

## Surfing Alaska

By Colin Berry

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It's a humid Sunday evening in August, and I'm at the front desk when Frank bursts up from the office with the news: his wife is in labor. Doesn't want to know why I haven't folded towels or swept the lobby or why, although I *am* his lovely assistant manager here at the Bronze Age Tanning Salon, I am at this moment online, surfing the Web for information about Alaska.

What Frank wants to know is: can I close tonight? Lock up, check the lights and breakers, secure the beds, set the alarm? He's standing in front of the OPEN sign, his back to the parking lot, the blue O framing his head like an angel's and making him look extraterrestrial.

So you can handle that, Tawnya? he says.

I've locked up before, and the books are light — no reservations after Mrs. Dozier, who's in in a few minutes — so I say Sure, no problem. What I don't say is: A monkey could do this job.

Jeez, I can't believe it, he says, shaking his head. I'm going to be a *father*. He goes back to the office for his keys.

For my five months of undying loyalty, Frank has two weeks ago made me assistant manager, and these are my responsibilities: greet the customers, verify their UV program, collect their cash, issue them a towel and little eye-protecting goggles, and authorize the system for the proper bed and time. When they reappear, red-faced, half-an-hour later, I offer them some candy, book their next appointment, punch their Frequent Tanner Cards (Buy Ten Tans Get One Free!), bid them goodbye. Our clients are women in their forties, gay men, strippers, waiters, flight attendants, teachers, and cab drivers.

I have no idea why cab drivers need to be tan.

Now and then it gets complicated if we have four or five people waiting for different booths, or if someone wants to substitute a standup for a bed, or a face for a non-face, or has questions about tan accelerators (which, trust me, don't work), or

gets a cracked pair of goggles. And now and then a breaker blows, or the computer freezes, or someone gets fried, or one of the beds is on the blink — literally, *blink, blink, blink*. That's as tough as it gets.

See what I mean, though? *A monkey*.

Some people seem to think that just because I work in the Bronze Age they have license to ask why I'm so pale. I feel like Alice in Wonderland: you should learn not to make personal remarks. But I've tried tanning before, and it's not for me. Besides the claustrophobia — the bed is like a cross between a waffle iron and a set of stadium lights — I could feel the UV's tingling the moment the purple bulbs came on. As I lay there in my bikini, all I could think of was how a chicken in a microwave turns pink, then brown, as it cooks from the inside out. Afterwards I felt sick for a week, skin prickly, fillings humming — long after my pathetic pink tan had faded back to white. So no thanks. I'll be here at the front desk, pale and unpoisoned, folding towels and surfing Alaska and greeting Mrs. Dozier, who walks in just as Frank races out.

Hello, Tawnya, she says. Mrs. Dozier is a buffalo-sized scoop of coffee ice cream with a face like a Shar-pei. She's wearing a flowered dress that could double as a tablecloth. Busy this evening?

Hi, Mrs. D, I say. Nope, just the usual suspects. Full session tonight?

Yes, dear, she says. She squints at my t-shirt. Is that a radio station?

Rock band, I say. Room Twelve all right for you?

Fine, dear, anything.

I pull her up her on the computer, set and verify her time: 30 minutes at full power. You're all set, I say.

Banana, anyone?

Once in her booth, Mrs. D will slip into whatever she wears (or doesn't wear) under the lights, press her goggles into her face, and ease her huge body onto the bed. It will creak and squeak — the surface is covered with Plexiglas — and she'll slowly lower the lid enough to squeeze one arm out, push the button that starts her session. For thirty minutes, she'll lie in a half-coma, lulled by the warmth and the white noise, the fans sucking heat from the lamps and the lamps sucking pallor from her skin. The session ends when the lights shut off and she slowly comes to her senses again. Maybe it's the candy or the tan accelerators or the slow-roasting flesh, but there's always a slight, sweet smell in the air.

