the hill. A woman passes me. She's small and walks at a stiff pace. I try to start a conversation, but get nowhere. Later I learn that she suffers from an aggressive form of dementia and wanders through the village from morning till night. Back in the day, she drove a truck round the northern oilfields and called herself 'a Mother-trucker'. A bit further along she waves at a woman driving a 4x4. The woman has long grey hair and large eyes, and her mind, too, has started to slip. She drives on and the 4x4 disappears from view. It's kitted out with a tracker, so that the staff of the care home can find her if she gets lost: a dot glowing on a screen.

A thermometer near the post office reads 20 degrees. In Belgium that's nothing special, but here it's an event. People sit outside on doorsteps that aren't doorsteps, on the rungs of old ladders and upturned buckets. Someone puts a lawn chair on the river bank and sits gazing at the Yukon, at the glittering waves lapping over each other. A dog lies in the shadow of a pick-up truck. I have a jarring encounter with two men on a quad bike. The driver is stoned: he looks right through me. His son, on the back, turns his head away. They reek of burnt chemicals. 'Yes, we know Monique,' they say, then accelerate away. Outside the post office, people are waiting for the clerk, who strolls up, unlocks the door and hands out letters that are read on the spot. Quads and trucks drive back and forth. 'Fucking assholes,' someone says. He tosses a letter into a barrel.

Next to the post office there's a notice board. 'Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is roughly 50 x MORE POWERFUL THAN MORPHINE.' Good news seems to be thin on the ground: a notice with a picture /of an elderly woman reads 'The most overlooked victims of domestic violence are....seniors'. A few construction jobs are on offer, through the tribe, mind you. 988 is the number to call for the Suicide & Crisis Helpline. And in a tiny street library, no bigger than a microwave, I find a book by Lundy Bancroft entitled *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*. The pebble in my shoe makes itself felt again.

The grocery store is in the same building as the post office. It's run by Cynthia, who has the gift of the gab. She's married to a Mormon farmer's son with Swedish roots who hails from Washington State. Everything that Cynthia sells is flown in by Cessna or delivered by barge. It's possible to grow your own fruit and vegetables – in summer at least, when the soil isn't frozen solid. Things like carrots, lettuce and peas that grow quickly during days with twenty hours of sunlight. But round here, not a lot of people go in for gardening. They do get food coupons, which don't go very far. A carton of milk costs \$9.99 in the store, and you pay more than \$10 for a stale, sliced loaf. The place stocks olives, Doritos and giant tins of Monster Energy. Here, out in the middle of nowhere, the selection of crisps and soft drinks is as big as in the city where I live. 'Are you that friend of Monique's?' Cynthia asks. 'Isn't she incredible?!' I nod. 'Come over this evening! I'll make moose soup for you!'

A banner hangs from the wooden façade of the post office, showing a man driving a dog sleigh. His name is written in black letters against a snowy background. It's the man whose memorial leaflet I came across in the church. He was shot by his neighbour – his nephew and namesake – in 2023, when a dispute about snow clearing got out of hand. A bit further along is the Tanana Sandbar Liquor Store, which only opens for two hours each evening. The bars in front of the window hint at a pressing need.

Apart from the post office, the grocery store and the liquor store, Tanana doesn't have any places where people might meet and linger. There's no butcher or baker, no park, no café, no cinema, nothing that makes a village a village. There's only trees and water. All you can do in Tanana is live, in houses that stoop under the weight of time, like the shoulders of an old man. Paint peels from their facades, moss swallows up sills and shingles, ravens fly in through broken windows.

Derelict cars are everywhere, standing idle in the crusted mud of front yards. Busted windscreen wipers, rusty hub caps and dog-chewed moose antlers snagging on chicken wire and the tangled cords of tarps. Everything that once had value – from strollers and coolers to bedframes and snowmobiles – fails to get cleared away in time for winter, then snow buries all memory of the past until spring, when rusty noses poke through the mud, a reminder of the sorry state of things. A warped basketball hoop tilts downwards, the wind plays with frayed American flags. Blunt axes rust next to moth-eaten sofas. Graveyards, these are, graveyards of hard lives in a décor I must learn to decode.

