



David
Vann



Legend
OF A

SUICIDE

'So hard to put down that I am
thinking of suing David Vann
for several hours of lost sleep'
Lionel Shriver

Legend of a Suicide
by
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Ichthyology

My mother gave birth on Adak Island, a small hunk of rock and snow far out on the Aleutian chain, at the edge of the Bering Sea. My father was serving two years as a dentist in the Navy; he had wanted Alaska because he liked hunting and fishing, but he obviously had not known about Adak at the time of his request. Had my mother known, she would have scratched out the request herself. Given enough information, my mother has never made the wrong choice.

So it was that she refused to have her sweltering, jaundiced baby yanked out of Adak's underground naval hospital and thrown into the jet that sat waiting on the runway for more than six hours. Because my temperature was 105 degrees and still climbing, the doctors and my father recommended I be flown to the mainland, to a real hospital (no one on Adak survived even a mild heart attack while we were there—no one), but my mother refused. She was certain, with what my father always described as an animal, instinctive fear, that the moment I was borne aloft, I would perish. She placed me in an ordinary white bathtub filled with cold water, and there I survived. Flourished, even. My orange, blotchy skin gradually calmed to a healthy baby pink, my limbs unlocked, and I flailed my legs in the waters until she lifted me out and we both slept.

When my father had finished his sentence with the Navy, we moved to Ketchikan, an island in southeastern Alaska, where he bought a dental practice and, three years later, a

fishing boat. The boat was a new twenty-three-foot Uniflite fiberglass cabin cruiser. Still wearing his dental smock beneath his jacket, he launched the boat late on a Friday afternoon as we cheered from shore. He slipped it into its stall in the docks, and the next morning he stood on the edge of those docks looking down thirty feet through clear, icy Alaskan water to where the *Snow Goose* sat like a white mirage on the rounded gray stones. My father had named it the *Snow Goose* because he had been filled with dreams of its white hull flying over the waves, but he had forgotten to put in the drain plugs the afternoon of the launching. Unlike my mother, he had neither eyes nor ears for matters below the surface.

That summer, as we flew back over the waves from a day of fishing (my father had had the *Snow Goose* raised and cleaned, proof that persistence sometimes can make up for a lack of vision), I would be on the open but high-sided back deck with the day's catch of halibut, flopping into the air with them each time my father sailed over one wave and smashed into the next. The halibut themselves lay flat, like gray-green dogs on the white deck of the boat, their large brown eyes looking up at me hopefully until I whacked them with a hammer. My job was to keep them from flopping out of the boat. They had terrific strength in those wide, flat bodies, and with a good splat of their tails they could send themselves two or three feet into the air, their white undersides flashing. Between us a kind of understanding developed: if they didn't flop, I didn't smash their heads with the hammer. But sometimes, when the ride was especially wild and we were all thrown again and again into the air and their blood and slime were all over me, I gave out a few extra whacks, an inclination of which I am ashamed.

And the other halibut, with their round brown eyes and long, judicious mouths, did see.

When we docked after those trips, my mother would check everything over, drain plugs included, while my father stood by. I played on my knees on the weathered boards of the dock, and once saw a terrifying creature crawl from a rusty tin can that had been knocked on its side. Repulsed by those barbarous legs, I howled and went over backward into the water. I was fished out soon enough, and thrown in a hot shower, but I didn't forget what I had seen. No one had told me about lizards—I honestly never had dreamed of reptiles—but on first sight I knew they were a step in the wrong direction.

Shortly after this, when I was nearing five years old, my father began to believe that he, too, had made steps in the wrong direction, and he set out in search of the kinds of experiences he felt he had been denied. My mother was only the second woman he had ever dated, but to this list he now added the dental hygienist who worked for him. The nights at our house were soon filled with a general keening of previously unimaginable variation and endurance.

I abandoned ship one night when my father was crying alone in the living room and my mother was breaking things in their bedroom. She didn't utter any human sounds, but I could chart her progress around their room by imagining the sources of wood snapping, glass shattering, and plaster crumbling. I slipped out into the soft, watery world of Alaskan rain-forest night, soundless except for the rain, and wandered in my pajamas down the other side of the street, peering in dark, low living room windows and listening at doors, until at one door I heard a humming sound that was unfamiliar to me.

I went around to the side of the house, opened the screen door, and pressed my ear to cold wood. The sound seemed lower now, almost a moan, barely audible.

The door was locked, but I lifted up the rubber corner of the welcome mat and, just as at our house, the key was there. So I went in.

I discovered that the buzzing sound was the air-pump filter on a fish tank. Something about wandering alone through someone else's house was awful, and I moved solemnly across the linoleum to take a seat high on a kitchen stool. I watched the orange-and-black-striped fish suck at pebbles and spit them out. The tank contained larger rocks, also: lava rocks with dark caves and crannies out of which peered many tiny round fish eyes, shiny as foil. Some had bright red-and-blue bodies, others had bright orange bodies.

