Nothing Without Air:
Alaska, the Tuba, and the Fight to Stay Myself

by Mike Martinson

PROLOGUE

Diving In

July 2005
Kachemak Bay, Alaska

We had just loaded several hundred pounds of salmon onto our commercial fishing boat near Homer, Alaska, when I saw another boat drifting toward our beam. I threw the engine into reverse to clear it, but instead of the usual surge, there was a violent, metallic shudder that ran through the soles of my boots, followed by a sudden, hollow silence. After hours of working next to a large diesel engine, that sudden stop is a frightening sound. I knew immediately: the prop had fouled.

Around commercial fishing boats, a loose line in the water is like a snare. When a rope wraps around a spinning propeller, it tightens with such force that the nylon feels like rebar. We managed to use the skiff to push ourselves out of the immediate path of other boats, but we were dead in the water just as the fishing reached its peak. Sockeye were jumping everywhere; even from inside the cabin, I could hear the arrhythmic slap-slap of salmon hitting the surface. We were "in the money," as they say. A single good day like this can yield as much as two weeks of slow fishing. I couldn't let that profit slip away.

My crew of four on the purse-seine boat included my three children and me: David was 21, Benny was 18, and Sarah was 14. We would spend about two months each summer fishing for salmon in one of Alaska's most beautiful areas.

"I'm going in," I said, already kicking off my boots. I planned to jump into that glacier-cold water with nothing more than a steak knife and a swimsuit. I knew the risks: in water that

cold, the gasp reflex can seize your chest and flood your lungs before you manage a single stroke.

But we had all been in that water many times. After a long day of fishing, while the summer light in Alaska stretched on all night, we would sometimes use our seine skiff to tow one of us on water skis, much to the bewilderment of the other crews.

I went into the cabin to strip down, but my son David was already there, shirtless and determined.

“I’ve got it, Dad,” he said.

He was an excellent swimmer, but the physics were risky. To reach the prop, he would have to swim under the boat itself. When he ran out of air, he couldn’t just surface; he’d first have to find his way back out from under the aluminum hull before he could ascend.

I tied a safety line around him, trying to hide my shaking hands. Gripping the steak knife, he jumped into the dark and disappeared beneath the boat for what felt like far too long. When he finally surfaced, breathing hard, he confirmed my fear: the wrap was tight.

He dove eight more times. Each time he went under, I held the rope, feeling the faint tugs through the safety line as he sawed at the rope. Finally, he surfaced with a handful of shredded nylon and the bent steak knife clenched in his teeth like a pirate on a sabotage mission.

Sarah turned the diesel stove to its highest setting to help him thaw out. From start to finish, the mini-crisis was over within an hour: the prop was turning again, and salmon were swimming back into our net.

That was how I solved problems: invent a solution, accept the risk, dive in, and fix it without hesitation or delay. I thought that was how all problems were solved.

Years later, sitting in front of an X-ray screen, a doctor pointed at a white blur and handed me a problem that neither courage nor quick thinking could fix. The solutions were no longer in my hands.

CHAPTER 1

Gut Punch

December 2014
Anchorage, Alaska

"You need to get your affairs in order," the doctor said, his voice heavy with concern. "You have one to three years to live."

I could hear the strain as he delivered news he wouldn't wish on anyone. He cleared his throat, fist pressed to his lips, then looked at me before dropping his gaze to the floor. And just like that, my life was upended.

I hadn't even gone to the doctor for anything serious. It was just my shoulder, an ache that had been hanging around for months. I assumed it was a sprain or maybe something more serious, like a rotator cuff tear. Either way, I thought it was something that could be fixed. Most things were. I ignored the pain until it got so bad I couldn't lift my instrument at all.

On a typical rehearsal evening with the Symphony or various orchestras in Anchorage, Alaska, I would park on G Street, two or three blocks from the rehearsal hall, and carry my instrument inside. But as the pain got worse, carrying my instrument became unbearable. It didn't help that I played the heaviest instrument in the orchestra: the tuba.

