



Photo by Ken Ilgūnas

## KEN ILGŪNAS: “OUT OF THE WILD”

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Interview by Laima Vincė

### Introducing North American Writers of Lithuanian Heritage

Over the following months, this series will introduce North American writers of Lithuania heritage who write in English but maintain ties with Lithuania and honor and reflect on their Lithuanian heritage. This series defines writers of Lithuanian heritage as people who have ancestral roots in Lithuania, whether their religious faith is Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Pagan, or agnostic. It is not necessary to have 100 percent Lithuanian blood to participate! We live in a global era and while Lithuanian-born Lithuanians are traversing borders and can be found on virtually every continent and in every time zone, Lithuanians born abroad are coming home—either in a cultural sense or literally and physically—to the Homeland. All this movement makes for some very interesting writing that I hope to explore in this series. In a word, this series aims to break down the traditional barriers of who is a Lithuanian writer and what is important to Lithuanian writers. I do not profess having any definitive answers, but instead my goal is to ask a lot of questions.

I will ask writers over the next few months to share about their ties to Lithuania and to reflect on what it is in their writing that is uniquely Lithuanian, and whether it is even possible (or relevant) to seek such a definition. To better understand North American Lithuanians, it is useful to become familiar with an overview of Lithuanian emigration to North America. There have been three major waves of Lithuanian migration to North America over the past three

centuries. The first wave took place in the mid to late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century when both Christian Lithuanians and Litvakes (Lithuanian Jews) began immigrating to North America while Lithuania was part of the Russian Tsarist empire. The second wave of emigration to the United States and Canada took place at the end of World War II, when Lithuanians escaping Soviet terror and Lithuanian Jewish Holocaust survivors sought refuge in the democracies of the West. The third wave of emigration from Lithuania into the United States, Canada, and elsewhere, has been taking place since Lithuania reinstated its independence in 1991.

Laima Vincė

### **Out of the Wild: A Conversation with Ken Ilgunas**

Interview with Ken Ilgunas

By Laima Vincė

Author photos by Woody Welch

**Laima Vincė:** Tell me about your Lithuanian heritage?

**Ken Ilgunas:** I know almost nothing about it. All I have is this goofy name—a name that’s normal in Lithuania, but goofy in North America. All we knew, and we do have this Scottish guy in my family who does the family tree work, is that my ancestor, Juozas Ilgūnas, left Lithuania in the 1890s and sailed to Scotland. That was very much the pattern of migration back then. I read about Lithuanian migration in a book called *The Scottish Nation: A Modern History*. I learned about Lithuanians coming to Scotland. A lot of them were enroute to America, so they’d get off the ship somewhere on the East Coast of Scotland, make their way to the West coast, where they’d board a ship to America. But a lot of them stayed in the Glasgow area. There used to be a culturally strong Lithuanian identity group in Glasgow. That is what Juozas Ilgūnas did. He stayed in Glasgow and went to work in the coal mines in Scotland. However, I don’t believe he was a coal miner by trade originally. Most of these men were peasant farmers in Lithuania. From this book I learned that they were able to retain their cultural identity for a generation or two, but there was also a lot of prejudice towards them, which is typical of immigrant groups. So, they had an incentive to assimilate into British culture.

My father, who gave me this name Ilgunas, was a steel worker. He worked in the Motherwell Scotland Steel Industry. He later moved to Canada and worked in the steel industry there. I was born in Canada. We later moved to America. But we never had any Lithuanian cuisine, any Lithuanian day, a Lithuanian meal—we never had a Lithuanian story. All of that was completely gone. Growing up I had this really strange name—Ilgunas—which was the only thing that had survived from Lithuania.

A few years ago, when I married my wife she asked if I’d like to change my surname to hers. Now, that’s a completely appropriate thing for a man to concede. But she doesn’t have this relationship with her surname the way I do. My name is a survivor. Somehow my name made it through Scotland. A lot of the Scottish Ilgunases changed their names to Gilgun, which sounds very Scottish. But Ilgunas just survived. So, I said to her, “Do you mind if we keep my name and pass it down in our family.” For our wedding gift she agreed to take my name and that’s a wonderfully sentimental gift. So, yes, my name is the only thing that survived from Lithuania.

But, a few years ago, I received an email from a Lithuanian woman named Ugnė. Her maiden name was Ilgūnas. Her father had been Stanislovas Gediminas Ilgūnas (1936–2010). He was a signatory of the Lithuanian declaration of independence in 1990. She was curious to figure out if we were relatives and how we were connected through our

name. Her father had been a writer and I was a writer, so she was very curious to meet me and see if we had a family connection.

So, in 2017 I decided to do a trip across Europe for the first time. I started in Britain, where I had many ancestors, and met many family members who have Lithuanian heritage. I made my way to visit Ugnė in Lithuania. I don't know if we are actually related or if we just share the same surname, but she and her husband treated me like family, and I spent six weeks with them living in their house. That was my entryway back into Lithuania.

