

THIS ISSUE

**WE'RE ALL
IN THIS
TOGETHER**

**THE PARTICULAR SHEEN
OF AMERICA BY AMTRAK.**

**BY CAITY WEAVER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY:**

HOLLY ANDRES

TELL YOUR FELLOW AMERICANS that you plan to cross the United States by train, and their reactions will range from amusement at your spellbinding eccentricity to naked horror that they, through some fatal social miscalculation, have become acquainted with a person who would plan to cross the United States by train. Depending how you slice it — time or money — there are either 61 or 960 immediate reasons not to travel by Amtrak trains from New York City to Los Angeles. Those are the extra hours and dollars, respectively, that you might reasonably expect to forfeit

if you forgo a six-hour \$129 nonstop flight and opt instead for an Amtrak sleeper car. Covering the interjacent 2,448.8 miles can easily consume some 67 hours for a mind-boggling \$1,089.

Of course, you might remind your quote-unquote fellows, any form of modern engine-based transport, even Amtrak, is preposterously fast compared with the method that Homo sapiens employed to move ourselves and, more important, our tchotchkes for most of our species' 300,000-year history, which is walking. Crossing the stretch of land where roughly half the Donner party starved, froze or, in the case of the group's two Miwok guides, were shot to death for food — an overland journey that took the party about five months to complete in 1847 — could be done in under two hours by a Honda Accord today, assuming normal traffic, while a plane from Springfield, Ill., their starting point, to Sacramento would zoom over their whole route in half a day, including layover. Because of this ability to effectively teleport between locations, 21st-century Americans have become flippant about transcontinental voyaging. To truly appreciate the size of the landmass (the third-largest country in the world by land area) and the variety of its terrain (rain forests, deserts, prairies, Margaritaville, etc.), you have to see it from the ground.

Amtrak clings to the hope that someday people will view its service not as something that sucks and that they hate, but as something that is actually nice and that they don't hate. There's a whole separate Amtrak website dedicated to this dream (AmtrakVacations.com), where Amtrak does things like describe Los Angeles to people who have never heard of it. "The 'City of Angels' is one of the premier attractions in sunny Southern California." But the other selling point of a cross-country train trip is a chance to look behind the American scrim: to learn where the nation makes and stores the hidden parts that run it, to find new places you wish you had been born, to spy on backyards and high school football fields whose possible existence had never occurred to you. Or me. Why not me? My boyfriend and I were planning a short vacation out West anyway. I could just leave a few days before him and get there after he arrived.

As I quickly learned, there are no passenger rail routes that cross the entire United States in a single trip, nor are there likely to be any soon. Even proponents of the high-speed railway systems much lauded in Asia and Europe (and tentatively proposed in Congress's Green New Deal resolutions) generally give the competitive edge to planes for travel across distances greater than 600 miles. At present, reaching California by rail

from New York requires at least two trains, one of which will depart from New Orleans or Chicago, all of which, like most lines operated by Amtrak, have names so sumptuously picturesque (Maple Leaf, Coast Starlight, Sunset Limited) they make the storybook “Polar Express” sound as sterile as “Amtrak” by comparison. To book tickets, a person must first complete a battery of tests measuring her patience, hand-eye coordination and aptitude for deductive mathematical reasoning, in the guise of Amtrak’s impossible-to-use online trip planner. (While the trip planner cannot identify the train station nearest to an address, or even a city, it can tell you the name of the city you have already typed into its search bar, provided there is an Amtrak train station there.) The fastest way to complete this slow journey is to take the Lake Shore Limited to Chicago’s Union Station, then board the Southwest Chief to Los Angeles, one of sunny Southern California’s much-hyped premier attractions.

FOR YOUR SAFETY, DO NOT WALK OR PLAY ON THE TRACKS

Contrary to multiple acquaintances’ declarations that I would encounter “some real weirdos” on the train, the first person I met on board my first sleeper car after boarding the train in Penn Station was a man in a sparkly cardigan and leather pants who breezily identified himself as “a prophet,” which is perhaps the world’s second-oldest profession. And forgive me if I find nothing “weird” about being gainfully employed under a supervisor with the kind of multinational name recognition God has.

As he doubtless expected, the prophet and I were in opposite Viewliner roomettes — private compartments Amtrak describes as “designed for one or two passengers,” although a roomette is both narrower and shorter than a standard porta potty. What Amtrak has managed to cram into this minuscule space is impressive: a fold-down sink, two cushioned benches that convert to a bed, a second premade bed that lowers from the ceiling, a tiny foldout table with an inset of alternating colored squares for checkers or chess, a coat hook, a luggage cubby, a large picture window and the largest variety of not-quite-matching shades of dark blue upholstery fabrics ever assembled. There is even a small metal toilet covered with a puce-colored lid, which invites the brainteaser: Is it more luxurious to have a private toilet inches away from your sleeping area, or a shared toilet elsewhere?

The prophet sat silently in his compartment with the curtains open.

[See a voyage by train through Nigeria.]

The car's friendly attendant advised me that the recommended way to enter the upper berth was to step first atop the toilet seat (a little over a foot off the ground), then, using a wall-mounted handle for balance, climb onto the narrow built-in ledge above the toilet, rotate my body 90 degrees and, fueled by a cocktail of optimism and derring-do, launch myself into the bed suspended in midair. To prevent occupants from rolling off their 28-inch-wide mattresses (the same width as a standard casket) and falling several feet to the floor, stowed beneath the mattress of every upper bunk is a kind of net of seatbelts that hooks with grim determination into the ceiling. Once on the bed, I subjected my body to a series of Cirque du Soleil-inspired experiments to confirm that this safety web would indeed hold my weight, were I to roll unconsciously into it at 2 a.m. I tested the strength of the straps with one leg. I rolled from the wall into the net, flopping my limbs. I placed each hand on a segment of net and pushed against it with the full force of my upper body, something that I had never done in my sleep but that now seemed possible or even probable. It seemed secure.

It also seemed representative of Amtrak's casual, makeshift approach to passengers — a slightly refreshing, slightly unnerving attitude to encounter after a lifetime of air travel. The freedom to move about in a train evokes an illicit, almost danger-courting autonomy. (The nonprofit National Safety Council reports that a person in the United States is several times more likely to die of "sharp objects" than a plane or train crash, though the events that preceded the recent emergency Boeing groundings make such statistics cold comfort.)

The instructions given by conductors and attendants were not so much formulaic as they were desperately obvious — a black comic litany of bare-minimum survival tips. "Just for your safety please do not walk or play on these tracks," went one announcement. Another asked parents to ensure young children did not "wander around the train alone." Although there was no whiff of a T.S.A. screening in place (it would presumably be possible for someone to arrive one minute before departure carrying a duffel bag of uranium and swords and hop right on, although hopefully no one will), pantomimes of security distributed responsibility among everyone aboard. "WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER ... LITERALLY" read the text on a

safety brochure promoting Amtrak's "If You See Something, Say Something" campaign.

Even on short plane trips, every passenger is offered the kindergartner's communion of juice and cookies, as if a majority of adults are incapable of going 90 minutes without such provisions. On trains, passengers are treated as individuals even more powerful than adults: independent teenagers who just want to smoke. Amtrak knows you want to smoke. Amtrak knows you love to smoke. But while you're living under Amtrak's roof, you have to follow the rules, of which there is only one, and that is: Don't smoke inside.

"Albany is going to be a smoke break," a young male voice declared over the intercom as the train hurtled northward. "Just a reminder, ladies and gentlemen," a voice like that of a female jazz radio D.J. warned on a westbound train. "This is a completely nonsmoking train." She added: "Your first official stop for a smoke break is Kansas City, Mo."

In winter, the 3:40 Lake Shore Limited experiences just 90 minutes of daylight before darkness descends for a majority of its journey west to Chicago. The first leg of the trip follows the Hudson River, revealing glimpses of hidden islands and idyllic ruins — like the crumbling remains of a fanciful 20th-century castle built by an arms dealer in need of an out-of-the-way place to stash his stores of live ammunition, some of which eventually exploded, creating the crumbling remains. At sunset, when all that was left of the day was a tangelo slash along the horizon, that same color flashed up from partly melted ice craters that caught the light as the train chugged past. Suddenly, the air outside the train became crows — thousands of crows, rushing in from all angles and alighting on the blue-white frozen river, as if deposited there by an unseen hand.

Sleep the first night came easily and, as it was interrupted several times, frequently. After performing the traditional nighttime rituals of climbing atop the toilet and carefully catapulting into bed, I was rewarded with the gentle rocking of a hammock experiencing a constant minor earthquake tremor. The atmosphere on board was librarylike; even the periodic train whistle sounded very far away, as if in someone else's dream.

[How to spend 47 hours on a train and not go crazy.]

AMONG THE TRAIN PEOPLE

The most unifying characteristic of my fellow passengers was not age (although, as a rule, the sleeping cars skewed retired), race (very mixed), income (while sleepers are astronomically priced, coach seats can be downright economical for shorter segments) or even fear of flying (no one I spoke to had it); it was their relaxed, easygoing, train-lulled contentment. To opt to travel long distance via Amtrak — a method deemed “on time” just 71.2 percent of the time by its own generous metric — is to say: As long as I get there eventually, I’m satisfied.

Train people are content to stare out the window for hours, like indoor cats. The trouble with the Lake Shore Limited is that the amount of enjoyment it is possible to derive from staring out the window of a train is inversely proportional to the population density of the land you are traversing. People need things, and unfortunately most of those things are ugly to look at. Many of them are gray. Views picked up considerably when, after a five-hour layover in Chicago, I transferred onto the Southwest Chief, a double-decker “Superliner” with many of its coach seats, sleeping quarters and lounges on the top level. Sightseer Lounges are the crown jewels of Amtrak’s long-distance trains: entire cars of retro-futuristic curved floor-to-ceiling windows where passengers can sit at tables or outward-facing upholstered chairs and watch the scenery streak by. Shortly into its route, the Chief passes the single best thing in the United States: a silo in Mendota, Ill., with an 80-by-20-foot ear of corn painted on one side.

Train people are also individuals for whom small talk is as invigorating as a rail of cocaine. For them, every meal on board Amtrak (communal seating like a Benihana, reservations only, included with the price of a sleeping-car ticket, check in with the dining-car attendant) is a rager. A white middle-aged man in motorcycle gear discussed leukemia treatment with a swish black grandmother. Another man, while gathering up armfuls of research books from a table, bid farewell to a farmer and suggested that he might run into him on the same train next year. I was seated at dinner with an Amish couple traveling to Arizona for a construction job, and by the time our Amtrak Signature Steaks with optional Béarnaise sauce arrived (the food is on a par with the fourth-best airplane meal you could ever imagine), we were deep in a conversation about one of my favorite topics, which is myself. I offered a tip I’d learned about cleaning up glitter using dryer

sheets, and they laughed as they tried to envision a situation in which this information could ever be useful.

“‘Who told you that?’ ” the husband asked himself, anticipating companions’ questions. “‘Some girl that writes in The New York Times!’ ”

“They’d never believe us,” mused his wife, who had ordered cheesecake for dinner.

At another meal, my table mates were a Missouri-based retired physician and her husband, a retired special-ed teacher, plus a retired architect from Arizona who was traveling alone. In the middle of a conversation about how they met their spouses, the architect suddenly seemed preoccupied with his iPhone. “I read one where it said,” he muttered into his chest, “‘Keep your photo of your wife when you met her.’ ” He lifted the phone and showed the table his lock screen: a black-and-white photo of a beautiful young woman in 1960s dress. I barely managed not to cry into my Land & Sea entree (Amtrak Signature Steak with optional Béarnaise sauce, plus additional crab, shrimp and scallop cake).

Back in my warm little room, there was something I couldn’t put my finger on that made it subtly nicer than my Lake Shore Limited accommodations, and that was the in-room toilet, because this roomette did not have one. I had been given a stationary pointing tour of the compartment by the Chief’s sleeping-car attendant — a middle-aged woman from a small town in Mexico, who, like every Amtrak attendant with whom I interacted over the course of three days, hummed along with the unflustered friendliness of a benevolent spirit continuing to go about its business in a hotel decades after the property has been converted into luxury condos. Her soothing voice made everything she said sound like the hurried recitation of a familiar recipe. Her assessment of me — “You are on vacation, you probably want to close the curtains and sleep and sleep, wake up and eat and then go and take another nap, it’s O.K., that’s why you are on vacation” — was delivered all in one breath.

ECSTASY IN THE SIGHTSEER LOUNGE

Kansas shares a border with Colorado. I never could have imagined that I would one day say this, and I know many people will be disconcerted by the statement. They will wonder if, this whole time, they have been reading an

avant-garde work of science fiction, or perhaps a Mad Lib. “Is magical realism always this scary?” they will ask themselves. Some will claim I am lying. Many will assume I am wrong, demented or a clumsy typist.

To all of whom I respond: The truth of our nation’s internal demarcations is stranger than fiction — stranger than even the kind of brilliant avant-garde science fiction I am most likely capable of producing yet choose not to. But the unvarnished fact is Colorado has to start somewhere, and for whatever reason, that’s inside Kansas.