On the edge of the village there's a small powerplant. Four generators keep the settlement going. But not all houses and cabins are hooked up to electricity. Many aren't even connected to the limited water supply or the sewage system. People make do with buckets filled at the village pump or, in winter, drive onto the river, drill a hole in the ice and pump up a barrel of water. Toilets consist of small outhouses built over a latrine. You heat your home with wood burnt in old barrels with a hole cut into them and a pipe welded on. You need 25 logs to make it through the winter. Cold used to be measured in *dogs*. 'It was a five-dog night,' meant you needed the bodily warmth of five dogs to get through the night.

As I cycle towards the hill, I pass The Circle on my left. You could call it a neighbourhood, a handful of houses arranged in a circle, none of which have running water. Years ago, the Yukon swept through these homes, washing away hard-won livelihoods in a torrent of oil barrels and animal carcasses.

Small though Tanana is, many locals live yet further out. To them, the village is *too busy*. Only much later would I really understand this. On the settlement's outskirts you see remote cabins in the woods, a few derelict barns. The gravel road narrows to a path scarcely wider than a bed, taking me to the foot of the steep rise of Mission Hill. Wooden crosses, enclosed by low, peeling fences, stand amid thigh-high grass, wildflowers and ferns. Many Native families have their own plots on this once-sacred hill. Descendants lie here, among rosehips and budding paper birches. Shamans and gold prospectors are buried here too, and there's an old mission chapel that looks as if it's about to fall down. It's a striking building, with a pointy little spire sticking up above the mossy gables, and small, Gothic windows with smashed panes in a shell of rotten timber. The hill embodies transience: crosses rotting in the freezing rain along with the decomposing bodies, until there's nothing left to remember them by.

With an effort and sweating heavily, I reach the top of the hill and see the Tanana River merge with the Yukon. Oil on canvas, this incredible vista. I feel like the *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* in the painting by Caspar David Friedrich – the wanderer on a rocky precipice, surveying an unconquerable landscape of distant peaks, wreathed in mist. He thinks he stands above it all, yet senses that it transcends him. He's awestruck by the grandeur, the force of nature, which here takes the form of sandbanks and islands cutting through the unruly waters of the Tanana. The river deposits tons of sludge in the mighty Yukon, which takes the Tanana by the hand like a child and travels on westwards for sixteen hundred kilometres, carving the state of Alaska in two, before emptying into the Bering Sea. In the distance, some 250 kilometres to the south, lies the Alaska Range, a stunning line of peaks, with Mount Denali – 'The High One' in Athabaskan – rising more than six thousand metres above the landscape. This mountain chain blocks the flow of moist maritime air from the south, cutting off the interior from the 'warm' Gulf of Alaska. When I turn around, I see, almost as far away, the Brooks Range to the north. This rugged, lower chain – its peaks just under three thousand metres – forms a second climatic barrier, shielding the inland region from the cold air of the northern Beaufort Sea. That sandwich turns the interior into a hothouse in the very short summers

and a freezer in the long winters. Decades ago, this spot held the record for the state's lowest temperature: minus 60 degrees Celsius. The current record is only two degrees colder. Hemmed in by two mountain ranges, the landscape is anything but flat. There are wind-sculpted hills south of the Yukon, and the more rugged Ray Mountains northeast of the village. Forests and swampland wherever you look. From this vantage point, you understand why you can only get to Tanana by plane, and – in summer – by boat. A while back, a dirt road was cut on the other side of the river, a few kilometres from the village. It leads to Fairbanks, the idea being to make Tanana more accessible. But in winter the road's impassable, and in summer you can't cross the river, because there isn't a bridge. And even if you managed to get a truck to the other side, it's still a huge gamble taking a road that nature's working hard to reclaim. Many hope that the isolation will hold. That the distance will continue to do its work. That Tanana will remain too remote, too cold and too expensive to reach easily, and that its inaccessibility will protect them. Not from life, but from the version of life that was invented elsewhere.

