All the Way Rider

**A STORY**

[**BY MATTOX ROESCH**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/mattox-roesch)

**The same month** my brother Wicho went to prison, I met Go-boy for the first time. He’d won a trip to Disneyland for his whole family after making a home movie and entering it in a contest for Native Alaskan high school students:[](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/node/280) *What Are the Most Important Issues Facing Rural Villages in the Twenty-first Century?* I remember because it was the first time I had ever thought about Alaska and all the cousins we had there. Go-boy brought the tape along and showed it to us. Mom was silent the whole time, just watching. After a while, she asked Go’s dad—her brother—*When did they build those snow fences? What happened to General Store?* Go narrated the ten-minute video and ended it by saying, *Unalakleet, like most Alaskan villages and other Native communities, will be a gauge for America’s priorities in the twenty-first century.*

My brother had already been locked up for almost a year, in and out of trial, so we were used to him being gone. But it was that month, when Go-boy came to Disneyland, that Wicho was finally sentenced to life in prison, putting an end to months in limbo.

I remember everything that happened at that time, from Wicho’s arrest to his trial and his sentencing, clearer than anything else. Through all the waiting—through the string of trials and mistrials, the settlement offers, and then, the damning evidence—Mom had been busing to the courthouse for every meeting and hearing, always convinced of Wicho’s innocence, always on time, always optimistic. When the jury called him guilty and the guards hauled him away (and scolded Mom for trying to talk to him), she managed to stay composed. She led me out of the courtroom, silent, ignoring the PD and the victims’ families, not flinching, until one of the jurors found us in the hall and tried to apologize. “I’m sorry for your son,” he said, jumping in front of us. I told him to get the hell away, but it was too late. After a year of silent humiliation, Mom finally broke down. But when she did, when she walked off down the hall, her arms wrapped around herself, I wasn’t sure if she was crying for her son or for herself.

What happened was that Wicho gave his life for a gang. A year before any college or army could claim him, he shot two fifteen-year-old kids on a Wednesday afternoon. He shot members of his own gang—Mara Salvatrucha. They had tried to leave the clique, saying they had never represented anybody, but Wicho told me they’d been jumped in and everything, and one even had *MS13* tattooed on his stomach, Old English style. He said they knew what they’d gotten themselves into, knew being jumped in meant forever.

We lived in West Los Angeles at the time. Every day Go-boy and his family were in LA they’d come by our house in a rental car. It was Go and his mom and dad, and it was the first time I met any of our family from Alaska. Growing up, we heard nothing about Mom’s side, but there they were in our house. Go-boy looked about the same age as Wicho but a little taller, and he spent most of the time trying to find out what we had in common, asking me about music and school. We both liked basketball. And that was it, I guessed.

Go said, “The Lakers could win the whole thing this year, ah?”

And I said, “I like Chicago.”

I remember secretly enjoying our trip to Disneyland. Go-boy and his parents had an extra ticket, so they invited me to the park, as well as to the beach for picnics and shopping trips to malls. I kept thinking about how Wicho would’ve reacted to the idea of Disneyland and everything else we were doing, and I tried to keep that in mind so I didn’t get too excited or happy.

Before Go and his family left, Go told me I should come visit Unalakleet. He told me about our grandpa—called him Jumpa. He said I should come for Bible camp or for silver fishing or even play on his basketball team in the holiday tournament Jamboree. “Did you know Alaska is so big it stretches from Minnesota to California? The whole state has the same population as Milwaukee.”

**Mom said when** we needed Pop he was never around. And when she didn’t need him, he ate all our food and got her pregnant. That wasn’t totally true, but this was after she kicked Pop out of the car and left him with the street murals by the Celaya Bakery on 23rd. She was trying out those words, saying those things to see how they sounded. I didn’t expect she’d turn it into a habit. That was the last time we saw Pop and not long before Mom started talking about moving to Alaska.

I kept telling her that I wanted to stay near Wicho because when I turned eighteen at the end of summer I would finally be able to visit him. I told her I wanted to be with my friends.

