CHAPTER 9

The Comfort of Eagles

And he will raise you up
on eagle's wings.
—"Eagle's Wings," a gospel hymn

I was driving back from town to our house when I came upon a dozen bald eagles calling, swooping, and coasting over the road between the tall spruce trees and the river delta. The silver salmon were spawning, and their carcasses littered the beach. The eagles were there for the free lunch. One flew so close to the windshield I could see individual feathers on its wings. The shadow it cast on my Subaru station wagon reached from bumper to bumper. A full-grown eagle's wings span seven feet; they are the biggest backyard birds you'll ever see.

Even though there was a roof over my head, I ducked. A second later an eyeless fish head dropped from the sky to the pavement, and two more eagles jumped on it, right next to my car door. I stopped and rolled down the window

to get a better look. For a heartbeat I wondered if being this close to a couple of eagles was dangerous, but before I could decide it was, one of them grabbed the salmon head in its talons and took off, with the other in pursuit, gliding and flapping over the lush beach grass, the wild roses, and on up the broad river valley. This is what Emerson must have had in mind when he wrote that "the proper response to the world is applause."

Betty Holgate was out on her ride-on lawn mower so I pulled into her circular drive to say hello and marvel at my eagle encounter. Betty and Don have the biggest lawn on our road. I'm pretty sure it's the biggest lawn in Haines, which is not really a lawn kind of place. Most of the brambly yards on Betty's side of Mud Bay Road lost ground when the state upgraded it from gravel to pavement. The Holgates' property was scheduled to be cut in half until they informed the engineers that the tall spruce way down at the corner where their driveway meets the road was an eagle nesting tree. The state swung the new road around the tree, and the Holgates kept their big yard. Such is the power of eagles.

As I drove up, Betty pulled over, shut off her mower, and hollered, "Did you see the show?" I didn't have to ask if she meant the eagles. Even though everyone around here knows that eagles are opportunistic scavengers and that where there's free food, you'll find them, we still admire them. You can't help it. They demand your attention.

A little like our friend John Katzeek. He thinks noth-

ing of calling at seven on a weekday morning, asking, "What's for breakfast?" and, before I can even answer, adding, "I'm coming over; put the coffee on." John drinks only decaf, so we keep his beans in a separate jar. John is a Tlingit clan leader or, more accurately, the keeper of Klukwan's Tall Fin Killer Whale House (*Keet Gooshi Hit* in Tlingit). He is also part of the Eagle moiety. As I said when I told you about Wayne's totem pole, I am no expert on Tlingit culture, so forgive me if I err. I do know that Tlingits are members of either the Eagle or Raven moiety and that those main cultural trunks are divided into many branches of other clans and houses that people are affiliated with. Some of the houses, like John's, actually exist and hold the clan regalia, carvings, and objects that tell its history. Those houses and their contents are used on ceremonial occasions, mostly having to do with death—from wakes to the more elaborate potlatches held about a year after a funeral. Other houses are gone now, but their names and family associations remain, as well as some of the regalia, which is stored elsewhere. John has called Haines and the nearby Tlingit village of Klukwan home all his life. His ancestors have lived in the Chilkat Valley since the last ice age.

I know John because he and Chip hunt together. They have become friends slowly, in the way grown men from different backgrounds rarely do. While John is as local as the weather, my husband is a newcomer. Of colonial New England and immigrant Norwegian Minnesota farmer

stock, Chip has lived in John's territory for only about twenty-five years. John has brown skin and black hair with a shock of gray up front. He graduated from Haines High School and earns a living as a hunting guide. My husband is tall, fair, and balding and has a master's degree in forestry and environmental studies from Yale, but of the two of them, John is the expert on Alaskan natural history. It's safe to say John is teaching us all a lot.

John's father, Tom Katzeek, known as Tom Kat, raised his sons in a traditional Tlingit way, surrounded by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Klukwan and Haines. "Every night my grandfather would have the same talk after dinner—and every dinner was a kind of Thanksgiving," John tells me. "For an hour or more, it was always the same stories: who we were and where we came from." John and his five brothers were with his Klukwan grandparents frequently because Tom Kat and John's mother, Isabell, were working at the cannery on Mud Bay Road, the old red one down past my house, packing salmon into cans. The myths and legends John heard at the village dinner table were more than entertainment. On the one hand John is completely modern; he is definitely not the crying Indian of those old anti-pollution campaigns. His hair is trimmed short, he smells of aftershave, and he wears creased flannel shirts, cleaner blue jeans than Chip, and good leather hiking boots. On the other hand he is very much a traditional Tlingit. He believes the historical and spiritual truths in the old stories. For instance, about

thirty years ago John's father was out on the Chilkat River when an otter appeared and told Tom Kat his oldest son would die. Tom Kat knew the legends about otters bearing bad news and understood that the only way to prevent the otter's prediction from coming true was to kill it. A few days later John learned that he had potentially terminal cancer. John is alive today, he says, because his father killed that otter.