This is isolation: if you let yourself float down the river from here towards the sea, you'd travel nearly two hundred kilometres before you encountered another living soul (not counting animals) in the next village, Ruby. Heading upstream towards Canada, the next village along, Rampart, is more than a hundred kilometres away. Near Rampart, the broad river squeezes through steep gorges, the site of the 'Tananites' favourite fishing spot, the Rapids, where I will stay later.

I'm reminded of something Wallace Stegner wrote, which explains why I'm so enchanted by the landscape. It's because it's so unlike the place I come from. According to Stegner, we're not only shaped by the environment in which we grow up. The landscape of our childhood also forever determines how we view the world. It's the lens through which we interpret everything around us. For me, growing up between garden hedges, cycle paths and concrete curbing meant that all roads always led somewhere. In that orderly, planned landscape, church spires and apartment blocks towered above the few trees. There is nothing of that here. In Tanana there are no borders or rules.

This is it, the thought flashes through my mind: a straight line, a cable car carrying me from my childhood bedroom in Waregem straight to the top of this hill. The forest, the Yukon, Alaska. I'm standing at the geographical centre of a vast wilderness, leaning against a slab of rock, feeling the stored warmth of a hot day, physical proof that the painting in front of me is no illusion, but a reality too immense for the intense glow coursing through me. Feeling euphoric, I spread my arms and look up. I'm *alive*.

Until the wind picks up and a thunderstorm bursts loose. The rain slaps me in the face like a wet cloth and I hastily cycle down the hill. The steep gravel path changes colour, edged by rivulets of water which are hurrying down with me. Shafts of lightning illuminate the sky. Once on level ground, I plough through mud. On my left, the Yukon flows past; on my right, the scrubland gives way to thick forest. The thin tyres of my bike sink into the mire, leaving deep tracks. I dismount, the wetness seeping into my shoes, and see that the downpour's blowing bubbles in the river. When I get back to where I'm staying, I'll have to quickly jot everything down in the notebook I always carry with me. In a Ziploc bag, luckily, as my rucksack's soaked.

I cycle on. Until, suddenly, I hear him? her? behind me and see, emerging from the forest, a black bear. A single clawed swipe, I realise, would line my cheeks like the notebook. Time contracts to a moment that one day I'll surely be able to write pages about or recount at length, but that here, now, doesn't last longer than, what, five seconds? A slow blink in which reality feels more *real* and the speed of the thoughts racing through my mind seem to give that reality mass, as if I had hold of the Higgs particle. *If it's black, fight back. If it's brown, lay down. If it's white, say goodnight.* The bear, about twenty metres away, halts. Moving slowly, I feel for the bear spray in my rucksack. The rain ramps up the tension, which dissipates as fast as it arose. The bear doesn't seem surprised. Which

surprises me. When I detach the safety clip from the can and brandish it in front of me like a pistol, the bear disappears into the scrub. Lazily, uninterested, ambling back to the forest. I wait for a minute, then jump onto the bike and pedal away quickly. By the time the village comes into view, my body still feels electrified, as if struck by the lightning flashing overhead. Once I reach the church I throw my bike into the grass, drop the soaked rucksack in the porch and collapse onto the green carpet in front of the altar. My phone rings. It's Monique. 'Saw a bear, huh?' I hear her chuckle. 'Yeah, that happens sometimes. I once spent the night in a sleeping bag next to the Yukon and a bear walked right by me. That was pretty funny.'

p 60-63

It's morning. Lois sits in the front pew of the church, her legs crossed. She's small and wiry. In front of her there's a lectern, with a red, gold-edged Bible on it, the ribbon bookmark neatly creased. She opens a hymnbook. 'Good morning,' I say, entering the church from the rectory. I hand her a mug of hot coffee. Lois is brusque in our encounters. I don't know why. She radiates defensiveness, a human fortress. When Lois laughs, the clouds part, but that laugh often seems to hide behind a portal whose key I suspect few possess. A fortress that must have taken shape gradually, when she couldn't shake off her misfortunes. Each loss, each disillusionment, each blow added another stone, a new layer to the wall, a hardened spirit whose foundations I would later come to know, and never forget. On a whiteboard, Lois writes the numbers of the hymns to be sung at her husband's funeral.

