

# 1 | *Courage*

*“This is it Dad,”* David Kirby thought as he turned his Nissan King Cab onto a gravelly road choked by alders and encroaching fir and pine. David could almost feel his father’s presence in the truck with him. He half-believed that if he turned just right—not too slow, not too fast—that his Dad would be sitting right there, pipe loosely clenched in the corner of his mouth, rings of cherry tobacco smoke circling his head, a shit-eating grin on his face as he waxed philosophic about some worldly concern.

But David knew that could not be. His Dad’s heart attack over the winter—followed by two months of lingering in and out of comas, and then death—made that impossible.

Rounding a bend, David stopped a few yards short of a rusted cable suspended between two steel posts. A weathered pine board with the word “PRIVATE” crudely painted on it in large letters hung at the center of the span.

David could still remember that cool, damp day some 25 years ago when he helped his Dad dig the holes and pour the cement where the steel posts now stood. David had been only 10 at the time, but his memory of that day—like so many other memories of this place—remained sharp. Rain had fallen steadily for most of their two-hour drive from Bangor on that long-ago morning, easing to a light drizzle as they pulled onto the Seboeis Camp road a few miles north of Shin Pond Village. By the

time they approached the edge of the camp property, and finally this very spot, the drizzle had ended. A cool breeze had taken its place. David remembered the wind pushing the rain-soaked trees this way and that as he and his father worked. He could still hear the rat-a-tat of water splattering down through the leafy branches overhead.

Now as he stared at the sagging, rusted cable, David watched several solitary mosquitoes bounce along the exterior curve of his windshield. He remembered how the mosquitoes and black flies had been particularly vicious as his Dad mixed and poured the cement, and that aside from running to fetch a beer for his Dad every now and then, his greatest contribution to the project had been to swat the nasty pests. *“The bugs made Count Dracula look timid,”* he recalled and chuckled.

For 25 years the cable had stood guard across this private section of roadway. For 25 years David, his Dad, and often an uncle, a cousin or close friend had spent at least one or two weeks each spring in this place fishing, relaxing and creating a lot of good memories.

David switched off the ignition and the truck fell silent. He rolled his window down halfway to listen to nothing in particular. Out here, at least 10 miles from the nearest town and electricity, what he could hear was almost as amazing as what he could not: there were no noisy streets, no noisy crowds, no blaring radios, no honking cars.

In the distance, David could hear the familiar murmur of the Seboeis River along its course. Overhead, a breeze was kissing trees that were just beginning to get their full summer foliage. Songbirds flittered and sang.

David chuckled again. There was one more sound he could identify. The sound was unmistakable—the hum of millions, if not billions, of buzzing mosquitoes and black flies waiting for some unwary victim to step out of the truck and unlock the cable. If his Dad had been there, he would have suggested they each start sipping a 16-ounce *Colt 45*—his favorite—to “get up their courage” before facing the swarming pests.

David pulled the release on his door, was surprised by how loud it sounded, and then stepped onto the gravel roadbed as the door swung open. That’s when he realized this was the first time *ever* he had undone the cable alone. In prior years, when other family members or friends had not been able to get time off from work or had made other commitments, he and his Dad had always been able to make the trip. *Always*.

But not this year . . . and not ever again.

David felt a rush of grief. He shrugged it off as best he could, suddenly afraid his six virgin 12-packs of *Coors Extra Gold* in the back of the truck would not last him the week. One 12-pack was already on ice in the cooler, and David worried that he might need a few before too long to get *his* courage up and keep it there.

Without warning, David’s thoughts shifted to his wife Kate and their two children: nine-year old Dylan and three-year old Kylie. His insides ached. He missed them already—even though he had left them only three hours before.

Kate had not wanted to come. With no electricity, no water, no plumbing, and barely a road to travel on, Kate left little doubt that she considered the camp the epicenter of the proverbial “nowhere.” She had not wanted David to go, either. In fact, she had hardly spoken a word to him all week as he prepared for

the time away by rushing to finish assignments at work and by catching up on various chores around the house.

“I wish you’d come with me,” he had told her. “I’d like you *all* to come with me.”

He and Kate had argued, but it had been more of a spat rather than a full-fledged row. After all, it was somewhat familiar territory—and it had been ever since his Dad died.

“You’ve got to get yourself out of this funk,” Kate had said. “It’s not healthy . . . not for you, for me, or the kids. I don’t like the idea of you going up to Seboeis, away from everybody, with all those memories.”

David had told her she was probably right, but that going to Seboeis—even alone—was something he felt compelled to do, some unfinished business he had to put to rest with at least one last visit. It was what his Dad would want. It was what he wanted, what he needed.