**Laima Vincė:** Have you done any genetic tests?

**Ken Ilgunas:** Yes, I did "23 and Me" and I was completely unsurprised with the results—they zeroed right in on Vilnius. The family history I'd been told was completely in line with the genetic testing results. My mom is Polish, so the test showed 50% Polish, 25% Lithuanian, and 25% Scottish. The question I want you to ask is why does any of this matter?

**Laima Vincė:** I've wanted to ask you that too. When I read your books and your essays I found in them so much that for me reflects a Lithuanian character.

**Ken Ilgunas:** So, please tell me about it. I'm curious.

**Laima Vincė:** Your Alaska essay is introspective, about a close connection with nature, about being alone out in nature. To me these are themes I find in Lithuanian literature. If you talk to Lithuanians and if you were to ask them what is the most important aspect of a Lithuanian identity, most Lithuanians would say, "It's my connection with nature." You might be an urbanite living in Vilnius, but the moment you have free time, you would go out to nature, to your farmstead or cottage in the countryside. So, I feel that in Lithuanian culture the connection with nature is important. Every national literature has its themes and in Lithuanian literature the connection with nature is a strong theme.

Then, you write about that sense of going through life introverted and introspective and how it can be a struggle to communicate with other people. That comes up in a lot of your work. You write about hunching in on yourself living in a van, pursuing a solitary life. That's also a Lithuanian theme, that sense of being introverted and not negotiating the social space the same way more open cultures would. And then there's your frugality. That's Lithuanian to me. You write a lot about not being comfortable with debt. Not going into debt is part of the Lithuanian psyche as well.

**Ken Ilgunas:** My dad is extrovert and cheery and he has his Scottish culture. So, I'm not sure where these qualities in me come from.

**Laima Vincė:** I think that when we write a lot of these qualities come from deep within us. But I do have to admit that as I was reading your writing, before speaking with you, I kept saying to myself, "Oh my God, this guy is such a Lithuanian!"

**Ken Ilgunas:** It gives me a weird sense of comfort to hear that. I think because we Americans have this sense of uprootedness because we've only been on that continent for so long. Certainly, my family has only been on the North American continent for a generation or two. We're all very transient. People used to live in villages generation after generation. They knew the places, they knew the soil, the animals. We ended up in a suburb with a bunch of people who just moved there with no connection to the land. American rituals are not as deep and substantial as

other cultures' rituals and traditions. I think that we're always reaching for something. We want to feel that sense of connection.

**Laima Vincė:** When I was a teenager I had this strong need to learn Lithuanian, so I went to live in Lithuania when it was still a part of the Soviet Union in the late eighties. I felt this deep pull towards Lithuania. Like you, I grew up in a suburb and I had neighbors who were Armenian, Italian, Irish, and everyone was just thrown together into one social space with their own histories that they wanted to forget in America. I've found distant relatives in Lithuania and met them, but it's this ongoing work to create family out of that connection.

**Ken Ilgunas:** We are also seeking—maybe inspiration. We want to feel that we're capable of something more. It's a kind of treasure hunt. Who will I find? Maybe I will have a bit of him or her in me? If he can do that, then maybe I can do that too. If there is a family legend about someone being gallant and brave maybe I can be gallant and brave too. We want to feel that we are capable of something too. But then again, we can turn up something nasty in our family background that we hadn't known about—if your family takes a wrong turn at some point...

**Laima Vincė:** This conversation that we're having now, this never comes up in conversations with friends and family in Lithuania. And that's because they know who they are. They've always been in the same place. What we're talking about is the longing of the immigrant.

**Ken Ilgunas:** Yes, that's right.

**Laima Vincė:** I'd like to ask that question. Tell me from the perspective of a writer: Why does it matter?

**Ken Ilgunas:** I'm not sure it does matter. Isn't the history I have good enough? Isn't it enough to know where my mom came from? Where my dad came from? Do I really need to go three generations back? People who have spare time and the resources to investigate their family heritage have the ability to do that. We are seeking to elevate ourselves, to self-improve, to be the best person we can be, and so we feel that we need to tap into that ancestral tree and take some of our ancestor's sap and supercharge ourselves in some way.

I wanted to walk Lithuania's fields and forests and wonder if I might feel that I belong there. Is there some mystic connection? I have to say that I didn't feel that. I loved my time in Lithuania. I think the country is beautiful. But did I feel that mystic connection? No, I didn't. When I went to Scotland, I didn't feel it either. I just feel that human beings are so forward thinking and adaptable. If we colonize Mars, three generations later on Mars they are going to be Martians, and they will barely think about planet Earth. As humans we accept the now.

**Laima Vincė:** So, you were looking for a connection with Lithuania and it didn't come?

**Ken Ilgunas:** It didn't come, and that is okay. Maybe what I had is enough. I'm curious about a cultural echo and how a culture can echo through the generations, and maybe there comes a point when that echo just dims into silence.