I offer my condolences on the loss of John Huntington. Lois doesn't look up – 'Thank you' – and carries on selecting appropriate texts. John was seventy-eight, and I read in the obituary that he liked to help Lois with the sled dogs. Back in the day, they had more than twenty. Now, only five are left. Every morning and evening Lois goes into the barn to fetch straw, water, kibble and meat.

There's no priest in Tanana, nor does one fly over regularly from Fairbanks. So Lois is the heart and soul of the St Aloysius Church. She trained as a lay minister and administers Holy Communion. 'Lay' comes from the Greek word 'laos', meaning people, and it makes Lois one of the few leading figures in a village of chainsaw-wielders and bear hunters. John was another, dignified and well-respected, although it's women who hold the power in Tanana. Even in the church you almost always only see women. Men lost their old role as heads of the family and providers, and for decades now have been rummaging through sheds and boxes of clutter in search of a new purpose in life. The forced transition from the old way of life to a Westernised one, and the technological revolution that went with it, left them rudderless. Snowmobiles pushed sledges into sheds, outboard engines replaced oars, meat was flown in, food coupons arrived in the mail, kerosine stoves warmed the isolated cabins and men increasingly became reduced to temporary labourers and seasonal hunters. Meanwhile, the women grew adept at handling the growing mound of paperwork. They drew up grant applications, pored over legal codes and – like Lois – broke bread together.

Some fear her bluntness and her opinions, which cleave like an axe through spruce timber. Lois seldom looks back. She's like the Yukon. The teacher who spent her life drumming order and discipline into children, while keeping the parents at arm's length. After her career in education she served as the chief of the tribe for a while, and now she leads the church. All that time, year after year after year, her faith grew ever stronger. Now, spirituality is the mortar that holds the fortress together.

'There's practically nobody left who can hand the old stories down to the younger generation,' she sighs. 'Stories about the profound changes we underwent.' Her words remind me of

a passage from *Fifty Miles from Tomorrow*, the memoir of William 'Igġiaġruk' Hensley, a well-known Iñupiaq leader from northwestern Alaska:

Since we first received tobacco from the Russians, along with coffee and tea, pots and pans, matches, knives and telescopes, we have changed. We changed when the whalers brought alcohol and guns. We changed when epidemics of influenza, diphtheria and tuberculosis ravaged our villages. We changed with the Gold Rush. We changed when the missionaries and the government worked together to try to control our families, our culture and our spirit. We changed with the arrival of planes, engines, phones and television. We changed with the coming of the state. We changed with the division of our natural world into federal, state, and Native landholdings, and with the arrival of corporations.

'John was a carpenter,' Lois says, 'a sociable guy. I'm different. After a day's teaching I'd go home, drink tea and feed the dogs. In his own quiet way, John was a leading figure in a changing world. The world of 'half-breeds', like his father, Sidney Huntington. The last few years, John was in poor health. He was in a nursing home in Fairbanks. When I visited him, he no longer recognised me.' A raven flits past the window. 'Should we have documented his life?' Lois wonders. 'Young people are leaving the village. What's left?' Lois is in her late seventies. Three of her four children live in cities, and the youngest, an adopted daughter, is at boarding school.

She drinks the last of her coffee and snaps the hymnbook shut. 'You're welcome to come to the funeral.' As she leaves the church, she turns and asks: 'Have you read *Shadows on the Koyukuk*?' As it happens, I have a copy of the book in my luggage. I came across it in a dingy thrift store in Fairbanks. 'Read it, then you'll know where John came from – then you'll understand what life's like here. Or was. If you think the stories sound exaggerated, you should know that the opposite's true. And one more thing: drop by this evening, we'll have dinner together.'

Shadows on the Koyukuk describes the life of Sidney Huntington, the father of the late John, Lois's father-in-law. Sidney died in 2015 at the age of one hundred. Looking back on his life, a friend memorialised him in a radio broadcast. 'Sidney Huntington's most striking legacy is the new Alaskan identity that he forged. He was half Native, half white, and didn't regard himself as a full member of either camp. He drew knowledge from books, from his time in boarding school and from older Natives.'