I woke in Colorado to a weather phenomenon called the pogonip — freezing fog that condensed on tree limbs and sagebrush until they looked dusted with powdered sugar. The terrain of the Colorado tablelands is so flat that it seemed possible to detect the exact location where the pogonip ended and blue skies began, the margins of the changing landscape revealing themselves as definitively as gutters between panels of a newspaper comic.

A childlike compulsion to identify distant cows rippled through the observation car as we hurried along. So fast did we fly past baby deer that the “aw!”s caught in our throats. Whichever way you face, you are privy to an all-day show, although there is a nagging sensation that by being focused in one direction, you are missing something spectacular unfolding in another. Sometimes you are. Sometimes other people will even tell you you are, like when a grizzled stranger sat down next to me, close enough to be way too close, jerked his head behind us, growled, “That’s Pikes Peak” and walked away. Unknown to me, on the north side of the train, the Rockies had just begun to loom up out of the prairie.

Azure and golden orange were the colors of the afternoon. Action-movie posters are dominated by this color combination, famous for its vibrancy, and indeed, a horizon filled with just these hues seemed to draw the Sightseer Lounge into a kind of trance. For a long while there was nothing but sky and earth to observe — I saw actual tumbleweeds somersault by — yet everyone, me included, remained riveted to the windows. It was possible, in the Sightseer Lounge, to watch weather roll in from a great distance, even from one side of the car to the other. As we ascended hills covered in pinyon and juniper, flakes began to fall, and soon we were in a winter forest. As quickly as we had entered the snowscape, however, we were back in dusty New Mexican grasslands, rolling through a hailstorm of white birds.

Sunset pushed the denizens of the Sightseer Lounge to the brink of insanity, as all but the Amish frantically tried to capture the flame-colored sky on our cellphone cameras. A companionable mother I met earlier in the day, accompanying her own parents on a casino trip to Nevada, dashed from another car to make sure I was facing out of the best side of the lounge to photograph the heavens. When the sun dipped below the horizon, the sky turned the color of wet slate, then dark denim blue with a pale apricot smear that we chased west for several miles.

Scale on a rail trip is what's most arresting. We live so much of our lives close-up — scrolling through phones, watching our type appear on computer screens, scrutinizing papers, preparing meals, cleaning our homes room by room. Very few elements of our day-to-day tasks remain out of arms' reach. An extended train ride affords a chance not just to see a horizon but also to soak it up. To luxuriate in the far-off for uninterrupted hours. To exist, briefly, in the uncharted sections of the cellphone-coverage map.

And it feels as if you're getting away with something — seeing more than you deserve. The best part of the trip wasn't spying on the backyards of houses; it was out here, in the open. The bright hues of the nation's choropleth population-density maps fade to white in these areas, yet many of the most beautiful habitable parts of the United States, no offense to Boston, are contained within those colorless expanses. Amtrak takes advantage of this circumstance. It is fortunate that its routes were laid during a period of industrious optimism, when everyone assumed the West would soon be made as unbearable as the East; if they had known it would remain beautiful, it would have been difficult to justify the financial investment.

Lying in my berth, I felt as happy as an egg in an incubator with no plans to hatch. My mood was so upbeat that when I spotted a vitamin on the carpet, I optimistically assumed it was the one I'd been keeping in my pocket for weeks but forgetting to take, and I popped it in my mouth, reminding myself to look up the writing stamped on it later. It turned out to have been a supplement for adults 50 and over. I had become train-lulled.

When I awoke on the third day, we were about an hour behind schedule. It had happened, our attendant explained, when assistance for a handicapped passenger was slow to arrive at an overnight stop. "We can't rush them!" she chided (referring, presumably, to the passenger rather than the

assistance), though delay appeared to have dampened no moods; it meant that the sun rose over the San Bernardino Mountains at breakfast. As we approached our final destination, the scenery deteriorated, the red rock vistas replaced by heaps of wooden pallets stacked in strip-mall parking lots. When we pulled into the last stop on the line, the train was almost empty. I had surveyed thousands of miles of panoramic splendor, and I couldn't believe I had come all that way just to get to Los Angeles.

CAITY WEAVER is a writer at large for the magazine and a writer for *The Times's Styles* section. She last wrote for the magazine about the actress and comedian Maya Rudolph. **HOLLY ANDRES** is a photographer known for her cinematic style. She last photographed the figure skater Jason Brown for the magazine.

THIS ISSUE

RICK
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THE TRAVEL GURU
BELIEVES THE TINIEST
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BY SAM ANDERSON
PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY:

ZACHARY SCOTT

RICK STEVES CAN TELL YOU how to avoid having your pocket picked on the subway in Istanbul. He can tell you where to buy cookies from cloistered Spanish nuns on a hilltop in Andalusia. He can tell you approximately what percentage of Russia's gross domestic product comes from bribery. He can teach you the magic idiom that unlocks perfectly complementary gelato flavors in Florence ("What marries well?").

But Rick Steves does not know his way around New York City.

"In the Western Hemisphere," Steves told me one afternoon last March, "I am a terrible traveler."

We were, at that moment, very much inside the Western Hemisphere, 4,000 miles west of Rome, inching through Manhattan in a hired black car. Steves was in the middle of a grueling speaking tour of the United States: 21 cities in 34 days. New York was stop No.17. He had just flown in from Pittsburgh, where he had spent less than 24 hours, and he would soon be off to Los Angeles, Denver and Dallas. In his brief windows of down time, Steves did not go out searching for quaint restaurants or architectural treasures. He sat alone in his hotel rooms, clacking away on his laptop, working on new projects. His whole world, for the time being, had been reduced to a concrete blur of airports, hotels, lecture halls and media appearances.

In this town car, however, rolling through Midtown, Steves was brimming with delight. He was between a TV interview at the New York Stock Exchange and a podcast at CBS, and he seemed as enchanted by all the big-city bustle as the most wide-eyed tourist.

"Look at all the buildings!" he exclaimed. "There's so much energy! Man, oh, man!"

A woman crossed the street pushing two Yorkies in a stroller.

"How cute!" Steves shouted.

The town car crawled toward a shabby metal hulk spanning the East River.

“Wow!” Steves said. “Is that the Brooklyn Bridge?”

It was almost the opposite of the Brooklyn Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge is one of the most recognizable structures in the world: a stretched stone cathedral. This was its unloved upriver cousin, a tangle of discolored metal, vibrating with cars, perpetually under construction. The driver told Steves that it was the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge — or, as most New Yorkers still thought of it, the 59th Street Bridge.

This revelation only increased Steves’s wonder.

“The 59th Street Bridge!” he said. “That’s one of my favorite songs!”

With buoyant enthusiasm, Steves started to sing Simon and Garfunkel’s classic 1966 tune “The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy).”

“Slow down, you move too fast,” he sang. “You got to make the mornin’ last — just — kickin’ down the cobblestones. ...”

The car hit traffic and lurched to a stop. Steves paused to scan the street outside. “Where are the cobblestones?” he asked. Then he refocused. He finished the song with a flourish: “Lookin’ for fun and feelin’ — GROOOVYYYYYYY!”

There was a silence in the car.

“Can you imagine those two guys walking around right here?” Steves said. “Just feeling groovy? Gosh, that’s cool.”

Steves pulled out his phone and, for his online fans, recorded a video of himself singing “The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy).”

“It’s fun to be in New York City,” he signed off. “Happy travels!”

There was another silence in the car, this one longer.

“You know,” the driver said finally, “you’re not very different than you are on your show.”

This was correct. The driver was referring to Steves’s long-running, widely syndicated, family-friendly public-television travel series, “Rick Steves’ Europe,” on which Steves is a joyful and jaunty host, all eager-beaver smiles and expressive head tilts. With a backpack over one shoulder and a hand tucked into his pocket, Steves gushes poetically about England’s Lake

District (“a lush land steeped in a rich brew of history, culture and nature”) and Erfurt, Germany (“this half-timbered medieval town with a shallow river gurgling through its center”) and Istanbul (“this sprawling metropolis on the Bosphorus”) and Lisbon (“like San Francisco, but older and grittier and less expensive”). He reclines jauntily atop the cliffs of Dover and is vigorously scrubbed in a Turkish bath. The show has aired now for nearly 20 years, and in that time, among travelers, Steves has established himself as one of the legendary PBS superdorks — right there in the pantheon with Mr. Rogers, Bob Ross and Big Bird. Like them, Steves is a gentle soul who wants to help you feel at home in the world. Like them, he seems miraculously untouched by the need to look cool, which of course makes him sneakily cool. To the aspiring traveler, Steves is as inspirational as Julia Child once was to the aspiring home chef.

[Read a profile of Terry Gross, the host of “Fresh Air.”]

Eventually, Steves’s busy New York day ended on the Upper East Side, where he was scheduled to give a talk at a Barnes & Noble. As we drove to the event, Steves confessed that he wasn’t sure what kind of crowd he would get. You never knew exactly where his Rickniks (as the hard-core fans call themselves) would materialize en masse. Some Steves appearances were mobbed; others were sparse. His appeal is slightly cultish. For every Ricknik out in the world, a large contingent of average people have no idea who he is.

I was mildly skeptical about Steves’s drawing power in New York. It was hard to imagine a bunch of cynical, worldly, urban, polyglot, multicultural East Coast sophisticates — people who probably vacationed at deconsecrated eco-hostels in Oman or Madagascar — getting excited about public television’s reigning expert on Europe.

We arrived, however, to find the bookstore overflowing. A solid wave of applause met Steves at the door. Fans had been pouring in, the organizer told us, for two solid hours. People sat in the aisles and stood in the back. Some wore T-shirts and hats bearing the Rick Steves slogan: “Keep on Travelin’.” The crowd’s body heat overwhelmed the building’s climate control.

I noticed a group of hipster 20-somethings standing near the back, and at first I assumed they had all come sarcastically. But as Steves began to speak, they grinned and laughed with absolute earnestness. Everyone here was, apparently, a superfan. At one point, Steves showed a slide of tourists

swimming in a sunny French river underneath a Roman aqueduct, and the whole crowd gasped. When he mentioned that his website featured a special video devoted to packing light for women, a woman in the crowd actually pumped her fist.

At the end of his talk, Steves offered to sign books — but not in the traditional way. There were too many people for a signing table, he said, and anyway, single-file lines were always inefficient. (This is one of his travel credos: avoid waiting in line.) Instead of sitting down, Steves walked out into the center of the room and invited everyone to open their books and surround him. He pulled out a Sharpie. And then he started to spin. Steves held out his pen and signed book after book after book, fluidly, on the move, smiling as the crowd pressed in. “We went to Portugal on our honeymoon,” a man shouted. “How romantic!” Steves answered, still spinning. A woman asked him where to celebrate Christmas in Europe. Steves, in midrotation, still signing furiously, told her that he had made a whole special about precisely that question and that it was available free on his website. “Keep on travelin’, Rick!” someone shouted. “Keep on travelin’!” Steves shouted back. As he spun, Steves thanked everyone and gave quick, off-the-cuff advice. In an astonishingly short time, he had signed every book. The people were satisfied. The crowd thinned. Steves finally came to a stop.

RICK STEVES IS ABSOLUTELY AMERICAN. He wears jeans every single day. He drinks frozen orange juice from a can. He likes his hash browns burned, his coffee extra hot. He dislikes most fancy restaurants; when he’s on the road, he prefers to buy a foot-long Subway sandwich and split it between lunch and dinner. He has a great spontaneous honk of a laugh — it bursts out of him, when he is truly delighted, with the sharpness of a firecracker on the Fourth of July. Steves is so completely American that when you stop to really look at his name, you realize it’s just the name Rick followed by the plural of Steve — that he is a one-man crowd of absolutely regular everyday American guys: one Rick, many Steves. Although Steves spends nearly half his life traveling, he insists, passionately, that he would never live anywhere but the United States — and you know when he says it that this is absolutely true. In fact, Steves still lives in the small Seattle suburb where he grew up, and every morning he walks to work on the same block, downtown, where his parents owned a piano store 50 years ago. On Sundays, Steves wears his jeans to church, where he plays the congas, with great arm-pumping spirit, in the inspirational soft-rock band that serenades the congregation before the service starts, and then he sits down

and sings classic Lutheran hymns without even needing to refer to the hymnal. Although Steves has published many foreign-language phrase books, the only language he speaks fluently is English. He built his business in America, raised his kids in America and gives frequent loving paeans to the glories of American life.

And yet: Rick Steves desperately wants you to leave America. The tiniest exposure to the outside world, he believes, will change your entire life. Travel, Steves likes to say, “wallops your ethnocentricity” and “carbonates your experience” and “rearranges your cultural furniture.” Like sealed windows on a hot day, a nation’s borders can be stultifying. Steves wants to crack them open, to let humanity’s breezes circulate. The more rootedly American you are, the more Rick Steves wants this for you. If you have never had a passport, if you are afraid of the world, if your family would prefer to vacation exclusively at Walt Disney World, if you worry that foreigners are rude and predatory and prone to violence or at least that their food will give you diarrhea, then Steves wants you — especially you — to go to Europe. Then he wants you to go beyond. (For a majority of his audience, Steves says, “Europe is the wading pool for world exploration.”) Perhaps, like him, you will need large headphones and half a tab of Ambien to properly relax on the flight, but Steves wants you to know that it will be worth it. He wants you to stand and make little moaning sounds on a cobblestone street the first time you taste authentic Italian gelato — flavors so pure they seem like the primordial essence of peach or melon or pistachio or rice distilled into molecules and stirred directly into your own molecules. He wants you to hike on a dirt path along a cliff over the almost-too-blue Mediterranean, with villages and vineyards spilling down the rugged mountains above you. He wants you to arrive at the Parthenon at dusk, just before it closes, when all the tour groups are loading back onto their cruise ships, so that you have the whole place to yourself and can stand there feeling like a private witness to the birth, and then the ruination, of Western civilization.