Earlier this morning Kate, Kylie and Dylan had gotten up to watch him pack some last-minute items in the truck and to say their “goodbyes.” With the sun still minutes from clawing its way above the eastern horizon, they had stood yawning and shuffling in the gravel driveway, shivering in the deceptively cool pre-dawn air as David slammed the tailgate shut.

“Dad,” young Kylie had said, clutching her father’s leg and giving him the tightest squeeze she could muster. “I love you.”

Dylan—dressed in a rumpled tee shirt and equally unkempt sweatpants—had bravely fought back tears that threatened to moisten his bespectacled eyes. Hugging his son, David had whispered, “maybe next year,” so only he and Dylan could hear.

David and Kate had embraced, and he had noticed a trace of day-old perfume in her hair. It was a familiar scent, a good scent. Their hug had been long and tender, full of unstated “*sorry*”s and “*be careful*”s.

“I will be careful,” David had reassured her with a wink and a peck on the cheek.

Leaving the driveway, with the defroster fan roaring, he had watched in the driver’s side mirror as his family’s waves disappeared into the murkiness of first light. David despised leaving them, but he also felt energized by the prospect of a week away from work and time alone to reflect on the last few months and ponder what lay ahead.

A mosquito buzzed in David’s ear, yanking him back to the present. He swatted, rubbed his ear lobe, checked for blood, and then drew a tarnished, brass key from his pants pocket. The key slid easily into the old “Elgin” steel padlock that held the cable in place, but would not turn. Rust apparently had seized the mechanism inside. A couple of squirts of WD-40 and several well-placed strokes with a two-pound ball peen hammer later, though, and the old lock soon gave up its hold.

David wrestled with the heavy cable. Despite years spanning the road, it still retained plenty of memory from its days stored on a factory spool. He coiled it as best he could along the edge of the road, drove his truck through, and then re-locked the cable to keep out unwanted company.

Just ahead, flanking the road, was a dam of entwined sticks and mud, newly-built by an ambitious beaver. The dam had turned the ice-cold, spring-fed flowage that seeped under the roadbed into a murky, nearly stagnant pool that completely

bisected David's path. The flowage had always been an ideal natural bait tank, but now it was ruined.

Disappointed, David shook his head.

He knew the ground beneath the newly-expanded pool must be the same solid shale and gravel that had always been there, but who knew what hidden currents might have gouged deep holes? To be safe, he engaged the truck's four-wheel drive unit and eased into the flowage.

The water was ruddy brown. Rings of pollen, undisturbed for some time, lined its surface. For a moment, David thought of letting up on the gas and retracing his tracks. Maybe this was a sign. Maybe this was Nature's way of telling him that nothing was forever, that time was fleeting, that everything changed—eventually. Maybe it *was* time to put it all behind him, to move on . . .

But maybe it was the way the early-morning sun seemed to paint the trees in vivid yellows and bright greens at that exact moment; or maybe it was the ever-present sensation that his Dad was still riding shotgun with him; whatever it was, David punched the gas. The tires spun and caught hold. Gravel crunched. The truck slogged forward.

David winked to the empty space beside him—"Thanks Dad"—and for a moment he was sure he smelled cherry tobacco.

Soon the road opened onto what once had been a large field about three acres in size. Now it was full of juniper bushes with a sprinkling of fir, poplar and cedar. Ahead, through the trees and atop the highest point of ground around, David could see a gray, metallic roof. As he drew nearer, he began to make out a weathered, faded log exterior.

“At least *you* haven’t gone anywhere,” he whispered.

The one-story building was about 60 feet long and 20 feet wide—hewn from trees felled more than three quarters of a century earlier to clear the field he now traversed. His Dad had told him the story of a retired army officer nicknamed “The Colonel” who had hired a crew of local wood cutters and craftsman to clear the land and build the camp back in 1919. “The Colonel” had returned from World War I weary of fighting and bloodshed, seeking to create a personal refuge for mind, body and spirit—and that’s exactly what he did.

For more than 40 years, “The Colonel” lived at Seboeis from early spring through late fall, seldom seeing any uninvited guests except for the occasional fisherman, trapper or logger. He left the place only in wintertime, when the roads to and fro could not be traveled safely or reliably and the temperatures plummeted well below zero both outside and in—despite the roaring blazes he would build and tend in the building’s great fieldstone fireplace.

Most winters, “The Colonel” rented a small apartment on Main Street in Patten—a logging town of about 800 people some 25 miles distant—where he bided his time until spring returned. Other winters, he traveled to southern climes to visit relatives or long lost friends . . . only to return to his “beloved” Seboeis with the advent of warmer temperatures.

