

it started
in Alaska

B

This book is a collection of true stories written over a thirteen year period.
These stories were handwritten the same day (or week) the events took place.
This book has not been edited or proofread by anyone other than myself.

I wish for these stories to be relayed directly from me to you.

I hope this book can help you along your way.

- *B. Taylor*

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*If you would like to listen to music while reading this book,
I would suggest Alexis Ffrench album “Dreamland”
(relaxing piano music).*

This book will never be sold for any monetary gain.

This memoir is a gift I present to the world.

Welcome to a human experience.

A journey.

Fox, you are not alone...

THE INJURED BEAR

Today, a dead whale washed up on the shore of Nelson Lagoon, Alaska.

Human population: 100. Bear and wolf population: out of control.

I knew this dead whale was going to be a problem. It was only a matter of time before the carcass begins to rot, and the smell trickles in bears from down the coast. And since it was my job to keep the community safe, this dead whale now became my problem.

The Aleutian Peninsula is home to some of the biggest bears in the world. And this whale carcass had washed up in just about the worst possible spot. Next to people's fishing nets, cabins, and right off the airplane runway.

Weighing in at over a ton, it was too heavy to tow the whale out of town with my vehicle, so it just lay there, rotting.

Over the next few days, multiple bears set up camp. The worse the whale smelled, the more the bears loved it. They gorged themselves, rubbed their bodies all over it, as if it was some kind of perfume. They even tried to bury it, but the whale was too big for that.

Two of the bears fought viciously over the carcass. The victorious bear claimed the whale. The defeated bear limped off to rest and recover nearby.

My phone rang.

Villagers rarely called me to say, “hi”, so I knew it was likely an emergency.

It was the village administrator, Justine, notifying me the plane was arriving, and there were bears dangerously roaming the all gravel runway.

Normally, when an airplane arrives in Nelson, a majority of the community will drive to the airport. Some to pick up passengers, some to pick up booze or groceries, and some just to mingle.

Airplane visits are the largest community gatherings in the village other than Christmas parties and funerals. So I knew that bears roaming the runway, were bears too close for human comfort.

My go-to plan for this type of scenario is simple. Drive straight at the bears in the direction I want them to run.

My vehicle for this mission today is a forest green, dual seat, 4X4 Arctic Cat. No doors, easy to jump in and out. Knobby tires, never gets stuck. Loud engine, no nonsense. Scares off bears before they even see you.

When I rolled up to the runway, the winner of the bear fight, the larger bear, had already taken off. The defeated and injured bear however, remained.

The injured bear was a beautiful bleached blonde colored sow (female bear), smaller sized, weighing in around 350 pounds. I had seen dark brown bears and light brown bears, but I had never seen a bleached blonde colored bear before. I will call her, Madonna. She was the Madonna of brown bears.

I slowly drove in the direction of her. At two hundred feet away, she remained lying in the grass. At one hundred feet away, I couldn't believe she hadn't moved yet.

I fired my pistol in the air. Still, the bear did not budge.

I inched closer and closer. Fifty-ish feet away, and she remained unfazed. At this distance, I could see blood and cuts on her face. Must have been from the earlier fight. She didn't appear aggressive, nor did she look to be in pain. She just appeared... calm.

Once I got within about thirty feet, the bear began to move slowly.

Inch by inch, I kept driving closer.

The bear eventually stood up, picked up speed, then leapt off the grass cliff towards the beach.

"Finally," I thought, "Maybe she just needed a little motivation to get moving."

I drove up to the edge of the grass cliff to check her direction. I looked left. I looked right. No bear.

I was almost certain that she would have run down the beach by the time I drove up to the cliff. I was quite confused.

I stepped out of my vehicle to get a better look.

Then froze.

She was right there. Huddled just a couple feet beneath me.

She didn't look up, but I could see the top of her head. The bleached blonde fur so close that I could have reached down to touch it with my boot.

My eyes grew wide. My heart stopped.

I backed up slow at first. Then fast.

This would have been the scariest moment of my life, had I any time to actually be scared.

I jumped back in the Arctic Cat, circled around, and started pushing her down the beach. It started to feel like we were making progress. Maybe even having a little fun at this point.

The bear, walking alongside the ocean with a beautiful rainbow in the background, this was turning out to be a miraculous day. One that I will never forget.

But then she turned around.... And I saw it.

Blood had soaked through her blonde fur. Her right side was torn open from the fight. Pieces of skin and guts hung from her body.

That's why she didn't run before. That's why she was hiding.

Suddenly, it all made sense.

I needed to get her out of town and away from the villagers' homes fast. If I did not drive the injured bear out of town before nightfall, I would be the one responsible for putting her down. And I didn't want that. Not her.

Hours went by of me trying to push the bear out of town, but she had given up. Madonna was no longer intimidated by gunshots in the air or my vehicle getting close. She simply lay in the calming ocean waves awaiting her fate.

For a small wound, the ocean could have healed her. For something this big, it wouldn't make any difference. I knew what was coming, but I didn't want to accept it.

Madonna, lying in the shallow sea behind the homes of elders and kids, was a serious safety concern.

An injured bear is a very dangerous bear. They'll do anything for food, like break into a nearby home or hunt a human.

Because of this, I knew I would not be able to leave her so close to the villagers' homes.

John Jr., someone I looked up to in the village, drove up in his black, single cab, Toyota Tacoma, with tires always spitting sand but never getting stuck.

He rolled down his window and said, “Nightfall’s coming. Do you want me to put her down?”

I said, “No, I will take care of it.”

In my mind, I wasn’t going to give up just yet, there was still time to try and save her.

I grabbed some rocks and threw them near her.

“C’MON BEAR!” I yelled.

Madonna stood up. Took a few steps. But then laid back down.

Nightfall was just around the corner. And time had run out.

But I didn’t want to do it.

Up until this day, I’d never killed an animal in my life. Not a bird, not a rabbit. If there was a spider in my home, I would usually try and get it outside unscathed.

I have no experience with hunting, no firearms training, and this was before I attended any police academy. I’ve only been on the job a few months and I have no idea what I’m doing out here.

I am just a city boy who was dropped off in one of the most remote places in the world, with a job of protecting people. I have no backup or how-to guide. I am all that there is out here, and I have to make the best decisions I can on the fly.

So I grabbed my .45 pistol and started firing rounds into her. Hoping to make it fast. Hoping to make it clean.

But it wasn't. The bullets hit the bear like bee stings. She jumped around in agony.

It was the worst moment of my life, and I was the sole cause of it.

I had just spent the entire day trying to save her life, and this was how it ended.

She died. And I was gutted.

I couldn't leave her near the village. I had no choice.

But that didn't make it any easier.

I tried. I really tried.

I never wanted to hurt anything in my life.

But Alaska makes you tough. And this was just the beginning.



PRE ALASKA

My name is Taylor. I always try to lead with kindness and treat others with respect. Since I was a kid, fitness and health have been the cornerstones of my life.

In college, I was a triathlete, earned a Biology degree, and eventually got accepted into medical school. But I dropped out after realizing that I hate hospitals. The white hallways, the squeaky floors and beeping sounds, doctors constantly getting paged, feeling boxed in no matter where I went. I couldn't stand any of it.

I kept asking myself, “Do you really want to spend the next decade of your life in a medical school and residency program, only to end up working in a hospital the rest of your life?”

The answer was a resounding, “NOOOOOOO!”

Friends and family all said it would be a mistake, giving up a high salary career, a stable life, and a stable paycheck. But none of that mattered to me.

I loved nature. I needed adventures. I wanted to challenge my resolve. I wanted to get uncomfortable with everything and find out who I really am, and what I am capable of.

I wanted to live a dream!

So I set out to make it real.

THE JOB SEARCH

Because I was tens of thousands of dollars in medical school debt with only \$600 or so to my name, I knew I would need to find a job that could support my adventure in life. So, I began looking for the most remote places in the world an American could work.

This caused me to stumble across the Aleutian Islands in Alaska.

Erupting volcanoes, exaggerated cliffs, the unforgiving Bering Sea beach with iceberg winter waves.

As an athlete, I've always loved running in new and exciting places under extreme conditions. And the Aleutians seemed like the most adventurous place I could ever imagine running wild.

So I started my job search.

It turns out there were two types of job openings for outsiders in the Aleutians. The Community health aide, which is pretty much a solo village doctor that runs a small clinic. And the Village Public Safety Officer, which is part-cop, part-firefighter, part-everything.

I don't know anything about police work or firefighting, so I applied for the medical position.

During my interview with the nonprofit, I expressed my passion for wanting to help people. I told them about my background in medicine,

and how I didn't want to waste years of my life in medical school or a hospital.

I felt the interview was going great... Until the final question.

“How long do you plan to stay in Alaska?”

“I could commit to staying five years, possibly more if I liked it,” I replied.

They concluded the interview by telling me that five years just wasn't a long enough commitment to justify the cost of training me.

Just like that, it was over.

I was crushed.

The interview went so well, but my dream of running wild in the Aleutians was ruined by one question.

THE BOTTLE CAP

My phone rang.

It was a Sergeant from the Public Safety department in the Aleutians. It turns out the nonprofit organization I interviewed with sent him my information. He was looking for a new officer.

After speaking with the Sergeant for some time, I was offered the job. Public safety something.

Firefighting, law enforcement, medical emergencies, search and rescues, animal control, you name it.

I would be running this department solely by myself.

No backup or help for days. No real “off days” either.

“Well, this sounds interesting,” I thought.

But, I was torn.

I never had any interest in police or firefighting, I’ve never done a search and rescue, and I definitely don’t know how to ride a snowmachine.

The Sergeant told me he needed a decision by tomorrow.

So, I went for a run to clear my mind.

After my run, I grabbed something to eat at a local Whole Foods, then walked outside to eat on the patio.

I knew during this meal, I would decide the fate of my future path in life.

I asked myself one question, “Should I go to Alaska?”

And just when I sat down, I saw it.

A Sweet Leaf Iced Tea bottle cap on my table.

I picked it up, flipped it over, and there was the message:
“Here today, gone tomorrow.”

Having just finished reading *The Alchemist* a week prior, I was in disbelief.

The entire premise of that book is, when the universe gives you a sign, you take it. If you start refusing the signs of the Universe, you will likely grow old and unfulfilled.

So, I decided to be open minded.

I asked the universe a direct question, and the universe provided me with a clear answer.

I called the Sergeant and asked him, “Are there bears there?”

“Unfortunately yes, that will be one of your job duties,” he replied.

“What about wolves?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, there’s wolves there too. You’ll have to be careful running.”

And right then..... I felt it.

Excitement. Fear. And butterflies in my stomach.

“I’ll take the job,” I said.

The journey begins.



GRANNYISM #3
HERE
TODAY, GONE
TOMORROW

THE BONFIRE

A week before I left my home in Texas to embark on my Alaskan adventure, I had a bonfire at my best friend's house.

I took all my personal belongings and torched all my memories.

Photos, clothing, letters of recommendations from old college professors, everything got burned.

Won't need that stuff where I'm headed.

Someone once told me that you cannot press the reset button on life. I set out to prove this theory wrong.

I reduced myself to a suitcase and a duffel bag, gave my truck to my mother, and I boarded an airplane.

No one had a clue what I was up to.

I deleted my Facebook account, and my cell phone wouldn't work where I would soon live.

I had officially pressed the reset button on life.

GETTING FITTED FOR POLICE UNIFORM

Once I landed in Anchorage, I was transported to the Alaska State Trooper supply headquarters to receive my state issued safety gear.

“Do you have any prior police experience?” The woman at the front desk asked me.

My Sergeant answered for me, “No... He’s perfect.”

At Supply I was fitted for a bulletproof vest and given a few uniforms. I was informed I’d receive my policing “tools” after attending weapons training at the academy in Sitka. In the meantime, I was given a loaner vest, two sets of handcuffs, and a laptop.

That was it.... I was being sent out to a remote village alone.

No badge. No taser. No baton. No training.

Just my personal handgun, and some optimism that everything is going to be OK.

Truly wild, wild west stuff.

I had no idea how this was ethical... or legal... but it seems this is how Alaska operates. So I went with it.

A go forth and conquer approach. Sink or swim. And I was ready. At least I told myself I was.

THE MOMENT I LOST MY FEAR OF DEATH

When I arrived at the airport to check-in for my flight to the Aleutians, a woman at the counter began asking for everyone's body weight.

I thought, "this can't be socially acceptable to ask for people's weight with others around."

But Alaska operates on safety first and feelings last. And this gathering of people's weights was to evenly distribute the airplane, so it would not flip from the strong Aleutian winds.

At the airport, there was no TSA security, no body scanners. Just a bunch of passengers with a lot of fragile "hand carries" for items they won't be able to buy where we are headed (like birthday cakes and freshly cooked pizzas).

Meanwhile, me, I was headed there with some beans and a pistol.

The airplane we boarded was a Saab 340, a prop plane that holds about 30 passengers. This was the smallest airplane I had ever flown on so far.

The plane landed in a hub city called Cold Bay, which is known for two things: thick fog and a liquor store called Bearfoot.

I told the woman working at the counter, "I am going to Nelson Lagoon."

She replied, "I know, it's going to be an hour or so."

I thought to myself, “How did she know who I am? I didn’t even give her my name.”

During my wait in the small airport, people kept asking me, “So you’re the new cop out there huh?”

It was my first taste of small-town living. People knew who I was and what my job was before I even knew anybody’s name.

The pilot, a young man who appeared to be in his twenties, walked up to me and said, “OK, we are loading up let’s go.”

I looked around... I was the only person walking with the pilot. It turns out, I was the only passenger scheduled for the flight.

I walked out onto the tarmac, and I saw a small plane the size of a car, with airplane wings, only a foot or two off the ground.

The plane was called a Piper Cherokee, and it was filled with ice cream and cases of beer. I took a quick photo so I could remember this incredible moment of my life.

The pilot then showed me how to enter the airplane by stepping onto the wing, and he sat me in the cockpit, right next to him.

So... there I was, cruising down the runway, co-piloting a flying beer cooler.

The pilot looked at me.

I envisioned him say something really cool like “you got your parachute ready” or “you know how to work the gun turret?”

But instead, he looked at me and said, “you’re pressing on the brakes, could you ease up a bit?”

Brakes? Just like a car?

“Oh, my fault” I said.

The pilot then looks at me again, probably realizing this is my first time in an airplane this size.

He says, “You get air sick?”

I yelled “Hell no, let’s get crazy!”

He replied, "OK, we'll have some fun."

About 15 minutes into the ride, flying about 200 feet off the ground, the pilot does a rolling maneuver where the plane’s flying at a sixty-degree angle.

The pilot then gets less than 50 feet off the ground and spots a family of bears. Some of the bears were playing in the river, while one was out on the land.

The pilot got closer and closer to the ground. We began literally chasing a bear with an airplane.

“THIS IS UNREAL”, I screamed in my head.

The bear was sprinting across the tundra, while glancing back at the airplane. The bear then stood up on his hind legs as if to swat us.

The pilot pulls up.

My eyes and soul filled with wonder.

I could not believe what I had just experienced.

This was my first time seeing a large wild animal outside the zoo... And it was a bear. And we were chasing it... In an airplane... The size of a Honda Civic!

In the past, I had a strong fear of death. After that moment, with this pilot, that fear completely vanished. I had just done something I never dreamt was possible.

Here I was, a city boy, “buzzing” bears in my own chartered airplane, overlooking beautiful Alaska wilderness, flying to my new home in a remote village that no one I knew could point to on a map.

At that very moment I exceeded my life’s expectations of how far I could journey and the excitement that awaits when you take chances. That was “the” moment of my life so far.

And in that *exact* moment, I lost my unhealthy fear of death.



THE

ALEUTIANS

I'VE LANDED

When the plane landed at the runway in Nelson Lagoon, there were multiple cars surrounding the airplane and even more people on four-wheelers. It seems everyone came out to see who the new cop was.

I stepped out of the airplane. I pointed around and said in a stern voice, "Alright everybody, party's over."

I waited a second or two, then let out a big smile.

The villagers laughed, some before others. I then introduced myself to the villagers, and I was given the keys to my new duty truck, a navy blue 1990 Dodge Dakota.

I drove the truck to my office just to get a sneak peek at where I would be working. Inside my office was firefighting gear that I had no idea how to operate. There was also a jail cell made of wood, about as thin as cardboard. Seems safe.

Inside the garage was an Arctic Cat Side by Side, and a yellow snow machine (Alaskans call snowmobiles snow machines).

I thought, "This is fucking awesome."

So many toys. No clue how to use any of them.

How hard could it be?

DID YOU BRING A GUN?

When I arrived at my new wooden police home in Nelson Lagoon, I quickly rummaged through my duffel bag, grabbed my running gear, and sprinted outside.

I was too excited. I needed to see this place.

Just behind the house was a twenty-foot grass hill that protects the town from the ocean.

I ran up it. The grass vibrant green and waist high, flowing in the wind.

A wolf or a wolf-like dog, began running at me from afar. I was quite terrified. I had a gun in my hand, ready, in case I needed to defend myself.

The “maybe wolf” ran right up to me. She seemed friendly.

I began petting her. Everything checked out.

Back to running.

I took my first step onto the beach. A fine black lava sand with no footprints but my own.

The sun was shining bright. The sky was blue. The coastline seemed never ending.

I had the greatest, most freeing run of my life.

When I returned from my run down the beach, I went for a drive around the town.

Every time I passed by a villager, I would say, “this village is stunning, I just went for a run and...”

Then, I would get interrupted mid-sentence, and the villagers would ask in different variations, “Did you bring a gun?” or “You brought a gun right?”

I thought, “what strange people, everyone asking me the same question.”

However, my favorite one was from my neighbor Marc who asked, “You brought a gun, right? You know shit’s real out here.”

He could not have been more right.

Shit was about to get very, very real out here.

THE VILLAGE OF NELSON LAGOON, ALASKA

Nelson Lagoon is a tiny fishing village, located on a narrow spit of land sandwiched between the Bering Sea and a “river” (technically a lagoon).

The village has a surprisingly large school, a fuel storage farm, a nice new health clinic for medical and dental emergencies, an environmental building, a water treatment plant, and a public safety office where I store my police and firefighting gear.

There's also a quaint hotel, an all-gravel runway right off the beach, and a trash site where you can burn *almost* anything you want.

The Natives in Nelson are called Aleuts. And since some of their ancestry includes Norwegian fishermen who settled there long ago, a few of the people even have light-colored skin and hair. Some even have what I call, *Canadian accents*. Not sure why though.

In Nelson, all the roads are sand, and all the grass is waist-high and luscious green. Bald eagles fly all day, seals haul out on the beach, bears wander the coastline, wolves lurk beyond the edge of town, porcupines stroll around like they own the place, and prairie dogs just burrow, trying to dodge the dogs that chew em like bubble gum.

Nelson is the land of salmon fishing, rifle shooting, booze drinking, off-roading adventures. And usually a few of those get combined at the same time.



THE GIVING RICE

When I first landed in Nelson, I was so warmly greeted by the Native Community that I wanted to show my appreciation for welcoming me into their village.

I knew Nelson Lagoon was a fishing community... Salmon country.

So I thought, “What goes good with salmon?”

I ended up buying a shipment of Lotus Foods’ organic black forbidden rice.

I then went around to every home, and I passed out a bag. Whether they ate it or not, I have no idea. But about an hour after I finished passing out rice, I was greeted at the door by a kid with a large trash bag.

“My dad wanted me to give this to you,” the kid said.

I peeked inside. It was a massive beautiful fresh red sockeye salmon.

I had never filleted a fish before. So, that was the day I learned to fillet a giant salmon.

That was also the day I learned not to fillet a giant salmon inside your house, unless you want it to smell like a cannery.

But everything about this journey is going to be a learning process.

THE VILLAGE JACKASS

I was so excited to explore my new village and test the capabilities of cool vehicles I had no idea how to drive.

My Sergeant told me about some of the off-road trails I should explore, in case I am ever called to that area for an emergency. So, of course I did just that.

I hopped in my Dodge Dakota truck, and I took off down a trail behind the runway. I was cruising around in waist-high grass and the scenery was stunning. As I was driving along the trail, the pathway became less and less visible.

Suddenly, I realized I was making my own trail. Where did it all go wrong?

I tried to keep myself calm. I told myself, “I can just bust a U-turn on this hill, then head back into town. No one even has to know I drove out this far.”

Well, things got bad. As I was trying to make a U-turn on the hill, the vehicle began to topside. My front left wheel was lifted multiple feet off the ground. I had never seen a vehicle this far off the ground from making a simple turn.

What the hell have I done? The first week and I have almost flipped my truck.

The more I pressed on the gas, the more stuck I got. “Deep breaths, Taylor.”

I jumped out of the vehicle, because at this height, it required jumping out. I look back at the vehicle in disbelief, “How did this even happen?”

I’m too far to walk back to town, and the only communication device I have on me is a VHF radio that the entire town is glued to. Knowing basically, the only way to get help is to get on the radio and look like a complete jackass.

Time to swallow my pride.

I began speaking over the radio, “Justine.... I am stuck out here and need a tow.”

Here I am, the town’s safety officer, supposedly the search and rescue coordinator, less than one week on the job, and I need to be rescued. Pitiful.

She responds worried, “Where are you?”

I am so far out of town that my VHF radio is barely working.

“I have no idea,” I respond.

Her voice broken up on the radio, “Ok... We are sending help.”

30 minutes goes by and no rescue yet. Justine comes on the radio, “We still can’t find you. Where are you?”

Surely at this point the entire town is laughing at me.

But it gets worse.

There was an airplane scheduled to bring in passengers and freight around this time. So Justine gets on the radio with the pilot, requesting him to find me.

The plane spots me and begins flying circles around me.

The pilot then comes on the radio, “Chhhhhh we found him. Chhhhhh repeat, we found him.”

I wanted to bury myself in the sand and disappear. And this was just the beginning.

Two rescuers named Franchini and Merl showed up and they could not believe what I had done to my truck.

They tied a rope from their vehicle to mine, and thankfully, they managed to pull me free after a dozen tries. Some of the attempts even snapped the rope.

As I passed by villagers on my drive home, they all smiled and waved at me. I know everyone was laughing at me, making jokes, but in a way, I felt like this was my soft welcome to the community.



MY FIRST CALL TO ACTION

Almost an entire week had gone by. And in that time, I had not received any emergency calls.

But then it happened.

One afternoon a kid on an ATV drove up to my home, ran up my doorsteps, and banged on my door repeatedly. I ran to the door and the kid yelled, “HURRY, MY DAD NEEDS YOUR HELP.”

I rushed to put on my uniform and bullet proof vest.

I ran outside, and the kid shouted, “A PORCUPINE ATTACKED MANNY!”

I thought for a second....

I don't know any Manny...

And I don't know anything about porcupines. I have never even seen a dang porcupine.

I have absolutely no idea what the hell I am doing here, but I am Village Public Safety Officer, handle all emergencies.

So I thought, “how hard could it be?”

While driving to the house, I had no idea whether I was going to be in a gun fight with a porcupine or carrying some guy named Manny to the clinic.

When I arrived at the house, I soon discovered Manny was a black Labrador retriever.

The large dog had bitten the porcupine, which resulted in quills being shot into the dog's face and inside his mouth. This dog had a black face, but there were so many white quills in and around his mouth, it looked like he had a frosted gray goatee.

And still.... I have no idea what I am doing there.

The owner, John Jr., informed me that his dog was old and could possibly die from the porcupine attack. He asked me if I would hold the dog down while he pulls out the quills with steel pliers.

I began thinking to myself, "OK, this is starting to get a little crazy."

But I powered through.

I bear hugged this black lab as hard as I could so it could not escape or bite me, while John Jr. proceeded to pull the quills from the dog's mouth.

Each quill removed produced a scream from the dog that most dog owners will never hear from their pets. Even myself having owned a few dogs in my life, I have never heard these shrills come from a

canine. The only sound I can compare would be a young kid screaming for his life. It was human type screams coming from a dog.

We endured this for an hour or so due to the sheer number of quills. Each one removed, accompanied a piece of the gum or skin of the animal. Blood was everywhere.

By the time I got back home, I sat in the corner of an empty room, with a sick feeling in my stomach of what that animal had just gone through.

I just sat, thoughtless...

Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine this scenario occurring in my life.

I thought my first emergency call would have been a fire, or a stolen vehicle, or a missing person's case. No way in hell would I have guessed my first call would be a dog getting into a fight with a porcupine.

My saying of "How hard could it be", soon after became "how much worse can it get?"

And to that answer, it gets a lot worse.

THE “PRE” POLICE ACADEMY

Before the real police academy, I had to attend a "Pre-Academy" for Village Police Officers (VPO's). This training took place in an Alaskan city called Bethel, not to be confused with the city Jesus was born.

This would be a basic police, firefighting and medical academy to prepare me for the more grueling academy during the wintertime.

I had two roommates who would soon become my brothers for the next months. Since they were both ex-military, they taught me how to shine my boots, polish my brass, and make my bed with precision hospital corners. During this academy we put out fires, learned about law enforcement, and we were thrown into intense police scenarios with actors.

One of the nights, we participated in a domestic violence scenario. All the recruits were lined up outside of the home. Each recruit, one at a time, would go into the house and complete the scenario. I was last in line due to my name.

When the recruits exited from the building, they would make comments like "I almost did it, but I got killed" or "I was so close, but they got me." So, in my mind all I could think was, "I am NOT going to die tonight."

My turn was up. My adrenaline was pumping.

I received the call to begin the scenario, and I approached a room for a domestic violence complaint. I was on high alert.

One gigantic man who likely weighed more than 250 pounds answered the door. I immediately got physical with him by dragging him out of the room, meanwhile the other man inside the room, locked the door and began laughing and taunting me.

Not knowing anything about proper police communication I began yelling “LET ME IN THERE, OR I AM GOING TO KICK THIS FUCKING DOOR DOWN!”

The actor on the inside began taunting me by laughing loudly.

I yelled once more, “WHEN I COME IN THERE, SHIT’S GONNA GET CRAZY.”

Not knowing what to do at this point, I turned to the evaluator and said, “Do you want me to kick down the door?”

Scenario over.

The Alaska State Trooper Sergeant who was evaluating me, stared at me in complete shock. He said to me “Hey, mini Schwarzenegger, you can’t come in at level 10, there is nowhere else to take it to.”

The evaluator looked at me unsure if this was just all a big prank.

After my “peptalk”, I was dismissed.

I walked away with my head held high. I didn't die in the scenario like everyone else. I survived. I was proud as hell.

The audio of my "performance" during the scenario was subsequently passed around the state to senior officers as a joke. Sometimes I would meet a high-ranking Alaska State Trooper, and when I introduced myself, they would reply laughing, "oh I know who you are."

BACK FROM BETHEL

When I got back from the "Pre-Academy", I still was not a certified officer. I also had no clue how to work most of the equipment in my office. So I just did small things to help out around the community.

I would stand lookout for bears, help elders pick berries, or give villagers who didn't have vehicles, rides to the clinic and the post office.

Sometimes people would call me about getting their vehicle stuck in the snow. And instead of using a rope to tow them out, I would just ram them free, bumper to bumper. Unsafe? Definitely. Unorthodox? For sure. But I was learning on the fly.

I think being open to helping, even though I had no idea what I was doing, went a long way toward becoming accepted in the community.

People didn't care that I was green, they cared that I showed up.

SANTA AND THE TURKEYS

Nelson Lagoon's built on salmon. It's how people pay the bills and feed their families.

And this year was supposedly one of the worst fishing years on record for them, or at least that's what I was told.

Christmas was around the corner. And since I was one of the only people in the village with a stable paycheck, I decided to "pay it forward".