When John arrived for breakfast one morning, I told him I was working on an essay about eagles for an Alaskan wildlife anthology and asked him what I should write. He answered the way I knew he would. "Tell them you are married to one."

It's true. John adopted Chip at a big party last October where the Eagles and the Ravens gathered to honor a deceased elder. When an Eagle or a Raven dies, the other clan supports them in their immediate grief at the time of the funeral. Then after a year or two, the moiety on the receiving end pays the members of the other one back, thanking them with food, music, dance, money, and many gifts in what is usually called a potlatch, or payoff party. The proper Tlingit term, though, is *Khoo.éex'*, which means to call, or invite. The *Khoo.éex'* also ends the mourning period. At these events, new members may be adopted into the tribe and, in this way, when someone dies a few more folks are added. Tlingits adopt friends or individuals who support the culture, but not in the way

babies are adopted, or even the way my daughter Stoli was adopted by us. Being adopted into a Tlingit family is to be adopted into a way of life. You don't move in together; you probably don't even share Thanksgiving dinner. It's not that kind of relationship. If you are adopted by Tlingit friends, you support the traditions and the values and especially, as they say, you "show your face" by attending Tlingit community events.

After breakfast, John asked if I wanted to ride up the river with him in his airboat, to see if the bears were moving out of their winter dens yet or if the trumpeter swans were back. He keeps his boats in Klukwan. We lurched down the potholed village road by the school, down between one-story ranch-style homes with pastel vinyl siding, decks facing the river, and wood smoke drifting from metal chimney pipes. We made our way slowly—the village speed limit is 15 mph—past rusted rigs, skiffs on trailers, four-wheelers, snow machines, satellite TV dishes, and loose dogs. Aside from the new traditionally designed hand-hewn post and timber tribal house, my favorite buildings are the derelict turn-of-the-century Bureau of Indian Affairs structures. They were built in the Greek revival style and have no paint left on them at all—the Chilkat River dust has sanded the cedar a steel gray, from dentil moldings to clapboards. Some are roofless; others lean far to the right or left. Still others are upright and hollow-eyed, with no glass in the windows. The former government school, though, has been restored and painted

white, and it retains its functional beauty as the Chilkat Indian Village office. In front, there's a community garden, and nearby is the veterans memorial park, with a monument, flag poles, and two warrior totem poles.

If you don't step out of the truck in Klukwan, if you aren't invited to see a riverbank smokehouse or the young men carving a totem pole down by the new traditional knowledge camp, if you have never been to a funeral in the Alaska Native Sisterhood Hall or to one of the many after-death ritual feasts, you might think Klukwan is kind of shabby, especially in springtime, when the melting snow reveals piles of junk and general disarray. (Haines doesn't look much better at this time of year; when my father visits each summer he grumbles that no one seems to care about their yards. "Haven't you people ever heard of a weed whacker?" he'll say. One trip he even painted the trim on our lumberyard because he couldn't stand to see the paint peeling.) Also, if you aren't invited to spend some time in Klukwan, you may never know how peaceful and productive some of its households are or just how much the rhythm of life in the village is tied to the seasons and what's for dinner tonight and what will be for dinner two months from tonight.

In addition to guiding big-game hunters, John, along with his wife, Cheryl, offers a paid tour of the Tall Fin Killer Whale House in Klukwan. The tour includes a look inside his tribal house, and sometimes there is traditional dancing and singing by the student dance troupe from

the Klukwan School. But like a first impression of the village, Tlingit song and dance taken out of context reveals only part of the story. It's the difference between singing a few Christmas carols at a party and singing hymns at a candlelight mass on Christmas Eve. It's the difference between eating crackers and drinking wine and taking Communion.