I thought perhaps the fish were hungry. I went to the refrigerator and saw sweet pickles, opened the jar, and brought it back for the fish to see. I found slots on top of the tank, toward the back, and dropped the pickles in, one or two at first, then the whole jar, slice by slice, and finally poured the juice in, too, so that the tank water swelled up and ran in beads over the side.

I stared at the pickle slices floating brightly with the fish, some of them sinking and twirling. They bounced slowly over the bright pink and blue rocks below. The orange-striped fish had all flashed about the tank as I had been pouring, but they, too, now moved slowly. They leaned a little to one side as they swam, and several rested on the rocks. Others stretched their long, see-through cartilage mouths at the surface every few moments and sucked for air. Their side fins rippled as delicately as fine lace.

When the pickle slices had settled more, they rocked like

sleeping fish just above the pink and blue gravel, and the real fish rocked silently beside them, as if in gentle groves of eelgrass and sunken lily pads. The image was beautiful, and in that moment of beauty I strained forward.

I pressed my hands and face close to the glass and gazed into the mute black core of one of those silvery eyes. I felt as if I, too, were floating, gently rocking, oddly out of place, and in that flicker of a moment I caught myself feeling the rocking and, perceiving myself perceiving, realized that I was I. This distracted me; then I forgot what had distracted me, lost interest in the fish, and, after slapping my feet across the linoleum of the kitchen floor, passed again into the soft, dark rain.

Three years later, after my mother and I had moved down to California, I was given a fish tank of my own and decided to become an ichthyologist. My parents had separated, of course, startled nearly as much by what I had done as by what they themselves had been doing all along. Any connection between my vandalism and their nighttime exchanges was completely mysterious to them.

My first aquarium was only a clear plastic tray of the kind most often used to hold nuts and bolts. In it were two goldfish I had won at the county fair and some gravel my mother had bought at Sal's Fishworld on our way home.

I watched over those thin, pale goldfish, but the tray had no cover, and after our cat, Smokey, snagged them with his paw and ate them on our countertop as I watched, unable to move, my mother took me down to Sal's and bought a proper ten-gallon tank with a bubble filter, more gravel, a wide-leaved plastic plant, a piece of volcanic rock with a hole in it, a few goldfish, and even one of those orange-and-black-striped fish

I knew from Ketchikan, which I now discovered were called clown loaches.

We watched those fish every evening, cleaned their tank every weekend, and also survived the occasional ich plague: a sudden, mysterious proliferation of white spots on fins and tails that threatened to kill them all.

We buried the first of the deceased in elaborate ceremonies, during which my mother would sit beside me on her knees in the dirt and I would wear an old white bedsheet. The fish themselves were always wrapped in many layers of toilet paper, placed in small boxes, and buried six inches under, where the cat wouldn't dig them up.

Soon we just flushed the fish down the toilet and replaced them, but even then they were all I thought about. I wrote reports on them at school in lieu of book reports. My elementary school teachers never seemed to catch on, but apparently believed I had read books titled *The Clown Loach*, *The Silver Dollars*, *The Iridescent Shark*, and *The Plecostemus, or Bottom-Sucker*. Everything in human life was to be found in that tank. Yellow-and-black angelfish floated delicately by, all glamour and glitz, while behind them trailed their waste in streamers. Suckers at the bottom of the tank ate this waste, spat it out in disgust, and roved on, still hungry. And within five minutes of placing two new silver dollars in the tank, I saw real brutality. These silver dollars were large, thin fish, nearly identical in shape and shine to the coins after which they had been named, and once out of their plastic bag from Sal's, they swam up on either side of my one lazy, boggle-eyed iridescent shark. This iridescent shark had been badly misnamed; he was in actuality no more than a long, thin goldfish with a shiny body and two large, bulbous eyes. The silver dollars were slick and merciless and knew how to

work as a team. In one quick flash each went for an eye and sucked it out. They didn't even swallow, but let the round, billiard-ball eyes float dreamily down to the rocks, where they were ingested by the sucker fish.

My mother was swift in her retribution. The silver dollars were netted and flushed within minutes, and we spent that evening together watching the iridescent shark bump blindly into the sides of the tank, waiting for him to die.

As we spent these years in California leading steadily more circumscribed lives, my father ranged farther and farther up in Alaska, and everything he did seemed to lack sense. He had never enjoyed dentistry, and felt now that perhaps fishing was more what he wanted to do. In this I believe he was right, and he was certainly earnest, but he didn't think ahead very well. He sold his practice, ordered a beautiful, expensive, sixty-three-foot aluminum commercial fishing boat, to be completed before the halibut season, and persuaded my uncle to be the crew. They had fished together for sport all their lives, but neither of them had any experience on a commercial fishing boat, and they were to be the only two on board. My father's lone-explorer image of himself would have been undercut if he had worked first on another boat or had hired a captain.

