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Election Day

THERE ARE TWO polling places in Haines. One is in the arts center lobby, on the hill above the harbor and cruise ship dock, the other at the fire hall in Mosquito Lake, a woodsy rural settlement twenty-six miles out of town. I voted at the arts center and said hi to everyone as I walked in, but I didn't say, "Wish me luck," or anything close to it. The public radio station, KHNS, and signs on the street corners reminded residents that no campaigning was allowed at or near polling places. One neighbor, who lives in an old house with a wide porch on Soap Suds Alley, was asked by the borough clerk to remove campaign signs from his yard since his home was too close to the polls. I did notice who was there voting, though, friends and foes, and wondered which side of the Haines left-right divide would be victorious. Either way, a little more than half of us would be happy, and a little less than half would be disappointed. Haines is predictable; I assumed it would be close.

It looked to me as though more conservative voters than my supporters were at the arts center that morning. I hoped my years in town, my community service on the library board, the hospice board, and planning commission, my volunteer hosting of the local country music show on KHNS, coaching high school

runners for seventeen years, five good children and five grandchildren (the sixth and seventh were still to come), our family business, Lutak Lumber, which my husband, Chip, runs, plus all those obituaries—I've been writing them for the *Chilkat Valley News* since 1997—would give me crossover support. I'm not sure that term fits Haines-style elections though. Candidates don't run on a party platform, and a so-called liberal may not want to pay more taxes for trash pickup because they recycle and compost everything, while a so-called conservative might because they are tired of illegal dumping near the river where they hunt moose. I may be a registered Democrat, but at least everyone knows me. I have written about this town in three books, which are in many ways love letters to Haines. My life is an open book, literally.

In Alaska, municipalities are organized as boroughs, and Haines Borough has a mayor, and a six-member assembly that hires a manager who runs the daily operation of what is essentially the small city that is Haines proper, with about sixteen hundred residents, and the outlying areas—the borough is about the size of Rhode Island—with a grand total of about twenty-five hundred people. I asked how the turnout had been so far, and one of the women seated at the folding table handing out ballots, a friend—our kids grew up together and we played on the same softball team—said, “Quiet but steady.” That could describe any Tuesday morning in Haines. I signed the line next to my name in the big book of registered voters and took the ballot over to one of the portable red, white, and blue-curtained booths. I stopped a minute to read my own name on the official ballot before filling in the oval next to it. That little moment of pride and even joy may be as good as it gets. It could be the beginning and end of my late-in-life

political career. I was proud of myself for running, for channeling my frustration with the circus of national politics that had been so distracting, really ever since Sarah Palin's rise. And now Trump seemed to be her successor in the "speak first, think later" category, prompting headlines with outrageous pronouncements and turning politics into a new kind of theater of the absurd.

After feeding my ballot into the electronic ballot box, I pressed a blue-and-yellow sticker featuring the flag of Alaska, with its Big Dipper and North Star that read I VOTED on my jacket, and we all wished one another a nice day. Which of the poll workers had voted for me, I wondered? Actually, I didn't mind not knowing. They didn't need to know who I chose, either. That's how we stay friends after an election. It is also why most businesses don't allow candidates to put up campaign signs, and why a lot of residents never endorse a candidate publicly. You don't want to burn any bridges or hurt any feelings in a place this small and isolated. Only ferries and small planes connect Haines to Juneau, the rest of southeast Alaska, and beyond, and the one road out of town runs north, through British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. I had let friends know that if they wanted to put up a yard sign, I'd give them one, or if they'd like me to come over myself and hammer it on their tree, I would. I didn't think I needed to order any more than twenty-five but ended up buying extra because of all the requests. Did they make a difference? I doubt it.

Did we even need to campaign? We candidates publicly fielded lots of questions about the biggest issues facing the community: the economy, the multi-million-dollar harbor expansion project, the freight dock repairs, the expensive private dump that results in people tossing trash out in the woods or burning it instead. I

don't know if my positions changed anyone's mind. Voters knew us, and most had a first choice before any of the six candidates vying for the two open seats had even said a word. Maybe their second choice was still up for grabs.

