

# Cloud9

MAGAZINE  
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## *The 7 Wonders* OF OREGON



SKI ALASKA  
HONORING OUR VETERANS  
HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR ONE AND ALL

The official publication of

SEA\*PORT  
AIRLINES

WINGS  
OF ALASKA

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**ON OUR COVER:** *Mt. Hood, one of the 7 Wonders of Oregon, towers above a field of lavender.*  
*Photography: Chantal Anderson, Courtesy Travel Oregon*

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# Cloud9

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# Lugubrious Christmas

*By Chad Holley*

*Soon after we moved into the neighborhood I grew up in, my father built me a sandbox. This sounds storybook to me now, but it's true, and I loved it. My father, I am certain, relished every effort he took to build that sandbox—to frame it out, to shovel a pickup-bed of clean sand into it—and when he finished I sat in the silky cool stuff and played, alone, for hours and days on end. This sandbox sat just inside the narrow gate in the tall wooden fence that surrounded our backyard, also built by my father. And one afternoon, as I sat playing in my sand, I looked up to find someone standing in the open gate, watching me.*

It was a child, brown-eyed, summer-tanned, head clamped to the jawline in a helmet of wild black hair. That it might be a girl did not especially bother me. But afterward my mother told me: this was Tucker Willingham, my three-years-older next-door neighbor, a boy. I could not have been more than five years old that afternoon, but I can still see him standing there, the way he regarded me, sitting alone in that sandbox, the mixture of amusement and haughtiness on his face, the glimmer in his watchful eye, the handsome grin. Never has anyone been able to communicate to me so clearly—and yet so softly that our companionship would often resemble real friendship—that his happiness in no real way depended upon mine. I could attend him if I wanted, he'd be happy to have me along, or I

could find something else to do, it didn't matter to him. And the true index of his power in this, of course, lay in its never, in all our years together, having to be spoken. He simply emanated it, like cool, like confidence. So, naturally, he would always be the boy I would chase: in my choice of bicycle and baseball glove, in my taste in t-shirts and tennis shoes, in the way—when in time he began to groom himself with adolescent particularity—I asked to have my hair cut. I was by no means alone in this. Most every boy in the neighborhood, I suspect, sacrificed something, eventually, at Tucker's altar. But whatever he may have been for the others, I can say that Tucker Willingham was for me the first person, other than my father, I ever wanted to be.

"Hey," he said, standing in the gate, on the afternoon I first laid eyes on him.

"Hey."

He was, even at that age, smiling that haughty smile of his.

"What're you doing?"

I looked down at the sand I was playing in, at the plastic shovel, the truck.

"Playing."

He smiled more fully at that, at me, then he turned and disappeared from the gate.

Even then, I believe, it felt like the beginning of something. I stood up and brushed impossibly at all the sand on my legs and hands, and I stepped out of the sandbox and went inside the house. You'll think I am exaggerating, but I do not remember ever playing in it again.

\* \* \*

So it was that one December afternoon, I'd guess I was now ten, Tucker and I were alone in his house, eating cheese out of the door of his refrigerator. I noticed him sneaking looks at me. In deference to the cheese preferences of my father, my mother could not be induced to buy this delicious mild cheddar, and I had told Tucker this, so I figured that must be what he was

thinking about. But then suddenly he put the cheese away, closed the refrigerator door, looked at me squarely, and said, "There's something upstairs I haven't told you about."

My mouthful of cheese lost all flavor. I was terrified of the upstairs of Tucker's house, with its long, dim, creaky hallway, its eerily silent bedrooms, most especially the two deserted, mausoleum-like bedrooms of the grown sisters who no longer lived there.

I said, softly, "What's up there?"

Tucker shook his head. "I'm not supposed to tell you."

All I wanted in the world was to discontinue this conversation. I swallowed the thick wad of cheese.

I said, "What, come on, tell me."

Tucker took me upstairs.

We stood in the shadowy hallway, before the closed door of one of the deserted, grown-sister bedrooms. I was as frightened as I ever want to be.

Tucker said, "Your Santa Claus stuff is in there."

I looked at the dark door, at the bar of gray daylight beneath. My mother and father were not heavily invested in the Santa Claus story. They had, in fact, let it fall away fairly early, in favor of playing up the Christ child. What they were heavily invested in, however, was surprising, yea, astonishing my sister and my brother and me on Christmas morning with undreamt of indulgences and a general demonstration of abundance wholly unknown through the rest of the year. Each year they somehow managed to convince us that this time we'd be lucky to get a pack of Nabs, maybe an orange, and when Christmas morning finally arrived they'd wallop us with a spread to rival the cover of the Service Merchandise catalogue.

Tucker said, "But don't ask me to take you in there, because I can't."

I said, "Okay."

We stood before the door, in the dark hallway.

Tucker said, "How much would you pay me to take you in there?"

I found some cheese in my mouth, swallowed it.

I said, "Six dollars."

He had me wait in the hallway while he went inside. After a moment, he called for me to come in.

He showed me a cherry-colored wool sweater. He would not let me touch it. He put it back in the crackly brown department store bag it had come in, and ushered me from the room.

He closed the door behind us. We stood together again in the dark hallway.

I said, "That was clothes."

He said, "So?"

I said, "So, gyp."

For another six dollars, he agreed to take me in and show me something besides clothes.

It was a watch. The exact kind I had asked for, but been flatly told I would not get. It had calculator buttons on it. Again, he would not let me

touch it, and after a brief moment we came back out of the room.