My friend Kimberley Strong, the Klukwan Village Council president, has a hard time leaving her riverfront home to drive to town in the summertime when there is so much to do. Kimberley has worked as a law clerk and, like John, served on the board of one of the region's largest corporations, Klukwan, Inc., a logging, construction, and tourism–based corporation owned by the village. It was once a multimillion-dollar operation but has fallen on hard times. She's also on the school board, the electricity co-op board, and the Chilkat Valley Community Foundation Board, and is a leader in the Alaska Native Sisterhood, a civil rights and social organization. "I'm basically a professional volunteer," she acknowledges, and if you ask her how she supports herself, Kimberley will tell you with *subsistence*, the Alaskan word for living off the land.

When she smokes her fish, Kimberley faces the split carcasses upstream for the first half of the drying and then turns them on the greased smokehouse poles and heads them downstream for the final smoke, just like John does—it's so their spirits will return to the sea to

guide next year's salmon back up the river again. The black soil in the community garden Kimberley helps tend produces basketball-sized cabbages, sweet carrots, peas, squash, and greens of all kinds. Klukwan's fingerling potatoes come from stock hundreds of years old. The steep mountain foothills that rise behind the village are covered with blueberry bushes; there are nets extending out in the river from nearly every backyard, and smokehouses are in continuous use from June to September. In the spring, eulachon (pronounced "hooligan"), a smelt prized for its oil—"Omega threes," John tells me, "good for your cholesterol"—are caught in dip nets, fermented in pits, and then boiled in vats to release the oil that is skimmed off and put in jars to be used later for dressing salmon or seal meat or to stir into cranberries and salmon eggs. In the fall, moose are hunted, butchered, canned, and frozen. This year Kimberley and her women-only hunting party had more success than John and Chip did in the annual moose hunt, shooting a big bull in the first hours.

John stopped the truck in the muddy lot next to his smokehouse. There's a locked chain-link gate on his long open shed. Inside are several boats and motors and a fuel tank and hose. He filled up two plastic gas jugs and grabbed a quart of oil, and we headed out of the village and toward his other boat landing farther upstream. "Too much dust," he explained. "I can't leave the airboat here until the water is higher; the dust ruins the engine." In the early spring, the river is low. The snows haven't melted up

high yet, so water flows in meandering channels through the gravel, sand, and fine gray chalk-like dust of the wide, wide valley. On your bare feet, on a warm July day, it could be the same soft sand of a well-groomed pitcher's mound. When John and Kimberley's ancestors first settled in Klukwan, about six thousand years ago (there is also some evidence that humans lived in the region as far back as ten thousand years ago), geologists theorize that the village was at the head of a twenty-mile-long fjord. The Tlingits sailed up it in deep dugout canoes from the beach in front of my house. In the centuries since then, the glacial-sediment-bearing river has dropped one thousand feet of natural fill into that underwater canyon.

An alluvial fan, where the Chilkat is joined by two other rivers, lets water percolate through the sand and gravel all summer, creating an underground reservoir that bubbles back up in the winter. It keeps the river ice-free from November to February and thus attracts the largest concentration of bald eagles in the world. Some three thousand gather near the village each autumn to feast on the carcasses of spawning salmon in the only open water for miles. The eagles have come here since "time immemorial," as the Tlingits say, because of the warm upwellings and for the easy meals those rotting spawned-out salmon provide.

Every November, Haines hosts an eagle festival, with guided eagle viewings and special programs for photographers, artists, and naturalists. The highlight is the re-

lease of rehabilitated injured eagles back into the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, forty thousand acres of critical eagle habitat adjacent to Klukwan. The American Bald Eagle Foundation organizes the event and ties this flight into patriotism, since the eagle is our national symbol. They call it the Flight to Freedom. In that great American way, the privilege of releasing a bird is auctioned off to the highest bidder to raise money for the foundation and the festival and to rehabilitate more eagles. The eagles are transported to the preserve from town in large dog kennels, which are carried out to the center of a circle of spectators and participants on the riverbank. It's usually snowy and often bitterly cold, and it takes a while for all the speeches, the photographs, and the auction. The last time I went, a woman had bid eight hundred dollars for this opportunity, and she wanted to hold the eagle as she set it free. The handler wore talon-proof gloves and helped her sort of half-hold the raptor, which was wrapped tightly in a blanket. She wanted to kiss the eagle, as well, but that was way too dangerous. An eagle's beak is razor sharp. She was so overcome by the experience that she wept. Eagles can make people who aren't used to them very emotional.