In my thirty-plus years in Haines, a lot has changed in the national political, social, environmental, and economic climates, and those developments have in some ways coincided with shifts in our community as well. Haines has grown from an old logging and fishing town to a newer artsy place for tourists and retirees, and it's more seasonal, bustling all summer and shrinking in the winter. Hillary won Haines, as did Obama before her, though neither won in the Mosquito Lake area, which typically has about a hundred voters or less who tend to vote more right wing than left. Don Young, "Congressman for all Alaskans" forever, it seems, hasn't taken Haines a few times in recent history. It's been close, but still. Lisa Murkowski has won here every time.

The Haines electorate is violet with red and blue highlights. The Elks Club folded and is now a private gym owned by a chiropractor from Colorado with nine (or maybe ten by now) home-schooled children. There's a new distillery in a former army bakery and Leo Smith Logging Co. is no longer, and neither is Leo. The spruce that he once cut for sawmills is being used to craft custom snowboards and skis at another new business. Gift shops, tour offices, and art galleries surround his widow's trailer home and my husband Chip's lumberyard on the waterfront.

The local NRA members host an annual fundraiser at the Fogcutter Bar, where raffle prizes include assault rifles. The Southeast Alaska State Fair raffles off a new Subaru. There is a women's pistol club, where some learn to shoot in self-defense,

and others for sport. My hairdresser is a member. Her husband passed away following a long illness, and she is a vocal advocate for major healthcare reform to make it affordable, compassionate, and available to all. Susan marched with the club in the Fourth of July parade wearing a sidearm in a holster buckled over her jean shorts. They meet at the public library where the environmental organization, Lynn Canal Conservation, sometimes shows films on protecting wild salmon and rivers threatened by mines, timber sales, and climate change. Bumper stickers on rigs parked on Main Street range from RESIST and BERNIE to FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS EAT FARMED SALMON and EARTH FIRST, WE'LL MINE THE OTHER PLANETS LATER. On one bumper there are both INSURED BY SMITH & WESSON and IMPEACH OBAMA stickers. (They're hard to peel off after years of snow and grime.)

Here in the north, accelerated global warming is changing the landscape and altering the fisheries. No one is certain where the once-abundant Chilkat River king salmon have gone, but strict fisheries management measures are underway to keep them from disappearing altogether, including limiting commercial fishing so king salmon aren't accidentally caught with other, more plentiful species of Pacific salmon. The glaciers are retreating before our eyes, the winds blow harder, and it seems to rain more than it snows. There is a major mining prospect in the exploration phase near the headwaters of the Chilkat River, and state officials are negotiating contracts for the largest timber sales in decades. State revenue from oil development, which communities like Haines depend on for much of their funding, is waning. The Alaska Marine Highway, as the public ferry service is called, is our link to Juneau (the nearest city, more than four hours away by boat.)

It has seen reductions in service and more breakdowns than ever due to the aging fleet, all of which makes for anxious and defensive people.

A whole group of residents, including our current mayor, believe the proposed mine and increased logging activity are what Haines needs to thrive, and dream of high-paying jobs, a steady economy, and the prosperity this could bring. Writer Seth Kantner, who lives above the Arctic Circle in Kotzebue, observes that because Alaska is changing so rapidly in so many ways, we are living in the past, present, and future all at the same time. I would argue America may be as well. That's stressful. But what an opportunity this gives us to address our mutual problems together, civically, one community at a time. Climate change especially affects everyone's survival, no matter what your politics are. Or so one would think.

CAMPAIGNING MIGHT NOT have mattered but at least I enjoyed the public forums, studying local government history, and learning more about how it operates. I love the preamble to the Borough Charter and how in the Haines Borough, corporations are not people. I voted for that Charter amendment after the Citizens United ruling, along with a majority of residents on all sides of the political spectrum. It was not even controversial then, although I bet it would be now, with the mine development looming. The prospective owners are a multinational corporation seeking a louder voice in the discussion.