So, I secretly purchased the whole town frozen Turkeys for the holidays. There were so many turkeys, in fact, we ended up having to charter an airplane to get them all into town.

The village asked me to play Santa Claus for the Festivities.

During the Christmas program, I would walk out onto the stage with my Santa Claus outfit and gift satchel, then sing Christmas carols with the children.

After we were finished singing, the kids would all take photos with me as I handed out gifts from the tribe.

I would make most adults come up as well, pretending that there was a gift for them, just so I could get a memorable and embarrassing photo of them sitting on the cop's lap.

When people made jokes about me on stage, I would look into the dark crowd, joking back, "Who is that? I need to know whose house I am going to be patrolling around later."

At the end of the Christmas party, I handed out all the frozen Turkeys.

It was my first Christmas in Nelson Lagoon.

It was my first Christmas in the snow.

And in a way, it felt like it was my first Christmas ever.



MY FIRST SNOWMOBILE RIDE

For the last few months, the snow was heavy and frequent. I was told it was one of the coldest winters in recent memory.

And today, I was pumped, because it would be my first time ever riding a snowmobile, otherwise known in Alaska as a snowmachine.

Once I started the snowmachine up, I immediately thought, “Let’s see how fast this thing can go!”

30mph, then 40mph, then 50mph, then 60mph, as I am screaming into the cold wind!

It was a gorgeous day, and I was flying on powdered snow.

I followed some snowmachine tracks, and about 30 minutes in, I spotted a few tents. I cruised over, and there were some villagers ice fishing.

They cut a large hole in the ice, broke pencils into small pieces and tied fishing line to each piece. They then placed bait on the end and dropped the lines into the cold water. By breaking the pencils into small pieces, this creative method allowed a single hand to hold many different fishing lines.

They miraculously caught all kinds of baby fish.

I broke up a pencil and caught a few myself. I threw the fish in some tin foil and then decided to venture into the mountains. I was having too much fun on the snowmachine, and I wanted to test the limits.

At one point there was a big hill, and I thought, “maybe I could ride to the top and possibly jump it.”

Well, halfway up the hill, reality set in. I aborted the mission, and my snowmachine ended up rolling onto its side. That’s OK, I thought, I can flip it back over.

One try, two tries, three tries. “FUCK”. It was way too heavy for one person to flip back over.

I am miles away from anyone else, and I am in a location I cannot even describe. Just white snow and mountains everywhere. I am lost and stranded. I cannot believe this is happening to me again!

I get on the radio to call for help. No one can hear me. Panic begins to creep in. “Keep it together, Taylor,” I tell myself.

I walk about 15 minutes away to find a high point, hoping the radio can reach someone.

Finally, John Jr. comes on the channel, “Where are you?”

Once again, I had no idea. But eventually they found me and helped me flip the snowmachine back over.

I rode home slightly embarrassed, but not enough to take away from the fun I just had.

When I arrived home, I cooked the tiny fish I caught. I grilled them whole and ate them bones and all. They were the best tasting fish I had ever eaten.

During dinner, I received a phone call from two villagers, Franchini and Justine, who said “We heard you had a big day!”

Of course they did. Village news spreads fast. And it appeared everyone already knew. Today was just another day that the town had to save the guy who was supposed to be there, to save them.

THE ATHLETE IN ME

It has been a long-term goal of mine since I was a teenager to physically train every single day.

There is something about sprinting, whether it be on a bike, in the water, or on land, where I am completely out of breath, and my body is begging me to stop, but the mind says, “push on”. It is hard to describe, but this exact moment of “pushing on” is what I live for, it is what brings me peace and feels like home.

*How can you truly know yourself,
if you never see how far you can push yourself?*

TRAINING FOR THE POLICE ACADEMY

There was no gym in my village, so I built my own.

I found a large log that I would use for squats, adding buckets of paint to the ends for extra resistance. I would do pull-ups off the deck of my home, and push-ups in the sand.

Every day I would go for a run down the beach, regardless of the weather. But because there are so many bears and wolves out here, I literally have to run with a .45 pistol in my hand, keeping my finger placed behind the trigger so I don't accidentally shoot myself.

I remove the water system from my "Camelpack" bag and stuff it with a radio, Combat gauze, and an extra pair of gloves. The combat gauze is in case I get bit or attacked by an animal and need to stop the bleeding. The extra pair of gloves is in case the first ones get too soaked.

I always call Justine (the village administrator) before I leave the house to go on a run. This way, if she does not hear from me by nightfall, she could assume I'm dead or send a rescue team. It was our system.

Since I got here, I have been studying my own tracks on every run so I know how they change with the weather. I have a very unique track due to my spiked shoes (Vivobarefoot trail). And after a few months of studying them, I can now tell whether an animal track is fresh or not.

Some of the scariest moments of my life, are during these runs.

Imagine running in 50mph winds alongside an iceberg ocean with snow falling as thick as marshmallows. Not being able to see 15 feet in front of you. Being miles out of town with no civilization in sight, then running across fresh bear or wolf tracks.

Knowing which way the wind is blowing (bears scents), which direction the tracks are headed, and how fresh the tracks are, became crucial details between life and death.

I have run across wolf tracks while being stuck in a squall (high snow area) where you could not see three feet in front of your face. Like a blanket of snow had been thrown over me. Feelings of complete panic and claustrophobia would hit hard. I would spin in quick circles to make sure there was nothing around me.

One time in a squall, I was so panicked when I ran across fresh wolf tracks that I contemplated shooting my pistol while spinning in a 360-degree motion. I was so far out of town that the stray bullets wouldn't have hit anyone, but I needed to save my rounds just in case.

During these snowstorms, I would sometimes sprint home, but since I could not see much in any direction, I was constantly in panic that I was getting run down by a predator.

Was I out there running to encounter these types of extreme feelings? Or did I encounter these extreme feelings because I wanted to get out there and run?

I am not quite sure. But I kept running.

SITKA

ARRIVING AT THE ACADEMY

The Alaska State Trooper Academy in beautiful Sitka, has a reputation for being one of, if not the most, grueling police academies in the US.

Unlike other police academies, recruits were required to live on the paramilitary base following strict rules. No leaving. No access to phones. No fraternization.

Multiple ex-military told me the Trooper Academy was more difficult than military basic training due to the overload of Academic courses, topped with physical fitness, and cleaning duties.

I was nervous to attend. I honestly did not know if I would complete the academy. It was months long with multiple sessions. And before attending, I was told numerous horror stories of officers getting injured near the end of the academy and having to redo the entire training, or recruits getting caught doing something mildly inappropriate and being kicked out.

Even the smallest lie can get you booted. No second chances.

And if you don't finish the academy, you're fired.

The night before my flight, I did some yoga to try and relax a bit, but I didn't sleep a wink.

The next morning, I flew into Sitka.

When I departed the airplane, I saw multiple Alaska State Troopers.

The Troopers were all monstrous in size, all with stern looks, perfectly ironed uniforms, and wearing the classic pointed large Stetson hat.

I approached them, maybe a bit too confidently, and one of them immediately said to me in a firm voice, “You must be the triathlete. Get in line with the other recruits.”

Once we got on the bus, the rules came out.

Look straight ahead.

No looking out the bus windows.

Sit still with perfect posture, and with hands placed on knees.

We were told to remain completely silent.

The mind games had just begun.

MY FIRST TEST

The first day of the Academy, we were all required to perform a Physical Fitness test (also called a PT Test). Push-ups, sit-ups, and a 1.5-mile timed run.

First, we did the push-ups and sit-ups, then we lined up on the track.

I was told by fellow recruits that the toughest Trooper of the group, aka the “Tough Corporal”, had placed a wager with one of his fellow troopers that he would beat me in the race.

All the recruits were lined up at the starting point. The Tough Corporal, who was about 6'5" and 230 pounds, with an always angry face, and perfectly trimmed, burly mustache, lined up right next to me.

He looked me up and down, as if sizing up the competition. He then pushed me with both hands and said, “Back up, give me some space.”

When the buzzer started, we both took off running.

One of my favorite athletes ever was an Olympian runner by the name, Steve Prefontaine, who died at the age of 24. His racing style was to lead right out of the gate and punish his opponents, as by his quote: “Somebody may beat me, but they are going to bleed to do it.”

When the Tough Corporal and I took off running, I decided to take a different approach. I let him lead the way, with me right on his tail for the first 300 meters. I wanted to see how fast he was.

Running is an art, and my strategy was simple. First I would test his speed and then attempt to demoralize him. If he was going to beat me, I was going to make it hurt.

Right at the 300-meter mark, I turned on the rocket boosters. I sprinted the next 400 meters. At this point I was a solid 200 meters ahead of him, which I kept up until the end of the race.

I beat the Tough Corporal by a good distance, and when he crossed the finish line, I congratulated him on second place.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? WHY AREN’T YOU HELPING THE OTHER GUYS FINISH THE RACE?”, the Tough Corporal yelled at me.

What I did not know at the time is in these types of military academies you can never do anything right. If you finish first place, you get yelled at because you’re not continuing to run with the other guys. If you finish last, you get yelled at because you are not fast enough. This type of training is called “stress inoculation”. It is meant to reveal your true self. To expose the best and worst qualities in a person.

I never asked the Tough Corporal whether he actually bet any money on that race, because to me it didn’t really matter. *I won that day.*

Three days later, the academy gave me a *Letter of Exemplary Performance* for being “More fit than any of my peers”. And although it was nice to receive the recognition, fitness was my life, and I never did it for any paper.

LAUGHING AT THE TOUGH CORPORAL

The first week of the academy is called “Hell Week”. Recruits barely get any sleep. We wake up at 4:30am to swim in a freezing Alaskan swimming pool, where the heat isn’t turned on until 6:30am. That’s when the recreational swimmers show up. Not us.

So basically, when you’re awake, you’re either cold, in pain, getting yelled at, or trying not to fall asleep in class because you are so damn tired.

Then comes the all-night cleaning duties. And finally, when it’s time to sleep for a couple hours, some guy starts snoring like a chainsaw. I became delirious.

One Friday night, near the end of the first week, we marched to the chow hall in the snow. Because of my last name, I was always the last one to get food. And by the time I grabbed a tray, a few recruits were already done eating and yelling at me to hurry.

It was stress from all angles.

I scarfed down my spaghetti as fast as possible. Slammed my tray away. Then lined up with the other recruits outside, ready to march back to the dorms.

The Tough Corporal was barking marching commands. He yelled nonstop. Loud and aggressive. It didn’t matter if we were doing something right or not. And tonight was no different.

The Tough Corporal however, realized he left something inside the chow hall. And when he walked in to retrieve the item, a business owner who runs a small yoga studio nearby approached us shouting, “ALL YOU GUYS DO IS COME AROUND HERE SCREAMING DAY AND NIGHT. WE HAVE A ROOM FULL OF PREGNANT WOMEN IN HERE TRYING TO PRACTICE YOGA. WE ARE FINISHING WITH OUR RELAXATION POSE, KEEP IT DOWN.”

The Yoga business owner stormed off. He was obviously pissed.

A few minutes later the Tough Corporal came out of the chow hall and started yelling again, “ATTEN-HUT” (He means the word “Atten-tion” but it sounds like “Atten-hut”).

Everyone began looking around. Who was going to tell him to keep his voice down?

He yells again “RIGHT... FACE”.

One of the recruits softly speaks up, “Sir, we were told to keep it down.”

The Tough Corporal yelled back, “BY WHO?”

The recruit hesitantly answers, “some guy over there.”

That wasn’t going to fly. I knew someone needed to elaborate, so I spoke up, “Sir, they are practicing *Savasana* in the yoga studio.”

The tough Corporal looked at me like his brain broke. He yelled, “PRACTICING WHAT? ARE YOU MAKING THIS STUFF UP?”

Then other recruits jumped in to take the heat off me. But my emotions were toast, I couldn’t stop laughing.

The Tough Corporal told me to shut my mouth, and we began marching back to the dormitory... quietly.

Once we arrived back at the academy parking lot, I could not stop comically thinking about the incident. It was so funny to me because I actually knew what the yoga rest pose was called, and when I told the Tough Corporal “Savasana”, the look on his face was priceless. I could not stop laughing inside.

The Tough Corporal caught me smiling again, “TAYLOR, WIPE THAT SMIRK OFF YOUR FACE.”

I really tried, but I think so many days of no sleep just got to me.

The Tough Corporal then got directly in my face and screamed while simultaneously spitting, “IS IT ME? AM I GOOFY TO YOU? WELL THEN MAYBE WE SHOULD JUST TAKE A TRIP TO DISNEYLAND!”

At that point I started cracking up, I could not hold back anymore.

The Corporal then pondered for a few seconds on how he could ruin my evening.

He knew I could run all night, so punishing me with exercise would not have worked. Instead, he sent me upstairs to the student lounge that had a window view to the parking lot. He told me to go up there and look out of the window.

I had no idea what was coming. I apologized before I left, as I was not trying to be disrespectful, I just could not stop laughing. I think it was just a combination of no sleep, a high sugar meal (protein-less white pasta), and a funny incident that put me over the top.

I went upstairs and gazed out the window unsure of what I was about to watch.

The Tough Corporal then had all of my classmates lying on their backs doing “cockroaches” on the wet pavement. This is an exercise where you lay on your back, with your legs in the air, and then extend yourself up slightly to touch your toes, mimicking a cockroach on its back.

The Tough Corporal had all the recruits yelling, “Thank you Taylor”, during the very long torturous workout. This intense revenge workout went on for about twenty to thirty minutes.

When all my fellow recruits came upstairs, they all hated me. The Tough Corporal knew exactly how to punish me. He turned my brothers against me.

He won this race.

PRE-HYPOTHERMIA

One Saturday morning at the academy, after we finished taking exams, we were asked to fill a metal therapy bathtub with ice. Once that was complete, we were then instructed to fill the tank with cold Alaska tap water. Keep in mind this is January, so it is freezing cold outside.

The Cold tank was then placed at the front of the classroom. The Tough Corporal pulled me out into the hallway and said, “Taylor, we chose you for this exercise because your heart rate is the lowest and you have the least likely chance of death.”

I replied the only way I could in this situation, “Yes Sir.”

During these types of academies when you get asked to volunteer for something, it is pretty much regarded as “voluntold.” I had no idea what I had volunteered to do yet, but when the class started the instructor said, “We need a volunteer, Taylor get up here.”

I walked to the front of the classroom and the instructor told me to strip down to my “skivvies” (underwear) and straddle the iced cold-water tub. The Corporal then spoke, “Today we will learn how to treat someone with hypothermia. When I give Taylor the go, he will submerge himself for 10 minutes.”

I knew I was getting into the water, but I had no idea it would be for 10 minutes. In my mind I said, “Fuck, this sucks.”

The Corporal gave the word, and I dunked myself in the tank. For the first minute or so, I was hyperventilating with my body in shock. This is a normal part of the process for cold water submersion.

After the hyperventilation period ended, my body went into hardcore shivering. The entire classroom sounded of ice cubes shaking against each other from my body convulsing. The instructor continued teaching his lesson plan, stopping sometimes to place ice cubes on my head. He would tell the class in a very loud stern voice, “DO YOU SEE WHAT PAIN YOUR BROTHER IS GOING THROUGH SO YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO THIS?”

I could see the look in the other recruits’ eyes. It was the first time during the academy that everyone pitied me.

At this point, all the blood in my body has been transferred to vital organs like my brain, lungs, and heart to keep me alive. The shivering remained strong.

Eight minutes in and the instructor asked about my condition. I told him that my eyes are working because I am staring at the clock, and my ears are working because I am waiting to hear that I can get out.

The instructor says, “five more minutes.”

I know that will far exceed the 10 minutes originally quoted, but there is nothing I can do. I cannot display weakness.

After the time was up, the Tough Corporal gave the instructions for the class to remove me from the cold tank. My body felt frozen at this point.

As my brothers were lifting me out of the tank, I told them to be very careful as I literally felt like my body was glass. I thought that if I was dropped, I might shatter into a million pieces.

They laid me onto the ground.

The corporal then tells me to stand up and count down backwards from 67 to 54.

As I was counting down, the class let out some laughter. I guess I missed a few numbers, but I thought I did it correctly.

My brain was not functioning at a high level.

I was then asked to do squats to show dexterity. I felt sick like I was going to die. The only way to describe the feeling, is a dizziness of standing up too fast accompanied by constant stomach punches. I am not sure if it was the frozen blood trying to get pumped around my body or something else, but I felt like I might really pass out and die.

I was then wrapped in multiple blankets. 2-liter coke bottles were filled with warm water and then placed on high heat loss areas like my groin and underarms. I continued to shiver for around an hour. I remember asking the Tough Corporal if I could take a warm shower to heat my body temperature up.

His obvious answer, "No."

An hour later we all went to the swimming pool to practice cold water survival techniques. My mind was still not working. My skin was frozen burned, to the point where I actually felt like I had a sunburn.

For this class, we were learning all about personal flotation devices (PFD's). All the recruits were lined up wearing a PFD we had chosen from a pile. Each recruit, one at a time, was supposed to state the purpose of the specific PFD we were wearing, but my mind dozed off. I had forgotten what we were doing.

The Tough corporal yelled my name, "TAYLOR IT'S YOUR TURN"

I snapped awake. "THIS IS A TYPE THREE PFD", I shouted. Then I dove into the swimming pool fully clothed.

"TAYLOR, ARE YOU BRAINDEAD? GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WATER," the Tough Corporal screamed.

I looked around and realized that I was the only one that had jumped in the water. My mind was shook from earlier in the day, but I was trying to keep it together.

The next week the entire class went down to the Sitka dock, and we were forced to swim in the Alaskan ocean, in January freezing temperatures. I began singing in the water. The recruits followed along and sang back with me. I felt like I was completely prepared for this. Sure, it was cold, but nowhere near icecube bath cold.

THE CUPCAKES

A call came in over the academy loudspeaker, “Taylor, report to the Sergeant’s office immediately.”

Whenever someone had to report to the Sergeant’s office, it was usually due to a disciplinary reason.

All the recruits were staring at me, wondering what I had done. I shrugged my shoulders, because I had no clue either, but I nervously rushed down to the office.

The Sergeant said, “Taylor, the administration staff thinks you are either hitting on them or trying to bribe them for good grades. Did you give them cupcakes today?”

Normally, I would laugh at this, but knowing the severity of the situation, I just said “What?”

I then explained to the Sergeant, that earlier in the day, while I was in line for food, the chef had asked me, “Do you want to take some of these cupcakes with you, if not we will probably throw them out?”

I knew I would not eat them, but I did not want them to go to waste either. So, I thought, maybe the female administration staff at the academy would like some.

So, I had the chef package up the cupcakes and I brought them to the staff to enjoy.

The Sergeant looked at me in a weird way and said, “Taylor, don’t talk to the administration staff for the rest of the academy.”

I emphatically replied, “Yes sir, no more cupcakes for them.”

I could tell the Sergeant was amused but he was not going to show it.

“Dismissed Taylor.”

THE PEPPER SPRAY

During the Academy, recruits participated in various training scenarios. There was cold water survival, defensive tactics, ethics, crime scene investigations, firefighting, medical courses, and of course weapons training.

Since I attended multiple academies in Bethel and Sitka, I was forced to get shot with a taser and pepper sprayed a few different times.

Getting tased was without a doubt the most painful experience of my life. With probes placed right on my spine, it felt like I had a jackhammer on my back for 5 seconds. The pepper spray however can be described by cadets as, “the devil pissing in your eyes.”

I had felt that hellfire before, and today I was about to feel it again. This was the day every recruit dreaded, the pepper spray training.

All the recruits lined up for the scenario. And once again, I was last in line because of my name. Being last is always the hardest, because I hear the screams, cries, and agony of the recruits that go before me. The buildup of anxiety, waiting hours for pain, is almost as tortuous as the actual pain.

A few hours went by.

The Tough Corporal then says, “Taylor, you’re up.”

I personally felt because of my high level of physical fitness, the academy always tried to make things a bit more tough for me. And I still felt like the Tough Corporal wanted to induce some “payback” for my laughing stint a few weeks back. Well, this was his chance.

I will never forget this specific moment in my life. The Tough Corporal grabbed a can of pepper spray from a box with many used canisters. He shook it up to test the contents. He then put it back and grabbed another. He shook up the next canister and also deemed that one to not have enough. Finally, he just decided to grab a new can for my scenario. He wanted to make sure I felt it.

The Tough Corporal gave me the instructions of the scenario, that my face would be doused with pepper spray and I would be required to arrest a belligerent suspect. Well, doused in capsicum oils my face became. It was painted orange with pepper spray.

I ended up arresting the subject with pure adrenaline, but then the pain crept in. Imagine cutting up some hot peppers and accidentally rubbing your eyes. Now multiply that by 10,000. That is the pain level (or the Scoville heat rating).

The Tough Corporal would not let me leave the scenario until I opened my eyes for an extended period. The problem was, my eyes were in such extreme pain, and opening them even for a split second elevated the pain tremendously.

I kept screaming, “FUCK, I CAN’T”

The Tough Corporal calmly responded, “If you think you can, you will. If you think you can’t, you’re right.”

I then held my eyes open with my fingers screaming in agony.

I was finally dismissed, and I was led to the showers.

Ice cold water on my eyes was the only thing that could alleviate the pain. So I stood in the shower for about an hour, with that Alaskan cold tap water drenching my face.

I had to do this bent over because I made the mistake of standing upright and the pepper spray dripped down to my genitals. This also created extreme pain.

The Tough Corporal got his revenge.



YOU ARE YOUR BROTHERS KEEPER

During the paramilitary academy in Sitka, every recruit was forced to clean the entire building every night. The Academy did not employ a cleaning staff.

So, early mornings we would conduct physical fitness, then we would have classes from 8am to 5pm. Sometimes we would have an additional training session after dinner. Then we would finish the night by studying and cleaning the building.

Each recruit had their own corridors to clean. I was assigned the hallways and the toilets (the worst job in the academy). Having to scrub toilets daily and keep them clean for a group of grown men was a true nightmare. But scrubbing those toilets every day taught me something valuable.

I decided from that point on to never leave a bathroom, or any room for that matter, worse than when I entered.

In airports, in gyms, in malls. Wherever I go, I think about the person who has to clean up the mess, and how much easier their job would be if everyone just cleaned up after themselves. I decided from that moment on in my life, I would not be the one adding to their burden.

GRADUATING THE ACADEMY

After many months of torture, I graduated from the academy.

Pepper sprayed, tasered, thrown into countless fight scenarios, overloaded with exercise and stress, and running on barely any sleep.

Sergeant Michael Dekreon, one of the best examples of what a real officer should be, named me valedictorian of the class.

Now as a certified officer, it was time to head back out to bush Alaska and ramp up the adventure.



BACK TO THE

ALEUTIANS

THE VILLAGE SHOOTUP

It was Saturday afternoon. My phone rang.

It was a caller frantically telling me a man is firing gunshots at people in town.

The story was, the shooter's wife had left the home with the last bottle of whiskey, and the man went unhinged, firing shots off the porch of his home in the direction of villagers.

Since there is no liquor store in town. Any alcohol purchased had to be flown into the village. So when the booze runs dry, especially on a Saturday, it is usually out for a few days. And this can make the daily drinkers a little... twitchy.

I am still pretty new on the job at this point. But, I knew the man needed to be arrested as this is clearly a felony, and a real-time public safety threat to the community members and himself.

I also knew that if I called into headquarters, they would tell me to stand down and wait for backup (since I was alone).

But the earliest any backup could arrive is 48 to 72 hours depending on weather conditions. And if I couldn't resolve the situation for multiple days, this would make me seem pretty useless in the town's eyes. Not to mention if someone gets shot in the meantime, the blame would fall solely on my shoulders.

So, I called my oversight Trooper. Prepared to tell him I was NOT going to stand down, and that I would be arresting this man.

Luckily for me... he didn't pick up.

I left a voicemail stating the situation, along with my location and my plan to arrest the man. This way, in case I died, someone would at least know where to find my body.

Nighttime arrived, and I was in the bushes outside the man's home, peeking in through the windows to track his movements.

I saw the man lie down in bed, a good distance away from his rifle.

My heart was racing, hoping that there wasn't another weapon within his reach.

I ran into the home, then jumped on the man and placed him in handcuffs while he was still in his bed.

The man yelled, "WHY AM I BEING ARRESTED?"

I told him "because you were shooting your pistol at people."

The drunk man yells, "IT WASN'T A PISTOL. IT WAS A RIFLE"

During my training of interview and interrogation techniques at the academy, I was taught when interviewing suspects, exaggerating a crime could elicit a more honest response.

For this case, I knew the pistol would be perceived as more threatening than a rifle. So the man clarified for me, which was the confession I needed.

I took the man to my makeshift jail cell, basically a plywood box reinforced by 2 by 4's. I called into Anchorage headquarters, and they gave me orders to charter my own plane into town with the prisoner.

This is where things get weird.

The plane we chartered was a small Piper Aztec 4-seater plane, the size of a Subaru. Pilot up front, while the prisoner and I sat next to each other in the two back seats.

The flight path is around 5 hours and there is no bathroom on the plane.

Thirty minutes into the flight, the man, still heavily intoxicated, slurred, “I need to pee.”

“There’s no bathroom, and we cannot land. Just hold it,” I said.

The man starts squirming in his seat, “I NEED TO PEE.”

Knowing there is nothing I can do, I tell the guy “Well, you better piss your pants.”

The pilot looks back after hearing me say this, “No, don’t piss in my airplane. Hang on.”

The pilot pulls out a freshly sealed water bottle and chugs it until it is empty. He then gives the prisoner the empty water bottle and lets him relieve himself.

Crisis averted... for now.

30 minutes later. Same situation. This time, the pilot whips out a Gatorade bottle and asks me to help chug half with him, to ease the burden.

I agreed to help.

This happened two more times. Total: 4 bottles.

Three hours went by, and I assumed we were in the clear. But no.

The prisoner starts up again, “I AM GOING TO PISS MYSELF IF I DON’T GET ANOTHER BOTTLE.”

I guess this was the old “Give a Mouse a Cookie” routine.

The pilot and I, however, cannot chug anymore Gatorade. We have to pee really bad ourselves at this point. But the pilot knows the prisoner will turn his airplane into a splash zone. So he starts downing another one.

“I AM GOING TO START PEEING,” The prisoner frantically screams.

“JUST HOLD ON FOR ONE SECOND,” I yelled back, knowing the pilot was drinking as fast as he could.

And then.... it happened.

As the pilot was halfway through chugging a Gatorade, the prisoner let loose. He started peeing in the air like a mini fountain, misting the back of the pilot’s chair with urine ricocheting everywhere.

I pressed up against the right-side window, trying to stay as far away from the urine fountain as possible, yelling “HEY PUT THAT THING AWAY.”

I am not sure the physics of it, but tiny airplanes in Alaska really put pressure on the bladder. Even if you feel you don’t need to pee, a few minutes up in the sky can change that feeling pretty fast.

I wish I could say this was my worst experience with a prisoner on an airplane.

But it wasn’t.

SCREAMING INTO THE OCEAN

Over the next few months, I received multiple emergency calls, and I made multiple arrests, all in one of the most rural parts of Alaska (and the world), without backup for days.

Every time I would arrest someone, it usually meant staying up for multiple nights with no sleep. Throughout the day and night, I would have to conduct constant welfare checks on the prisoners, making sure they were not trying to hurt themselves or escape.

The day following an arrest, the prisoner and I would appear for a telephonic court appearance. But if the prisoner still had any alcohol in their system, we would need to wait an additional day.

During these times, I would not be able to shower or sleep for days.