They can make people who are used to them emotional, too. I stood there, looking at the birding world's paparazzi, the local dignitaries, the sponsors' banners flapping, and that woman sobbing and clutching her breast, and part of me thought it was all way over the top. But here's the thing:

even though I have seen hundreds of wet eagles hunched in the cottonwoods along the river on rainy fall days with their white heads tucked into the shoulders of their ruffled brown coats, like old men in a city park—grumpy eagles that look more like Walter Matthau than an ad for the Air Force—even though that's where my mind was, when that woman half-tossed, half-dropped that eagle into the air and he glided away from us without even a tip of his wing, he took a part of me with him. I made a good wish, the same way I do on the first evening star.

As the public eagle releases during the festival grew in size and popularity, the people of Klukwan asked the festival organizers if they could hold a private ceremony. There are no microphones, no fences, and no auctions at that one. It's down by a log smokehouse at the edge of the village on the riverbank a few feet from the water. There is Native singing, dancing, and prayers for eagles, salmon, and the people whose lives and spirits are so closely intertwined with them.

Villagers wear their ceremonial best: the carved wooden clan hats; the red and blue button-trimmed blankets; the black, white, and yellow Chilkat blankets; woven headbands; and beaded moose-hide slippers. This year the elders chose a young woman who teaches Tlingit at the village school to release the eagle. She quietly opened the kennel door and the bird stepped out. It would be nice to tell you that this eagle responded to the more reverent setting differently than her brother had at the bigger release.

It would be nice to report that she had looked her Tlingit relatives in the eyes and made a spiritual connection. But that's not what happened. She took off so fast and so fiercely that the little children in the front row ducked and the cameras missed it entirely. It is always tricky, and often disappointing, to attribute to animals traits we'd want to see in humans.

Many people know that Ben Franklin objected to the bald eagle as the choice for our national symbol because of its behavior. "He is a bird of bad moral character," Franklin wrote. A cynic, observing American politics today, might say that our forefathers knew exactly what they were doing. In the days before Alaskan statehood, fox farmers said eagles stole their cubs, and fishermen said they ate their salmon, so a bounty was put on them. From 1917 to 1953, hunters were paid anywhere from $0.50 to $2.50 per dead eagle. More than one hundred thousand were legally shot dead, and many more deaths were never reported. "That's how we got grocery money in lean winters," one old-timer told me.

Sometimes we tell tourists stories about eagles. We all like the one about the dachshund in Sitka that was picked up during a backyard picnic by an eagle and then dropped a few yards later because he was too heavy. But even jaded Alaskans can see there is much in the eagle's character to respect. They mate for life; they build sturdy homes, returning to them year after year; and they take good care of their babies, most of the time. I have read that

more than half of all young eagles do not survive their first flight, but I don't believe it. I have never come upon a dead fledgling at the bottom of a nesting tree and don't know anyone who has. Betty, a pilot, watches the young eagles launch out of the nest in her front yard each spring. Once, she told me, one almost crashed to the ground, but at the last minute he pulled up and soared off. "He must not have had a very good flight instructor," she said, "but he figured it out."

Eagles often watch me from the treetops, their white heads bright against the dark spruce branches, when I garden. I imagine that they enjoy my company. They have never shown any interest at all in kidnapping my terrier, Phoebe, but then again, Phoebe is fairly feisty and not meaty enough to be worth the effort catching her would require. Even though there are rumors each fall of eagles killing cats, I have seen an eagle eat only one, and I'm pretty sure it was already dead—it had been hit by a car—when the eagle pulled it off the macadam and flew off with it.

If you go out on the river flats near the village of Klukwan with John, under a gibbous December moon, and skid a canoe over the blue-white snow, slip it into the black mirrored water, and paddle across to the line of bare cottonwoods etched against the white mountains, you will be surprised that it is not a silent night at all. You will see and hear hundreds of calling and cackling eagles, dragging salmon out of the river, fighting over them, and

tearing them apart with their talons and beaks. Those who want eagles to sound courageous or at least as distinguished as hawks are usually let down. Eagles have a high singsongy kind of whistle when they call from trees, roofs, or telephone poles. They chatter like seagulls. As much as I'd love them to, they don't speak English.

But they may speak Tlingit.