We stood before the closed door. I was satisfied. A watch was not clothes.

He said, "There's a lot more stuff in there. It's under the bed."

He took me in four more times, at six dollars per. I have no recollection of the items.

After the last trip inside, we stood outside the door together.

I said, "I don't think I have any more money."

Tucker said, "That's okay, I can't show you any more anyway."

I said, "Okay."

We stood in the hallway.

I said, "How much do I owe you?"

He said, "Thirty-six dollars."

I said, "Okay."

Downstairs, I said, "My stomach hurts. I think I'm going home."

I walked back around to my house with my head full of thoughts.

I walked in through our carport door, into the kitchen. My mother

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**We stood in the shadowy hallway, before the closed door of one of the deserted, grown-sister bedrooms. I was as frightened as I ever want to be.**

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was at the stove, fixing supper.

"Hey, darling."

"Hey."

"Did you find your Christmas stuff?"

I stepped into the little blue bathroom off our dining area and closed the door. This was a half-bath, with walls of cool blue tile and a lavatory and toilet of cool blue porcelain. On the back of the toilet there sat a tiny vase of dried flowers and a small framed painting my mother had done of a little chubby naked girl in a bonnet using a chamber pot. I closed the

lid on the toilet, stepped up on it, and leaned over to study my face in the mirror over the lavatory.

"No, ma'am," I called.

I came out of the little blue bathroom, went to the counter with the bar stools, climbed up in Miss Sissy's. Miss Sissy was Tucker's mother. Several days a week she would sit on this stool at this counter and drink coffee while my mother cooked at the stove or washed dishes at the sink. Miss

Sissy would slap the counter and tell the funniest stories about Tucker or her husband Mr. Eddie or her mute and milky-eyed Chihuahua named Hercules who fainted a lot. I watched my mother wipe a sponge around the chrome surface of the stove, among the simmering pots.

I slapped the counter.

I said, "Remember that time me and Tucker went to the Halloween Carnival at Christ United Methodist and we went in the haunted house with Miss Sissy and when she brought me home she said, 'Honey, they like to tore my clothes off!'"

My mother took the lid off a pot, stirred it slowly.

She said, "I do."

I laughed.

I said, "That was so funny."

She said, "Yes, it was," and kept stirring the pot.

I slid from the stool and headed downstairs, where I could hear my

sister and brother playing in the den.

My sister was five years younger than I was, my brother seven. I sat down on our brown corduroy sofa and watched them chase one another around the room in idiotic innocence. I was still sitting there when I heard my father come in through the carport door from work. It was a short, wide stair that led from the den to the kitchen, and I could hear everything, heard my father close the carport door, heard him greet my mother at the stove (“Hey”), heard them kiss, heard him put his wallet and keys on the buffet and start down the stairs.

He moved around the den to kiss each of us on the top of the head, sat down on our other sofa, an uncomfortable wood-and-thin-cushion job, crossed his legs, draped his arms along the sofa back.

“So who knows what they’re getting for Christmas?”

My brother and sister exploded, leaping, gibbering.

I sat on the brown corduroy sofa, inspecting the fine job done by the factory upholsterer. When I had mustered what heart I could for deception, I bounced up and pushed through my sister and brother, threw my hand in the air:

“I know what I want!”

From the calm center of all that surrounded us, my father looked only at me.

“I didn’t ask who knows what they want,” he said. “I asked who knows what they’re getting.”

“Oh, yeah, shoot,” I said, and

turned to retire to the back of the line.

But it would not have been like my father to let us all off so easily. And when I dared look at him again, his eyes were still on me.

“How about you,” he said. “Do you know?”

It has, of course, occurred to me to fault him for insisting. After all, I was the one with the burning questions here. But as I say, he knew none of us would be getting off easy.

I looked at him. He waited.

“No, sir,” I said.

Whenever I come across the word *lugubrious*, I think of that Christmas. Particularly of my father. Of the way he looked at me from our uncomfortable sofa that afternoon, of the way he nodded when he’d heard my answer. But how to describe the profundity of my relief, my gratitude, when the following day, beneath the pecan tree outside the gate in our backyard fence, Tucker did not insist on cash, but with a patience and magnanimity to match the spirit of the season, watched me carefully open the tissue in my hand, and with a soft, satisfied smile lifted from it the little ivory-colored rock from our curio cabinet. My father had found it on one of our walks in the creek bed, the deepest I believe we ever took into the old woods beyond the neighborhood. Tucker held it up in the colorless December light. It looked undeniably like a sheep, with four short legs, a bobbed tail, a head with ears. ➔



CHAD HOLLEY lives in Los Angeles. He is at work on a novel about twenty-odd boys growing up in a rural

Mississippi neighborhood, of which “Lugubrious Christmas” is an excerpt. Read it on page 54.

KATHERINE HOPPE is director of the Coos Bay-North Bend Visitor & Convention Bureau. As an Oregon resident for the past ten years, she is a fan of all



things Oregon Coast, as well as a wannabe professional clammer/crabber. She delves into the wonders of “The Adventure Coast” on page 48.



JUDIAANN WOO is as passionate about finding the next great meal as she is about finding unique, off-the-beaten

path adventures, which makes her well suited to tell the stories of Oregon. Born in South Korea, Judiaann has always considered Oregon home, and today she oversees the PR and media relations program at Travel Oregon. Visit the “7 Wonders of Oregon” on page 39.