

FAITH FALLS



Primrose Creek cascades into Porcupine Creek in a 100-foot drop of white, churning water. The water rages over a wall of granite before crashing into a boulder-strewn gorge where Porcupine Creek cuts a crease into the mountain's flank. We would never have discovered the falls except that deep snow on the trail kept us from reaching our original destination of Lost Lake.

Erik and Mark and I—along with my friend Jane and her son, Jake—began our backpacking trip at the Primrose Trailhead on a sunny day in June. The forest near the coastal waters of Resurrection Bay had a fairy-tale quality compared to the drier black spruce forests closer to home in Eagle River. Here, light filtered through a gossamer veil of lichen that draped over the arms of up-reaching trees. Soft, green moss clung to the thick trunks of white

spruce and hemlock. Young ferns were beginning to fan open on sunnier sections of the trail. Shoots of false hellebore pushed up through the ground like green bananas. It wouldn't be long, in the nearly round-the-clock daylight, before this plant spread its enormous leaves to the sun.

The boys walked ahead while Jane and I followed, reminiscing about other outdoor outings we'd taken together when our children were much younger. We had been friends now for eleven years and people we met often asked if we were sisters. We were both tall, fair-skinned, with shoulder-length hair. Beyond this, I wondered if our faces shared a certain amalgam of fond bewilderment, an expression peculiar to mothers with sons.

Mark, at thirteen, was tall and skinny with a mirthful grin that still revealed little-boy dimples. As the boys walked three abreast, Mark occasionally bumped into his brother just to knock him off balance. Given to forgetful daydreaming, Erik, at fifteen, took it in stride, dodged Mark when he could and occasionally stumbled over an untied bootlace. Jake, just between them in age, laughed at their antics. Jake's rosy cheeks had grown from the round softness of childhood to an angular glimmer of a young adult. The only person missing from the picture was Jane's sixteen-year-old-daughter, who had recently discovered interests outside those of her brother and his smelly friends.

Both Janes' husband and mine worked demanding schedules with long stretches spent away from home. And

the time they did have off was often dedicated to hunting or fishing. So while the kids were still toddlers, without any particular deliberation, we formed an alliance. On days off from our own jobs and school, we took the kids adventuring. In the light of Jane's sense of humor and gentle wisdom, life felt less frazzled. She had a knack for listening that helped smooth the ruffled fabric of family life. Frustrations seemed more bearable when they were shared.

So she understood, as we hiked and talked, my wistfulness about Erik's recent decision. A year earlier, Todd and I had presented Erik a leather-bound Bible with his name embossed in gold letters. Confirmation marked his passage into an adult faith, the beginning of a personal accountability to God. The Bible was a keepsake that I hoped would attend all of life's important events—his graduation, his marriage, and the birth of his children. I imagined the worn leather in my son's aging hands as he drew comfort from its words during the twilight of his life.

But just a few days before this backpacking trip, Erik had given the Bible to a youngster in the Alaska Native village of Copper Center. It was Erik's going-away gift to a sad-eyed boy, one of the many children ages three to thirteen who'd attended the Vacation Bible School put on by our church youth group. The youth group called itself F.I.S.H.—an acronym for Faith, Integrity, Service, Honor. When I arrived to drive them home at the end of the week,

weeping children hung on to Erik's arms and clung to his legs, begging him and the others not to leave. At home, Erik told me about Benjamin. And as warmed as I was by Erik's bigheartedness, I'd swallowed hard when he told me his Bible now belonged to someone else.

Jane listened quietly. As we climbed, dirty patches of snow stretched across shadowed sections of the muddy trail. Jane had little use for organized religion. Although she claimed not to believe in God or church, she did believe in kindness. She recognized Erik's generosity as an act of faith both childlike and wise.

As we talked, I discovered the distinct outline of a bear's paw on the soft trail. I kneeled to inspect the impression. The edges of the track were clear and still damp. We called to the boys and realized that although we'd agreed to hike together, they had gone on ahead, quite beyond our sight and hearing. We picked up our pace to catch them. A little farther along lay a fresh pile of bear scat. Jane and I looked at each other and kept moving. It took another half hour of uphill climbing before we reached the boys—who had shed their packs for a snowball fight. We reminded them of our agreement to stay close together.

"Fine," they said.

Within fifteen minutes they again were half a mile ahead of us.

We greeted a young couple hiking the other direction on the trail and asked if they had seen the boys. Yes, they

had passed them at the abandoned mine about halfway to the lake. Lost Lake, they said, was still frozen. Our fly-fishing rods would be of no use on this trip.

We met up with the boys at the mine, an open area that overlooked the blue waters of the Kenai Lake below. Jake and Mark used sticks to whack on the dry hollow stems of last year's cow parsnip, sending splinters of dead plants flying. Erik, wearing a crusty old hard hat he'd found half-buried in the ground, peeked out the window of a dilapidated cabin. I was reluctant to scold the boys. They were having so much fun, playing as they had when they were little. In not so many years, we would no longer be doing this together. I wanted to make a happy memory.