“Fine, I don’t care,” she said after a while. “Don’t come. Do whatever you want.”

That year I’d been running with a Sureños 13 clique—Clicka los Primos. On the streets it was a rival gang of Wicho’s, but in prison it was the same. We both ran with Hispanic gangs, even though neither of us had a drop of Hispanic blood. Pop always tried telling us our great-grandma was Mexican and we shouldn’t forget that. All Pop’s friends were Chicanos, and he seemed to think he was Chicano too. He was older than Mom and had grown up in a part of town where being white wasn’t cool—that’s why he gave his sons Mexican names. Wicho—Luis. Luis Daniel Stone. Me—Cesar. Cesar Silas Stone. He had our names tattooed on his chest, and eventually I learned that we were named after friends of his who had died. *RIP WICHO. RIP CESAR*. Pop said they were also family names from his grandmother’s side. But Wicho said that everybody in LA had a Mexican grandmom and that Pop was full of shit. And when it came to Pop and his stories and his plans, Wicho tended to side with Mom.

All growing up, we didn’t see Mom as an Eskimo. Maybe Mom didn’t talk about it because she tried to forget about her family, or maybe Pop tried to ignore that his wife had darker skin than he did. And maybe that’s why he thought he could get away with giving us Mexican names—he knew Wicho and me would look exactly like those pale-skinned Chicanos he’d been running with his whole life. Light, but not pinkish, with black hair, and a day at the beach would tan the shit out of our skin. He was right. We were those chameleon kids who almost blended in but never did—we’d be too dark to look white with white people, and too pale to look anything but white in the streets. I don’t know about Wicho, but I always felt like an imposter—Cesar, the white Chicano—like it was only a matter of time before my friends called me on it. But they knew our mom wasn’t Mexican because she didn’t speak Spanish. Not a drop. And really, our friends didn’t care. Wicho and me weren’t the only light-skinned kids running with Sureños or Salvatruchas. We ran with the crews who didn’t keep track of where everyone’s family was from. And regardless, or maybe as a result, I had forgotten Mom was Native.

Mom said, “It’ll be good for you to spend time with your family.” She was trying to convince me that going to Alaska was a good idea. But I’d only met Go-boy and his parents once, and the rest were just a bunch of strangers.

The first step Mom made in leaving Pop was leaving his neighborhood. She moved us out of LA right after Wicho was sentenced. Besides leaving Pop, she thought maybe a better area would be good for us, get us away from the place that landed her son in jail, get us away from the things she related to being poor—the street art and street vendors and tangerine-colored buildings on Pico Boulevard.

We moved in with first-generation strip malls. Moved to Santa Ana. And that’s where I eventually hooked up with Los Primos.

That was why I didn’t want to leave—my friends were in Santa Ana. But more than that, if I moved I could never come back. The same thing that landed Wicho in prison would be the same thing that would happen to me if I was ever seen around home again. None of my friends knew I was going to Unalakleet.

They asked me one night when a dozen of us were at a hotel party, “Where you going?” Kids were sitting on beds and tables and the air conditioner under the window, ladies too, smoking and drinking, and waiting for me to answer.

I told them we bought a house a couple miles up Tustin Ave. in Orange.

“Cesar of Orange?” someone said and laughed.

I told them that in spite of moving, nothing would change.

Even though all those kids in the gang would’ve probably left if they’d had the chance, secretly moving was the worst. Any secrets were the worst. We weren’t really a violent clique, like those always out there carjacking or starting shit in other neighborhoods. Occasionally, if necessary. But most of the time we’d just be hanging out, throwing these hotel parties or selling some drugs or getting high and having sex with the girls. School nights, weekends, anytime, it didn’t matter. Teachers would flunk us and send us to the non-college-bound part of school. The teachers spent all their time trying to convince us that we needed to believe our future was important, that we needed to commit our lives to something. They always tried to convince us to get off our butts and work harder, when all we wanted to do was have fun. And really, they were just saying that stuff to make themselves feel good, feel like they were doing the right thing. We knew our future was important. And we knew what they didn’t believe—that it would eventually work out, somehow.

