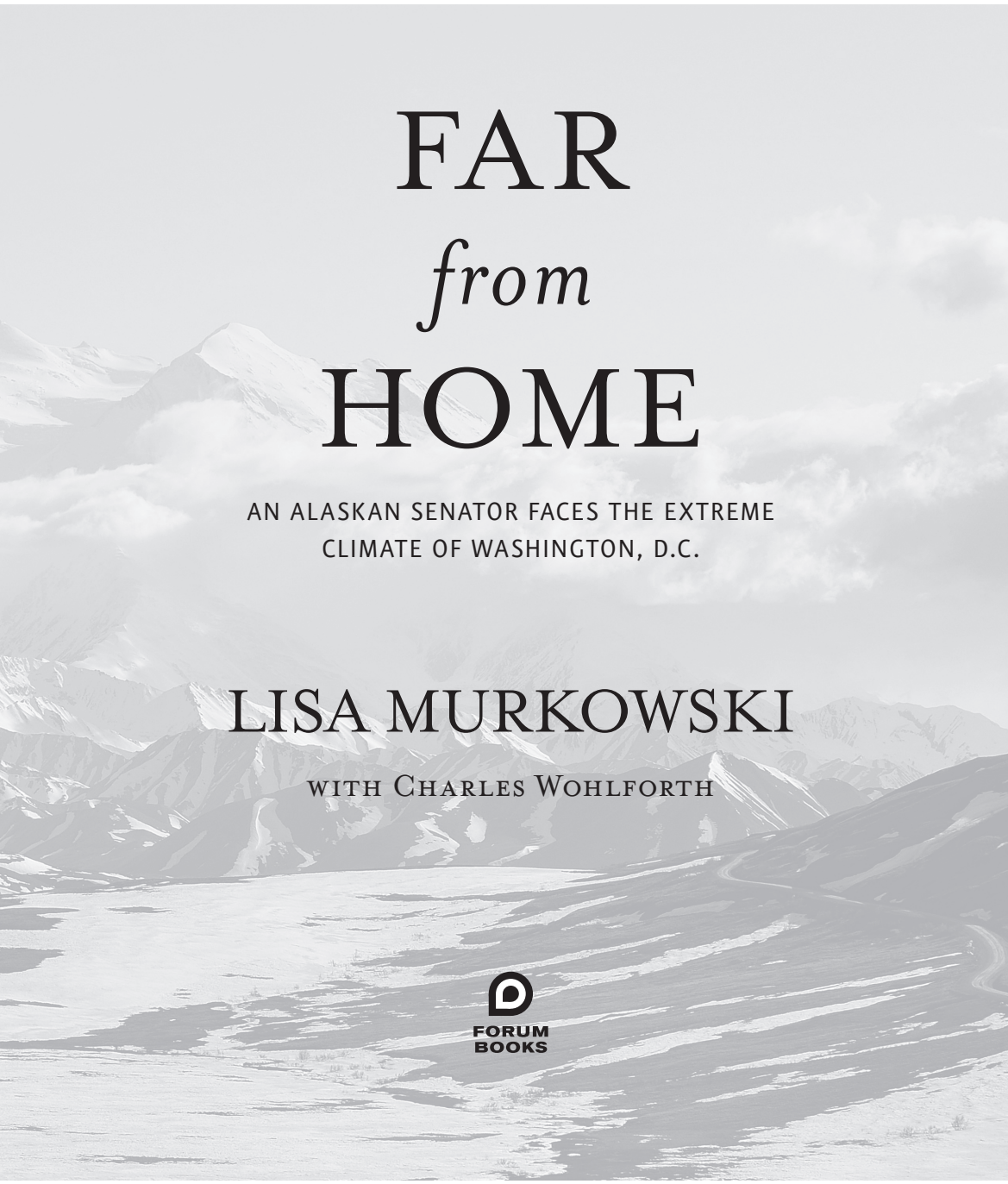
AN ALASKAN SENATOR FACES THE EXTREME CLIMATE OF WASHINGTON, D.C.

FAR FROM HOME

SNEAK PEEK
FORUM BOOKS
UNCORRECTED PROOF

LISA MURKOWSKI
WITH CHARLES WOHLFORTH



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INTRODUCTION

My travel day started on Capitol Hill, by car to Reagan National Airport, a flight to Seattle and another to Anchorage, eleven hours in all, and then another Alaska Airlines jet, far beyond the road system to the Yup'ik community of Bethel, on the banks of the Kuskokwim River in Southwest Alaska. Then we took off again, this time aboard a single-prop Cessna, another hour over the river delta, half of it freshwater lakes and half green marshy wetlands, to the gravel airstrip at Newtok, an Alaska Native village of a few hundred. The airstrip was the only linear thing in that landscape of curving waterways. When the engine stopped, I felt the sudden quiet soak into me, with the calm of that vast, life-filled space. I felt like I had come home.

The distance I had traveled was great, more than four thousand miles across four time zones, but it was nothing compared to the cultural distance from my workplace in the Senate to the riverbank in Newtok. Unless they visited, my Senate colleagues couldn't conceive of a place such as this, five hundred miles from the nearest road connection. Here, Washington obsessions evaporated—people were concerned with survival, not political images or partisan strategy. They hunted, fished, and gathered berries to feed their families.

I looked forward to the hugs and sincere conversations.

The needs were very basic. The village itself was washing away. The warming climate had thawed permanently frozen ground, called permafrost, turning the land to mush, with buildings sagging on sinking foundations. The Ninglick River was rapidly eating away at the community, foot by foot. At the same time, families in Newtok lived, as they always had, without running water or flush toilets. We met for an hour in the community hall to discuss both of these problems.

I had worked to bring sewer and water systems to other villages, essential for a community's health, but we couldn't install utilities here, where the entire village needed to move before it eroded away. On the wall of the community hall, village leaders displayed a copy of the bill I had passed through Congress a decade earlier, authorizing a land exchange for a new site, nine miles upriver at a place called Mertarvik (meaning "getting water from the spring" in the Yup'ik language). But relocating the village would cost more than $100 million, far beyond the means of people who lived a subsistence lifestyle, largely outside the cash economy. I had come on this day, now more than ten years ago, to check on our progress. We would go see the new barge landing at Mertarvik that had been built as part of a military training exercise.

But first, I had to use the toilet. The community hall had no facilities, so one of the leaders took me to the home of the mayor's mother. We entered a run-down plywood house with two rooms, similar to many rural Alaska homes, with one room for sleeping and the other for everything else. An older woman and her daughter sat at the kitchen table beading. Across from them, in the kitchen area, stood a five-gallon plastic bucket, similar to those sold at Home Depot, with a toilet seat on top. This was the so-called honey bucket. The ladies chatted with me cheerfully as I sat down and as I reached for the toilet paper, which was resting next to me on the stovetop. Families would dump honey buckets such as this one in a sewage lagoon near the school, at the edge of the village. I thought

they deserved better: decent housing, safe drinking water, and sanitation—the essentials other Americans have taken for granted for a century. It was my job to help address those needs.

My political philosophy is simple: I work for these people. I work for the women beading at that kitchen table in Newtok and for the many Alaskans with basic, practical needs, to help them survive in our wonderful, often harsh, and largely undeveloped state. I work for deckhands netting our sustainable harvests of fish, for tour guides greeting visitors stepping off cruise ships, for airmen defending us at Alaska's strategic northern bases, and for teachers and road crews, whose salaries depend in large part on oil industry revenue flowing through our state government—and, of course, I work for many others who directly and indirectly depend on federal decisions, as Alaskans do more than any other state. The federal government owns more than half of Alaska, and our resource-based economy rises or falls on federal policy changes.

The United States has a trust responsibility to the Native people of Newtok, and the challenge of saving this millennia-old tribal community can be solved only with funding on a federal scale. The work is hard. We are still helping that one village, and we have dozens more threatened by climate change or lacking water and sewer systems.