I grew up in a Buffalo, New York melting pot with a lot of Polish, and Irish, and Italians. You can see how each group retains a little bit of their heritage. If you talk with someone of Swedish descent and someone of African descent you can sense the difference in their cultural echo. So, my question for myself was: is there still that Lithuanian echo that has somehow survived going on a hundred and fifty years away from Lithuania? I think you can never quite tell from your own skin. You need someone else—like yourself—to point something out about your

personality that is definitively Lithuanian. When I went to Lithuania, people wanted to see things in me that were Lithuanian. At times I felt they were forcing it. All in all, it's a big question mark for me.

**Laima Vincė:** How much is it a cultural construct? Or a social construct? Or an artistic ideal?

**Ken Ilgunas:** When I was a young man I traveled to Alaska, and I felt completely at home there. Sometimes we can feel the most at home in places where the ghosts of our family have never been.

I also think that how we perceive our ancestors' culture has to do with how it is perceived by the culture that we are in. Let me illustrate that. Growing up when someone asked where my family was from, I'd say, Scotland. My dad was an immigrant, and he had a Scottish accent. I'd say that my mom is from Poland because all her family were from Poland. It was easy to identify Scottish. When you say Scottish to an American, they think of the hills, and the sheep, and the bagpipes, and the Mel Gibson sword. It is a well-packaged cultural image. And then when I think about what is Polish, all I can think of is polka dots and accordions. That's about it. But if you were to ask me when I was a teenager, or even just a few years ago, what is Lithuania, I wouldn't have had any answer. It helps when you're identifying and crafting your own identity how well packaged these identities come. If you were to ask anyone in Maine or in Buffalo what is Lithuania, you are not going to get any answer.

**Laima Vincė:** Lithuania was wiped off the map for all those decades because it was occupied by the Soviet Union, so to North Americans Lithuania literally did not exist. When I interviewed North American writers of Lithuanian descent who grew up in the Lithuanian Chicago diaspora community they told me about how they went to Lithuanian school, ate Lithuanian food, attended Lithuanian cultural and sporting events. For them, their Lithuania is in Chicago and not in Lithuania. The Lithuanian community in Toronto is the same way. They don't have a sense of a Lithuania in northern Europe. They perceive Lithuania as their neighborhood in Chicago or Toronto. So that ties in with your argument about cultural constructs. And yet, you hold onto the name, and you have pride in your name.

**Ken Ilgunas:** The name is a survivor. That is how I think of Lithuania as well. Lithuania is a survivor. How the hell is that country still intact? It's been battered about by these huge empires for hundreds of years, it has been occupied, and its people were brutalized and suppressed and terrorized, and then every time, Lithuania emerges again from the ashes. For me, Lithuania's story is an amazing story of resilience. Maybe I didn't find that relative who made me feel that I could say "I could do that because he did that." But at least I can say, I'm Lithuanian, this country did that. This country survived.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I wanted to ask you, how far back can you go and feel you still can connect with an ancestor?

**Laima Vincė:** When my Great Aunt passed away, we found a suitcase that contained notebooks that were written by hand by my great grandfather in 1959. In those notebooks, he wrote our family history going back to the 1863 revolt against the Tsar. He wrote about ancestors in his and my great grandmother's family who had participated in that revolt. He wrote about his ancestral village. He traced his family tree back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. As I read his notebooks, those lost ancestors came alive for me and I felt that I knew them. That is the power of writing.

**Ken Ilgunas:** We don't know anything about Juozas Ilgūnas. There is a ridiculous family story of him being shot at by Cossacks while in a rowboat. That's got to be complete nonsense.

**Laima Vincė:** Well, wait a minute, it might not be that far-fetched. In those years Lithuanian men were running from conscription into the Tsarist Army.

**Ken Ilgunas:** For me that moment of connection happened when I visited the (Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights)<sup>[1]</sup> in Vilnius. I'd been in Lithuania for a good while. I could see the legacy of the Soviet occupation. It's still reverberating through the generations even now. You can look at the suicide rates in Lithuania; you can look at the alcohol problems. It's all connected to this dark history. I saw it everywhere. When I went to the KGB Museum, I really understood why everyone doesn't come across as a cheery happy go lucky American there. When neighbors are turned against neighbors, when people are informing against each other, that breaks down social trust. I think that's difficult to repair. On that visit to the KGB Museum, I experienced my first deep emotional connection with Juozas. I don't want to come across as offensive and perhaps I shouldn't say this and I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I was happy that Juozas Ilgūnas had left. I was happy he got on a boat and went to Scotland where he was able to lay down a family foundation for the generations that followed. He lived outside of war and occupation and was able to live in relative freedom. His descendants were able to slowly climb the socio-economic ladder. We went from a family of coal miners to steel workers to ambulance drivers to butchers to contractors to engineers. I was happy that he left, and I was happy that we didn't have to live with that legacy of war and occupation.