Steves wants you to go to Europe for as long as you can afford to, and he also wants to help you afford it. (Much of his guru energy is focused on cutting costs.) He wants you to go as many times as possible, and while you’re there, he wants you to get way down deep into the culture, to eat with locals in the teeming markets, to make a sympathetic fool of yourself, to get entirely lost in your lack of America.

Out of this paradoxical desire — the enlightenment of Americans through their extraction from America — Steves has built his quirky travel empire. His guidebooks, which started as hand-typed and photocopied information packets for his scraggly 1970s tour groups, now dominate the American market; their distinctive blue-and-yellow spines brighten the travel sections of bookstores everywhere. Steves is less interested in reaching sophisticated travelers than he is in converting the uninitiated. (“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents,” the Bible tells us, “than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.”) Last year, his company led close to 30,000 paying customers on dozens of elaborate European itineraries. Steves teaches his followers everything from how to pack a toiletries kit to how to make themselves at home in a small hotel room to how to appreciate a religious tradition they may have been raised to despise. (In order to enjoy St. Peter’s Basilica, Steves admits, he had to learn to “park my Protestant sword at the door.”) He is a sort of spiritual travel agent for America’s curious but hesitant middle classes. He is simultaneously goofy and dead serious; he can ping, in an instant, from golly-gee Pollyanna cheerfulness to deep critiques of the modern world. In a series of long, affectionate, candid conversations, Steves’s colleagues described him to me using the words “sophomoric,” “knucklehead” and “Santa Claus” — but also “juggernaut,” “evangelical” and “revolutionary.” Rick Steves wants us to travel because it’s fun, yes, but also because he believes it might actually save the world.

I CAN TESTIFY, firsthand, to the power of Rick Steves. In 1998, he spoke at my college. Nothing about the encounter seemed promising. Our campus was a tiny outpost in a tiny town, and Steves delivered his talk not in some grand lecture hall but in a drab room in the basement of the student union. I was poor, shy, anxious, sheltered, repressed and extremely pale. I was a particular kind of Pacific Northwest white guy — blind to myself and my place in the world. I had never really traveled; I was more comfortable on Greyhound buses than on airplanes. Going to Europe seemed like something aristocrats did, like fox hunting or debutante balls.

My girlfriend dragged me to the talk. I had never even heard of Steves. He entered looking like the kind of guy who would bring an acoustic guitar to every single church picnic within a two-hour radius of his favorite Applebee’s: large glasses, floppy hair, bluejeans, wholesome grin. But what he said over the next hour or so changed the rest of my life.

It's hard to describe how thoroughly energized Steves becomes in front of a crowd. He paces, gesticulates and speaks very fast. He tells his favorite old jokes as if they were eternally new. ("Eet smells like zee feet of angels," the French cheesemonger always exclaims.) Onstage, he is a combination of preacher, comedian, salesman, life-hacker, professor and inspirational speaker. Steves told us, that day, how to pack our entire lives into a single bag measuring 9 by 22 by 14 inches. ("It's enlightened to pack light," Steves insists. "It's a blessing to pack light.") He told us how to find excellent cheap hotels, how to survive on minimalist picnics in public parks, how to wash clothing in bathroom sinks and how to make friends without sharing a language. Steves's signature book, "Europe Through the Back Door," seemed less like a travel philosophy than a whole mode of being: scrappy, prepared, independent, extroverted. Europe's front door, he told us, was positioned to feed travelers directly into exploitation: overpriced cafes, trinket shops, long lines, corporate high-rise hotels. The back door, by contrast, led to revelations. He showed us impossibly enticing photos: cobblestone piazzas teeming with fruit stalls, quirky wooden hotels among wildflowers in the Alps, vast arsenals of multicolored cheese. He made travel seem less like a luxury than a necessary exploration of the self, a civic responsibility, a basic courtesy to your fellow humans. It seemed almost unreasonable *not* to go. Above all, Steves told us, do not be afraid. The people of the world are wonderful, and the planet we share is spectacular. But the only way to really understand that is to go and see it for yourself. So go.

My girlfriend and I left the room converts to the gospel of Rick Steves. We bought his book and highlighted it to near-meaninglessness. We started mapping itineraries, squirreling away money, asking relatives for donations. (In probably the worst phone call of my life, my rancher grandfather expressed shock and dismay that I would ask him to support this meaningless overseas lark.) Eventually, over many months, we scraped together just enough to buy plane tickets and order minimalist Steves-approved supplies, including a travel towel so thin and nonabsorbent that it seemed to just push the moisture around your skin until you forgot you were wet. We packed exactly as Steves taught us: T-shirts rolled into space-saving noodles, just enough clothes to get us from one hotel laundry session to the next. Then, for the first time in our lives, we left North America.

One of Steves's strongest recommendations is to keep a journal. Mine was so corny that its cover actually said "A TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK" over a

picture of the Eiffel Tower. When I opened it recently, the reality of that long-ago trip hissed out with fresh urgency. My 20-year-old self recorded everything. On our first day in Europe, we bought imported Austrian apples with fat, heavy English coins and saw a woman stumble on a staircase, breaking an entire bag of newly bought china. We arrived at our first hostel, the Y.M.C.A. in Bath, to find a man urinating in the stairwell — so we kept walking until we happened into a nearby churchyard, where the gravestones were so old and thin they were almost translucent. As we tried to make out the names of the dead, songbirds sang strenuously in the trees all around us. This juxtaposition — old death, new life — blew my jet-lagged American mind. “Already, after just one day in Bath,” I wrote in my journal, “the world has grown firmer. Reality fills its gaps.”

That, more or less, was the theme of the trip. For six weeks, we followed the Steves game plan. We shared squalid bunks with other young travelers from Denmark, Australia, Canada and Japan. In the stately public parks of Paris, we ate rotisserie chickens with our bare hands. One stifling afternoon at the Colosseum in Rome, we watched a worker slam his ladder against the edge of an arch and break off some ancient bricks. (He looked over at us, looked down at the bricks, kicked dirt over them and kept working.) We were moved by Van Gogh, Picasso and Gaudí, but unmoved by Versailles (“more vain than beautiful,” I wrote), bullfighting (“more brutal than artful”) and Goya (“vague and blurry”). Once, I left my underwear on a Mediterranean beach overnight and, since I could not afford to lose a pair, had to go back and pick it up the next day, in full view of all the sunbathers.

Wherever we went, Rick Steves was with us. In my journal, I referred to him half-jokingly as our “worldly uncle and guiding light,” and as we walked around, I annoyed my girlfriend by doing impressions of him. We seemed to have entered the world of his slides: the fruit markets and overnight trains, the sunny French river under the ancient Roman aqueduct. Sometimes our European hosts, with the quiet pride of someone who once met Elvis, told us stories about Steves. He was a gentleman, they said, a truly good man, and he always came in person to check out their hotels, and he never failed to ask them how their children were doing.

By the end of our trip, we were completely broke. We couldn’t afford even a baguette on our last day in Paris. We flew home looking ragged, shaggy, weather-beaten and exhausted.

But of course Steves was right: Our lives were never the same. We were still young Americans, but we felt liberated and empowered, like true citizens of the world. The most important things we learned all had to do with home. As the English writer G.K. Chesterton once put it, in a quote I found printed in my corny old travel journal: “The whole object of travel is not to set foot on foreign land; it is at last to set foot on one’s own country as a foreign land.” After looking at a Roman stone wall topped by a Saxon stone wall topped by a medieval English wall next to a modern paved street, I began to see what a thin crust of national history the United States actually stands on. I began to realize how silly and narrow our notion of exceptionalism is — this impulse to consider ourselves somehow immune to the forces that shape the rest of the world. The environment I grew up in, with its malls and freeways, its fantasies of heroic individualism, began to seem unnatural. I started to sense how much reality exists elsewhere in the world — not just in a theoretical sense, in books and movies, but with the full urgent weight of the real. And not just in Europe but on every other continent, all the time, forever. I began to realize how much I still had to learn before I could pretend to understand anything. Not everyone needs Steves’s help to get to this point. Some people get there themselves, or their communities help them. But I needed him, and I am eternally glad I was dragged that day to see him talk.

[How to eat in Venice like a Venetian.]

STEVES ANSWERED his front door slightly distracted. I had come in the middle of his breakfast preparations. He was stirring a block of frozen orange juice into a pitcher of water. “Freshly squeezed from the can!” he quipped. This was April 2018, exactly 20 years after my first trip to Europe. I had come to see Steves in the most exotic place possible: his home. He lives just north of Seattle, in a town so rainy it has a free umbrella-share program. There is nothing particularly exotic about the house itself. It has beige carpeting, professionally trimmed shrubs and a back deck with a hot tub. What was exotic was simply that Steves was there. He had just returned from his frenetic speaking tour of the United States and would be leaving almost immediately on his annual trip to Europe. For now, he was making breakfast: frozen blueberries, Kashi cereal, O.J. “I would eat this every day for the rest of my life if I could,” he said.

But of course, he could not. Steves is gone too much, yo-yoing between the misty forests of the Pacific Northwest and the sun-baked cathedrals of Europe. Every year, no matter what else is going on, Steves spends at least

four months practicing the kind of travel he has preached for 40-odd years: hauling his backpack up narrow staircases in cheap hotels, washing his clothes in sinks, improvising picnics.

He is now 63, and he could afford to retire many times over. But he doesn't have the metabolism for sitting around. Among his colleagues, Steves is a notorious workaholic. After grueling days of filming in Europe, he has been known to slip script revisions under the crew's doors at 2 a.m., and then to ask them, at breakfast, for their feedback. On long car rides, he sits in the back seat and types op-eds on his laptop. His relentless hands-on control of every aspect of his business is what has distinguished the Rick Steves brand.

It is also, obviously, exhausting — if not for Steves, then at least for the people around him. He has two children, now grown, and for much of their childhoods, Steves was gone. He was building his company, changing the world. For very long stretches, his wife was forced to be a single mother. (She and Steves divorced in 2010 after 25 years of marriage.) Every summer, when the family joined Steves in Europe, his pace hardly slackened: They would cover major cities in 48 hours, blitzing through huge museums back to back. The kids complained so much, on one trip, that Steves finally snapped — if they were so miserable, he said, they could just go sit in the hotel room all day and play video games. They remember this day as heaven. One year, while Steves was away, the children converted to Catholicism. His son, Andy Steves, eventually went into the family business: He now works as a tour guide and even published a European guidebook.

Steves is fully aware that his obsessive work ethic is unusual. He admits that he has regrets. But he cannot make himself stop. He has the fervor of the true evangelist: The more people he meets, the more cities he visits, the more lives he might change. At one point, as we talked, he pulled out the itinerary for his coming trip — from Sicily to Iceland, with no down time whatsoever. Just looking at it made him giddy. I asked why he couldn't ease up slightly — maybe just spend two months in Europe, maybe just speak in 10 American cities.

“It's a strange thing,” he said. “I get energy from it. It's like I'm breathing straight oxygen. What would I do if I stayed home? Not much. Nothing I would remember.”

In his house, Steves offered up a little show and tell. He pointed out an antique silver cigarette lighter shaped like the Space Needle. He sat down at his baby grand piano and lost himself, for a few happy minutes, playing Scarlatti. He took me to a room filled with books and reached up to a very high shelf. “I don’t show this to too many people,” he said, “because they’ll think I’m nuts.” Steves pulled down a thick red binder, the contents of which were, indeed, pretty nutty. When Steves was 13, he decided, for no apparent reason, to conduct a deep statistical analysis of the 1968 Billboard pop charts. Every week, he would clip the rankings out of his local newspaper and, using a point system of his own devising, graph the top bands’ success on sheets of gridded paper. The lines were multicolored and interwoven — it looked like the subway map of some fantastical foreign city. You could see, at a glance, the rising and falling fortunes of the Beatles (red) and Creedence Clearwater Revival (black) and Elvis Presley (dots and dashes). Steves kept this up for three years, taping together many pieces of graph paper, and in the end he summarized the data in an authoritative-looking table that he typed on the family typewriter. This is what was in that binder: a systematic breakdown of the most successful bands from 1968 to 1970, as determined by the objective statistics of an analytical adolescent weirdo. (The winners, of course, were the Beatles — 1,739 points — followed by Creedence, Simon and Garfunkel, Neil Diamond.)

Steves laughed. It was ridiculous. But it was also a perfect window into his mind. Even at 13, a powerful energy was coiled inside him — an unusual combination of obsession and precision, just waiting for some worthwhile project to burst out in.