My hope is to show readers the complexity of this wild and unique state and the self-reliant people who inspire me. I was born in the small coastal town of Ketchikan, where my parents were both raised, and I grew up in communities across the state. There could be no better place to grow up, playing in the woods and on the beaches. Knowing that, my husband, Verne, and I raised our own children where the Alaska outdoors defined us. Others have recognized this connection in me. Of the many honors I have received over the years, the most precious was being adopted into the Tlingit Deisheetaan clan and gifted the name Aan Shaawátk'l, meaning "Lady of the Land." I'm an Alaskan at heart. This will always be my home in every sense. It anchors my roots and holds my future.

What a contrast to the Senate and my other life, in Washington, D.C.! Over twenty-three years there, I've watched as the practical needs of Americans increasingly took second place to partisan fights and political point-scoring. Both parties have been at fault, and I have often found myself in between them. I cast a deciding vote against a Republican priority in 2017 to save the Affordable Care Act from repeal, because no alternative plan had been advanced to take care of Alaskans. I passed a landmark bipartisan energy bill in 2020 that made a down payment on addressing climate change, and in 2023 I won a go-ahead for the Willow oil field in Alaska's Arctic—because we need the energy and jobs. I never sought the role that came to me, so often in the middle, standing up to the extremes—including against President Trump, who tried to defeat my reelection—but I didn't shy away from it when that was my job.

I have one overriding purpose in the Senate: to get things done for Alaskans. I believe in public service, good government, and solving problems. I am a Republican because I believe in personal responsibility, limited government, and individual liberty, but my party comes after my country, and Alaska is always first in my heart. I believe in working with everyone, compromising for the benefit of all, and sharing the credit. I think that is what most Americans want. Most are like me: they want their leaders to cooperate for the good of all rather than engage in partisan rancor or culture war. Perhaps that makes me a moderate, but I don't care for labels, and I don't think problem-solving occupies a particular spot on the political spectrum. Most of us treasure democracy, whether we stand at the left, right, or center. We understand that participating in democracy means accepting the legitimacy of those who disagree and respecting the institutions that allow us to make decisions together. Many of us fear we are losing our democracy because those on the extremes have forgotten these virtues.

I want to offer hope. The traditional tools of American democracy do still function. I wrote this book to tell the story of one

consensus-building senator—grounded in her home, aware of who she serves, and honoring the process—who produced results and won elections. The chapters ahead explain how this happened. I began as president of my sons' elementary school PTA. That satisfying community leadership encouraged me toward state elected office before I found myself suddenly catapulted to the national stage and challenged by overwhelming responsibilities. My story took a major, positive turn in 2010, after I lost a primary election and voters themselves convinced me that my service was still important, and why. A diverse coalition of Alaskans returned me to the Senate in a write-in campaign, with a mandate to vote my conscience and keep their practical needs foremost, not my party. With their confidence, I became a newly self-directed and more successful senator.

Alaskans' voices still guide me every day. Independent Alaskans became the largest part of my electoral coalition, and they supported me in thinking for myself, even if they sometimes disagreed with the result. I took that to heart, and followed my own judgment on votes, many times contrary to party leadership. For example, as the Senate process of confirming presidential appointments degenerated, with party-line votes for or against nominees based purely on politics, I chose to prioritize qualifications rather than party. In one of my toughest stands, I was the only Republican to oppose the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the U.S. Supreme Court. I got heat for these choices, but I believed I was helping the system work as the founders intended. At times, my independence also yielded political benefits, although that had not been my goal. Senators began working for my vote, knowing they couldn't take it for granted. The White House realized nominees had to be qualified to gain my support.

The system works if we use it. We don't need an overhaul with drastic reforms (although I will touch on election changes in Alaska that empowered the center and could help elsewhere). The more discouraging message is that being a pro-institution problem solver is hard, and not many of us remain in the Senate. We have passed a

lot of good laws, because our swing votes controlled the balance of power, but our team of roughly a dozen senators spread across both parties has been shrinking. Intense pressure weighed on bipartisan lawmakers such as Joe Manchin, Kyrsten Sinema, and Mitt Romney. The parties demand conformity, and their loudest voices are also their most extreme and uncompromising. As holdouts for bipartisanship, those of us building consensus brought abuse on ourselves. Now all three of these smart, honorable, productive colleagues have retired from the Senate.

The solution is to keep electing people who want to solve problems. We can do this only one senator—and one voter—at a time. The partisanship and division in our country has come with a loss of community and a weakening in many of the local organizations that connect us. We no longer spend enough time talking to people with different points of view. I'm an example of someone who started out in public service, in our highly diverse neighborhood in Anchorage, learning about families unlike my own while we worked together to improve our children's lives. We build up American democracy from that community level. It is up to each of us to get involved.

And that brings me to one more reason for this book: We need stories so we can see the possibilities. We need to be able to imagine ourselves in our leaders' roles. Washington, D.C., should be visible from Newtok and from every community in our country. This is why I've chosen to be open about my feelings and my failures as well as my successes. I have no exceptional talent. One reason I legislate with partners is that others have great ideas I would never think of. I know how to bring people together and get things done, but I'm no better than anyone else.

My hope is that when you learn my story, my struggles and my fears, you will realize that you can do this, too. We need you. Only good people can get our government back on track. We need regular people who care about their communities and are willing to do the work, follow the rules, and think for themselves. We have plenty

of ideologues and party-oriented political warriors in Congress. We need more Little League coaches and soccer moms. If I can do it, so can you. In fact, it's your responsibility.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming a Reluctant Senator

On my fortieth birthday, with a brand-new mountain bike in my living room, life was just about perfect. My husband, Verne, who had engineered the gift, was a great partner and dad. Our high-energy young sons, Nic and Matt, kept us going all the time, along with our two black Labradors. This new bike would help take us on more Alaskan adventures. I wanted nothing more. We lived in a modest house in Anchorage's mixed-income neighborhood of Government Hill. Verne owned and operated Alaska Pasta, making ravioli and other fresh pasta for restaurants by himself and with one employee. I practiced law from a home office on my own part-time schedule. We had as much money as we needed and the time to enjoy our sons' childhoods. Our family was constantly outdoors, fishing for salmon and playing soccer in the summer, hunting ducks in the fall, and skiing all winter. That new bike, which I still ride a quarter century later, excited me as if I were a little girl getting my first set of wheels, with the loving world opening ever wider for me.

At roughly midlife, I had not even the slightest inkling of ever becoming a U.S. senator. I didn't desire any career in politics. Many of my Senate colleagues dreamed of power from a young age, as

they relate in their memoirs. Those dreams never occurred to me as a kid, and by the time I was forty, such a dream would have seemed utterly extraneous to this comfortable life. Adding political office to my résumé would add nothing to my happiness, and could take away time with the family. Besides, there was no reason for me to put myself forward as a leader. I am not a special person. Many others could do those jobs.

But I did understand the rewards of public service. I had learned that as the president of the Government Hill Elementary School Parent-Teacher Association, a position that helped launch me as a leader.

Verne had first seen the promise of the Government Hill neighborhood when we were house hunting, before Nic was born. The dated house had been for sale for most of a year. Inside, it was a crazy maze of little rooms. The neighborhood, one of Anchorage's oldest, squeezed between a railroad yard and an Air Force base, was among Alaska's poorest, according to the census, with small middle-class homes and duplexes, and with the largest low-income complex in the city. My parents tried to talk us out of buying the house. So did our real estate agent. But the house was sunny, we could afford it, and Verne believed he could remodel it into something special. And he did.