The families would also drive up to the jail house and verbally threaten me for arresting their family member. But this came with the job territory. You have to be okay with being hated at times. And as long as you treated the prisoner with respect and compassion, you would be forgiven... eventually.

Anytime a prisoner was in my custody for a few days, we would generally have quite a few deep conversations about life. I learned a lot about the people and their families during this period.

I would let the families bring food to the jailhouse and even let them drop off laptops or portable DVD players so the prisoner could pass the time enjoyably.

I don't think the village knew how much it pained me to arrest them. I loved the people in this village, and I only wanted good things to happen to them. But I also had a job to do.

During the telephonic court appearances, I would try and help the people in the village anyway that I could. I would often times tell the judge the prisoner is a good person and they just made a bad mistake, hoping to lighten their sentence.

If I arrested someone during the summer, I would request from the judge that the individual serve the prison sentence after the summer fishing season had passed. This way, the prisoner could still earn money for the year, as fishing season has a short window.

I know it's hard living out in rural Alaska, and I did not want to make the villagers' lives any harder. I just wanted people to not hurt each other.

After days of staying up with no sleep, prisoners trying to plead with me, and families verbally abusing me, I would go for a run down the beach to clear my mind. Once I was far enough out of town, I would scream into the ocean, in the loudest cry possible. I might do this scream two or three times. Usually my voice would be hoarse the next day, but it was the only thing I felt worked in releasing the bad emotions.

MY SURROGATE MOTHER (JUSTINE)

Decades ago, a woman from the lower 48, moved out to the Aleutians, married the chief of the Nelson Lagoon tribe, and settled in the village for the rest of her years. Her name is Justine.

Justine is probably in her eighties, but acts like she is in her thirties.

She has been more kind to me than anyone in my life. Everywhere she went, she would tell people she is my surrogate mother. Initially, I didn't even know what this meant when she said it.

She would constantly checkup on me, and make sure I had plenty of food in the village.

One day she called me, asking if I was going to order food from Cold Bay.

I told her, "Food? Who needs to order food? There are seagulls all over the place."

Even though I was certain this would be perceived as a joke, she thought I was dead serious. She let out a worried cry, then begged and pleaded with me to go to her home for dinner and to pick up food from her.

I never turned down a meal from Justine. She was always great company, so long as you could handle the constant bickering between her and Franchini.

She also had the village's most extensive DVD collection, and I would rent about twenty at a time. Literally... twenty.

I would go into her DVD storage with hundreds of titles, and I would come out with a bundle of movies stacked up to my neck.

She would always shout "ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?"

She would sit down and make a note of every movie I rented from her. And then post the "rental slip" on her refrigerator.

In Alaska I didn't have cable TV or Wi-Fi, so twenty movies would last about a month, if I watched one movie a night or so.

Sometimes when I get home and tried to watch one of the movies, the disc would be absent from the case. When I returned the DVD case without the movie inside, she would interrogate me about the missing DVD.

This would always get weird because I am literally the guy with the keys to the town protecting everyone, yet she thinks I would steal a Jurassic Park 3 DVD. It never made sense to me, but I would just laugh all the way home.

I am also not sure if Justine knew exactly how Amazon.com worked, because she would often accidentally buy multiple copies of the same movie.

If Justine invited me over for a meal, she would oftentimes send me home with a trash bag full of food to go in various Tupperware's.

And I am not sure if this is an old lady thing, or just a Justine thing, but she was always obsessed with me returning those damn Tupperware's.

Sometimes I would go on vacation, and I would call to check in on her and the village.

I would say, "How are you, Justine?"

And she would reply, "I know you still have my Tupperware."

VOLCANO LOVE JOY

Rural Alaska is a pretty isolated and desolate place. Some days or weekends, my only interaction is with my neighbor's dogs that I go on long runs with down the coast. But Isolation is like anything else I guess, where you just get used to it.

One day however, I drove down to the runway to greet passengers arriving into town. And a female scientist was aboard the airplane, flying in to conduct an environmental survey.

I guess this was her first ride in a small airplane because she stepped out holding a small plastic bag of fresh vomit. No one seemed to want to give the girl that just puked in the airplane a ride to her hotel, even me to be honest. But everyone left and there she was stranded. So I told her, "I can give you a ride".

Maybe this was her first time in rural Alaska, or maybe this was her first time riding with law enforcement, I am not sure. But, thirty seconds into the drive, she turns to me with a nervous energy and says, "I want to know everything there is to know about this village."

I replied, "Settle down, let's just go for a ride first."

I only had one working radio station in my vehicle plus three CD's (The Counting Crows, Jerry Jeff Walker, and Sarah Bareilles). As I was giving the scientist a tour of the village, a song came on and she energetically asked, "This is Sarah Bareilles. Is this the radio?"

I said, “No this is a CD.”

She then replied, “This is my favorite singer in the whole world. Did you look this up my Facebook?”

Knowing that she just kind of implied I was a stalker, I responded in the most condescending way possible, “Lady, I do not even know who you are?”

I dropped the woman off at her lodging for the night, happy to be done with the interaction. I went home and had a great meal, which is the same meal I have every night, wild salmon caught from the Nelson river and organic rice. I call that a win!

The next morning, I showed up to my office and there she was waiting for me to discuss “village water quality.” She was interested in how the fire hydrants operate in town, so I gave her a quick tutorial, and we shot some water in the air.

Later that afternoon, I opened up the school gym for all the kids to play basketball and volleyball. The scientist showed up to play as well. She got to experience a real sports night in rural Alaska.

The kids in the village seemed to be trying to romantically hook us up by hinting that I was single and pairing us on the same team. Slightly embarrassing, but we went with it, and we all had a lot of fun playing volleyball that evening.

After the game was finished, I received a call from Justine inviting me to dinner at her home. And anytime I can get a meal other than salmon and rice, I jump on it.

When I showed up, the female scientist was also there. We were very friendly together at this point and my attraction towards her was starting to grow.

We had a great meal together, and as the scientist and I were leaving, I asked her if she would like to go for a night ride. She obliged and we took off in my 4x4 Arctic Cat with no doors.

I took her off-roading in the sand dunes, then drove to a remote spot overlooking the lagoon and the beach.

I let her wear my gloves because her hands were ice cold.

I do not remember exactly what we were talking about, but we were in deep conversation.

Then suddenly, we notice Mt Pavlof volcano about 40 miles away starting to erupt, shooting lava deep into the night sky.

We were sitting on the hill, in the dark, watching a volcano erupting lava, and I thought to myself “well, this is about as romantic of a moment as there will ever be.”

So, I turned towards her, pulled her body close to mine, and gave her a kiss.

We made out on that hill until she noticed my hands became frozen.

We were both freezing cold at this point, so we decided to go back to my home to warm up.

I desperately wanted to take a bath to get warm, so I suggested she put on a pair of my shorts and a shirt, and we treat my bathtub like a Jacuzzi (sitting on opposite sides).

“I just met you, I’m not taking a bath with you,” she said.

I replied, “It’s a *jacuzzi* if we are in full clothes and sitting opposite each other.”

She commented “And you give me a white T-shirt?”

She was giving me too much credit for thinking that far ahead.

I swapped her white shirt out for a black one.

We then warmed up in the bathtub, then made our way to the bedroom where we made love... all night... and the morning.

Her phone kept vibrating throughout the evening, which I assumed was either a friend, family member, or possibly boyfriend. I wasn’t psychic, but I knew she didn’t want to pick it up.

Afterwards, she told me “I am single, but it is complicated.”

My situation on the other hand, could not have been more uncomplicated. My best friends out here are dogs that aren't even mine.

So I told her "It's OK, we can keep this as a one night adventure. I won't even ask for your number."

She was leaving the village in a few hours anyway, and we were likely to never see each other again. I understood the situation.

That early morning as the sun was coming up, I dropped her off at her lodging, and we said our goodbyes to each other.

Later in the day, I went to my office to do some paperwork, and surprisingly, the scientist stopped by.

I was shocked because she was supposed to be on an earlier flight.

She said to me, "The flights have been canceled for a week because of the volcano spewing ash into the skies."

"Oh wow," I told her. "I guess you're stuck."

She replied with attitude, "And you were not even down at the runway to say goodbye to me?"

She was clearly upset, which was shocking to me, because earlier in the morning, she had made it seem like we were never going to see each other again.

But I guess the volcano was my matchmaker, and it wasn't done matching.

The scientist and I ended up spending every day and night together that ashy week. We forged an intimate bond, and she told me that it was the best week of her life.

It was one of the greatest weeks of my life as well.

And when she left, I felt a painful isolation.

There is a saying in rural Alaska, "If you don't bring a girl to Alaska, you don't get a girl in Alaska."

And up until this point, I had not felt this type of isolation while living here.

I know my best years are being spent in solitary.

But feelings are like waves... and I know in time I will bounce back.

DOWN DOG (A SAD STORY)

My job in Alaska had a lot of responsibilities. People in the community placed a great deal of trust in me. I was the police corporal, fire chief, emergency medical responder (when called upon), the search and rescue coordinator, and I dealt with any other public safety matter. This included animal control... Wild and domestic.

Since the village could not afford to fly a veterinarian out to operate on the animals, I was trained to give animals vaccines, and sadly I was also responsible for putting sick or injured animals down. These moments were some of the hardest parts of my career... and life.

One afternoon, I received a call from a community member that their elderly dog was in a lot of pain.

A portion of the dog's intestines had exited the body from the rear, and there was no way to treat the animal in the community.

The family said they have been thinking about having the dog put down for a long time, and they are saddened by the dog's pain.

"It is time to say goodbye."

I understood the family's grief and difficulty in making this decision.

So, I told the family to place the dog outside on a leash, tied to the porch along with her favorite meal in a 1 container. I then asked the

family to go for a long ride down the coast so they would not be traumatized by hearing any sounds.

Once I arrived at the family's home, I untied the dog, and walked it out to a field, petting the animal the whole way.

I gave the dog praise, told her she was a good girl, hoping she had a good life. I always felt the animals knew what was coming, and that they were at peace with it all.

I spent some minutes with the dog, putting her at ease. And while she was eating her final meal, I put a handgun at the base of her skull and pulled the trigger.

The dog made an initial sharp sound, but then fell over and the legs began moving rapidly. It looked as if she was running to heaven.

This lasted for maybe a solid minute or so. I then wrapped the dog in a blanket and then placed her into an igloo cooler. This would be the dog's casket.

When the family drove back home, I was there to greet them. I told them the dog passed away peacefully. The family then took the remains and had a burial for the dog.

I always thought it was strange that I was asked to put down a family's dog, but I was never asked to be a part of the funeral. But I knew it was better that way, as I needed some time to myself after these events.

Alaska is no place for weak men. And you get a constant reminder of this anytime you seem to forget. What provides me solace during these sad events, is the fact that a family entrusted me to spend the last remaining moments with their pet, and that I would send it off as humanely and respectfully as possible.

The village residents placed a great deal of trust in me to help them in their times of despair. Because if it were not for me, they would have had to do it themselves.

This made me tremendously sad. But it also made me proud that I could shoulder their burden.

GOLD AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

When I was a child, I was always told that a treasure chest of gold is at the end of every rainbow. Yet every rainbow that I ever saw seemed like it was miles away, never within reach.

So as an adult, I just assumed rainbows were some sort of distant optical illusion, that if you ever got close enough to one, you would never be able to see it anyways.

I was DEAD wrong.

One day as I was driving my Arctic Cat 4x4 down the sand beach, I saw a beautiful rainbow in the distance radiating off the ocean and landing somewhere in the village.

I thought how cool it would be to drive underneath a rainbow. Who knows, maybe it will bring me luck!

So, I drove alongside the ocean in the rainbow's direction.

Yet, the closer I got the more I realized this rainbow was not landing in the village, it was landing on the beach shore right in front of me.

I could not believe my eyes. It was the first time in my life I have seen a rainbow hitting land.

I was getting excited, but I also assumed the closer I got to the rainbow, the faster it would disappear. But it did NOT disappear.

I kept getting closer and closer, until I drove right through the rainbow.

The suspended colorful atmosphere permeating through me. It was pure magic.

I turned around hoping to drive through it again, but it was gone.

What the hell have I just experienced?

Before I came out here, everyone told me that moving to Alaska would be a mistake. But it ended up being the greatest thing I had ever done with my life.

And then I realized..... there is gold at the end of a rainbow.

It was the golden gift of taking chances.



CHILL BEAR

I run across a lot of bears in Alaska. But today, during one of my runs down the coast, I saw in the sand, a paw imprint that was bigger than any bear track I had ever seen.

The locals taught me how to estimate a bear's height from its track, and I knew this bear would be 12 or more feet tall. I was scared as hell to know this bear was close to me, but I was just so damn curious to see how big this bear really was. So, I followed the bear's tracks along the beach for maybe 10 or 15 minutes. And at some point, I noticed the tracks started to veer off into the grasslands.

Now, I might chase bears on the beach, but when it gets into the grasslands and hills, I do not dare. There are too many hidden rolling hills where a bear could be hiding.

So, I figured this was the end of the road for me. And just as I thought to turn back, I noticed a huge tree trunk lying flat in the grasslands. I thought to myself, "how did the ocean wash up that huge tree all the way to the grasslands?"

And then..... the tree trunk started to move.

It was not a dead tree.... it was the bear.

Now, the thing about bears is, they all have different personalities, kind of like humans. Some bears get scared and run off, some get aggressive

and want to fight, and some are just curious and want to see what's going on.

The other thing with bears is, they like to scan the environment with their noses. Which is why the gigantic bear started to stand upright and stick his nose in the air to smell me. I could not believe how big this bear was.

I also could not believe that I was alone, in the Alaskan wilderness, with no one for miles, right next to a humongous bear.

Could this be the moment I die?

I nervously grabbed my phone and took a quick photo as the bear was lowering himself. I then slowly started backing up and saying, "easy big fella."

I quickly put away my phone, shaking slightly. I was ready to fire some warning shots in the air with my pistol just in case, but I did not need to. I think this bear was so strong and powerful, he did not worry about me.

He just went back to doing whatever the hell it was he was doing, and I walked home backwards, tingling from adrenaline that I got to witness such an enormous, majestic animal, up close and in the wild.

If all bears have different personalities, I would label this one as....

Chill Bear.



BIG JOHN, LITTLE JOHN

In our village, we have a family called the Nelsons. The Nelsons in Nelson Lagoon, who fish on Nelson River. Go figure.

There is big John Nelson, and there is little John Nelson, aka John Jr, aka Johnny.

Big John Nelson is as nice and tough of a man as you will ever meet. He fished on the river up until his seventies, and on an annual basis probably did more tough work than most people that live in a city do their whole life.

My interactions with him were not as much as I would have liked, but he was a great man.

Every time I would drive past him on the road, he would roll down his window and say to me in a kind of Norwegian accent “How you doing there young fella?”

We would chat every now and again on the beach or at the river dock.

One time he told me the tragic story of his puppy he loved.

He said they would spend every minute together, and every time he left the house, he would bring his little dog to ride on his lap.

One day though, he let the dog out of his truck to take a pee on the beach, and a bald eagle swooped in and snatched the dog up.

The eagle flew the dog high up in the air and then dropped it to its death.

This is a tactic eagles use to sometimes kill their prey. And big John had to witness this happen to his beloved pet.

Anytime an elder would share tragic stories like this with me, I felt I was a part of their tribe.

One year, the state bought my office a brand-new off-road vehicle called the Polaris Ranger. I knew that out of everyone in the village, John Sr. needed help the most.

So, I drove my old Arctic Cat 4x4 to his house and handed him the keys.

I will never forget when I got to his home, he originally thought I was there for a police disturbance. I guess because I had never showed up at his house before.

When I told him I was there to give him my old police vehicle, he couldn't believe it.

Someone once told me, "Good people recognize good people."

And I am not sure if I am on that list, but John Sr. was one of the best of em.

BABY SEAL

Last night we had a massive storm that brought the tides higher than the village had ever seen. We live on a spit, sandwiched between a river and the ocean, and water had completely flowed over a piece of the land to the other side of the river.

Other than the predatory animals and frequent 100mph winds, this is probably the scariest thing about living out here. If there was an earthquake north of us, with a big enough tsunami, we would all be swept out to sea.

And considering the Aleutians are literally the ring of fire with volcanoes and earthquakes throughout, it is not unrealistic to think that at some point this might happen.

After the bad weather cleared up a bit, I went for a ride down the coast to see the destruction the storm had caused and to look at any interesting debris that had washed up on the shore.

About 15 minutes of driving out of town, as I was cruising through trails near the point of the spit, I saw a baby seal a few hundred feet removed from the ocean.

It seemed like the baby seal had become stuck on land when the water flowed over the spit. I knew if it stayed this far inland it would eventually die. Luckily, I had a giant plastic snow shovel in the back of my Polaris Ranger.

I tried to lift the baby seal with just the snow shovel, but damn that little baby seal was heavy. She was also too bouncing around for me to pick her up. So, we ended up working together.

The baby seal was using its front flippers to propel its body forward, while I used the shovel to pick it up from the rear, pushing it towards the ocean.

Baby seals are heavier than you would think.

Both of us exhausted, we had to take a few breaks along the way.

I was excited this seal's life was going to be saved. Having just watched the movie "Frozen" the night before, during some of our breaks, I would get up close to the baby seal and sing, "Do you want to build a snowmannnnnnnn?"

The seal pup and I went back to work. She scuddled, I lifted and pushed.

When we got a few feet from the waves, I let the seal do the remainder of the work.

The seal swam off into the ocean.

Shortly after, she popped her head out of the water to look back at me. I assume she was in shock for what had just happened. But maybe she wanted to say, "thanks and bye."

Anyways, I was sure that will be the last time someone sings her a Disney song.

I was elated. I had just saved a baby seal. I was riding high. I left there feeling like no matter what else I did that week, I had done a great deed.

A few days later, I went for a ride down the coast. It is quite normal to see seal pups from a distance close to the shore, but normally they will dart back into the ocean once they see any kind of vehicle approaching.

But this seal remained still.

When I drove up close, I realized this was the same seal pup. This time however, she was dead.

I was pretty sad for I had spent some good times with that seal.

But I guess the earlier storm had separated the seal from her mother, and the baby seal could not survive alone.

So, as it turns out, I never did save that seal.

Rural Alaska is no place for weak people, or weak animals. And if you ever forget, there will always be reminders.

VILLAGE PARANOIA

The village airplane service is how the village receives all mail and groceries. And the flight days are every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday (weather permitting).

The fuel farm manager Franchini will get on the radio and say, “plane arriving in 35 minutes with mail and freight” (freight means booze and groceries).

Everybody from the small town usually drives down to the runway to pick up their supplies. When the plane lands, all the cars drive up within a few feet of the airplane, grab their items, and then drive off.

As an officer I was required to document most of my daily activities in my notebook. For example, I would write something like “time is 1349, Patrolling the runway”.

One night, a drunken prisoner told me the village thinks I write down in my notebook who’s getting alcohol in from the airplane.

I laughed and told him, “alcohol is not illegal in this town buddy, it sounds like you guys got a case of the paranoias.”

Being the officer in town, I also had keys to the public buildings like the school. So oftentimes, I would alleviate my boredom with a session of late-night basketball at the school gym.

Across the street from the school however, was a home with people that like to “enjoy” their evenings partying.

A villager once told me that when I go play basketball at the school the town thinks I am doing a stakeout, and the guests are told “Don’t drink by the window, or he’ll see you.”

This was hilarious to me because 1) Alcohol is legal in this town, and 2)
Not a whole lot of stakeouts going on in Nelson Lagoon.

THE SINKING BOAT

Last night a bunch of fishermen in the village got pretty drunk partying.

Before passing out, one of the fishermen ended up tying his captain's boat to the dock a bit too tight. When he woke up, it was low tide and the boat had capsized. The boat was rapidly taking on water.

I heard yells on the radio calling for help.

As I pulled up to the dock there was one fisherman trying to scoop out water from the boat with a bucket, and another fisherman throwing up in the ocean due to being so hungover, I guess.

Everyone was panicking because the \$400,000 boat is about to bite the dust.

In my firefighting "Code Red Unit", I had two large Honda water pumps for fire emergencies.

Normally, these kinds of pumps are hooked up to a water source like a lake, river, or ocean, then water is sprayed out to be used as a fire hose.

However, for this incident, we devised a plan to use the Honda pump in reverse.

We were going to suck water *out* of the boat and spray the water back into the ocean.

But a big responsibility of my position is knowing when to risk using emergency equipment and when not to.

One of the Honda pumps was brand new and the other had been used extensively over the years.

It is very difficult to get new resources in rural Alaska. And I knew if I did not leave one functioning pump for a possible home fire, and a fire actually broke out, the wrath of the village would fall on my shoulders. Plus, these pumps were going onto a boat with a chance of sinking, so it was too risky to use both.

I ended up making an executive decision. Protecting homes from fires was more important than a boat that was already taking on water. So I only authorized the use of the older rusted pump.

When I brought the used pump on board the boat, it took me and John Jr. a few minutes to get the pump started. The hungover fisherman losing his mind, asked if I had another pump to use.

I told the fisherman, “I do, but I’m not going to bring a brand-new pump and put it on a sinking boat. I need to save that one for my Code Red Unit.”

I will never forget the young fisherman who had throw-up all over his shirt, respond frantically saying “YOU ARE WORRIED ABOUT CODE RED?!? THIS IS CODE BLACK, MAN!!!”

Rarely do I laugh in emergencies, but I could not hold back. It was a surreal experience.

Here I was, a lone cop, on a large boat that is tilted sideways because it is taking on water about to sink, with a drunk hungover fisherman throwing up, and another fisherman scooping buckets of water out of the boat, everyone in panic. Meanwhile, the guy makes a hilarious unintended joke.

In the end though, we saved that boat with the single used pump, however all the ship's electronics got fried from the saltwater exposure.

The boat would be out of commission for the rest of fishing season.

Whichever fisherman tied up the boat the wrong way, cost the captain and the crew an entire fishing season worth of money.

But that's life in bush Alaska.

Shit hits you when you least expect it.

WHAT I ATE OUT IN BUSH ALASKA

For multiple years, I ate the same meal almost every night. Organic wild rice with Nelson Lagoon caught sockeye salmon.

One day, I saw a woman named Polly in town and she asked, “What’s for dinner tonight salmon and rice?”

M face scrunched up, “How do you know that?”

“Everyone knows that” she replied.

See, during the summer I would load up on fresh fish caught by the Aleutian fisherman. I would buy about a hundred pounds of sockeye salmon, and forty or more pounds of cod.

Every day, every meal, I ate Alaskan fish.

Sometimes I would mix it with Annie's organic Mac N Cheese, but most of the time, I would just eat it with organic wild rice, olive oil, and sea salt.

When I flew into Anchorage, I would shop at Costco and fill multiple totes with frozen blueberries and broccoli. This way I had some nutrients in town.

A few years of living in bush Alaska also turned me into a forager for edible plants. In the summertime, I would pick mini strawberries and salmonberries.

I would also collect and bottle mossberry leaves and fireweed to make very interesting teas. However, the mossberry tea was always a bit iffy. If I drank too much, I would start to feel *different*. Cannot describe the feeling, it was just *different*.... but not in a good way *different*.

I also would pick wild greens to make salads, experimenting with eating them slowly to make sure I was not ingesting toxins. My favorite was a beach grass salad. I would eat this one all the time. I even saw it in a culinary magazine one day. I was shocked.

Every month, I would help out a well-known Alaskan scientist by the name of Bruce Wright by collecting mussels near the pier and sending in samples so he could study paralytic shellfish poisoning.

Whenever I came across a bird or plant, and I wanted to know the species, I would email a photo to Bruce.

The scientist became so worried about me eating wild plants out here, he sent me a book detailing which ones are too toxic to eat.

But by that time, I had eaten almost everything out here anyways. I would just brace myself after the first few bites for a bad reaction. Luckily, I never had one too severe.

Every couple of years, hunters would come up from the lower 48 to “bag” (kill) a moose. Since they only desired keeping the “rack” (antlers), a plane would fly in the spare moose meat for the village.

I think I was the only villager in the Aleutians that preferred moose meat over caribou (reindeer), so the village one year gave me an entire moose thigh.

I used the bed of my truck, with cardboard laid out, to slice up the moose. And because a moose's thigh is so massive, after cutting them into steaks, I was left with a one-foot-tall pyramid of pure gristle.

Since it took so long to finish outside, I went back into my home to wash my hands and take a short rest. I had planned to drive the gristle to the dump site for the foxes, but I ended up forgetting.

After a few hours, I remembered that I needed to take the moose scraps down to the dump, but when I went out to my vehicle, the mound of moose gristle had completely disappeared.

What the hell...

I came to the conclusion that it must have been taken by bald eagles, because my truck bed was closed, so it was only visible from the sky.

Boy, was I wrong.

Later that week, I shared the story at the environmental office, and my neighbor Angie said to me, “oh my god that was you. No wonder my dog has been bloated and hasn’t moved in days. We thought he was sick.”

I replied, “Oh shit.... That was a lot of gristle!”

THE GOLDEN RULE OF POLICING

I think I had a pretty cool style of policing. I would always apply the golden rule: police people how you would want them to police you.

As long as no one hurt each other, I would simply intervene as a peacekeeper. If someone stole something, I would give them a time frame to return the item or else I would introduce consequences.

When fishermen had disputes, I would let them curse and yell at each other over the radio so long as it didn't cross a physically threatening line. No matter what, I always treated people with respect.

Whenever I arrested someone, the town knew it was well deserved.

If I had to fly the arrested person out of town into the big city Anchorage, I would place a sweater or jacket over the handcuffs to not advertise the person was my prisoner. Sure, everyone would know the person was a prisoner anyways because small town gossip travels lighting fast. But it still preserved some dignity for the person.

One time I was called to a home because the woman said her boyfriend was being "abusive", but she would not elaborate what "abusive" meant over the telephone.

When I showed up to the home, the man was resting on the couch. I gave him a nudge to wake him up, but he was passed out sleeping.

I asked the woman what the problem was.

She told me she was upset because her boyfriend would not wake up and party with her.

I then looked down on the table and saw a big bag of weed (this was before marijuana was legalized in Alaska)

Then the woman saw that I was looking at the bag of weed.

Then we both looked at each other.

Then she said very quickly, “OK everything is good here, thank you for your help.”

I left, then laughed all night.

DUI CALLS

After 1 year of living in rural Alaska, I came up with a saying “if they are drinking, they are driving.”

After many years, this phrase was changed to “if they are breathing, they are boozing.”

So, incidentally I could not arrest every drunk driver, or else there would be no one left in the villages.

Knowing this, I devised a plan.

In the event I got a call that someone was drinking and driving, I would call their parents or wife or kids, depending on how old they were, and I would say “I have a report Mr./Mrs. X is drinking and driving tonight, I just wanted to let you know that I am going to put on my uniform and head out on patrol to find them.”

This way they would send a search party out immediately to get the person home before I saw them.

Sometimes they used radio codes on the VHF, sometimes they would call them directly, and sometimes the drunk person would just abandon the vehicle all together and walk home.

Then afterwards, I would drive by the home to speak with the person. I would say, “not heading out anymore tonight, right? I really do not want to take you to jail.”

The drunk driver was convinced they outsmarted the police, and I was simply content they were home safe and off the road.

It was a win-win situation.

THE GLASS FISHING FLOATS

In the early 1900's, the Japanese created glass spheres the size of tennis balls to use in fishing nets. The Japanese used these glass "floats" so that their fishing nets could float in the ocean. The Norwegians also used glass floats in the 1800's. Glass was the only option at this point in human history, as plastics were not yet used in commercial products.

These glass fishing floats would get dislodged from their fishing nets and then would travel across the world spending somewhere between 50 to 100 years at sea. Then one day, they would find their way onto the shore of our little village.