And that, coincidentally, was exactly when he found it: the project of his life. In the summer of 1969, when Steves was 14, his parents took him to Europe. They owned a business tuning and importing pianos, and they wanted to see factories firsthand. Steves approached this first trip abroad with the same meticulous energy he brought to his Billboard graphs. As he traveled around the continent, he recorded the essential data of his journey on the backs of postcards: locations, activities, weather, expenses. One day, Steves spent 40 cents on fishing gear. Another, he met a 79-year-old man who had witnessed the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. To keep everything in order, Steves numbered the postcards sequentially. He still has them all packed lovingly into an old wooden box.

On that same formative trip, the Steves family visited relatives in Norway. They happened to be there in July 1969, when Neil Armstrong walked on

the moon. “*Ett lite skritt for et menneske,*” the television said, “*ett stort sprang for menneskeheten.*” In that moment, in that strange place, young Rick Steves felt the concept of “*menneskeheten*” — “mankind” — at a depth he never would have been able to access back home. Europe was a crash course in cultural relativity. In a park in Oslo, he had an epiphany: The foreign humans around him, he realized, were leading existences every bit as rich and full as his own. “Right there,” he would write later, “my 14-year-old egocentric worldview took a huge hit.” A life-changing realization clicked into place. “This planet must be home to billions of equally lovable children of God.”

That first trip set the course for everything that followed. When Steves was 18, he went back to Europe without his parents. Soon, life in America became a series of interludes between travel. He taught piano to earn money, then stretched that money as far as he possibly could, sleeping on church pews and park benches, in empty barns and construction zones, from Western Europe to Afghanistan. He turned his cheapness into a science. Instead of paying for a hotel room in a city, Steves would use his Railpass and sleep on a train for the night — four hours out, four hours back. He would stuff himself on free breakfast bread, then try to eat as little as possible for the rest of the day. Naturally, he recorded all this, and today he has an impressive archive of old travel journals. Their pages preserve, in tiny handwriting, shadowy young dissidents in Moscow, diarrhea in Bulgaria, revolution in Nicaragua.

In his 20s, Steves brought his wide-roaming wisdom back to the United States. He started to supplement his piano teaching with travel seminars. His signature class, European Travel Cheap, ran for six hours. Steves could have talked longer than that, but it struck him as impractical for his students. In Europe, he rented a nine-foot minibus and started to lead small tours. Eventually, his seminars and tour notes morphed into his books. The first edition of “Europe Through the Back Door,” published in 1980, was typed on a rented IBM Selectric. It had no ISBN and looked so amateurish that bookstores assumed it was an early review copy. “Anyone caught reprinting any material herein for any purpose whatsoever will be thanked profusely,” it said. This was the birth of the Rick Steves empire.

RICK STEVES BOTH is and is not his TV persona. Offscreen, he allows himself to be much more explicitly political. He has the passion of the autodidact. Growing up, Steves led a relatively sheltered existence: He was a white, comfortable, middle-class baby boomer in a white, comfortable,

middle-class pocket of America. Travel did for him what he promises it will do for everyone else: It put him in contact with other realities. He saw desperate poverty in Iran and became obsessed with economic injustice. He started searching for answers in books, scribbling notes in the margins of “Bread for the World,” by Arthur Simon, and “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” by Hannah Arendt. He studied the war industry and colonial exploitation. The first time Steves traveled to Central America, he came back so outraged that he wrote a fiery tract called “There’s Blood on Your Banana,” then flew to Washington and hand-delivered a copy to the office of every member of Congress.

In the early days, Steves injected political lessons into his European tours. Sometimes he would arrive in a city with no hotel reservations, just to make his privileged customers feel the anxiety of homelessness. In Munich, he would set up camp in an infamous hippie circus tent, among all the countercultural wanderers of Europe.

Today, Steves is more strategic. His most powerful tool, he realizes, is his broad appeal. He has an uncanny knack for making serious criticism feel gentle and friendly. Often he disguises critiques of America with a rhetorical move that I like to think of as “U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.! (But. ...)” “I’m unapologetically proud to be an American,” he writes in the introduction to his book “Travel as a Political Act.” “The happiest day of any trip is the day I come home. ... But other nations have some pretty good ideas too.”

That’s when he hits his audience with legal prostitution, high tax rates and universal health care.

When I asked Steves about this strategy, he chuckled.

“It’s not America-bashing,” he said. “It’s America-loving. I think it’s loving America to look at it critically. But you’ve got to set it up. You’ve got to allay people’s concerns that you’re a communist. So you explain to them: I’m a capitalist, I make a lot of money, I employ a lot of people, I love the laws of supply and demand. It seems kind of silly, but you’ve got to say that. Then, especially the husbands who are dragged there by their wives, they go, ‘I thought he was a commie, but he’s O.K.’ And then you don’t need to be too gentle. You can confront people with a different perspective, and you’ll get through.”

Steves learned this strategy, he said, from his early days running tours, living with the same people for weeks at a time. Survival required being pleasant. People didn't want grating lectures about America's shortcomings — even if that was sometimes his instinct. Instead, he pointed out different perspectives with a smile. He became fluent in the needs of American tourists. “I know what their buttons are,” he said. “I know what their attention span is. I don't want to just preach to the choir. I want to preach to organizations that need to hear this, so I need to compromise a little bit so the gatekeepers let it through to their world.”

This balancing act has become increasingly difficult over the past two decades, in a world of terrorism, war, nationalism and metastasizing partisanship. After the Sept. 11 attacks, most travel companies anticipated that the bottom was about to fall out of the market. They canceled tours and cut back budgets. Steves, however, remained defiantly optimistic. He promised his staff that there would be no cuts, no layoffs and no shift in message. He insisted that a world in crisis needed travel more, not less. Soon the shock of Sept. 11 turned into the Iraq war, which strained the relationship between the United States and even its closest European allies, sending the travel industry deeper into its trough. In his hometown, Steves caused a controversy when he walked around removing rows of American flags that had been set up in support of the war. It was, he argued, an act of patriotism: The flag is meant to represent all Americans, not just war supporters. “I was shark-bait on Seattle's right-wing radio talk shows for several days,” he wrote.

Lately, Steves concedes, his political message has begun to take over his teaching. In “Travel as a Political Act,” the familiar elements of his guidebooks — walking tours, museum guides, hotel reviews — are replaced by rabble-rousing cultural critique. Steves expresses deep admiration for Scandinavian-style social democracy and calls out many of America's faults: our addiction to cars and guns and mass incarceration; our deference to corporations; our long history of cultural imperialism (“one of the ugliest things one nation can do is write another nation's textbooks”). Some moments in the book verge on un-American. “Sometimes, when I'm frustrated with the impact of American foreign policy on the developing world,” Steves writes, “I have this feeling that an impotent America is better for the world than an America whose power isn't always used for good.”

Occasionally, despite his best efforts, Steves still ruffles feathers. Recent TV specials have covered Iran — “I believe if you’re going to bomb a place,” Steves has written, “you should know its people first” — and the rise of fascism in Europe. In a special about the Holy Land, Steves refers unapologetically to “Palestine” instead of “the West Bank” or “Palestinian territories”; some viewers were so outraged that they told Steves they were removing PBS from their wills. After one recent speech in the Deep South, event organizers refused to pay Steves — their conservative sponsors, he learned, considered his message a form of liberal propaganda.

In recent years, Steves has become a happy warrior for an unlikely cause: the legalization of marijuana. He first tried the drug in Afghanistan, in the 1970s, in the name of cultural immersion, and he was fascinated by its effect on his mind. Today, he is a board member of Norml, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, and a regular speaker at Hempfest. In his headquarters you will find a poster of the Mona Lisa holding a gargantuan spliff. In 2012, Steves campaigned hard for Washington State’s successful legalization initiative, and since then he has barnstormed other states (Oregon, Maine, Vermont and more) to make sure the civil liberties are properly passed around. On a shelf in his living room, right there among all the European knickknacks, Steves displays a sizable bong.

Sometimes, fans urge Steves to run for office. When I asked him if he would ever get into politics, he had an answer ready: “I already am.” Good travel teaching, in his eyes, is inherently political. To stay in a family-owned hotel in Bulgaria is to strengthen global democracy; to pack light is to break the iron logic of consumerism; to ride a train across Europe is to challenge the fossil-fuel industry. Travel, to Steves, is not some frivolous luxury — it is an engine for improving humankind, for connecting people and removing their prejudices, for knocking distant cultures together to make unlikely sparks of joy and insight. Given that millions of people have encountered the work of Steves over the last 40 years, on TV or online or in his guidebooks, and that they have carried those lessons to untold other millions of people, it is fair to say that his life’s work has had a real effect on the collective life of our planet. When people tell Steves to stay out of politics, to stick to travel, he can only laugh.

“It’s flattering to think I could run for office,” he admitted. “And it would be exciting. But I think I’m accomplishing more right now than I would in

office, and I'm having more fun. I'm skiing with beautiful wax on my skis. When I want to do something, I can do it."

Steves is deeply indifferent to creature comforts. When I visited him, the back seat of his car was covered with a greenish slime, practically disintegrating, because of a mysterious leak. He just cracked the windows to try to dry it out. Steves prefers to spend his money on his favorite causes. His activism can be quirky and impulsive. In 2011, after hearing that his local symphony orchestra was struggling, he stepped in with a gift of \$1 million, spread over 10 years, to help keep it operating. (This, pointedly, was how much money he would get back from President George W. Bush's tax cut over a decade.) Last year, during a chat with one of the national leaders of the Lutheran Church, Steves wondered how much it would cost to send every single Lutheran congregation in the United States a DVD of his recent TV special about Martin Luther. It was something like \$30,000; Steves happily wrote the check. In the 1990s, working in partnership with the Y.W.C.A., he started investing his retirement savings in local real estate in order to house homeless mothers and their children. The plan was to take that money out of the banking system and let it do a few decades of social good, at which point Steves could sell the buildings to fund his retirement. Eventually he worked his way up to buying a whole 24-unit apartment complex — and then he donated it outright to the Y.W.C.A. The mothers, he said, needed it more than he would.

Steves is obsessed with the problem of poverty and amazed at our perpetual misunderstanding of it. "It's not just: You screwed up, so you're poor," he said. "There's a *structure* that keeps half of humanity poor. This needs to be talked about. I can do it, and I can get away with it." His next TV special, in production now, will investigate extreme poverty and hunger through two very different non-European countries: Guatemala and Ethiopia. In the meantime, all the royalties of his latest book — an updated edition of "Travel as a Political Act" — are being donated to Bread for the World, an organization that lobbies on behalf of hungry people. He is working on making his company's tours completely carbon-neutral.

"If I was trying to build a career on the speaking circuit — if I was struggling, and I needed these gigs — I would not talk about that stuff," he said. "I could just talk about light stuff, and everybody would love it. But I'm not working right now to do that. I'm not trying to get anywhere that I'm not already. I don't need to be anything I'm not. I'm 63 years old. I could retire now. But I'm ramping up."

Indeed, Steves's business has been booming. Once the travel market finally recovered, some years after Sept. 11, Steves occupied a disproportionately big share of it — precisely because he had refused to scale back. By taking a principled stand, Steves flourished. Today, his chipper voice is reaching more Americans than ever. “Fear,” as Steves likes to say, “is for people who don't get out very much.”

[4 stops for a woman-focused trip to Seoul.]

ONE NIGHT, in his living room, Steves pulled out a plain black notebook. “Here's something you might find interesting,” he said with his trademark cheer, and he flipped open to a random page and prepared to read aloud. I was familiar, by then, with Steves's deep archive of old travel journals, and so I settled in to listen to further adventures from 1975 Moscow or 1997 Paris. This, however, was something else entirely — a record of a very different kind of journey.

“Getting high,” Steves read, “releases the human in me.”

“Intelligence is a rubber band,” he continued. “Getting high is stretching it.”

I was sitting in the beige living room of America's foremost travel guru, underneath framed reproductions of popular European masterworks, and my mind was about to be well and truly blown. For the next 20 minutes, Steves would read me koans about the glories of being stoned.

“High is the present,” he read.

“When you're high, you debate long and hard over whether to put on your sweater or turn up the heat.”

This journal, Steves explained, contained what he called his “High Notes.” For nearly 40 years, he had been writing in it exclusively after smoking marijuana. He would get baked, open up to somewhere in the middle and jot down whatever he happened to be thinking — deep or shallow, silly or angry. There is no chronology; on every page, axioms from many different decades commingle. It is a lifelong treasury of Steves's stoner thoughts.

He continued to read.

“As soon as I stop mattering so much, I'll be happier.”

“A baby doesn’t know if the hanging is on the wall or if the wall is on the hanging.”

“Make a rug with vacuum marks, so it always looks freshly vacuumed.”

The entries covered an impressively wide territory. Some were little shreds of oracular poetry (“We all have a divine harness”), while others were dashed-off semi-witticisms (“Wolfgang von Bewildered”) or bitter social critiques (“The spiritual cesspool of America — our shopping malls”). “They don’t let you into heaven without calluses on your soul,” he read at one point. “Suffer or weep.” There were scraps of humorous dialogue (“ ‘Nothing is wrong with an ego!’ he bellowed”) and sentences that would have made great bumper stickers on rusting VW buses: “I’d like to be quarantined from reality.”

