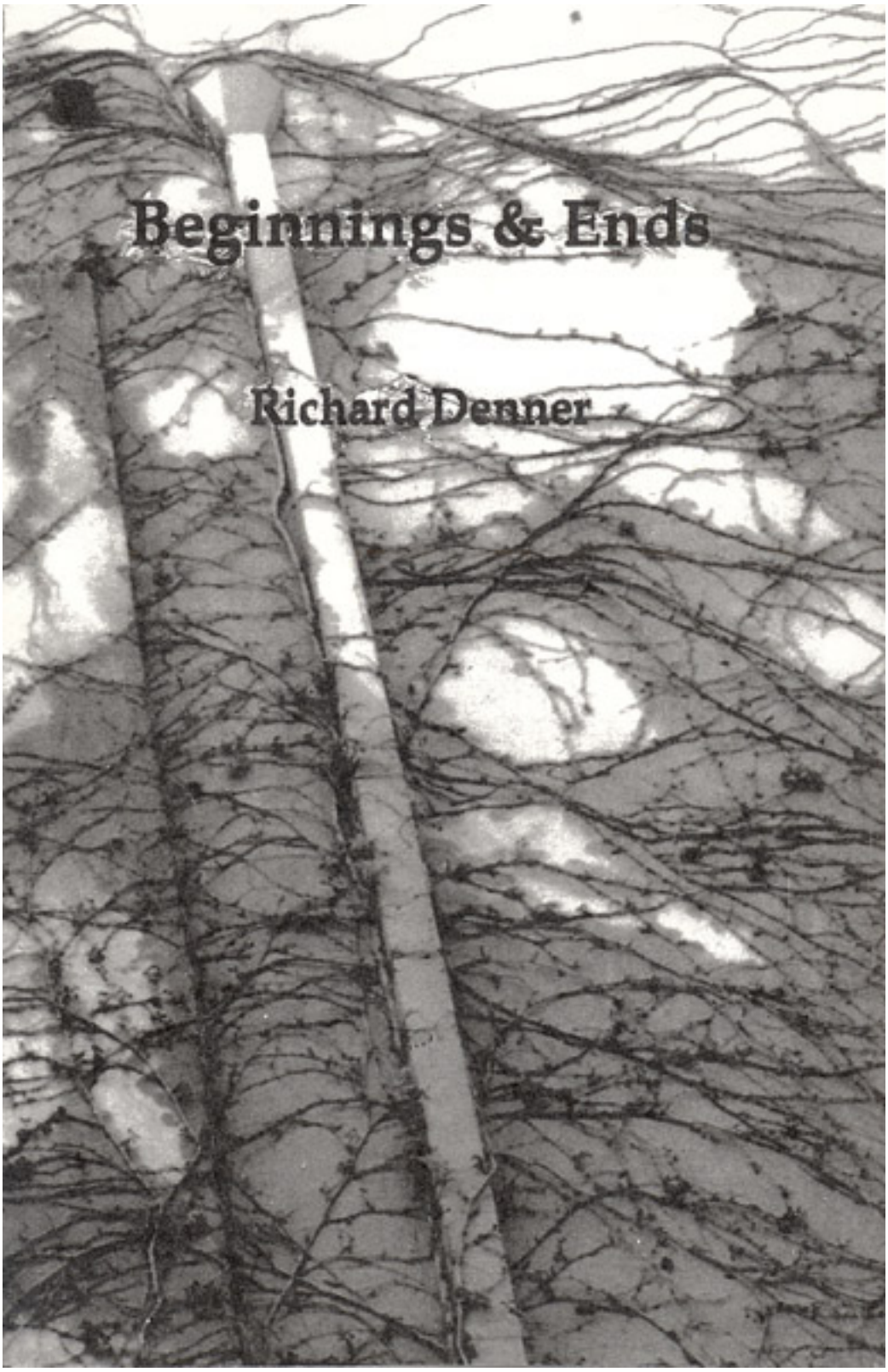

Beginnings & Ends

dPress 2003 Sebastopol
Cover photo by Bouvard Pécuchet

for my son, Theo

SCARS

My earliest scar, a spiral. I'm seven, and we live on Arlington Avenue in Kensington. I am riding a racing scooter, a *Flexi-flyer*, down a hill, and I catch my right ring finger in the brake mechanism. Peels back a nasty flap of skin in the soft pad of flesh above the first knuckle. The searing pain of torn and bruised flesh, the shock of seeing my blood gushing from an open wound—so odd we are full of liquids. Screaming up the street, I stop for a minute and stick the bloody mess in a puddle of water on the pavement to be sure the end of my finger is still there. Reassured it is, I dash home, and my mom wraps my hand in a towel and takes me to the hospital. My first stitches. Six of them. I am an initiate now.