**Laima Vincė:** What is most important for you as a writer?

**Ken Ilgunas:** Brutal, uncensored, unfiltered honesty. It's not just the best kind of writing, it should be the only kind of writing. Sometimes when I'm writing and a cliché comes out of me it feels as though it is something that is almost expected. If you're writing about going out into nature you're supposed to write in a certain way. I must have at least once written in a draft, "I felt a oneness or whatever." A lot of that is just bullshit. When you really investigate that and peel back those culturally implanted layers and you get to the cold-hearted truth of it, that's when the writing is really good. I was once flying over the Tar Sands of Northern Alberta, which is arguably the worst human made environmental disaster in human history. I think the first draft I wrote was about my disgust and revulsion from what I saw. But when I thought about it, I realized that I don't think I actually felt those things. I think I felt amazed by what I saw. It was so big and so huge, a whole landscape erased from the face of the earth. It was an abstract concept. The human mind cannot even register a normal emotion for something like that. So, that's when it got interesting, when I really peeled back the nonsense and found some powerful truths. That was good writing. It was, for me, the toxic sublime.

**Laima Vincė:** Tell me about your love for open spaces.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I spent the first portion of my life in a fairly bland suburb where I cannot even think of going on a trail hike for the first twenty years of my life. It was an active childhood with soccer fields and hockey rinks. I grew up in a suburb where there were once wild swamps and forests and now there are nothing but houses. Around the age of 16, I started getting obsessed with the idea of Alaska and I have no idea why. I wasn't reading books about Alaska. I wasn't watching movies. Something about Alaska captured my imagination. I'd have dreams of grizzly bears. I think it was my subconscious saying: "Get out of the surreality of gas stations and car dealerships and cookie cutter homes." There was something false and weird and not exactly right. You need to go into the purest, most pristine nature you can. That ushered me up to Alaska. I spent the next seven summers in Alaska. It was a formative time and a formative place. I love nature for what it is and for what it is not. You mentioned introverts before. As an introvert who never feels comfortable in crowds and cities, nature is that place where none of those pressures exist. I tapped into my wild side and I came to believe that a life lived not half wild is a life only half lived.

**Laima Vincė:** When he was a young man, my uncle went out to Alaska in the 1970s to earn money working on the pipeline. He met his wife there and they stayed and built a life. My cousins grew up in Alaska and in fact one cousin

still lives in Seward. I first went out to Alaska as a young woman. I grew up in the New York city suburbs and I remember that shock I had when I got to Alaska when I saw how clear and beautiful and vast it was. I felt like I couldn't write anything, I couldn't draw anything, because any human attempt at beauty is nothing compared to the beauty of Alaska's nature.

**Ken Ilgunas:** It's the culture out there too. I remember in Alaska I met these friends, and they asked me to come over for dinner. They killed one of their chickens and served it with blueberry cobbler. I spilled blueberry cobbler down the front of my shirt, and nobody even noticed. It was one of the most natural, unpretentious, down-to-earth, liberated places. That made me fall in love with that culture.

**Laima Vincé:** Of the three books you've written, which one do you feel most connected to?

**Ken Ilgunas:** I'll never say that one of my books is my favorite. They're all my babies. I love them all. You're only allowed to write your coming-of-age journey once in your life. *Walden on Wheels* is that book. It's about growing up. My second book is about my hike and my third book is about advocacy.

**Laima Vincé:** You write a book, and you release it into the world and these echoes come back. Sometimes you can't even predict how people are going to react to your book. So, for example, you have a *New York Times* essay about living in a van and it was also published in Salon. Those are very big venues. That kind of reaction did you get after those essays came out?

**Ken Ilgunas:** The *Salon* essay that was published in 2010 changed my life. It was a life altering article. My first national publication. That was read hundreds of thousands of times. I received hundreds of Facebook "Friend" requests. All these gay men were hitting on me. I had phone calls from NPR, Inside Edition, and they all wanted to talk with this van dweller. Now wanting to live in a van is a normal and reasonable thing for a young person to do, but back in 2010 people thought only the homeless and perverts lived in vans. People who were commenting on that article thought it was a hoax. Other people thought I was insane. What's insane about sleeping on my back seat and saving tens of thousands of dollars so that I could avoid debt. There was nothing insane about that. A literary agent got in touch with me, and he suggested that I adapt that article into a book. That is how *Walden on Wheels* came to be.

**Laima Vincé:** I had a student in my class at the University of Southern Maine who was living in a tent in the woods while attending university. But, in a state like Maine, which is an economically poor state, a young woman living in a tent is something people understand within that economic context, but you were going to a prestigious university, and therein lies the incongruity.

**Ken Ilgunas:** Yeah, and maybe that incongruence made it appealing in some weird way.

**Laima Vincé:** After that essay was published, your professors had to know. How did they react?

**Ken Ilgunas:** Everyone was half amused by it. A couple people, as I was walking down the street, would say, "Hey, van man!" So, life continued on as normal. I was sleeping in the parking lot next to this old tobacco mill that had been refurbished and some student apartments. Someone complained that there's someone living in their van in the parking lot. I was very hygienic and not putting on parties or anything like that. So, I was really upset about that. But Duke was kind enough to offer me a different lot to park in conveniently located next to the campus police station. They didn't kick me out. Living in my van made me stand out. I think I even got a date out of it.