I found myself wondering, for the thousandth time: Who *does* this? What kind of mind not only thinks of such a project but actually follows through with it, decade after decade after decade? Who, for God’s sake, is this disciplined when they’re high?

As Steves read, he interrupted himself again and again with great shouting honks of laughter, and I cackled right along with him. Then, suddenly, with almost no transition, we would find ourselves deep in earnest conversation about the nature of true happiness or the dangers of ambition. And then we would suddenly be cackling again. We were, in other words, getting high on Steves’s “High Notes.”

He kept reading.

“I’ve been craning my mind to see you,” he said.

“I feel like a hungry bird, but I won’t eat any worm I don’t like.”

Steves showed me complex analytical graphs about true love and divorce rates, about the way music sounds when you’re high versus sober, about the degrees of honesty possible with the various people in your life. (“Scale of Unconditional Regard,” this last one was called.) One page of the journal had a strand of hair taped to it, labeled “split end.” There was a drawing of a woman’s breasts. And of course there were many, many more descriptions of getting high itself. “Getting high is like roasting an English muffin,” Steves read. “You start out cold and doughy, and you toast it to a crisp brown, and just a little more and you get all black and burned.”

At some point, he looked up from the journal. “To me,” he said, “this is a precious thing. Because this is *me*.”

He kept reading.

“Time spent socially is time spent at the expense of personal betterment,” he said.

He shook his head. That’s how he had thought when he was young. “That’s my problem,” he added ruefully. “I work all the time.”

Then he kept reading.

“When I die,” he read, “scatter me all over the budget hotels of Europe.”

SAM ANDERSON is a staff writer at the magazine and the author of “*Boom Town*,” a book about Oklahoma City. In 2017, he won a National Magazine Award for his article about Michelangelo’s “David.” **ZACHARY SCOTT** is a photographer known for his humorous and highly stylized work, which has been featured in the magazine’s *Year in Ideas* and *Comedy Issues*.

WHEN MY WIFE and I were married, my mother-in-law told us she had a special gift for us. I wasn’t sure what to expect. She didn’t tell us what the gift was, but she did tell us where it was. In Sweden, on an island, in the forest.

AS WITH ALL magical places, getting to the island in Sweden requires some effort (particularly as my wife, son and I live in Los Angeles). After the plane, the train and a car ride to the countryside, a boat ferries us across the lake from the mainland. There are only a handful of cottages — with no electricity or running water — on the island. It hasn’t been developed (and, I hope, never will be). The forest service long ago gave over the island’s forest management to nature, so the place is thick with trees: gangly evergreens and white birch, as well as wildflowers, blueberry plants and many others. The island is only about 50 acres, but it’s quite easy to get lost. Distances walking in the forest are hard to determine. You spend so much time walking over, under and around branches, brush and fallen trees that a simple hike can quickly become a disorienting journey. There are no straight lines in a forest.

IN SWEDEN, mushrooms are like gold. Specifically chanterelle mushrooms. Aside from their high cost and their subtle earthy flavor (cooked in butter and served on toast), their value is enhanced by how late in the season they grow. So Swedes are extremely protective of their chanterelle patches. And though the custom of *allemansrätten* (“freedom to roam”) allows everyone access to walk and forage on all lands, when a patch is discovered deep in the forest, people sometimes record the GPS coordinates and pass them down like a closely guarded secret.

THE DAY MY mother-in-law took us for our first walk, everything seemed slow and quiet (besides the buzz of the mosquitoes). I listened to her tell stories of playing here as a child; exploring it made me feel young, and nostalgic for a past I had never lived. I marched behind my wife and was careful when stepping over fallen trees or catching branches she bent back to allow me to pass. I noticed too that colors were brighter — particularly the striking golden-yellow chanterelles, whose unusual billowing shapes sometimes reminded me of linens blowing on a clothesline or tiny versions of Marilyn Monroe’s dress in “The Seven Year Itch.” Once I reoriented myself to searching like this, it became sport to find them. Some mushrooms you can eat, and some can make you very sick. Animals know this, and people who spend lots of time in the forest know this. My mother-in-law knows.

I wasn’t sure how far we had walked, and I would not even have seen the path if it weren’t for my mother-in-law’s pointing it out. She took us to a clearing among some trees, looked around a bit, then stopped and bent down. She carefully pulled back some leaves and brush and said, “This is for you.” It was a small patch of chanterelle mushrooms: a cluster of about five or six undulating golden nuggets jutting out of the dark, wet ground. She said she had given each of her children a patch in the forest where she found that mushrooms consistently grew each year. “Some years the animals get to them first,” she said, “but we’re lucky this year.”

IT’S WINTER NOW, and we are back in Los Angeles. But I find myself thinking a lot about my mother-in-law’s *gava*, her gift — our tiny plot of mushrooms. The quiet of the forest, maybe it’s snowing, maybe it’s dark. It’s strangely comforting to think of something so small and delicate and so

far away — our small space alone on its island where we will return year after year.

Brian Rea is an artist in Los Angeles, where he has an exhibit on display at the CMay Gallery. His book “Death Wins a Goldfish” was published earlier this year.

Illustrations by Brian Rea. Animations by Pablo Delcan.

THIS ISSUE

THE SENSELESS

LOGIC OF

THE WILD

A WEEKLONG TRIP IN
ALASKA WAS SUPPOSED
TO BE AN ADVENTURE.
IN AN INSTANT, IT
BECAME THE EXPERIENCE
THAT DEFINED US ALL.

BY JON MOOALLEM

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY:

DAVID BENJAMIN SHERRY

THE WHALE SIGHTING HAPPENED right away, minutes into Day 1. Jon, Dave and I had just been dropped off on a remote Alaskan shoreline, an hour and a half by boat from the closest speck of a town. Jon was working as a sea-kayaking guide that summer in Glacier Bay National Park, and he had invited us up for a seven-day excursion during his week off. As the boat that delivered us vanished, the drone of its engine dampening into a murmur and then finally trailing off, it became unthinkably quiet on the beach, and the largeness and strangeness of our surroundings were suddenly apparent. It was a familiar phenomenon for Jon from the start of all his trips: a moment that people instinctually paused to soak in. To me, it felt like those scenes of astronauts who, having finally rattled free of the earth's atmosphere, slip into the stillness of space. Except we weren't in space. We were on earth — finally, really on earth.

We were only starting to move around again, packing our gear into the kayaks, when we heard the first huff of a blowhole, not far offshore.

Jon was ecstatic. It seemed to him as if the animal were putting on a show, swimming playfully in the kelp, diving, resurfacing, then plowing its open mouth across the surface to feed. He took it as a good omen. Though I had no idea at the time, he was anxious that Dave and I might feel intimidated about making the trip; such a big payoff, so quickly, would get us excited and defuse any apprehensions.

For Dave, the whale-sighting had exactly the opposite effect. Once, when he was a kid, his dad took him scuba diving with dolphins. They were friendly, awe-inspiring creatures, purportedly, but they terrified Dave instead. He could still conjure the feeling of hanging defenselessly in that water while the animals deftly swirled around him, less like solid objects than flashes of reflected light, while he could move only in comparative slow-motion. Ever since, he had harbored a fear of large sea creatures — a niche phobia, particularly for a young man who lived in the Bronx, but a genuine one still. And so, even as Dave understood that a chance to see whales up close like this was a major draw of a kayaking trip in Alaska, and though he feigned being thrilled, some second thoughts were kicking in: We were going out there, he realized.

The whale left me exhilarated and gleeful, like Jon; but deeper down, I also remember feeling shaken, like Dave. Nothing about the animal registered to me as playful or welcoming. It just appeared in the distance, then transited quickly past us, from left to right. My uneasiness had something

to do with the whale's great size and indifference — its obliviousness — as it passed. Watching it made me feel profoundly out of place and register how large that wilderness was, relative to me.

At the time, I was working at a literary magazine in New York City called *The Hudson Review*, picking poems out of the slush pile and mailing them to an outside panel of editorial advisers. I was trying hard in my letters to impress one of them: Hayden Carruth, a gruff and irreverent 81-year-old poet who lived far upstate. I loved Carruth's work but was more enamored with his persona: his yeoman life in the woods, his intolerance for phoniness and, most of all, the precision with which he articulated common suffering, including one strain of his own suffering that I related to, particularly in those years, but wouldn't have had the courage, or clarity, to examine.

"I had always been aware," Carruth once wrote of his youth, "that the Universe is sad; everything in it, animate or inanimate, the wild creatures, the stones, the stars, was enveloped in the great sadness, pervaded by it. ... Never then or now have I been able to look at a cloudless sky at night and see beauty there. A kind of grandeur, yes — but not beauty. The profusion and variety of celestial lights have always frightened me. Why are they there? Why these instead of others? Why these instead of nothing?"

That was how I felt, watching the whale from the beach: afraid that everything was accidents. Then again, maybe it's just hard to picture the start of the trip in retrospect without amplifying some feeling of foreboding. Something else Carruth wrote that has always stuck with me: "The wilderness begins at the edge of my body, at the edge of my consciousness, and extends to the edge of the universe, and it is filled with menace."

[Read about Aleksander Doba, the 71-year-old who kayaked across the Atlantic 3 times.]

IT WAS MID-AUGUST 2002, and we were 23, 24 and 25. We had graduated from college together two years earlier. Dave, whom I also grew up with, shot out of undergrad knowing he wanted to be a doctor and had just finished his first year of medical school. Any similar momentum I had after graduation was instantly sapped. Three nights after I returned to my parents' house from school, I found myself driving my father to the emergency room. Three weeks after that, he died. My grief was disorienting and total; at a moment in life when everything is supposed to feel possible,

making any single decision became impossible. I gave into that sadness for the better part of a year, resettling at home in New Jersey with my widowed mother and sliding back to the summer job I worked during school, glumly breaking down beef at a butcher shop two towns over.

I coped with my fatherlessness and confusion in ways I'm not proud of and still don't understand. I read a lot of books about Ronald Reagan, for example, even the collection of his love letters to Nancy. I also lashed out at Dave, who was living at home that summer, too, studying for the MCAT. He withdrew awkwardly after the funeral, and I suppose I was happy to hold that against him. It triggered some longstanding jealousy. A part of me always resented how he seemed unfairly exempt from the self-doubt and heaviness that I was prone to.

Jon, meanwhile, was teaching at a rustic little boarding school in Switzerland, where his mother was from. The summer after graduation, before starting the job, he set out for Alaska with a friend, sleeping in the bed of their old pickup. In the minuscule town of Gustavus, the gateway to Glacier Bay, he picked up seasonal work in the warehouse of a kayak-tour company. Jon had little actual experience of sea kayaking but had always felt drawn to the ocean in the abstract. In college, he and another friend plotted out a paddling expedition near Glacier Bay, across the border in Canada and applied for a grant from our school to fund it. The grant was set up in memory of an alumnus who died in an avalanche while mountaineering. It was meant to encourage the "responsible and conscientious pursuit of wilderness expeditions." Safety was key. But the committee rejected Jon and his partner's application. They seemed insufficiently prepared.

That wasn't surprising. Jon grew up doing a lot of backcountry camping and was a competent outdoorsman, but putting together a grant application required a kind of administrative fastidiousness he didn't always possess. He was bright but scatterbrained, forever picking up things and putting them down, both figuratively (music projects, conversations) but also literally. I can still picture him hustling around the house we shared in college, hunting for his keys or his soldering iron, having gotten in over his head rewiring some device. He was an artist; one piece I remember consisted of a half-peeled banana, implanted with circuitry and suspended in a jar of formaldehyde. Once, he grew grass in our upstairs bathroom — a living bathmat, he said — until the turf became muddy and flooded the downstairs.

This was Jon's third summer in Alaska, and he'd worked his way up to leading expeditions, taking out vacationers for days at a time. Our trip, however, would venture beyond the typical circuit, into a remote corner of the park that he'd never been to. Jon had no serious concerns about our safety, but he felt he bore responsibility for our emotional well-being. To enjoy ourselves, we would need to feel comfortable, not just in the wilderness but also with him as a leader.

He suspected we wouldn't trust him entirely. We didn't. We knew him before he became a professional guide, and our perception of his expertise lagged behind the reality. "With Jon," Dave told me, "it was always unclear to what extent he'd thought everything through." Dave remembered landing in Gustavus the night before we got underway and casually asking Jon a lot of questions: Where are we going, exactly? Do we have everything we need? Jon seemed to have solid answers for all of them. As we headed back to his place for a good night's sleep, he told us to wait in the yard. He was living alone for the summer in a house that an acquaintance was building in the woods. The structure was framed-up but largely wall-less, and Jon, to be safe, needed to check that no moose had wandered in.

AFTER A SPECTACULAR first day of paddling, we came ashore on a rocky tidal flat about two miles from where we were dropped. Jon gave us his detailed tutorial about bear safety while we set up our campsite. He taught us, for example, to holler "Hey, bear!" if we heard any rustling but also preventively, ahead of us, when we walked through the woods. The last thing you wanted was to come across a brown bear unannounced.