**Before we left** California, Mom visited Wicho. She visited him almost every two weeks. When she came home from her last visit, she said that Wicho didn’t want us to leave but told her he’d do his best to behave and maybe get out on parole. He was optimistic that *life* didn’t really mean for life. Mom reported all this because I was a minor, and minors weren’t allowed to visit guys locked up for murder.

The first year he was jailed I wrote him letters, and occasionally, when Mom let me, I rode along to the prison and waited in our Caravan, listening to music. I was twelve, and sometimes we brought my BMX, and Mom dropped me off outside the chain-link fences. I biked around the little roads up and down the surrounding hills. Wicho wrote me letters too, and in the process he’d put this idea in my head that if I worked hard I could get him out of jail. So I had this plan, and while I biked around the prison fences, I calculated the time it would take for me to go to college and become governor so I could get Wicho free—I figured I’d be twenty-four and Wicho would be thirty. One time the yard was full of prisoners, and from a distance I could see them watching me pedal around, pointing me out to their friends. I kept riding up and down the roads, with the wind kicking hot dust in my face and knotting my hair, and I didn’t even look at the inmates who watched. I just silently told them to treat their future governor with respect, and if they did, and if they also treated Wicho well, then I could get them out someday too.

After Mom’s final visit to the prison, before we moved, she seemed sad and defeated. “He still believes you’ll go to college and find a way to get him out.” She didn’t hide what she felt now—her regret for leaving Wicho, and for having him, and for everything.

**So I moved** to Alaska with Mom. We flew from LAX to Anchorage on a jumbo jet and then hopped on a second flight, a Pen-Air twelve-seater, boarding from the tarmac. The small plane had one thin aisle with a single beige seat on either side. Plexiglas windows. Only a little kid could stand up without hitting her head. In the sky that thing flew on a bungee cord, dipping and bouncing, its twin engines blaring like they were topped out. Mom seemed like a different person once onboard. She wouldn’t pay attention to anything around her. It had been twenty years since she’d severed all contact with her home, and I knew she wasn’t prepared to return and didn’t want to. But she had no choice—she was broke.

I’d been asking Mom questions about Alaska since we flew out of Anchorage, trying to find something to protest. I asked her if there was running water in the village. If there were cars. TV. I asked about our family. The food. Anything, looking for something that might turn us around and send us home. And in that loud plane, with nobody talking, flying on a string through empty white air, she went along with it all, doing her best not to snap.

“Are there any squirrels in Alaska?” I yelled across the aisle. We were now less than an hour from Unalakleet.

Mom repeated—squirrels in Alaska?—and thought about it for a second. But something switched in her, and she didn’t answer my question. She turned to the passing clouds. By the end of the trip she’d closed her eyes in a way that I knew she wasn’t sleeping but thinking, and remembering, tumbling thoughts over and over, stressing.

Then we saw the ocean with its fingerprint of waves, and the plane banked right as wisps of clouds blew past, and down below us, about the size of a pen cap, or cigarette butt, was Unalakleet. Mom opened her eyes, and we looked out our separate windows at the village—stacks of homes on a spit of land between the ocean and a mess of rivers. I looked at Mom, and we caught each other’s nervous glance.

Right then we were almost equals—neither of us had a home. I wondered when she had last seen Unalakleet from the air. Later I learned that while growing up she’d flown all the time—into Nome for doctor shots, Anchorage for clothes and groceries. She’d flown on little planes packed with the girls’ basketball team on their way to weekend tournaments. Then at some point she flew on a little plane out of there, got married, had kids, lost her oldest son to prison, then divorced. Never once had she visited. I wondered what drove her to disappear for that long.

The airport was an aluminum building, like a farm shed, next to other aluminum buildings with garage doors for the planes. About forty people were inside, standing around, joking and sipping coffee from paper cups. A few sat quietly along the back wall under some windows, watching.