When the time came, I had doubts about sending our boys to the nearby elementary school, in a cramped, old former military building. Government Hill Elementary received Title I funding under federal regulations supporting schools stressed by poverty. In addition to serving the neighborhood kids, the school offered a duel immersion program, where the student body was half native Spanish speakers and half English speakers, with morning instruction in English and the afternoon only in Spanish. Many of the children came from the low-income housing complex, often with parents who were recent immigrants, while others came from around the city for the Spanish. I worried that Nic and Matt would fall behind academically in this educational experiment, but I wanted to en-

courage the language skills the boys had acquired from their Colombian caregivers. Verne needed no persuasion, because he had grown up speaking Spanish in Latin America, where his father, an American businessman, had managed factories making Arrow shirts.

At Government Hill, the boys gave me an education in how people of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds can learn together and be true friends. I had grown up differently, in Alaska towns where I knew only White or Alaska Native people, and I had perceptions I wasn't aware of. Matt confided that he worried about his Hispanic friend Victor, who had trouble understanding the classwork in the morning, when the teacher spoke English. But then Matt recognized that he had the same trouble in the afternoon, when the lessons were in Spanish. So Matt could be "the smart one" in the morning and Victor could in the afternoon, as they helped each other learn. When Nic came home from first grade excited about his new girlfriend, Angela, I couldn't picture who she was, although I knew all the kids in the class. Nic described her by her clothes, her pink backpack, and her pigtails. Finally, I realized he was talking about an African American girl, a detail he thought too insignificant to mention, and that I had never considered.

Academically, the school worked better than I ever could have hoped. Besides learning all the basics, the boys gained a fluency in Spanish that gave them the confidence of being experts, far beyond what I had learned in high school language classes, with their focus on conjugating verbs. At the dinner table, they babbled away in Spanish with their father, craftily supposing I couldn't understand their boy jokes. I got the gist, but I couldn't respond.

We were all equal at our school, but not in the world, and that mattered because Government Hill Elementary had major needs. I was a lawyer with a well known name—my father, Frank Murkowski, was a U.S. senator—but my main qualification for the moms who recruited me to follow them as the leader of the PTA was that I showed up. In fact, no one else wanted the responsibility. Our worn-

out school, crammed with 45 percent more students than it was designed to hold, needed a major expansion and remodel. I had no idea how to address that.

We organized a group of about eight parents to meet at a brewpub in downtown Anchorage, and we began to devise a plan to make our case, splitting up the tasks. We contributed as a team, gathering facts, trading contacts, calling elected officials, attending school board meetings. We all worked hard as parents trying to do something for kids, bringing attention to our funky, diverse little community school. It was extra effort for all of us, as working parents, but it felt good because we knew we were doing something positive for everyone. And we succeeded. After a vigorous campaign and lots of phone calls, we won. Our project was included in a bond package, received approval from voters, and the remodel took place. Some of the poorest kids in town got one of the nicest schools. And I benefited greatly, myself, as the effort had a foundational influence on me.

I believe that practical, solution-based politics are the true heart of our democracy. That's why I think this simple story is important to tell. There was nothing exceptional about what we did. We were just fulfilling our duty as citizens to our families and our community. Our group included Democrats and Republicans, working parents and stay-at-home dads. It was not about politics or notoriety. We got together and accomplished something big for our kids that would improve many lives. And it felt great.

This kind of work is as old as America. As early as 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville described how Americans govern themselves with voluntary associations, from those he mentioned, which distributed books or started hospitals, to our Government Hill PTA and our group gathering at the brewpub. These are the volunteers, at many levels, who create a social consensus that gives the government real legitimacy. The system works best, as it did for most of our history, when citizens enter into it with goodwill, prepared to see everyone as a potential ally with a legitimate point of view. The dirty and ugly

part of politics cannot be denied, but that is not what makes America work. Our country is built on communities.

As Alaska grew up from statehood, in 1959, it was a prodigy of this kind of participatory democracy. I was one year old at statehood, and my generation of Alaskans could sing our state song, "Alaska's Flag"; we knew that fourteen-year-old Benny Benson had designed the flag and that educator Marie Drake had written the song. Most of us could tell the story of the Alaska Constitutional Convention drafting our model founding document. In its declaration of rights, our Alaska Constitution dedicates us to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, the rewards of industry, and to equality and equal protection under the law. It also asserts, "All persons have corresponding obligations to the people and to the State." Those words anchored the statehood generation, which wrote and adopted them, and they taught us well those values, especially the obligations of citizenship. I learned them as deeply as any catechism.

As Tocqueville noted, local associations not only solve local problems, they are also schools of democracy for leaders headed for higher levels of government. We build a certain kind of people in these settings. Ordinary citizens learn to grapple with issues collectively and to develop common cause. Today we call those skills social capital. They include both the ability to work with others collaboratively and the sense of community and belonging that gives us the hope to engage.

Certainly, I had many formative influences before the Government Hill PTA, and many more lessons in leadership were in my future. Those stories will fill this book. My purpose in writing is to show what I learned along the way. I want to revive your hope that it is possible for our democracy to function again as a forum for Americans of goodwill to collectively solve our problems and protect our liberties. And, moreover, that doing so does not require extraordinary efforts by special people. On the contrary, it calls for the everyday dedication of ordinary people with shared values. Maybe there is such a thing as a born leader, but I suspect most

people are like me—hardworking and sincere but essentially unexceptional, and unsure that we have anything important to contribute. We do. In fact, we are the critical ingredient to cure American democracy.

I'm just one woman doing her best to represent the people of Alaska while listening to my conscience—one example out of millions—but the only one I know well enough to write about. The solution to our country's ills will come with the involvement of many others, people rising up from PTAs, neighborhood groups, churches, and tribal councils, who follow the path of service that our founders intended, and develop their volunteerism into leadership.

In the autumn of 1970, when I was attending Romig Junior High in Anchorage, all hands in our large Catholic family worked in the basement of our house on St. Elias Drive, stuffing thousands of envelopes with my father's campaign materials and sorting them into zip code piles on the Ping-Pong table, chairs, shelves, and any flat surface. He lost that race for Congress—to the relief of us kids, as we didn't want to leave Alaska. He returned to his career in banking and didn't run for the Senate until 1980, so we children didn't have to worry much about politics. But my parents always remained civically active. My five siblings and I grew up under the expectation that everyone should give to the community by getting involved. I had a couple of minor political jobs as a young person, but not because I was drawn to politics—they were just jobs. As adults, my sisters and I started a club for Republican professional women that put on an annual food festival at a notorious bar, with all the proceeds donated to charity, not the party or its candidates.

Alaska's sparse population lives in isolated communities divided by continental distances. Politics involves small numbers of people who know each other well. Around the time I turned forty, I volunteered to chair my legislative district party committee—essentially

a committee of one. A year later, our longtime State House representative retired, and the job of recruiting a replacement fell to me. During that cycle most of the city's legislative elections would be uncontested, and I soon learned why, as I tried to persuade the few active Republicans I knew in the district that they should run for the seat. It was almost a free ride to our state capitol in Juneau, as our Republican-heavy district, mostly contained in the military base, was unlikely to attract a Democratic candidate. Yet no one was interested. It was like finding a new president for the PTA.

Some of the folks I called suggested I should do it myself. I didn't even consider the idea. The same reasons that made it unappealing for others influenced me, too. The Alaska Legislature meets in Juneau from January to May every year, without road access and six hundred miles from Anchorage by air. The annual salary at that time was $24,000. Why would I want to make that sacrifice, being away from my boys for so much of the school year? I didn't even mention the suggestion to Verne, who I assumed would feel the same way. Verne always supports me, but he gives me space to make my decisions. His quiet, competent presence supports my confidence. One evening when I was helping him make dinner, he asked how the search was going, and I told him the only name coming up was mine. He asked, "Why don't you run?" Feeling indispensable, I told him I couldn't leave the family, but he calmly asserted that he could handle it—as I honestly knew he could.