"Hey, bear!" Jon kept hollering, by way of demonstration. He said it goofily, like a children's TV host greeting some down-on-his-luck ursine neighbor at the doorway to their clubhouse. This was intentional. Jon had noticed that the people on his trips often resisted bellowing "Hey, bear!" into the wilderness. It was essential for their safety, but it felt silly or vulnerable somehow, like singing in public. So he learned to turn it into a shtick, spinning it into a stream-of-consciousness narration: Hey, bear, I'm coming into the trees now. Hope you're having a fantastic evening, Mr. Bear! It loosened everyone up. They were performing for their friends now; the whole group was in on the joke.

I had never seen a wild bear, though I have backpacked in bear country a handful of times. I felt comfortable with the animals in the abstract. But here, the bears weren't abstract; they breached the material plane. There

were bear trails everywhere, leading from the tree line to the water, and disquietingly close, I felt, to where we were pitching our tent. We found heaps of their scat. We saw trees where the animals had slashed off the bark to eat the inner layer, tufts of fur from their paws still plastered in the sap.

I pretended I was having fun. But that evening I grew increasingly petrified, almost delirious. My eyes tightened, scanning for bears. The sound of the wind became bears, and so did the mossy sticks cracking under our feet. I gave myself a migraine, then phased in and out of sleep.

At sunrise, I woke feeling foolish. While Jon cooked pancakes, I reasoned with myself, privately, in a notebook I brought on the trip. I tried to conceive of the situation as a geometry problem. Yes, some number of bears roved this landscape, I wrote: relatively tiny, independent blips, going about their business randomly, just like us. In all that empty space and confusion, a lethal collision of their moving blips and our moving blips would be an improbable coincidence. I'd been distorting those odds, mistaking myself for "the absolute focus of all bears' attention," I wrote. It was embarrassing, really. "To be afraid of bears," I concluded, "is to be narcissistic."

I was reminding myself that freakishly horrible things are, by definition, unlikely to happen. Even now, my reasoning feels sound.

[Read about the search for a missing hiker in Joshua Tree's wild interior.]

DAY 2 WAS a slog. We paddled through a spitting drizzle in an endless straight line, along the high granite walls of the coast. We talked less and less, just pushed through the emerald chop. Then eventually we gave up, hauling in our boats and making camp in a wide, crescent-shaped cove, short of the site that Jon originally picked out on his map.

We had entered Dundas Bay, a rarely visited pocket of the national park that, I've since learned, has a storied history as a hide-out for solitary misanthropes. In the 1930s, one prospector built a cabin not far from our campsite and brandished a gun at the Alaska Natives who passed through.

We intuited that the scenery was beautiful, but we could see very little of it through the fog. Our guidebook explained that "the east side of the bay" — where we were — "can get extremely rough during foul weather, since large waves roll in ... and batter this shoreline." That was happening now: The

weather that plinked at us all afternoon was roiling into a storm. Soon, the big rain started. We rushed through dinner, then loafed in our tent until, eventually, the loafing turned to sleep.

A local newspaper would later describe the storm as “short but intense.” In Gustavus, a creek swelled to about a foot higher than its previous record. Gale winds, with gusts up to 59 miles per hour, turned back two cruise ships in Skagway, about 85 miles north. Around 2 a.m., we woke to discover the wind had shorn the rain fly off our tent. Jon’s sleeping bag and mine were soaked, while Dave was snug and dry between us. We heard torrents of water lashing down and the waves crashing in the cove.

We got up three or four hours later. The rain and wind no longer felt ferocious but were still too gnarly to paddle through; there was no question, Jon said, that we were staying put. We cooked breakfast and took turns playing chess in the tent. By late morning, the storm seemed to have passed. We were antsy. We figured we would take a look around.

The terrain was crammed with thickets of alder and spruce, underlain by ferns and a furor of prickly things. Jon pointed out devil’s club: three or four feet tall and leafy, armored up and down with spines. The plant pierced fleece and hurt like fire.

There were no trails. We’d been trudging for some time when we reached a fast-moving stream, maybe 10 feet wide. Jon was surprised; it wasn’t on his map, most likely just a drainage bloated by the storm. We followed it downstream, looking for a way across, and eventually found it bridged by a hefty tree trunk. It seemed like an easy crossing. Jon stepped up and led the way, and Dave and I waited in a single-file line on the stream bank behind him. The creek was loud, like a factory with all its gears and rollers churning. Looking down, Jon realized there was more water than he’d thought.

That’s when I heard the snap in the woods behind me. After all my paranoia, I instantly understood that the many bears I’d thought I heard before were absolutely not bears — were nothing — because this sound was so unmistakable and crisp, so explicitly something. I turned and hollered, “Hey, bear!” then waited a beat. Maybe I said “Hey, bear!” again; I’m not sure. But I must have scanned those trees long enough to feel satisfied and safe, because I know I was turning my head, to go back to my friends, when I saw the dark shape rushing forward in my peripheral vision.

WHAT I HEARD must have been roots popping. If a tree is large enough, you can apparently hear them cracking underground like gunfire.

The thud was seismic. The trunk crashed down right next to me. Mapping out bits of evidence later, we concluded that the tree must have been about 80 feet tall and perhaps two feet in diameter. It was some kind of conifer — a spruce or cedar. I screamed, involuntarily, “Look out!” then watched Dave, a few steps directly in front of me, dive sideways and hit the ground. When I got to him, he was crouching, stunned but O.K. He looked up and said, “Go get Jon.”

It hadn't clicked back in for me: There were three of us. The sight of Dave going down had canceled out everything else. I scrambled out over the creek, running across the tree that had just fallen, shouting Jon's name, then spotted him in the water, tangled in a snarl of sheared-off branches near the bank behind me — a cage, which kept him from hurtling downstream.

He did not know he'd been hit by a falling tree. It had narrowly missed his head, struck his left shoulder, shearing it from his collarbone and breaking many of his ribs. Later, a doctor would explain that the downward force had been so powerful that it had probably squashed Jon's entire upper body, and all the organs inside, down toward his waist, momentarily compressing him like a bellows; for a split second, his shoulders headed in the direction of his bellybutton, before his torso sprang up again.

Jon had heard nothing, seen nothing. He was turning around to help Dave onto the log — again, feeling responsible for our safety — and the next thing he knew, he was in the water. He tried to reach out his left arm but could not make it move. He could not move his legs. He felt a bolt of pain down his spine.

Jon later described flashing through an idiosyncratic sequence of thoughts, all in a few milliseconds, as if watching a deck of cards fanning across a table. One was an image of himself in a wheelchair, sitting behind a mixing console in a fancy recording studio. “I guess I can become a recording engineer in a wheelchair,” he remembered thinking. He had never worked in a recording studio and, though he played music, he had no particular plans to. Still, this vision apparently felt like an acceptable future and freed him to resurface in the present. That was when he registered me, screaming his name.

Jon told himself he shouldn't move. He knew from his many wilderness first-responder trainings that moving a person with spinal injuries risks paralysis. Then again, he also knew that most of his body was submerged in cold water, and he recognized that he risked dying of hypothermia if he didn't move. "If I'm already paralyzed," he concluded, "I may as well move."

He somehow hoisted himself out of the stream before Dave or I got to him, using his right arm and his chin and biting into something loamy with his teeth, for additional leverage. He reassessed the situation: better. Also: worse. He now realized that we were at least a mile inland from our camp.

Suddenly, his body was walking; his legs just started working. Dave and I put him between us, supporting his frame. He was moving faster than we expected, but uncoordinatedly. Then he crumpled between us. We tried again; Jon was dead weight. Dave noticed that his breathing was shallow and his voice was low — signs, Dave knew from med school, of a collapsed lung. He began battering Jon with a pep talk, telling him, firmly, that he had to get up, that we had to get out of here. Jon didn't need that explained to him; he was cogent and still trying to plot our next steps in his mind. He looked down to see why this log he was resting on was so lumpy and realized that he was, in fact, sitting on his left arm. The arm was slack, obviously broken; his sleeve, pierced up and down with devil's club. Jon had zero feeling in it. He found it amusing, this sensation of complete estrangement from one of his limbs.

Jon had been stressing that it was important to stay together. But this was another theory of wilderness survival that appeared to be breaking down in practice. Someone would have to get on the radio back at our camp. By chance, while marooned in our tent during the rainstorm the night before, Jon showed us how to use the device, though he did it almost as a formality; the hand-held VHF unit was merely a line-of-sight radio, he told us, meaning its range was small, its signal too weak to pass through most obstacles. You were unlikely to reach anyone you couldn't see, and we hadn't seen anyone since a faraway fishing boat, early on Day 1.

There was a moment of discussion, or maybe just an exchange of looks between me and Dave. I told Dave he should go. I didn't trust myself to find my way back. I also knew that I lacked the courage to try; whether I was being sensible or cowardly, I still don't know. Besides, I took for granted

that Dave would make it. He was more capable in my mind, less likely to cinch himself in indecisive knots.

Recently, though, Dave told me: “You probably had no idea how much in my own head I was. I know that you, growing up, definitely felt insecure about things, and I think you looked at me and thought, Dave has everything figured out. But I had so much anxiety.” He brought up the tremor he used to have in his hands. I knew about it; in high school, we waited tables together, and I occasionally had to carry out Dave’s soup orders, so he wouldn’t spill. But I guess I thought of the tremor as strictly physiological. I couldn’t see the vulnerability causing it.

Now, as Dave sprinted away from me and Jon, swatting devil’s club from his path with the rubberized sleeve of his rain jacket, his nerves rose up and rattled him. He worried he wouldn’t be able to find the radio once he got back or know how to turn it on. What if he broke the radio, foreclosing whatever marginal chance we had of getting help? There were lots of ways to screw this up, Dave realized. More occurred to him as he ran.

He found the radio. He turned it on. Then, having solved these problems, he encountered another he hadn’t anticipated: “What is the appropriate thing you’re supposed to say?” he remembered thinking. On TV, you see a lot of people saying “Mayday.” And so, Dave faced the open water and started broadcasting into the fog: “Mayday, Mayday.” Even in that moment, though, alone on a beach in the middle of nowhere, he felt slightly self-conscious about it. This is so goddamn cliché, he thought.

BACK IN THE WOODS, kneeling over Jon, I was having the same problem: I didn’t know what to say. He was lying near a log on his injured side, his beard and glasses flecked with dirt and tendrils of moss. He seemed to be on the brink of losing consciousness. At no time would the possibility of Jon’s dying surface concretely in any of our minds. Still, I knew I was supposed to keep talking to him, to tether him to the world with my voice somehow.

I started vamping platitudes: We were going to get out of here soon, and so forth. But I could feel myself treading water, even blundering, at one point, into a long-winded apology, worried I overstayed my welcome that one Christmas with his family. I was afraid that the helplessness in my voice might be counterproductive, unsettling Jon instead of steadying him. It was a tremendous silence to fill.

What can a person say? I had two literature professors in college who made us memorize poems. You never knew when some lines of verse would come in handy, they claimed. One liked to brag that, while traveling through Ireland, he found that if he spat out some Yeats at a pub, he could drink free. This is how I wound up reciting a love poem to Jon.

It was “The Shampoo,” by Elizabeth Bishop, a lyric poem about the enormity of time, which turns startlingly intimate at the end, when Bishop offers to shampoo her lover’s silvering hair: “Come, let me wash it in this big tin basin,/battered and shiny like the moon.”

After that, I imagine I also did some W.H. Auden; I knew a fair amount of Auden back then. The stuff in rhyme and meter was always easiest to memorize — “Looking up at the stars, I know quite well/That, for all they care, I can go to hell” — which is why I had a lot of Robert Frost at my disposal as well: “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “The Road Not Taken.” For the most part, I trafficked in hits.

Jon and I would spend about an hour and a half together alone on the forest floor. I ran through everything in my quiver — Kay Ryan, A.R. Ammons, Michael Donaghy — padding each poem with little prefatory remarks, while Jon said nothing, just signaled with his eyes or produced a sound whenever I checked in. I felt like a radio D.J. playing records in the middle of the night, unsure if anyone was listening. And here’s one about owls by Richard Wilbur, I would tell Jon, and off we would go.

I must have also done at least one by Hayden Carruth, my curmudgeonly pen pal at the literary magazine. Carruth’s poems didn’t lend themselves to memorization, but I’d worked hard to nail one of my favorites, in which he describes stopping to notice a deer standing in an apple thicket, then realizing the northern lights are flaring overhead. Hayden and the animal pass a moment in stillness together. “We are proud to be afraid,” he writes, “proud to share/the silent magnetic storm that destroys the stars.” Relative to that boundless violence above them, he and the deer are momentarily allied, though still not entirely connected: “a glimpse, an acknowledgment/it is enough and never enough.”

That’s what I said to my friend, powerlessly, tenting my jacket over his face when it started to rain. The title of the poem is: “I Know, I Remember, But How Can I Help You.”

THE COAST GUARD cutter Mustang wasn't where it was supposed to be. The 110-foot patrol boat normally spent its time coursing through the Gulf of Alaska, inspecting halibut-fishing vessels, or circulating, as a terrorist deterrent, near the oil terminals at Valdez. It was home-ported in Seward, hundreds of miles from Glacier Bay. But the crew was transiting to Juneau for a training when, a few days earlier, they were smacked by the same storm that later poured inland, over us. "We had gotten absolutely pummeled," John Roberts, a petty officer on the Mustang, told me recently. For two days, the boat swished around in 15-foot-plus seas. Many on the crew had been hunkered in the mess deck, vomiting, while Roberts and a couple of his shipmates did their best to cover everyone's watches. Finally, the Mustang slipped into Glacier Bay to find some protection. The weather started to ease. That afternoon, as Roberts piloted the Mustang east, toward Dundas Bay, his pallid crewmates were finally staggering back up to the bridge, asking where the hell they were.