I finally visited a medical clinic and saw one of the physicians on staff. The clinic was efficient but impersonal, sharp with the smell of disinfectant and the soft trickle of a rock-wall fountain. People stood in line, shuffling forward to explain their ailments to the receptionist. Before meeting her, I told myself my shoulder was just an annoyance, nothing more.

I sat by myself to avoid the coughing and nose blowing, flipping through magazines and thinking about the music I was going to play that evening. Outside, heavy December snow was

piling up. The city was being transformed into a clean whiteness that was great to look at but miserable to drive in.

Soon after, an assistant called my name. She walked me through a hallway where I was introduced to the doctor who would be treating me that day, a kind-looking man in his fifties with a short beard and a balding scalp. I explained the pain and weakness in my shoulder. Without hesitation, he sent me to the X-ray room.

After the X-ray, I was asked to wait in a small seating area while he examined the results. The waiting area had three chairs and a small table with outdated magazines. I sat there for 20 minutes, watching other patients walk by and wondering why it was taking so long.

When the doctor finally approached, his head hung low, his face burdened. He invited me into his office and offered me a chair in front of his computer. I recognized the digital picture as an X-ray. My ribcage filled the screen, and near my right shoulder was a large white object. He explained that a baseball-sized tumor was destroying the second rib on my right side, causing pain in my right shoulder. He asked if I had heard of multiple myeloma. I hadn't, so he spelled it out for me. Then he said, "You need to see an oncologist."

I later learned this cancer targets plasma cells in the bone marrow, where blood cells are produced. It only affects about 7 out of 100,000 people each year. I was in an exclusive club, one I could do without.

My mind felt numb. I tried to study the X-ray like a music score I'd never seen before. This white mass, where bone should have been, was silently eating through my rib for months while I'd been conducting rehearsals above it. For 32 years, I had been teaching students to read and interpret music notation: black-and-white symbols that transform into sounds that words cannot imitate. Now I was trying to decipher what this white blob meant.

It felt like he was talking about someone else. My voice remained steady as I asked technical questions about tumor behavior, maintaining the same analytical detachment I used to dissect my conductor's score: breaking it into smaller pieces, trying to solve the puzzle.

For decades, I'd guided teenagers through their first encounters with complex musical ideas. Now I was the confused student, and there were no practice exercises for mortality. You either understand that you're dying, or you don't. The doctor watched me with concern, clearly recognizing that I hadn't truly processed what he'd told me. He seemed more shaken by the diagnosis than I was, at least for now.

I thanked him politely, as if he'd just given me directions to the nearest coffee shop. My body moved on autopilot, shaking his hand, gathering my jacket, and walking through the antiseptic hallways toward the exit. I must have walked through the snow to my car because I found myself standing beside it, keys in hand, wondering how I'd gotten there. An hour earlier, I was a band director with a sore shoulder.

CHAPTER 2

Climbing Spikes

October 2014
Eagle River, Alaska

I knew that most people, faced with four dead trees leaning over a house, would pick up the phone with a credit card nearby and consider the problem solved. I never learned to make that call. My first real job was on a family gold claim a hundred miles north of Nome, where the nearest help was a day's drive of bad road and the answer to every broken thing was the same: you thought up a solution, and then you fixed it with what you had. My father never paid someone to do a thing he could figure out himself, and neither did I.

I knew, as always, my wife, Gerilynn, would protest if I asked her opinion. She would say, "It's worth the money to let someone else do it." We've never agreed on that point. So I put the belt and spikes on without telling her my plans. I did let her know by calling her on my cell phone as I was climbing the first tree. She stepped outside, took my picture, and went back in the house. She couldn't watch.

Dead trees don't fall politely. Any hard wind could put one through the roof or the shed. I'd picked up a used set of climbing spikes and a belt a few years before. This was the fall of 2014, and a dull ache had settled into my right shoulder that I figured would work itself out. The snow had already fallen, and soon its weight would burden the trees even further.