"What's the deal?" I asked. "I thought we agreed you wouldn't get so far ahead."

"It's not our fault that you guys are so slow," Mark said, taking another swipe at the cow parsnip. Jake and Erik nodded their agreement.

"Listen," I said. "There are bears in the area. Either we stay together or we turn around and go back."

Resentment crept across the boys' faces. Erik set his mouth in an angry line. Mark's brow furrowed into a frown. Jake rolled his eyes. And I sensed that something about this backpacking trip was different. We had left behind daily routine for the soulful embrace of the backcountry. But along with their enthusiasm, the boys had brought with them the creeping shadow of adolescent disdain.

Soft snow buried the trail beyond the mine, making the path to Lost Lake nearly impassible. Since we couldn't fly-fish, we decided to go back and camp at the waterfall the boys had discovered earlier.

Although the sound of melting snow trickled all around us, at a certain point on the trail we could hear the faint roar of white water. Somehow, in our earlier hurry to catch up, Jane and I had missed this. The boys bounded off the trail toward the sound. We climbed over logs, ducked under fallen trees, and generally bushwhacked about a quarter of a mile before reaching the edge of a ravine that overlooked Porcupine Creek. Primrose Creek gushed over the opposite side of the canyon, spilling into the water below in a cascade of thundering power. At the base of the 100-foot falls, a house-sized rock reached up to receive the rush of water like a cupped hand. White rivulets streamed between its glossy black fingers.

This was what I loved about the backcountry—the possibility of discovery. When the senses feast on what nature has to offer, the spirit expands to receive not only beauty, but the power of revelation. It seemed to me that the whole purpose of creation was to reflect the nature of God.

Jane and I dug out our cameras to take pictures.

"I wonder if this place has a name," Erik said. As always when he grew thoughtful, his blue eyes narrowed and his head tilted slightly. "Let's call it Faith Falls. I'm going to

name all the places I find this summer after FISH. This will be Faith Falls. I'll call the next place Integrity peak or creek—whatever it happens to be.”

It was true that this waterfall had no known name. A natural falls of this caliber would have been a national monument anywhere else. But in Alaska, naming every stream, waterfall, or mountain was like naming the stars. After a while you run out of ideas. There were already 105 places in Alaska—coves, rivers, bays, mountains, and creeks—with the word “Eagle” in the name. The number of “Fish” creeks, lakes, mountains, points, and bays was endless. So “Faith Falls” seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to call this place.

How interesting that Erik—like Adam naming the animals of Eden—wanted to name these places, wanted to lay claim to them in some way. Before Jane and I put our cameras away, the boys posed “GQ” style, making us laugh. With faraway looks and come-hither postures, they said, “Yes. We’re cool.” Mark stripped off his shirt, curled his arms, and tightened his stomach. He didn’t realize that masculine bravado along with his knobby knees and stick-legs emerging from clunky hiking boots made him look like a scrawny, big-pawed puppy.

We agreed this was a good place to camp. But we would have to be especially vigilant about bears. The sound of the falls kept us from hearing anything except our raised voices. A clean camp was a must. We decided to fix dinner

and then find a way down to the water. We each cooked our own meal—an arrangement that suited everyone. The kids could have their autonomy and Jane and I gladly shed any vestiges of domesticity. Besides, the boys claimed to be competent outdoorsmen and decent cooks. We arranged a camp kitchen in the clearing overlooking the ravine. The boys pulled their one-burner mountaineering stoves from their packs along with boxes of macaroni and cheese.

Jane and I were immersed in preparing our own pasta dinner, when suddenly the guys let out a whoop. We looked up to see a circle of fire burning on the ground around Mark's camp stove. The boys were laughing. Jake clutched his sides with hilarity.

Jane and I grabbed our water bottles as Mark began stomping out the flames. He quickly quelled the fire, but Jane and I looked at each other, wondering about the competence of these outdoorsmen. Mark had apparently spilled a good portion of his fuel on the ground before striking a match to light the stove.

"Geez, Mark. You could have lit the whole side of the mountain on fire. What were you thinking?" I asked.

Mark rolled his eyes. "Chill out, Mom. I know what I'm doing."

I clenched my teeth. The last thing I wanted on this outing was conflict and confrontation. I took a deep breath and swallowed. Anger settled like a hot stone in my stomach. At some point during the trip he would need

more fuel, presumably from me. Surely he had learned from his mistake—he just wouldn't admit it.

After dinner the boys headed for the canyon bottom to look for a place to fish. Clouds had turned the blue sky into a smooth slate of gray. Jane and I decided to pitch a tent in case it began to rain. We placed a tent 100 yards away from the camp kitchen. Carefully we hung our remaining food from a tree a good 100 yards in the opposite direction. As old friends we seemed to know each other's mind—a different thing than thinking alike—and we worked together with easy deliberation.