Mom walked in behind me and softly hugged people. Those expecting us looked surprised that we were actually there but didn’t say much. Other people said, “Hey, Lynn,” walked up to Mom, and stopped three feet away without shaking hands or embracing, and said, “You’re back, ah?”

I met almost everyone in the building. They told me their names and how we were related. That’s when I met Go-boy for the second time. He was taller than before, and his black hair stood on end, messy, like a cloud of smoke. There was the tail end of a tattoo poking out from his jacket sleeve.

He said, “Hey, Cousin. Here you are,” and pointed to a spot on the big map of Alaska that was pinned to the wall.

I said, “Where? Mexico?”

He laughed. “Yeah, man. That’s what Unalakleet means—the Arctic Territory of Mexico.”

Out the window a forklift was carrying a plywood box filled with luggage. It wheeled past the building and set the bags next to the parking lot. One of mine was pinched in the middle.

Mom grabbed my arm and pointed to an old guy, saying, “Meet your great-uncle.”

After twenty minutes of that, we were out of the airport, and Go-boy was tossing my bags into his station wagon. “You want the tour? I could ride you around, show you everything.”

He rode me around the village, and we coasted over washboard ripples and potholes on the gravel road. An AM station buzzed. Go waved to everyone he saw and showed me the post office, AC Store, Igloo, the lodge, and a bunch of other plywood buildings with tin roofs. There were no signs or billboards, no trees or grass lawns, and the houses were lined under empty grids of telephone poles. It was the ugliest place I’d ever seen.

Go called it the *real* Alaska.

Between the dash and the windshield he had what looked like about fifty green and brown stones. But they weren’t stones; they were gillies—chunks of glass smoothed by the sea over years and years. Go was surprised I’d never heard of gillies.

“What grade are you?”

“I’m not going to school here,” I told him. “My Pop and me are starting a business together back home, in the fall.”

We drove down Beach Road beside the ocean and then back through town on Main Road. Some houses were painted teal, and every yard was littered with skeletons of four-wheelers and snow machines and fishing boats. Some places there were ratty dogs, some places fifty-five-gallon barrels.

Go-boy drove us to the edge of the village and parked his AMC in the middle of a concrete bridge, blocking the single lane. He shut off the engine. The passenger side overlooked a slough where fishing boats lined the shore. In front of us the road split bare fields of tundra, stretching out and ramping up hills, disappearing into evergreens. We sat there waiting for something. “Where’s this road go?”

“About twelve miles,” he said and laughed.

I asked if that was it, because I’d never heard of a road just ending, but a huge jetliner flew over, and Go didn’t hear me.

The plane was Northern Air Cargo. Go said it flew over the village every day around three o’clock. “You’ll get used to it.”

I looked through the windshield. “The only road out of town doesn’t get anywhere? It just ends?”

Go-boy nodded. “I could show you.”

The big plane tipped left and faded behind a wash of clouds.

Go said, “I’ll make a bet with you. I bet you stay for one year.”

“A year?”

“Yeah,” he says. “A year. Are you in?” I laughed. “What are we betting?”

Go looked out over the nothingness he calls home. “I bet you never leave, man. You’ll probably find a nice Native girl and get married and have a bunch of real Native kids.”

“Tell me what we’re betting.”

Instead, Go-boy tells me more about the village and our family. He tells me he’s just gotten back from college in Anchorage, and he’s working upriver for the summer, on a fish tower. He’s not planning to go back to school though. He’s dropping out. And I’m not supposed to say anything about it to anybody because it’s still a secret and he doesn’t want his dad to find out, but I don’t even think twice. Who would I tell? When I ask him what he plans on doing instead of school, Go says he doesn’t know, yet, but he has lots of ideas and possibilities, maybe jobs, and maybe even a few options that will include me.

“Something’s bound to happen around here,” he says, looking through the car windows, as if it’s waiting out on the tundra. “It already feels like I have a plan, like we have a plan, and I’m just waiting for the details.”

“We?”

Go-boy said, “I can feel it.”

“Is that what your tattoo is about?”