My sisters expressed more concern about my family. We rarely hear such worries about fathers going into politics, but I understood their feelings, having been brought up at my parents' traditional dinner table. My own family was different. Alone among the four sisters, I kept the name Murkowski after marriage, not as a statement but because it made sense for us, with my established legal career. Verne and the boys all encouraged me to run. Nic was seven and Matt five years old at the time. Nic said, "You probably won't like being a legislator, but you should try it because you should try everything once." It was sound advice we had given him about

eating his dinner. My friends from the school urged me on, as well. We were well on the way to winning our remodel-and-expansion project. And Verne insisted, again, that he could take care of home while I was away. A skilled chef, he had always handled the kitchen and the shopping for our family, and his schedule at the pasta shop allowed him to be home with the boys after school. Although he refused to sort the colors when loading the washing machine, he certainly could do every domestic task I could do, and more.

With family and friends' urging, I decided to try it and see what kind of good I could do. Early on the morning of Monday, June 1, 1998, Verne, the boys, and I went to the Alaska Division of Elections office, where I paid a $100 filing fee and signed the papers to be a State House candidate. Despite weak opposition, I knocked on every accessible door in my district, with no app to tell me who was a super voter or which were Republican households, just me introducing myself to the voters.

I won the August primary over a single opponent, with a total of 830 votes, the most I would ever receive on a contested ballot for the legislature, but also a measure of just how small this election contest was. No Democrat had filed, so I was unopposed in the general election. In January, I began commuting to Juneau on Monday mornings, flying back on Thursday nights or Friday mornings to fill the weekends, as much as I could, with being a good mom. To keep me from worrying, Verne worked hard during the week to make sure everything was perfect when I arrived home, with all the laundry washed and folded, unaware that doing so made me feel expendable and forgotten—the family wasn't supposed to get along so easily without me. My guilt about missing school events accumulated. Some of that, I never did forgive myself for. I still keep a picture of Matt flipping on the switch for the Christmas-tree-shaped lights on the huge telecom tower near the school on Government Hill, an annual tradition in which the school principal draws the name of one lucky student from the whole student body. I wasn't there for Matt's big moment. The photo reminds me of my sadness

over missing so many special days, but when I told Matt why I keep it, he didn't even remember my absence. He and Nic always assured me they were fine—as I have finally come to accept, now that they are happy, successful adults.

The dirty side of politics touched me before I was even sworn in as a member of the State House. I received a call from Bill Allen, the CEO of the oil field services company Veco, and one of the most powerful men in Alaska at the time. I knew his oil patch drawl, as everyone did. I had been to his annual pig roast fundraiser, with a whole pig cooking on a spit in his backyard, as had every Republican candidate who had raised campaign dollars in the state. He even controlled a daily half page in the state's largest newspaper, an opinion section called "Voice of the Times," which was the state's most influential conservative media outlet—despite the paper's revelations of his illegal campaign contributions dating back to the 1980s.

Allen had called to say he "needed" Representative Pete Kott to be elected Speaker of the House, apparently expecting that I would vote as asked because he had contributed money to my campaign. I was stunned and felt filthy. Did people think I would be receptive to such a call? I ended the conversation quickly and swore to myself to never tell anyone it had happened. But when I got to Juneau, talking late with my freshman colleague Andrew Halcro in his office—I had nowhere to go after work but a tiny apartment—he related getting the same gross call, and we shared our mutual disgust. We both voted for Brian Porter, who won the Speaker's chair. Bill Allen didn't abandon his sleazy practices, although he never gave me any more contributions while I was in the legislature, and I had no dealings with him. Over the years to come, his corruption and the fallout from it would devastate Alaska and indirectly change the course of many lives, including my own.

For the most part, however, I enjoyed being a legislator, and I found I was pretty good at it. I've always done my homework, and I had plenty of time alone during the week to read every bill that

came to my committees—something that is practically impossible in the U.S. Senate. The Labor and Commerce Committee appealed to me, and in my second term I became chair, because we dealt with hard, substantive issues that affected people's lives, like workers' compensation and retirement issues. I'm a nerd. I like working with colleagues and stakeholders to pass complex bills that solve problems.

But even in those gentler times, partisanship and party discipline sometimes interfered. I never played a team sport growing up, and I was unprepared to think of my party as a team dedicated to beating the other side. This style of partisanship demanded that legislators set aside our own judgment to act in unison and called for us to exercise all the perquisites of power. I learned this on the first day of the session, when I fell in love with a charming old-fashioned couch in my tiny legislative office. Representative Beth Kerttula, a freshman Democrat from Juneau, recognized the couch when she dropped by to introduce herself, as she fondly remembered it sitting in her father's office during the more than thirty years he served in the legislature. Each of us insisted that the other should take the couch. When I shared my dilemma with one of the male leaders in my caucus, he dismissed my concern. "You want the couch?" he said. "It is your couch. You're in the majority. She's in the minority. When she's in the majority, she can have the couch."

That answer didn't sit well with me. The next morning, I made a proposal to Beth: I would take the couch this session, and she could have it next session, and we would trade it back and forth each year after that. It was my first legislative compromise.

I discussed my loose party loyalty in another late-night conversation in the capitol (they were many). I sat on a bench outside my office with Ethan Berkowitz, who at that time was the outspoken House minority leader for the Democrats. I had supported a Democratic amendment that day—I no longer recall the issue—and Berkowitz asked how I'd been brave enough to break with my caucus. I assured him that this was not a matter of courage. Courage

isn't needed to do what you believe, unless doing so risks consequences you cannot accept. And that wasn't the case. I said, "Look, what's the worst that can happen? If I am not reelected, it's not the end of the world. I've got a husband and two sons at home who love me. And I can go back to a job that was very satisfying. I don't need to be a legislator to be happy."

I had political freedom. The reasons why I decided to serve gave me different motivations than some of my colleagues. I don't understand the drive that places the prestige of public office above so many of the other good things in life. My drive came from a feeling of responsibility and membership, as an Alaskan, in the cause of making our state better, something I really believed in and cared about. I never felt a strong desire to take credit for accomplishments or to defeat opponents—later, in the Senate, that would drive my staff crazy—and I don't believe that's something special about me. I think it comes from the community tradition that brought me to politics.

Arliss Sturgulewski embodied that tradition. She was a trailblazer for women leaders in Alaska, coming up from the League of Women Voters in the 1950s, with its nonpartisan mission of good government. She earned her living (and raised her son, Roe, my brother-in-law) after her husband died in a small plane crash, and went on to a long career in politics. She had retired by the time I joined the legislature, but she still held a place of immense esteem among Alaskans. With her bright, slightly conspiratorial smile and warm, deep voice, she periodically held court in the back room at Jens Hansen's restaurant in Anchorage's Midtown. Every couple of months about two dozen women would gather for dinner, all highly accomplished, and we would share, in unstructured conversation, what we were working on and where we thought the state was going, with the problem-solving attitude that Arliss had taught so many of us. Jens, I later learned, called this group "The Smart Women in the Back Room." Being younger, I was thrilled to be included. I felt empowered by those women, able to talk freely, to feel supported as

well as challenged, and to leave with a new sense of energy and fresh ideas.

In my first two years in Juneau, my political personality had developed and become clear to me and to others. There weren't many tough votes—yet—but there was plenty of work to do. I realized I could make practical things happen, such as establishing a college savings plan for the state, and I found the process rewarding. I wasn't ideological, and I certainly wasn't an obedient Republican, but people knew who I was and where I stood. Firmly in the middle. I even got teased for that. One Christmas, my sister Carol gave me a T-shirt that said on the front, "Knee-Jerk Moderate."