The first tree was the most dangerous. If it fell in the wrong direction, it would have landed on the roof. That kind of damage, especially in cold weather, would be devastating. I could have dropped the trees from the ground and tried to steer the fall by cutting a notch, but with trees that close to the house the risk wasn't worth it. So I climbed, spikes on, belt set, chainsaw hanging from a chain off my hip, and limbing the trunk as I climbed until each tree was

a bare pole, then taking it down from the top in eight-foot lengths. Small enough to control. Nothing left standing that could hurt what was underneath.

The first tree went the way it should have. Its top had to be thrown to clear the roof; after that, the sections dropped five feet out with a thud. The other three came down the same way. Each section made enough firewood to last a couple of weeks.

It's a different world on top of a tree in October in Alaska. I could see dozens of houses, all trying to stay warm. It was freezing, probably in the upper twenties. There is something about that kind of cold that feels perfect. The air is crisp and dry, each breath like a cold glass of water. Leaning back on my belt with boot spikes stuck into the tree was like cheating death. If something went wrong, I knew I wouldn't survive the fall. But the solution was simple. Don't fall.

The feeling of being that high and leaning back on a rope and a piece of leather meant I trusted that nothing would break. I'd been to many logging shows as a child, watching my dad compete in the axe throwing and cable splicing. One cousin did the tree-topping event. He would climb a 90-foot spar tree, then cut the top off with a bucking saw. At one point, I decided to see how fast a 55-year-old could climb.

Near the top, I flipped the safety rope upward, but it snagged on a branch stub. Instinct took over. I hugged the trunk. That single error unweighted my boots, and my climbing spikes ripped out of the bark. I dropped ten feet in a heartbeat, wood tearing at my arms, my spikes leaving twin vertical gouges down the trunk before one finally bit into solid wood and stopped my fall.

"Ow!" I yelled, once I had firmly planted the other spike and leaned back on the belt. "Stupid," I muttered to myself. I knew hugging the tree was exactly the wrong thing to do. A ten-

foot fall with twenty feet still below me could have been a lot worse. My arms were scraped and the adrenaline was still flaring. But I knew why I fell, and I knew I wouldn't do it again. So I slowly climbed back to the top. 'At least Gerilynn didn't see that,' I thought.

The shoulder flared every time I hauled myself up. I told myself it was a job that had to be done and the pain was something I could manage. I didn't know I was climbing on a rib the cancer was already eating through. I was carrying the tumor up the tree with me. Up and down, up and down. Each time I lifted the chainsaw, the tumor protested, but I wasn't listening.

When the last section came down, like the three trees before it, not one piece of wood had touched the house. Four trees lay on the ground in pieces, and I had days of good work ahead, bucking into 16-inch lengths, splitting them, stacking firewood for winter, hauling off the brush. It was physical, the kind of work I've always liked. It hadn't cost me a dime, and I didn't have a tree service crew milling around my yard. By the time I finished, the ache in my shoulder was constant. But I was sure it would fade with time.

I thought about that two months later, sitting in my car in the clinic lot with the snow coming down. Back then I'd been protecting the house from the dead thing that might fall on it. Now I was the house.

CHAPTER 3

Folgers

September 1963
Bellingham, Washington

July 1974
The Gold Mine North of Nome, Alaska

I was only four years old when playing with gold nuggets like toy cars seemed perfectly normal. My dad ran a bucket dredge north of Nome, Alaska, and at the end of each summer he brought home Folgers coffee cans full of them. To me they weren't treasures. They were just shiny pieces of a childhood where wild Alaska stories and ordinary life existed side by side.

Later, as a teenager, I spent six summers at that same gold mine. The rolling hills of tundra stretched to every horizon, too far north for trees to grow. The ground was frozen solid just below the surface. The permafrost was as hard as rock even in summer. The mine was more than a hundred miles north of Nome, accessible only by a dirt road that crossed tundra and forded rivers. There was no phone, no hospital, no one to come if something went wrong.