I remember the rock in the palm of my hand and my first horse, Patches, a Paint, long in the tooth. We are late getting home and pushing it. Coming up Robinson Drive in the Oakland hills at a full gallop, we hit a patch of gravel. All four legs go out from under him, which catapults me into a ditch and on top of a pile of lathe and innumerable small nails that pierce me all over. My left hand hits the pavement, and sharp gravel punctures my palm.

My wind is knocked out, and I lay there, while Patches clambers to his feet and begins to chew on some grass. My dog, Spot, licks my face which gives me encouragement as I crawl on my hands and knees. When the world quits spinning, I pull myself loose from the sticks that are attached to my clothes. I open my pocketknife and dig the pebble out of my flesh. My shirt is torn, and there are scratches and tiny, bloody wounds, but nothing seems broken, so I gather up the reins and hobble home, leading my horse.

Outside of a nasty gouge in my palm, the rest of my wounds are

superficial and clean up with dabs of peroxide. The hole in my hand is not bad enough for stitches, or at least I don't go to have it stitched, and it heals up to form a heart-shaped scar.

When I am nine, I get over a hundred stitches when I nearly cut my thumb off. I'm living on my cousin's farm in Iowa for the summer, and I am having a great time milking cows, driving a tractor, riding in the bin of the combine. I'm a greenhorn, but I have chores.

Late afternoon. We've been cutting hay and are putting it up loose in the loft of a barn. A hot day. My job is to stand at the back of the barn and relay a signal to the tractor driver to let him know when he should back up or come forward. At the other end of the barn, the wagons drive up, some pulled by horses, and a pair of tongs lifts the hay piled on the back of the wagon into the barn. The tongs are attached to a rope, which runs through a pulley, which is attached to a rail, which runs the length of the barn and through another pulley and down to the pulley where I stand. I am wearing bib overalls and an engineer's cap that is a couple of sizes too big for me. The cap has a safety pin in the back, but it is still loose, and it falls off, and when I bend over to pick it up, I put my hand on the rope to steady myself, a dumb thing to do, and my thumb goes into the pulley. I whip my hand out of there fast, but it has pinched off the flesh to the bone. Now, this is pain. This is crippling. After this, nothing ever hurts again.

The crew bundles me into the car, a Hudson Hornet, with great suspension, and my cousin, Birney, burns rubber all the way to Mason City. I sit in the waiting room of the hospital and bleed, while the administrators phone my folks in California to get permission to operate. They say I need a skin graft.

I'm given a shot of painkiller in the meaty part of the wound and another shot further up the arm, and my hand and arm get numb. I start to feel like there is a God after all—in the guise of a doctor named Christenson—who has compassion. I want to watch the operation, so the nurses set up a couple of mirrors, and I watch them remove a section of skin from my upper arm and stitch it to my torn thumb. This takes time. I pass out at some point, because the next thing I remember is being put into bed and my arm being propped up with pillows, imagining myself at the wheel of a Model

A Ford, chugging down a dusty, dirt road "chuggachuggachuggachuggachuggachuggachuggachuggachugga." I pay the pain no mind as long as I hang onto the mantra. My cousins, Betty and Birney, stay through the night with me. Birney asks what I keep saying, and Betty says that I am out of my head, and I just kept "chugging."

In a couple of weeks, after I am feeling better, I wander out to the pasture to the abandoned Model A to check it out. I climb in behind the wheel and start bouncing up and down on the seat. This old car is rusted and busted, sitting right here for many years, and big, black and yellow bumblebees have built their nest in the stuffing of the front seat. The commotion disturbs them, and they get wind of my wound and go for that thumb with a vengeance. I jump out of the car swatting and swearing and running with all my might back to the farmhouse, but before I get there I am stung on my neck and on the upper arm at the edge of the bandage.

My arm swells up like Popeye's, and I am woozy for days and stay inside and play solitaire and read comic books and listen to the radio. The Green Hornet, Sky King, The Lone Ranger, Inner Sanctum, Fibber McGee and Molly, Big John and Sparky, The Arthur Godfrey Show, Earl Nightingale, TheWhistler, The Shadow, the Thin Man, Boston Blackie.

Eventually, the thumb heals, and the nail becomes a claw with which I can open cans and dig through brick walls. The nerves are only partly restored, so I have to check for damage when I hit my thumb with a hammer. The girl who sits next to me in the 5th grade, Dorothy Darling, won't hold my hand when we have to go outside during fire drill. "Ooooh, it's too weird," she says. To me it is a banner—scars and stripes forever.

I am sitting on the rump of my horse, showing off. Bill and his girl, Sandy, and my girl, Toby, are hanging out in the rodeo rink. I'm sitting cross-legged on the rump of my horse, roping the toe of my boot with a piggin' string, when Kitty Barrett bucks and leaves me hanging in the air. While I'm floating, she kicks me in the crotch with a lethal left hoof. This propels me into a fence where my calf is impaled on a jagged piece of the fence.

Extracting myself from the fence, I grab my testicles and writhe on the ground saying, "Oh, my stomach, my stomach," because I'm

embarrassed about where I've been kicked. Bill helps me up, and he can see I'm holding my hands lower than my stomach, and although he's concerned I might be hurt, he can't help but snicker about my discomfort.