He pulled up his right sleeve. “It’s not real. It’s just a sketch. I’m having it done later this summer. I’ve drawn it on about fifty times with ink pen.”

The drawing stretched from hand to elbow, wrapping around and blanketing most of Go’s forearm. The image was the face of an Eskimo wearing a parka; each facial feature was labeled. The eyes were dubbed *INFINITY*. The ears, *UNITY*. I thought it was the guy in the Alaska Airlines logo, but Go said it wasn’t a guy. “A daughter,” he said. “Daughter of the world. She’s the Native Jesus. She’s reaching into the clouds on this side, and the sea on that side.”

Go-boy was dropping out of Bible college because he didn’t agree with their teachings anymore. “Jesus died for everybody,” Go said, “not just those who know about him. If people don’t believe that, then they’re deciding whose life is worth saving and whose isn’t.”

“I wouldn’t give my life for nobody,” I said and then thought about Wicho.

“Well,” Go said. “Good thing you’re not Jesus, then, ah?”

**On my second day** in Unalakleet, Go picked me up and offered me a boat ride upriver or another drive up the road, where there were more things to see—a couple of gravel pits, a dump, a tank field, and a new jail under construction. So we took the drive out of town. The new jail was just a big hole in the ground so far. “Why does such a small town need a jail at all?” I said.

“It’s for the whole region. But, yeah,” Go said, “I doubt we’ll need it much longer. Things have been getting better out here.”

At the top of a hill, at the edge of a clearing, we got out of the car and looked around. Below us the village’s small strip of buildings, lining the ocean, looked small and cold, like a distant rail yard.

“That’s Amak Hill.” Go traced the mound with his finger pointed in the air. “*Amak* is Eskimo for boob.” He traced the smaller hill to the left. “That used to be the other amak, but they dug it out for the gravel pit. Now we call that one Ripped Tit.” We laughed.

“So what do you want to bet?” Go said.

I was hoping he’d forgot.

“Our bet,” he said. “From yesterday.” We watched the cargo plane pass over again, just like the day before.

“You still plan on leaving in four months?”

I nodded.

“I bet you stay one year. And if you stay, you have to get my tattoo.” He hiked his sleeve again to show me the drawing. It had faded and smudged.

“That?” I said.

“By the time you lose, I’ll have the tattoo for real, and we’ll both have it,” Go said. “We’ll be real same-same.”

“And when I leave before a year?”

“I dunno. Anything. I’ll bet whatever you want, man, because I know you’ll stay.”

“A car?”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll buy you a house. Anything.”

But instead of a house or a car, I think about college. I think about a lawyer for Wicho.

“I don’t want that tattoo.”

Then we were quiet for a while, and the mosquitoes started swarming—big, nickel-sized mosquitoes—so we got back in the car.

Go said, “I’ll think of something.”

Before we got back to the village, Go parked in the middle of the concrete bridge again, this time facing Unalakleet. We watched a lady tie her fishing boat to the shore, and by the time she was done, it seemed I’d been in Alaska for a month.

“Is this bridge the only concrete in town?” I said.

“No, there’s the basketball court.”

I pictured every village kid hogged onto that slab, shoulder to shoulder, dribbling basketballs between their legs, tree-flipping skateboards, hopping on pogo sticks, everyone pushing and shoving for their fair share of luxury. It was bizarre to think that I’d go an entire summer without walking on concrete.

“I got it,” Go said. “I’ve got the bet.”

“It won’t even matter.”

“If you stay here longer than a year, you have to change your first name.”

“To what?”

“To your Eskimo name,” Go said.

“But I don’t want an Eskimo name.”

“You don’t have one?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want one.”

“Man, I’ll give you an Eskimo name,” he said and started thinking.

Could Eskimo names be given to non-Eskimos? Were Eskimo names the kind of thing that Go could just hand out without talking to anyone? It seemed like something parents should decide. But I doubted Mom was thinking about that on her second day home after twenty years. I couldn’t imagine what she was thinking about, and I couldn’t imagine having an Eskimo name without Wicho and Pop having one too.