I make more coffee and flop into the worn armchair in the sitting-room to read about Sidney, son of an Anglo-Scottish Gold Rush prospector and an Athabaskan woman. The book, which was written more than three decades ago, proves gripping. After only a few pages the outside world fades away, and sled dogs pull me into a fractured life, mended with gold lacquer.

Sidney Huntington built up a life for himself on the banks of the Koyukuk, a tributary of the Yukon. He did so together with his children – thirty, all told, both biological and adopted. John, Lois's late husband, had twenty-nine brothers and sisters. As he lay dying, relatives streamed into the nursing home in Fairbanks. The Huntingtons are a decimated family – three brothers took their own lives – but they don't let go of one another.

Sidney's life reads like a dark graphic novel into which just enough shafts of light fall. He was five when he lost his mother, while his father was away. His mother's death and his father's absence became fused in his mind, causing him to lose trust in people. Trust that took another blow at a mission school on the banks of the Yukon in the early 1920s. There he made friends with another small boy who'd also lost his mother. And his father. A traditional *potlatch* had been held when his father died: a ceremonial feast that centres on open-handedness, the opposite of the Western idea of wealth. A potlatch can be held to mark a birth, marriage or death, or the transfer of hereditary rights

and titles. Widowed, the mother of Sidney's friend witnessed the life she'd struggled to build up being dismantled like an old market stall, and given away to friends and family. She lost her clothes, her belongings, her canoe, her dogs, even her bed and her house. When a rogue shaman set his sights on her and the rest of the village looked away, the mother saw no way out other than a tree, a length of rope and a leap in the dark. One of her sons followed Sidney around like a puppy at the mission school. He wouldn't eat if he wasn't sitting next to Sidney in the refectory, wouldn't sleep unless Sidney lay next to him. They grew inseparable. One morning Sidney found his friend lying in bed, unconscious. The boy died the same day, and was buried in a ravine below the mission, along with Sidney's remaining faith in life. A single stark sentence sums up his feelings: 'The loss of my friend was very painful.'

p 125-129

Alaska's history is soaked in alcohol. It's not an issue exclusive to Natives or small villages, but extends to cities and white mainlanders; it is the original sin of the state where the sun sets so early. In 1877, ten years after the Americans had bought Alaska from the Russians, a customs inspector wrote as follows about life in Sitka, then the state capital:

The situation in Sitka is as shocking and scandalous as can be imagined. There is no form of law and order whatsoever, nor any means of enforcing it. In the city, almost every house is a clandestine distillery; in the Indian village every house is one. So far, the ban on the import of alcohol has had no other effect than that the ordinary type of drunkards – Indians, whites and half breeds alike – have turned into sheer raving lunatics. Their home-brewed liquor is little more than pure poison.

More than a century later, the *Anchorage Daily News* would report that in Alaska, the suicide rate among white men aged 20 to 24 was almost double that of the national average, and in the case of Native men ten times as high. The paper emphasised that the figures were merely the tip of the iceberg, given the underreporting of the issue. A Native boy of fifteen had a one in ten chance of committing suicide or attempting to do so before reaching the age of 25.

Moreover, in Alaska, the percentage of violent crimes remains more than five times than the national average. Reports of rape are at least three times as high, with Natives, who only make up one-fifth of the Alaskan population, accounting for almost half of rape victims. The state tops the national rankings in femicide. Add to this that in at least one in three villages in Alaska – a state where sexual abuse is widespread – there is no law enforcement, no local police. Contrary to what you see on television, the challenge in Alaska isn't the physical struggle with the wilderness, but the battle with oneself. Stories about the growing darkness, Seasonal Affective Disorder and other forms of hardship had been published much earlier in Alaska, but it was the sheer scale that defined the public response to these newspaper articles in 1988: the weight of personal stories and testimonies.