Village residents would always scour the beach to find valuable debris that washed up onto the shore. And I always heard about people finding these glass floats, but up until this point I had never found one myself. But in all honesty, anytime I was running the beach, my attention was always focused on not getting hunted by bears and wolves.

My beach runs were anything but typical. And usually afterwards, I would just sit on my home deck marveling at where I am in the world. Sure it was cold outside sitting on that deck, but my body was usually pretty heated up from the prior exercise, so I could manage it for half an hour or so.

Today however, there was a rain and windstorm too severe to sit on the deck. So after my run, I decided to go for a drive along the beach.

I had a favorite spot where I would normally park, listen to music, and watch the waves roll in. However, when I pulled up to the spot, the waves looked more violent than ever. And far far off into my vision there appeared to be a diamond glistening in the sand.

I thought, “is that a glass float?”

I ran out of my vehicle maybe a hundred feet away, keeping my eye on the diamond as I ran.

“YES!”, It was a crystal turquoise glass float. I was elated.

And just as I turned around to head back to my car, I could not believe my eyes.

I had been so fixated on the single glass float that I had obviously run by more than 100 of them scattered along the stormy black sand beach.

Some of the glass floats were being spit out of the ocean, and some were being sucked back into the sea.

I thought to myself “I do not have a bag, how the hell can I grab all of these?”

Looking around the beach I suddenly observed a large plastic tote being thrown around on a wave. Waiting for the wave to puke it onto the sand, I quickly ran up and grabbed it. The tote ended up being cracked on one side, but I would make it work.

I collected about 140 glass floats that afternoon. It was unreal, I was like a treasure hunter.

I then went home, washed them with soap, and studied all the different variations. I guess I was now somewhat of an antique glass fishing float connoisseur.

There were blue ones, green ones, one was black, some had been glassblown into one piece, others that were manufactured at a later date had sections put together. Some had numbers and some had Japanese symbols. Some had sun marks of where the old rope connected to the float, and some still had a hemp rope attached. Those were the oldest ones.

I knew that all of these life-changing adventures I was experiencing was a direct result of the nonprofit that I had first interviewed with for the medical job, who then sent my information to the public safety department.

So in the spirit of giving back, I looked up a directory of all the nonprofit employees, then bubble wrapped each float individually with the employee's name written on it and then sent them each by mail. I must have shipped over 100 glass floats.

These glass fishing floats traveled the world by sea and lived longer than many people do. And it was always awe inspiring to think that these glass spheres getting thrashed around for decades in the most violent ocean in the world could be more durable than humans. But they were.



THE VILLAGE FUNERAL

I went to visit my brothers and mother in Texas this last week, as I have not seen them in years.

However, while I was visiting, I received a call that there was a vehicular homicide in the village. A young man had passed away.

He was thrown from a tumbling vehicle and was found the next morning by a dog, dead and frozen. I had been the officer of this community for years now, and they were requesting me to fly back to the village to calm everyone's emotions down.

So, I cut my trip short and hopped on the next flight back to town. This village was family to me, and I felt like it was my duty to be there during their worst times of grief.

The funeral for the young man was held in his grandfather, Gunner's garage. Gunner's place was right in the middle of the town. He had a massive garage with every tool known to man. There was a village saying about tools in his garage, "If Gunner doesn't have it, then you don't need it."

During the village funeral everyone was able to pay their respects. We then dug the young man's grave by shovel and hand. As someone who works out religiously, digging a grave in the winter months of Alaska is a damn hard job, considering the ground was somewhat frozen. But everyone in the community was getting dirty digging, and in my full police uniform, so was I.

This funeral was another very powerful moment in my life.

This was not only the first time I had dug a grave by hand, but it was the first time that I felt truly accepted into this Native American community.

I visited the deceased kid's grandparents after that on a regular basis.

In a way, I guess I was trying to fill the void that was created by their grandson's passing.

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE JOB

When I arrested the town mechanic, the joke became, “pray your car doesn’t break down.”

When I arrested the heating fuel delivery guy, I had to fill my own home’s fuel. This doesn’t sound so hard until you realize I had to drive a 1950’s fuel truck with no brakes, a giant stick shift, and no roof or windshield. Riding around in the winter in that sucker will make you feel alive, that’s for sure.

When I had to arrest the same villager three times in a short period for violating judge’s orders, the family warned me not to step foot on the property, or they would shoot me. Well, just a few weeks later their home caught on fire. A burning charcoal was thrown out of their window, which rolled under their house. To stop their home from burning down, I had to run inside the home and axe their floor open so that I could spray foam underneath the floors.

After putting out the home fire, I had to visit the clinic and get a nebulizer for excess smoke inhalation. And as I was sitting there with the nebulizer mouthpiece covering my face, I began to think “What an interesting job. Just a few weeks ago I was the villain to this family, and today I was being praised for taking an axe to their home.”

The complexity of this job was truly unique. Hated one day and loved the next. Or loved one day then hated for weeks.

THE NEW HIRE

This week we hired a new officer to serve in a community called Akutan, Alaska.

The new hire, Tom, had just left the military where he served as a medic. New hires in rural Alaska are always a crapshoot. There is a huge chance they quit right away or within the first few months.

It's a tough life out in bush Alaska and very few people are willing to embrace it.

There once was a White House Secret Service member that accepted the job. The man ended up flying out to a village, got out of the plane, looked around, and got right back on the plane to head back to the lower 48.

Since I had been on the job for 5 years at this point, and I had the most cases in the region, I was the go-to guy for advice on calls and support with procedures.

I reached out to the new officer, to let him know if he needs anything, I am here to help day or night.

Tom did end up reaching out a few times, but he was less interested in asking police questions, and more curious how I was able to live alone as a young man in rural Alaska for so long.

I had seen officers in Alaska that said they would never quit the job, quit the next day. And some officers who say they are quitting every day, go on and work for years.

So, I told Tom, “Almost everyone doing this job is living one day at a time.”

A couple of weeks went by, and I received another call from Tom.

This time, he sounded pretty beat down. He then went on to explain that a man had just committed suicide at the fish processing plant.

Akutan was the location of the largest fish processing plant in the United States, and the second largest fish plant in the world.

Tom went on to explain the man that committed suicide, had hung a rope around his neck and tied it to the front leg of the bed. He then jumped out of a 3-story window, and the bed swung around which created six feet more of rope before it could provide any resistance to the man’s neck.

That extra six feet of force was so strong that it popped the man’s head right off his body. Tom told me, “I was a medic in the Army for two decades, I never had to pick up a human head off the ground and put it into a bag.”

I could sense the despair in his voice.

In stressful jobs, sometimes the only way to cope with traumatic events is to bring humor to otherwise humorless situations.

Tom would joke about a scene in the Jim Carrey movie Dumb and Dumber, “OUR PETS HEADS ARE FALLING OFF. WE GOTTA GET OUT OF THIS TOWN.”

Tom left soon after that event. But who could blame him?

WOLVES

In all my years in Alaska, running in the wild, trekking across the land, I never once came face to face with a wolf.

An elder once told me, “that’s how it’s supposed to be. You don’t see wolves, wolves see you. And if you do see a wolf, it’s probably too late.”

There was always stories in the village about how intelligent these wolves were in hunting for prey.

People would tell me if I run the same time every day the wolves would learn my schedule. There is a story of a female teacher in Alaska that would run every morning who was killed by wolves specifically because they learned her run times.

There are even stories about how the female wolves in heat would come into the village and draw out the male dogs so the wolves could hunt them.

I would always run as close to the freezing ocean as possible just in case I was ambushed by a pack. This way I could enter the water and fire my gun from there. With wolves, I may not have a land advantage, but I had a water advantage.

Depending on the time of year, I had two different “packs” I would run with. If there were a lot of bears around town, I would run with a tactical shotgun, tucked inside my GunRunner backpack. I trained with this pack so I could pull out my shotgun instantly. Normally, I would keep one buckshot in front and the rest slugs. On other days that I wanted to be mobile, I would run with my pistol in hand.

But during bear season, when Natives saw me running with a pistol they would say, “That’s not going to stop a bear. Just make sure to save one bullet for yourself.”

When there are wolf tracks spotted in town people would always call me and say, “Be careful running, there are wolves around.”

My response was always the same to the villagers, “The only wolves messing with me are the suicidal ones.”

They would always laugh at this.

THE STOLEN GUN

Today a city-man flew in from the lower 48 who was interviewing to be the next nurse of the town.

He was a tall, older man who had never visited Alaska before, much less rural Alaska. He said he had only lived in cities his whole life, but he dreamed of one day of living in the great outdoors.

The city-man bragged to me about all the expensive guns he owned. Maybe he thought I was a gun connoisseur and he could impress me. But I had no idea about any of the guns he mentioned.

Later that evening, I received a call from Gunner, the hotel owner, saying the “city visitor” was freaking out about a stolen gun.

I got suited up and drove over to the lodging.

When I pulled up in my patrol vehicle, I observed the city-man from the lower 48 waiting for me out on the porch, pacing frantically.

What was hours before, an excited visitor to rural Alaska, quickly became a man flushed with panic and anxiety.

The city-man quickly approached me as I was stepping out of my vehicle. He stated nervously that his expensive pistol had been stolen out of his hotel room along with a can of tuna.

In the squeakiest voice possible he asked, “does this happen a lot?”

I was unsure if the city-man was worried that he may never recover his pistol, or that it may be used against him that evening. But he was trembling.

I told him to wait in his room, and I would investigate.

This is the more fun part of my job, piecing together the mystery of a case, and seeing if I could outsmart a criminal.

I asked the lodging owner whether there was any cleaning employee scheduled after the man arrived. He said there was not.

I also asked if there was any other occupants staying at the hotel. To that question he replied, “Yes, one other man. In town to work on the runway.”

During investigations, I always try to gather as much information as possible before I interview a suspect. The more I know, the less they can lie to me initially. So, I put a game plan together.

I knew there had been two items stolen, a pistol and a can of tuna. I knew the thief would hide the pistol with careful consideration, but I was hoping he would be more careless with the canned tuna. So that is what I would search for initially.

I knocked on the suspect’s hotel door, and then politely asked if I could come in to speak with him.

Once the suspect let me in the room, I discreetly walked over to the trashcan where I spotted the empty can of tuna on top of the garbage. I did not say anything, but mentally I knew I had caught my thief.

I asked the man if he stole the neighbor's gun.

Of course he denied it.

I then asked the suspect how the victim's tuna can ended up in his trash.

It was always amusing to hear excuses from people who have been caught for crimes. But this one was extra special.

The suspect replied, "someone must have broken into his room to steal the tuna, and then broke into my room to eat the tuna."

I ran back the scenario to the man, "So someone broke into a hotel room, stole a gun and can of tuna, then broke into another room to eat the tuna? This is what you are saying happened?"

The man knows how stupid it sounds, and I can see him getting antsy.

Because there is a gun involved, and I do not have any backup, I need to take extra precautions. So I quickly placed the man in handcuffs.

The suspect then gives me permission to search his hotel room and I find the pistol in the bathroom.

I proceed to take the thief to my cardboard like jail cell, and I called the victim from the lower 48 to notify him I have recovered his gun.

Interestingly, the city-man from the lower 48 let me know he did not want to press charges. He said, “I just want my gun back and to get the hell out of Alaska.”

The thief is supposed to fly out of town tomorrow, but the problem is, the hotel owner will not accept him back at his lodging. And since there is only one hotel in town, I gave the thief the option to sleep at the airplane hangar where he had been working, or in my jail cell.

The thief said he preferred to sleep at the airplane hangar.

I never have a grudge when I do my job. I always try and offer maximum respect to victims and suspects. I would never want to be judged at my worst moment, so I try not to judge others at their worst.

I knew it would be cold at night in the airplane hangar, so I gave the thief a few emergency blankets for sleeping. I also figured if the man was stealing cans of tuna, he must have been pretty hungry. So, I gave him some MRE’s (meals ready to eat) from my emergency supplies.

I then drove the man to the airplane hangar and wished him a nice night.

The “city man from the lower 48” however, will likely never step foot in Alaska again. But at least he’s got a story to take home with him.

THE SAME JOKE OVER AND OVER

In regards to Alaska and Hawaii, most USA maps in schools are not drawn to realistic scale. Usually, Hawaii is perceived larger than it really is. Meanwhile, Alaska is perceived multiples smaller than it really is.

In Alaska, whenever someone asked where I was from, and I replied “Texas”, it was very common to hear the same joke.

“You know what happens if you cut Alaska in half right?”

And myself having heard the joke numerous times, I would sluggishly reply, “Texas becomes the third biggest state.”

But this joke rightly explains how huge Alaska truly is. And to top it off, there is not even one million people who live in Alaska. So by the sheer size and low population count, Alaska is truly one giant wilderness. Otherwise known as “The Last Frontier”.

If the sunset in the Aleutians was at 2am, and you traveled to Anchorage that same day, the sunset might be at 11pm. So there could be a three-hour sunset difference, but the time would remain the same.

And that..... is how truly big Alaska is.

THE ALASKA DENTIST

Rural Alaska cannot afford to hire full-time doctors and dentists living in the villages. So doctors typically visit once or twice a year and stay for a week.

Well, this week a Native American dentist came into town, and I needed to get my teeth cleaned. So, I scheduled an appointment for the afternoon.

As I was laying in the dental chair with the dentist scoping my mouth, a voice came over the radio “there is a bear running through town.”

I told the dentist I needed to make sure everything is OK.

The dentist then told me he was a hunter with a valid bear hunting permit, and that he was going to hunt the bear for its hide.

Legally, the dentist is fully within his right to kill this bear, but I was still hoping the bear could get out of town without getting shot.

The dentist however, with the help of a local villager, was able to track down the bear and unfortunately kill it before it could escape.

The Dentist and a dental assistant named Sven, spent the rest of the evening removing the bear’s hide. And because it was dark outside, and my job is to keep villagers safe, I patrolled the area to make sure no animals ambushed them.

As I drove by to chat with the dentist and Sven, I noticed the bear laying there lifeless, and now fur-less. I know Alaskans do not eat brown bear meat, but I could not stand the thought of this bear only dying for its fur.

So, I put on some medical gloves from my truck and cut a dark red piece of meat from the bear's chest. And since I did not have a Tupperware container or a bag, I simply held the meat with my hand and turned the glove inside out.

I then decided I wanted to take the big brown bear's heart to eat as well. Become one with the Alaskan wildlife.

However, removing the bear's heart from the aorta was extremely difficult, it was like cutting through thick PVC pipe.

After I managed to cut out the bear's heart and held it in my hands, I realized how massive a bear's heart really is. It was the size of a football, but way heavier.

I did not have anywhere to store the bear's heart inside my truck, so I just threw it in the bed of my pickup and drove home. Because the roads are so bumpy, the heart was bouncing off of all the walls of the truck bed making loud thuds, "DOOD.... DOOD.... DOOD..."

That is how heavy that heart was.

When I arrived home it was pretty late at night and pitch black dark outside. The Dentist called my phone and said, "Do you want to reschedule your dental appointment for tomorrow?"

I replied, "It would be best just to get it over with."

He said, "OK, let's do it"

So that night I had my teeth worked on by a dentist that was covered in bear blood, and me also covered in bear blood. Alaska is a wild place!

After my dentist appointment, I went home to cook my bear meat.

Word travels fast in the village because a short while later I received a phone call from Justine who said, "Please tell me you are not going to eat bear meat?"

She begged me for about ten minutes not to eat the bear meat, saying I would get a disease. She then offered me some homemade pizza thinking maybe I was starving.

I told her I will accept her homemade pizza, but I was still going to eat the bear.

First, I cut up the bear meat and placed it in the oven. After it was fully cooked, I then sautéed it with some olive oil and seasonings.

The first bite I was nervous. Justine's words had gotten in my head. I ate a bite, then waited a minute. My throat felt fine, my stomach felt fine, so I ate a few more bites. The heart was like rubber but great. The chest was more fibrous and less tasty. I ate almost all the meat, but saved a small bowl so I could share some with the villagers.

The next day at lunch time, I heated up the bear meat and then drove it to the community center where I passed out some to villagers.

I would hear comments like “not bad”, or “hey that’s pretty good.”

When I gave a piece of the bear meat to my neighbor Mark who runs the environmental department, he started chewing it, but then the phone rang. He picked up the phone and it was the community nurse Melinda. He put the call on speaker so I could hear, and just as he swallowed the bite, he said, “hey the cop just brought up some bear meat.”

And the nurse immediately said in a very stern voice, “DO NOT eat any bear meat, they have trichinosis.”

Mark’s face went blank, and he responded in panic, “OH MY GOD, you called me one second too late. I just ate it. Am I gonna be OK?”

I laughed like I had never laughed in Nelson Lagoon before. I knew I cooked the meat thoroughly so there would be no trichinosis parasites.

What an experience. Here I was, a white guy from the city cooking up bear heart in Native Alaska for Native Americans.

Because of this incident, an elder in western Alaska gave me the Native American name, which sounds “Juh-Hi-Yack-Eek-Ja-Kook” which means “Bear heart”.

And I think I can confidently say that was the first time, and definitely the last time anyone eats bear heart again in that village.



ST GEORGE ISLAND

Out of all the unique places I have visited in Alaska, St. George of the Pribilof Islands was not only the most remote, but the most magical.

St. George island has a very interesting history dating back to the Russian seal fur trade in the late 1700's. And the officer stationed on the island was taking an extended leave, so I was asked to fill in for him for a few months.

I had visited most of the Aleutians, but I'd never been to the Pribilof islands, and I'd always wanted to go, so I emphatically said yes.

When I arrived on St. George island, I was mesmerized. The breathtaking flowing grass mountains and huge exaggerated cliffs. I was so excited, I spent the first few days exploring the entire island. I went hiking along jagged cliffs and viewed perched puffin birds, the kind I'd only seen on cereal boxes at a Whole Foods grocery store.

It was also breeding season for the fur seals, which meant the males would claim their territory on the shore and then fight the other males for their right to the location. In the end, the male fur seal with the best spot would get a harem of female fur seals to impregnate. I would travel to a cliff and watch hundreds of fur seals below frolicking. It was like a Discovery Channel documentary in real life.

For the first few days, it seemed St. George island was somewhere I could live the rest of my life. It had hiking and mountains to run,

abundant sea life, wild reindeer herds, and the most unique birds I had ever seen.

I would sprint on the black sand beach while watching seals ride ocean waves. There was a charming Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of town, and every day I would spend time playing games with a sweet village elder. I was living some sort of dream. In fact, it was better than any vacation I could dream up.

And then..... the fog rolled in.

I knew from past stories, that St. George's fog can be so extreme that planes might not be able to land for over a month. I thought this was an exaggeration, but like much of Alaska's stories, what seems like an exaggeration, is just a brutal truth.

Almost everything I loved about St. George from the week prior was now taken away. The fog was so thick that if you held out your hand in front of you, your hand disappeared. There was no more sunlight, no more ocean, no more birds, and no more visible sea life, although you could still hear the fur seals "barking" all day.

When the sun was out, St. George was like an uninhabited gorgeous Hawaiian island. And then when the fog rolled in, it was like Stephen King's "The Mist."

St. George was also unique in the sense that it has a million-dollar public safety building. It had the first real jail cell I had seen in rural Alaska, complete with steel doors. There was a hangar for vehicles,

which included a full-sized fire truck, ambulance, Polaris Rzr (looks like a dune buggy), and an electric Honda Scooter from Japan. Since I knew I would never have this chance again in rural Alaska, I chose the best vehicle for patrolling..... the electric Honda Scooter from Japan.

I had a few interesting police calls when I stayed on St. George, but the most interesting was a Native American elder who called me over to her home one morning for “help”.

When I got to her home, she asked me “Could you please bring me a bucket of salt water from the ocean?”

I replied as if I had heard something very strange, “What do you need?”

She replied, “I need a bucket of salt water from the ocean. I cannot tell you why.”

Normally, I don’t get these kinds of requests from my job, but rural Alaska is the embodiment of helping your neighbor. Plus, she was an elder. So I said to myself, “sure, what the hell”.

I got in my truck because I could not carry the bucket of salt water on the Japanese scooter. I then drove down to the lowest point in town and walked to the ocean to scoop up a bucket of fresh salt water.

When I got back to the elderly woman’s home, she thanked me but still refused to tell me what the ocean water was for. I just thought, “What a strange, strange place this is.”

Later that night, the same Native woman called me back to her home for a surprise.

As it turned out, the elder wanted to welcome me to St. George by cooking me a baby seal. And the salt water I retrieved for her was for cooking it.

I did not want to eat a baby seal, actually I think it's illegal. But I knew the elder had prepared it all day, just for me.

So I ate the black seal meat and enjoyed my welcoming dinner with the Native woman.

At the end of the meal when I was preparing to leave, the elder said “You didn't even eat the flipper, that's the best part.”

I replied jokingly as I was heading out the door, “Emergency call, I've got to get going. But this was wonderful!”.



AKUTAN ISLAND

While riding helicopter copilot, I looked down at my feet through the clear helicopter shell. I could see the ocean beneath me.

Akutan was a stunning volcano island on the Aleutian chain shaped like an enormous cone with almost no flat terrain for an airplane runway. This requires passengers to take a plane to a nearby uninhabited island with a large rolling tarmac for planes to land. From there, a helicopter transports passengers to the actual island.

I arrived on Akutan island for medical training and to work for a few weeks in the village, but I had only one thing on my mind.... hiking to the top of that stunning 4,275-foot island peak.

The exaggerated mountain was a challenge staring me right in the face, whispering, “climb me if you dare”.

Unlike Nelson Lagoon, Akutan was a place with absolutely no predators. No worries of bears or wolves or even accidentally brushing a leg up against a porcupine. I was in pure bliss.

There was no apartment for me, so I slept in the town jail. At night, I watched Die Hard on an office computer overlooking the ocean with ships cruising by in the dark. I loved that night, enjoying a classic film in a new and very strange location.

The strangest thing about Akutan however was the cats. It was the first time I had seen wild cats in rural Alaska and boy were they depressed. I

will never forget the image of walking by a home, and seeing a cat sitting on a porch getting rained heavily on. I had never seen a cat not bothered by rain or water. But the strangest thing is, all it had to do was move about eight inches or so and it would have been out of the rain. The cat literally did not care, and its face showed that spiritlessness.

The next day I got up excited for my hike and headed out. I began my trek up the volcanic mountain.

The left side of the mountain was snow filled and climbed gradually. The right side of the mountain was less snow, but more of a vertical climb. I decided to go the “less snow, more vertical” route.

The way up started off pretty uneventful. I would continuously climb a vertical six to twelve-foot wall accompanied by a four-foot flat perch. I climbed one after another, hoping it continued all the way to the top. However, a hundred feet or so from the peak, it became a dead end. I looked left and right for a possible detour but there was none to be found. I was literally standing on a cliff.

This meant I had to go back down the way I came. There was a big problem though, it was way too dangerous to descend this cliff.

While climbing up a six-to-twelve-foot wall one after the other did not seem like a big deal. Going down the same way appeared suicidal. If I fall down even one of the walls, it would surely cascade. I would then likely fall down the entire mountain resulting in death. I began to panic.

As I was sitting there perched on the top of that cliff, I began to ponder my options. I had a radio in my bag, and I could see a large boat in the distance. “Should I radio for help?”, I thought. “What about the helicopter, maybe they could get me with a rope.”

Being on the job a week and needing a rescue is cute, but being on the job multiple years and needing a helicopter rescue did not seem like the option I was ready to go for. So, I sat.

I sat there for a good thirty minutes to collect myself. Looking over every route I came to a gameplan. If I could just make it down four or five of the drop-offs, I could come to a level where I could then move sideways around to the snowy part of the mountain.

So, as careful as I have ever been, I scaled down that mountain. Grasping tightly onto the rocks, lowering myself down, foot by foot, almost inch by inch.

Once I made it down one cliff, I would take a rest on the perch and collect myself, then start the next one slowly. One by one, I gained confidence that I wasn’t going to need to be saved.

On the sixth or seventh descent lower, I was able to make my way sideways to the snowy part of the mountain. I almost considered giving up and heading down because I was so spent emotionally, but the mountain whispered, “don’t give up”. So I proceeded through the snow, heading higher and higher.

Once I arrived at the peak, I sat on the top of that whispering mountain with a 360-degree view of the entire Aleutians. I wanted to forever remember this moment, so I took a video with me shaking my head at the top, in the self-realization of how I could have almost just died.

I hiked back to the village with an extremely sore lower back because the hike was so vertical. I arrived just in time for my class. And as we were being taught the medical course, I kept thinking in my head, “Oh my god.... I almost just died.... And nobody will ever know”

UNALASKA

One of the most famous places by name in all of Alaska is “Dutch Harbor”, which is a fishing port city connected to the island Unalaska.

Unalaska is very historical in the United States, because it is the only place that a foreign enemy has occupied America during war. There are old sunken bunkers all over the island, and old gun turret stations on the cliffs. There are even a few wild horses here left over from the war. I guess that's how the soldiers got around back then.

We would often have annual training in Unalaska, and there were always a few certainties to the island. One, the winds would always be over 50mph, sometimes over 100mph. And two, the airplane flights would make you queasy, often times getting canceled. But since the Aleutians are regarded as “the birthplace of the winds” this was to be expected.

One day on Unalaska island, I went for a run in 120mph+ winds. Talk about intensity. I had never run in wind this strong. It felt like an extreme unexpected workout, almost like having to sprint through water, if that makes sense.

Running back the other way, was technically not even running. I just held out my arms perpendicular to my body, and the wind would propel me down the street with absolutely zero effort. My feet just had to keep up with the wind's force.

That same day, I hiked to the top of a mountain and crawled inside of a bunker to take refuge from the wind. Later that week, I was told exploring the bunkers was not allowed. But I think because the winds were so strong, no one dared to head out in those conditions to stop me.

The following day, when the winds died down, I ventured out to the mountains, hoping to find the old war horses. I took with me some celery and carrots just in case I came across their path. The veggies would be my peace offering.

Surprisingly, I spotted six horses in a distance grazing the tundra. The horses looked beautiful against the wild Alaskan backdrop.

There were three brown horses and three white horses. I slowly approached a beautiful brown horse, who had a white streak down its nose. As I got closer, I noticed the horse had likely never been groomed or cared for, as its hair was lengthy and uneven.

I gave the horse a carrot and a pet on the nose. Then all of a sudden, the definition “wild horses” took on a literal meaning. The horse was now aggressively inquiring about what I was doing there. And not just the one horse, but now multiple large horses began to approach me with speed. They were like a tough horse gang.

The horses did not seem happy.

I would be a complete liar if I did not admit I was completely scared at this point. I was now encircled by wild horses that seemed to not care about the food, but more about why I was in their space.

I slowly crept out of the circle and let the horses be.

I think a wild Alaskan tundra horse is about as tough a horse as there is. And for at least a small moment, I was in their presence up close and personal.

First peacefully... then terrifyingly



A SEA OF DOGS

Alaska is such a wondrous place with so many cool animals. One day on a flight back into Nelson Lagoon, I spotted a whale breaching the water. I signaled to the pilot, who then began flying in a circle less than 50 feet above the ocean. We only made one circle before the whale breached again, exposing itself perfectly for us to see. This must have been a rare site for even the pilot, because he turned to me, and at the same time we both said, "*coooooool!*"

In the spring and summer time, if you just watched the ocean for more than a minute, you would likely see a spout of water shooting up from whales. I always wanted to get a wetsuit and swim laps in the ocean, but after seeing a salmon shark wash up on shore, there's no way. They're essentially a small version of the great white shark.... but not that much smaller.