Go sat behind the steering wheel of his AMC, moving his lips and thinking about names.

A work truck rolled onto the bridge, and the driver pulled alongside us, slowly trying to pass, then stopped. There were only a few inches between vehicles, so the guy folded in his side mirror. “You got trouble?” the guy asked Go.

“No, we’re just waiting.”

The guy looked up and down the slough for signs of something to wait for. He glanced around the open fields in front of his truck, and then he turned in his seat and looked back at the village. Finally he said, “For what?”

Go stared through the windshield, straight down the road into town. A kid on a bike rolled across the gravel where it curved between two homes. On the left side of the road was a row of dogs sitting bored on top of their little plywood houses, ugly dogs, watching us.

Go turned back to the guy in his truck, and said, “We’re waiting to find out.”

**Everyone in the village** had an Eskimo name, but the names weren’t official.

They weren’t on driver’s licenses or birth certificates. An Eskimo name was like a fancy nickname. In the middle of summer, when Go decided my Eskimo name, I didn’t know where it came from. Was it Go’s great-grandpa’s name or the name of a mountain, or was it something Go had made up?

“Atausiq? Does it mean something? Like whale fighter or seal clubber?”

“Atausiq doesn’t mean anything,” he said. “It’s just a name. But it’s a good one. It sounds right.”

“But I won’t even be here—”

“Atausiq seems like the name you’ve always had.”

I laughed. It was strange. I didn’t know why he thought he knew me so well or why he didn’t want me to leave his town. I’d never known anyone as optimistic as Go-boy. He had faith that everything would work out, that everything would become perfect.

Later that summer Go came up with the idea that all things were part of a world conspiracy—a good conspiracy. He said, “Time is a tool to watch perfection unfold.” He believed in heaven on earth, believed it was about to happen, and believed it was his duty to dedicate his life to the cause.

“It’s a strange plan,” he said. The only way for a person to live was to listen to their heart. Intentionality, he called it. Something about sketching out your life ahead of time—your joys, sorrows, mistakes, accomplishments—before birth, your conscience revealing your master plan. Living hundreds of times to experience everything.

He said, “She’s coming.”

“Who?”

“She’s coming. God. The completion.” He said humanity grew from the male essence, the male-dominated perspective, and humanity would be fulfilled in the female, the spiritual.

I laughed. “Grew from the male . . . fulfilled in the female?”

He laughed too and told me the Native word for penis—*dunguu*.

Go was convinced that with the right perspective anything was possible. He said people live most of their days without feeling alive; people go every moment without paying attention to the quiet life—the life that matters—the voice that can direct a person’s destiny away from a world of shame and guilt to a world of meaning and realization. He said people who wait for heaven don’t really want it. He was always telling me this kind of stuff while we passed the time—counting fish in the river or skipping rocks or pushing his busted car back home.

**I stayed in Alaska** longer than I said I would. It was about ten months after we first landed in Unalakleet that Go-boy checked himself into a psych ward and said he didn’t want any visitors. No one. Not even his sister. So I talked to my mom, and she said, “Just try. Visit him anyway.” She was sure that Go would want me there if he knew I was waiting on the doorstep. I had about five hundred bucks saved, so I dropped most of it on the plane ticket and was at the hospital the next day. But Mom’s plan didn’t work. I showed up for visiting hours, and they told me I wasn’t on the list, so they called up to Go-boy, but he was still refusing to see anyone. They told me he was very angry. I asked, “About what?” And they said, “Everything.”

After Go wouldn’t let me visit that first day in Anchorage, I had time to kill, so I hopped in an aunt’s pickup and ran errands, getting groceries and other shopping for Mom, and some video games and a movie. That’s what you did on trips to Anchorage when you lived in the village—shopped.

Then, later, I was standing outside the hospital on a sidewalk, looking up at the tinted windows on the fifth floor, imagining Go-boy looking back down at me, and that’s when I became Atausiq. I’d tell Go that I didn’t change my name because I’d lost the bet or because I was going to lose. I changed it because nothing is permanent, nothing is forever, not even a name.