Although my mother, Nancy, never held office, she may have been a bigger influence on my development as a leader than my political father. In 1966, when Dad was only thirty-three, he became Alaska commissioner of economic development, and he ran for Congress just four years later. He had a successful banking career in various Alaska towns, with leadership positions on the side in the local chambers of commerce or Elks Clubs. Mom raised the six children, baked cupcakes for school, hosted Dad's business dinners, and played piano at Mass, without ever seeming frazzled or tired. Dad led with decisiveness and a strong voice and always stuck to his guns (even sometimes when backing down would have been the smarter move). Mom made his success possible. She is one of the smartest people I know, but she doesn't worry about showing off her talents or pushing her ideas. Instead, she manages feelings and personalities, gets everyone cooperating, and births solutions like a midwife.

I do have a notable streak of my dad's personality, which may be one reason we sometimes butt heads over politics. When I get my teeth into something, I don't let go (again, sometimes when letting go would be the smarter move). One of my favorite stories along these lines involves my determination to get a horse soon after our

family moved to Fairbanks, when I was about fourteen years old. Our family had lived in various places up to that point, but mostly in Southeast Alaska, with its steep mountains, mossy rainforests, and ocean waterways instead of highways—and no horses. Somehow, horses were my thing, with horse figurines of every kind filling my side of the bedroom I shared with my older sister, Carol (to her annoyance). I read every horse book and used every birthday wish, when blowing out my candles, to ask the universe for a horse of my own. Perhaps my wish was answered. In Fairbanks, we moved into a rambling house on the Chena River that had once been a log cabin on a dairy farm, with a barn, a pasture, and several retired railroad boxcars for storing hay. Now I had to get my horse.

Our sensible parents wouldn't consider it, so I went to work on my siblings, lobbying them to raise $125 to buy a horse I had found in the classified ads. They didn't want a horse, but I persuaded them to pool our birthday money and babysitting earnings, and we painted a long fence in the pasture to earn more. We dumped our combined wealth on the dining room table, just short of what we needed, and promised our parents we would haul hay in fall and shovel the manure in spring (in frigid Fairbanks, where winter temperatures commonly fall to forty degrees below zero, manure freezes like rock). Lady, a huge (almost eighteen hands) white former packhorse, came home ridden by her former owner, because none of us knew how to ride. The veterinarian recognized her immediately. He said she was the oldest horse in the Tanana Valley. Indeed, Lady was not beautiful or fast, and her teeth were worn, but she was my best friend. Lady came before any boyfriend. I loved her, and during my four years of high school, I cared for her every day. I learned responsibility from Lady.

Family surrounded and defined us. On Saturdays we all worked together, weeding the garden, cleaning out the boxcar, or doing projects Dad would make up to occupy us, like picking up seedpods that had fallen from the cottonwood trees. Sunday mornings were for Mass, and we usually stayed together that afternoon, too, with a

family activity such as boating down the river for a summer picnic on a sandbar, or cross-country skiing through the hoarfrost-decorated birch trees in winter. Family dinners were mandatory. Every evening when Dad got home, we'd all sit around the table—in the summer, outside under the warm, dry midnight sun—and he would lead a discussion, seeking our opinions on the issues of the day, often going around the table in age order to make sure each of us spoke. He would quiz each of us about what we would do when we grew up, suggesting to the boys that they would be bankers, like him, and to the girls that we could be teachers or nurses, like his mother or aunt (for both genders, it went without saying that we would go to college). That didn't bother me at the time. This was the world we lived in, with its gender roles. I decided I would be a teacher.

At school, being a teacher seemed like a reasonable goal. I never worried my parents and I got respectable grades, but I was never an outstanding student. In another setting, I might have been lost in the crowd, but we attended the tiny Monroe Catholic High School, with only twenty-seven students in my graduating class, and everyone had to take turns as a leader because there were simply too few of us to go around. I was involved in student government, I was a cheerleader, and I was head of the yearbook—not because I was particularly talented but because I was needed and willing to try. I was an untalented actor and had no interest in drama, yet I was cast in a play about the Holocaust, set in a concentration camp, a production that I think must have been one of the worst ever presented on a stage. As much as the audience suffered, however, these high school experiences taught me that I could put myself forward, be a contributor, and that my leadership had value. Important lessons for any citizen in a democracy.

Two more incidents stand out in my mind as I think about the development of my political personality. Both reflect the obstinacy I inherited from my father and the family motto, "If there's a harder way, we'll find it."

As a sophomore at Willamette University, the small liberal arts school in Salem, Oregon, that my mother had also attended, I reached the midterm in my required economics class without showing any interest in or aptitude for the subject. College so far had been for having fun and making friends, attending to classwork as necessary, and rarely thinking about why I was there or what I was trying to accomplish, with the vague notion of "teacher" hanging somewhere out in my future. At a midterm meeting, my economics professor, Russ Beaton, said I should drop the class and take it again later, because I was on track to fail. From his perspective, it was reasonable advice, but I was indignant that he had doubted my ability. I threw myself into economics with everything I had. More importantly, I began to think about why I was at Willamette. Why had a I taken such a safe path, following my mother and majoring in education? What was I missing by avoiding any risks?

I passed economics (although with only a C), and I signed up to study for a semester at the International College of Commerce in Kawagoe, Japan. I was determined to push myself beyond my comfort zone. I had studied high school French for four years but didn't speak a word of Japanese. That great adventure showed me the benefits of taking a chance on myself. I transferred to Georgetown University and changed my major to economics. I like to say I did it to spite Professor Beaton, but I think I had come to realize that if I wanted to do something substantial, I needed to push myself and not just settle for what was acceptable. Reach for the gold ring, as my dad would say.

The other story I tell on myself about my personality involves my repeated, humiliating failure of the Alaska bar exam, and how I dealt with it. Before going to law school at Willamette, I had been afraid I wouldn't measure up—I was accepted from the waiting list the last day before classes started—but it turned out everyone felt intimidated, and with hard work I seemed to grasp as well as anyone a new way of using my mind. No longer would it be enough to spit out memorized knowledge; law students learned to think and

approach problems analytically. I enjoyed it. The law challenged me, and I loved learning about it for the sake of learning. After three years of classwork, summer work, and student loans, I graduated and took the Alaska bar exam. I passed the written portion without difficulty, but the multiple-choice section got me. The law firm that had hired me kindly kept me on board to try again in six months. But when I failed again, I knew I had to resign. I got a job as a clerk of the state district court in Anchorage and took the test again in six months. Again, I failed.

After each exam, the list of new lawyers would be posted publicly on the door of the courthouse, and each time my name was absent the humiliation and shame cut deeper, with the sense that I had wasted three years, the time and money, and the educational effort, and that I had let down my family and my employer. Maybe I really didn't have what it took to be a lawyer. My friend Jamilia George, who worked with me at the court in Anchorage, gave up after her third try (not unusual, since Alaska had one of the toughest exams in the nation). I stubbornly tried again, but failed on the fourth attempt. I got that news just before a post-Christmas family vacation in Puerto Rico. Although I had recently gotten engaged to Verne, the news about the exam hung over our gathering as if someone had died. My parents and siblings gave me space, never mentioning what was in the air. But near the end of the trip, as I sat next to the pool, my father sat down beside me.

Without looking at him, I said, "I'm done."

We both knew what I was referring to.

In his matter-of-fact way, he didn't try to console me, or even accept my decision.

He simply said, "You know we don't quit. We start something, we don't quit."

I fumed. I felt he was being unreasonable and insensitive. Soon, however, his comment got under my skin, and I knew I couldn't give up. But I also had to try something different. I convinced Jamilia to join me, and we superstitiously changed everything we had

done in preparing for and taking the test: where we studied, how we studied, the city where we took the exam. We even published a novena to Saint Jude, patron saint of the impossible. Most importantly, I needed a new approach to answering the multiple-choice section of the exam. We flew to Portland, Oregon, for a bar exam preparation course specifically focused on strategy for these questions. To do well, a test taker had to quickly pick the least wrong choice, but in my studies I wanted to work until I got exactly the right answer. The new strategy worked. I learned to settle on the closest answer and move on. Jamilia and I both passed, on her fourth try and on my fifth, after two and a half years of taking the exam.