Even though Patti hadn't seen those articles, she knew similar stories. Patti *was* such a story. Her notes about her job as a social worker show a solid grasp of the prevailing theories on rural hardship, and that she clearly understood the nature of intergenerational and historic trauma. Patti knew that the oldest generations, those of the great-grandparents and grandparents, were the first to *lose*: their little economy, culture and spirituality came under pressure with the arrival of newcomers. The Russians didn't try to make the indigenous

population acculturate or assimilate; that came later, under the Americans. If the Natives were first able to 'progress' thanks to new tools and weapons, those gains were soon devastated by the illnesses brought by outsiders, as Harold Napoleon describes in *Yuuyaraq – The Way of the Human Being*. Napoleon, a Yupik who killed his son in a drunken rage, spent his time in prison re-examining his life. There he recorded his thoughts, reflecting on the blight of disease and lives lost in epidemics. Children lost fathers, mothers, grandparents and role models. They saw the custodians of the old world disappear. And with them the stories and the knowledge, as the familiar order of things unravelled. There wasn't enough wood to make crosses for the dead. The children of those generations ended up in schools in a different world, sometimes thousands of kilometres away. After which they returned, with high expectations of a new life. Expectations that came to naught in the wilderness. It was as if their legs were planted on ice floes that were slowly drifting apart. In that precarious straddle they started their own families, after which the divide only grew, and few could give their children what they had never received themselves.

As those children grew up and themselves became fathers or mothers, roles in the community changed. Women stepped into the void left by the men. Young mothers with children drew welfare benefits, old people received pensions and the men drifted aimlessly in an expanding world, as satellite TV beamed images of an unobtainable Western lifestyle into their log cabins. Some lived very different lives abroad, in Vietnam, and returned addicted. Life no longer had a predictable structure. Too few pillars were left on which to prop up identity. As meaning ebbed away, so too did their sense of self.

Patti didn't need scholars to tell her that historical upheaval lay at the root of the problem. She was all too aware of the destructive power of loss, and had done what so many did: sought relief from the burden of loss upon loss. But Patti had had enough of history. She wanted something to be done.

When a villager in Tanana overdosed on cocaine, Patti called the emergency services. Furious, she only got angrier when she heard the name of the dealer: a childhood friend she'd grown up with. She rang the man up and cursed at him. The next day she ran into him in the store. 'Don't mess with me,' he said. To which Patti shot back: 'No, don't mess with *me*.'

The rift between Patti and the village grew. For her, it wasn't about the drugs, but about the reasons for using them. Not everybody wanted to acknowledge that. What she did isolated her because she was rejecting other people's lifestyles. Her isolation was bigger than just the physical distance between her house and the village. She hinted at this in 1993, during an open meeting for care providers: 'If we're to carry on working with young people towards their recovery, we also need to carry on working on our own recovery. Because we're constantly busy, it's easy to get tired or burnt out.'

Patti was the driving force who inspired a growing number of women – from ex-alcoholic mothers to abused girls and young grandmothers struggling to stay off drugs – to pitch in and organise local get-togethers. The emphasis was on connection, fun and a sense of community. Halloween became a party with games, competitions and lots of food. As soon as the first blanket of snow fell, kids would sledge down the slope near Mission Hill. A new choir performed in the village hall. Our New Year's Eve there was a booze-free party. Followed by a Valentine's Day ball, a skiing event for high school pupils, an Easter egg hunt, 4H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, baseball and a Child Protection Team made up of women who understood all too well why this work mattered.

Seated at the living-room table, I leave the notebooks with reflections that feel too intimate unopened, and instead focus on her working methods. Patti wrote a lot. Often about the impact on children of alcoholic parents, about the loss of identity. But also about

alienation, blurred boundaries and a sense of hopelessness. In her spiral notebooks, Patti wrote about sugar-free honey and homegrown vegetables, as well as about helping village women get restraining orders against their abusive husbands. But what Patti couldn't do was hold back the collapse of her own family. Since going sober in 1988 and her subsequent recovery from drug addiction, she'd tried to bring about change in many homes. The problem was that Patti just couldn't bring herself to kick out her own partner. She called a magistrate several times about getting a restraining order against him, but fear of tearing her son's life apart caused her to hold back. In a notebook she wrote down fifty 'Pet Peeves', like 'Hair in my food' and 'Someone talking with food in their mouths.' Number 49 on the list was 'Not having a meaningful relationship.' The fact that she stayed with her partner was peeve no. 50. 'Hanging onto Mel even though I know I have to let go.'

