

Wakefield Press

EXPOSURE

Joel Magarey has been an ice salesman, juggler, translator and journalist. He has travelled in remote regions across the world, and his travel stories, short fiction and poetry have appeared in Australian and American literary magazines. Born in 1969 in Adelaide, he lives in Melbourne, where he works as a writer and as a reporter with the Victorian parliament. *Exposure* is his first book.

EX POSURE

A JOURNEY

JOEL MAGAREY



Wakefield
Press

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For Mum and Dad
with admiration, gratitude, and love.

Author's note

Exposure recounts my experience and memories, but I have taken some creative licence, and dialogue and correspondence are not verbatim. Most names have been changed and some identities disguised.

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United States, September 1995

‘EXPEDITION.’ The fax on the noticeboard at the Anchorage Youth Hostel catches my eye. ‘Volunteers wanted.’ I see a group of adventurous people – *women?* – bonding amid Alaska’s peaks; the group of us flowing on the clear adventurous river: the intensity and excitement I want at last.

When I phone the number on the notice, Troy, a Seattle financial analyst, tells me he’s coming up to Anchorage for two weeks and wants someone to go paddling with.

Still – it has possibilities. Troy goes on to describe a plan – to descend the length of the Clark River, in the isolated Chigmit Mountains – which does sound exciting. Despite his name, Troy sounds pretty good too. He’s had ‘thirteen years of kayaking experience’, including a trip in the Alaskan panhandle, and sounds in his late thirties or forties – just the sort of weather-beaten hardman a novice like myself should venture into deep water with.

When I confess my kayaking experience is limited to half a season of canoe polo played in a swimming pool – but add that I did learn the Eskimo roll – Troy’s deep voice reassures me this ‘sounds fine. In any case, if you got into trouble I’d be there giving you assistance straightaway.’ Later during the call Troy mentions that the ‘glacial kayaking season’ of the Clark River is ‘technically finished’.

‘But,’ he says, ‘this isn’t a problem – I’ve spoken to the ranger.’ Which I accept. Which sounds plausible.

When I ring back the next day, we begin organising the logistics, but just as we do so Troy asks if I am now ‘committed’ to the venture.

Automatically I say, ‘Yes.’

We’re involved.

What the—? Waiting at the top of the hostel stairs, the next afternoon, is a young person: a blond, bright-eyed, trendy-jeans-wearing young person who *must be younger than me*.

The young person is grinning at me. ‘G’day, Aussie!’ he says with the expectant sparkle of someone being consciously witty.

‘G’day, Yank,’ I manage, but then I fall mute. Will this fresh-faced dude really pluck me from the roiling water? Still, he could, physically – he’s a big fresh-faced dude. Must be nearly seven feet.

Troy’s enthusiastic, too. As we take his father’s collapsible kayak down to the park for a test-packing, his talk is all of sightings of moose and bear – he *wants* to see a bear – catching our own dinners, and not sleeping in the tent ‘if we don’t have to’. Sounds pretty cold to me, and the kayak, sitting on the grass with our stuff in it, strikes me as kind of full. But Troy says it’s fine, and what do I know? By now it’s dusk, and Troy announces he’ll sleep the night by a lake on the outskirts of Anchorage. He smiles apologetically but knowingly. ‘When you’re in *Alaska*, you don’t sleep in a *youth hostel*.’ In the morning I’m gratified to hear he couldn’t find the lake and ended up sleeping in the park with a drunk.

On the plane to Kenai, Troy seems a little shitty. I’m not certain whether it’s because I slept through my watch alarm or because, having also got our plane’s departure time wrong, I’ve made us an hour late meeting our float-plane pilot. Sitting in a Subway cafe in Kenai while our pilot now makes us wait, Troy tells me it’s both. I try to blame the airline – they really did mislead me – but it

doesn't wash. I cop that, but a few minutes later Troy refuses to believe me when I tell him O. J. Simpson has just been acquitted, a piece of news that has come on the Subway radio while Troy was in the toilet. He actually goes off to check my report with a counter girl, returning looking upset, and at this I can't help commenting, 'Whaddaya know – Aussies understand radio news.'

Is it right that we should already be squabbling this much? But Troy lets me have the front seat in the float plane so I think he must be alright after all. We fly west over the Cook Inlet and on its far side approach a wall of mountains running north and south without visible end. Our pilot, Will, aims straight at the wall and takes us into a narrow canyon-like split in it. Rocky mountainsides soar a hundred or so metres from either wing, blue tongues of glaciers hanging from them. A rock face rears directly in front; Will skirts it to the left and turns south into a valley he shouts is ours. Soon he points down to a lake at the head of a winding watercourse that disappears into the mountains. 'That's you,' he yells, and turns the plane down towards the lake.