He says he'll drive me home in his hotrod, and Toby says she'll lead Kitty. When I get home and take my pants off, my left nut has swollen to the size of a baseball and become an ugly shade of black and blue. There's also a nasty splinter imbedded in my leg. Most of the bruise is on the inside of my thigh. When I get to the doctor, he extracts the splinter from my leg with forceps and closes the wound with a couple of stitches. He tells me I need to rest and put an ice pack between my legs and that it might be advisable to make an appointment with an urologist just to be sure nothing is amiss (whatever this means). I have a puckered scar on my calf, and I'm the grandfather of six. I guess nothing is amiss.

A three-inch scar on the inside of my right ankle and a four-inch scar on the outside of the ankle where I had pins and plates installed on my fibula and tibia. It all happened fast. One minute I was nailing a tarp to the ridge line of a roof in the rain in my rain gear, and the next minute I was sailing down this water slide I had created like a quattrocento airplane designed by Leonardo DeVinci. Into space— the Wrong Brothers. Landed flat-footed on the concrete. Did I think I could tuck and roll like they teach in parachute school? No such luck, the concrete was unforgiving. I heard the leg pop and I was suddenly shorter. I looked at the right leg and knew it was broken—those Cubistic angles, something drawn by Picasso in a state of depression—thought, shit, oh dear, I need help. Yelled a few times from the mud puddle I was lying in, and the lady of the house came to the door. Told her I needed an ambulance. She called. It came but drove around the various lanes on the property looking for the right address. I sent the lady's son to point them in the right direction. The kid was spot on. The ambulance took me to a small, local hospital. Lucked out with a good orthopedic surgeon on call, Dr. Campbell, who put the pins and plate in my right leg. Left heel fracture, nothing to do there but let it knit together.

No casts. An ankle support on the right leg and an *Ace* bandage on the left. Three days in hospital and then home, crawling to the

toilet. Painful, but soon I could stand and take small steps with my right foot, which helped me get in and out of my wheel chair. Crutches in the second week, after I had begun to use the right leg with the pins and plates to carry my weight. The heel fracture prohibited me from standing long on it. Takes awhile for a fractured heel to heal. No fancy dancing, but I knew I would tangle again, if not tango. The doc said I would be fine with ‘pin and plate fixation' and recommended early movement. I asked for a set of X-rays so I could get through security points at the airport.

Scars can be tender, itchy and displeasing. Scars can be beautiful and intriguing. A scar can be a map, a mark of bravery or a sign of stupidity, a reminder of how precious life is and how cruel. A scar can be an ornament or a form of disfigurement. Some scars show, and some scars are deep in the psyche. I look at my scars, astonished that I miraculously heal. The wounds vanish, and pale marks in the meat are all that remain.

KETCHIKAN: WORKS AND DAYS

Before we moved out to Deep Bay, I asked at the Fish and Game Department whether I needed a permit to hunt all year. The official told me there was no such permit, but that in Alaska, if you lived in the woods, there was no law preventing you from keeping food on the table. A kind of grandfather law. The same with fishing—but to show my good faith, I bought a fishing license as a gesture to the law of survival.

The move to the cabin came quite suddenly. I had been working at the Ketchikan Daily News doing layout, shooting plates, and assisting on the web press. On Thursdays, I got off early to write Waterfront News, my own column. I was glad to work indoors through the winter in Alaska, but I also enjoyed getting out to see what was happening beyond the back shop.

Walking past Wini's Beachcomber, I spied a book in the window by Bradford Angiers, entitled *How to Live in the Woods On $10/ Week.* Angiers lived in British Columbia, a part of the same geographic area as Ketchikan. Ketchikan is at the tip of the Alaskan

panhandle on the island of Revillagigedo. The island is long and narrow. *Ketchikan* is a Tlingit word, meaning, "spread of the eagle's wings."

In his book, Angiers discusses the land and the supplies necessary for survival. The basic idea was to find a place where it doesn't cost anything to live and to survive from nature. I inquired around town about abandoned cabins. Most of the cabins I looked at were in terrible need of repairs, but my grocer, Mr. Rollog, said he had one in Deep Bay that was in good shape. He said he would be happy for us to live there if we maintained it and protected it from vandals. I arranged to have a bush pilot fly me out to take a look.

The place smelled musty and damp. The stovepipe was rusted, and there was a lot of snow on the roof. The two oil drums that were jerrybuilt to the Yukon stove were half full. There were utensils in a drawer. There were mattresses and blankets, pots and pans, a pressure cooker, tools. The cabin was on pilings along the edge of shore. 20 feet by 40 feet with 10 feet at the end that had been turned into a workshop. The previous occupant had been a pack rat. Whenever I needed some wire or nails, a bolt or a hinge, I could find it in one of his caches.