I've given enough book readings and talks to be comfortable in front of a crowd, but that's when I control the script and my audience is friendly, which is not always the case in campaign

appearances. I was nervous in my first public forums and still am to some degree. I decided right from the get-go that I'd say exactly what I thought and not attempt to be too smooth or political by repeating tired old lines like I'd support something "if it's sustainable" or "if it's environmentally responsible" or "if it's affordable." That way there could be no big surprises if I were elected. I was happy to endorse local hiring, fully funding the library, and maintaining the pool, the school, and the nonprofits. It was easy to affirm what I like about Haines and why. The questions about government excesses and wasted tax dollars were not hard, either. Who wouldn't agree that spending twenty thousand dollars on a study confirming the helicopters used to shuttle backcountry skiers to the slopes were noisy was foolish? Or that the new—they are always new it seems—policemen need to spend less time in their cars and more time walking around, or even riding bicycles, so we get to know them and they us?

The lone incumbent who was running, Diana Lapham, argued at one forum that once you are on the assembly, decisions about studies and employees aren't so simple, because assembly members, the staff, the mayor, and the borough attorney all know more about so many things than "the general public" does. She was ignored by the rest of us who had not sat in her chair, and was even smirked at by some residents who believed that "insider information" was part of the problem with government. Later, much later, I recalled her words and understood what I believe she meant by them. Campaigning and governing are not the same at all. It's easy to say what's wrong with government; it's harder to fix it, and progress can be very slow.

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THE DAY BEFORE the election, I went on a walk with my friend Margaret, who was finishing up her first year on the assembly. She brought her Lab, Buddy, and I had my golden retriever, Pearl. We met on the beach by my house, a two-mile-wide stretch of sand, meadows, and woods, with steep forested and glaciated mountains for a backdrop. A few years ago, after heated debate, the borough officially made what I think of as my backyard into the “Chilkat River Beaches Recreational Zone,” including a non-motorized designation. That means no motorbikes, four-wheelers, or snow machines. I was part of that effort and was impressed by the members of the planning commission. I liked the way their meetings were run. The chair and commissioners genuinely wanted to use zoning to plan for the benefit of all and had done that with common sense and good humor. The experience prompted me to put my name in for a vacant planning commission seat.

Margaret is the reason that when my planning commission term ended, I ran for the assembly. I had encouraged her to run the year before and promised I would follow her lead the next election. We had sort of worked together at Haines’s independent weekly newspaper, the *Chilkat Valley News*. She had a desk in the actual office above the bookstore and the chiropractor; I write obituaries from home. She covered the borough, schools, Chamber of Commerce meetings, car accidents, fishing, tourism, and hunting seasons, and all the other hard news. She’d gone on to be the news director at the radio station before resigning to work for a regional conservation organization.

“Who do you think will win?” I asked.

She predicted the incumbent, Diana. She thought the conservative deputy mayor, who was pro-mine and timber industry and

all-in for the harbor expansion, would easily take the first seat, and the second seat would be too close to call. “Don’t feel bad. You asked, and I’m just sayin’.” She conceded that *maybe* I’d squeak out a victory over Ryan Cook, the young and sometimes hot-headed fisherman who agreed with Diana’s positions and was less diplomatic about calling out the artists and environmentalists with whom he did not agree. He wanted to make Haines great again. But the winner might also be Judy Erekson, who did worry about the mine, and was not sure about the timber sales, and had concerns about the harbor, and was socially liberal, but was also the longtime school accountant, which gave her great value on the assembly as a budget explainer; or it might be Leonard Dubber, the libertarian plumber who could speak the same language as the borough maintenance men, and had an old-time Alaskan and anti-government vibe, somewhat eccentric views, but also a kindly, folksy way of speaking. I liked talking with him when he did the annual tune-up of our furnace.

Margaret was sure that Tom Morphet, the editor and owner of the *Chilkat Valley News*, would bring up the rear.

“Really?” I said. Tom had filed at the last possible minute, just before five o’clock on the final day because, he said, there were no competent candidates. Tom is blunt and can be rude. Times like that I wondered how we had managed to be friends for so long. He probably had no idea how much that comment stung. For better or worse, if elected, Tom and I would be viewed as a like-minded team, because we are old friends, and because of the paper and our shared relatively liberal politics. The top two vote-getters would win three-year terms. The seats are staggered so that the entire assembly and mayor won’t shift too drastically year-to-year, and

to provide continuity with at least two senior members, two two-year members, and two freshman members on any assembly—or at least that’s the theory.

“I don’t think we will have the results tonight; absentee ballots will decide it,” Margaret said.