In waist-high rubbers Will jumps into the water and pulls the plane to the shore. When we've finished unloading our gear he hesitates, then asks us to send him a postcard when we get out. 'You know,' he says, 'just so I know . . .'

We watch him dip his wings in farewell. In the icy wind we shiver and hug ourselves. Chunky pyramids of grey and black rock topped with ice and snow rise on all sides, the steep faces cracked and striated, glaciers creeping down the highest visible gullies. The valley itself looks unearthly: there's no green, barely any life, only pebbles by the acre, wet brown earth, stones, and an occasional patch of stunted brown ground cover.

'Oh, man!' yells Troy.

I go over. Troy's looking down at some enormous bear prints. As

he takes a photo of the length of my size-eleven boot fitting across the width of one of the bear's prints, I recall the mistake I made perusing a book on bears in the wild in an Anchorage bookshop. I'd thought it would reassure me that they never attacked humans unprovoked. As Troy starts snapping shots of his own size-thirteen boots in the prints, I notice the spray of earth clods around the prints have a, well, *fresh* look to them.

'Should we get going, Troy?'

We look along the southern banks of the lake for the river, but it's an odd thing: we can't find a river. We search more, but there's definitely no river flowing out of the lake. This is a worry, since there needs to be one if we're to go anywhere. We split up and search more. After half an hour I find a stream of muddy glacial run-off trickling into the valley a kilometre down.

It's a long, slow, multi-trip haul to get the kayak and all our gear over, but by 2 pm the boat sits in the shallow water ready to go. Troy holds it to the bank while I gingerly step in. The kayak hits the bottom. 'It'll deepen a bit further down,' Troy says.

We walk the kayak a bit further down, and try again; it hits the bottom. We repeat the process three more times. The fourth time, the kayak floats. Troy gets in too and we push off and paddle with the flow – this is better! One two, one two. Then there's a scraping sound and we grind to a stop, water flowing around us. Troy, in the back, tries to push us off the pebbly bottom with his paddle, but it becomes obvious someone has to get into the water and pull us free. We sit in silence while I wait for Troy to register he's the one with the scuba-style booties on. When he finally hops in he takes a sharp breath.

'Oh, *man!*'

The getting stuck on gravel banks becomes a pattern. After Troy has dragged us off them about half a dozen times, I feel duty-bound

to have a go. The ice water burns. We progress slowly for three hours, scraping and pulling or pushing, Troy repeating, 'It'll deepen further down,' until I want to brain him with my paddle.

Late in the afternoon I'm dragging the kayak off another bar when Troy shouts and points to a big orange-red fish idling in the water. He yells at me to try catching it with my hands. Reluctantly I grab at it, amazed when I succeed. 'Wo-hoo!' Troy yells, but I'm upset: I hate fishing, hate watching the fish writhe and suffocate. Yet I'm too cowardly to deliberately fumble and drop this wriggling fish now. Instead, on the bank, which Troy is yelling will be our camp-site, I grab the biggest pebble I can find and start pounding the fish's head in; but the pebble's not big enough for the job, so I have to keep pounding, harder and harder, until the fish's head is a bloody mess. When I've finished I notice Troy giving me some funny looks. I tell him I'm really an 'escaped Australian psycho murderer'. He smiles an odd smile.

Swathes of gold laid across snowy peaks by the morning sun lift my spirits. When we drag the kayak back into the water we see how much worse our vessel is for the pebble-sledding wear. The metal frame is bent in a few places and one of the plastic ribs is broken. Last night Troy also discovered some small tears in the rubber bottom, which he repaired.

Now, as we lock down the storage compartments, I fumble and lose a screw in the flow.

'Whoops.'

Troy takes the opportunity to explain politely that we'll have to replace everything we lose or break on his father's kayak. I take the opportunity to reply courteously that I'll be happy to replace anything I lose or break. With the burning pain and other strange sensations that haven't left my toes since yesterday, I'm acutely

conscious that the changes in both my feet and the kayak are directly down to the strange choice Troy has made, despite his thirteen years' experience, of a very shallow river for us to paddle.

An issue for later. We both still expect the river to deepen any minute, or any hundred metres. Especially since, if it doesn't, we'll probably starve or freeze to death, there being no human civilisation for at least 100 kilometres as the crow flies, and maybe twice that as the watercourse winds.

We set off and, a few seconds later, scrape to a halt. Troy digs with his paddle to try to push us off. 'Shouldn't we get out before pushing off,' I say, 'given the tears in the bottom?'

Troy is digging, grunting.

'Troy?' There's a snap as his paddle blade breaks.

'Oh, *man*,' he says, jumping out and splashing unsuccessfully after the fleeing half of the blade.

