

I remember when I was younger hearing the phrase that “your two greatest enemies are hope and fear”. And this hit me strangely, because fear sure, I get that one, but hope? Why would hope be one of the greatest enemies?

It is hope that I am full of as I fly down the snaking backroads of Southeast Alaska’s Prince of Wales Island. Driving me is Jim, a Native American from the island. He’s either Tlinget or Haida, I’m not sure which, and haven’t had the courage to ask. There’s a silence that’s washing over us as he drives, braking around corners and hitting the gas when we get a straightaway. But it’s not an uncomfortable silence, neither of us feels any need to fill it with conversation, and I don’t feel any pressure to talk, which I normally feel while riding in a car for a while with another person. It hangs over us rather than between us, like a comfortable curtain or a blanket.

Jim works for the logging company that we’ve come to interview for our documentary. It’s sort of unclear exactly what his role is – perhaps “duties as assigned”, perhaps he’s a liason between the loggers and the island. When we first met him, he was so quiet at the dinner table that we would have to lean in to hear what he said. But he was quick to smile, his eyes shone, and he liked to laugh. We felt an affection for him immediately.

When the logging company PR guy took us on a PR walk through one of their forests – to show us that they “were planting even as they were logging” – it was Jim who shouldered a rifle, ready to fire warning shots to scare off bears. He told us he’d never had to shoot a bear directly, though he had fired a bunch of warning shots.

The following morning when we were all sitting for breakfast, Jim didn’t hesitate to sit with us. While the other tables held various dignitaries, guitar company CEO’s and logging company officials, we had a table of producers, camera crew, and Jim. When the check came, I paid for Jim’s breakfast without hesitation. He didn’t thank us out loud, but somehow it didn’t matter.

He told us that later he had to go do his shift as an EMT, responding to injured hunters or lost tourists on the island. Prince of Wales island is small, with only three roads, no traffic lights and a handful of towns. Lots of forest for logging, and a bunch of Native American communities who were loggers, totem pole carvers, fishermen.

While we race towards our destination in the pickup, Jim is dressed head to toe in his EMT uniform. It’s a blue jumpsuit, with about a million pockets to hold scissors, little flashlights, phones, bandages, tools. He’s also wearing his trademark “Alaska” baseball cap, and his large ears hang below it like a Buddhist statue.

A few hours earlier, the crew and I had stopped by the side of the road to film a sign. The film was about logging taking place in the Tongass National Forest, and we wanted to film the roadside sign that indicated we were enterin the Tongass. I pulled over our Jeep Cherokee. We thought it would be a quick shot – we had other shoots to do and were running out of time – but the cameraman wanted to do it properly on the tripod. I jumped out of the car, ran to the trunk, opened it, took out a backpack that was blocking the tripod, leaned it on the

ground next to the back tire, and got out the tripod. I was hurrying, sort of joking, pretending to be a guy who carried stuff for a living. It was pretty funny.

The cameraman got the shot, I ran back, replaced the tripod, ran to the front again, and we were off. We had to hurry. We were hoping to grab a last interview with Clarence, one of the Native Tlinget board members of the logging company, and we still had to do some last minute arranging. We caught up with Clarence and he suggested we drive to a totem pole park to shoot the interview. We got to the park, jumped out and quickly realized that it was way too windy to do an interview there. Clarence suggested a totem pole carving shed, so we followed him there. It was perfect.

We did a quick walkaround, found a great location and began to set up the shot. I opened the back of the Jeep, the cameraman began to get out his gear. After a moment, he looked me in the eyes with a look of sheer panic.

“Where’s the backpack?”

And in that moment I felt the pit of my stomach sink. I knew I had left it back on the side of the road, forgotten to put it back after clowning around with the tripod.

“Holy shit, I think I left it on the side of the road.”

“Oh shit, that’s not good. My lenses were in there, my gear, some stuff that’s irreplaceable.”

“Whoa. Lemme get back there and --”

“Go get Jim and ask him to take you there.”

This was issued as a command, but it sounded so right that all the questions I had – will Jim be willing to drive me there, does Jim have things he needs to do, since when does the cameraman get to issue commands – evaporated. I ran over to Jim who was standing next to his pickup.

“Jim, I need a favor.”

“Sure, what?”

“I think I left a bag with some really expensive equipment on the side of the road about an hour ago.”

