

NORTH RIVER ROUX

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Flour. Powdered milk. Butter. A couple cloves of garlic. A hunk of cheese. Pasta shells. After nearly a month of backpacking and rafting in Gates of the Arctic National Park, north of the Arctic Circle in Alaska, that's all my Outward Bound group has left to eat on the last night of the trip. And no one seems to have any idea what to do with it.

We're camped on a sandy bank on the North Fork of the Koyukuk River, our destination after hiking for two weeks from Chimney Lake, where we had been flown in by float-plane, and after another two weeks of rafting the very slow, very low river, which has meant much paddling and less floating and thus very sore biceps and split, bloody fingers.

The jagged, snow-capped peaks of the Brooks Range hug the northwoods forest, already turning to fall colors in late August, and they encircle this river valley, where unseen moose, wolves, grizzly bears, and other large, teeth-bearing mammals sniff us out from afar. Our two-man tents are set up a few feet from one another, near our kitchen mid, halfway between the river and the unexplored boreal forest behind us. It is quite possible that we are the only humans within the 8.4-million acre park.

We've carried seventy pounds on our backs and hiked through trailless tussocks and quarrelsome alders, traversing scree fields thousands of feet high and descending valleys carved by glaciers. We've slept in tents every night, though it never gets dark in the twenty-four-hour summer sun. We've used the shape and movement of the clouds as our weather channel, and we've showered simply by splashing a pot of river water over choice body parts while whistling or singing to ourselves to ward off grizzly bears. And we've cooked our own meals twice a day.

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We have, in fact, been living quite large: eggs and hash browns or pancakes with maple syrup for breakfast; for dinner, posole pie baked in a Dutch oven over a campfire, bean thread noodles in Thai peanut sauce, pesto with pasta, and even homemade pizza on our tiny backpacking stove.

But by the last night, we are left with the dregs. My fellow students are three nineteen-year-olds who haven't yet been weaned from mom's kitchen favorites or college dining hall slop. Two of them are on cooking duty this evening.

I'm twenty-five, and after four years of office work in a sterile high-rise where my greatest physical challenge is walking to the water cooler, and after nearly five years with my rugged, adventure-minded woodsman boyfriend Neil, I want to expand my comfort zone, wash off the city-girl patina, and get dirty. I decide to embrace the notion that everything is sweetened by risk, and that the road less traveled can make all the difference. I've come to Alaska to overcome my quarter-century crisis, and to suck the marrow out of life.

I'm wearing chest-high waders, with a light fleece jacket, admiring the river-tumbled stones, veined with white quartz intrusions along the shoreline while the chefs rummage through the white, plastic food-storage barrels looking for something useful. A chorus of "There's nothing here!" and "We're going to starve!" drowns out the lulling trickle of the river. The Outward Bound instructors, closer to my age, drinking coffee while relaxing in their backpacking chairs, throw up their hands and tell the students they're on their own. So I volunteer.



A year earlier, in Virginia, hovering over the stove in our Sears bungalow in muddy Carharts and a plaid flannel shirt, Neil whisked together a couple tablespoons of melted butter and flour in a small saucepan, his calloused hands moving gracefully, while I watched. He was showing me how to make a roux.

Neil had already taught me how to "fold" egg whites into waffle batter, how to "cut together" cold butter and oats for apple crisp topping, and how to mince vegetables efficiently with a large kitchen knife. It is Neil who reminded me how many cups make a quart or how you know when whipped cream peaks are stiff enough to stop beating. When the yellow split peas still hadn't softened enough for *dal* after forty-five minutes on the stove, he taught me to cover the pot to pressure the hot water through the legumes. For these questions, I've never called my stepmother, grandmother, or mom.

Neil has also been a recipe inventor, the one who has dreamed up and tested out his own tomatilla salsa, baked mac and cheese with horseradish, and New Mexico-style black beans. For special dinners, he'd grind his own spices with a mortar and pestle to make *garam masala* for Indian dishes or *berbere* for Ethiopian.

His talent in the kitchen is an extension of his try-anything spirit and a naturalist's curiosity, the same personality that has taken him winter backpacking in the Adirondacks, where he's camped in sub-zero temperatures, and bird watching in Big Bend National Park, where he searched patiently in the blazing heat for the rare Colima Warbler.

I give my mother much credit, however; she was an excellent recipe-follower who encouraged my gourmet palate throughout my childhood. After coming home from her full-time work at five-thirty, she'd take a ten-minute nap, and then fix a home-cooked meal for the two of us, using ready ingredients: beef skillet fiesta with canned corn, stewed tomatoes, minute rice, and strips of Steak-Ums; chicken with forty cloves of garlic; chicken with Coca-Cola; or fettuccine with a spinach cream sauce made in a blender — whatever recipes the *Philadelphia Inquirer* printed that week.

Anyone who can read can cook, she demonstrated. Cooking was orderly and safe, like our lives, in our fourth-floor city apartment where I learned to follow directions and not take too many chances. And it was this basic knowledge, plus a couple of Moosewood cookbooks, that got me through senior year of college, when I lived in a house with four roommates who liked to throw dinner parties, and my first several years as a post-graduation, professional adult. I made one-pot meals from recipes with short ingredient lists and not too much fuss.

But thank God for Neil, for I never found myself more on my own than that final evening in the Alaska bush, with no recipe in sight and dinner suddenly depending solely on me.



We've just spent a month surviving in a wilderness few humans will ever explore, learning rope knots, wilderness first aid, route-finding in a trailless terrain, and how to navigate with a map and compass, but dinner is so obvious to me and so hopeless to my fellow group members that I wonder how the three of them will ever make it in the real world.

I direct group member Rob, who had never eaten anything other than his mother's steak-and-potatoes southern cooking before this trip, to boil the pasta and set the pot aside on a flat rock. I busy Josh, a

quiet, dreadlocked kid who actually probably has helped his mother in the kitchen, with chopping garlic, with his large, nimble hands. And I assign Jenn, an easygoing but inexperienced college freshman, to be the ingredient-gatherer. Then the four of us, with our scabbed and scraped arms and legs, our unwashed, greasy hair and pungent bodies, crouch around a saucepan as I tell the group to sauté the garlic in butter, tempering the hard-to-adjust controls to prevent it from burning, and then add flour, whisking, until the mixture is slightly browned and crumbly. We stir in the powdered-milk-and-river-water mixture (slightly orange, from the iodine tablets we must use to kill giardia parasites). And as we stir this lumpy, soupy mess—stomachs growling, minds wondering about Plan B—I try to channel Neil's previous encouragement: "It will thicken," he had promised that night in the kitchen. "Just wait."

And it does—a thick-as-the-mud-we-saw-grizzly-bear-tracks-in, white pasty base. Then we slice up our rectangle of hard, yellow, nameless cheese, and stir it in. And when it's as smooth as fondue, we mix the shells and sauce together so that each shell is filled and coated, as any fine restaurant would do, and we serve what was raw and incongruent and impossible into each of our bleach-scrubbed plastic bowls.

And then, on logs, with our sporks, swaddled in the still silence of Alaska, we sit at the edge of everything we once knew about ourselves and everything that has changed, thousands of miles away from home, somewhere in the northernmost mountain range in the world, and we eat.