I’m three forkfuls into a silver salmon steak when the phone rings. Must be magistrate business. Only the cops and troopers call me at home. Everyone else just shows up unannounced at the door. In my cautious judge voice I say hello. The state trooper I name Harley Davis responds: “Pete Brown found a body, a floater. What are you going to do about it?” He’s testing or teasing.

After ten years on the Kuskokwim River, I know about teasing and also about the need to maintain a professional detachment when faced with crime or sorrow. That would be the test. In the village I am coroner as well as magistrate so I ask, “Can you get it with your boat if I help?” He agrees and tells me to meet him ten minutes later at the trooper’s float.

I know the compact, gray-haired trooper well enough to call him, “Harley.” He gets the tough death calls, the ones that involve suicide or an infant’s passing. When he phoned from a village and asked me to forgo the autopsy of a baby, I heard sympathy in his voice for the surviving parents. He has watched more than a few cry as their child’s body is loaded onto a plane. But he likes to tease.
The troopers moor their blue-striped aluminum boat to a wooden float anchored on Aniak beach. Harley shows up five minutes late, squashing a mosquito into the fabric of his trooper-blue utility jumpsuit—the kind they use for dirty work.

Harley crosses the float and climbs over a gunwale. On the boat, he pushes a switch that lowers the outboard prop into the river. I stay on the float as he hits another switch to start the motor. The river is as flat as the light on this overcast day. It’s warm on the float but I’ll cool off quickly when the boat starts moving unless I sit in its half-enclosed cabin.

The dead guy we’re after must be the pilot who crashed his floatplane just downriver from Aniak during the June king salmon season. Without luck, searchers dragged heavy hooks for him through places where current often delivers the dead. He has been in the river long enough to plump with decomposition gases and float ashore. Since no locals drowned in the river this summer, it must be him. Did he have a family? Someone will have to call them. Now I dread two things.

How bad will he look? I can’t guess. A mortician sanitized all the bodies I had ever touched. As coroner, I issued death certificates, granted permission to transport bodies, and ordered autopsies. The sadness of most of those deaths didn’t touch me because usually Harley or another law enforcer stood between me and the body. Today, only latex gloves will separate the dead pilot’s flesh from mine.
Harley smiles and waves me on board. I untie the boat and swing a leg over a gunwale as the boat drifts away from the float. He smirks. Is he planning to tell people about how close I just came to falling between the float and runabout? I almost trip on a body-sized plastic bag that slides around the smooth deck. He smirks again. Harley takes a seat behind the steering station and pushes the throttle forward. He offers me the other seat but I stand by the motor where there is no chance for conversation. Standing exposed helps to maintain the numbness I will need to help get the body into the bag.

We pass a man tending a drift net from the back seat of his open skiff. The net forms a deep, porous wall across the current. Some of the white plastic net floats jerk when silver salmon swim gill-deep into the net mesh. The boat driver waves as we pass. Does he know why the magistrate and trooper are in such a hurry? Was his cousin one of the suicides that I processed after taking over the magistrate job?

I take a seat next to Harley, who smiles again and shouts out an offer of coffee. He has already poured a mug for himself from an almost-new thermos. Is he trying to discomfort me with his apparent lack of concern? Is he testing or teasing? He knows about the criminal defense work I did in Bethel before taking the magistrate job. Then, I was another pesky lawyer helping criminals avoid responsibility by poking holes in trooper cases. Now, I can issue search warrants, order him to arrest dangerous criminals, and require him to transport a body for autopsy. I should expect testing and teasing.
Harley slows the boat and shouts over the droning engine, “It floated up there, on that gravel bar just below Pete’s salmon-drying racks.”

I spot something man-sized and indistinct as driftwood resting just out of the water. Harley throttles back so the boat wake won’t rock the body when he turns to land. The pilot’s gas-bloated corpse distends his sweatshirt and jeans. Harley unrolls the body bag next to the pilot and pulls down its industrial grade zipper. As I pretend that this is as normal as a fishing trip, Harley lifts the wallet and a comb from the rear pockets of the pilot’s jeans. He slides them into plastic evidence bags.

The trooper carefully tucks one zippered edge of the body bag under the pilot. Taking up station on my side of the body, he tells me to kneel next to its legs and slide my hands under the thighs: “When I start to roll it onto the bag you do the same. Be careful. He’s been in the water all summer and we don’t want an arm or a leg to fall off.” I hide my fear, tell myself that collecting the dead is one of the village magistrate’s responsibilities and that I should be grateful that the troopers usually do it for me. Now close to the body, I finally smell the sweet but rotten scent of spoiled meat. It is not as foul as decayed salmon or a moose carcass. But I know I will never forget it.

Someday, I will wonder that I did not vomit or run away. Did Harley expect that? I want it over, but work with as much care as the trooper to make sure we bag an intact corpse. I remember that the pilot has a wife down in Texas. I’ll have to call when we get back to the village. For her and for Harley, I carefully lift the body into the bag.
The pilot’s swollen face is the last to disappear as the trooper zips up the body bag. I will always be surprised that the hair, while coated in river silt, still looked alive, that the river had turned his skin the color of the mahogany wood I used for carving, that it had relaxed his features into a calm expression.

There is no graceful way to lift a full body bag over a three-foot-high gunwale and lower it onto a boat deck. The trooper and I try our best. Someday I will appreciate the consideration he showed the body. I will realize that he asked for my help because no other trooper was around to help him. He did use the retrieval to tease me. Eventually I will accept that at the end of a career that required him to deliver the worst news, and investigate those who hurt others, he was entitled to use gallows humor to tease a former defense attorney.

I sit in the passenger seat on the way back to Aniak. Harley is all business, no talk, as he maneuvers the boat alongside the trooper float. Since the body doesn’t belong to a village family, no one waits for us on the beach. I stand on the float while the trooper drives his truck down to where we can transfer the body into its bed. He hands me the clear evidence bags and I stare at the pilot’s black comb as Harley drives me to my office. If he hurries, he has time to slip the pilot into a coffin-shaped tin box and ship it to Anchorage on the evening flight.

When the sound of the Anchorage jet takeoff fades, I call the widow in Texas. I should have called her an hour ago but stalled, trying to think of how to break the news. For the
other village deaths, Harley or another police officer notified the next of kin. Will the pilot’s wife faint, scream, or blubber? I should be prepared for tears, maybe hysterical sobbing. Will my voice crack with emotion? Good thing Harley left.

The phone rings as I realize, in a panic, that it is the middle of the night in Texas. She answers before I can hang up. With the voice of young woman who cannot sleep, she says, “Hello.” Today, I cannot remember her name so I call her Mrs. Stevens. I respond to her greeting with, “Mrs. Stevens, this is Dan Branch, the Aniak magistrate.”

“Yes.”

For some reason I open the bag holding her dead husband’s comb. Its smell of decay floats up as I say, “I am afraid I have some bad news.”

“You found him.”

“Yes.”

“Thank God!”

“Mrs. Stevens, I am afraid that he is dead.”

“I know. I didn’t think he could still be alive. But now I can tell the kids. We have a body to bury. The insurance will pay. Thank you.”

“We weren’t able to recover any salvageable personal effects. There is a comb and a wallet but you probably won’t want them.”

If she asks me to send them to her I will have to tell her that they smell of death. She doesn’t want them, just the body. I warn her about the required autopsy and promise to issue orders for the eventual shipment of her husband to Texas.
The smell of the wallet and comb waft up every time I open the coroner file drawer. Long after I leave the river I will remember that smell and how long it took to wash it from my hands.