At the mine, problems were never theoretical. They arrived as broken machinery, bad weather, frozen ground, or meat thawing in a dead freezer. Once, our freezer died early in the season, while it was full of moose meat. Even that far north, summer temperatures could climb into the eighties, so the meat wouldn't last long. My dad knew what to do. He said to walk about a hundred yards away from camp so bears wouldn't be tempted to come in. Then I was to shovel a hole in the permafrost, three feet square, three feet deep. I thought it sounded simple until I pushed the shovel through the tundra and heard a chink, the sound of metal hitting frozen ground.

I found a miner's pick and swung at the permafrost, breaking off shavings of frozen dirt. It took several hours to chip through the frozen ground and shovel out the shavings of dirt. Eventually the hole was deep enough. We packed the meat inside, replaced the squares of tundra for insulation, and it stayed frozen for the rest of the summer.

No freezer. No electricity. No problem.

That solution wasn't perfect. Whenever we wanted to cook a roast or steaks, someone would ask me, as the person in charge of our new freezer, to go outside and bring in some frozen meat. I would pull off the tundra squares and dig through the garbage bags for the right package. I always kept one eye on the lookout. Bears appreciated moose meat too.

The cabin had just one room, with a round table and Sailor Boy Pilot Bread stacked in the center next to peanut butter and jam. That was our go-to snack throughout the day. We had a diesel stove that served for cooking as well as heat. There were two cots in the corner, where my dad and my stepmother slept. The sink had cold water fed by gravity from a 55-gallon drum on the roof. The cabin was usually too warm, so we shed our outside gear before we came in. The warmth, the smell of meat cooking on the stove, and the smiles made that cabin the earned reward for a hard day's work.

Every year, within the first couple of weeks, my dad would say, "There's a moose over there." He could spot one on a distant hillside without binoculars, just a dark spot that wasn't there yesterday. The crew would stop mining, load onto a sled behind the bulldozer, and come back with enough meat to last the summer. We ate like kings.

Dinner was moose meat nearly every day. After dinner, the work was done. My dad would start telling stories, or he would pull out his mouth harp. We talked about what we had accomplished that day and what needed doing tomorrow. He was building an airstrip so we could

get supplies more easily. We had a couple of bush pilot friends who would drop our mail now and then. They would fly low, open the airplane door, and drop a mailbag or package near the cabins. The new airstrip would let them hand us our mail like civilized people do.

One evening he told us what had happened out on the strip that day. He had been running the giant old cable-blade D8 bulldozer, laying the airstrip at a certain angle to use the rocky terrain as a base. If he went into the tundra, the landing strip could turn mushy in wet weather and become unsafe. He was leveling ground when he noticed something moving.

He stood up to look over the top of the 14-foot blade. It was a lone squirrel, standing on its hind legs eight feet in front of the D8, on top of a small mound of dirt. My dad shut off the diesel engine and, as he put it, "I just got my ass chewed out."

He said the squirrel was shaking his fist and cussing at him while he sat on 70,000 pounds of bulldozer. After the scolding, that little fellow disappeared into a hole in his mound, satisfied that he had given my dad a piece of his mind.

I asked, "What are you going to do?"

He said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, "I'll change the direction of the airstrip. I'm not messing with that guy."

Then he started warming up his mouth harp, and the music began.

CHAPTER 4

The Band Room

November 2014
Chugiak, Alaska

The bell hadn't rung yet, but the room was already in predictable chaos. Students were still walking in with their instruments. Others were already warming up. Most of the flute players were ready to go, quietly talking to each other. Some were practicing difficult passages. Two tuba players were tossing a football underhanded until I told them to toss it to me. An alto saxophonist was arguing with a tenor sax player about the last calculus test.

Three percussionists were having a contest to see who could balance a timpani mallet the longest. Both French horns were practicing diligently while the three trombones started poking them with their slides. I gave the trombones my look of disapproval. James saw me, shouted, "Sorry," and started to warm up.