In manila envelopes I find articles cut out of newspapers and glued onto sheets of A4. The events of that Friday the 13th in January 1995 are reconstructed in detail in the *Anchorage Daily News*. In an account that goes on for pages, you read what happened to Patti almost minute by minute. Sparing no detail of her private life, it's a cinematic story that builds up like a thriller, with the thump of a telephone receiver falling to the floor and a police officer who arrives just too late. An officer who'd only spent eleven days on the job in Tanana. Former cops had warned him: virtually every call would be alcohol-related. After twenty years as a local police officer in Northern California, then a spell as a campus security guard, he'd visited a friend in Alaska the previous summer and was ready for some adventure. So much so that he responded to a job ad in the paper, packed his things in California and arrived in Tanana with a suitcase full of dreams. He could hardly believe his eyes when he first stepped into the village's tiny jail. The most secure place in Tanana was serving as the liquor store's warehouse. Hundreds of crates of Olympia beer were stacked from floor to ceiling.

The reconstruction in the paper was the wormhole in the apple. In the aftermath of the murder, the families of both victim and perpetrator suffered alike, but it was the details that tore them apart. As did the subsequent trial, when facts drove a wedge between the two sides of the courthouse, or in this case: the village.

When Patti travelled to Fairbanks to see a doctor on that fatal day in January 1995, she was already low in spirits. Not long before, on a November night, a 61-year-old man had driven into the bitter cold on a snowmobile, wearing only socks, tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt. He was found five kilometres from the village, next to his snowmobile, on the frozen Yukon. Whiskey, friends said. Whiskey was also what a woman had been drinking on Christmas Eve. Wanting to visit her sister, she jumped on the back of a friend's snowmobile. The friend, too, was drunk. The snowmobile got stuck in the snow on the river. The man walked fifteen kilometres back to the village in search of help, while the woman stayed where she was and froze to death. Rescue workers found an empty bottle of whiskey next to her body. In another note Patti wrote in 1993: 'It's difficult to stay positive when so many negative things happen around you. I'd love to take time off work and do something else – just stay home, work in my yard, relearn how to fillet fish – and really spend time with my family.'

I hear Tom coming upstairs and I search for suitable words, but don't find them. He comes into the living room and sits down opposite me, working a splinter out of his index finger. We sit in silence for a few seconds, and I realise that I now see him in a quite different light. He's not the same person I first met soon after my arrival in the village. I'd spotted Tom near the school, where he was handing some paper plates to his grandson. I'd spent half a day with

him on the other side of the village, and felt an affinity with him. A friendly grandfather with steel-rimmed spectacles and long grey hair, roasting goose heads on the riverbank. Tom. When you arrive in a village as a stranger, you size people up on the basis of short exchanges and brief encounters. It's only when you're in a place long enough, and the conversations and encounters mount up, that your take on someone stops swinging from one extreme to the other. Everything carries extra weight, though. Tom's way of laughing, for instance, comes across differently after reading Patti's story, as does the hesitation in his voice, the way he rubs his hands together, the choice of a particular word, the omission of another, a splinter in his finger. 'You read everything?' he asks. For a moment he just gazes out of the window, then he carefully piles up all the notebooks and other papers. The air thickens. I nod and feel heavy, as if my weight has just doubled. In the days that follow I will sit even more rigidly on chairs in other living rooms, doing little but nod, keeping as still as possible and groping hopelessly for words. 'You know, after the murder, alcohol was discussed, here in Tanana.' A drop of blood seeps from his finger. 'The village was up in arms. It didn't take long before all anybody talked about was the alcohol problem.' Tom wipes away the blood. 'I couldn't stand on the sidelines in that debate.' It seems that Tom doesn't find it hard to talk about this, though each sentence is followed by a long silence. 'Something had to happen, I felt. So that Patti's labours weren't in vain. It's on her tombstone, actually: *May God Grant Patti's Vision to Grow*. Come with me, I'll show you her grave.'

Translator's note: Except for the article in the Anchorage Daily News, I had no access to the English originals of the books, interviews and other sources on which the author drew, so the 'quotes' are translations from the Dutch, not word-for-word quotations.
