

Just This Once

Once, in a wild place, I felt myself quiet down. I listened, drew silent breaths. It was dangerous not to warn the bears I was there, no question. But I wanted to live one moment in a wild place without disturbing the other creatures there. This delicate moment laced with fear — a life wish.

Just this once, I told myself. Everyone else snored. Black nets billowed, let in a few mosquitoes. I snuck out, careful to prop shut the cabin door so porcupines wouldn't be tempted, pulled on hip waders folded knee-high, headed up the path not singing, not calling out, not jangling bells to warn the one who left tracks bigger than ours at the edge of the water and her spring cub who dawdled behind, clawing up storm clouds of silt. Undisturbed and not disturbing, I stood still breathing in sphagnum's mossy sigh quiet after loon calls, followed unmarked paths left by stars too wild to show themselves anywhere but here, inhaled her nursing musk, the bear I knew was there.



Death can come at any time. I know that.

So why was I so shocked when on a sunny Alaskan afternoon near the end of the twentieth century, near the end of a twenty-mile bike ride I damn near bought the ranch, headed for the last roundup, kicked the bucket, cashed in my chips? I almost said hey to St. Peter, shuffled off this mortal coil, heard a fly buzz, left the mirror clear.

I always figured I'd get old. So how does "any time" apply, I mean, to me? I assumed I'd sprinkle marigolds in a path for the dead to follow on Día de los Muertos, so my mother, gone in her thirties, could walk beside her mother, frail in her eighties, who told me the hardest thing in her long life—outliving two children.



FAIRBANKS, JUNE 19, 2000

Three canoes drift the Chena. From our garage, we watch them round the bend in the river and slip out of sight. We strap on our helmets, zero out the last ride's numbers on the handlebar computers. It's my turn to choose where we'll pedal. Joe likes to snake through downtown or to meander through neighborhoods. I prefer less traffic and suggest, "Let's do Farmer's Loop, on the bike path where it's safe." That's fine with Joe, proud these days to be fit enough for twenty miles of hills. We pull on gloves with no fingertips and pedal off.

If you sent away for a glorious Alaskan day, this one you'd pay extra to have delivered. This afternoon splendid as the cover of a seed catalog—better even, because it sprouts on its own, a volunteer, wild gift. No effort's required of us. All we have to do is savor it.

The river ice is long gone, the birch trees in full leaf. Beavers gnaw 360s around trunks, then like playground bullies push down scrawny trees.

A few blocks through Hamilton Acres and we catch the bike trail along the Steese Highway. We dodge broken glass behind Big Daddy's Barbecue, dodge fireweed poking through asphalt cracks by Seekins Ford. We slalom around potholes in the dips and rills along Old Steese. Then we gear down for the wide half-mile curve that opens onto the Loop, get ready to stand on the pedals. They're deceptive, those gradual long inclines. You think you can pace yourself and make it fine, but breath tells you exactly where your limits are.

I break a sweat before we hit the collapsed place outlined in hot pink spray paint, clunk into a lower gear, and spin my legs faster, teetering a little as the hill gets serious. I aim for the crest, inhale the aroma of wet fireweed. Up top, Joe grins. Birch and spruce shade us. Then, nose down, we take on momentum. Wind we create ourselves cools our brows. We don't need to pedal almost until the Dog Musher's Hall.

We pass the odd lot where some guy (the owner? a squatter?) has nailed up stuffed animals. Hundreds of stuffed animals. Bears and cats and floppy puppies all over trees and trellises. Branches of beanie babies, pyramids of gargantuan carnival animals. He's made a forest of blue dogs, Tasmanian devils, Tweety, Sylvester, Oscar the Grouch. Blue plastic tarps crackle, the nailer's shelter. A huge yellow sign, swiped from a construction site, says, "Absolutely No Hiring." Another, "No Visitors." I pedal a little faster past his lair.

We speed up on the downhill, past the trail to our secret blueberry patches, past the pond, past the road to see musk oxen, past the back entrance to University of Alaska Fairbanks. We wait for the signal at University and College, then push on to Geist, where the bike path's fenced all the way along the side by Johansen Expressway. The other side's open sometimes, but fenced where a steep slope or the slough might be dangerous.

We breathe deeply, and feel virtuous with twenty new miles on our odometers. It's the peculiar self-congratulation of the not particularly athletic, once we get off our duffs and do something active. We laugh, the sun warm on our shoulders, a gray camp robber leading us on in glancing loops.

All along the rock meadow separating Aurora Motors from Noyes Slough we've got clear sailing. Concrete and chain link separate us from the freeway on the right. Joe has drawn a little ahead as we near the Overpass to Nowhere. Some highway planner had projected a walkway over the freeway, and the rise was added, but the path, fenced off, leads to open air.

We strain up the last big hill before the flat mile home. Joe's lead is increasing, so I pedal on the downhill, catching up. Concrete and chain link line both sides of the trail up ahead where the trees get thick. Alders grown bushy along the slough push through the fence and block the view.



What comes next, I learn from Joe, again and again.

Around the blind curve comes a kid, screaming illegally down the bike path on his four-wheel ATV. Joe sees him, thinks, "Oh, man, this is gonna hurt." The ATV's suspension catches Joe's front tire, crushing it rim to hub, twisting. Joe flies over his handlebars, over the kid and the four-wheeler, and lands on his knees on the path. "Wasn't so bad," Joe thinks.

He jumps up, cursing the dumb son of a bitch, and runs to where I am lying. I'm curled on my side, back to the concrete. Both sides of my helmet are gouged and scraped. My right knee bleeds around imbedded gravel. A little trickle of blood leaks from my lips. Joe tries to get some response, but I am out.