**Laima Vincé:** I love the part in the essay where you describe opening the van doors and all these odors come wafting out.

**Ken Ilgunas:** Maybe I embellished that...

**Laima Vincé:** Is travel writing for you more about the experience of travel or writing?

**Ken Ilgunas:** I think a journey is only half a journey until you write about it. For me, writing about a journey unlocks the journey in some way. That's when you're able to understand what happened, to document it, to fit it into the narrative of your life. Once you write about it then the journey becomes whole. When I walked across the Great Plains I had a wonderful trip, but then you research and you spend months in libraries researching about the Native American tribes who lived in the Great Plains, the animals who migrated over this for millions of years.

**Laima Vincé:** How have your topics and sensibilities changed now that you no longer live in the wide-open spaces of the United States but are living in the United Kingdom?

**Ken Ilgunas:** I don't think my geographical change has affected what I write about. I didn't want to fall into a trap as a travel writer. Many travel writers start out writing about a journey they went on and it turns into a book. Then you get these travel writers who say, "Okay, I'm going to hop across Egypt on a pogo stick." You know, just gimmicky things. I always wanted my journeys to be authentic in some way. When I chose my third book, I didn't mind that it was outside of the travel memoir genre.

I'm working on my fourth book now. The title is actually *Out of the Wild*. It's a book about my relationships. That's not a travel memoir. I just think that writing about relationships is something that men never do and could really benefit from and find entertainment in.

**Laima Vincé:** No! The women will love it. They'll be inspired to think about how they can tame a man like you.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I tamed myself though. It was me who took me out of the wild. So, yeah, our culture really glorifies these tales of going into the wild. Escaping civilization. But there is a part of every hero or heroine's journey that is the return, when you come back. I want to write about that. I want to write about leaving the wild and coming back to civilization. Setting some roots down. And that's what I've done here in Scotland with marrying, having a kid, buying a house with a mortgage.

**Laima Vincé:** I'm interested in what you were saying about how men don't even talk—much less write—about relationships.

**Ken Ilgunas:** We don't even talk about relationships in person, over a beer, beside a fire. Even in ideal circumstances it's something that rarely comes up. It's a no man's land, and yet it's such a universal evergreen topic. If you were to ask me what are the books written about men who explore their relationships I could only think of one.

**Laima Vincé:** That's uncharted territory.

**Ken Ilgunas:** It's the bravest thing I can write right now because I have no idea if there's a market for it. I think publishers would be unsure what to do with this book. Yet, someone once said authors are pregnant with an idea and the only thing you can do is deliver it. And so, I have to deliver this baby.



**Laima Vincé:** Actually, I think it's an amazing idea and I have the feeling that this book will do well. We don't have brick and mortar bookstores anymore, but when you remember the times when we did, remember the men who would buy *Penthouse* magazine and hide it inside a brown paper bag. I think that this is how men may buy this book. They'd sneak it out of the store.

**Ken Ilgunas:** Or they'd put something manly on the cover, so men would buy it thinking it's a book about fishing.

**Laima Vincé:** I think it's this fear of confronting intimacy.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I'm an exception. I have a best friend. We've been pals since we were 13-years-old and we have this email correspondence going back 22 years. That started when we were dating our first girlfriends and we were trying to understand and process that whole amazing, terrifying, bewildering experience. We've kept that going. We've written about all our relationships just trying to understand ourselves. I think I must have written a million words on the topic.

Writing is how I process my experiences and make sense of them and understand them. If one person does that really well and puts it onto page, it's going to help other people advance their own thinking. I don't know why we don't do this. Somewhere along the path of boyhood we're discouraged from exploring these things, from being intimate, from showing vulnerability. That does need to end, I think.

**Laima Vincé:** If you look towards popular movies, men are portrayed as having no real deep emotion. Everything is oriented towards exterior attraction and with little substance.

**Ken Ilgunas:** If you look at those Marvel movies, the male characters just give those sardonic one liners standing there with their chiseled pectoral muscles.

**Laima Vincé:** Perhaps we could say that society has done a disservice to men by reducing them to these one-dimensional caricatures in terms of emotionality and sensitivity. Do you think society doesn't create a space for intimacy?

**Ken Ilgunas:** If you want to create a space you can, like I did through my email correspondence.

**Laima Vincé:** It's a fascinating topic and I would hope that this book becomes something that might shift and change things in society to get people to be more open or at least feel that it's okay to explore openness.

**Ken Ilgunas:** And coming from a guy—I don't know if I'm allowed to call myself manly—but I don't feel effeminate in any way. You can be a manly person and still embody traits that go against the grain of what we typically perceive as unmanly. I don't think there's anything wrong with being open and intimate and empathetic. These are words we wouldn't typically associate with manliness.