Friends helped us move the first week of January. The sky was clear and the air, cold and crisp. At high tide it was easy to unload at the front door of the cabin on the deck. Amazing how quickly the elements became the main factor determining what we could and couldn't do.

Everyone pitched in settling things indoors. I had to clear a patch of snow off the roof and set up a new stovepipe. The kids were whimpering, but Al quickly built a fire, and soon an area around the stove was warm. We stood there and drank coffee from a thermos and had a picnic of Mimi's sandwiches before our friends headed back to town. There were fond farewells, but once their boat was around the bend in the bay, the silence was ominous.

The trickle of water. The hoot of a bird. Mauve shadows from the sunset. The tide lapped the rocks. Darkness. The glow of embers from the fire. Eerie shadows danced on the ceiling from the flickering lamp. Primeval recollections. Aloneness—not loneliness—the feeling of being out of the loop, off the grid. Solitude and a

realization that I had left the city to get the Man off my back, and ironically, by using the system to free myself, I was the Man.

Cheri and I cuddled together with our sourdough starter in a crock, tucked in next to our feet at the end of the bed. There was ice on the inside of the wall. The fire was stoked and crackled, and we were just dozing off when there was a fast-moving, scraping sound above us. Cheri grabbed me with both arms. "Is it an avalanche?" Silence. Then, a enormous splash along the side of the cabin and the heavy thump of a wave hitting the wall. A pool of water was fast forming on the floor. "No," I said in a calming voice, "I think it's a tidal wave."

The heat from the stove had melted the snow pack on the roof, and a section had slid into the water along side of the cabin. We lay there and trembled from the adrenaline. I don't know any secrets about life. I try to look at life accurately and soberly. The fact that we were there, alone, changed nothing. A New World was before us, and I knew that even when we hold each other we are alone. We share this aloneness together.

I got the oil stove to function by taking the line off the Yukon stove and attaching it to the other carburetor. I cut up some beached timbers into blocks and strung them together so I could row them to the woodshed at high tide. The dinghy I found on the dock needed repairs, but I found a sheet of marine plywood to make a new bottom, and with some tar and a few dabs of paint I soon had it ship shape.

Our first mishap came when the weather warmed and we decided to air things out. Opening the doors of the cabin, front and back, to create circulation, I stoked up the fire, but I underestimated how hot the stovepipe could get, and soon smoke was pouring from the attic. Smoke in her eyes, Cheri grabbed the fire extinguisher and managed to spray foam into the kitchen. I pulled off the metal around the stovepipe that revealed smoldering mattresses and newspaper insulation. No flames, only smoke, but, to be on the safe side, I grabbed two buckets of salt water used to flush the toilet, put my bandana over my nose, and walked along the rafters to douse the fire from above. I nearly asphyxiated myself in the process. After the smoke cleared, I looked at the objects in the room, the sink, the table, the chairs, now that everything had been saved from

fire, and everything seem unique and very precious.

Birds and beasts, high and low. Sea otter and seal, beaver, bear and Sitka black-tailed deer. Woodpecker, thrush, starling, cormorant, raven and owl. Seagulls and more seagulls. Once, I saw an Emperor Swan. And eagles—what an awesome presence. Theo had learned to pee between the boards on the fenced part of the deck in front of the cabin. I encouraged this because it cut down on the number of diapers I had to wash. He was relieving himself, and I looked up and counted fifteen eagles circling overhead. I quickly shooed him indoors before one swooped down and plucked his little white buns up to its aerie.

Sort of unreal, this tug of life and death. I had eaten my lunch by the beaver pond. I had encountered the black bear that frequented the berry bushes behind our cabin. I had kept a low profile, but he caught my scent and moved into the shadows. I smoked a joint and listened to two ravens discuss the weather. I had come as far as the hemlock snag by the river, maybe four miles inland. Beyond, for me, was unexplored territory.

Coming up the incline of a hill, the sun broke through the drizzle. A buck appeared in silhouette. I got off a shot with the gun half way to my shoulder, and the deer spun around the crest of the hill. I heard his hooves clatter on a bit of rock, and then there was silence. I moved quickly around the edge of a cliff in pursuit. Stopping to listen, I saw a blur. I turned and was knocked off my feet. The buck scrambled a few yards and fell. There was a gaping shoulder wound. I was at his throat with my knife in a flash. Then, it was over, except for the handling of the meat. I removed the entrails, careful not to break the bladder. I left the head on a log. I cut the skin between the tendons on the back legs above the joints and dislocated the forelegs and poked them through the tendons, making a kind of knapsack out of the carcass.

Now, which way was home? I had gotten myself turned around in all the excitement. Just fog and tall trees whichever way I turned, none of it seemed familiar. I tried to sort it out...Let's see...I came over this hill and around to here, and I turned and went over there, and then I knelt and backed up and turned and sat down and adjusted my gear and got up and…

Beyond the forest, perhaps, the world had stopped. Here there

was an excess of noisy quiet. I looked into the stony face that might annihilate me. I figured if I could find the river, I would be all right, otherwise I could wander in the forest until I became exhausted. I climbed the hill and looked for a mark. In the distance, some rock and a fallen tree, which seemed familiar, and an enormous cedar. I walked toward the cedar to see if I could get my bearings. From there I could hear the sound of the river. But now it was getting dark, and since I was covered in blood and carrying a freshly killed deer, I worried about wolves.

