American Piehole Rick Bass

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The glaciers were melting—hell, that wasn't the word for it, any fool could see they were crashing—and it was quick high summer in Wrangell, the lawn mowers were buzzing, and boat shops were welding, sawing, sanding—a steady howling at all hours of the day, with the scent of paint and lacquer mixing with the fragrance of cold brine and waves, and the cries of gulls laughing and mewing—and people throughout town were hammering and sawing, nailing back together the porch roofs and garages that had collapsed under the previous season's snows.

You could take boat rides up the Stikine to witness the carnage—as if in a seemingly harmless war, Luftwaffe fighters strafing the homeland—carpetbombing the glaciers, with one chunk after another blasting off, releasing, tumbling over the cliffs from their millennia-old strongholds, disgorging waterfalls of clattering boulders into the ocean below. It was a sound like a thousand rumbling gutterballs—

sometimes a mastodon would tumble past in the frigid, glistening slurry, the perfectly-preserved giant charging out into the air like the sudden prize from a jackpot, re-released into the brief future as if given one more chance—and the cruise ships in the Inside Passage docked in Wrangell for a day or two, the noisiest town in Alaska in the summer, and spent a couple of days glorying in the devastation, paying extra money to Zodiac up the Stikine to look for such miracles, or to journey farther, up the little Anan, where eagles and bears gathered around a six-foot gap in the creek, a slot beneath a waterfall, to dine on the hundreds of thousands of pink salmon that sought, as relentless as electricity, relentless as love, to time the rising tide, to each attempt to batter and hurl and leap its way up and over those falls—to go to the end of the line, to each carry its procreative spirit as deep into the womb of the old cedar forest as was physically possible, and then, maybe, a little farther. The carcasses of spent salmon-flesh blossoming with nutrients that would sustain not just the nation of bears but the forest in which they lived, and in which they prospered.

Wrangell was my first job as a journalist and my editor, Benny Haupter, said sometimes I over-wrote and that I would need to spend time in town before I could go out and write about the larger world around us. I supposed he might be right. I was only there for a year-long internship, and still had ten months to go. I'd grown up in Taylor, Mississippi, gone to school in Charlottesville, which was then somewhat in the news, even in Alaska.

My first writing assignment in Alaska had been the weekly Friday night bowling tournament at the Elks Club, where children could buy a root beer float for three dollars—I would not have believed one could find anything in Alaska that cost as little as three dollars—one adult root beer could be had for seven dollars. Benny was in there, trying to bowl, but had had a few of the Atomic Fireballs, and it wasn't working out too well. Later, there would be a karaoke; I hoped to be gone before that.
I was living in an upstairs apartment north of the cannery and didn't own a car—a reporter without a car!—and either walked or kayaked. I could pretty much get everywhere I needed to that way, though the tides of the Inside Passage were a bitch, with twenty-five foot daily variances, and I soon learned to read the tables. Every night I walked home from the newsroom, fixed my dinner of chips with a little cheese melted in the microwave, had two glasses of wine, read, fell asleep with the shades drawn to shut out the light, and slept eight hard hours, lulled by the routine of my life and the knowledge that each day I was doing the best I could.

Lisa Murkowski had just voted her conscience that summer, had refused to stop health care for the 30 million poorest among us, many of whom lived in her state, and was rumored to be coming to town later in September, nearer the end of the fishing season. I didn't have a chance in hell of getting that gig, though I wanted it. There were some things I wanted to ask her. She had done some good but there was more on tap, undone. Also, North Korea could reach us on any old Saturday, and I wanted to know if there would be any kind of warning, or if it would just be a bunch of heat and light. All those fish, suddenly cooked. I guessed it would be the end of the glaciers, too. I didn't think there was anything she could do about any of this, but I did want to hear from her: Yes, we have a plan in place, there will be a warning.

My most interesting article yet was coming up. All year, the women of Wrangell psyched themselves up for this contest: the archetype of domestic tranquility, the reassurance of stability, emblem of hearth and home, etc. (No men had ever entered). If I had not been reporting on it, I think I would have entered. I would have used my grandmother Robson's rhubarb recipe, and I like to think I would have had a slugger's chance at winning, which might have helped me to integrate into the tiny and often bitter community a little more easily. Living so isolated—not just on any island, but an island near the top of the world—they talked to me plenty, had plenty to say—wagging their fingers at me, telling me

what I ought to be writing about, and how they had answers about how to fix almost anything that was going on "out there"—but I can't really say I'd made many friends.