That was when Dave's Mayday call came through. The signal on the Mustang's radio was thin and faint, barely edging into range. Another of the ship's petty officers, Eamon McCormack, explained to me that in retrospect the connection feels "mind-boggling." Glacier Bay National Park extends over more than 5,000 square miles. Our signal would have covered two or three miles at most. And yet, a boat — a Coast Guard boat, no less — happened to be passing through that exceedingly small window at precisely the right time. "I don't know if, nine times out of 10, you play that over again and the outcome would be the same," McCormack said. A moment earlier or later — seconds, potentially — and we might have slipped out of alignment. The moving boat would have cruised out of range, uncoupling from us forever.

IT WAS 1:25 P.M. when the Mustang received Dave's call, according to one of the subsequent Coast Guard reports. Roberts couldn't believe it. "Come on, man, I'm tired," he said aloud, wearily, to the receiver in front of him. Roberts waited for a moment, per protocol, on the off chance that the Coast Guard's central communications center in Juneau would pick up the call instead. Then he turned and asked his watch commander to pull out all the standardized search-and-rescue paperwork. He was steeling himself, resummoning his professionalism. "I guess we're doing this," he said.

Roberts was the crew member on the Mustang with the most current medical training; he would complete his E.M.T. certification the following month. As he started firing questions at Dave on the radio, he didn't like

the answers that he heard coming back: the shallowness of Jon's breathing, the likelihood of a punctured lung. More fundamental, Roberts remembered: "Any time a tree falls on somebody, it's not good." He was also unsettled to learn that Dave and I both lived in New York City — a red flag, he had found, when someone winds up in trouble in the wilderness.

We were 100 nautical miles from the nearest hospital; a half-day trip, even in ideal conditions. The Mustang requested that the Coast Guard Air Station in Sitka send a helicopter, but the immediate plan was for Roberts and three crewmates to peel toward shore in the ship's Zodiac and track us down. Dave had found the flare in Jon's emergency kit and now, at 2:20, with the Zodiac underway, the Coast Guard asked him to fire it. He was still in front of our campsite, facing the water. He'd never shot off a flare before. He aimed straight up, then watched as the bright tracer rose and arced somewhere far behind him, deep in the woods. He was uncertain whether this counted as a success. He started scanning the fog in front of him, but the Zodiac never appeared.

Someone on the Mustang caught sight of the flare near the end of its arc and immediately directed the crew on the Zodiac toward it, steering them far away from Dave to the opposite side of the little peninsula we'd camped on. And yet, this was lucky: they wound up coming ashore much closer to where I was waiting in the woods with Jon. Soon, whatever poem I was reciting was interrupted by whistles blowing and voices calling, and eventually three shapes, wearing hard hats and heavy orange rain gear, rushed toward us out of the trees.

Roberts was especially impressive, a reassuringly large Boston-area native with a booming voice. He knelt and took Jon's vitals. The information was troubling: his pulse was 60 beats per minute; his breathing, fast and shallow. They put his neck in a brace and eased him onto a kind of truncated backboard, called a Miller board, to move him out to the beach. Dave had returned by then. He and I crouched at one end of the board, near Jon's feet, as someone — presumably Roberts — bellowed a count of three to lift.

Later that night, lying down to sleep in a bed-and-breakfast in Gustavus — stunned and depleted, but dry and warm — Dave and I would talk and talk, reviewing the entire ordeal. We had drooped into a long silence, coasting toward sleep, when Dave spoke up with one last observation. When we were getting ready to lift Jon on the backboard, he said, it occurred to him

that this was one of those crisis moments you hear about, like when mothers are suddenly able to lift a car off their baby. Dave expected we were going to have superhuman strength.

We did not have superhuman strength. On Roberts's command, the men raised Jon to waist height, swiftly and seemingly perfectly level, as though their arms and deltoids were hydraulic. Then, in one motion, they took off downhill, with negligible help from us. This can't be accurate, but I remember the sensation of being almost dragged, like children in a sled.

A NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC television crew was embedded at the Coast Guard's air station in Sitka, filming an installment of a thrill-ride reality series. The network had sent crews to other Coast Guard stations around the country too, though this assignment appeared to hold the most dramatic potential. Air Station Sitka was unique: Its pilots were responsible for 12,000 miles of coastline, a sprawling, treacherous wilderness riven with fjords, inlets and glaciers, often buffeted by implacably horrible weather. People who went into the backcountry in Alaska had a way of getting themselves into a different magnitude of trouble, too; as Roberts put it, "When stuff happens in Alaska, it's big." Still, this was the television crew's eighth day in Sitka, and as the show's producer, Annabelle Hester, explained: "I was having calls with my bosses at headquarters saying, 'Nothing is happening!' We were scrambling to come up with Plan B." Then, the Mustang's call came in at 1:42.

"What type of injuries are we looking at?" asked the dispatcher. She was taking the call from behind a semicircular counter, like the reception desk at a midlevel corporate branch office. She had a framed snapshot of a parakeet to brighten her work space, and a photograph of a dog with a heart that said, "I Woof You." A cameraman stood conspicuously beside her, holding a tense, tight shot.

"Probable broken ribs, a definite broken arm," said the man on the other end. Then his voice faltered, seemed to give up: "And whatever else would happen to you if a tree fell on you," he added.

The dispatcher retrieved the appropriate paperwork and scribbled "Tree fell on person" on one line. She read the current weather aloud: "30 knots wind, 300 ceiling, heavy rain and one-mile vis." That would soon be revised: the ceiling had dropped to 100 feet. Entering the weather conditions on one of the Coast Guard incident reports, someone would write, in a kind of nihilistic catchall: "Extremely terrible."

The Coast Guard's policy was to deploy a helicopter within 30 minutes of the initial request, but the Air Station's operations officer, Cmdr. Karl Baldessari, informed everyone that this mission would take longer to plan. Baldessari was a 25-year veteran of the Coast Guard, a fast-moving, sinewy man in a blousy flight suit, with a tidy mustache and spiky hair. His role at the air station was that of a firehouse chief. He was responsible for the safety of everyone working there, which meant making judicious decisions about what warranted sending them hurtling through the sky.

That calculus got knotty in conditions like these, though there was a baseline volatility to flying in Alaska at all. The Coast Guard didn't let its helicopter pilots fly lead out of Sitka, no matter how much experience they had at other air stations, until they practiced difficult landings at specific locations in the region and got their egos battered a little by logging a full winter in the state. Visibility in Alaska was frequently poor; conditions changed quickly. One pilot told me about blindly tunneling through fog in the dark when his co-pilot got "caged": The man lifted his eyes momentarily from his instruments and, without any visual references or a horizon to latch onto, found it impossible to reorient himself, lost all sense of direction and was felled by vertigo.

During much of the year it was also cold enough, with sufficient moisture in the air, that ascending to clear the region's many minor mountains or even just flying through a cloud risked the aircraft's icing up. To mitigate this, the Coast Guard had laid out virtual "track lines" across the entirety of their range: a grid of GPS points and a network of paths connecting them, along which pilots could chart a course and fly at a relatively low altitude, confident they weren't going to smash into a mountain. The system wasn't comprehensive; the track lines got the pilots close to their destination, but ultimately they had to diverge from this GPS superhighway and fly the remaining distance the old-fashioned way, with their radar and eyes. It was like taking an exit off the interstate, except there might be a granite wall in front of you wherever you chose to get off. It was possible the pilots would travel very far — a half-mile away from whoever needed their help — only to discover that the last leg was too risky and be forced to turn back.

Baldessari gathered the two pilots on duty that afternoon and the Air Station's flight surgeon, then unrolled a large paper map. He pointed to our location, explaining: "That's probably one of the lousiest places we fly in and out of. This Inian Pass, right here, is the worst place we could possibly go."

Inian Pass is a slim channel near the center of the Icy Strait, the long, interconnected system of waterways stretching through Glacier Bay. Conditions in the Icy Strait can be bad 300 days of the year, Baldessari recently told me; wind, rain and storm surges all push through it fast from the open ocean. But Inian Pass is a narrow keyhole at the center of the strait — a mile-wide opening between a few uninhabited islands and a rocky point — where all that weather speeds up. The only way for the pilots to reach us would be to fly straight through it.

Nothing in the National Geographic footage, at this point, feels reassuring. The flight surgeon holds his hand over his mouth and bites his lip. The copilot, Chris Ferguson, only a few months into his posting in Alaska, mills around and fidgets with his ear. It's obvious Baldessari needs convincing. He wasn't eager to send his men up if he didn't have to and wasn't certain they would make it all the way there if he did.

"It's kind of funny," he told the pilots, pointing at the map. "You've got a boat right here."

LYING ON HIS backboard like a burl of driftwood, Jon was conscious and cognizant of his pain, but he had started to feel somehow buffered from his body, uninterested in connecting with the world beyond it. He would later describe himself as a "thinking blob. It was a very passive experience." He didn't know what was happening but could tell our momentum had stalled. He was confused and felt impatient. In his mind, the three of us had solved the impossible problem: We'd managed to get help. This was supposed to be the simple part, when everyone rushed him to the hospital. Instead, his condition deteriorated. Within 10 minutes of reaching the beach, Jon threw up. I'd never seen anything like it, a kind of dark purple gristle. I took out my wool cap to wipe his face, and he retched a second time, straight into my hat.

"I got that all over me," John Roberts told me recently. He'd seen vomit like that before; it meant Jon had ingested a fair amount of blood and signaled internal injuries. It made Roberts anxious. He had been on the Mustang for two and a half years at that point but had spent the previous four years in Palm Beach, a busy but less extreme posting that often involved rescuing weekend boaters from relatively close to shore — and where, Roberts pointed out, the water is warm and won't necessarily kill you if you go in. Moreover, the bulk of the Coast Guard's training is for maritime rescues, not rescues on land. Counterintuitive as it sounds, Roberts's comfort level

and confidence had dropped significantly once he hopped off the Zodiac and set foot on the beach.

He reported back to the Mustang that Jon had thrown up, then soon radioed again, explaining that Jon was going into shock. He kept giving and requesting updates, trying to gauge how long this might take, and eventually started erecting a makeshift shelter out of plastic sheeting and medical tape, hoping to keep Jon out of the rain. Out of earshot of us, Roberts explained to his crew mate Eamon McCormack what the vomit meant: The possibility of Jon dying, here under their care, was real. At one point in the National Geographic footage, as Roberts's calls are relayed to the air station in Sitka, you can see where the dispatcher clearly writes on her form: "E.M.T. does not feel comfortable."

By this time, the air station's flight surgeon had received enough information to be alarmed. "It sounds like he's got a pretty significant chest injury," he told Baldessari. Baldessari understood they would need to launch a helicopter but warned the Mustang that the aircraft might not make it through the weather; ultimately it would be the pilots' call, once they veered off their last track line and tried to shoot through Inian Pass.

They would go and give it a look, Baldessari explained over the radio, but the outlook was iffy. The guys on the beach, he said, must be prepared to get Jon back on their cutter and haul him to a hospital themselves, as fast as they could.

ONE EVENING THIS winter, my phone rang, and it was Karl Baldessari. Long retired from the Coast Guard, he was teaching aviation at a community college in Oregon, where I left a voice mail message earlier that day. I meanwhile had metamorphosed into a 40-year-old father of two and fumbled to explain to Baldessari that, as thrilled as I was to have tracked him down, I was, at the moment, racing to finish a risotto for my daughters before gymnastics practice and would have to call him back. Without missing a beat, Baldessari blared orders at me, joking, but still sounding as instinctually in charge as he did in the National Geographic footage: "O.K.," he said, "you want to stir it constantly, but slowly!"

I didn't expect any of the Coast Guardsmen I was cold-calling to remember that day. However dramatic it remained for me, I assumed it would have been obscured in a yearslong wash of more sensational incidents. But everyone I spoke to did remember it, immediately and in detail. Baldessari had been involved in hundreds of rescue operations during his 30-year

career, and yet, as I stood at the stove on the phone that evening, he told me: “The moment I listened to your voice mail, I knew exactly the case! It was almost like it was yesterday.”

There was something about the supreme freakishness of the accident that left a lasting impression. For those who came ashore, the experience was also marked by a feeling of subtly escalating chaos and the pressure to surmount it. McCormack told me that ours was a story he retold endlessly, often to the younger Coast Guardsmen he was eventually tasked with training. In it was a lesson about “not taking situations that look impossible at face value,” he said. “When things start to go wrong, don’t panic or lose sight of what resources you’ve got.” Keep working the problem until its absolute end — even, McCormack added, if it means deviating from official policy.

McCormack was not supposed to be landing an inflatable boat on an unforgivably rocky Alaskan shoreline, for example. But there he was, anyway, beaching the Zodiac as gingerly as he could, so that Roberts and the other men could load Jon aboard. They slid him in on his side “like a folder into a filing cabinet,” as Jon put it, and started motoring through the chop, very cautiously, back to the Mustang, about a mile away.

