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appeared in "Half-Baked Alaska"
Alaska Magazine, March 1997

RAIN

by Suzanne Andersen

In Lisianski Inlet on Chichagof Island, it rains. It is not the liquid vengeance of a Caribbean hurricane, but more like the slow drip of Chinese water torture. The drip accumulates to 120 inches per year, which seems like a lot unless you compare it to soggy Ketchikan, which gets 124 inches, also in drips.

The mountains are to blame. They rise 3000 feet from the fjord on both sides. On a clear day you can see their snow fields in attack position, ready to condense moisture from the sea breeze, and send it dripping to earth. One waits for the occasional summer day when the wind blows so hard that there is no time for condensation. On those days one can scramble to the top of Mt. Raatikainen and, with double good luck, can see Mt. Fairweather rising 20,000 feet on the mainland northwest of Glacier Bay.

Mt. Fairweather? Surely the cartographer jests. He was inspired, no doubt, by his disingenuous predecessor who called our ocean "Pacific". These folks had a different point of view than the explorers and fishermen who named, for example, nearby Cape Deception and Peril Strait.

The only time of year when it does not rain in Lisianski Inlet is in the winter. In winter it snows. The snow, high mountains and high latitude collaborate to produce dark. Weeks pass with only the barest hint of a diurnal cycle. The snow piles up in great heaps, which children love because they can play "king of the mountain", and grown-ups hate because they know how the snow gets

there: shovel full by shovel full. The solstice passes, then Christmas, then Groundhog's Day.

Groundhog's Day? It was marked on calendars, and had to be explained to us children.

"The groundhog does what?" We looked doubtfully out the window, trying to imagine a groundhog burrowing out of the great heaps of snow and looking futilely for the sun. There were no groundhogs in Lisianski Inlet; an animal that stupid would surely not survive.

However children are cooperative, and we allowed the grownups their little hoax about the groundhog. It was certainly no less credible than their story about how children Down South got to stay home from school whenever it snowed.

After Groundhog's Day and another month or two of snow, suddenly it would begin to rain. That is how we knew it was spring.

Many years after I had left Lisianski Inlet, I took my husband Joe back to visit. It is hard to believe, but I forgot to tell him about the rain.

I told him instead about waterfalls cascading down cliffs into the fjord. I told him about frozen winter nights when the crystal air is so still that your breath hangs there for hours, and the only movement is the aurora borealis making a light show in the northern sky. I told him about whales breaching in

the fjord in front of our village, and about wild strawberries that one must wrest from the grizzly bears. I told him about the sun glinting off high snowfields, beckoning the fit and adventurous to scramble up a mountainside. I told him about the mountain lakes warmed by the sun where the hot, sweaty hiker could shed his clothes for a refreshing swim without the intrusion of other hikers. I backed all of this up with photographs.

Can I be blamed for this deception? Do other people take photographs in the rain?

We arrived in Lisianski Inlet in my father's fishing boat *Sea Haven* on a day my father described as "flat calm". There is disagreement on this point. To a fisherman, "flat calm" means that the boat does not take spray over the bow at 6 nauts. To Joe, "flat calm" means that he does not spend the entire trip throwing up over the rail. By the latter measure, it was not flat calm.

We turned southeast from Lisianski Strait, passed inside of Minor Island, and made our way down the Inlet toward Pelican. I stood with Joe on the fore deck, remembering aloud the adventures of my Lisianski childhood.

"This is where Chrissie and I beached the Buttercup, missed the tide, and had to wait five hours until it came in again."

"This is where an eagle swooped down to clasp the deerhide we threw overboard, and took Alan's hat instead."

As I peered down the Lisianski canyon between the high mountains, I saw sparkling days of youthful adventure. Joe saw dark clouds and rain.

"So what will we do for three days in the rain?" he asked.

"It's not going to rain for three days," I said. "It's not even raining now."

I had lapsed into Lisianski etiquette. Unless the rain is actually coming through the windowframes, it is not mentioned in polite company.

"It's not raining? Then what is dripping off my Sou'wester onto my raincoat, and into my boots?" he asked.

I looked at him sternly, as one would look at a child who was slurping his soup.

"Why are you wearing boots," I said, "when it is not raining?"

We finally approached the Pelican boat harbor, and friends came to lend a hand in tying up the boat. One hand, that is. The other hand was holding an umbrella.

It was in Pelican that I learned the Law of Conservation of Umbrellas: It doesn't matter how many you lose, or how often you leave them at other people's houses, because there is a fixed number of umbrellas and a fixed number of people, with fewer people than umbrellas. If you find yourself without an umbrella, then someone else has several, and will give you one.

Among our welcomers was my friend Gail Corbin: mountaineer, hunter, fisherwoman, field guide, and local magistrate of Pelican, a rambunctious community of 200 people. She lives in a log cabin in Pelican's suburb, Sunnyside, of about a dozen people. Sunnyside was evidently named by the same folks who brought us Mt. "Fairweather" and the "Pacific" Ocean. It is two miles from Pelican, but can only be reached by boat. The sheer cliffs of the mountainside make the land route impossible.

I hugged her warmly. "I was hoping we could climb a mountain for old time's sake," I said. "Too bad about the rain."

"What rain?" she said.

We climbed Mt. Raatikainen, and even saw Mt. Fairweather. Later, in Berkeley, Joe regaled our friends with tales of sheer cliffs, unreliable deer trails, and mountain lakes so clear you don't know they contain water. Finally he was persuaded to pull out the few photographs that he had taken. There we are, with bedraggled hair and rainwater dripping off our noses.

"You climbed a mountain in the *rain*?" they asked.

Joe looked at them as if they were slurping their soup. "What rain?" he said.

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