I stood beside the podium, waiting until two minutes after the bell. Then I stepped up, which was the signal to be quiet and focus eyes forward. I refused to compete with noise by raising my voice. If they didn't respond to the visual cue, I held everyone after class, which made them late to lunch. "He's on the podium." That spread through the room in waves. A trumpet lowered. A mallet was set down. Someone took one last cheap shot at a bass drum. I said, "Tristan, let's talk after class." Then the room settled into the kind of silence that was ready to burst into music at a moment's notice.

I looked around the room, smiled, and asked, "Darrel, was that you blasting during warm-up?" He raised his hand slowly. "Thanks for your honesty. Do you know how to tell when a trombone is out of tune?"

He answered a sheepish “No.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Most of the band laughed. Darrel smiled and nodded. “Now let’s do this,” I said.

We started with a Bach chorale to warm up. I spoke over the music. “William, listen. Are you flat or sharp?” They all knew to tune the way professionals tune. When? Always. Our oboist played a concert B-flat as a tuning note. The players tuned for about thirty seconds. When they were finished, I asked the trumpets to play their B-flat again. “Are you flat or sharp? If it sounds out of tune, make an adjustment. If it gets worse, adjust the other way.”

We started our first rehearsal piece at the most difficult section, half tempo. I tapped my music stand like a metronome. “One, two, ready, play.” A flute player looked disgusted that we were playing so slowly. I said quietly, “Would you like to try this on a tuba?” We worked through the piece under tempo but fast enough to hear how it should sound. I reminded them to mark the music wherever problems occurred. The change of key, the nasty 5/4 measures thrown in here and there. I pointed out the phrasing and reminded the trumpets that their part at letter C was not melody. And a dynamic marking of “p” in their music doesn’t mean “powerful.”

I reminded them to listen for the melody and support it, not overblow. Balance with your section. Balance with the rest of the band. “At letter E, listen to the flutes. That’s the dominant line. Don’t cover them up.” Some of my instruction was spoken while the music was playing. Then I would stop the rehearsal to drill in the most important concepts.

I made sure to make eye contact with everyone, sweeping from left to right and front to back. All musicians were accountable. There is no relaxing in band. Just five years earlier, these kids were in middle or elementary school. Now they were making music, not just reading notes but turning them into something that tugs at souls.

Then we read through a slow, dramatic tune. I stopped after the first phrase. “You played every note correctly. Pitch was good. Timing. Balance. Now play it again and turn it into music.” They knew exactly what to do. The second time through, they followed my left hand as I shaped each phrase. They breathed together. My two tuba players, the same two tossing a football ten minutes earlier, filled the bottom, giving each phrase a foundation that allowed the melody to flourish. Without that foundation, nothing works.

I stopped again, just a minute into the piece, and slowly put my baton on the music stand. All attention was focused. They wondered what had gone wrong. “That was music. Beautiful. Now let’s make it better.”

I stepped off the podium and walked near the saxophones. “What can we do to improve even more?”

The first alto saxophone said, “Pitch?”

“Yes, what else?”

Three hands shot up. I called on a trombonist. “Dynamics.”

“Yes, what else?” A percussionist raised her hand. “Everything.”

“Yes. Our tuning was good, our timing was excellent, our balance: good. Now focus, listen, and make it even better. This time, work on precision for entrances, and especially releasing together.”

I raised the baton, took an obvious breath where I expected them to breathe, and dropped it. They didn’t just sound great, they moved me, the only person in the room not playing an instrument. They were playing with their brains in sharp focus but their hearts on fire.

At the final cutoff, the pyramid of sound sitting with the bass instruments on the bottom resonated. I kept the baton up for five more seconds. That silence was the true ending. Nobody moved.

I lowered my hands slowly. “Wow,” I said, almost under my breath.

A euphonium player said out loud, “I’m starving!”

I gave a small sweeping motion with my hand that meant pack it up and go to lunch. The room broke into chatter as they put their instruments away. Some left. Others had their lunches with them and stayed.

I walked into my office. I never left for lunch. If I did, I would have had to lock the doors and kick everyone out. I stayed so they could stay. But I always shut the door to my office so my band students could just be kids without a teacher lurking.