Healing in Nature

Small steps for a mom and son in Alaska

BY **MICHELLE THEALL**

RIGHT NOW, MY BOY IS ASLEEP, CURLED UP WITH HIS stuffed Lamby, the one he's had since we adopted him at two years old. His lights are on—all of them. When he wakes, he will begin the repetitive rocking, fidgeting, and sensory-seeking and avoiding behaviors that make him and us, his parents, exhausted. But this boy is no longer a boy. He's just shy of his 14th birthday, starting to shave, with an addiction to video games on Roblox, and the eye-watering smell of teenage boy hormones wafting from his room. In many respects, Connor (not his real name) is a typical teen, but early trauma rewired his brain so that his survival instincts override the executive functioning he needs to be successful with friendships and school, and inevitably leave him feeling worthless. He avoids crowds, eye contact, and noise—sports venues, concerts, plays, even renditions of happy birthday followed by applause. If asked to present in front of the class, a landslide of anxiety results in a migraine or vomiting. We have tried every camp, therapy, intervention, supplement, diet, and even medications starting from when he was in first grade—on the day he first told us he wanted to kill himself and threw a rock, breaking his teacher's window.

Over the years, we have adjusted our expectations, mourned unrealistic dreams, protested institutional norms, and gobbled up moments of love, kindness, and gentleness tossed to us like crumbs in between our son's threats of violence, self-harm, and shutting down. The easiest route for all of us, and the safest, is when he is happily watching a movie or playing a video game. We know it's not good. We try to limit screen time, but every now and then we all need a retreat from the battlefield.

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Like Connor, I was also abused as a child, and many of my responses to those years were similar to his: I pushed the world away, ready to punch its lights out, so I wouldn't be hurt again. As a damaged adult, I retreated to the mountains and found a home on 10 feral acres, where elk migrated through, and I could hike all the way from Colorado to Utah if I wanted without seeing another living soul. That haven of wilderness healed me and made me whole again in a way that nothing else could. It led me back to people, and marriage, and eventually motherhood. And yet, I still escape several times each year from the crushing defeat of domestic failures, typically to Alaska, to try to regain

that strength—to remind myself of who I am outside of those who need me.

This year, I decided that while there's no instant solution to the challenges facing our son, I would take him with me to my place of refuge, to see if it might become his, too. Three weeks in Haines. Alone. Together. Rehab for both of us.

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"Will they have wi-fi where we're going?" Connor asks, tethered to his phone, which we have all but disabled with the exception of the ability to listen to Spotify.

"Yes, but it will be slow, very slow, too slow to play games," I say. "I'm taking you to Roblox Detox," I say. I expect him to groan, but he thinks this is funny.

When we arrive in Haines, we hop a ride with the mail delivery service into town. There's no Uber here or taxis. The driver tells us that Steve, over at Kroschel's Wildlife Preserve, just got an orphaned moose calf two days ago. "It arrived on the plane from Anchorage in a modified dog crate. We've flown injured bald eagles here before, but finding a moose on board is a first," she says. Connor's eyes grow wide.

Our rental car, a dusty Subaru with a cracked windshield and tires low on air, is another reality check for Connor. "Why would they give us a dirty car?" We skip the usual "damage check"—no one cares or can tell if any of the dents are newly acquired or old. As we drive away, the oil light blinks on. I ignore it and tell Connor I have to stop for groceries to make sure I have coffee in the morning. He says, "I don't want to stop. This is stupid. Why can't you just go to Starbucks?" I explain that there is no Starbucks. "What about McDonald's?" I shake my head. He sulks in the passenger seat, but it doesn't escalate. He doesn't try to jump out of a moving car as he has in the past.

Eight miles out of town, we pull into our VRBO at Paradise Cove. Two bald eagles swoop across the saturated blue of the inlet, welcoming us to the moss-covered cottage that will be our home for the next three weeks. I take inventory of the kitchen, while Connor seeks out any working electronics in the place. From the next room, he calls out, "Mom, how do you make this thing work?" He fumbles with a cassette deck on a boom box, before turning his attention to a VHS player hooked to an ancient television hissing with static. Defeated, Connor follows me outside where I gape at the view like a bear catching a fish. Chrome-still waters reflect the mirror image of the mountain across the cove, a hanging glacier with two waterfalls cascading down its face. Rocks strewn with slick algae line the shore and a dozen white-winged scoters preen and dive for fish. I tell Connor he can explore, but he doesn't. He sits on a rock next to me—poking me in the arm repetitively. "This would be a great place for a zombie apocalypse," he says.