Finding the river was one thing and following it, another. I felt small in the vastness of the forest, smallness I knew I would feel forever if I survived. Panic tingled at the threshold of every step. I knew I must keep moving—courage would follow. Battling my way through a field of devil's club, I stepped into a soggy muskeg up to my knees. I was about to hang the deer on a tree limb, when I spied the snag I used as a jumping off place.

I climbed a mossy slope to the trailhead just as darkness arrived. I was resting under the snag, catching my breath, when I heard a shout and saw the beam of a flashlight. Then, Dale was embracing me—a friend had come to visit. Cheri was worried and had sent him with a bag of munchies. I gobbled them up as fast as I could. He told me he had put some candle ends in the bag in case we needed to start a fire, but by then they were gone, consumed in my hunger, all in one taste.

The weather suddenly turning warm from a Chinook wind made it necessary to process the venison I had hung in the woodshed. We had all the equipment necessary for canning, a pressure cooker, jars and lids. We set the cooker on the *Coleman* stove and brought it to pressure. We cut the deer meat into chunks and filled all the jars we had. The rest we cut into strips for jerky. We feasted on the ribs, and put the jars away for a time when venison might be scarce. I was thinking, it is happening: we are living off the land.

If, on any given day, the fishing was poor or the deer were too clever to be found, I would return to the clam bed. We ate clams steamed, fried and stewed. I think it was clam burgers that finally threw me off clams.

My favorite spot to fish was down a long inlet near a fresh water

lake, a place known as "the rat hole." During a short interval at high tide, the water coming down from the lake would reverse, and a boat could get into the lake. At the end of the inlet leading to the stream was an area thirty feet in diameter, which became a whirlpool during this augmentation of the lake. Fish would be trapped there, and if you kept your speed up and stayed in a gyre, you could catch a boatload. Fortunately, the area was off limits to commercial fishing, so the sport fishermen had it to themselves.

I had built a smoker out of a couple of oil drums, one with racks and the other for the fire, hooked together with a length of stovepipe. Some fish I hard-smoked and wrapped in waxed paper and stored. Some fish I light-smoked, so we could feast right away. Like all good things, too much is much too much. Salmon is rich meat, and after awhile, we again needed a change.

A boat in the bay, fishing for herring. I rowed over, and the fishermen gave me a cardboard box full of fish as a friendly gesture. Another day, I was sitting on the deck smoking a *Gauloises* when Ron Arnce and some of his band dressed in bearskins, bearded and looking like Vikings, pulled up in their riverboat and handed me a huge slab of bear meat. Everybody was looking out for each other.

Well, not everyone. One morning, a boat pulled up, and a guy asked me if he could use my dock to fix his engine. "Sure, no problem." I went inside to put together some breakfast. Then, I heard a shot, and when I looked out the window I saw a widening pool of blood on the water.

I shouted, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Shot a seal," he replied.

"Why don't you have numbers on your boat?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"I guess I do."

He became apologetic and told me he was a seal hunter. I told him the next time I was in town, I would drop by his place and shoot his dog in his front yard. He asked if I wanted some of the meat. I had my handgun tucked in my belt against my back. I just smiled at him and went back inside.

I looked out the window and realized there is division between men of strong will. We might have understood each other, but we

failed, and by then the moment to be friends had passed. I thought, neighbor, my nemesis, you follow me everywhere. I could see the War is eternally inside of me.

The weekend was over. The traffic on the bay slowed to a halt. Things were quiet. I consoled myself that being alone is one of the few things I could have totally to myself.

Whitecaps in the cove, cedar bending in the gale, gulls motionless. February—a windy month. Made a mixture of vinegar, cloves, onion, garlic, salt, sugar and mustard to make sauerbraten. Put it and a venison roast in a stoneware crock to marinate. Awoke to a fourteen-foot tide, enough to float a forty-footer off an abandoned logging rig. Tied on and rowed it to the cabin. Took a break for coffee. Read a few chapters of Thomas à Kempis.

Dedicated to a spiritual life, the teachings and disciplines were obvious and traditional. The problem was in the implementation. Wood and water, water and wood, would you believe wood and water? The meaning is subtle. I felt I had only scratched the surface.

An abundance of bugs and migrating fowl signaled spring. Two surveyors came in their speedboat to chart the wilderness with a laser on a tripod. They moored their boat just off the deck of our cabin. I knew they were looking for a brass stake, but I played dumb, wondering how far off the mark they would be. Theo and I stood on our deck and watched them hack their way through the brush.