The experience taught me determination. I have proudly told the story many times, with the moral that failure is less important than how you handle it. After I passed, I contacted the bar review program in Portland and asked them to bring their three-day class to Anchorage, to help others. They declined but allowed me to offer it myself, using videotapes from the course and proctoring the tests, and I did so through five more test cycles, meeting students on weekend mornings in a dim, cold conference room at the Holiday Inn in downtown Anchorage, the least expensive space I could find. I also offered one-on-one tutoring, but with a prerequisite. I worked only with students who had already failed the Alaska bar at least once. Because only those students could understand the anxiety of facing that test after the shame of a failure. Most knew the law but were confronting their first taste of defeat. They needed to learn the mental game.

In comparison, making unpopular political decisions has been relatively easy. I began dealing with them in my second term in the legislature, in 2001, when some of us realized we needed to address a severe budget deficit without causing deep harm to public education or other spending that supported Alaskans and the economy. Alaska's main source of revenue for public services had crashed in 1998, when the price of oil dropped below $10 a barrel, and we had already cut the budget deeply. We needed new revenues to maintain

our economic competitiveness and quality of life. But the public had paid no broad-based taxes in almost twenty years, when oil revenue surpluses first arrived, and most Republicans in the legislature considered taxation ideologically off-limits and as politically dangerous as the proverbial third rail. They preferred to continue cutting the budget, as they had done through the 1990s, covering expenditures by taking from the state's dwindling savings, with deficits in eight out of ten years. That no longer made sense.

Quiet conversations about addressing the problem began in my office, at night. When we got serious, we moved the meetings away from the capitol for greater secrecy, to a legislator's home. That's how risky it was to talk about solutions such as taxes, especially on the Republican side. We approached our leadership, but they would not consider working on a fiscal plan. Eventually, we gathered a core group of newer, moderate House Republicans—avoiding the old guard Republican committee chairs—and teamed up with some minority Democrats. Toward the end of the 2001 session, we announced the formation of the bipartisan Fiscal Policy Caucus. In the fall we would gather and write a fiscal plan to eliminate the structural deficit, including in it a small income tax and various other taxes, use of earnings from the Alaska Permanent Fund, and an alcohol tax increase. We would hit every interest group, hoping fairness would win us supporters. I was learning how to legislate with a bipartisan "gang," as I would do in the Senate two decades later.

At first, I didn't realize just how much political peril we were facing. The media called our plan historic. An editor dubbed me the "Moxie Moderate." The Democratic governor, Tony Knowles, shocked me with a shout-out in his State of the State address, noting that, within the plan, I had taken the lead on the alcohol tax. Speaker Porter, a former Anchorage police chief, had been convinced by social advocates that a slightly higher tax could provide money to address the damage of alcohol abuse, which is one of Alaska's worst problems. Porter asked me to lead on it.

Porter had recruited me in the way penguins seem to push one of their own into the ocean to check for leopard seals before the others jump. The alcohol industry had been among the most powerful lobbies in the capitol since before Alaska became a state. It employed the top lobbyists and helped fund most members' campaigns, especially Republicans. But the time was right, I was relentless in my advocacy, and I seemed to be winning. On one Friday in March, I was in a committee meeting when I got a tip that a member of the House Finance Committee had advanced an amendment to cripple my bill—an amendment written by the lobbyist for Anheuser-Busch. I walked out of my meeting and burst into House Finance, interrupting their meeting by declaring (rhetorically), "I'm going to kill somebody!" Everyone could hear my conversation with the House member who had put in the killer amendment. His colleague leaned over and said, "Careful. You don't want Lisa mad at you." The member went into the audience to talk to the lobbyist for permission to drop the amendment. The next day, the incident was on the front page of the Anchorage paper.

The backlash against the fiscal plan came as we were gaining momentum at the end of the 2002 session. An Anchorage financier, Bob Gillam, began running a series of nearly full-page ads attacking six of the legislators supporting taxes—five Democrats and me, the lone Republican. We struggled through the final days, rolling over powerful committee chairs to get our proposals to the floor, and passed the plan with a coalition of our moderate Republicans and almost all the Democrats. The plan died in the Senate, but my alcohol tax became law.

I had infuriated the alcohol industry, the well-heeled fiscal conservatives in my party, and some of my Republican legislative colleagues. On the second-to-last day of the session, just after the victory on the alcohol tax, conservative party leaders suddenly pushed a bill to the floor that would severely limit Medicaid funding for abortions by redefining what was medically necessary. The Alaska Supreme Court had already decided the issue the previous

year, and I felt this was a messaging bill, certain to be vetoed, intended to smoke out those who supported abortion rights. It was directed partly at me. Legislative reapportionment had very intentionally redrawn my district to put me up against Eldon Mulder, the co-chair of the House Finance Committee, a powerful member of the Republican inner circle who aligned against our fiscal solutions. Mulder would surely vote for the abortion restriction. My friends and allies urged me to do the same. Why fall into this trap? Since the bill would be vetoed anyway, I was told, going along would be a free vote. The more I heard that argument, the angrier I got. An issue so important to so many women should not be a political football. I was adamant that I would not vote for a bill I didn't believe in. There was no such thing as a free vote.

When the time came, I not only voted against the bill, I also gave the most impassioned speech of my legislative career, gaining wide media coverage.

"I may have a very short-lived political future here," I said. "But you know, I've got great kids, and a great husband, and I'm going to have a good heart, and I'm going to stand up for the Constitution, and I'm going to stand up for the women of the state of Alaska, and I'm going to vote no."

Recorded phone messages of praise and condemnation flooded my answering machines. The message from my father, a consistent abortion opponent, was neither. He simply advised, "You know, on some issues it's best that you just vote and not say anything at all."

That was my last significant State House speech. But not for the reason I expected.

We began to see the political price of trying to solve Alaska's fiscal crisis with the filing deadline for reelection. That election of 2002 would be the first held under a new law passed by the legislature, which required each party to have its own primary ballot, with voters barred from crossing over to vote for candidates from other par-

ties. Although the Republican Party was the largest in Alaska, it still had only 25 percent of voters as registered members—half the number registered without party affiliation. The new voting system had been designed by Republican insiders to get rid of moderates by narrowing the electorate to a smaller group of true believers. Those who dared support taxes or abortion rights were high on their list of targets.

The Fiscal Policy Caucus ceased to exist. Several of its Republican leaders decided not to run for reelection or faced tough primary opponents from the right. I expected to be in that category, with Eldon Mulder against me, and I seriously considered dropping out. But a lot of people liked what I had been doing, and I had accumulated a substantial campaign account. I didn't see why I couldn't run just as hard as he could, despite his greater power and seniority in the legislature. I knew Eldon well, as my sister Mary had introduced him to Alaska. We took a walk on a beach in Juneau. I told him I had decided to run and I hoped the race wouldn't affect our friendship. To my surprise, after thinking about it for a few days, he decided not to run, and later became a successful lobbyist. It looked like my reelection would be easy, with no Democrat declared and only one Republican opponent in the primary, an unknown political newcomer named Nancy Dahlstrom.

My low-key race gave me the opportunity to help friends with their campaigns and to try to stop Bill Allen from selecting the next Speaker of the House. Allen's influence in Juneau had become outrageous and grossly blatant, as in the past session he had quickly drummed up and influenced major legislation, including a bill, which failed, to build a private prison in which his company would be a partner. Now Allen was raising money for individual legislators on the condition that they would organize the House under the speakership of Pete Kott, who had carried his private-prison bill. I entered the race for Speaker to offer an alternative. But I also had critics. My father had decided to run for governor after his years in the U.S. Senate, creating the possibility that I would be Speaker

while he was governor, an arrangement that Kott's supporters said would give our family too much power. In the media, I batted the point aside, but I privately knew that it was not unreasonable.