Witnesses stop right away and call 911. A man leaps the fence and holds my head.

The ambulance can't drive all the way to where we are, so it

eases out across the gravel. Then paramedics have to hoof it. Two people hold my head still as they strap me to a backboard.

I open one eye but the sun's too bright.

While he talks to police, Joe watches paramedics tending me, then sees that they're heading for the ambulance. He tries to run, to keep up, and feels his back seize.



I'm under a door covered with sandbags. Muddy water's rising. My hips sink deeper into muck. I can't open my eyes until I know what's in this water. The weight crushing my chest grows heavier. Am I wearing armor? My lungs fill with wet concrete.



Next thing I know, Joe's holding my foot. We're in a large room. Many people. He comes up beside me and says loving words. Then he says, "Nobody knows how to take out your contacts. Think you can do it?" (Later Joe tells me how they cut off my clothes, snipped right through the front of my bra, stuffed the scraps into a plastic bag with a handle and absurdly presented it to him.)

Things are moving fast. Flat on the gurney on the way to surgery, I open one eye. Nobody knows how to help this time. I reach up deftly with my left hand and pluck out what brings the blurry world into focus.

I close my eyes, slip backwards into the blur as wheels beneath me begin to roll.



I wake in a body I barely recognize. My head's too heavy for my neck. I can't turn my face. The room swirls. It occurs to me that I must be alive. Nobody has ever mentioned that death hurts this much. My belly's bandaged, as is my right leg. My whole upper

body feels rubbery, numb. Joe tells me we had a wreck, on our bikes. Joe tells me not to move.



It takes months of telling, Joe finding words again and again. Joe dredges up detail after detail, over and over. It takes months before my mind can see these nuggets not as separate chunks, but as part of one vein, as story.

Constants

For forty-odd years of my life, I could count on three constants: reading, writing, and the love of my mother's mother. Grandma Moen read to me, wrote to me. She thought of me every day. She let me know that anything I wrote she would read, even the painful parts. She taught me to read by reading every hour, every day.

Now she's gone from this earth. My eyes can't focus. It's as if I've just been born. Who am I? Who can I be?

Easter, Grave Tending

VILLAGE OF MOEN, NORWAY

Just after milking, Hanna Loften tied back her skirts and knelt among the lettered stones, seven generations in need of her thick wrist twisting nettles, scraping back winter's scrim, her stiff bristles scouring themselves to nubs against chiseled names shed by those held close in stories, shed too by those forgotten. Hanna Loften rinsed and weeded till one clear star rose, the churchyard's constellations spiraling around her, fading as dawn lifted night from her eyes, one star outshining the great blazing arc Viking longboats steered by.

Stars bright at noon, just not given to us then. Evening she whipstitched edges of openwork, hardanger holes spaced evenly as graves, their beauty outlining what's no longer there.

Dovetails

My grandfather John Moen never forgave his own father. His mother, Hanna Loften, died young. Not in childbirth, not from malnutrition. She had what in those days women didn't mention to men—"female troubles." Her husband, paying off his passage, refused to call the doctor. Hanna grew so weak a neighbor offered to take her to town. "It'll be too much for her, I think," Engebret said. End of subject. End of Hanna.

John watched his mother suffer, watched her yellow, watched her writhe. He snuck in the midwife when his father was out of sight.

"She's in a bad way, son. You need to get her to town." The woman might as well have said, "You need to get her to the moon." He made his mother tea. He held her head when she leaned over the edge of the bed.

He planed the boards, fit the dovetails tight.

Vinstra

John Moen thought of his mother's folks. No word for months now. Did they have enough to eat? Had they been put off the land?

Since childhood, it had been his mother's job to clear the family plot in Vinstra, in the Gudbrands Valley of Norway. Who would care for his mother's little patch of America outside of Rocklake, North Dakota?

Lefse

Bachelor cook, he floured the board, rolled out lefse made of last night's boiled spuds, watched brown patches rise across their faces as if they were loved ones left behind in a country that speaks his language.

Churning, 1924

Long before she stood at the counter of the cream station in a rubber apron, skimmed up a sample for the centrifuge, whirled it, slipped in two drops of ruby oil, set the points of calipers just so, careful as a snake balancing an egg on its fangs, delicate, the farmer watching, not that he didn't trust E. J.'s daughter you understand, but business is business and butterfat determines how many sacks of flour and meal go home in that wagon and whether or not a few yards will unwind from the bolt of muslin, new cloth for Easter, fresh skirt for his wife's made-over go-to-meeting dress and the good part of the old skirt whipped up into a waistcoat for the baby, before that, before prices she quoted let Harriet know whose skinny cow wouldn't make it through another Dakota winter, and whose skinny kids wouldn't have a baked potato to bring to school, before all that she had one big chore—butter.

After her father milked, and set tall cans in the pantry, it was her job to scoop off risen cream with a slotted spoon, slip it into a half gallon mason jar, and shake. Forever. Shake steady, shake long, shake till her arms fell off. First she'd slosh white water, rapids foaming, then watch storm clouds thundering, then witness the miraculous conception—gold, arising via her muscles, her shaking, her will—flecks to clumps to a solid chunk, new body luscious, prepared to anoint hot bread, huge farm bowls of mashed potatoes, legions of string beans. Whatever the seven sisters, their parents, and the hired hands couldn't eat, she got to sell.

What did she save her pennies for? Crank and a paddle—a mail-order churn.