“Are you sure?”

“My guess is it will probably be Diana and then you when it’s all sorted out. It may take a while is all.”

Maybe I should have campaigned harder. I had spent about a thousand dollars and thought that was too much. Half of it was for the signs, and the rest for ads in the paper. I never held a fundraiser. How could I solicit money from someone now and then disagree with them later? It doesn’t take a political scientist to explain how money influences Congress. How can it not? Mainly I talked to people informally and answered questions at a handful of the candidate forums sponsored by the Chamber of Commerce, newspaper and radio station, and the miners.

My Mud Bay Road neighbor who had advised many Alaska politicians suggested that I “never speak in absolutes.” He said that if I declared I will or won’t do this or that, I’d set myself up, and to some extent the assembly I join, for failure. Especially when campaigning, it was critical to keep an open mind and listen to concerns and ideas that I might address later as an assembly member.

When I was on the planning commission, I had opposed the multi-million-dollar harbor expansion project because I had doubts about the design, but I was the lone dissenter so the engineer’s plan was approved by the commission and then by the previous assembly. Now that same plan was going out for bids and the new assembly would have to make the final decision. (Committees

and commissions are advisory to the assembly, which has the last word since they alone have the authority to appropriate the funds.) While campaigning I backed off some. I was still against it, but partly I was trying to heed the advice of my neighbor, and partly I had decided a borough-wide advisory vote—a referendum—would be fairest. Then we'd know for sure what people wanted. If the planning commission and the old assembly and the Ports and Harbor Committee were right, and I and the other detractors were wrong, the voters would approve it and we'd move on, confident that a majority had ruled.

On this point Margaret disagreed with me. She was for moving ahead with construction without delay. She'd worked on the harbor design for the last year and thought my fears, and others', about the final price tag, the maintenance costs of the steel breakwater, and the necessity of the huge parking lot, were unfounded.

AT THE ALASKA Miners Association's candidate forum at seven o'clock on a Friday morning in the Pioneer Bar, I answered the first question about any personal connection to mines or mining we may have by divulging that my great-grandfather had been a Klondike prospector, and that my grandfather was a mining engineer who graduated from the Colorado School of Mines and worked in the coal, oil, and gas country of Western Pennsylvania. There's a photo by my desk of a great-grandmother on my mother's side seated sidesaddle on a burro at the Mexican silver mine where she taught school. Borough and burro. Was it a sign?

I told the audience that I loved songs about mining like "Sixteen Tons" (but didn't mention John Prine's "Paradise," about a Kentucky town that Mr. Peabody's coal train hauled away)

and literature inspired by mining, from stories like “The Luck of Roaring Camp” to the writings of Jack London and Robert Service, whose classics, or at least lines from them, Alaskans are familiar with. One of my favorite novels is Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose*. The book is about love and a marriage and is set in Western mining towns. The title is a metaphor, but in reading the book, I learned that practically speaking, “angle of repose” is the term for the steepest slope at which a hill of loose material, say mine tailings or gravel, is stable. When the phrase was mentioned in a planning commission review of a gravel pit, I knew what it was, thanks to that novel. I was so eager to please, that I may have even told the miners that they could borrow my copy of the book, if they wanted to read it. Some of them work in mining camps near Juneau; others are part of the Constantine Metal Resources crew exploring that potential mine in Haines.

“You probably shouldn’t mention literature next time,” my campaign manager, Teresa, said as we debriefed over a glass of prosecco in my kitchen.

“That’s the least of our worries,” I said, and told her what happened when the moderator asked if I supported a so-called Tier 3 clean water designation, the highest protection possible for the Chilkat River, which is right below the Constantine mine site. When the moderator said, “Yes or no, one word,” Diana said no, Leonard said no, Ryan said no, Judy said she wasn’t sure but when pressed said no reluctantly.

“Heather?”

“Yes.”

“You said yes?” Teresa asked. “To the miners?”

“Yes.”

“Well. Good for you,” she said.

Never mind that another old and dear friend, road-building contractor Roger Schnabel, my daughter JJ’s godfather, put his head in hands and said, “Oh, no, Heather, and I was going to vote for you.”

Tom said, “Yes,” and loudly, too.

Was this why Margaret thought we might be doomed?