“Let’s go.”

We jumped in the truck and Jim put the hammer down. I told him it was by the Tongass forest sign, and Jim said he knew just where that was. As an EMT on an island with 3 roads, I figured he probably knew these roads backwards and forwards. He was driving so much faster than I could have, reading each turn and dip in the mountain road. I was so glad he could drive, so glad we would get there as soon as possible, so glad we would soon know if it was there or gone.

As we drive we pass three eagles feeding on a dead deer by the side of the road. I remember seeing that deer when we drove past it coming the other way. When we approach, they take wing, flapping their distinctive flap and flying up into the trees. I’m still not used to seeing eagles like this. I wonder if this is an omen of some kind, and I want to ask Jim, but I don’t want to seem like some white guy with a clichéd view of Native Americans.

I had this weird feeling. My mind was going haywire, as if circuits had been crossed. I was keyed up, and I couldn’t stop daydreaming about coming around the corner and finding the backpack, or finding it gone. Each possibility seemed

equally real, and my brain was firing the fantasies in both directions at the same time. When I thought about finding it, I imagined how amazing it would feel, and how I would tell the story to the rest of the guys, and how I always sort of felt lucky in my life, sort of golden. Except for the parts of my life that weren't golden. In fact, there've been a handful of big dark experiences. Maybe this was one of those. If the bag was gone, shit, we'd be out what, 40 grand? How much do those lenses cost anyway? I know they're damn expensive. If we have to pay 40 grand, that'll blow the house we were hoping to buy, blow our funding for the documentary, put us way in debt. This is huge.

Jim was flying down the road. He leaned over towards me.

"I'm driving so fast because I want to get there as quick as possible. These towns have been hit hard economy-wise, and if someone found a backpack of equipment..."

I thought as much.

"Thanks Jim. I really really appreciate it."

It was strange, it made me feel odd. Earlier in the day we had been in the town of Hydaburg, and it was obviously having a tough time. A small town on the end of the island, there was a sense of tough tough times the whole time we were there. And here I am complaining that I might not be able to buy a house?! Classic rich white middle-class complaining. Oh man I got it so tough.

We're getting closer, and the suspense is actually hurting me physically. I keep seeing it, coming around the corner and there it is, coming around the corner and it's not there. What will it be. This is the feeling of hope, the feeling of fear. It seems to make things sharper, I feel like I have laser focus. We're so close, it could be any corner now. This is beginning to wear me out, it's like I'm willing my eyes to move around the corner before the car does. I've forgotten that Jim is even there.

Finally, we round the right corner. There's the Tongass sign we were filming.

No backpack.

I expect the feeling that was at the pit of my stomach to get worse, but instead, it almost goes away. Strange.

We get out of the car and look thoroughly in the ditch by the side of the road and in the shrubbery. I don't have much hope. Jim is looking intently, pausing to investigate when he finds a piece of paper, discarding it when it's nothing. He has the measured moves of an investigator, and in his blue EMT jumpsuit he looks like someone out of CSI. I notice a piece of trash in a small puddle that I noticed when we stopped to film before. Weird.

After we exhaust the possibility of the backpack being there, we get back in the truck. Even though I'm sure that's where I left it, I get Jim to drive us to the last couple of stops we filmed before the sign. These happen to be sites of clear-cutting that are up a steep, treacherous, 4-wheel-drive-only gravel road. When I was driving it I had to hold my breath. Jim takes it like it's nothing, flying up the path, answering a text that's come through on his cell phone without stopping the truck. It's breath-taking.

No backpack.

Nothing left to do but head back.

On the drive back, in the silence again, I have time to study the way I'm feeling. It's complex.

Some of it is pure relief at finally knowing one way or the other. Some of it is slightly zen attitude of "well, whatever happens happens." Some of it reminds me of other tough times I was in, this physical feeling is familiar. I start to think "well, no one got hurt." I think "nobody died." If it messes up our finances we'll work it out. These things happen. C'est la vie. Easy come, easy go.

At some point riding back in the comfortable silence with Jim, it hits me what has happened: I've moved from thinking in the future to thinking in the present. All the hope and fear I had was based on the future event of finding or not finding the backpack. Now that it's happened, I have no choice but to move forward and do whatever happens now. Or something like that. It's tough to put into words, but I can feel it in the pit of my stomach.

It feels free.