Orcas were rarer to see, but every year I would see a few swimming near "the point". If the dorsal fin was longer and skinnier, that would signify it was a male. If the dorsal fin was less tall, and more wide, I knew it was the female of the pod.

Every time I went for a run down the beach, I would see seals floating with their heads out of the water curious as to what I was doing. I could see upwards of a hundred seals during a single run down the beach. They were literally the most abundant animal in the village. It was like an ocean of wet curious sea dogs.

During the summertime, the prairie dogs in the village would try and gain as much weight as possible so they could hibernate through the winter in their burrows. It was always hilarious to see towards the end of the summer how fat they got. I would always laugh when a late summer chubby prairie dog would spot me, then try to run and hide in their burrow, but they would have to shake their butts and wiggle extensively just to fit back through the hole in the ground.

My dining room in Alaska had a huge window facing the hills. With waist high flowing green grass, I could stare out of the window all day. It was like a screensaver of nonstop seagulls and bald eagles.

I frequently spotted bald eagles in mating rituals, locked up together in midair, executing acrobatic maneuvers, which was always spectacular. For years I thought they were fighting. Until I watched a BBC animal documentary, and found out it was just a lover's dance.

Every year, I would see birds like eiders, scoters, oyster catchers, and even the fastest animal in the world, the peregrine falcon. When I rode alongside the beach, a swarm of sandpipers would harmoniously fly in groups of hundreds surrounding my vehicle.

There was a bird called the ptarmigan, which lived off berries. And in the wintertime, after the berries fermented, the ptarmigans would get drunk from eating them. They would sometimes get so drunk, a person could walk up and pet it (although I never did).

One Thanksgiving I was invited to a home to eat dinner. I asked the host, "What are we eating?"

The host replied, “Emperor goose.”

I replied, “Wait, isn’t that an endangered species?”

And the villager replied back, “Not here.... they’re all over the place.”

THE HEROIN CASE

Today, I received a report that there was a passenger traveling into the village with heroin.

Someone had accidentally walked in on a man shooting up drugs in the airport bathroom in Cold Bay, and they gave me a heads up that he was heading into our village.

I waited at the runway for the plane to arrive. Once the young man got off the airplane, I asked him if I could search his bags, to which he consented. If he'd said no, I would've just taken the bags anyway and requested a search warrant. But this made it easier.

During my duties of police work, I always try to give maximum respect. That is number one in the way I conduct myself as a human being.

Even though the young man was thought to be entering the community with drugs, I did not want to embarrass him in front of the entire community, so I asked him if he would like me to search his bags at the runway with people viewing, or if he would like to go to my office in private. He preferred the runway.

In this spirit of showing maximum respect, I asked a village resident to drive his truck up to become a barrier to the rest of the community. This way the man had some privacy.

The suspect admitted he had a personal amount of drugs in his possession and that he was trying to quit. He said it was cocaine that he

was shooting up, not heroin, and that he would give me the drugs, no problem.

However, the rain started to pick up, and he could not find the drugs in his bag, so we ended up driving to my office.

At my office, the man rummaged through his bag, and he gave me all his needles and paraphernalia. But he still could not find the small bag of drugs. He emptied out his pockets and checked his shoes and socks. He then told me he was shooting up in the airport bathroom but got paranoid because someone had entered.

“Maybe I left it in that bathroom, or maybe I flushed it in a panic, I don’t remember, I was really high” he said.

Many police will often say the phrase "if they are talking, they are lying", but I genuinely believed the young man that day.

Since he was being so cooperative, even if I would have found drugs, I would have just flushed them down the toilet and given him a warning. I believe he was genuinely trying to quit, and I wanted to be supportive and not arduous.

As an officer in a small community, I cared more about preventing hard drugs from entering the community than arresting people. I cared more about people’s wellbeing than getting any sort of merit for an arrest or case. I simply wanted people in the village to be happy, healthy, and safe.

THE BEAR OOSIK

During my long, solitary years in Nelson Lagoon, I ran the beach almost every day.

I became a part of the environment.

And every time I ran, I brought something back. A rock, a seashell, a piece of a bone. My pockets always full. My house slowly turning into a museum of strange, natural oddities.

One day, I carried home a baby whale rib. And although it was a “baby” whale rib, it actually stood taller than my refrigerator.

Another time, I found a small bone that I assumed was a fox leg or something.

I collected large black lava rocks that were airy light, glass fishing floats, whatever called to me.

Every few months, I would have to rid my home of the excess shells and rocks to make room for the new ones I collected. I would do this usually opening up the back kitchen window and tossing them into the yard.

One day, I got invited to the home of two Natives, Ernie and Leona.

They had some of the coolest artifacts I’d seen in Alaska. Blackened walrus tusks. Rare glass fishing floats.

And then.... Ernie held up a bone.

“You know what this is?” he asked.

“I have one” I said, “it’s a fox leg, right?”

Ernie grinned, “Bear oosik.”

Apparently, while most mammals just have cartilage, walruses and bears have an actual bone in their penis.

I immediately thought, “Fuck, I haven’t seen that bone in my house in a while. I hope I didn’t throw it out.”

I raced home and searched my backyard.

And there it was lying peacefully in the grass where I had launched it out my kitchen window.

A goddam bear oosik.

And honestly, I think the fact that I found a bear penis bone on the beach, says everything you need to know about how many bears are out there in Nelson Lagoon, Alaska.

THE BIG FIRE

Everything that is called “trash” gets burned in rural Alaska. Tires, Styrofoam, cardboard, plastics, doesn’t matter what it is, it’s getting thrown in the incinerator and burned. The only other way to dispose of stuff out here would be throw it in the ocean, so torching everything is the way it’s done.

A few times a week we have burn unit days. This is when people are allowed to drive their trash to the incinerator and a villager burns it all. The burn operator will always check for wind directions before burning the trash, because even a few embers that exit the unit could burn down the entire town if the wind direction is wrong.

Nelson Lagoon has waist-high green flowing grass in the summertime, and knee-high yellow dead grass in the winter and spring time. Since Nelson Lagoon often experiences strong winds, if a fire were to spark the yellow dead grass, and the wind direction pointed towards the town, there is a very real possibility the entire town burns down.

That is why, wind direction is so important for dumpster burns.

Well, this evening while the wind was over 100mph and pointed away from town, someone decided to burn their trash on their own, not in the burn unit. The fire quickly spread down the coast away from town and lit up the night skies.

The problem, however, was that the wind began to fluctuate back and forth. And the fire began to make its way towards the town.

Throughout all my years as an officer in the village, the only time I felt relaxed was in the middle of the day, when I could sneak in a nap on the couch. Every morning, every afternoon, every evening, I was on high alert. At any moment, a scream might come over the radio, or the phone might ring. And if you didn't answer the phone, someone would end up pounding on your door.

To prepare myself, every day I would analyze how to handle certain types of emergencies. There wasn't a single day that I wouldn't run through tens of emergency scenarios in my head, and how I would handle them all.

If someone at the dock falls into the ocean, would I jump in? Throw a life raft? Jump in with a PFD on, and swim to the drowning? Would I take off my bulletproof vest to not sink, but leave my boots on?

If a plane crashes on the runway, do we allow the ambulance to head to the crash site, or do we evacuate the entire area because the runway is next to the fuel farm, which could catch fire as well?

If there's a tsunami alert and we cannot fly out in time, do we pile the village into boats? What if it is wintertime? Is there even any high grounds to evacuate to?

Emergency scenarios constantly ran through my mind. This was the weight on my shoulders, as I never wanted to have any devastating incidents occur on my watch and let the community down.

But the one emergency that always plagued my mind, was fires. I knew how fast fires spread in high winds. And I knew it could completely devastate the community and possibly kill many. I never wanted to have this tragedy on my shoulders.

So I made a map of all the working fire hydrants in town. I would test them in spring and fall time and make sure they are operational. In case I panicked, I could look at the house on the map, and the map would tell me the closest plan of attack.

My dry powder fire extinguishers would not stop fires in the wild with such strong winds, and there was only enough foam to stop a single house from burning down, but what the village did have, was water and fire hydrants.

The only problem is, in order to use the water, the fire would need to be pretty close to the homes. Unless the river was high tide, and then we could use a Honda pump, but that was not the situation today.

So knowing the fire is creeping back towards town, I had the Code Red Unit deployed along with lines of hose connected to the fire hydrants.

I wet the grass areas and let the fire come towards it.

Village residents were screaming at me over the radio in fear.

One woman screamed, "DO SOMETHING!"

Another woman yelled, "OFFICER, DO YOUR DAMN JOB!"

One man screamed at me, “USE THE CODE RED UNIT!”

Even reasonable residents came over the radio more calmly, “Hey Taylor, this fire is getting awful close to town.”

The fire had lit up the sky like a war zone, and I could definitely understand the people’s panic.

I got over the radio and responded calmly to the residents, “it is all under control, I will let you know if it gets out of hand.”

I knew my response wouldn’t calm them down, but the outcome was what I was focused on. I had a strong gameplan, something I had mentally rehearsed regularly.

The fire did end up getting close, but it never fully reached the village. And sometime around 2am, I got on the radio and said, “The fire is out. Everyone can sleep in peace.”

Immediately afterwards, one of the drunk women who was yelling at me before to “DO YOUR DAMN JOB”, now came over the radio to give me praise.

She screamed into the radio for the entire town to hear, “YOU ARE 100% MAN”

I laughed and thought to myself, “I need a vacation.”

WHY I HAD TO DUCT TAPE A MAN ON AN EVA AIRLINES FLIGHT TO ASIA

I work alone in a remote village in Alaska. A job that requires me to be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

After spending 6 months without a break, I was ready to get the hell out. I looked up a travel website and saw Angkor Wat in Cambodia was the top destination that year for international travel. Good enough for me!

I called my First Sergeant and told him, "I gotta get out of here, man."

He didn't even hesitate, "You're clear to travel. Have fun."

Flying from my remote Alaskan village into Seattle took an entire day. Sleep deprived and burnt out, I boarded my 13-hour flight from Seattle to Taipei.

It was New Years Eve, and I had an emergency exit row seat with 8 plus feet of leg room, on Taiwan's EVA 777 jumbo plane. For the first time in six months, I was looking forward to nobody being able to call me. No one being able to need me.

A few hours into the flight, the intercom system came on requesting any medical professionals to assist at the front of the aircraft. Two women jumped up and ran down the aisle. I thought, "Great, I'm sure they've got this. Let's watch some movies!"

I watched the film *The Martian*, a one-hour video on the Warriors rise to an NBA championship, some weird show about Germany's biggest indoor beach, and then I passed out. I don't know how long I slept. 10 minutes. Possibly 30.

Then all of a sudden, 50,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean on a 777 jumbo jet, chaos.

A Taiwanese flight attendant woke up my entire row in a panic and told us we had to move to the first-class seats FAST.

I thought, "OK, maybe the person who required medical attention earlier needs our big exit row to lay down."

So the three of us quickly moved up into "elite" class seating.

As I was taking a seat however, I heard grunting sounds coming from the exit row I just left. Something wasn't right.

I looked back. The flight attendant then signaled with her arms for help. I could see the urgency in her body language.

I ran back to my exact seating area, where a man was being helped to the ground from what I assumed was a heart attack, but all of a sudden, he started resisting... Violently.

"Is this a police or medical emergency?" I quickly asked.

A Taiwanese flight attendants yelled "POLICE!"

That was all I needed to hear.

I body slammed the guy to the ground and held him down while the airline flight attendants zip tied his arms behind his back.

My first thought that the suspect was a terrorist, but I didn't really have time to think too much.

I notified airline staff that I was law enforcement in the U.S.

They asked if I could keep an eye on the man for the rest of the flight. But they didn't just mean watch him, they wanted me to take full control.

So, I walked the man to the front of the airplane, but the terrorizer refused to remain seated.

Pressure was applied to the man, who then began screaming "I know what you are doing, aaaahhhhhh, you're squeezing my pressure points."

Ziptied up and now buckled in his seat, the situation seemed under control, and the flight staff resumed their duties of calming passengers.

I was just barely two minutes out of a nap, still trying to piece it all together.

I smelled marijuana on his breath.

OK, maybe this guy was just caught smoking weed on the airplane.
Nothing too crazy.

The man then turned to me, "Will you scratch my eyebrow?"

"I'm not touching your eyebrow", I told the guy.

The man screams, "I AM GOING TO KILL EVERYBODY!"

He started thrashing around in his seat, kicking cabin walls, trying to head butt me, and yelling vulgar sexual insults at the staff completely inappropriate for an aircraft, and all the families on board.

This was going to be a very long flight.

I knew something must be done.

So I approached the flight staff nearby and notified them that the man must be duct taped to his seat, and his mouth shut.

With six-plus hours left of flying, you cannot have a man screaming sexually explicit and death threats to passengers and kids.

The woman with a soft Taiwanese accent stated, "no sir, we cannot tape his mouth shut."

Immediately after she stated this, the maniac began convulsing and screaming once again "I AM GOING TO FUCKING KILL EVERYBODY!"

We both looked back at the man.

I simply said, "you might want to run this by the captain."

Seconds later the woman walked up to me, and without a single word, just handed me a giant roll of medical tape (similar in appearance to duct tape, but white in color and less adhesive I would learn).

I recruited two Americans on the flight, to assist in detaining the subject. The plan of attack was simple.

The First American walked discretely one row behind the subject and sat in the seat directly behind him.

I gave the order, and American Number One grabbed the individual's forehead from behind and forced it back towards the seat.

American Number Two, ran up and secured the legs.

I then proceeded to tape the individual's forehead to the seat, along with his entire body. And finally, I taped his mouth shut only leaving his nose exposed for breathing.

The plan went perfectly, and the man was taped up, and shut up.
Mission complete.

I then began interviewing the staff and passengers to find out what happened.

It turns out, the man was running around the aircraft, banging on cabin walls, and punching women in the face.

The man convulsed in his seat for the remainder of the flight attempting to free himself, chewing the tape off his mouth, hoping to incite terror in the aircraft once more.

This continued for six torturous hours.

I was forced to retape the man multiple times over that 6-hour period. I found that by taping multiple layers over his mouth, I was able to drown out the volume of his voice significantly.

After the aircraft landed, all the passengers walked past this individual taped up like a mummy. The Taiwanese police then boarded the airplane and escorted the maniac to either a jail or a mental institution. I have no idea.

When I grabbed my stuff to leave, I was given hugs and sighs of relief from ten or more Taiwanese flight attendants. They also presented me with two giant bags of snacks and a set of pajamas (probably the best gifts they could give out without supervisor approval).

This pretty much conflicted with my plan of traveling around Asia with a solo backpack, but I happily accepted the gifts.

I filed a report with the Taiwan Police, while also forwarding reports with names and birth dates to US agencies.

The last day of my Asian vacation, when I arrived at the Bangkok airport for my return flight, an exceptionally polite EVA airlines manager met me at the ticketing counter and offered her sincere appreciation on behalf of her and her company.

EVA provided me with a "premium pass" for monks and diplomats to bypass standard security and immigration, and they upgraded me to a business class sleeping pod for my trip home. Luxury at its finest! Goose down comforter, luxury pajamas, fully reclining seat-bed with 5-star meals.

When I landed in Seattle, the regional manager of EVA provided me with a gift bag containing a nicely written card, a box of chocolates, and a fancy crystal pen.

The sleeping pod and small gifts were appreciated, but what stayed with me the most was the way the Taiwanese airline staff hugged me as they got off the airplane. They were shaken up, for sure. But seeing the relief, and appreciation on their faces, that stuck with me.

I didn't want to encourage public photo taking of the spectacle.

However, I did manage to sneak one in!



THE BEACH PATIO

When I returned from vacation, I heard a story about a woman in the village who was severely depressed because all her children had left the town for college or boarding school in another city.

She had felt alone. And isolation in rural Alaska is the real deal.

So I decided to take my police hat off for the day and put on my village hat.

Earlier that summer, I had built a sand patio behind my home with chairs and rock pathways so I could relax and watch the ocean waves roll in at sunset.

I had extra chairs at my office, so I grabbed a couple and went to the woman's home. I then spent the rest of the afternoon building the same sand patio for her as I did myself.

I presented her the gift to show her she is not alone in the village. She cried and was thankful.

Because suicide rates in remote Alaska are so high, I made her promise she would not hurt herself or if she had feelings of hurting herself that she would call me first and we could talk about it.

Sometimes people just need to feel they are not alone in this world. And small community living means you have a real opportunity to make an impact on people's lives.

THE MOMENT OF MY LIFE

Today is the day that would forever change my life.

For the last 8 days I have been receiving reports of a bothersome bear scaring the villagers.

Every morning for the last few days, I would awake to new complaints of a bear terrorizing homes, breaking windows, climbing on trucks, and completely unafraid of humans.

This same bear had destroyed a home by raiding it of food down the coast, and it had now learned that enclosed homes are a great place to find tasty human snacks. And possibly even dog food which bears seem to love.

Any bear that associates human homes with food is what we call a “bad bear”. They have been conditioned to be dangerous.

One night the bear (we will call it “the bear” for this story) climbed on my neighbor Ray’s vehicle. Ray fired warning shots at the bear, but the bear was unfazed.

Ray was an elder that lived in the village his entire life and he claimed this was the first time he encountered a bear that had not been startled by a rifle or human noises. He said the bear even progressed towards him when noises were made.

This was a “bad bear”.

The following night, John Jr. walked out on his porch and the bear was waiting for him. Johnny became immediately startled and threw a knife he had on the deck railing at the bear and then ran inside.

Justine found the bear's paw prints on her front door and windows the next morning. And a kind elder named Laura told me in the seventy years she had been alive, she had never seen a problematic bear like this one.

I questioned why this bear had terrorized almost every home but mine. But tonight, the bear and I would meet.

Rural Alaska is an amazing place. During the summer, I would sleep with my windows open due to no air conditioning and enjoy the sound of the Bering Sea waves crashing on the beach. The seagulls and songbirds pleasantly awaking me in the morning.

I had recently started dating a girl that I met on my previous vacation, and she decided to come visit me in rural Alaska.

At four in the morning, we were laying side by side sleeping in bed. Pitch darkness surrounded us.

A thunderous BOOM awakened us both, and my home was violently shaking.

It felt as if Zeus himself was throwing refrigerators at my wooden house. That is the only way I can describe the large banging sounds.

My eyes jolted open and my mind began running a million miles an hour, contemplating what could be causing these sounds. I quickly piece together that there is a “bad bear” in the village, and these loud sounds cannot be made by a human, unless a truck is driving into my house.

My girlfriend screamed “WHAT IS THAT?”

Within milliseconds I grab my .45 pistol that I keep on the side of my bed.

With the house violently shaking, I assume the bear had broken into my home.

It sounded like it had bulldozed down my front door and was running through the house.

At this point I am plotting an escape path for us both out the window.

I tell her “everything is fine”, even though I am not sure it is.

If the bear had broken through my solid front door, then my cardboard bedroom door does not stand a chance. And... I knew even if I shot a bear with my pistol that it would still have enough adrenaline to maul me to pieces.

So yeah, it was code black.

With my bedroom lights still turned off, I looked out of my bedroom window with my pistol in hand, beginning to pan left to right, when all of a sudden, the bear and I came face to face.

Maybe six inches apart. The bear close enough to take a bite out of my face. Time froze, and we just locked eyes in the dark.

Purely out of reflexes, I pulled the trigger with the pistol two inches from the bear's nose.

The flash from the gun blinded me. For 2 to 3 seconds I could not see anything.

That 2 to 3 seconds felt like an eternity, and I anticipated at the time of no vision that I may take a blow from the bear.

My vision returned. 30%, then 70%, then full vision returned.

I did not see the bear anywhere. But I could hear him. He is right outside my window.

My girlfriend was sitting on the floor in the opposite corner of the room shaking uncontrollably. After all, here I am firing a handgun in our bedroom just a few seconds from being woken up by loud noises and the home shaking violently.

She was in shock, trembling. My adrenaline was redlining. I felt out of body but managed to stay collected.

My girlfriend stood up, but I yelled "IT IS A BEAR, STAY DOWN"

She let out a faint, high-pitched cry and immediately collapsed to the floor.

I can hear the bear choking on his blood right outside my window.

The sound continues for a minute or so, but my adrenaline is pumping so high, I can't discern time accurately. All I know is that this bear is down but sometimes bears travel in groups.

I do not feel safe.

I tell my girlfriend that I need to check the rest of the house, but she begs me to stay in the room with her.

I ignore her request and make a quick sweep of the home with my gun and flashlight.

The rest of the home was clear.

I take a deep breath, and then go to console the girl, promising her that she can fly out ASAP, if she wants to leave Alaska. I knew this was about as traumatic event as a human can have.

I quickly made an announcement on the radio that the firearm discharge in town was from me, and that I had put the bear down.

The girl and I were unable to go back to sleep due to the high adrenaline.

I kept thinking of the face-to-face eye contact I had made with the bear. One swipe to my face from his claws or one bite to my head is all it would have taken.

My girlfriend and I ended up taking a nap around 10 or 11 am, and when we awoke a few hours later, I went outside and saw the bear was gone. It had just disappeared.

The bear's body was just gone.

I knew I had not dreamt this encounter but I also had to ask myself, "was this all a dream? Surely it wasn't."

Was I going crazy?

Well, it turned out that as a show of gratitude, the villagers removed the bear from my property and "rolled it" into the ocean while we took a nap.

The next day, I went for a ride down the beach, and I saw the bear on the shore getting taken out to sea.

I went up close to the dead bear that I had shot the day before, to pay my respects.

The water had washed away all the blood, and the bear looked incredibly beautiful. I looked into its eyes, and I observed the bullet hole. It had entered through the cartilage of the nose, and went directly to the brain.

One shot, that's it.

My encounter with this bear was not peaceful, but at least this animal didn't suffer a long death.

If it wasn't for cameras and witnesses nobody would believe this story. Ask any Alaskan how many people they know who have put down a bear, point blank range with a single shot of a pistol, and I think you would be hard pressed to find a single one.

My girlfriend took the bullet casing and turned it into a necklace which she still has to this day.

For months and years after this event, I would sometimes sleep with a pistol in my hand.

I would prefer this event never happened in my life, but it happened.



EARNING MY SERGEANT STRIPES

Over the years, I attended various trainings to become an instructor in Cold Water Survival, Defensive Tactics, De-escalation Techniques, Tasers, Rural Firefighting, and Suicide Prevention.

I taught courses for police all over Alaska, including being a TAC (training aid and counseling) officer for new recruits, and a youth counselor for kids at the Public Safety Academy.

I was a moderator for a public safety summit, taking the stage with the commissioner of public safety, and I went multiple years without any disciplinary infractions. At this stage, I had earned my sergeant stripes.

It was also at this point that I decided to take an assignment in the Arctic.

This whole career has been kind of a shock to me. I never intended to work in public safety or policing. I never once said growing up I aspired to become a police officer or firefighter.

Years ago, I applied for a medical position, and I just happened to stumble into an adventure career.

Throughout the years, with ups and downs, I thought of giving up multiple times. It is extremely difficult to live in isolated rural Alaska, especially alone. I often thought I was throwing away some of the best years of my life.

While friends of mine were partying, dating, and starting families, I was running with a shotgun backpack trying not to get killed by wild animals. It's like I was living in a different universe from everyone else I knew.

I loved working in the Aleutians and the Pribilof islands. Residents in these communities were my friends, and many were like family to me. But Alaska is a huge state, and I wanted to experience life in the northern Arctic.

I think the Nelson village really loved me, because they ended up giving me two going-away parties.

It was an emotional farewell. Outsiders are not welcomed into these Native communities often. We fought, shared meals, celebrated holidays, and dug graves together as a community.

But it was my time to go.

And since the village was so accustomed to rescuing me when my vehicles got stuck or when I got lost, my last words to the community were, *"There is a lot more snow up in the Arctic, which means I will be riding my snowmachine more often. When I get stuck, you better answer your phone John Jr."*

THE

ARCTIC

ARRIVING IN THE ARCTIC

When I stepped off the airplane in the Arctic, it was in the dead middle of winter and the temperature was a frozen -40 degrees Fahrenheit.

This was the coldest weather I had ever experienced in my life, and immediately the first thing I noticed was breathing being more difficult. The inside of my nostrils actually feel frozen when breathing in air.

As an Arctic Sergeant, my first stop was a Native village with a population of around 500 people. The officer before me was run out of town by a villager trying to kill him.

I had one job while stationed in this village.... Keep the peace.

Once again.... all by myself.

MY FIRST ARCTIC CALL

My phone rang late that night. The caller reports a man had been stabbed.

I laced up my boots and jumped in my Polaris Ranger.

Driving around in Arctic towns feels like being in an apocalypse movie. Home windows have been broken out and boarded up, doors have been

kicked in and replaced poorly. In the middle of winter there is no sunlight. Tall trees with constant snowfall. It is the perfect Alaskan horror story backdrop.

I drove around the town looking for the man who had supposedly been stabbed.

I spotted him waiting outside the clinic. The man was bleeding profusely from his mouth. He had such a big gap in his upper lip that you could fit a starburst candy or a quarter inside.

I approached the man and said, “Holy hell, what happened to you?”

The man proceeded to tell me his girlfriend took a giant Tonka Toy truck and smashed him in the face.

I instantly thought, “Oh she is definitely going to jail.”

We waited for the nurse to open up the clinic, and once the man was being operated on, I drove to speak with his girlfriend.

When I approached the home the porch lights were off.

I knocked on the door and there were multiple women inside.

I asked the girlfriend to come outside to speak with me.

She obliged and then admitted to striking her boyfriend in the face with the toy truck.

Another woman came out to the porch and asked if I would be taking her friend to jail.

I explained the domestic violence law in Alaska requires me to arrest in this type of situation.

The second woman then flips on the porch light, and says “What about what he did to her?”

Shockingly once the lights came on, I saw bruising all over the girlfriend’s face, that before was hidden by the darkness.

The woman then explains that her boyfriend dragged her down the stairs by her hair and stomped on her with his feet.

She had bruising marks all over her body. The story just did a complete 180, where it was actually the girlfriend that was the victim, and she was just practicing self-defense.

I interviewed all the witnesses and took their stories. I then headed back to the clinic where I placed the man under arrest who just had his face sewn up.

The nurse was quite upset that the patient was being arrested, but I didn’t care. My duty was clear.

The man was jailed and transported into Kotzebue the following day.

My first Arctic case was dark, but things were about to get even darker.

THE BROKEN WINDOW

The day after my first Arctic arrest, I was inside the police home talking to my brother on the phone.

As we were talking, I walked by a window and BOOM, the window was broken out.

I was unsure if someone just tried to shoot at me through the window, so I grabbed my gun and I ran out of the home looking for the possible shooter.

My phone was in my bulletproof vest pocket, and I was speaking to my brother on a headset. So when the incident happened, he heard everything.

My brother said, “What just happened? Are you OK?”

I told him, “Someone might have just shot out my window, I am outside seeing if anybody is out here.”

My brother replied, “Are you crazy, get back inside.”

I did not talk to my brother much, but this was the first time he got to experience what my current life was like.

It turned out to be a rock that someone broke the window with.

A welcome rock to the Arctic.

FEAR

Fear is an interesting emotion.

Because when you break it down, it comes down to two things.....
a timeframe and a choice.

When I came face to face with bears, there was an absence of fear.

Not because I was fearless, but because there just was not enough “time”
to get fearful.

When I went on dangerous police calls, much of my fear was absent.

Not because I am tough, but simply because my job was to respond.

Realistically, I never had a choice to not go on a call. I was depended
upon by vulnerable people in dire need.

There was no backing down.

I never considered myself a hero, but I was always prepared to go out as
one.