**Laima Vincé:** It's like you're tracing your life through the books you're writing.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I guess so. There are some rocks I haven't yet picked up and uncovered. I had to ask myself at one point: what are my best attributes as a writer? What should I rely on most. I'm terrible with dialog. I just don't remember what people say. Could I possibly do books like your standard "pick a topic and do a statistical nonfiction argument book." I could, but it wouldn't be great. What I do best is introspective writing, understanding myself and

putting it onto the page in a brutally honest way and in a funny way. This is a conversation I had with myself a couple of years ago and I just decided I'm going to lean into this. I'm going to choose this as my literary identity.

**Laima Vincé:** You talk about being brutally honest in your writing. The reader can always tell where you're not being honest and skirting the issues. Having that practice as a writer, do you feel that honesty crosses over into your day-to-day life and your personality? Do you become this brutally honest person.

**Ken Ilgunas:** When you write about yourself in an honest way, and you're trying to uncover the cleanest version of the truth, it's almost like going to therapy. You will navigate through the world differently having gone through this process. So, there's that. But then do I bring this kind of brutal honesty into my everyday interactions? Absolutely not. When I'm writing a memoir, there is always this tension between: should I be a nice person, or should I be a sociopath? The sociopath is the true artist. The sociopath wants to create the best form of art and he or she is not afraid to upset anyone or to put anything before the quality of the work.

When I've written memoirs and I've written scenes about other people I've had this tension: do I care more about the work or do I care more about these relationships. And some of the stuff I've written has affected my relationships. So, there's that. But in normal day-to-day life I go out of my way to be as polite as I can possibly be. I'm conflict averse, so that brutal honesty doesn't go for face-to-face interaction.

**Laima Vincé:** But it does. It goes in the way that you choose the path how to live your life. That's the important thing. You're so right about the sociopath. I know that feeling.

**Ken Ilgunas:** Are you a sociopath as a writer or are you a nice person as a writer?

**Laima Vincé:** You can't be a nice person as a writer and be interesting. It's not that you set out to consciously be interesting. I think of how Frank McCourt opens his memoir *Angela's Ashes*: "The happy childhood is hardly worth your while." We write about what challenges us and what is difficult.

**Ken Ilgunas:** I love feeling brave. You're sitting on a chair, looking at a computer, typing on the keyboard. It's nothing to look at. It's a very sedentary pose, but it can be an act of bravery. It can be an act of courage. It can be an act of heresy. Even though you're sitting on your keester sometimes you feel most alive in that pose. I think your first draft has to be wild and brash and uncensored. You've got to be like a wild horse out there.

**Laima Vincé:** You're moving through time and space in your mind.

**Ken Ilgunas:** If you're not going to be interesting, then what's the fucking point.



Photo by Ken Ilgūnas

## **Out of the Wild: A life-changing summer among the bears of Lake Clark National Park and Preserve**

By Ken Ilgūnas

*This essay was first published in the fall of 2021 by National Parks Magazine.*

I used to have nice dreams about bears.

When I was in my late teens, I'd dream of grizzlies roaming over lawns and munching on grass in my suburban neighborhood in western New York. At the time, I never quite understood why I'd have these dreams, but I'd wake up exhilarated. I felt drawn to Alaska as if by some unbending law of physics. At age 22, I drove to Alaska to work for a summer cleaning rooms with the idea of seeking real bears and real wilderness.

I saw both, and, year after year, I returned to Alaska to work as a guide or ranger, which managed to keep my bear dreams at bay. But in the spring of 2017, when I was 33, the dreams returned, except this time the bears would be chasing and/or eating me. I'd wake up damp with sweat, wondering if it had been a good idea to accept a job at Lake Clark National Park and Preserve, where I was to spend a summer living amid one of the world's densest populations of brown bears.

Established in 1980, Lake Clark is one of the country's least-known and least-visited national parks. Its 4 million acres — located 120 miles southwest of Anchorage along the Cook Inlet coast — are middling by Alaskan park standards, but Lake Clark is bigger than Connecticut or any of the lower 48 national parks. There's far more to it

than its size or namesake lake: nearly two dozen rivers, creeping glaciers, dense boreal forest, and the mountains of the Alaskan and Aleutian ranges that soar as high as the 10,197-foot Redoubt Volcano. Lake Clark contains numerous significant ancestral sites of the Dena'ina people, who have lived in the area for thousands of years. Tribal members continue to fish and hunt in the park in accordance with legislation that allows for subsistence use of federal lands.

The region is also home to bears. Lots of bears. Many of North America's 55,000 brown bears live on the Alaska Peninsula — the 500-mile saber that slices through the Pacific. (Brown bears and grizzlies are the same species, though it is customary in the area to call the larger, coastal creatures "brown bears" and the smaller, inland ones "grizzlies.") The coastal bears are so large because of their diet made up of sedge grass high in protein, razor clams as big as hot dog buns and abundant salmon.

As a ranger, I was to monitor human-bear interactions on a 3-mile section of coast within the park boundaries. I wouldn't be out there alone. In this part of the park, known as Silver Salmon Creek, there are a few private cabins and two private lodges that employ guides who accompany guests on walks up to bears. Bush planes from outfits based in Anchorage, Homer, Kenai and Soldotna also land on this stretch of beach every day in the summer. Because of the large number of visiting groups and commercial operators, the Park Service erected a log cabin some years back and started employing park rangers to live there during summers.

