Hometown Fourth of July

A small fishing boat waits for us at the dock. Eighty-year-old Ivan smiles as he helps us aboard. The water is glassy smooth, and the occasional turquoise-blue iceberg floats by us as we head up the river to photograph bears pulling spawning salmon from a creek.

Ivan fled Prague in the sixties, and speaking no English, ended up on the tiny, remote island of Wrangell. People in Wrangell gave him cleaning jobs and what work they could. He has never left and is a well-loved wildlife photographer and guide in the community.

"I knew your father," he said. "It was sad, what happened." The plane accident happened more than fifty years ago.

The next day, as we stood waiting for the parade on Wrangell's Main Street, holding our beers and a Bloody Mary in to-go cups, people stopped to give us a hug and to say hello.

Sam Carlson stopped in front of us. "I went on a date in high school with your sister, Diny!!"

Sam, a hunter and a trapper who lives off the land in a tiny, remote Alaskan bay is now a reality TV star of sorts, for National Geographic, along with the other twenty-five people who live in Port Protection on Prince of Wales Island.

"I remember your dad doing an aerobatic show in his plane every Fourth of July."

The Queen float, traditionally made up of a Wrangell girl and her court, rolls down the street to great applause. This year a young man, wearing a queenly robe and crown and holding a bouquet of roses waves to the crowd who voted him in.

"We were cuter queens," my best friend from high school tells me, laughing.

I realize that my husband and I CAN go home; people remember us and remember our stories. Even fifty years later.

Wrangell changes very little. The same dilapidated houses still stand, the same flower gardens bloom profusely in the 20 hours of sunlit summer days, and Wrangell is still effortlessly accepting of every person, regardless of education, race, sexuality, or lack of teeth. Life here is tough and not everyone survives it. The ones who do, remember.