BIG BILL AND BIG COURAGE

It was 3am, pitch black outside, and snowing heavily. Someone began pounding loudly on my front door yelling bloody murder.

I was in an Arctic village alone, sleeping in a public safety cabin. All my windows were boarded up or replaced with plexiglass because they have all been broken out by residents who hate police.

I answered the door in my sweatpants with a gun.

A man started yelling that there was a guy named Big Bill who was 6'5 and over 350 pounds, who was on drugs and assaulting people.

The man said Big Bill hit him in the face, and that he was also going to beat up his girlfriend.

I had heard stories of Big Bill.

He had to be one of the largest men in the entire Arctic. And if what this man said was true, I would be needing to arrest him for domestic violence.

I told the man I would get dressed and take care of it.

I was all alone in this village with no backup. And the soonest someone could get to me for help would be daylight the next day (that is, if weather was suitable for flying).

The temperature outside was around -40 Fahrenheit. It was snowing hard. And it had been snowing nonstop for the past few days.

I walked outside and made my way to the Polaris Ranger, but it wouldn't start.

I then walked over to my snowmobile. It also would not start.

There is an emergency happening in real time and with none of my vehicles cooperating, I decided I would just walk.

I knew if I had to arrest Big Bill, getting him to the jail without a vehicle would be an absolute nightmare. But I figured I would cross that bridge when I get to it.

I will never forget the sound of walking through the snow in the dark that night.

Since it had been snowing so heavily the past few days, the fresh snow was above my knees. I could hear the initial sound of my legs pushing the powder snow aside, making a whooshing sound, followed by a crunch of my boots landing on the compact snow beneath.

My adrenaline was flowing big time.

I tried making myself angry in case this turned into a fighting scenario. I kept repeating to myself "You are a fucking warrior Taylor, you got this."

I took a couple deep breaths, put on my toughest face, and I knocked on the door.

Someone yelled, “COME IN.”

I walked in, and there was probably 10 or more people sitting around the room on various couches and chairs.

There was likely firearms galore in that house. I was intimidated, but I kept my composure.

I asked Big Bill to exit the home to speak with me, as I did not want to be ambushed by the other nine or so people in the home.

Big Bill stood up and towered over me.

My mind was on the edge of code black, just waiting for a glimpse of “go time.”

The man walked outside, and there we were, faced off against each other.

I was ready to start trading blows.

Big Bill looked down at me.

I was anticipating him pushing me, trying to punch me, or maybe he would start running.

But he did none of those.

We just sat there looking at each other for a few seconds, then all of a sudden, he started crying.

Internally, I was relieved.

I wanted to exhale deeply, but I held it in.

I felt that this might all end up OK after all.

I asked Big Bill the typical questions on whether he assaulted his girlfriend, which he said he did not. But he did admit to punching the man in the face who had initially knocked on my door.

I find in these types of situations, when a suspect is being forthcoming, I will give respect by being forthcoming in return.

I told Big Bill that if his girlfriend corroborates his story, and that she was not assaulted, he would not be arrested. And if the man who was punched did not want to press charges, then he would not be charged with any crimes, and we could just forget this whole night ever happened.

See, in Alaska, there are very strict domestic violence laws, where if a family member or boyfriend/girlfriend assault each other, an arrest is mandatory. But if it is just friends fighting, then an arrest is not necessarily required.

I ended up speaking with Big Bill's girlfriend alone, who corroborated the entire story. She did not seem frightened at all. And she also had no visible assault marks anywhere.

And just like I assumed would happen, the man who originally knocked on my door, who was assaulted by Big Bill, said he did not want to press charges.

I knew if the man did end up pressing charges, he would have had more village wrath on his hands than by just letting it go.

I was the law, but there is still a lawlessness retribution out here.

In rural Alaska, there are multiple guns in every home. Usually, they are just laying around or propped up in the corner.

Past Alaskan officers have been killed in ambushes, and so will future officers get killed in these types of situations. Thus, every call is one of intensity. And since I do not have any backup, I am all that there is to keep me alive out here.

When I walked home in the heavy snow, I was proud of myself. I never thought once of backing down. The idea never even crossed my mind.

If I died or got hurt protecting someone, I thought it is an honorable way to go.

As Sean Connery said in *The Untouchables*: "The Lord hates a coward."

RUNNING DOWN THE FUGITIVE

Earlier this week, I received a report that there was a fugitive in town. And even worse, it was a fugitive with a history of violence against police.

The judge had ordered this man to not step foot in the village, so it was actually a felony for this man to even be in town.

My directive was clear. Track his location and arrest him.

Over many days, I searched multiple homes and patrolled the town frequently for the fugitive.

Sometimes he would escape out of back windows with too large of a lead for me to pursue. Sometimes, village kids would lie about the direction the man went to throw off my pursuit.

This cat and mouse game went on for many days.

However, today I was finally able to make contact with him.

I received a call from a family member that the fugitive had just assaulted his parents.

I now had a real time location of the man's whereabouts, plus an additional crime to charge him with.

When I arrived at the family's home, I spotted the man outside.

The fugitive began to run from me.

The man was fast, but I knew I was faster. So I started to pursue.

The running fugitive had multiple advantages. He knew the surroundings better than me. He was also not running with 15 pounds of police gear, such as a duty belt and a bullet proof vest.

When the man ran behind homes or crawled under buildings, I was forced to slow down and make sure I was not being ambushed.

When the man ran straight down the road, I was able to make progress and catch up to him.

I had my Taser out, and I was just trying to find a moment when the two laser dots lined up on the fugitive's body so I could pull the trigger. But I was sprinting so fast, it was difficult.

My vision was focused solely on the man's back, while I was running full speed.

In the bottom of my field of vision, I recognized there was a puddle on the ground, which I decided to run through. That puddle however was not a puddle. It was a 3-foot hole in the ground, filled with water, and with a wooden structure built inside.

I smashed my knee into the structure, and I was in chest deep water. I was soaked wet, and the man got away.

This was my first real failure in policing. And on top of that, my knee began to swell and bruise.

I was extremely upset with myself.

I let the man get away and I injured myself in the process. It was a double fail.

I knew that this man would not go down without a fight, and now that I am injured and unable to run, it was clear he won.

At this point, I am unable to respond to any more police calls because of my injury. I feel I let the village down. The maniac was still on the loose, and I could do nothing.

But then I got a call.....

The fugitive was said to be passed out drunk in someone's backyard.

I thought to myself, "Holy shit, if I am tactical enough to sneak up on him, maybe I could redeem myself."

So I crept around the backyard, careful not to make any sounds.

I spotted the man about 50 feet away sleeping face up on a snowmachine seat.

My knee was in pain, and I knew if the man woke up and started to run, I would not be able to chase him.

So I slowly crawled towards the man.

Once I got within striking distance of him, I decided to guarantee my victory by handcuffing his ankles together as quietly as possible.

Each handcuff on his ankle slowly ratcheted in... Click... Click... Click...

I started to get excited that I might actually win this battle despite my injury.

With his legs secured in handcuffs, I then stood up and quickly handcuffed his arms together as well.

I knew at this point I had won.

The man's eyes bolted open.

I had the largest smile on my face, and I just said, "Hey, you're under arrest."

The man, unaware that his feet are handcuffed, tried to stand up and run, but fell face down in the mud.

This was unorthodox policing, handcuffing someone by the ankles, but it worked out well, and the community was now more safe.

LIFE IS WAVES

Life is literally in a wave.

Think of things in nature. Sound, light, water, all these things move in waves.

And yet, so do the good and bad things that are happening to us in our lives.

And thus, our emotions are also moving in a flux of waves.

People will say, “don't get too high, don't get too low”, but then how can you “live in the moment.”

I was unable to run for a while due to my knee injury from the police chase.

Running outside expanded my world and my mind, and without it, I felt like walls were closing in.

But emotions, like nature, come in waves. And it was only a matter of time before I bounced back.

THE TRIFECTA

Today, a call came in over the radio about an ATV crash down at the runway.

I immediately drove down to the scene of the accident and saw a little girl lying on the gravel with people surrounding her crying. I told everyone to get back, and I checked the unconscious girl for breathing.

She was alive, but completely knocked out. She must have hit her head hard on the ground. I needed to get her to the clinic fast.

I called the clinic, but the nurse told me she does not know how to drive the Ambulance, due to it being a left-handed stick shift.

So, I put the little girl lying flat in the back of my vehicle, I had another woman sit alongside her to make sure she would not fall, and I drove the little girl to the clinic.

While at the clinic, the nurse tended to the little girl and called for a Medivac (emergency medical plane). They were going to need to fly her to a hospital in Washington State, very far away.

It appears there was brain trauma.

A short time later, I received a call that the Medivac plane cannot land because there is a suicidal man walking on the runway talking about killing himself.

“Unbelievable”, I said to myself.

And just when I thought things could not get any worse, I received an additional call about a domestic violence situation in town, where a woman was being assaulted by a man.

So, now I have 3 situations I need to prioritize, or in medical terms, “triage” the situation.

Most important was the young girl. And the suicidal person on the runway is preventing her from seeking medical help. So, I drove down to the runway to confront the man.

Now normally, I try and be as appropriate and respectful as possible. But this situation did not afford me that luxury, as we have the medivac plane flying above us, unable to land.

I drove up to the man who was now stripping his clothes off, and I told him, “Brother I know life is hard, but we have to think about this little girl.”

He kept yelling, “ARREST ME! ARREST ME!”

Normally that would have been fine, but I am the only officer in town, and I am also the only prison guard in town.

I could not arrest the man, watch him in a jail cell, respond to a domestic violence call, and make sure the little girl was put on the plane safely. Impossible. Stressed.

So I told the man, “Look, if you think your life is hard now, how do you think you will feel if this little girl dies because you prevented the medical plane from landing?”

The man responded back, “I don’t care.”

So I told him in a firm voice, “Look, I do not want you to kill yourself, I like you. But if you really insist on killing yourself, stop being selfish and go do it somewhere else.”

The man could not believe what I said, but it got his attention, and he moved off the runway.

I made sure the little girl was put safely on the airplane, then I drove straight to a residence where I arrested the man for beating up his girlfriend.

The little girl ended up surviving, the suicidal man did not kill himself, and the assaulter was put in jail.

I wish I could say that was the only time I had a Trifecta emergency in Alaska, but it’s actually a common occurrence in this job.

THE AURORA

The absolute greatest thing about living in the Arctic is patrolling on a snowmachine down a mountain of freshly powdered snow. Adventure so thrilling. Nature so serene. What a beautiful balance.

During my time in the Arctic, I made friends with the president of a Native community, a beautiful Inupiat woman, tiny like Tinker Bell, but powerful.

She had promised me a date one evening to show me the hidden snowmachine trails in the forest.

It had been snowing nonstop for days, and this night was the first clear sky in a long time.

She called me and said, "Tonight is a good night to head out, you ready?"

"Heck yeah", I replied.

So we headed out of town together on my snowmachine and cruised into the woods. It was incredible, riding through a narrow snow trail of tall Christmas trees, unable to see anything but the large spruce in front of us.

I was the driver, and she was gripping onto me tight. The powdered snow was so many feet high the experience of riding is difficult to describe.

Normally when riding a snowmachine, I felt like I was riding flat and balanced. But once we cruised through the thick powder, it was like riding at a 120-degree angle with the nose pointed straight up.

It felt like I was riding a jetski that I had no control over. The nose of the snowmachine was pointed up so high, I could barely even see in front of me.

I wanted to slow down but the president yelled, “Go faster so we don’t get stuck.”

At this stage I felt like the snowmachine was driving itself recklessly.

We were bouncing left and right, dodging trees almost automatically. I was terrified, but she was laughing in my ear having a great time.

I thought to myself, “Does she know how close we are to crashing into a tree?”. But she didn’t care, or maybe she trusted me that I would keep us safe.

After we emerged from the trail, and the trees disappeared, I could finally see my surroundings again. I was so mentally exhausted from the ride, I stopped to take a rest.

The president then jumped off the back of the snowmachine into the fresh powdered snow. She sank so deep that her legs completely disappeared.

She began laughing hysterically.

It was a beautiful sight to see someone so comfortable and familiar with their natural environment.

I pulled her out of the deep snow, and we found a spot to lay on our backs and make snow angels. We were both wearing such insulated snow gear, it wasn't cold for us, it felt just right. Like laying on a cloud.

While laying on our backs, we stared into the night sky, and watched the aurora borealis while holding hands.

Almost the entire sky was lit up and the neon lights were dancing to a rhythm of nature. Before tonight, I had only seen photos of the auroras, and I had no idea the lights actually dance in the sky. I thought they remained still. It was an unreal surprise.

Out of all my years in Alaska, I had never seen the aurora borealis sky lights. I guess only certain locations, usually the most North, get to experience this phenomenon.

And although it was a beautiful and mesmerizing moment, I still had to keep my gun in my hand or right next to me the entire time, just in case a pack of wolves emerged.

That's the thing about the Alaskan wilderness.... it is the most beautiful place in the world where you can never fully relax.

Alaska is a constant place of wonder. And that night. That magical night. Was by far my favorite night of my Arctic adventure.

THE FACE STABBING

Today I received a call saying that someone had been stabbed in the face.

“Ohhhh boy, here we go again”, I thought.

My last call for a knife stabbing turned out to be a Tonka Truck to the face, so I was curious what this call would reveal.

I approached the home and knocked on the door.

A man answered with blood dripping out of his mouth and large chunks of cheek missing.

Definitely the most gruesome injury I have seen in an attack.

The man said he had no idea what happened, he was just sleeping and someone stabbed him in his face with a long-serrated bread knife.

The home looked like a murder scene with blood everywhere.

There was a giant hole in the man’s mouth and every time he spoke to me, chunks of his cheek ended up on the floor. It was hard to watch.

I needed to get this man to the hospital.

Up until this point, the man was alone in the home.

But suddenly, his wife walks in.

I was interested to see her reaction to the injury.

She walked up to the man, and I thought she would say something like
“Oh my god baby, what happened to you?”

Nope.

She walked up to him and then punched him right in his injured face.

“JESUS” I thought.

I immediately arrested the woman for domestic violence as was required by law.

I called the town ambulance for the man, he went to the hospital, and I took the wife to the village jail.

While interviewing the wife, she lifted her shirt up slightly to expose her stomach. There was bruising everywhere.

The man purposely beats his wife in places that are not visible, so he will not get in trouble with the police.

In retrospect, I wonder if that was maybe the wife’s only chance to hit her husband while in front of an officer, so he could not retaliate. But I am not sure. The assault was not in self-defense. So I couldn’t release her.

While we were at the jail, a family member of the wife called, worried that she had been arrested for the face stabbing.

In the process, the family member ended up confessing to stabbing the man in the face.

So now I had 3 people in this case that all had assaulted each other.

It was like a triangle of assaults.

The husband beat the wife so badly that her body was all bruised. The family member was so upset, that she stabbed the man in the face in his sleep.

And the wife hit the husband in front of me.

Crazy times out Arctic Alaska.

All three ended up going to jail, but the wife was let free as her crime was minuscule in comparison.

Once again, I wish I could say that this kind of trifecta assault was a rare occurrence in rural Alaska, but it wasn't.

SO MANY GUNS

Rural Alaska can be a dark place literally and figuratively. Even in the summer when the sun never sets.

It is a weird sight to see unsupervised kids running around playing at 3 am just because the sun is up.

My phone rang.

I received a report that kids had broken into the teacher housing at the local school.

A teacher, who left the village for the summer vacation, had kept eight guns in his apartment. Why this man had so many guns as a teacher in Alaska, I will never know. But he had seven pistols and one rifle. All of which had now been stolen. But the worst part is, all these guns were now in hands of children.

Alaska is consistently ranked one of the highest states of suicide in the US, along with domestic violence. With 7 pistols and 1 rifle now circulating among children, I knew it would only be a matter of time before they were used against someone else or themselves.

With no leads, no witnesses, and no security cameras, I had to devise a plan.

This is kind of the fun part about being a lone officer in the wild, being able to use intelligence and sometimes trickery to get a safe end result.

So this is what I did..... I put the word out in town, and I told parents, that kids would be getting charged with felony gun thefts, which would also mean search warrants would be executed for the family's homes.

I told the families, however, that if the guns were returned to me in a timely manner, I would not file any charges. We could just forget the entire ordeal.

Imagine being a police officer that says, "return to me guns that you stole and I will look the other way".

I knew the most important thing was getting the guns out of these kids' hands, so I had to make them feel too scared to keep them, and safe enough to return them.

Within two days, a young boy came by the office and relinquished a rifle. Then another boy with a handgun. And then another.

It was quite a sight to have a 9-year-old relinquish a handgun and say "sorry."

Over the next two to three weeks, I had secured all but two handguns.

I knew which kids had the remaining two, so I went to their homes and sat down with the parents to explain the severity of the issue.

One of the kids was afraid to return the gun because he had filed the serial numbers off, while the other had buried the gun.

However, I assured them and their parents that they would not be arrested.

So one kid went and dug up the pistol, and the other handed over the serial number “defaced” pistol.

I ended up getting every single gun back. And none of the kids got charged or went to jail.

Eight children, around the ages of 8 to 16, had now all been relieved of a handgun or rifle.

It was the greatest victory of my entire policing career.

I truly felt like removing the guns from those kids’ hands, saved at least one of those kids’ lives.

And at that point...

I felt like I had made a real difference in Arctic Alaska.



TASER FACE

This last summer in the Arctic has been a wild ride. Nonstop crime and running on a lack of sleep.

The nighttime is usually busy, so I wanted to balance out my day, and go collect some peace down at the riverbed before the night started.

I headed out the door in full uniform, I couldn't get 50 feet, before a woman waved her arms at me to stop.

I stepped out of my vehicle, and I could see she had fresh bruising on her face.

She said a man inside the home punched her, and he is on a rampage. She also told me the man is a fugitive with felony warrants for his arrest.

Right after she told me that, I heard screaming coming from inside the nearby home.

I took a couple deep breaths to collect myself, and then walked up the steps. I was preparing for anything at this point. Gun, knife, fistfight.

But just as I was walking up to the home, a man exited.

He has blood all over his hands.

I asked him if he is OK, and he responded with, "some bitch cut me."

I asked for the man's name, and he of course lied.

You can always tell when they are lying about their name because they fumble.

I told the man with blood all over his hands, "no one is able to leave until I figure out what is going on."

The woman then signals to me that he is the man who punched her.

I can see the man sizing me up, to see if he can win a fight with me. We call this the thousand yard stare. The look in his eyes tells me that he is about to fight me or take off running.

And just like that, the man starts sprinting.

I chase after him and I pull my taser out. Lasers pointed at his back, bouncing up and down, while I am running. FIRE AWAY!

The man turns the corner and collapses. I can only see his legs shaking from electricity running through his body.

"I GOT HIM", I thought to myself.

I then run up and kneel on his back to handcuff him. At the same time, his girlfriend comes out to see him and yells "YOU SHOT HIM IN THE HEAD!"

I looked up in disbelief. There was a taser barb sticking right out of his skull. That definitely had to hurt.

I tell the man I want to get photos of his injuries, but he flips me off of him and then tries to wrestle me. I proceed to taser him again. I can only imagine the pain of voltage flowing into his skull.

I then stood the man up, in order to walk him to my vehicle. But he thrust his elbow into my chest to create space.

The man is handcuffed, with his hands behind his back, but he is still trying to fight me.

It's unbelievable.

We are both maybe 5 feet away from each other in a standoff.

I thought to myself "this isn't a fair fight at all, this guy doesn't have any arms."

But he wanted to fight. So I brought it.

I body slammed the man to the ground. And just like that, a switch was flipped in his head that the fight was over. He had given up.

I will never forget walking the man to my jail cell.

He turned to me while handcuffed and said laughing "you shot me in the head, you're crazy man."

THE JOB TRAUMA

Anyone that does this job for any substantial amount of time will leave with some internal scars about humanity. This was especially true since we all worked alone..... and everything fell on our shoulders.

LEAVING ALASKA

I had some vacation time that I needed to take, so I decided on a trip to a peaceful little island called “Koh Rong” in Cambodia. The island has no roads, no cars, and no cell phone service. Exactly the kind of break I was looking for. Detached from everything.

I slept in a tree-house bungalow that overlooked the ocean, relaxed on white sand beaches, ate nonstop fresh mangoes with lime juice, kayaked to nearby islands, swam with exotic fish, and at night, I star gazed while lying on the beach and listening to the ocean waves.

I needed some time to shut off my brain, because that is when absolute clarity appears.

I could feel I needed to make a change. But change is hard.

The last few months in the Arctic was crazy for me. I had stabbings, I had to place a dead body in a body bag, I had child assaults, medical evacuations for children via aircraft, gun thefts from kids, domestic

violence cases, chasing down felony fugitives, and I had a few brutal felony assault cases. All alone. No backup.

Something just did not feel right about returning.

I had accomplished everything that I set out many years prior. I pushed myself to the edge physically and mentally, and I tested my true grit living in rural Alaska for multiple years.

And when I asked myself, “What Alaskan experience I was missing?”

I literally thought, “Other than getting shot or mauled by a bear, there isn’t one.”

I know that there is absolutely no way to calculate all the possibilities of a decision. But I knew decision time was upon me.

I had a plane ticket to return back to Alaska, and I was now in a farm town called Kampot, with a taxi ready to take me back to the capital Phnom Penh to catch my flight.

But deep down, I knew there was a new path waiting for me. My stomach went into knots thinking about returning to Alaska.

I tried to talk myself out of quitting my job, “Well, I already have a ticket back, and I have so much of my personal belongings in Alaska. Maybe now is not the time to quit.”

I was trying so hard to convince myself to return. I was giving myself every reason to, but something just did not feel right.

While riding in the taxi, headed back to the capital, we crossed a muddy wooden bridge and the car started to slide out of control. The taxi slid off the bridge and into a shallow river.

I was able to exit the opposite side of the vehicle with my bag before the car semi-flooded with water.

Multiple tow trucks couldn't get that taxi out of the river, it eventually required an 18-wheeler.

And ironically, all the deciding of whether I should return or not was not even a decision anymore. I was no longer able to make my flight. Maybe the universe had made my decision for me.

I began to wonder, what was I going to do? Where was I going to go?

The following day I received a message from an officer who worked in the Arctic. He said "be careful, it is supposed to get crazy out there next week. There is a funeral, and everyone is coming into your town."

No officer had never given me a warning like this.

So I took this as a sign, a "wink" from the universe that I made the right decision in my life.

CAMBODIA

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A NEW LIFE.... AGAIN

Coming from the Arctic, the Cambodia weather was hot. Temperatures are regularly in the high 90's and 100's, coupled with high humidity.

The capital, Phnom Penh, is noisy and chaotic. But I was enamored. The city of 2 million people was unlike anywhere I had ever lived.

I figured, if I got stuck here, maybe it was for a reason. So, I got a short-term studio apartment directly across the street from Russian market.

Every morning, I would walk out of my apartment and buy some fresh cut pineapple from a street vendor. The people were kind and friendly. And there were so many food options coming from Alaska.

I felt free, but also anxious. I have no idea what I am doing here. I knew I would need to find a job, or else I would be unable to remain in the country.

I searched job openings for foreigners. I did not want to be an English teacher, but I was not having any luck finding other opportunities.

That is, until I ran across a job opening for a part time lifeguard position at the newest and nicest international school in Cambodia.

I applied right away and thought, "How amazing it would be, to lifeguard part time, and enjoy a new country. It would be like living a permanent vacation."

THE INTERVIEW

A week or so went by, and I received a phone call from an American woman named Tessy. She said, “the head of the school reviewed your resume, and he would like to speak with you about an interesting opportunity.”

My curiosity was piqued. We scheduled an interview for later that week.

When I arrived at the school, I was astonished. Huge perimeter walls surrounding the multi-acre property. Gigantic colonial four story buildings with columns, a state-of-the-art fitness complex, bird sanctuaries, a full organic farm, and even a bunny farm.

I was told the campus cost tens of millions of dollars to build. I do not know if that was true, but it was beautiful.

I met with the Head of school, a tall gentleman from the UK by the name of Paul. Paul was larger than life and had a James Bond intensity to him. He had a very interesting business of starting up some of the most elite schools in the world. He recently worked in Japan, Australia, Europe, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.

Paul said, “Taylor, we have a problem at this campus, which presents a very interesting opportunity here for you.”

I said, “Yes sir, what can I help you with?”

Paul said, “Well, we have the wealthiest children in Cambodia attending this school. We have tried to hire consultants to come in and shape our security detail and safety protocols, but they have all been lackluster. We have royalty and other elite children stepping foot on this campus with bodyguards who are all armed. We will need to train a security detail that lets these parents feel comfortable enough to let their children enter without their bodyguards.”

I jumped in, “There is no one more perfect for this job than me sir.”

Paul and Tessy looked at each other.

Tessy then says, “do you really think you can do this with the cultural barrier?”

I quickly replied, “It is not a problem.”

Tessy and Paul seemed unsure.

Paul then says, “Would you mind working for a week so we can see how you operate? And if we decide to keep you on, we will extend the contract. We would pay you handsomely.”

I knew deep down, I was the perfect man for this job.

“Absolutely,” I told Paul. “I am going to blow away your expectations.”

Paul and Tessy smiled.

Tessy asks, “Do you need anything from us?”

I replied, “A few things. First, I will need to have full hiring and firing control over my team. Secondly, we will be doing some very unorthodox training. It may seem unnecessary, but I can assure you, it is all a part of the process. Lastly, I will need a translator.”

They agreed, and I had never been so excited to start a job in my life.

BOOTCAMP BEGINS

Day one of training, I told all the troops to form a line, all of them wearing raggedy clothes and flip flops.

I had received approval to purchase all new exercise gear for the cadets, but I wanted them to earn their new clothes first. Nothing is given, everything must be earned.

I learned the Khmer (Cambodian language) commands for marching drills, and I taught the troops how to march properly. Then I led them through vigorous exercise sessions. In every drill, I led by example.

After our initial workout, I put on an introduction class where I played audio clips of real police emergencies. I then showed them videos of me getting pepper sprayed, tasered, chasing bears, and transporting prisoners across the Arctic. I wanted the troops to know that the person commanding them had real world experience.

And at the end of the training day, I tested the cadet's firefighting knowledge.

With the help of my translator, I gave them a scenario of a school classroom on fire.

I said, "Show me what you would do in this situation. GO!"

The cadets ran around the building in circles a few times. I think they were all just following each other.

Eventually they stopped and said, “We do not know what we are doing.”

I told them, “That is a valid excuse right now, but it will not be one in a month. Do you understand?”

THE FIRST FEW WEEKS

The first few weeks of training were rough. I know the guys were hurting. I know the guys hated me. But it was my job to break them down and build them up.

They were sore, they were exhausted, and there was almost nothing they could do right.

We built a full football field length obstacle course with multiple small and large walls they would scale. I would connect rope to a tire and make the cadets drag me around the campus, sometimes in a race.

I would make them swim, even though they barely knew how to. I would make the cadets carry me around the campus in a stretcher, so they knew how to transport the injured. And then, I made the recruits fight each other, and me as well.

I brought in a professional boxer from South Africa to teach the recruits boxing. We had a registered nurse from Canada teach the recruits about first aid and CPR. We had firefighting classes and water rescue classes.

I displayed the attitude that nothing the guys could do was ever right. And if the cadets actually did something perfect, I remained apathetic.

If one of the cadets came in a few minutes late from partying the night before, I would work them out so hard they would throw up all their booze in their system. I was tough on the guys, but it was for a good reason.

When I gave the troops their new matching camouflage Nike and Underarmour gear for training, I told them to mark their names on their clothing. The following day, I asked to see their names written on their shirts, and none of them had done it. So they were all required to do 100 pushups... on the spot.