He named this boat the *Osprey*. Whereas the *Snow Goose* had been a bird to fly its white wings over the waves on short one- and two-day sport-fishing jaunts, the *Osprey* was a more wide-ranging creature. With wingspans of up to six feet, ospreys are known to soar far out over the waters in vast arcs and circles, and they often soar alone.

The *Osprey* was not finished on time, so my father and my uncle entered the season a month and a half late. In their

hurry they fouled up one of the halibut lines they had set, thus jamming for more than a week the huge hydraulic wheel that pulled the fish in, and of course they caught almost nothing. The loss of above \$100,000 that year on fishing alone left my father undaunted, however, because he had already entered the last beautiful, desperate, far-ranging circlings of his life.

My uncle tells of one night on the bridge of the boat when my father, having lost for the seventeenth consecutive time at gin rummy, instead of looking glum and muttering an insincere congratulation, curved his back suddenly and spread wide his arms. Standing up on his captain's chair amid the blue-white glow of radar and sonar, he stretched out his chin, tilted what my uncle remembers to this day as a distinctly curved beak, and squawked out, "Three degrees starboard!" My uncle adjusted the automatic pilot accordingly, and in the morning they set what was to be one of only three or four successful lines that trip.

This correlation between my father's predictions and actual success was rare. The hardware store he had also invested in that year collapsed, as did the price of gold, the IRS's patience with his tax dodges in South American countries (he was angry at having to pay Social Security, which, ironically enough, supported us after his death), and his relationship with his receptionist-turned-fiancée. In short, the year was not a good one. I spent all of four days with him, in mid-January.

Each night during that vacation, as I lay in a sleeping bag on the hotel-room floor at the foot of his bed, I heard his tossings and turnings until very late and sensed, with the assurance children sometimes have, that he would not be my father for much longer. His movements came in cycles

that were closing in steadily around him. He kicked wildly at the sheets, groaning in frustration, anger, and despair, until they billowed and ruffled like an offshore wind, then sank face first, utterly resigned and collapsed, into his pillow to weep. Then he began the cycle again. I assumed all along that he thought I was no longer awake, since he had never to my knowledge let himself weep in front of anyone. But one night he spoke to me.

“I just don’t know,” he said aloud. “Roy, are you awake?”

“Yes.”

“God, I just don’t know.”

That was our last communication. I didn’t know, either, and I wanted only to shrink farther down into my sleeping bag. He had a terrific pain in his head that painkillers couldn’t reach, an airiness in his voice that was only becoming more hollow, and other mysteries of despair I didn’t want to see or hear. I knew where he was headed, as we all did, but I didn’t know why. And I didn’t want to know.

My father ranged farther and farther that next year in the *Osprey*, changing gear for albacore off Mexico, then again for king crab in the Bering Sea. He began to sport-fish off the wide, high stern, and one day caught several large salmon, which he gutted on the spot. With the return to port and sale of the failed *Osprey* imminent (after two years of severe losses he could no longer even get a loan), with the IRS closing in, and with no further flights imagined, he took his .44 Magnum handgun from the cabin and walked back to stand alone on the bright silver stern under a heavy, gray-white sky and the cries of gulls, his boots slathered with the dark blood of freshly caught salmon. He may have paused for a moment to reflect, but I doubt it. His momentum was made up only of air, without the distraction of ground. He

spattered himself amid the entrails of salmon, his remains picked at by gulls for several hours before my uncle came up from the engine room and found him.

My mother and I survived. Not having taken off to any heights, we had nowhere to fall. We drank clear bouillon soup with a few peas in it after my uncle called and told us the news, and in the evening, as the light in the sky faded to blue and then black, we sat in our living room, in the fluorescent glow of the fish tank, watching. The iridescent shark had learned to find his way around by now and bumped less frequently into the glass. The empty sockets, their rawness originally laced with thin tracks of blood, had been soothed and covered over by an opaque white film. The tiger-striped archer fish, who was half jaw, half tail, who swam always at a forty-five-degree angle to the surface of the water, and who could spit sizable water pellets, was skimming his strong lower lip along the surface, waiting, and at some point—I have no idea when, since time stands still after a death, with no sensation of passing—I rose to bring him the jar of flies. I let one into the air space between hood and water, covered the hole again with tape, and sat down beside my mother to watch this ritual of the familiar, a relic from what our lives had been, but I knew that I had lost interest. The archer fish tensed up, danced in a fluttering circle with his hooked lip at the surface the fulcrum, followed the mad flight of the fly with quiet deliberation, and spat his pellet of water with such celerity and yet so little movement that it seemed not to have happened at all, and yet there was the fly, mired in the water, sending off his million tiny ripples of panic.