This drawing of lines through the forest, mapping the territory, gave me the chills. Six months earlier, I had been in Berkeley working for the Berkeley Barb, reporting on students trying to stop the first troop trains that were taking recruits to basic training in preparation for their eventual shipment to Vietnam. I looked at the railroad tracks and realized the weird *feng shui* of towns that had been built off those lines, and, now, here were the extensions of these same lines, forming a grid from the North Pole to the South Pole, from Deep Bay to the moon.

A rain forest, and the undergrowth was almost impenetrable. It rained 200 inches each year, which left maybe thirty clear days, and this was one of those days, a crisp, blue-sky day, and I could see to infinity. The two government surveyors separated. One went one way, right past the stake, and the other circled around and nearly

stepped on it. Cheri said, "Aren't you going to tell them where it is?" I said, "I'll tell them if they ask, but until then, I'm going to let them look."

While they were looking in the undergrowth, the tide changed. A fourteen foot tide exposes a lot of beach when it goes out, and the spot where the surveyors had anchored their boat was above an outcrop of rock that was underwater at high tide. I pulled on my rain parka and boots and went into the muskeg to tell them their boat was going to be high-centered if they didn't come back and get it away from the rocks. By the time we returned, the boat was listing to starboard on a large, flat rock, so we got in my dinghy and rowed over to it. After we tied their boat up to my dock, I showed them the survey marker surrounded by ferns near an enormous cedar tree. Given the technology at the time when the first stake was placed, during the Depression Era, it wasn't far off from the location of the new marker.

I invited them in for coffee and some of Cheri's fresh baked donuts, and we talked awhile. I was asked why I didn't tell them where the marker was, and I told them we didn't get many visitors or have much in the way of entertainment, and watching them scurrying about seemed like fun. I told them I was sorry that my enjoyment nearly got them stranded. They laughed and thanked me for my help and Cheri for her donuts, but they were curious about why we were living 25 miles from the nearest road.

I told them that perhaps the idea of developing a more livable community is a fruitcake idea, but in desperation one attempts such things. It seemed that my desire for the commerce of the world had mostly been used up. Not that I wasn't filled with sense cravings, but I realized they are transient and certainly don't provide any sense of real purpose. I mentioned Thoreau, who had pointed out in *Walden Pond*, that there are on three essential requirements—food, clothing and shelter. We were discovering that our material needs could be simply met, and we hoped to reveal this to an expanding circle—friends, town, city, state, country, world—that it could be done, giving them inspiration to do the same. We parted friends, no harm done, their mission accomplished. I had only forestalled the march of progress about 15 minutes.

The next Wednesday, which was a mail day, I rowed a mile

across the bay to the Cliffords' cabin, which is where the mail plane landed. Mr. and Mrs. Clifford, both pushing 80, had been living in a cabin at the mouth of Deep Bay since he retired as a mechanic and they sold their family home in Seattle. The two of them were among the first in Alaska to fish commercially with sport equipment in the 1950s. I don't think I ever knew his first name. We affectionately referred to him as "Old Man Clifford."

We spoke directly to each other using our last names. "Denner, I hear you tried to sink those gover'ment fellas' boat last week."

"Well, I did my best," I told him. "How'd you come to hear that? The Clarks been spying on us again?" The Clarks and their three young children had recently arrived on the far shore of the north cove and settled into another of the Forest Service's land use cabins. The Clarks resented having hippies for neighbors, and they made a point of showing it every opportunity they got.

It's funny. Old Man Clifford was as conservative in his views as Archie Bunker, but he loved to gab, and even though he wanted his independence and freedom and solitude, he and Mrs. Clifford were happy to have some company and swap stories. Looking forward to this weekly visit, we cooked up extra food so we wouldn't have any chores to do, a kind of Sabbath, and we took the dinghy over to the south cove and had a summer picnic on the beach, and then we putted over to the Cliffords' place.

Mrs. Clifford was a wizard with her *Coleman* stove, pumping it and boiling water and serving us cowboy style coffee. We cranked up on her brew and discussed world events. Cheri and Mrs. Clifford often retreated to the wash shed when things got too heated in the fury of our debates. But no matter how far apart we stood on issues like Vietnam, long hair, drugs, Black Power, or the manned space flight to the moon, we loved to hear ourselves talk. Sometimes, we went out to the beach to listen for the plane, but we would keep on bantering even as the mosquitoes drove us to the ground, and we would lay there face to face, fuming and frothing at the mouth, until the plane came.

Old man Clifford might disagree with me, but he was always happy to see me and to find something new to disagree about. The Clarks simply remained bitter and aloof, cultivating their fundamentalist belief that hippies were the minions of Satan. The

Cliffords were just good neighbors. They directed me to places to hunt and fish and set crab pots and dig clams. When Dale brought his dilapidated trawler out and couldn't get the engine started, the Cliffords came over with their outboard and a battery and gave us a jumpstart.