In addition to covering the pie contest for the paper, I had been asked to serve as a judge, along with two other men. That I was slight, even wiry, was viewed, I could tell, with some suspicion, but the fact that I was not from here was seen as an asset. I had traveled, had seen the pies of other lands, they must have assumed—and, better yet, I would be leaving soon, so could be used as a scapegoat for the resentment that was sure to plague the losers and runners-up for the next eleven-plus months. ("We were a hung jury, Mabel," the other judges could say, "but that sorry outlander, that swing-voter, picked Isabel's cobbler over your chocolate chess.")

I didn't think Benny was going to make it. I don't mean the pie contest, but life in general. He was florid, overweight, deeply forgetful, confused, rambling, blotched, shambling, etc.—a spent salmon in the turbulence of the river that was life in Alaska. He was in a wobble when I met him and retained only enough authority to pretend to be running a newsroom, in which, already, by midsummer, I was the sole remaining employee; everyone else had been fired, or quit. How could he have the authority to lead such a business when, he did not, could not, even have authority over himself?

To be certain, Benny was not there for the pies, nor was there anywhere near the turnout I'd expected, not among spectators and certainly not from pie-bakers. It was held in the beautiful new cultural center (hooray, federal grants; hooray, Lisa) during the first Saturday market of the summer, which was a wan thing indeed—no outdoor vendors, due to an intermittent mist. Where was the burly Alaska I'd imagined? People seemed more interested in buying things than making things.

Despite its being the first market of the year, noted long ago on the calendar, it seemed to have caught them all by surprise. What few vendors there were sold chalky, crumbling stale peanut butter cookies for a dollar, or painted stones. You can imagine that many of those stones had on them renditions of eagles and bears. Others, though not too many—clearly more desperate than the rest—had American flags. There was some macramé shit, and that was about it. But people were jammed in there anyway, and they were buying.

The pies were to be dropped off between the hours of eleven and twelve, with judging occurring at high noon. Though I did not intend to gorge, I'd skipped dinner the night before to help make myself ready, and of course had passed on breakfast.

The two other judges surprised me, in that I knew neither of them. The market's organizer, an old Tlingit woman, Joan, who was married to a white man, was savvy; we were all outriders. Bill was a seventy-year old walrus of a specimen, wearing a VFW hat, though not a vet, with that excruciating quality of speaking overly loud and thinking that people hung on his every word of deepest erudition. It was not difficult to imagine the little woman who abetted such behavior—upon whom he had practiced, all these long years—and Bill shared with us that he was just back from Arizona, where he and "the missus"—indeed, his words—had wintered for each of the last forty years.

As garrulous as Bill was, the other judge was reticent. The committee had picked the second judge up while he was hitchhiking. He said his name was Jeremiah, though even in the way he stated this simplest of facts it seemed he might be hiding something, or even flat-out lying. He said he was with the B'nai B'rith community in Haines—that part, I believed—and Bill laughed and asked if he had come down here to try to convert us. I confess to feeling a small bit of relief; we had found our heavy.

At twelve o'clock straight up—maybe a minute past, on some official iridium Air Force doomsday hot-button nuclear warhead clock somewhere—a red-haired buxom woman, somewhere in her forties, I'd guess, came rushing in with a cardboard box of her sticky buns. She was wearing a t-shit so tight and low-cut that her breasts were in danger of spilling down into her box of buns, and as she remained bent in front of us, showing the box to us, arranging and rearranging each bun and telling us how good they were, I came to understand this was her intent.

There was something weird going on—I mean beyond her display—that I did not understand, nor did any of the other judges. I for one would have been willing to sample one of the famed sticky buns. I heard someone grouse about how she should not be allowed in, that a bun was not a pie, and Joan took her by the arm and led her, with the woman carrying her box of buns away, into a corner, appeared to give her a good talking-to, and we did not see her or her baked goods again. They said later she appeared every year, and believed the rules did not apply to her, claiming there were "loopholes" that we did not understand.

Not to jump the lede, but when the judging began, I was pure. It seemed important to me not to tamper or seek to sway the results: to keep my impressions secret and hidden. To remain quiet, as if but a bystander, rather than a judge.

Whereas Bill plowed through his pies like a linebacker, smacking his lips and providing a commentary—as if he watched television intravenously, reality shows of all stripes, so that he had come to view his life as one, and could abide no silence—and where Jeremiah, too, was a speed demon with his pie—I, on the other hand, already a dainty picker, found myself eating even more slowly than I would have thought possible, in an attempt to at least neutralize the indignity of their gluttony.

Crumbs spilled from both men's mouths; had we been seated outside, sparrows would have swarmed around their ankles, seagulls would have squawked overhead, and even ravens, with their majestic heavy beaks, maybe even a thunderbird itself, the bald eagle, proud symbol of our many wars, investigating, would have perched on one of the totem poles outside the community center. There were so many crumbs.

