



Outside Passage: A Memoir of an Alaskan Childhood (Modern Library Paperbacks)

Julia Scully

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"Alaska, in its way, demands your full attention. Like a slap in the face, the assault of the weather, the landscape, the sheer physical effort of enduring forces memories further and further away." In *Outside Passage* Julia Scully regathers the memories of her childhood, and, like the strange territory and time they cover--the isolated far western Alaskan frontier before and during World War II--these memories demand our full attention. They begin with her immigrant parents' efforts to make a living during the Depression in California and the Pacific Northwest. Faced with illness and despair, Julia's father commits suicide when she is seven, and she and her older sister, Lillian, discover his body. Julia's mother then leaves her daughters in a San Francisco orphanage and goes to Alaska, searching for an economic toehold at the edge of the continent.

Julia seeks comfort in the rituals of the orphanage--learning how to knit and darn, roller-skating outside after dinner, listening to *One Man's Family* on the radio. Trying to adapt, she submerges her memories: "It's not that I can't remember my mother or what it was like before . . . but I don't think about any of it because, when I do, my chest aches." Eventually, her mother buys a roadhouse--the only public place in Taylor, Alaska, it serves the settlement's small-time gold miners--and at last sends for her daughters to rejoin her.

Despite the cold and isolation of Alaska, there are small blessings for Julia to count: secretive summer wildflowers and berries on the seemingly barren landscape, and the wild animals--reindeer, fox, and wolves--that roam the endless tundra. The young Julia serves whiskey to the rough customers who play poker at the ramshackle roadhouse, pans gold with a beguiling prospector, kisses her first boyfriend--one of the soldiers ordered to Alaska to defend against a possible Japanese invasion. As she begins to understand the mysteries of sexuality and her parents' secrets, she also begins to build the privations and the minor pleasures and the perceptions of her childhood into a platform for a wider and fuller life. In the same way, she has transformed her memories of that childhood into a written record sometimes as painful but always as beautiful as the cold, clear streams under which the gold lay hidden.

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