I suspect there is some telepathy when it comes to birds and animals and the Tlingit people. When John and I finally had his airboat going—it's one of those flat-bottomed skiffs with an airplane propeller on the back that you see in films about the Everglades, only smaller and homemade—it was so loud we had to put on headphones. I was more than a little disheartened. John had promised we'd see wildlife: swans, moose, bears, eagles, and "maybe some wolves." Surely this roaring plane of a boat would scare off every creature for miles. But as we floated swiftly up the river, in that oddly quiet headphoned world, the swans gliding in the sloughs turned to look but stayed put. The eagles didn't leave their cottonwood perches. Later, on a sandbar where we'd stopped for lunch, I asked John about that. He said the birds and animals were used to his boat, as they had been back when his father, Tom Kat, had a similar one. He said they could recognize a friend. Do I believe this? It may sound crazy, but I think I might. I don't have a better explanation.

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JOHN AND CHIP HAD become clan brothers at a big *Khoo.éex'* party for a couple hundred guests at the Klukwan Alaska Native Sisterhood Hall that featured more food and gifts in one place than I had ever seen. These are not rich people. But since everything in Tlingit society is reciprocal, John says it is important to be as generous as you are able, because the next time you may be on the receiving end. There's more to this deep giving, this distribution of wealth, than I'll ever know, but that's the simplest way to explain it. This memorial party for Austin Brown, a Tlingit leader from Juneau with Klukwan connections who had died two years previously, reminded me of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter all in one. The Eagle hosts gave gifts to their Raven guests all day and all night. There were so many that the Eagles walked up and down the aisles between the dining tables in teams, with one holding a box of socks and jam or canned goods, and another distributing them.

By the time I was handed a new thermal blanket, I was out of room for any more presents on my lap, the table, and the floor. I already had a grocery bag full of fruit and boxes filled with cans of Vienna sausages, pork and beans, fruit cocktail, and corn. There were new socks, jars of thimbleberry and salmonberry jam, soap, coffee beans, microwave popcorn, pens, oven mitts, half-pints of smoked salmon, and lots of Top Ramen.

"It wouldn't be a potlatch without Top Ramen," noted my friend Tony Tengs, one of the dozen or so non-Natives

in the crowded hall. He was with his mother, Helen, and nephew, Marty; they had all been adopted a long time ago. Everyone rose, shaking the ramen packages and doing a sort of Tlingit jig to the rhythmic chanting. I was glad for the activity. I was sleepy and very full. It was after midnight, and more than twelve hours had passed since the event began. I had eaten pilot bread; smoked salmon spread; berries; moose stew with biscuits; herring roe salad; salmon and rice; prime rib with potatoes, gravy, and carrots; and, most recently, fishy Tlingit-style lox with cream cheese on a toasted bagel. When he invited us, John warned that the one thing that must never be said at a potlatch is "No, thank you," and that it's important to eat whatever's on your plate. So I ate the sweet-and-sour seal, the fry bread with honey, the salmon eggs preserved in eulachon oil. Like the other guests, I had left my seat only during the handful of designated breaks in the singing and dancing and feasting. In the daylight I'd used that time to walk around the village and look up at the red, gold, and green mountainsides colored like an oriental rug and frosted on top with the first snow, which reminded me of powdered sugar. (Must be all that food going to my head.) But after dark, when the bears were out, I stayed closer to the back porch of the hall. The fresh air felt good, and I listened to the river and the ravens and eagles calling and singing in the trees.

John is an Eagle, and since he was doing the adopting, Chip would be an Eagle. I hadn't seen much of Chip at

the potlatch; he couldn't even sit with me. He helped his fellow Eagles cook, serve, and distribute piles of gifts. The Eagle hosts wouldn't sit down at all at this party—they even ate standing up. Although I had no official status, John instructed me to join the Ravens at the long butcher-papered tables. This was what was meant by the reciprocity I mentioned earlier. Ravens and Eagles represent the two sides of the Tlingit society and fit together to make a whole, similar to the Asian concept of yin and yang. An Eagle elder may not speak to a community gathering unless a Raven elder says a few words, too. They say it throws them off balance otherwise.

Memorial potlatches are held in the fall because that's when there is the most food to share and when the summer gathering and fishing are done. Just as at our house, it's the season when smoked salmon and jam are in jars, and fish and game are in the freezer. The apples have been made into pies and the last carrots have been pulled. It is also still relatively easy to travel, since the winter storms haven't yet begun. In this way, the gathering of the Tlingit people is similar to the natural congregation of wild eagles with which this party happened to coincide. The human Eagles and Ravens there that night came from all over southeast Alaska and the Yukon Territory.