With Mrs. D in Room Twelve and Frank at the hospital, I can surf Alaska without interruption. I find mostly cruise and travel sites, facts and figures. The Alaskan state flower? The forget-me-not, with its ring of light-blue blossoms. State bird? The willow ptarmigan, a pheasant who changes her feathers from brown to white with the coming of winter.

The night continues. People come and go, a new face here, a walk-in there, a little surfing, a little customer service. In all it's not too dull. I put away the candy, stack the newspapers in the waiting area. Mostly, though, I think of Alaska, of long highways and narrow roads framed by craggy peaks, of snow so bright it blinds you. I think about crystalline rivers and rolling horizons of forested trees.

Thanks, Mrs. D. Great to see you again!

Outside, the sun is setting over the parking lot.

In Point Barrow, Alaska, between May tenth and August second, the sun never sets.

May I help you?

Half an hour before we close, a Lexus pulls up and a constipated-looking Young Business Dude gets out. He's shouting into a cell phone and wearing expensive sunglasses, even though it's 9:30 at night. He hurries in and tells me he's here for a half-hour and needs to get started *immediately*.

I can smell his breath from where I'm sitting. Something about him is familiar.

What's your name? I say, and I must be looking at the screen when he takes off his glasses, because when I glance up, I'm staring into the coldest, most arrogant pair of light blue eyes I've ever seen — seen *before*, as it happens.

Oh my God, I think, to myself, it's David McNitt.

David McNitt, he says.

Maybe our database doesn't save UV profiles of creeps, but I can't find him on the computer right away. My hands are shaking; I feel like I might throw up. As I try different spellings he grows more impatient.

Look, can I just get started? he says. I've had a busy day and I don't have time to wait around just because your network is slow. He's waited maybe fifteen seconds.

Finally I find his name — turns out Frank inputted it last week — and authorize him for thirty minutes in one of the lie-down beds.

You're all set, I say, handing him a towel and avoiding his eyes. Room Six, end of the hall.

He goes. David McNitt evidently has no memory of me at all.

Which is ironic, because I remember him as if it happened yesterday. About seven years ago, I went to a party with my friend Carrie, a typical Marina-district bash in a flat off Chestnut, a second floor full of beautiful people drinking, smoking, and shouting at each other. Depeche Mode on the radio, halogen lights, tanned blondes in Hillary haircuts. We met Carrie's boyfriend, Richard, and with him was David McNitt, a friend from Stanford. He was younger then, just starting his MBA and already full of himself. Even then I didn't like him, but I remembered his eyes: cold and icy blue, like a sled dog's, like he could see right through me.

The four of us drank a few beers, and headed to Richard's place in Pacific Heights. I remember doing coke off a glass table, some liqueur with gold flakes in it. Then Richard and Carrie disappeared.

— at the front desk, the phone rings: Frank. It's a girl! he shouts, A gorgeous baby girl! Just popped out like a cork. We're calling her Neva Sylvia: snow in the forest. Everything okay? See you Tuesday! And hangs up —

I remember we argued about *Pulp Fiction*; I remember thinking he was decent-looking, but what a jerk! Then I must have passed out, and when I woke up, David McNitt was on top of me. I remember his shirt and pants, the fine hair on his arms. I remember him yanking my underwear down, tearing my shirt. I remember him holding me down on the couch, pushing me to the floor when I fought back, his knee, my thigh, the cold wood on my back.

I remember it all. His fingers on my face. His horrible breath. His glittering ice-blue eyes.

Later, Carrie was shaking me, saying Let's go, Tawny, we need to *go*. At the time, I said nothing. I never turned him in. Physically, I was lucky, in a way, I guess: I wasn't pregnant, no diseases, only a bruised hip and some scratches that healed in a few weeks. Smarter next time, I told myself. Carrie never asked about it, and eventually we lost track of each other anyway.

But I've never forgotten David McNitt, and seeing him now makes me wonder about all that.

No one else has come in, so at 9:40 I click the OPEN sign off. Closing the Bronze Age is really just a simple check-list: bundle the towels, refill the cooler, strap down the lids on the beds so static electricity doesn't start a fire. I do as much as I can while my old drinking buddy tans in Room Six, and at twelve minutes to close I'm caught up.