"Yes," I say. "I think we might be safe here."

The next morning, I collect wildflowers to put into a glass in

the house. I almost step on a bird that flushes out of the brush and she screeches at me and struggles across the rocks without taking flight. A killdeer, faking injury to lead me away from her nest. When I tell Connor about it, he goes out, on his own, to search for her. When he returns, he's beaming. He holds his iPhone out to me and shows me a nest with three blue eggs. After that, he runs back outside. He finds clams and small fish and insects, and I watch as he clambers on the rocks wielding a stick in the air, swiping it like a sword at his enemies, at the constant whirring and hum of his mind that struggles to stay still and calm.

In Haines, I take Connor to various museums, Steve Kroschel's Wildlife Preserve, and to meet author Nick Jans, who invites us to dinner at his one-room cabin. Connor finds the museums boring, but Steve and Nick—well, fascinating. Arriving at Nick's we're swarmed by mosquitos. Nick picks up moose droppings for Connor to see, and Connor grosses out—while I joke with Nick about washing his hands before slicing the bread we've brought. Inside, Nick sips PBR and serves up a hearty stew, while telling stories about the bear pelt covering one of the chairs in the 200-square-foot room.

At Steve Kroschel's, Connor fades to the edges of loud, overwhelming cruise-ship crowds. Connor, who loves animals, passes up opportunities to kiss a moose, feed the reindeer, and pet a porcupine. But he is watching Steve, the entertainer—the showman—this barefoot man who plays with a lynx, a wolf, and a wolverine named Banff. Later, Connor will put on his own show for me, telling me that when he grows up, he will be the "Crazy Crab Man" with a king crab living in his house and an aquarium where paying guests can swim—and he will teach them about starfish and whales.

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Toward the end of our stay, we take a hike to Moose Meadows, and I allow Connor to bring his phone so he can listen to music when we get to the beach. On the trek, he pretends to be a military commander charged with my safety—I am a journalist imbedded with the troops. I use moments like these to talk to him about what it means to lead on a trail: to look back and make sure your guests are still keeping up with you; to alert the hikers behind you to obstacles; to make noise to let bears know you're in the area. He listens. He does it. He's proud. When we emerge from the rainforest and wildflowers onto the beach, Connor pulls out his phone. He has cell service. He can play his game. I tell him no. We're not here to play games. He can play games at home. It seems important, vital to me that he grasp this. He postures, gets in my face, sits on the volcanic rocks, and jams in his earbuds. I tell him he's grounded. He says, "I. Don't. Care."

"Fine!" I say. I take my camera, leave the beach, and head up the trail. "I'll be back," I yell over my shoulder, knowing he won't leave—and knowing he'll be safe where he is.

I enter the forest again, dense leaves muting sound. I clap, toss out a couple "Yo, bears" as I walk. I try to drink in the peaceful quiet of the woods and disappear into it. Instead, I think: This is stupid. You're going off on your own, instead of being with your son. How awful would it be for him to find you half-eaten by a bear? He needs you. And just like that, without warning, I trip and tumble off the path and down onto my knees. I shield my camera and take the brunt of impact with my left leg. The right one wobbles, unsteady. Blood seeps through my pants, a bright crimson bloom like the flowers we passed earlier. I'm an idiot, I think, and turn to go back the way I came. A few steps in, I laugh—quietly at first and then loudly with tears rolling down my cheeks.

When I emerge from the thicket, Connor is walking toward me down the trail. "You get bored with the game?" I ask him.

"Phone ran out of juice," he says.

Man plans. God laughs. And I'm thankful for this divine intervention reminding us both what's important. We spend the next hour climbing cliffs and skipping rocks across the inlet—my son, unafraid, on top of the world, if only for a moment. Instead of taking photos of the driftwood and fireweed, I turn my lens to Connor. Among all this grandeur, my beautiful boy stands—dominating the landscape—a most impossible, miraculous gift.

That night, Connor sleeps with his bedside lamp off, in the Land of the Midnight Sun, where darkness never comes—and the fears that shadow a mother and son can disappear for a while into those undying embers of light.