With Eldon's retirement, Bill Allen and the other special interest groups lost their candidate. My opponent, Dahlstrom, received enough money from Bob Gillam, the alcohol industry, and Alaska Right to Life to send out postcards and air radio ads, but I raised nine times more. I wasn't worried. I knocked on doors and sent my own mailers, but I ignored Dahlstrom and her frequent appearances on conservative talk radio, where the hosts bashed me for my stands on taxes and abortion and for losing support from the National Rifle Association, and called me a Republican in name only, or RINO. I chose not to engage on talk radio because these rants sounded to me like empty, bombastic rhetoric. Nor did I take seriously the rumblings I picked up from others' polling that Dahlstrom was becoming a threat—I didn't think it was important to poll, as a favored incumbent in such a small district. I didn't even spend all my campaign funds, figuring I could roll the money over to future reelection campaigns when I might need it more.

On primary election night, in August, family and friends came to our home in Government Hill for beer and watching the returns come in, a fun and casual gathering, as we had done before. But this one was different. As the first round of votes were reported, the room fell silent. Dahlstrom was winning. I felt simply incredulous and assumed we were seeing only results from some anomalous precincts. Still, with each additional increment of votes counted, her lead held. I remained behind in the count late into the evening, after the guests had quietly departed. I was stunned that I had been so wrong in my assumptions. With a tiny turnout of voters in the closed primary, special interest money and talk radio had been enough to power a complete unknown whose message was simply criticism of me. A total of only 915 votes were cast in our race, between both candidates. When the final precinct came in, from the Air Force base, I pulled ahead, but by only 23 votes (57 when the

absentee ballots were counted, days later). I knew who to credit for my win. I told the newspaper, "My airmen, I love them."

This story is important because it was a lesson to me and many others. Our group in the legislature had stepped forward to solve a real problem for our state, working across party lines and against our leadership, daring to vote for new revenues that experts agreed were necessary for the health of the economy and for the future. People like Bill Allen, Bob Gillam, and members of the alcohol industry didn't want to pay those taxes, and they succeeded in removing many of our voices from the legislature, including nearly beating me. Their lesson was one of fear. Legislators afraid of voting for a fiscal solution would freeze the status quo for more than twenty years, beyond the time when the negative consequences of starving education and other state services had become obvious. Political courage is much easier before you have seen the consequences.

I felt some of that fear, too. Although I had said I was comfortable with being sent home by voters, and I'd meant it, I hadn't anticipated how awful that would feel. I found out on that primary election night in August 2002, when I thought I had lost. How had I missed the mood of a district I thought I knew so well? The money remaining in my campaign account was an embarrassing reminder of my overconfidence. As candidates, we carry responsibility for all those who support us and believe in what we stand for. For those hours, I believed I had let everyone down. I felt the uncertainty of losing my political footing. In all honesty, that unpleasant sense of doubt stuck with me, and may have made me more cautious in the years to come.

On top of the fear instilled in legislators by that election, there was the knowledge that, for all our efforts, Bill Allen and his allies had won. The fiscal plan was dead, not to be resurrected. That fall, Pete Kott became Speaker of the House. I would be chosen as majority leader.

My father, Frank, cruised through the primary and toward the general election for governor. Although I had worked hard on his

previous campaigns, I didn't get seriously involved in this one, focusing instead on my role as a legislative leader helping my colleagues get reelected (I had no opponent in the general). In November, he easily defeated Democratic lieutenant governor Fran Ulmer. In doing so, he took on responsibility for the state fiscal problem, and it would dominate his term, as he also fought the politically precarious cause of crafting a long-term fiscal plan.

After the election, the political world obsessed on a single question: Who would Frank Murkowski choose to be Alaska's next U.S. senator? A generational shift was coming, after twenty-two years when the Alaska congressional delegation had consisted of the same three men: Senator Ted Stevens, Representative Don Young, and my father. Under rules passed by the legislature, he was able to hold the Senate seat until he was sworn in as governor, in December, and name his own replacement to fill out the final two years of the Senate term.

I didn't pay much attention to gossip about the appointment. I was busy, fully immersed in my family and organizing the House. But in political circles, my father's choice became a parlor game, with names floating up and down, while his closest advisers added ideas and self-nominations to a long list for consideration. Everyone knew the basic criteria: the appointee would have to be a Republican of proven ability who was relatively young and willing to stay in the Senate for a long career, building the seniority that would give our young state clout. Politicians campaigned to gather supporters who would influence my father. Among the most vigorous campaigners was our friend Mead Treadwell, and I did support him.

Ten days after the general election, to manage the speculation, my father released a list of twenty-six candidates. Some were serious, but many were obviously on the list for other reasons—such as the elderly retired Catholic archbishop of Anchorage, Francis Hurley. My name was on the list, as was that of Senator Ted Stevens's son Ben Stevens, who was becoming majority leader in the Alaska

State Senate. I considered myself to be in the same category as Archbishop Hurley, as one of the unrealistic choices added to the list just for show. A week later, my father interviewed fewer than half of those listed; that group of the most realistic candidates included Mead Treadwell, former Wasilla mayor Sarah Palin, a former Anchorage mayor, and several former legislators—and did not include me.

But one evening that November he brought up the topic. My parents were at our house in Government Hill for dinner, and my dad and I were standing together in the kitchen. He mentioned that the list contained a lot of names, including mine, and asked what I thought of that. I didn't take the question very seriously. He then asked who I would pick, and I said, "Mead."

He misheard me—he thought I had said, "Me." His response was "Well, yeah, a lot of people have said that you would be really good."

"No, no, no, Dad, I didn't say 'me,'" I corrected him. "I said 'Mead.'"

He responded that Mead was on the list and they had talked. But then he pressed again, asking if I would at least consider the position. I refused. I thought it was a crazy idea. It would be a scandal for him, setting him up for charges of nepotism—which would be accurate—and those charges would reflect on me, too. Besides, my future in the legislature was bright, I enjoyed what I was doing, and life was good at home. He pressed me again to think about it. I said my answer was no. But finally, I agreed to consider it, while assuming that when I talked to Verne later that night, he would agree with me, and that would be the end of the topic.

I was wrong. Verne didn't see the political danger of the appointment in the same way I did. He simply said I would be good at the job. I had not thought about that. But I remained adamantly opposed to the idea.

Over the years, I haven't told this story often. One reason is my sense that people don't believe me when I say I didn't want an appointment to the U.S. Senate. For anyone who hasn't seen the life of

a senator close up, it is probably hard to understand. But I had seen the price my father paid. I knew that it was a tough job with immense responsibility and very little time for anything else. I knew that power could be a burden and that the trappings of prestige could be unfulfilling. And I knew that anyone who accepted the job was signing up for the long term—at least eight years, and perhaps a lifetime—as Alaska would need to have a senator with seniority.

My dad loves living in Alaska, but for twenty-two years he had been trapped in Washington doing a job that never stops. When he was first elected, in 1980, I had just finished college at Georgetown, which had included one summer session—I knew the miserable heat of a Washington summer and wanted nothing to do with it. My mother felt the same way. Although my parents are devoted to each other, they spent the summer apart, every summer, for two decades, as she lived in Fairbanks and he stayed in Washington.

Not long after I graduated from college, I saw the cost of that separation. It was a brilliant summer weekend in 1981, at their home on the Chena River, and the whole family was on hand, out on the river, at the picnic table in the evening, and enjoying all the fun that vibrant town has to offer under the sweet midnight sun. My father flew in, and then, just as quickly, he was gone. It was the first time I had seen what I call an Alaska flip-turn weekend—he had flown four thousand miles, across five time zones (since reduced to four), from D.C. to Alaska, and then headed back, traveling for at least fourteen hours each way, to spend about thirty-six hours on the ground. I couldn't imagine how he could do it, and he was doing this more than once a month. As for longer vacations and visits, they were unpredictable. When my sister Carol got married, she tried to schedule the ceremony at the only time the Senate would be certain to give our father time off to be there, during the April recess—but she had to negotiate with the church to hold a wedding during Holy Week.