David often wondered what it must have been like for “The Colonel” to spend so much time isolated and alone, with only the sun and the moon and the trees and the river to keep him company. He sighed. In another life, a life without Kate and the kids and that albatross he called a job, he would stop wondering and find out. But not in this life. He loved Kate and Dylan and Kylie too much. Maybe if he could show them this place—maybe

then they would understand; maybe then they would want to partake of a little of its magic, too.

David was a journalist. He ran a weekly newspaper with a circulation of about 6,000. He was editor, lead reporter, and general jack-of-all trades—even pitching in with type and layout every now and then.

The staff he had assembled comprised good, hard-working types who genuinely cared about each other and the newspaper. They worked hard, long hours for David, and getting the edition out on time each week had always been a matter of pride for them all—except that in recent months David’s zest for the newspaper, for meeting deadlines, and for “digging dirt” had waned. What with satellite television, 24-hour cable news, and the Internet, the newspaper business—especially the weekly newspaper business—was a dying art . . . or so David felt. Coupled with his Dad’s loss, the effect on David had been like that of a journeyman fighter receiving blow after heavy, thudding blow to his midsection. If he was not yet beat, David was certainly beginning to tire.

The owner and publisher of the newspaper was a woman in her early fifties. To David, she was cold, business-like, self-centered. David did not dislike her, yet he did not like her; what he felt towards her was indifference. She was a known quantity, predictable in her ways, all business and no play. David knew from week to week exactly where he stood and exactly what was needed of him—and that was not all bad. From David’s perspective, the paper, the employees, and even the subscribers were simply there to support her . . . and her alone.

She had been divorced for about 10 years and David knew—from news passed to him through the office grapevine—that shortly after her marriage had ended, and without a fight,



she had relinquished custody of her three young children to her ex-husband. The grapevine had also told him that she now saw her children only about four times a year, usually for dinner and a movie, but never for Christmas, Thanksgiving, a birthday, or any other meaningful occasion when it conflicted with her schedule.

David often wondered what the point of her career and all of her money was if she had no one with which to share it. The choices she had made stunned him; he would have made different ones.

As editor and reporter, David learned a great deal about what made his community function or—as he sometimes confided in his wife—what made it dysfunctional. Most days David was appalled by what he saw and heard, and his feelings had only grown more intense since his Dad’s passing. No one, from the town manager to the girls’ junior high basketball coach, appeared capable of making decisions for the right reason. There was always personal or professional gain to consider. “What’s in it for me?” seemed to be a universal, unspoken mantra.

David would often look for meaning in the senseless stuff—accidents, murders, untimely deaths—that touched all sorts of people, in all walks of life, but the meaning always eluded him. David could never understand such occurrences, could not understand *why* bad things happened. He hoped they were part of some greater, master plan—some overall scheme yet to be revealed—but secretly he feared they were not. Secretly, he feared they were the mindless, random events they appeared to be—without purpose, meaning or structure.

Young or old, rich or poor, whether someone slept on a heating grate in an inner city alley or was working late at night in

some high-rise office building; it did not seem to matter—death could always find its quarry.

David pulled the truck into the camp's dooryard and turned the key. The engine sputtered and died.

“Same as we left it,” he muttered.

Eying the post and beam porch that sheltered the front entrance, his stomach churned, his chest tensed, and his breath shortened. Here he was. After all the crying and thinking and talking of the past few months—here he was. Nothing looked different . . . yet it had all changed.

Facing him were two graying, wooden Adirondack chairs, sitting solemnly on either side of the doorway. His Dad had made the seats about 15 years ago. They were damn comfortable, too—much more so than they looked. David thought of the countless hours he and his Dad had spent in those chairs, gazing past the dooryard, down the steep slope the camp sat atop, toward the wide elbow in the river—the “deadwater” as they called it—watching for fish rises and hoping to glimpse a moose strolling by or a bald eagle soaring overhead.

The chair on the right was his Dad's chair, and it sat exactly where he had left it, as though it was patiently awaiting the return of its occupant. “It'll be right here for me next time,” the elder Kirby had often said upon departing. David could not remember if his Dad had spoken those words last year or not; and it really did not matter, the chair being empty was all that mattered.

David winced, fighting back a tear. How many times had he heard “I'll get to it next time” or “We'll have to do that next year”? How many times had he said the same thing, never thinking there might not be a *next time* or a *next year*?

He pushed open the truck door. Instead of heading for the camp, he went around to the back of the pick-up and opened the cap. Leaning in, he raised the cooler cover and dug for a cold beer.

He needed a little more *courage* after all.