Our Eagle hosts not only cooked all the food and distributed gifts, they also entertained us. They told lots of jokes, some in Tlingit, most in English. They sang pop tunes karaoke style, jazz standards, and ancient Tlingit

songs. Tony stood and sassily crooned "I Am My Own Grandpa," which everyone loved because Tlingits often really are their own grandparents. A baby named for a grandfather is sometimes called "Grandpa" and when, as an adult, he is asked to say a few words at a *Khoo.éex'* like this, he will preface the most important parts with, "I am my grandfather speaking now." One elderly Juneau woman whom I had pegged as a stern keeper-of-tradition type—she has steel-gray hair and teaches Tlingit language classes at the University of Alaska Southeast—proved me wrong when she and her equally serious-looking family presented their well-rehearsed "Mrs. Don Ho" musical review. It featured Hawaiian costumes, the singing of "Tiny Bubbles" in Tlingit, and hula dancing. John surprised me even more, joining them in the act, wearing a blue clown wig and, later, his clan regalia and dancing and singing with his Tall Fin Killer Whale brothers and sisters. There was so much more—some slapstick, some solemn, some I understood, much I didn't, and all the while more gifts were given and more food was served at the long tables under the bright lights of the full community hall.

I could write a whole book about what happened to a Chilkat blanket created by master weaver Anna Brown Ehlers of Juneau. After formally presenting it as a gift, she announced she would cut it in pieces. There was a long silence as the heavy king-sized, shawl-shaped blanket was lifted down from the wall it had been displayed on and draped over a table. The room remained quiet as Anna

carefully cut it up into about twenty small sections, a foot or so square, that she gave away to some of the Eagles, including John, whose piece had a killer whale pattern on it.

The blanket, woven in the traditional way from mountain goat wool, was worth many thousands of dollars. The ancient and modern weavers from Klukwan are famous for their skill at creating distinctive fringed white, blue, yellow, and black dancing blankets. The first time I saw one was in New York's American Museum of Natural History, on a field trip as a child. The museum's main hall, lined with totem poles, held a huge Chilkat Tlingit war canoe with a dozen life-sized mannequins in it, all draped in the now-familiar blankets. They take years to make and there are only a handful of true master weavers like Anna alive today. That's why there was silence when she said she would destroy her work in order to repair a tear in the fabric of the tribe that had happened so long ago that most people in the room, Native and non-Native, didn't even know the details. Anna's father, Austin Brown, had known, though, and it was his dying wish that she do this to make whatever went wrong right again. Anna smiled as she cut that blanket and gave the sections away.

After that, the adoption ceremony was fairly anticlimactic. The names of the half-dozen new clan members were called in English. One at a time they walked up to the front of the hall where an elder pressed a twenty-

dollar bill on their forehead (it can be any denomination—a five or ten will do just as well). Each was given a Tlingit name, which was then repeated by the crowd several times. The bill was handed to the clan member responsible for remembering the adoptee's new name and reminding them of their duties to the tribe. When I asked what that was all about, three Tlingit friends could not tell me, except to say it's tradition; in that way, they reminded me of Tevye's song from *Fiddler on the Roof.* I'm pretty sure I've explained this all correctly, but I'm certain I've missed some cultural subtleties. I was so full and so groggy I was nodding off. Tlingit protocol could take a lifetime to learn. Even the names can be challenging. The ceremony happened so quickly and it was so late that it took Chip a couple of days to figure out what his Tlingit name actually was. Now we sometimes call him *Keet-woo-saa-nee,* or *Keet* for short (we are still not sure how to spell the rest of it), especially when he's hanging around with John.

It was almost five in the morning when we finally made our way out of the thick air of the hall and into the cool of the predawn darkness. As Chip and I walked toward our truck on the frosted road, I listened with new ears to the rhythm of the wind in the cottonwoods, the steady backbeat of the river, the voices of the people who have accompanied them for as long as time, and wondered how to properly thank John and his clan. My own tradition of a written thank-you note seemed too small. Then I remembered what an Eagle elder had expressed hours

earlier, the day before actually. David Katzeek, a blood relative of John's, had said, "If you just say 'thank you' that is a great speech. Sometimes thank you is the greatest speech you can make." He also stressed that it is better to use the Tlingit word for thank you than the English one, even if you mispronounce it.

"*Gunalcheesh,*" I said softly to all the eagles, both human and animal, who I couldn't see but knew were out there in the dark. "*Gunalcheesh,*" I whispered again, practicing the unfamiliar lift of my tongue on the back of my palate. "*Gunalcheesh,*" I called out one more time, before I fell asleep in the front seat of Chip's truck as it rocked gently down the village road toward home.