In 2002, when my father asked me to consider that life for myself, I was only five years beyond my perfect fortieth birthday. My life

still seemed close to perfect, even with the adjustment to legislative weekdays a third of the year. Why would I want to give that up? I didn't want to, and having my name on the list annoyed me rather than presenting any kind of temptation.

That Thanksgiving weekend, about two dozen members of our family joined a cruise down Mexico's west coast to Acapulco, celebrating Dad's victory. The rough, gloomy weather left us plenty of time to talk. I had shut the door on the Senate appointment, and the subject hadn't come up again between me and my father. But my parents must have reached an agreement. Instead of my father broaching the subject, I got my mother's less direct approach. I heard from my siblings, with comments like "I know this may be hard, but have you thought through the pros and cons?" I finally called a stop to it. I said, "I'm on vacation, too." It was too much like that trip to Puerto Rico, fifteen years earlier, when I had failed the bar and everyone tiptoed around me.

Finally, my father approached me when I was standing by the rail on an outside deck. He said, "Your mom and I have talked this through, and I have interviewed everyone on the list that could take over the seat. And I keep coming back to you. And I think you need to consider it."

I said, "Well, what happens if I don't want to?"

What he said next felt very unfair at the time, just as when he had used my sense of duty to keep me from quitting the bar exam. He simply made a statement: "You love the state as much as I do, and if you really care, you'll step up to the responsibility."

Again, I agreed to consider it. And, again, he left me alone. He flew straight to Juneau from the vacation to be sworn in as governor. Now he had one month, by law, to make an appointment to the Senate. Weeks passed without an announcement. His words kept turning over in my mind. The sense of obligation he had planted continued to grow, as I thought about the service to Alaska I could do as a senator. The personal concerns that were holding me back seemed comparatively petty, and perhaps selfish, in an objective

sense. After all, members of the military make greater sacrifices for our country. And, in all honesty, I believed I did have something to contribute. I may have been a B student, and leadership was something I had learned rather than being born with, but I had proved myself as a legislator and I believed I could do a good job as a senator. Knowing that fact made the responsibility real. I had learned early on that leadership is a duty. This decision wasn't only about me.

The sun had finished setting in Anchorage by midafternoon on Wednesday, December 18, nearly the shortest day of the year. After school let out, I took the boys for haircuts so they would look good for our Christmas pictures. They were in the chairs at a Supercuts in a Midtown strip mall when my father called. I backed into a storage closet to talk to him. He asked, "Did you get the package?"

The day before, I had received a FedEx package that contained no note—nothing but a pair of funky homemade socks, knitted in the gold-and-blue design of the Alaska flag. A questionable Christmas present without wrapping or a card? Apparently, I now learned, Dad had sent them. But why? He told a story—he thought I would remember, but I did not—of when he had worn these ugly socks, a gift from a constituent, at our duck camp on Healy Lake, not long after he'd entered the Senate. I had teased him, saying, "I wish I was a senator, so somebody would give me socks like that." Dad, a bit of a pack rat, had kept the socks and remembered my comment all this time. Now he had sent them to me.

"I want you to take the seat," he said.

I was shocked. Three weeks had passed since we had discussed the appointment, and I had assumed, with a sense of relief, that he had moved on to someone else. I said, "I can't hear you, I'm in the barbershop." I suppose I was stalling. I left the closet and sought even more privacy outside.

The parking lot was cold, dark, and icy, and traffic roared through the multilane intersection of the Seward Highway and Fireweed Lane. Dad was calling from D.C., planning to fly to Anchorage the

next day. He said he had thought it through. He knew I could handle the job and that I would carry on the values that had guided him during his two decades in the Senate. He had decided I was the right person.

I accepted.

The shape of the rest of my life would change in a matter of hours. My father said I should begin earning Senate seniority before other entering freshmen, and he wanted to make the announcement before Christmas week. That meant the day after tomorrow. The family entered panic mode. We scurried to plan a morning press conference for Friday, followed by a swearing-in ceremony at midday. Friends came over to help me pick out what to wear, but after one look in my closet—I am notoriously frugal about clothes—they gave up and my friend Jamilia brought over a selection of her classic outfits for me to try on. I was up past two in the morning working on my speech, reading it over the phone to my sister Carol, the family wordsmith, who told me which words to cut out.

At nine A.M. on Friday, we were at the governor's office in Anchorage, ready for the press conference, which would be carried live by various TV outlets. I would be accompanied by family, key legislators, and friends who had been with us since PTA days in Government Hill. Jamilia decided that my clothes still weren't acceptable and put her St. John knit jacket on me, still warm from her body. We stepped into the conference room. A crowd of about seventy people waited to see who would walk in beside the governor. Bright TV lights exposed us and blinded our eyes. At that moment, the media and the world learned of my father's extraordinary choice.

He spoke first and then introduced me, and I delivered my speech. Then he left the room and I took questions. Certainly, there was surprise, as the event was a historic first, and a wildly questionable one, of a father appointing his daughter to a U.S. Senate seat, but the reporters were respectful and even kind—I had good relationships with them, having worked with most during my time in the legislature. Indeed, the coverage was far better than I had

expected—all but for the "Voice of the Times" newspaper section run by Bill Allen and Veco. The *Anchorage Daily News* summarized the political reaction in its leading story by declaring, "Not everyone was happy with the selection, including Democrats and Republicans alike who complained of nepotism. Some conservative interest groups, particularly Alaska Right to Life, say they are happy with the politics of the father but not the daughter. But others of wide-ranging political views hailed the choice, saying that Lisa Murkowski has proven to be a smart, talented and moderate leader who will reach out to all Alaskans." Ethan Berkowitz, the fiery Democratic minority leader in the State House, said, "Lisa is a friend of mine and I wish her well. This is one of the few times in my life that I will say no more than that."

The day got more complicated, not simpler. Verne found the freezer had stopped working at Alaska Pasta and two hundred pounds of ravioli were in danger of thawing. He set out on a frantic quest to buy a new industrial freezer on the last workday before Christmas. Our friend Branch Haymans, from our Government Hill school days, called every restaurant in town, looking for a room for our luncheon of thirty guests, and was also dispatched at the last minute to get proper clothes for Verne to wear at the swearing-in. Verne gamely dressed in a corner of the gubernatorial offices. Federal judge Andrew Kleinfeld, who had flown from Fairbanks to swear me in, asked who was on the program of speakers and who would hold the Bible. We didn't have a program or a respectable Bible. We quickly recruited speakers, and I called Holy Family Cathedral, a few blocks away. Archbishop Roger Schwietz had just returned from the airport and agreed to bless us and bring a Bible along. By noon, everything had miraculously fallen together, and the event looked as if it had been planned. Branch had found a place for the lunch, too. Later that afternoon, back at the house, our guests toasted with champagne, while I did hours of television interviews and Verne installed his new freezer. In the evening we ordered in Chinese food while the boys lit the yard with sparklers.

At lunch, Judge Kleinfeld had asked if I knew where the word "senate" comes from—I did not—and informed me that it derives from the Latin word *senex,* for "old man," which became *senatus,* or "council of old men." Was I ready to join a council of old men? I laughed. I thought so.

That very same day, Majority Leader Trent Lott abruptly stepped down, leaving the U.S. Senate without a leader. The Republican conference negotiated who would succeed him. The media asked who I was supporting. The whirlwind I had stepped into showed no signs of abating. I would have to meet as part of the conference by telephone on Monday to vote for the new leader. I already had a Senate office, my father's, where the staff now answered the phone with my name. There was no time to absorb the speed and intensity of these changes and the responsibility suddenly placed on me.

In fact, I had no idea how difficult a course I had chosen.