I had been looking for a way to escape an untenable living situation, support my writing career and also hit a reset button. The gig seemed like it might do all three, so I went for it, accepting my responsibilities with a kind of reckless "I'll probably get through this despite being unqualified" derring-do. For the past decade, that's how I'd been approaching my life, which was in a constant state of improvisational flux and opportunistic movement. I was often living out of a vehicle or packing a summer's worth of belongings into a backpack. I had a driver's license from Nebraska, health insurance in North Carolina and family in western New York.

Although I'd worked at another park in Alaska, I didn't have experience mediating group conflicts or dealing with bears. My training, in the village of Port Alsworth where Lake Clark's field headquarters are located, included a refresher on shotguns and bear spray, and a chat with the park's wildlife biologist. Because there weren't any actual bears in the training, being flown out to a cabin surrounded by bears felt like being called in to perform heart surgery after reading a medical textbook.

The morning after the training ended, I loaded a small bush plane with as many boxes of food as I could (potatoes, cans of pineapple, Bob's Red Mill muffin mix) and was flown to my cabin. We soared above the clear and placid Lake Clark — a narrow, 42-mile mirror that reflected the cloudy sky — then in between tall mountains, where impenetrable tangles of alder clung to steep slopes. Along the ocean coast, wet sand was etched by scores of squiggly streams, which stretched inland to the forested shore like long roots. When we passed over my home for the season, I could see the bulky bodies of a few brown bears in the light green sedge meadows near Silver Salmon Creek, a small inlet that widens with brackish water twice a day when the tides come in.

A ranger named Kara, who'd spent a couple summers living in the cabin, joined me for the first few days.

"Here, the bears are like dogs," Kara said with a giggle, shortly after we arrived. "But don't tell anyone I said that." A little later, in a more serious tone, she explained that a couple of years back, a bear had attacked a tourist — an English lady who unfortunately got tossed around and whose foot was bitten. (She survived.) Kara also casually mentioned that some of these bears might like to eat a human, which had me wondering what sort of dogs Kara had been hanging out with.

In truth, brown bears, like most bears anywhere, pose little threat to responsible humans, but every year there are a handful of bear attacks. In the state of Alaska, between 2000 and 2017, there were 68 hospitalizations and 10 fatalities due to bear attacks. (To put these numbers into context, it should be noted that hunters kill somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 bears in Alaska each year year, on average — and that doesn't include other human-caused bear deaths.)

Kara gave me a tour of my new home, the Silver Salmon Creek ranger cabin. Surrounded by tall Sitka spruce trees, the spacious log cabin has a big porch with a long roof overhang supported by three timber columns. Gutters that run along the roof — a shiny, metallic forest green — channel rainwater that is pumped from garbage bins to the kitchen sink. Inside are two bedrooms and a large living space with a table, couch and, tucked in the corner, a dried spruce sapling ornamented with fishhooks and spinners. Plus, there's an oven and a fridge with a tiny freezer, both of which run on propane. A sauna, an outhouse and a storage shed (where I would keep a pile of chopped firewood for the cabin's wood stove) sit in the backyard, a carpet of soft moss and rough lichen. It's a two-minute walk to the creek or ocean coast. My initial thought: I can't believe I'm getting paid to live here.

One of the first things I did was clean out the sauna, which a porcupine had invaded over the winter. I fired up the sauna's wood stove, excited for a trial run, and left to do more chores as the sauna warmed up. When I came back in, I was hit by a wall of noxious smoke. Waving my arms and coughing through the smoke, I saw that I'd left a 5-gallon Home Depot bucket on the wood stove. Bright orange molten lava was dripping down the side of the stove and onto the floor. I spent the next three hours with a hammer and screwdriver chipping away at the plastic, now hard and glued to the stove, hoping that no one back in Port Alsworth would find out.

"Well that was a long shower," Kara said, when I finally returned.

On my first morning on the job, I walked out to the beach to phone the Alaska Region Communications Center, which takes calls from rangers in the backcountry and notes that they're still alive. As I was extending the satellite phone's antenna, I watched a brown bear saunter toward me on the path I'd just walked. A small red fox daintily trotted next to the bear, as if they were buddies. I wasn't sure if this was a scene from an innocent British picture book or from one of those old German fairy tales full of carnage and hard lessons learned. I took out my bear spray, uncapped it and prepared for discharge. This, I'd quickly learn, was an overreaction. Every day I'd see around 30 brown bears, and many would get much closer to me than this one.

Kara and I hopped on the all-terrain vehicle and drove farther down the beach. We walked over the tidal flat to join one of the local guides with his six tourists, who were snapping photos of a brown bear sow digging up razor clams. The tourists barely looked up at us, so fixated were they on photographing the bear scooping heaps of sand with her paw. With all six cameras clicking, it sounded like we were approaching a stage of Irish tap dancers.