At the constant gravel bars Troy increasingly refuses, for reasons I can't fathom, to get out and drag the kayak. In response I do more and more. It's arduous, leg-numbing work, and the kayak's nose rope has soon seared away skin on my hands. Then Troy breaks another paddle blade. This time there's a snap in me too, like a gunshot, and I sense happiness, with a startled beating of wings, flying off and away, over the peaks, out of here . . .

Because we had swapped paddles, now one blade on each paddle is broken, which means we no longer have much steering control. Which is becoming more of an issue. Whereas the streams in the watercourse have so far been spread out in a shallow fifty-metre-wide tangle, they've now begun occasionally funnelling together into deeper, faster sections where the banks are lined by short wiry trees whose roots and low branches, protruding in thick bunches into the water, Troy says are a recognised hazard of the river. 'They're called "sweepers",' he adds, sounding satisfied.

Soon we're streaming down a narrow fast deep bit. It's fun and a great relief to be speeding over water after all the scraping. The kayak shoots out into a curve in the river, and now we're needing to turn with the curve, but we're not turning; we're shooting straight toward a dense thicket of sweepers on the bank opposite. 'Left! *LEFT!*' I yell back at Troy but he's already paddling left as hard as he can with his one blade. Seconds later the current sweeps us into the thicket, its branches whipping our faces. As the water pushes us harder against the branches I try to push us back, but now the kayak's tipping sideways and I glance back and see Troy half-falling, half-jumping into the water. I seem to be falling in too now, wondering if this is really happening, when *fuck!* the water's thousand icy hands grope me all over. I breathe in sharply, my mind goes hazy, and I can't seem to breathe out again. Both my legs are still stuck in the capsized kayak and I'm finding it hard to keep my head above water. I kick my legs wildly, and after a struggle they come out of the kayak along with a few bits of gear. Now I manage to breathe in, noticing in the same moment that the kayak and I are floating downstream. I look round for Troy and see he's lying over the upturned kayak next to me, shouting:

'... of the water! Get your top half out of the cold!'

I haul myself half out of the water as we begin to pick up speed. Lying next to each other across the kayak Troy and I look down-river and call out at the same time.

'Oh, *man.*'

'Fuck me.'

That frothing rapid will be the end of us.

As we pass the end of the length of sweepers I see a tiny beach and point and yell 'Beach, beach!' and let myself slip back into the water. The water's up to my chest and I can hardly stop myself in the current, let alone stop the kayak, but when Troy joins me we

just manage to hold ourselves steady and, inch by inch, push the kayak to the shore.

On the beach we stand, wide-eyed and dumb. Motionless, we stare at the kayak. It's a heavy, full bathtub. We stare at each other. Then we start trembling. We start shivering violently, uncontrollably. Troy jitters up and down the beach while I jog on the spot. 'F-f-fire.'

A lot of stuff has floated away, including one of my boots and one of the anti-bear sprays. Of what remains, all the unpackaged food is a sodden mess, both our cameras are wrecked, many of our clothes are wet and – worst of all – Troy's sleeping bag is sopping.

We try to dry what we can over a fire. When one of my mountaineering socks falls into the flames, the lethargy of my unsuccessful attempt to rescue it frightens me.

At least there's dinner.

God, the smell of that tortellini makes a helluva difference. I open my steaming packet of rehydrated pasta with glee. As I'm about to dig in I notice a sachet sitting on the steaming pasta printed with the words 'DO NOT EAT'.

I hold it up. Troy says, 'That's the seasoning. You put it on to taste.'

Oh, I think, so you 'do not eat' it *on its own*. Seasoning? I tear the sachet apart, sprinkle the peppercorn-like contents onto my pasta and dig in. Hmm, fantastic pasta. But the seasoning is kind of crunchy and, taste-wise, not doing it for me. In fact . . . I search for the discarded sachet and inspect it closer in the firelight.

DO NOT EAT

Oxygen Remover

I show Troy. 'Oh, *man*,' he says.

In the tent, Troy, who hasn't said much all night before jumping early into bed, shivers in his wet sleeping bag. In the Marmot Spire, kept perfectly dry by the 100 per cent waterproof bag-storage sack I spent an afternoon buying in Anchorage, I'm guiltily, toastily warm. But my bag doesn't protect my state of mind as I contemplate what lies ahead. What I see is the ninety per cent of the way we still have to go, and the new – or repeated? – disasters that seem sure to occur once we get back into that freezing water again.

To stop the dread inundating my mind, I counter-fantasise. I think of people and times and places I've loved and been happy and safe in. Mostly it doesn't work too well but if I stay with some memories doggedly enough – the travels Penny and I did in our teens are the best – I escape Alaska briefly and become drowsy for a while before the dread floods back in to jolt me awake again.