The following day, all the cadets showed me their names marked on their shirts without me asking. I simply walked away without praise.

We would conduct scenarios on a daily basis like someone sneaking a gun into the campus, or someone jumping the fence needing to be chased and tackled.

I would throw dolls in the water with crisis actors screaming, "SAVE MY BABY". I would light fires on different sides of the campus for the recruits to extinguish.

Anything and everything real world scenarios, I threw at them. I wanted the security detail to be confident in their jobs and know that they could handle any emergency.

The guys received real deal training.

They began walking more upright and looking more and more fit. Their confidence was building.

The recruits also saw some of the pains I went through to make sure they had top notch training.

I accidentally burned my hand setting up a live fire scenario, which they learned how to treat medically. The professional boxer had accidentally bareknuckle punched me during another scenario, which caused a massive welt on my head.

When I made the guys patrol in the direct sunlight on extremely hot days, I patrolled with them. When I made them run laps, I ran further and faster. When I made the guys swim one lap under water without breathing, I swam two.

I wanted to show the guys that when they bleed, I bleed. When they sweat, I sweat. And that I would not ask them to do something I had not done or could not do myself.

We became brothers through it all.



THE FINISHED PRODUCT

Whenever I stepped foot onto the campus, I was saluted and greeted by my security detail. Every morning, I would take a taxi into the facility, and after the first two guards saluted me, the taxi driver would always look back like, “who is this white guy?”

It was a pretty cool job.

After a few months, the guys were the absolute best security detail in all of Cambodia. The security was running high and tight.

Before, the guys could barely swim, and now, they are doing flips off the diving platforms. Before, the guys had no idea how to work a fire extinguisher. Now, the guys could work the building’s fire hydrant systems confidently.

Every single morning the security marched around campus. They practiced jiu-jitsu and take down tactics, water survival drills with child mannequins, and they would practice on a full-fledged obstacle course that were nicer than most police academies.

The security was dressed in all black tuxedo-type uniforms. I was granted permission to go to the military supply stores to equip them with the best handcuffs, batons, duty belts, and vests. And the guards remained at a “parade rest” stance at their post throughout the day. Always looking tough as nails.

During school fire drills, I would have the guys hook up fire hose and shoot streams of water over the buildings.

I do not think any school in the world does this level of fire drills. But it was necessary in Cambodia because the lack of public safety infrastructure.

Bullet proof Rolls-Royces and armor-plated Range Rovers accompanied by security teams of motorcycles would drop off kids at the campus. However, all the children's bodyguards were not allowed past the gates.

I strategically placed my security guards in the most effective positions. I took the guys with the most confidence and put them at the entrance to stop weapons from entering the campus. I took the best swimmers and put them on water safety patrol as lifeguards. And I took the most respected of the group and put him as the team leader. Everybody had a position and a job duty.

The transformation was complete.

Paul took great pride in his campus' new security detail. He was very particular not just about security, but everything on that campus.

One day when I asked Paul what kind of security he would like for the campus, he replied, "Like an embassy!"



REMEMBERING THE TOUGH CORPORAL

Everything I was able to accomplish as a trainer in Cambodia, I owe to the Tough Corporal. He was revered and hated as the main instructor. He took punishment and training to the extreme.

At my Alaskan academy, the Tough Corporal would reprimand us for even the slightest things. If your hat was even a little pointed upward, he would yell, "DO YOU THINK WE'RE OUT HERE HUNTING SQUIRRELS, PULL YOUR DANG COVER DOWN."

He would even speak with us about how to eat certain foods,
"HOTDOGS AND BANANAS WILL BE SLICED WITH A FORK OR
BROKEN UP WITH YOUR HAND TO NOT DRAW
INAPPROPRIATE ATTENTION TO YOURSELF."

It was not just about physical training, but training to become an all-around professional. And without that Tough Corporal, I wouldn't have had the confidence to train these recruits.

ALITA GRADUATION

After many months, I wanted to do something rewarding for the guys to celebrate graduating my training program. So, I designed certifications with special awards for “the most fit”, “greatest work ethic”, and “strongest leadership”. We then held an awards ceremony and graduation on campus, with food and all the families in attendance.

Since these men never graduated high school, this was the only graduation ceremony they would likely ever attend.

When I called their names, I handed them their new security certificates, each housed in a glass frame so they could hang them in their homes.

They had tears in their eyes, and they were proud of their achievement.

The weekend before the graduation, I saw Alita Battle Angel in 3D at the brand new mall next to the school campus. The graphics in the movie were mind blowing.

I asked my squad, “Did you guys see the new Alita movie?”

They replied, “No.”

So then I asked, “Have any of you been to the new movie theatre?”

They replied again, “No.”

My curiosity piqued at this point, “Have any of you, EVER, seen a movie at a theatre?”

They all again said “No.”

I was shocked. But I knew this presented a very cool opportunity. Since the graphics were so amazing, I thought, “What a perfect first movie for the guys to see.”

So, as a gift, I bought my entire squad tickets to see the 3D movie at the very nice theater. I also gave them some cash for drinks and popcorn. When I handed the movie tickets to the crew, they asked me, “Would you please go with us, we do not know what to do?”

I told them, “That is part of the process. Just make sure you get the glasses for the movie, otherwise, you will not be able to see.”

On the evening of the movie, I received text messages from all the guys.

They sent photos of themselves posing in front of movie posters and sitting in their seats with 3D glasses and popcorn. Many of them could not even read, so the subtitles probably did not help. But I could only imagine my first movie experience being 3D Alita Battle Angel.

They had a blast, and I felt blessed to provide them with that experience.

FEMALE SELF DEFENSE

During my time in Cambodia, I learned a lot about the culture and people. I became aware of their recent tragic history, and the problems that still plague the country. Sex trafficking and rape was still a very prominent issue that the country was battling.

Over the last five years, I had put together a female self-defense course that was predominantly nonviolent and focused more on preventative measures. This was my opportunity to give back to a world that has been so amazing to me, and a life that has given me so many wonderful experiences.

So, I decided to reach out to nonprofits to volunteer my time teaching female self-defense courses.

One of the nonprofits was a rehabilitation center for sex trafficked victims. Along with a female translator, I put on self-defense courses for girls aged 13-19.

They were smiling, happy, and thankful that a former police from USA was volunteering his time to teach them self-defense.

I could also see the anger in some of the older girls. They wanted to learn the moves so they would not be subject to rape and kidnappings in the future. It was a tragic day for me, but a successful day as well.

The nonprofit thanked me and asked if I would be willing to put on a class for the younger girls.

“Younger girls?”, I shockingly asked.

The woman for the nonprofit responded, “Yes, we have girls aged 3 to 12 who we would like to attend a class.”

I was quite taken-aback. My curriculum was not for kids this young, but I felt like I was being called upon, so I told them I would put something together.

The next Saturday morning, the nonprofit case workers drove me to the young girl’s safe house to teach the course.

When we pulled up, swarms of young kids surrounded the vehicle. A case worker turned to me in the car and said, “We need to tell you about some rules before we go inside.”

The case worker then informed me, “no taking photos of the children and no posting of this location on social media.”

The case worker then said, “We’re trying to teach these children what appropriate touch is, so we encourage hugs.”

I stepped out of the vehicle and kids began to hug me immediately. What was supposed to be a 2-hour class turned into a 6-hour day.

I put on training for the kids that was both entertaining and educational.

I put on protective head gear and then picked up the kids individually. They were instructed to hammer fist me in the nose repeatedly until I dropped them and they could run off.

We played a game called “Protect your friend”, where I had the kids laying down pretending to sleep. Then I would sneak up and try to drag one kid out of the room, but the other children would latch on and not let her go, all while screaming for help.

There was a 6-year-old little girl with a scar across her neck who could barely speak. She was abused by her uncle, who cut her throat so she could never speak about it.

One of the girls was tied up by her arm, which she mutilated to get free.

This was the most tragic group of people I had ever been around, and they were filled with nothing but love and positivity.

I felt honored that I could share my life with these brave souls.

Before I left, the nonprofit took a group photo of us where all the kids covered their faces.

I then offered a heartfelt goodbye.

Literally, for an entire week after that event, I walked around feeling a tingly sensation throughout my whole body. I never experienced this type of feeling before and definitely not for such a long period.

I was furious that humans could be this evil. I was sad that these girls had to experience such traumatic events. I was also mad at myself for ever complaining in life over trivial matters.

How could we have it so good and complain so much, and these kids had it so bad, but were nothing but joyous?

I was the instructor of these little girls, but they were the ones that taught me a lesson on resilience.

A few days later, I received photos of our time together and a thank you letter from the girls.

They gave me permission to share this photo.



CAMBODIAN CULTURE

I loved my new life in Cambodia. Connecting with the people and their culture was both humbling and amusing. I learned just enough Khmer, the Cambodian language, to get a few good laughs out of the people I interacted with.

If my security trainees ever asked for time off for a wedding, or if they needed to visit a relative in the hospital, I would hold out my hand and say “sum luoy?” This translated to “got money?”, as if they would need to bribe me for some time off. The first time I did this, they all thought I was dead serious.

When I walked into restaurants to eat, I would say “khlean jahn whap hi”, which meant “I am starving to death”. Which is hilarious to Cambodians, because I am a white guy in the city, not a native Cambodian stumbling out of the jungle looking famished.

One time after leaving a movie theatre, I flagged down a Tuk-Tuk to head home. As we drove by a coconut shake stand, I told the tuk-tuk driver, “chop chop chop”. This meant “stop, stop, stop”.

I then yelled out to the man making coconut shakes, “Dung Kriluk muoy.” This meant “One coconut shake”. The coconut shake man and the tuk-tuk driver looked at each other and started laughing.

And I suspect my Tuk-Tuk driver was drunk because the entire ride home he would laugh four or five times and then repeat the phrase “Dung kriluk muoy ha ha ha”.

THE FIELD TRIP BODYGUARD

A week ago, I received a text message from the operations manager of the campus. He asked me to come up to his office and speak with him.

He informed me that there was a high school field trip across rural parts of Cambodia, and that the rich parents were requesting the kids' bodyguards accompany them. Since this trip was supposed to be staff and kids only, he requested that I go as the kids' bodyguard to quell the parents' anxieties.

He said, "Hell, I won't even let my own kids go on the trip if you don't go."

Months prior, I prepared emergency first aid kits for field trips, with clear instructions on how to treat everything from a nosebleed to losing a limb in an accident. And all the parents knew me, as I ran security for the campus.

I felt honored that my presence would be so meaningful. So I accepted.

The first stop on our trip was Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. It is one of the oldest, if not the oldest temple in the world. Gorgeous scenery of gigantic trees with roots growing on top of the stone temples alongside Buddhist monks galore.

In a dark nook of a temple lay a monk on a woven red mat. I approached this monk and placed a small amount of money into his

brass cup. Speaking with his hands, the monk motioned for me to sit down in front of him on the woven mat.

When I sat down cross legged, the monk looked at me and began praying for me in Khmer. He then splashed some water on my face, grabbed my wrist, and placed a red woven bracelet around it. He kept praying for me and then went silent.

Right after the encounter with the monk, I asked a local Cambodian who observed the prayer, what the monk said to me. And although he prayed for a long time, she only told me that he said to wear the bracelet until its worn and weathered, and after it has worn away, dispose of it somewhere peaceful.

I thought to myself, “what is going to happen to me if I remove this bracelet before it’s worn away?”

I don’t think I want to disobey this monk. Who knows what sort of bad juju is gonna come my way.

So, I rocked on with my bracelet.

The following day, we drove to a native silk making workshop. Here, we learned all about how silk has been made using centuries-old traditions. I had touched silk before, but I never had any idea how cool a process it was to make.

The next evening we observed the Cambodian circus. Some older men tried sitting very close to the high school girls, and I told the men to take a hike.

The following day was a zip lining excursion through the forests. The only male teacher that took part in the field trip was too frightened to ride the zip line, so it was actually a blessing I went on the trip because who knows how many students would have backed out from fear, had I not stepped up. It was a blast, although I got super sunburned.

The following day we rode a bus, hours away, then hopped on a boat just for our school. We were headed to a floating village. I knew nothing about this place, but after an hour or so ride, we began approaching a floating community in the middle of a giant river.

As soon as locals spotted our boat arriving, it turned into a sort of aquatic Mad Max environment. Dirty water, and dingy boats speeding up next to us with giant snakes around the locals' necks and in their hands. The locals would drive up inches from the boat trying to hand snakes to us in hopes of getting a tip.

I will never forget the image of seeing a baby so young, riding on the floor of this broken-down speed boat, using a snake as her pillow.

I thought, "What the hell kind of place is this", and I instructed the kids to not grab the snakes.

The floating village, it turns out, is a group of Vietnamese that crossed into Cambodia, and setup their home on the river. They did this so

there is some legal gray area, and they cannot be removed. I did not understand it entirely, but there was a school, homes, restaurants, and gift shops floating in the river.

These were definitely the poorest people these kids had ever seen in their life. And on the ride home in the boat, many of them were crying. And whether it is lasting, or just for a moment, these rich kids had a new appreciation for their living conditions.

We did a lot of activities throughout that week, but on the final day, we drove hours away to a famous temple. I asked the native Cambodian school kids how I could also pray, and they taught me the method.

After praying in the temple and walking out, the foreign teachers from UK and Australia, asked me if I was Buddhist. I told them “no, just praying.” But I could see why they would ask me that, I’ve got a shaved head, I am wearing a red bracelet a monk gave me, and I am praying at the temples. But I just figured I would take a shotgun approach to religion. I figure if I pray to enough gods one of them is bound to hear me.

After the temple, we hiked for a few hours to a holy river that had a massive waterfall. I was so overheated that I was looking forward to the swim. But none of the kids wanted to enter the river. And neither did the teachers.

“Are you serious?” I said, “You guys hiked all the way to the dang waterfall and you’re not going to swim?”

“Whatever, I am going in.” I told them.

After a few minutes, some of the boys got in the river and tried convincing the rest of the students.

Then a female teacher and some female students came in.

“You all are going to regret this, if you don’t come in. I am an expert swimmer, I will not let anyone drown”, I reassuringly told the rest of the group.

And after about an hour and a half of swimming, every student made their way into the river.

And there is 100% certainty, if I did not accompany these kids on this trip, there would not have been any swimming near the waterfall.

And I knew, my job here was done.

THE HONG KONG DRAGON

Although I lived a modest lifestyle in Cambodia, the one thing I did splurge on was my gym membership. Most of the gyms in Cambodia are open air so they get pretty hot, and since I worked in the heat every day, I desperately wanted an air-conditioned gym to train in after work.

So I struck up a deal with a nice hotel that was close to my apartment, so that I could use the gym, infinity pool, and spa for a monthly fee.

Cambodia, especially Phnom Penh, is complete chaos. And this hotel resort was my oasis in the middle of the mayhem. After my work, I would often complete a workout at the hotel gym, take a dip in the neon lit infinity pool, then finish with alternating steam room and cold therapy tub.

The vast majority of the people who used the sauna and gym were hotel guests excited about being on vacation, often wanting to strike up a conversation. Talks always started with “where you from?”

And after I told them Alaska, the responses were always pretty similar, “Alaska to Cambodia, that’s gotta be a big difference in temperature”. Or if the conversation was taking place near the cold tub, it would usually go something like, “that cold tub isn’t cold for you right, coming from Alaska?”

I guess what I learned working out at a hotel gym is that people on vacation really like to strike up conversations.

One day I went to this hotel gym, I walked in and started filling up my water bottle, and there was a woman running on the treadmill. The treadmill was on incline, and she was running quite fast. I could tell this was not a weekend warrior runner, but someone who has a deep passion for running.

The woman glanced my way, and we made eye contact. I was quite attracted to this runner, and I rarely met someone I wanted to ask on a date. But how was I going to start the conversation?

As I was doing my workout, the female runner kept running. Miles and miles of running, and this anticipation of wanting to strike up a conversation with her was making me a little nervous. I thought to myself, once she was done, I would simply say, "Nice run, where are you from?". I figured that is what everyone asked me at this hotel gym, might as well try it on someone else.

But the woman never stopped running. And at some point, I left the workout room to use the restroom, and when I returned, she was gone. I had hoped she was also just using the restroom, and she would return to stretch or do some light weights or something, but she never returned.

I was pretty bummed out. And after my workout while I was using the sauna, I made a promise to myself, "If you ever see that woman again, you will ask her out the second you see her". DEAL. I told myself!

But days went by, and I never saw the woman again, then weeks went by and still I never saw her.

I figured she was just another woman on vacation, and I would likely never see her again.

But then one day, as I entered the gym, I saw the runner on the same treadmill, doing her same routine.

I knew I made a promise to myself. I could handle getting rejected, but I could not live with breaking the promise to myself.

So I walked up to the runner on the treadmill. She was wearing earbuds, and I made the motion with both of my hands signaling to remove the earbuds.

She removed them and slowed down her run, and said “Can I help you?”

I said, “Hi, I’m Taylor. I promised myself if I ever saw you again, I would ask you out straight away.”

She replied, “Ummmm..... can I finish my run now?”

“Sure!”, I said.

She continued to run, and I started my workout. That encounter did not go the way I had hoped, but I was elated that I stuck to the promise I made myself. I was glowing actually.

After her run, we chatted a bit, then she actually gave me her number.

We became romantically involved. We would work out together, swim together, and practice acrobatic yoga together. She would often joke about how I approached her, signaling to remove her earbuds while running on a treadmill full speed. She would look at me smiling and shake her head, saying “Who does that?”

Her name was Iris, like the flower, and she was a runner from Hong Kong.

Iris once told me, “Taylor, you know, there are many different types of Asian cultures. In one Asian culture date a flower, and then when you become married, the woman will turn into a dragon. And in another Asian culture, you date a dragon, but after you become married the woman will turn into a flower. But us Hong Kong girls, you date the dragon, and you marry the dragon”.

I had met Iris at the very end of my Cambodian stint, and I knew she had such a high paying job, that she would never give it up to move with me. And I knew my journey was headed in another direction. So I practiced detachment to mask the pain.

Before I met Iris, I had only seen dragons in movies. But now I know, they exist in real life.

THE END OF CAMBODIA

During my time in Cambodia, I led a foreign security detail, put on rigorous military style training academies, volunteered to nonprofits for female self-defense classes, and instructed youth in swimming and physical fitness.

What was supposed to be a short vacation, turned into a multiyear experience.

When I told my security detail that I was leaving, they cried. The men, some older than me, said I was like a father to them. We had gone through a lot together, and I was proud of them. But I had trained these men to lead themselves, never for me to stay.

Deep down, I knew my security squad was more mentally tough than me. They would often sleep outside on concrete floors to keep guard, and although they would always be looked down upon in Cambodian culture as a lower tier of society, the crew remained positive and cheerful.

As a leader, it is a difficult concept to be positionally above someone but look up to them at the same time.

Cambodia had humbled me.

I was learning so much about myself that I did not want the adventure to end. So, the path of enlightenment continued to my next stop.... Taiwan.

TAIWAN

臺灣

“MOTIVATION MOUNTAIN”

For the last four years, I have been running a mountain almost every day in a small remote town in Taiwan, called Puli (埔里). The locals on the mountain know me as the foreigner who runs up every day with no shirt on.... regardless of the weather.

If it's 100 degrees and blazing sunlight, I am running shirtless. If it is pouring rain with lightning and thunder, I am also running shirtless.

No matter how often I run that mountain, it never gets easier. I only become less likely to throw-up or pass out in the hotter temperatures. And I never pass out.

Although there are probably hundreds of people that walk this mountain every day due to its novelty and beauty, there are only a handful of people that run it due to the difficulty.

One of the runners is an old Taiwanese man who must be in his seventies or eighties. He runs slower than molasses, but he's still faster than all the walkers.

The old man is inspirational to me. Sometimes I will catch him taking a break and walking, and if we catch eyes in this moment, it's as if he got caught stealing. He will then pick up his feet and start running again. I yell “Jiiiii yohhhh” for inspiration, which means “keep going.”

Physical fitness is my passion in life, and I find it insanely humorous that I am pushing an elderly man that is likely more fit than 99.9% of the men his same age. But motivation is in my nature, so I push.

I have had a lot of time to think on this mountain over the years. I have come up with many different names and imagined all sorts of stories around it. Sometimes I call it “Motivation Mountain” because the Taiwanese people are so supportive, and every time I run by someone, they will cheer for me or give me a big thumbs up.

Sometimes I call it “The Widow’s Tears Mountain”, and I made up an elaborate story about how a Taiwanese man would run to the top of the mountain every day to get food for his family. But one day he died, and the wife would then need to run to the top to get the food for the family. Since it is so hard to run the mountain, and she missed her husband so much, she would often weep in sadness, hence the widow’s tears. Now, I do not know why there would be food on the top of the mountain, but it’s my story.

I also gave the mountain the name “Three-legged dog mountain”, because there are packs of wild dogs roaming around, but strangely a few only have three legs. I often wonder when I see these dogs, if they all had unfortunate accidents and then congregated to the most peaceful place in Taiwan. It was always a mystery to me, but I was just happy they lived somewhere peaceful.

I am not a guy that likes to go to church, but every time I make it to the top of the mountain, I repeat the same phrase that I adapted over many

runs, “Thank you God for everything I am, everything I have, everything I will be, and everything that I will have.”

At the top of the mountain, towards the end of the road, there are rows of connected bushes, and inside each bush rests fifty or so butterflies. And at specific times of the year, after my run to the top of the mountain, I will walk by the bushes with my arms out, and it causes all the butterflies to exit their home. So for about one minute, as I walk past the bushes, a hundred butterflies will swarm all around me.

The view from the top of the mountain is incredible, with Buddhist temples surrounding the landscapes, and tourists Paragliding into the blue skies.

One day there was an American female tourist, a heavier set woman, strapped to a lighter Taiwanese paragliding instructor. The wind was not quite strong enough to lift the couple into the air, so the shuttle driver helped push them off the cliff.

Unfortunately, the shuttle driver was caught onto the harness and tumbled off the mountain. I thought for sure the man had plunged to his death or at least suffered a severe injury.

I was about 100 meters away when I saw the accident, shocked no one else was running to rescue the man. I sprinted as fast as I could to the edge. As I peeked over the cliff, I saw the man resting on a sloped ledge. The man was not in danger, but I still offered my hand and helped pull him up.

I would never claim to have saved that man's life, but at that moment, I was the only person among a crowd that was willing to jump into the fray. And the man knew that.

Before that day, the shuttle drivers never waved to me as I ran the mountain, and now every single day, they roll down their windows and wave to me with big arm motions.

THE NEW JOB

My entire life has revolved around physical fitness. They say it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in something, but when I calculate the number of hours I have spent training in my lifetime, it is well over 20,000.

Being strong physically is great, but there is just something so mentally powerful knowing if a boat sinks, I could swim miles to shore. Or if I got stranded in the wilderness, I could run for miles on end to find water or help.

Throughout my life, I have trained women, men, and children across a vast array of physical fitness activities. And I loved sharing my passion for fitness with people.

Fittingly, I was offered a job with a Buddhist organization, Fo Guang Shan, to train children at their campus in a mountain town, and I was excited to make the move to Taiwan, the heart of Asia.

THE BIRD SOUNDS

I arrived in Taiwan at the beginning of the COVID pandemic, which meant I had to quarantine for 15 days at a government approved facility.

I was placed in a traditional Buddhist apartment that had wooden floors, a small mat on the floor for sleeping, and a pillow made from rice. There was no chair, no table, nothing. I thought to myself, “Is this a Buddhist test? Don’t they know who I am? I fought bears, they can’t break me with this!”

I did pushups on the floor, handstand pushups against the wall, and I used my suitcase to hold above my head while I performed squats. Everything I have, is everything I needed.

Because covid was so serious at the time, I was assigned a police officer that would check on me daily to make sure I never left my room. And since my phone was my GPS tracking device, if my phone ever died, they would show up to my place immediately. I did not know this initially, so on the second day when my phone died, the police showed up to my room.

The quarantine facility had traditional Taiwan meals delivered to my room three times a day unannounced. The meal was just left outside my room at a random time for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The ceiling was a typical office style drop ceiling with one large square tile missing. For the first few days, I would hear a bird making noises in

the ceiling. I could not tell if the bird was inside my room or right outside the hallway. But it would only chirp two or three times a day. I did not want to complain, and I also had no idea who I would contact about this, because I did not have anyone's number other than the police officer who oversaw my quarantine.

However, on the fourth day, I heard the bird sound at the same time I heard people shuffling around outside my room. I peeked out wearing a mask and notified them there might be a bird in my room.

The woman looked at me like a crazy person and said, “That is your doorbell.”

I could not believe it. It sounded so real. And then it all made sense to me. The birdcall meant my food had arrived.

For those 15 days in quarantine, I worked out in my room, watched movies on my laptop, and waited excitingly for the birdcall.

When I got out, I would tell the story of the bird doorbell and my rice pillow. The local Taiwanese would say, “Rice pillow is very traditional, you are lucky you got that one.”

And I would joke back, “For sure, the only one better is the traditional rock pillow.”

THE VENERABLES

My first day outside Taiwan quarantine was unforgettable.

I was transported to the Buddhist monastery of Fo Guang Shan (佛光山), in Kaohsiung (高雄), to meet my employer. It was breathtaking. The giant golden Buddha monuments and perfectly manicured trees. I toured the Buddhist museum and then ate lunch. Afterwards, I was escorted into a large conference room.

With more than one hundred people in attendance, the high-level female monks called “Venerables” walked to the front of the room. The Venerables, wearing all orange robes, and having shaved heads, began speaking in Chinese with microphones in hand. It was my first time meeting Buddhist monks and Venerables, and I wanted to make a positive impression. So when the Venerables were finished speaking, I asked for the microphone.

With my first time speaking Chinese, and a hundred plus Taiwanese people with eyes on me, I nervously said into the microphone, “Women de faxing yiyang.”

The entire room laughed.

Since I was in college, I had shaved my head weekly, and what I told the Venerables was, “We have the same hairstyle.”

Later that year, I was invited with a few other people to a private dinner with the head Venerable.

Throughout the year, she had given me gifts of fruits and moon cakes, and I wanted to show my appreciation. So I gave her a wooden bracelet that can be wrapped many times around the wrist. The bracelet was from a local Cambodian market, and it was made from real cinnamon bark, so the scent would last for years.

I handed the bracelet to the Venerable and I told her she could smell the bracelet for a calming effect.

She asked if it was from the real cinnamon tree, and I said “yes, of course.”

She then told me, “this is very expensive here.”

I gave a surprised look, then reached back for the bracelet and said, “Well, I didn't know that.”

I then let out a smile and said, “just kidding, please keep it.”

The Venerable and her assistant both laughed.

I am not sure if it was our matching haircuts, but I was always very comfortable around the Venerables.

I think that's what Buddhists call “Zen”.

Or..... maybe I don't understand.... and I don't know anything about it.

THE BUDDHIST APARTMENT

My landlord in Puli was a very devout Buddhist. When I went to her home to sign the lease agreement, I could hear Buddhist “ohhhmmmmmm” chants before I went inside.

She was a very kind woman who seemed to have very little worries in life.

After signing the lease agreement, she gave me a Buddhist necklace and welcomed me to Puli.

Although this was an older apartment and quite small, I chose it because it was very close to the mountain. But what really sealed the deal for me was that she agreed that I could use a decommissioned downstairs bathroom to store my bike. It was like my own garage for my bicycle.

The apartment building is four floors tall, and on the first floor of my apartment is a laundrymat business. The first floor also has one apartment in the back that is right next to the decommissioned bathroom where I stored my bike.