Everything I experienced living in the woods became a facet of the total discipline of making my mind so still that the core of purity that underlies it became manifest, seen, heard, felt. The waters in Alaska are cold and deep and dangerous. The radio never mentions small craft warnings. These are just taken for granted as a standing condition. A gale proportion wind is worthy of mention, and the weather changes fast. A couple of times coming out of the harbor, the tide coming in would be so strong I had to hold the 5 hp *Eska* steady with my feet and row with both hands to make any headway. There is probably a nautical term for this kind of maneuver, but I had had very little experience with boats.

My naivete is probably what got me through. If I had known how much danger I was in, I wouldn't have attempted half of what I did. The mountains in Southeastern Alaska rise 3,000 feet straight out of the water, and the inlets were carved 50 fathoms deep by glaciers. The water under the surface is only a few degrees above freezing, so if I capsized and was exposed in the water for long it would be the end of me.

Coming back from town on Dale's trawler with a couple of drums of stove oil, we had to buck the rollers at half-throttle with our faces out the window in the sea spray because the cabin was full of noxious fumes from a blown exhaust gasket. The weight of the drums put the stern of the boat almost at water level, and the bilge pump was working at full capacity. We were so focused on the tip of land barely visible in the fog where we were to make our turn, that we were unaware of the giant Japanese tanker right behind us. She blasted us with her horn, and we nearly jumped through the cabin roof. "Hard to port! Full speed ahead!" The wake of the ship nearly swamped us, but we managed to ride out the swells and make our turn. There was no time to be afraid, and afterwards Dale and I looked at each other and laughed, and I realized courage is more in the event than in the person. I had no idea how to act in a dangerous situation. I just winged it.

On another occasion, while on our way to town to get supplies, we saw several waterspouts rapidly coming at us and threatening to turn the boat upside down. We reversed course and sped toward shore. Wind blowing, rain pouring down, we tied up at the edge of the forest and looked around for shelter. Dale said he had spotted a cabin, and soon we found a trail and made our way to a place that had been boarded up for the winter.

We pried open a shutter and broke a pane of glass and climbed into someone's summer cabin. There was fuel in their stove and coffee and food in their larder, so we settled down to a plate of rice and beans and a hot cup of joe. The plan was to warm up, get dry and wait it out.

Later, the storm subsided, but the tide had gone out, and we had to wait for it to return before we could get our boat off the beach.

Cheri wondered what took us so long. We told her, but she was incredulous because, since the time we left two days before, the weather had been clear and calm in the cove. It was a local typhoon that nearly capsized us and left us stranded. Captured by pirates, sold as galley slaves, mutiny and shipwreck, battle with the Cyclops, rescued by Circe. Cheri didn't believe a word of it, although she seemed interested in the bit about Circe.

Dale returned the trawler he borrowed, and he came back with an old vessel fitted out as a crabber, held together with wire and rust. It was not in the cove two days before it rested on the bottom. We had no plans to go anywhere, so we left her sitting. A few days later, after eating some acid, I was sunning myself on a rock. In the distance I saw a tiny dot on the horizon that in a kaleidoscopic moment became a huge boatload of hunters right in my face. I was dazed by the sudden arrival of the conquistadors with their firesticks, and when they questioned me about the derelict in the cove, I said, "Oh, it just sank."

The following Monday, about noon, I was reading, with my feet up against the Yukon stove and my chair tilted back, when I was startled by a blast from an air horn. I looked out the window at a wall of steel, the enormous prow of a Coast Guard cutter almost in our living room. Theo's eyes got very big. Mine too. "All hands on deck. Man your stations, man. Lower the lifeboats." Wow!

They had a report of a sinking vessel and stranded passengers. A

quick inspection revealed the boat to be hardly seaworthy and in violation of innumerable requirements, but we were let off with a warning, and the boat was pumped out and towed back to town. Dale went with them to make whatever arrangements were necessary, probably a reservation in Davy Jones's locker.

Theo and I being left to our own devices, we took the ratty dinghy to the end of Moser Lake where there was an underwater shelf and a good place to set a crab pot. We used a bundle of deer guts for bait, and when we pulled up the pot that afternoon, we had eighteen handsome Dungenese crabs. At home, we turned the smaller crabs loose in our cove in the hopes they would transplant. The larger ones we brought to the cabin to have crab races in the front room. Cheri asked us to quit torturing the critters and cook them. "Not torture," I said, "This is sport." She's right, I should have compassion for all sentient beings, even if life is a food chain.

Theo and I went after bottom fish. We had our fill of crabmeat and wanted a change of diet, so we got out heavy line and baited our hooks with pieces of cod. We dropped our hooks over the side of the dinghy and waited. We caught a couple of small red snappers, which we compassionately threw back. Then, I hooked onto something substantial, something that required a bit of coaxing to bring to the surface. Just below the surface, I saw a flash of its underbelly.

Having worked two seasons in the cold storage, I knew what it was. It was a halibut whale weighing, maybe, 400 pounds. Shades of Moby Dick. I looked at Theo and back at the fish. Theo looked at the fish and back at me. The fish was as big as our boat, and we were wonderstruck.