I have to pee, so I flick the lock the front door and dart back to the bathroom. As I'm sitting there, my eye falls on my upper thigh where, since I was a girl, I've had this pattern of moles that forms a small circle. The Pleiades, my mom used to call them, the Seven Sisters. And as I'm looking at them, the Pleiades make me recall something I'd forgotten, something David McNitt said to me that night, pulling a quarter from his pocket and pressing it inside the little circle.

Insert a quarter, he'd said, buckling his belt. One play for a quarter. Is that how much you're worth?

The Pleiades whirl, swirl, pull me down the rabbit-hole. I can feel the blood moving through my veins and capillaries. Everything has wide space around it. My head feels cool and clear.

In Room Six, David McNitt has ten minutes left.

They go like this: in four minutes, I close out the register, carry the cash back to the office. In three, I run the trash to the Dumpster. At two minutes before 10, I

put on goggles and slip silently into the room where he lies, in goggles himself, dozing under the purple lights in a creepy red Speedo. His shirt and pants lie draped over the chair. The bed's heavy cover presses down on him like a coffin lid. I don't worry about him hearing me: the fans are loud, and the radio is on. He makes no move as I approach. Quickly, I attach one end of a thick rubber bungee to the top of the bed, then pull it firmly down and clip it to the metal bar at the bottom. I do this with four more cords. They strain slightly under the extra width.

When the lights shut off, he lies there for a minute. The fans whir a few more seconds and stop. Then he tries to move.

What the *fuck*, he mutters, struggling.

I take off my goggles and kill the radio. It's quiet in the room.

Time to talk, I say.

He freezes. What! Who *are* you? What the he—

I'm the Angel of Death, I say, I'm the Devil's Daughter. Here's what you're going to do for me.

I lay it out slowly, remind him of the details of our first meeting, invent a few new ones — like his baby girl, who's turning seven this year. I take my time. I mess with him, do my best to erase any doubt he has about what I know and what might happen to him. He is very attentive. Tonight is Sunday, I explain; the Bronze Age is closed until Tuesday morning. He has two choices: see things my way or spend the next thirty-three hours becoming the best-tanned Young Business Dude in the country.

He doesn't answer right away.

You'll never fucking prove this, he says, finally.

You're in no position to gamble on that, I say.

He is quiet again.

Okay, he says. Okay. But I have a question.

What's that?

And for the first time, his voice is softer, almost humble. What did you name her? he says. You said it was a girl, right? What's her name?

And then, don't ask me how, but I can picture it: the long, awkward nights with his yuppie wife in some loft in SoMa, their rumpled bedroom, her legs in the air, the manuals and charts and fertility pills covering the bedside table.

I can't tell you that, I say, but I'll tell you this: she has your eyes — and her favorite book is *Alice in Wonderland*.

He doesn't say anything after that, and before I leave him, I take one more look back. He can't move, and he's pink enough, I guess. I slip his keys and wallet out of his pants and close the door behind me. When the rest of the beds are secured, I shut off the lights, set the alarm, and lock the door. Outside, only a few cars are left in the parking lot. I pick one.

The Aleuts, who with the Eskimos have hunted and fished its forests and rivers for a thousand generations, call it *Al-A-Es-Ka*, the Great Land. It's a hostile place, but it's home for them. They have learned to walk on top of snow, see through ice, turn elk skins into clothes and blankets, whale fat into heat. They are magicians, shamans, survivors. They have stories to tell. To get there, they have come a long way — on foot, on sleds, on the backs of beasts.

David McNitt's Lexus suits me just fine. Gassing up north of Santa Rosa, I buy a card for little Neva Sylvia that I fill with his cash, and a map that tells me I have 3,000 miles before I reach Anchorage. I pretty much know the way, but it's good to have a back-up. I figure if I drive straight through, I can get there in two days, before the first snows of late summer, before the forget-me-nots fade, before the ptarmigan's feathers change from brown to white.