I am eager to describe the pies, but feel it's important to detail the complicated system by which the votes were counted. On a photocopied scrap of paper, we were to rank four categories between one and five. The B'nai B'rith Man was delighted that no one, including the organizer, knew whether a "one" was a low score or a high score—i.e., worst, or best. I made an executive decision and declaimed that one was low and five was high. It took some repetition and firmness on my part to establish this point.

Further complicating the fact was an annoying dyslogia in the electoral process. "Crust" was only ten percent while "Taste" was thirty percent, yet "Filling" was 20%, while "Appearance" was a freaking thirty percent. How were *Filling* and *Taste* to be differentiated?

Did we come here to eat pie, I wanted to thunder, *or to* look *at them*? But I kept my bombast to myself. In times like these, dignity is undervalued.

First Currant Crop of the Year—seriously? Currants? Nearly as vile as serviceberries, this seemed to be nothing but a statement of cornpone Alaskan self-sufficiency—I can make a pie out of anything!—and I struck it down with savagely low scores to dilute any enthusiasm for the homespun on the part of any of the other judges.

One pie caught my hopes like a kite. Blueberry Lemon Meringue: finally, a pie for our times. And visually, it was so appealing. Dewy amber drops of corn syrup puddled, glowed, sparkled, winked, atop and amidst the white-capped furls of egg whites lovingly thrashed. But my hopes were dashed immediately: canned lemon filling, so solidified and de-natured as to be an affront to the natural laws of God and man. I glanced over at Jeremiah, if that was his name—suddenly I disbelieved him with an intensity; with his calm but guarded demeanor, he so seemed like those broken men and women who come to Alaska and move into the forest and then begin calling themselves Summer and Fawn and Meadow and so forth—and I saw that he was having a similar reaction.

Where was the *love*? How hard would it have been, really, to chill the damned butter before making the dough? Where was the craftsmanship, the integrity, of yore? Even plain old pig lard, or chilled *Crisco*, for God's sake, would have flaked these things right up and made my life just a little easier, a little more bearable. I thought of all the technology we exported, all the great good—drilling boreholes for community water wells in Africa, and selling drought-resistant genetically modified seeds to Somalia, Burundi, Ethiopia—and I had the perhaps self-serving and uncharitable thought then, if we can do all that, can we not teach Alaskans how to bake pie crusts?

Joan came by at one point and smiled, viewing Jeremiah's and Bill's blue-stained maws and empty paper plates, save for the hideous lemon meringue, and said, "You guys are gettin' full, huh?" They looked away, nodded guiltily (my own little plates were still heaped high with all that was untouchable) and she asked, nervously, "Any good ones yet?"

Oh, I could have won this contest. I could have come into the little town like a pool shark, with my cold unsalted Irish butter and my fresh-grated organic lemon zest, my Dean & Delucca tin of duck fat; could have won that apron with the smiling pinnipeds and lumbering ursids and soaring eagles on it. Even a teaspoon of homemade vanilla bean extract would have carried any of these losers over the top.

As one bad pie after another was brought before us—clearly, this was not what any of us had been anticipating—Bill began to grow a little surly. He looked over to where I was making notes in my steno pad and said, "What's that, a diary?" — implying, I knew, a certain un-American feyness. This from the man who drove his big-ass RV to Arizona before the first snowflake fell each year. Anal Companion, Anal Bullet, Anal Scamp, Anal Explorer.

I want to say a little more about the entrants. Hand-Sized Blueberry Pies—bleh: dry cupcakes, really, mule-food, cheap-ass molasses instead of sugar, and moribund with, yet again, canned filling. Dough like oil-soaked cardboard.

You know how it is when you first begin to sense you are lost, but haven't yet admitted to your consciousness that you are—at which point, of course, panic can come surging in?

Joan kept watching over my shoulder. "Please, eat," she said. "Please, pick one. There are so many more. Please," she said, "keep eating."

But all I wanted to do was go home. It was raining outside. And there was still so much pie to stomach. It all looked okay on the outside, but tasted like shit. And it just kept coming. And for some reason I don't understand, we all just kept our heads down, and kept on eating, taking everything they brought to us, and becoming quieter and quieter.

Rick Bass is the author of 31 books of fiction and nonfiction, including, most recently, FOR A LITTLE WHILE: NEW & SELECTED STORIES. He lives in northwest Montana's Yaak Valley, where he is a board member of the Yaak Valley Forest Council (www.yaakvalley.org). In June, Little, Brown will publish TRAVELING FEAST, which chronicles a series of meals Bass prepared for his literary mentors.