During the first week of moving in, I was still trying to get comfortable maneuvering the bicycle in and out of the bathroom without banging too many walls and disrupting the first-floor tenant.

However, on this learning journey, one night I accidentally banged the bathroom door pretty loud.

Immediately after, a female Buddhist student in training walked out of the first-floor apartment and started yelling at me in Chinese. She had never seen me before, so I assumed she was asking something like “are you allowed to be here, what are you doing here?”

But since I did not speak Chinese, I had no way to answer her.

So, after putting my bike away, I went upstairs to my apartment and texted my landlord. I told her, “The first-floor tenant is asking me a lot of questions and seemed pretty upset. Could you please let her know that I am allowed to use that bathroom for my bike?”

My landlord texted me back, “Oh she was upset? That’s good. It means you are her karma. She just needs to practice her Buddhism more”.

I had never been called someone’s Karma before, but I thought it was interesting that I am helping someone overcome adversity by banging their walls with my bike.

THE BEGINNING OF TAIWAN

I was so excited to be in a place where I could ride a bike again, that on my second day in Puli, I rode my bike everywhere. I chose not to bring a phone with me so that it would force me to learn the city and find my way back home without a GPS. But Puli has a very weird layout, and I got lost for a few hours.

It was so strange because I was lost for hours, and I never asked anyone for help, but when I finally gave up and asked someone, I realized that I was directly across the street from my apartment. It was like the universe played a twisted joke on me.

For the next week, I rode my bike all over town, day and night. The city was magical with mountains all around and lit-up red paper lanterns hanging over the streets. I thought maybe I was living a dream. I would sometimes ask myself if this is real life. I would actually backtrack my life and think, “If I am in a coma, when would I have fallen into it?”

The following week, the campus had an orientation for new employees. The woman giving the presentation was showing the location of dentists' and doctors' offices along with banks and police stations. But since I had been riding my bike everywhere like a madman, I knew pretty much all the town.

When she pulled up Google maps street view, I noticed the area right away and quickly said in a serious voice, “Hey, there should be a dog there.”

The room burst into laughter.

But I was dead serious..... There normally is a dog there.



GUANYIN WATERFALL / 觀音瀑布

My first week in Puli Taiwan, I rode my bike to the base of a beautiful waterfall called Guanyin, named after the Bodhisattva of Compassion (the one said to hear the cries of the world). From there, I would hike to the top.

The Taiwan people were so friendly that I wanted to connect with them more. But at this point, I only knew how to say two Chinese phrases: “Hi” (Nee-how) and “I am hungry” (Woah Tootsy ughhhh).

So, everyone I saw on the hike to the waterfall, I would say, “Neehow, Wo Tootsy ughhh”, (Hi, I am hungry).

People would say hi back, and some would give me a piece of fruit or moon cake. This was my first interaction with how warm-hearted the Taiwanese people really were.

A funny story is, when I first visited the neighborhood 7-11, the store worker would yell in English, “Good morning,” as I entered. I would then tell her, “Good morning” back. But then I noticed, sometimes they would yell, “good morning” even in the nighttime. After a while, I started to get suspicious, and then I realized they were actually yelling “Guaying,” which in Chinese meant “welcome.” And the whole time I had been yelling back “Good morning.”

I knew I would need to learn more of the language to connect with people, so like Cambodia, I started with some funny phrases.

When I walked around the Buddhist campus I taught, I would take two of my fingers, point them at my eyes, and then point back at kids and say “Wo Tsi Kani” which means “I’m watching you.”

When the kids called my name, I would simply state “Wo mayo chen”, which means “I don’t have any money”, as if they were beggars.

In Taiwan a few simple phrases will always be asked of you, “heuya ma?” (do you have an account here?) which I always reply, “Mayo” (I do not have).

Next you need to know the word “Daitsa”, which means bag. If you go to any grocery store or convenience store, unless you say “Daiza hao”, you will be leaving with the items in your hand.

I actually sound like I know perfect Chinese for a few seconds every day at the grocery store, and for about one second when I pick up the phone and say “Wayyyy neehow!”

If I see someone struggling with an exercise, or if someone says they cannot do something, I simply respond, “Shang shing ni zuh jeen”. Which means, “Believe in yourself.”

And when people that I bump into on my run begin talking to me, and I have no idea what they are saying, I simply smile and say, “Megua”, which means “America!”

So, regardless of what the question is, America is always the answer.

MENGGU WATERFALL / 夢谷瀑布

For the past few weeks I have been riding my Taiwan brand, GIANT bike to Guanyin waterfall. Once I got there, I would rest the bike up against a tree, then run to the top of the mountain and swim in the waterfall to cool my body temperature down.

At the base of the Guanyin are fruit sellers, so I would usually grab some passionfruit, a peach, or my favorite fruit Yohtzi (pomelo), to eat at the top of the mountain. Yohtzi is like a giant, less-sweet grapefruit if it was mixed with a lemon.

In Taiwan, I became somewhat of a river and waterfall explorer. And today, I decided to ride my bike to a new waterfall called Menggu, which translates to “Dream Valley.”

Menggu was the furthest waterfall I had ridden my bike to at this point, something like 20 miles round trip and 1,500 feet of elevation. The bicycle ride to Menggu was all incline, and the final leg was one giant hill I would need to climb.

So, I rode my bike to the base of the waterfall and then began making the last big climb.

During my bicycle ride to Menggu, I was daydreaming about what fruits they would be selling at the top. I hoped for Yohtzi, but I would settle for anything.

As I was powering up the final large hill, it required me to “get out of the saddle” or ride in a standing position to increase my pedaling strength. I was forced to climb the hill slowly at a walking pace because it was so steep. When all of a sudden, in the corner of my eye, I spotted a cobra snake directly in my bicycle pathway.

The Cobra was on the right side of where my leg would need to drop down to pedal again. It was in a fighting position with its head more than six inches off the ground looking ready to strike me.

If I was on a flat road or going downhill, I could just maneuver around the snake. But going straight uphill at such a slow speed on my bike, I only had two options:

I could either fall off my bike, which would leave me lying on the ground next to the cobra – or pedal on, which meant my right leg would drop down towards the cobra’s head.

I decided there is no way I would want to be lying on the ground next to this snake. And a bite on my leg probably wouldn’t kill me. So, I pedaled as powerfully as I could, hoping the snake wouldn’t take the chance to attack me.

Luckily, I never got bit. But after I made it safely past the snake, I had to get off my bike and take a few deep breaths.

When I finally made it to the top of the mountain, I realized there was no fruit for sale anywhere. I felt instant sadness. I was famished from my ride, and I had not eaten breakfast.

I knew I wouldn't be able to enjoy the waterfall or hang out there for hours with such a hungry stomach. And I also knew if I rode back down the mountain towards town to get some food, I probably wouldn't want to come back. I was too far gone.

But I did not want to give up my waterfall day.

So, I rode around the top of the mountain until I saw a home with a car parked in the driveway. I approached the home, "Nee how!"

A younger aboriginal woman came outside, and I once again used my limited Chinese, "Wo tutsi ugh ugh" (I am super hungry).

She did not speak good English, but she understood seeing me on a bike, that I had just ridden from far away in the heat. I told her that I have some money, and I asked if I could buy some fruit from her.

She went inside and came out with five passionfruit. But she would not accept any money. I was so appreciative of her, because a lack of fruit would have ruined my trip to the waterfall that day.

Afterwards, I went and had an amazing day swimming in the waterfall, laying on rocks, and soaking up the sun. When I rode home, I thought of how I could return the favor to this kind aboriginal woman.

Since I had such a nice time at the waterfall, the very next day, I rode my bike to Guanyin, picked up a couple large bags of passionfruit, along with some sushi and chips from town, then rode all the way back to Menggu waterfall.

When I approached this time, the entire aboriginal family was there. I gave them the two bags of passionfruit as a thank you, and ate with them.

It was a lot harder climbing the hill with so much passionfruit on my back, but at least there was no snake in the road this time.

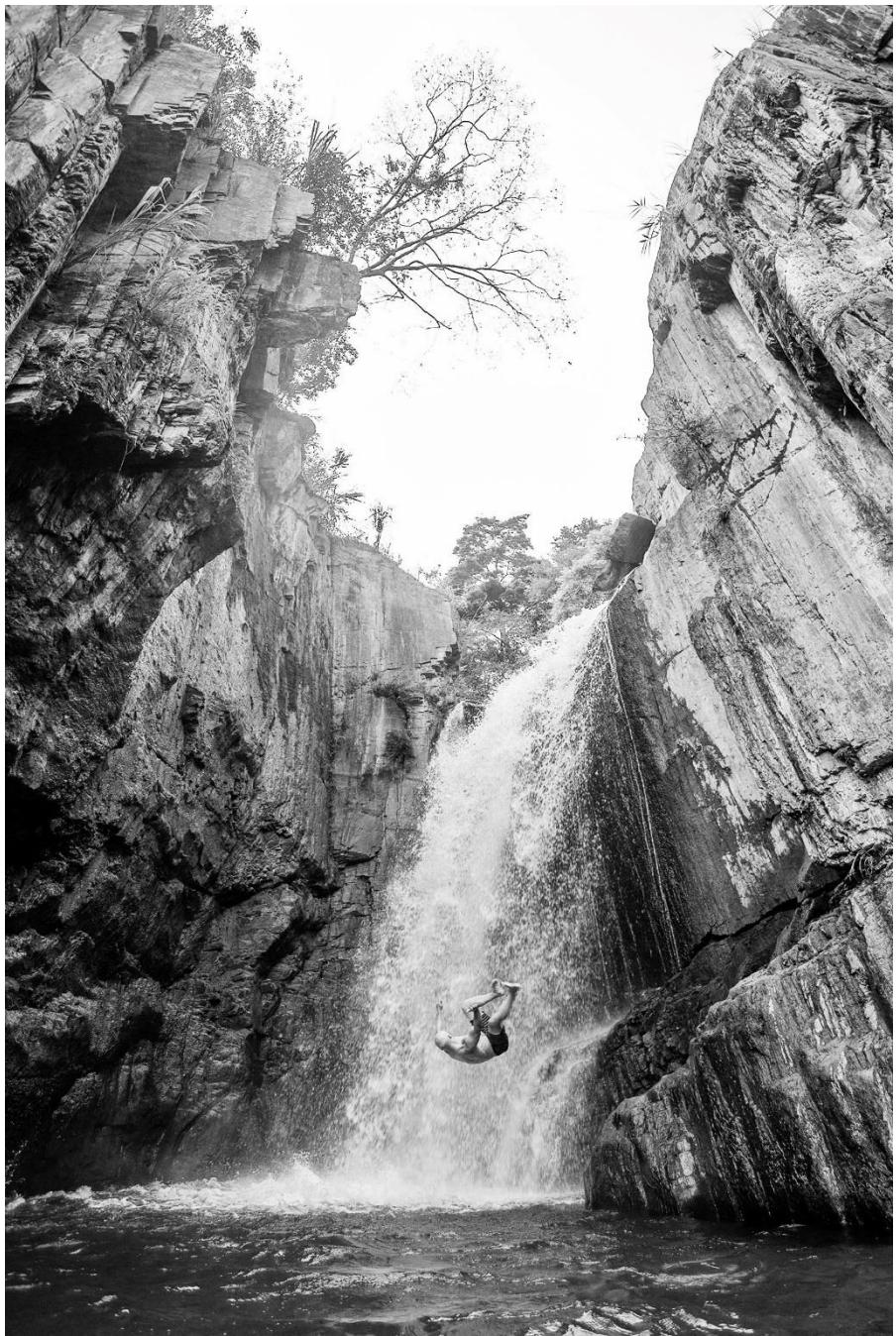
I asked the family if they wanted to swim with me at the waterfall, and they said, "We have not swam there in a long time, but ok."

We all walked to the waterfall together, ate passionfruit on the rocks, swam for a few hours, then returned to their home. When we got back, the elders taught me how to play an aboriginal musical instrument. It was a small piece of wood with a string that you would place up against your lips and pulled in a jerking motion.

They took a video of me playing the instrument, laughing, probably because I looked ridiculous. But after about an hour, I finally got it to make some noise.

I did not want to leave the family, but I knew with the sun going down, it was too dangerous for me to ride home in the dark. So, I thanked them for their hospitality and rode off.

When I got home, I remembered to google whether the snake I saw the day before was poisonous. And shockingly, yes, it is extremely poisonous. Like, deadly poisonous. So, I guess it's good that I dodged that bullet.



THE PULI PRESIDENT

When Taiwanese people ask me why I live in Puli, I just tell them, “I’m the Puli President.”

My mind runs so free here that I’ve actually thought about what I would do if I was in charge of the town. Conclusion? I would install pull-up bars in all the recreational areas and make dedicated bicycle lanes everywhere.

The main places I eat in town know me so well that I never need a menu.

For instance, at the famous noodle shop, they know I like my noodles non-spicy and dry. So while everyone walks up and takes a menu to mark down their order, I simply pull up on my bike and say “eega” (one) or “Li-anga” (two). The Taiwanese people eating always stare at me and give me a weird look of “what is this white guy doing in Puli?”

If you need to order three of an item, you would say “sanga”. And if you wanted four of an item, you would simply say “Suuu-ka”.

I never learned how to say “five” of an item, because if you need more than four of something, you should probably slow down.

When I get a papaya milkshake, they know I prefer an “off the menu” version where they throw in some banana to make it sweeter. I pay an extra 5 NT, but it completely makes it worth it.

At my favorite breakfast spot “Shimmer Cafe”, the owner knows I do not drink caffeinated tea, so she gives me a large glass of freshly made apple cider vinegar. She also gives me a second serving of sweet potatoes for free just to be kind to me.

I once asked the owner if she has a boyfriend, which she replied, “No” ... and I got excited. But then she told me she has a girlfriend... and my excitement went away. But I was still happy for her.

The convenience stores, the grocery store, my gym, and the mountain I run, everyone knows me. I always wave and smile, usually giving a big Thumbs up!

I assume everyone thinks I’m too poor to afford a scooter, but the reality is, I love the human locomotion of a bicycle.

Strangely, it has always been a dream of mine to live somewhere that I only needed a mountain bike to get around. So for me, I was actually living my dream.

In the Aleutians I could not ride a bike because it was all sand. In the Arctic, I could not ride a bike because it was all snow. And Phnom Penh, it would be suicidal to ride a bike in the heavy traffic. So in Taiwan, the dream had arrived.

Steve Jobs once talked about the efficiency of locomotion in animals and how condors came in first place for flying, but humans were unimpressively low on the list of efficient animals.

However, when a bicycle was added to the human, it catapulted us to the most efficient by a wide margin. So, in that regard, there is no bigger flex to an animal than a human on a bicycle.

In all my time in Taiwan, I only crashed my bicycle once when I was making a sharp turn near a park. I was going about 25 mph around a corner. My bike slid out from under me due to the slipperiness of the brick road after a rainspell. My head immediately hit the concrete and I tumbled a few times along with my bike.

When I got up, I knew I had cut open my face pretty bad, and there was quite a bit of blood dripping down onto my clothing. I also had severe road rash on my arms and legs.

The locals at the park called an ambulance for me, and I was transported to the hospital.

Just before the Taiwanese doctor began stitching up my cut, I told him, “Before this crash I had a girlfriend, you have to keep me handsome, so she doesn’t leave me.”

The nurse laughed, but the doctor was all business.

He just replied in a serious voice, “I’ll try my best.”

THE LAND OF THUMBS UP AND FREE PRAYERS

Over the years, I have come up with a few different names for Puli, Taiwan.

I call it “The land of Thumbs up,” because every time I run the mountain, get over twenty “thumbs up” from people.

Taiwanese people are so motivational when it comes to exercise. Sometimes, I will see a car drive by with fully tinted windows, unable to see who’s inside. And then the window rolls down just enough for a single hand to emerge... with a thumbs up. That always makes me laugh.

I remember the tough corporal once telling our class, “enthusiasm is contagious.”

So on my runs, I always shoot back the thumbs-up at every Taiwan person I see, hoping to keep the good vibes going.

One time, when I was walking around the mountain after completing a run, an elderly Taiwanese man started talking to me, asking me why I chose Puli.

I told him, “I love Puli.”

The man replied, “Puli is pure.”

And even though I do not know anything about this elderly man, I am pretty sure he knows what he's talking about here.

Another name I've given Puli is "The land of free prayers."

People sometimes ask if I'm Buddhist, and I always respond, "No, but my neighbors are."

Still, I do go to temples many times a week to pray. This typically involves lighting two to three sticks of incense and facing outward so Buddha can hear your wishes leaving the temple.

You start by saying who you are and where you live, so the blessings know where to find you. Then, you just kind of wish for what you want like it's Christmas.

And when you're finished, you simply stick the incense into a large, waist high, stone bowl filled with sand.

It's all good smells and great prayers.... I love Buddhism.

In many big Taiwan cities, and when you want to pray at a Temple in a big city, sometimes you need to purchase the incense from the temple. But not Puli. Puli is the land of free prayers. At every temple here, there is free incense and lighters for everyone to make unlimited wishes.

And that is why I call Puli *The land of Thumbs up and free prayers.*

And since I am just an extension of this amazing place, I guess that makes me, the man of thumbs up and many prayers.



THE YELLOW SHORTS

I have way too many pairs of running shorts.

Some people collect art. I collect activewear.

If I see a pair of running shorts I like, I buy them and toss them into the stash.

Sometimes I use them right away, and sometimes I pull them out years later.

Just whatever I am in the mood for.

One of those forgotten pairs was a bright yellow set I bought in Cambodia. Super comfortable.

Those yellow shorts are the only piece of yellow clothing I own.

And today, for whatever reason, I decided to wear them on my run up the Puli mountain.

And then.... something happened.

On my run up the mountain, in my yellow shorts, a family of yellow butterflies began circling my waist. They were traveling with me along my run. It was incredible.

I already knew there were white butterflies at the waterfall, and black butterflies at the top of the mountain.

But today, I became a part of the environment.

I *was* the big yellow butterfly climbing the mountain, with the smaller yellow butterflies flying beside me like I belonged.

It was pure magic.

If I had known that these enchanted yellow butterflies would come out for my yellow shorts, I would've worn them from the very first day I ran that mountain.

So, after that run, I rode my bike home, I immediately took off my new yellow shorts, and I threw them straight into the trash.

I wanted to keep that mystical moment for one day, and one day only.

I think that's what the Buddhist monks call "Zen."

Or..... maybe I don't understand.....and I don't know anything about it.

IT'S ALL FALLING APART

I once watched a show about police dogs and their sniffing abilities.

There was a test to see whether the man could outsmart the professional dog sniffer. So, the man prepared beforehand by taking a shower, putting on a hazmat suit, and he was even carried by another person to try and elude the dog.

Miraculously, the dog was still able to track the man down.

And the rationale behind this was human beings are literally shedding microscopic cells every millisecond.

If you think about lithium batteries, you can charge your cell phone to 100%, turn it off completely, then turn it on a month later, and there will be significantly less charge.

Why is that?

It's because the battery is dissipating.

Just like us.

The Sun, which is a giant burning ball of gas, will eventually burn through itself.

Trees are decomposing. Flowers are releasing pollen. We are all doing the same thing.

Everything is beautifully falling apart right before our eyes.

Japanese scientists have a word for healing in a forest, which they call “forest bathing”.

The scientists collected samples of the air and traced the healing effects to natural aerosols released by trees and plants. So in a sense, the forest shedding enters our bodies, and makes us feel better.

So when you feel you are getting older, or falling apart....

That is the beauty of the universe.

Just like the trees and plants in a forest, we are all sharing in this journey.



THE SPIRITUAL HEALER

During my years in Taiwan, I became very close to a woman named “Ting”, who was a spiritual healer.

Ting was undoubtedly the kindest person I have ever met in my life. Many people put on an act to appear nice, but she was the real deal, radiating love and light. Just giving her a hug, felt like I was falling into a cloud.

One day I asked myself, if I only had one day left on earth, who would I spend it with. And Ting was the only person that came to mind. That's when I knew she was a godsend.

During our time together, Ting taught me a lot about healing techniques of oils derived from plants. She would often make me concoctions of essential oil mixes for different ailments like sore muscles or stomach aches.

I began to learn how different plant scents could relax me or help me fall asleep. Douglas Fir in the wintertime was probably my favorite scent, I don't know if it heals me much, but it sure as hell reminds me of Christmas.

After I started to learn about plant smells, during my runs and bike rides, I began to pick flowers and leaves from the wild. I would then roll them up in my hands and breathe the scents in deeply.

Sometimes, I would even do this with trees. Carefully peeling back a bit of bark to find a smooth inner surface. Then I would rub my palm against it, cup my hand to my face, and breathe in the nature.

I always loved the smell of eucalyptus trees, but these were often grown by farmers.

So to not steal, I would try to find leaves that had fallen to the ground. If I found an entire branch, even better, I would take it home with me and enjoy it over a week's time.

I experimented with the scents of dozens of flowers and leaves.

And for the first time, I truly understood the old saying,
“stop and smell the roses.”

It makes me reflect back to my Nelson Lagoon days, when I was constantly experimenting with eating wild plants.

And now, on the other side of the world, I am experimenting with smelling them.

MY MANTRA

My entire life, I have had a simple mantra: "If you work out, things will work out."

Sadness, hit the gym. Heartache, go for a run. Failure in life, take it out on a punching bag.

Exercise of all sorts, is in our nature.

It nourishes the body and fills the mind with positivity, creating a ripple effect throughout our lives.

It's kind of hard to not be positive about facing adversity when you are looking tough and feeling good.

Before I left for Alaska, nothing was going my way. I was completely lost. I hoped good things were waiting for me, but I did not know what or when.

One day, I wrote down a saying, and then took a photo of it.

I put it as the screen saver to my phone, and every time I opened it, I would repeat the phrase.

It read, "I am a good person, good things will happen to me, the universe is on my side."

I still recite this over a decade later.

TIME IN A SENSE

How do you define time?

How would you describe an event in your life if you couldn't use words like "age", "years", "days", and "months"?

Most people would then use a location to describe a time period of their life.

In this case, location may be just as relevant a measurement of time as an actual ticking clock.

How else could we explain how you might be able to remember events from years prior with complete clarity. And yet, sometimes we cannot remember what we did the weekend prior, or what we had for a meal just a day ago.

What if living in different places throughout your life can actually make your life feel longer?

I do not pretend to know the answer to this.

All I know is that when I look back on my life, no matter where I lived, all the locations seemed like a similar timeframe, even though some were months... and some were years.

FINDING PEACE IN TAIWAN

Almost every day in Taiwan, I am either running mountains, swimming in rivers, or bathing in waterfalls.

I know every road in the town of Puli, and I have discovered countless secret rivers and waterfalls where I can be completely alone if I desire.

On any given day, I might ride my bike to a hidden river, sunbathe on a large rock in the middle of the flowing stream, and hang out with miniature monkeys collecting tree food. At first, they'd shake branches at me... until they realized I am just some chill animal.

At the river, I would put on goggles and swim against the current as a form of exercise, usually remaining in the same spot for minutes on end.... Only advancing up the river if I expended a ton of energy.

Butterflies and dragonflies are very prominent in Puli, and it would not be out of the norm to be surrounded by them at a waterfall or a river.

The white butterflies love me the most, maybe because my skin matches theirs. A whiter shade of pale.

The dragonflies, almost annoyingly, refuse to land anywhere but my big toes.

And if you stayed out long enough at night, the fireflies would turn up. They weren't as abundant as the butterflies or dragonflies, but they still arise, sometimes to light a path for me.

I ran Hutoushan mountain (虎頭山) almost every day, and if I did not run it during daylight, I often ran it in the nighttime. I especially loved running the mountain past midnight, because I would be the only human up there, and in a weird way, Puli after midnight felt like it was my own universe.

I would run to the top of the mountain and watch the stars. I would see animals in the nighttime that I could never see in the day.

There were Siberian weasels, Asian badgers, and one night I ran across what looked like a pack of golden labrador retrievers. But, when I got up close, I realized they were giant wild Formosan pigs. It was shocking how close I got, and how quickly we all seemed to agree it was a bad idea.

One afternoon, after running to the top of the mountain, I saw a young boy playing near the bushes that house the butterflies. I walked up and waved my arm over the leaves and a cloud of butterflies swarmed around the kid. His eyes lit up with joy.

I began to see magic all around me.

One morning I spotted a baby turtle on the road. I knew it would likely get run over by a car, so I picked it up and walked it to a small river stream.

Another day I saw a caterpillar on a handrail, so I scooped it up with a leaf, and placed it on a nearby plant. The following day, when I returned, I saw the caterpillar had eaten holes in the leaves I laid it on.

For years in Alaska, I was sitting by, waiting for my phone to ring for an emergency, or my door to be pounded on with screams. All day, every day, I was living in a state of “code yellow” or semi-panic.

And although I do not have a lot of crazy Taiwan stories like my Alaskan ones. I have a lot of peaceful Taiwan stories, which I think were necessary to bring a balance back to my life.

I was even given the Chinese name “Tai Heping” (泰和平), which means “Supreme Peace”, or a sort of grand harmony.

Taiwan is quintessential nature. And throughout the years, I camped all over the island. When I setup a campsite next to a river, I slept peacefully. But when I camped in the woods, and I heard branches crackling or the heavy rainfall imitating footsteps in the brush, it brought back bad bear memories from Alaska, and I couldn’t sleep.

I don't think I will ever sleep as peacefully as I did before that bear incident.

But maybe not all peace is meant to be found.



IT STARTED IN ALASKA

It has been a rainy August here in Puli, Taiwan due to the typhoons. And today was undoubtedly the strongest rains I had seen since living here.

Excited to run in the extreme weather, I threw on my running gear, rode my bike to the base of the mountain, and ran to the top in the pouring down rains.

As I ran up the water flowing streets, I spotted a handful of people walking down the mountain with umbrellas deployed. But not a single person was heading up the mountain into the storm.

And I thought to myself, “This sums up my journey perfectly.”

There is an Albert Einstein quote that says, “The one who follows the crowd will usually get no further than the crowd. The one who walks alone, is likely to find himself in places no one has ever been.”

Throughout my life, the best things I did usually started with someone telling me that I should not do it, or that I could not do it.

When I dropped out of medical school, everyone said that is a decision I would regret.

But I never did.

When I told people I was moving to Alaska, all my family and friends tried talking me out of it.

But they couldn't.

When I make a decision in life, I cannot be swayed. The rock does not bleed.

Over the years, I have often asked myself if I had any regrets, or if I would have done anything different. But if I would have done anything even slightly different, I would not have learned what I needed to learn, and I would not be where I am today.

I know it sounds crazy asking the universe for guidance, but it gave me the incredible Alaskan experience and the ones that followed.

So I now think, "How can the universe be ignored?"

13 years ago, at the very beginning of this book, someone told me that you cannot hit the reset button on life. Since that point, I have done it multiple times. I was living in the Aleutians chasing bears out of town, riding snowmachines tracking down fugitives in the Arctic, running my own security detail in Cambodia, and as I am writing this now, living in the Buddhist mountains of Taiwan, far removed from all those lives.

Even if I dreamed a thousand lives, I would not have been able to dream up these experiences.

T.S. Elliott once said, the person who waits for the train, is not the same person who boards the train. That we are all constantly changing.

And thus... the person who finished writing this book... is not the same person who started writing this book.

I once asked the universe for a sign.

And now.... I just go with it.... like water in a river stream.

it started in Alaska



I saw a lot of bears in Alaska.

There were boars, and there were sows.

A lot of them were young, and some of them were old.



This memoir endures where time cannot fade it.

Forever inscribed on the bitcoin timechain.

Block height 900182. Inscription #97,214,598

it started in Alaska