As relieved as Jon had been when the Coast Guard first arrived, he also felt instantaneously more vulnerable. Strapped to the back board, his neck in the collar, he surrendered control of his body, however imperfect that control had been. He was being hauled around as an object now, with no ability to wriggle or shift positions, to manage his pain or even to turn his head and see what was happening. He was helpless, entirely dependent on the upright people operating around him, those voices he could hear discussing him on the far side of some gauzy divide. About 10 minutes into the trip on the Zodiac, Jon heard one of those voices say, “Oh, shit, we’re losing air.”

A section of the Zodiac’s sponson — the inflatable fender that wraps around the boat — had punctured. One side was completely deflated. “It’s a big deal,” McCormack recently explained to me, sounding surprised that I had to ask. The sponson increases the boat’s buoyancy and stability, as well as keeping water from cresting over the side; under normal conditions, a Zodiac with a broken sponson would have been taken out of service automatically. Instead, McCormack found the puncture and wedged the nozzle of a small pump inside. Then — steering the boat with one hand,

operating the throttle with the other — he started working the pump with his foot, essentially doing leg presses, to keep the fender partly inflated. The ride was already bumpy in four-foot seas. Now McCormack began tracing a slow, zigzagging course, doing what he could to tamp down the turbulence and the violence to Jon's spine, as well as to guard against the possibility of the injured man's suddenly bounding over the side on his backboard.

Roberts and the other Coast Guardsmen on the Zodiac leaned over Jon to shield him from the splash. The pain was heinous; Jon seemed to be passing out. Roberts talked to him, held his hand. Roberts felt crushed, he told me; he was torturing this guy in order to save him. When they finally reached the Mustang, rather than hoist Jon off the Zodiac, they swung the ship's crane around and simply lifted the entire boat out of the water, level with the deck, and then carried him aboard, to keep from joggling him any more.

McCormack eventually returned for me and Dave, and a half-hour later we were reunited with Jon in the Mustang's athwartship passageway, a cramped, steel hallway, like the space between two cars of a train. Jon was still battened to the backboard, wedged up to keep the weight of his body on his less-painful side. They had cut off his clothes, though he'd murmured a plea not to — he was wearing a brand-new Patagonia jacket that he had borrowed from a friend — then swaddled him in a hypothermia blanket. Dave and I knelt and rubbed his feet.

The helicopter was going to make it. I don't remember there being a grand announcement. I'm not sure we were ever made aware of the possibility that it wouldn't. Now the crew got busy below: tying down anything that could be blown off by the rotor wash or stashing it in the mess. I also don't remember hearing the helicopter when it finally arrived. Instead, I remember only a heavy door to our left swinging open to reveal, like a scene from an action movie, the silhouette of a man in a blue flight suit, feet planted shoulder-width apart to steady himself as the ship rocked sideways. The cable he'd been lowered on drew back into the ocean spray and fog behind him. "I'm flight surgeon Russ Bowman," he said and stepped inside.

Bowman took Jon's vitals and gave him several, successive shots of morphine. Soon, everyone was working to squeeze him back through the

narrow doorway and onto the deck where the helicopter, an MH-60 Jayhawk, was idling overhead.

Until recently, the story I told about the accident unfolded in two basic acts: the tree fell, instantaneously unleashing a kind of unfathomable chaos; then the Coast Guard appeared and, just as swiftly, regathered that chaos into order. It was like watching footage of an exploding object, then watching it run in reverse. The maneuver the Coast Guard was readying to execute now, on the deck of the Mustang, would be the climax of that progression.

The helicopter hovered 30 or 40 feet over the boat, mirroring its speed and trajectory, while both vehicles moved slowly forward. “Looks like you’re heading for a rain squall,” the co-pilot, Chris Ferguson, radioed the Mustang at one point, and asked the ship to adjust its course, to keep them in as forgiving weather as possible. Soon the flight mechanic was calling out instructions to tuck the aircraft into alignment: “Forward and right 30. Forward and right 20. Forward and right 10.” Then, finally — speaking, in the flight recordings, with an almost galling air of imperturbability — the lead helicopter pilot, Rich McIntyre, radioed the flight mechanic to begin the hoist.

The whole procedure, from our vantage point, seemed seamless and routine. In a way, it was: After the agonized deliberation at the air station, the pilots exited off their GPS route into fairly manageable conditions around Inian Pass. The winds were workable; the water wasn’t excessively choppy. Ultimately, scooping Jon off the deck of the Mustang would resemble a standard exercise that the pilots drilled in their trainings. “Not to dumb it down,” the co-pilot, Chris Ferguson, told me — plucking someone with a spinal injury off a moving boat and hoisting them into a moving helicopter is a pretty insane thing to do. “But we normalize what isn’t normal.”

A few moments earlier, as the men scurried around Jon on his backboard, packaging and fastening him for the hoist, Jon worried that the second he got airborne he would start twirling uncontrollably, like the feathery end of a cat toy, and potentially thwack his head on the equipment on deck. But now, he was levitating smoothly — a solitary, swaddled bale of a man, perfectly perpendicular to the ground. Dave and I watched it happen: our friend rising steadily away from us, improbably, to safety. As Jon floated higher, he could hear the Coast Guardsmen on the Mustang beneath him

begin to cheer. He felt it was safe to open his eyes. When he did, he saw someone, hunched in the open cargo door of the helicopter, pointing a television camera at him.

JON WAS RUSHED into surgery at the hospital in Sitka that evening. He'd punctured both lungs, one to the point of collapse, sustained multiple fractures on eight of his ribs, broken several vertebrae, shattered his left shoulder blade and snapped his brachial plexus nerves. His spleen had been macerated into countless flecks. After awakening from surgery, Jon was disappointed that the doctors had swept those shards into a bag and thrown his spleen in the trash; he wanted to get a look at it, maybe even keep it preserved in a jar, alongside his cyborg-banana.

Once back in Gustavus, Dave and I realized that we would need to call Jon's parents in Switzerland. I didn't have to push the job on Dave this time; he was adamant. He felt he would need to face conversations like these if he was going to be a doctor. It was Jon's father who picked up, and after absorbing the news, he paused and caught Dave off guard. "Thank you," he said solemnly. "You guys saved my son's life."

Dave's stomach dropped. "I remember thinking about it," he told me recently, "and realizing, Yeah. I guess, logistically, we did." I had the same reaction when Dave hung up the phone and, clearly shaken, relayed his conversation to me. Until that moment, the idea that we saved Jon's life had never occurred to us, possibly because the idea that Jon might have died still hadn't occurred to us. We had zero sense of accomplishment, or even agency. In our minds, all we did was avoid screwing up until the real help could arrive and save him.

But Jon hadn't absorbed the story that way. From the instant he willed himself out of the water, he felt all of us locking into that same seamless flow of order steadily displacing chaos that Dave and I only experienced once the Coast Guard arrived. It was amazing to him how the three of us managed to generate solutions for each successive problem. Even my reciting those poems, which to me had always felt like a moment of utter helplessness, became, in Jon's telling, a perfect emblem of that streak of serendipitous problem-solving. "You conveyed a calmness," he told me recently. "I remember it being this nice moment." He added that if he ever has to spend two hours dying on a remote forest floor again, having me there to recite poetry would be one of his top ways to do it.

The feeling of inevitability that day became only more pronounced for Jon as time passed and the entire story of our rescue receded into a prologue to the rest of his life. The surgery in Sitka was only the first of half a dozen, and it would take several years for him to regain 60 percent of the use of his arm, wrist and hand, as the nerves gradually regrew along his injured side. He was in good enough shape to go back to Alaska the summer after the accident — repairing boats in the company’s warehouse and occasionally helping out at the bed-and-breakfast — but he struggled. He could repair kayaks but needed help lifting them. He was unable to wrestle the mattress corners into the fitted sheets when he made the beds. After that, he started working at a recording studio in Portland, just as he envisioned while stuck in the water, and he now runs his own audio-mastering company: Spleenless Mastering.

Eventually Jon seemed to have recovered from the accident without any conspicuous disabilities. But his life has been quietly corroded by chronic pain and, almost equally, by the stresses of navigating the doctors, medications (and their side effects) to manage it. About two years after the accident, he learned he had PTSD. The trauma wasn’t the falling tree, but his experience of powerlessness as a perpetual patient in the American medical system. It manifested as a kind of unbearable empathy for anyone who was suffering. Jon found himself shouting at doctors, on his own behalf but also on behalf of strangers in waiting rooms who weren’t being seen. He would hear interviews with natural-disaster victims or the homeless on NPR and have to pull his car over. There continued to be other tribulations, too — more mundane ones. A few times a year, he still rebreaks a rib out of nowhere; once or twice, Jon told me, all it has taken is an especially affectionate hug from his wife.

Jon found early on that he could cordon off this suffering, both in his own mind and in conversation, by making jokes about the accident itself and sticking to the happy ending of our rescue, a trick that got much easier after the National Geographic show aired later that year. “Mission Rescue: Final Frontier,” the program was called. The soundtrack was all heart-thwacking synth drums and shredding guitar. A foreboding, Ken Burns-effected snapshot of Dave and Jon looking joyful before the trip gave way to a whirring re-enactment of someone else’s legs — cast in the role of Dave’s legs — sprinting through the blurry woods for our radio. A melodramatic narrator pondered the fate of “Kayaker Jon Cohrs.”

Initially, the schlockiness of the production felt like a blessing. The show depersonalized the accident, giving us all a shorthand to convey how dramatic that day had been, without confronting how destabilizing and senseless it might have felt. At a party, you could lay out the basics — a tree fell on Jon — then say, “National Geographic even made a TV special about it,” and everyone would go wide-eyed but then move on, figuring you would unspool the real story some other time.

But we never realized the degree to which that kitschy shorthand started to obscure the real story — then, gradually, to replace it. I’m embarrassed to admit that, though Jon and I have remained close, I did not know the extent to which he has continued to suffer for the last 17 years until talking to him for several hours in order to write this account.

THE MORNING AFTER the accident, Dave and I traveled back to Dundas Bay to pack up our campsite and collect the kayaks we abandoned the previous evening. We were shuttled there from Gustavus by the same boat captain who dropped us off three days earlier, a forbiddingly taciturn commercial fisherman named Doug Ogilvy.

The tide in the cove was way out when we arrived; it was, as Ogilvy put it, “a suck-ass beach.” The approach was so shallow that he had to drop anchor a hundred yards or more from shore. He asked if we had waders. We did not. So Ogilvy put on his, climbed down the ladder and told Dave to get on his back. Then stoically, like an ox or an old-timey strongman hauling a safe, he trudged through the thigh-high water, dropped Dave on the gravel beach, then lurched back and hauled me the same way, as if I were a man-size infant in a papoose.

Dave told me he’d had a strange feeling on the ride out, as if we would discover that an even more massive tree had fallen on our tent since we last slept there and that all three of us would have been crushed and killed if we’d spent another night in Dundas Bay, as planned. That is, he half-expected to find evidence that the accident had been fortuitous somehow, that there was a reason, or redemptive value, behind it. My mother had the same instinct when I called her the night before. On the phone I strained to emphasize for her — she was only two years into her cruelly premature widowhood, and I was new at being the overprotective son of a widow — that Jon was going to be all right, and that Dave and I were safe. She told me that my dad must have been up there looking out for us somehow.

I resented all the supernatural thinking. If it comforted other people, fine, but I'd somehow known right away that I didn't need a reason for the accident. It was senseless, but straightforward, as unequivocal a fact as my father's death had been. A tree fell in the woods. It might not have, but it did. Jon could have died, but he didn't. Other possibilities spiraled infinitely outward from there, though apparently I wasn't too interested in contemplating them. As strange as it sounds, it was years before I realized that the tree could have hit me — and only after a friend pointed this out, as I told the story around a fire one night. And it was only a few weeks ago, while on the phone with Jon, that it occurred to me that the tree could have hit all three of us — we were standing in a single-file line, after all, waiting to cross the creek — and that we all might have wound up clobbered and scattered in that river, dying slowly and watching each other die.

It's also probably true that I helped preclude these possibilities by being so feverishly paranoid about bears, wheeling around at the sound of the snapping roots. That's what allowed me to see the tree coming, just barely, and scream that infinitesimal heads-up for Dave. And so, the real meaning of the accident, if I felt compelled to find one, might be that it validated my most exaggerated fears. But instead, it somehow helped cleanse me of them. There was comfort for me in accepting the arbitrariness of what happened, in regarding it as a spasm of random damage in time and space that, just as randomly, a small number of human beings got the opportunity to repair. We were more capable than I had understood. We were also far more helpless.

On the ride back to Gustavus with our gear, I pictured myself, again, as a small blip in empty space. The ride was rough and jumpy as Ogilvy impatiently pounded his boat through the last vestigial wave energy of the storm; Dave and I had to hold on, to plant ourselves on the bench behind him. But there was a moment when I felt so safe that I loosened my grip, leaned slightly into the motion of the boat, and, closing my eyes, felt myself lift off the seat.

Jon Mooallem is a writer at large for the magazine who is working on a book about the great Alaska earthquake of 1964. His last feature for the magazine was about our climatological future.