We were returning from our food cache when we discovered a teenage dumping ground. Their backpacks were strewn carelessly across the ground just as they had left them. Candy bars and peanuts spilled out of open compartments. Dirty dishes from dinner rested against the mossy forest floor. Pieces of their tent lay scattered. The only thing missing was a sign that said "Bears Welcome." Just then rain began to patter softly against their open packs.

With hardly a word, Jane and I began to collect their things. So much for relinquishing our roles as caretakers. Here we were, picking up after our sons. My resolve to avoid conflict dissolved with the rain. On the one hand the boys wanted to be expedition leaders without any parental directives. Yet here lay evidence that they had survived all those unsupervised experiences only by grace and good luck.

After tucking their things away, Jane and I decided to do a little exploring of our own, making our way down a steep embankment toward the falls. We scooted much of the way, knowing it would be a hefty climb to get back. The rain had stopped as quickly as it began but not without first releasing the scent of spring, a deep green smell of wet dirt and sunshine. I inhaled the forest's perfume. Clutching at the soft cool moss, we descended on heels and hands into the canyon. Anger seemed so inconsequential here, a small human fist against the broad night sky. As we approached the boulder-strewn stream, a cold mist from the falls dissipated my last burn of anger. To be truly present in this moment was enough.

The next morning the boys woke up eager to return to the stream and the falls. The tongue-lashing they'd received after we'd all returned to camp last night had been met with predictable contempt. But this was a new day. A new page to write a happier story. They dressed and headed toward the water. Jane and I sipped on hot coffee as the sun crested the mountains and poured into the clearing.

We talked about whether to stay another night or backpack somewhere else, and decided to ask the guys their preference. I leaned against a tree and closed my eyes to the warming sun. It wasn't long before Erik and Jake galloped into camp grinning, their heads dripping wet.

“You’ve got to come see this, Mom,” Jake said. “There’s the coolest place to wash your hair.”

We laughed. It was as though they’d waited all their lives to find such a place.

“Where’s Mark?” I asked.

“I dunno,” Erik said. “He was right behind us.”

We waited a few moments, but Mark didn’t show.

Jane suggested she and the boys backtrack the same way they’d come. I would wait in case Mark found his way to camp. As I watched Jane and Jake and Erik head down the canyon, my worry and frustration melded into a single sentiment. Rage. Suddenly I did not want to be backpacking with my sons. I was cursed with knowledge. To know the fallibility of their judgment was to lose faith in them and in an upbringing that underscored respect for surroundings far more powerful than they. I didn’t want to be afraid for them any longer. I simply did not want to know. Yet I *did* know and I *was* afraid and the fact of it filled me with fury. How dare they rob from me the joy of this outing? Their provocations tore at the fabric of the connections I so wanted to weave with them here in the wilderness. And in the moment that I no longer wanted to share in this adventure—in perhaps any adventure ever again—it seemed that something between us was lost.

Mark marched into camp and put his hands on his hips. My relief at seeing him blazed only briefly in the firestorm of my anger.

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

"What do you mean, where have *I* been?" I asked.

"Where were *you*?"

I thundered at him for every frustration that had ever passed between us. He yelled back. Cocky. Insolent.

"Why did you even come on this backpacking trip?" Mark asked. "We'd have more fun without you."

"That may be," I said. "But you can forget about going out on your own again if you don't take better care of your camp and each other." Then I listed the boys' safety blunders so far: not staying together as we hiked; lighting the forest floor on fire; inviting bears into a dirty camp; and now losing track of each other. Had they completely lost all semblance of common sense? Mark dismissed every accusation.

"That's ridiculous," he said, his jaw set with arrogant confidence. That anyone could be so profoundly sure of himself and so profoundly wrong amazed me.

Red-faced and angry, we finally grew silent with the same conclusion. On the next backpacking trip we would go *without* the other. The roar of water filled the empty space between us.

"Come on let's go. The others are waiting," I said. Mark led the way.

As we descended into the ravine, I paused to look at the waterfall across the canyon's divide. For better or worse, my sons were now making decisions on their own—

unexpected and beyond my control. Some of their choices, like giving away a Bible, filled me with bewildered gratitude; they possessed generosity beyond anything I had ever taught them. Other decisions, like leaving a brother behind, filled me with smoldering wrath. How could they be so careless of each other's lives?

My faith in Erik and Mark hung suspended in a chasm of doubt. How would they survive when life and death in the wilderness hinged on a single decision? Had we done enough, over the years, to teach them wisdom in their endeavors? And how would a wilderness education play against a young man's perception of invincibility? I could do little beyond pray to a God who I hoped was more merciful than the unforgiving landscape on which we lived.

On another level, I could not help but think about where we were headed in this tumble of emotion, in a churning free fall away from each other. The realization that we could, without regret, disappoint each other filled me with a sense of both foreboding and longing.

"Where does faith go when it falls?" I wondered. And I watched as white water poured into the hand of the rock.