I don't know how these kind of ideas get into my head, but I flashed that there was a shoal of gravel that extended from the mainland near where we were, and we might just be able to beach this whale. Enough meat for a battalion, but I guess the sport of the thing had taken possession of me.

I held the reel between my legs and rowed the dinghy towards the shoal, ready to let out line as the need arose. We were making progress, and the huge halibut was following, but as we neared the inlet where a creek fed fresh water into the bay, the fish sensed what we were up to and started to draw out more line. As we were

into the shallows, I tied the fish off on a stern cleat. Mistake. The rigidity of the line caused the monster to swim for open water, taking the rear end of the dinghy with him and sinking us then and there. Lucky for us, it was in four feet of water.

I told Theo, "I don't think we want to tell Mom about this. I think we will just say we stepped into a deep puddle." This is a fish tale that grows in the telling.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDS

My '52 Chevy is cherry. I've expended a lot of energy restoring it. Rebuilt engine. New chrome and new paint. Black with red pin striping. It's stock, but it has a few custom touches. Glass pack muffler. Hood and trunk molded. A slight rake. A set of moons. No reason to drive it over a cliff.

Well, not a cliff, exactly, but a steep hill with a fishpond at the bottom. I have only had my driver's license a short while, and I've already had a ticket for speeding and a warning from Dad that if I get another ticket my insurance will be cancelled. I am also on my good behavior for one of my peccadilloes.

Walking down an alley along the Paramount Theater in Oakland, I can see the fire exit on the third floor is open, and as I am a movie buff, I decide to climb up the fire escape to see if I can catch the show. Trying not to make any noise on the metal steps, I climb cautiously, fearing an usher will detect me. When I brush through the curtains, I am grabbed and blinded by a flashlight, but I twist away and crash down a flight of metal stairs making a terrible racket. I'm on my way down the second flight when a policeman's baton catches me in the legs and knocks me down. I am hauled back up the stairs to the balcony, where a policeman asks me for my ID. Apparently there has been a knifing, and the cops are looking for a suspect. A witness claims it was another dude, but they hold onto me and take me down to juvie. I use my phone call to summon Dad, and once again, much to his chagrin, he pulls me out of a mess. This time, there are no charges filed, and I am sent home with a reprimand for sneaking into the movies without paying.

I'm grounded; I'm not supposed to be out with my car, and I am. I had been visiting Toby in Piedmont, and we had been making out on the couch, and time just slipped away while I was trying to get her out of her slip and bra.

Racing up Park Avenue, I hear a siren, and I'm looking for the nearest hole to hide in, so I hang a right and floor it. The street goes straight, and I hope, Dear God, no one else is running four-way stop signs. I keep my foot on the accelerator, and I'm gaining momentum when I hit the crest of the hill—straight down, like the blocks in San Francisco—and the car shoots out into space. I turn the wheel, but there is no response because I have left the planet, and when I look down and see large posts the size of tree trunks with a chain between them, I know I had better do some fast backpedaling or I am in some serious shit. Better to try and go between the posts and hit the chain when the car hits the pavement on the second half of the block. Good plan, but the wheel must be turned to the left because the car swings that direction and bounces, and on the first bounce, my door springs open, and I am left sitting on the ground. The car bounces again and flips upside down into the Diamond Park fishpond.

The sound of tires screeching gives me pause. Looking over my shoulder and up the hill, I watch the police car that has been in pursuit spin towards me. The driver has been more cautious about his speed and has merely lost control and gone into a skid rather than becoming airborne. His back bumper catches on a cyclone fence at the top of the hill, and as he begins his decent his patrol car is wrapped in the fence, until his front axle strikes a cement abruptness put there to catch rainwater. The axle snaps, and the whole package comes to rest in a hiss and tinkle of glass and the wrenching sound of twisted metal.

I rush over to see if this guy is ok, but I stop dead in my tracks when he points his pistol at me and says, "Just stand right there, and don't move a muscle, or I'll shoot you."

He isn't kidding, so I do it. The Oakland Police arrive in force with two tow trucks and a cutting torch. While the officer is being cut out of the wreckage, other officers measure skid marks and handcuff me and take me to jail. Later, at the police station, the officer that chased me says it was all very exciting, but that his wife

would be very upset with me had things turned out differently and he had gotten killed.

I use my one phone call to summon Dad. Forty years pass, and he uses the phone to summon me. So now, I'm care-taking the old man, helping him in his time of need. Listening to my dad hack and spit phlegm in a wastebasket, I have tender feelings, and I'm not repulsed. Weakness reveals itself in various ways, some physical and mental and some in how we channel our energy. I've been blessed with good health, bright wits, and eventful karma. My dad has been amazed and dismayed at the extremes I've experienced, but he has never lost faith in me. Life begins with grace and ends in grace, and in-between there is a horse without a rider, a spotted dog without a bark, a blasted tree without bark.