I watched, mesmerized, as the bear, just 20 yards away, pulled a clam out of a hole and ever so delicately pried the shell open with its claws, before unceremoniously gobbling the clam's pale body. This is the sort of intimate bear behavior many visitors come to see at Lake Clark and nearby Katmai National Park and Preserve. It's a practical guarantee to spot a brown bear at a few select feeding spots, such as the salt marsh at Chinitna Bay in Lake Clark or Brooks Falls in Katmai, where visitors can watch brown bears catch salmon from an elevated platform. Because the bears must fish in close proximity to one another, they've learned to tolerate the presence of other creatures. This ability, and the fact that they are well fed by the bounties of land and water, make them relatively blasé about sightseeing humans.

Unlike Katmai, Lake Clark has no minimum distance requirement for bear viewing, so visitors at Silver Salmon Creek can theoretically get as close to bears as they reasonably can, especially on the beach, where the state has jurisdiction, not the Park Service. To protect both bears and visitors, Lake Clark published bear-viewing guidelines in 2003, in collaboration with commercial operators, Katmai National Park and the state of Alaska. But bear-viewing tourism has grown substantially over the last decade, and those recommendations are due for a review, said Megan Richotte, Lake Clark's manager for interpretation. The park administration is in the beginning stages of updating the coastal management plan, she said, noting that the process involves working with stakeholders to develop strategies that balance visitor experience with the protection of park resources.

Meanwhile, the guides, some of whom have been conducting bear-viewing tours for years, have developed a loose set of rules that they all follow for the most part: Walk together in clusters, not lines; better to let the bear get closer to the group than vice versa; never allow multiple viewing groups to "wall off" a bear; make sure to communicate with other guides over walkie-talkies if you want to join a group "sitting" on a bear; never eat around bears. If these protocols are followed, the bears never have reason to become alarmed or conditioned to human food. Some of these bears had been photographed up close their whole lives. Later in the season, I'd watch a 1-year-old cub — already accustomed to the clusters of photographers who followed it around all day — get so close to a group that anyone could have scratched under its ears.

"We're like walking trees to them," the guide assured me that first day. "These bears don't view us as a threat. At all."

My first impression of this weird bear-human dynamic was that it was crazy and dangerous and unnecessary and that I wanted nothing to do with it. But the human mind has an incredible skill for adaptation. Within minutes, I was there alongside the tourists — our little walking forest — snapping photos and feeling as if this was all perfectly ordinary.

Kara left, and my solitary life began to take shape. I was unbothered by many of the daily nuisances of modern working life. I didn't wake to an alarm, endure a mind-numbing commute, or have supervisors looking over my shoulder. My workdays began and ended whenever I liked. I'd make oatmeal and tea for breakfast, and then hop on my ATV and join a few bear-viewing groups on the beach or sedge prairie. I wrote down plane numbers, listened to the guides gripe about one another, and fell in love with every passably attractive guest. I tended my four jars of sprouts that were blooming into a curled mess on the windowsill. I'd dig for clams at low tide or fish for Dolly Varden char or salmon in the creek. Sometimes I'd host a visiting field biologist, and while I always enjoyed their company, the introvert in me craved having the place all to myself again.

A lot of my time was spent maintaining my cabin. I trimmed weeds along the electric fence, rewired the water pump, painted the shed and chopped firewood. One of my favorite duties was building a wheelchair-friendly, 25-yard gravel path to the creek. Every day, I'd take my ATV and trailer down to the beach, shovel in a load of gravel, haul it back and then lay the rocks over a mesh covering. It was good, exhausting work and the only visible evidence to anyone that I was doing anything.

I have park ranger friends who've told me about being verbally abused by anti-government cranks, but I've never experienced anything like that. The Park Service is arguably the most beloved agency of the federal government, and everyone seemed to warm to me as I gave my talk about the history of the park and the habits of bears. If there was a kid on board, the air taxis sometimes called me on my air-to-ground radio to ask me to meet the plane to deliver a junior ranger ceremony. Apparently somewhere in my training binder, I was given a junior ranger oath that the kids were supposed to recite. I never noticed it, so I'd improvise my own, asking the kids, with raised palms, to

pledge to commit to everything from ecological restoration to soil rehabilitation. Sometimes I'd throw in something about climate change. Despite the occasionally controversial (and certainly over-serious) nature of my oaths, the parents always looked on proudly, and the kids repeated my words and accepted their small plastic badge with an almost tearful solemnity.

When I wasn't working, I'd sit on the front porch and gaze into the deep green of the woods, listening to the waves lap against the beach at high tide, the wind swoosh through the topmost spruce boughs and the chatter among the red squirrels. I sauteed razor clams in garlic and butter and baked salmon filets in the oven. I'd pull up my chair next to the wood stove and listen to a classic rock station, one of five stations available on a portable radio. I read "Pride and Prejudice," a history of Scotland and almost all of the "Game of Thrones" books — and I felt it was easier to get lost in these worlds in my sanctuary of quiet. These are the good memories.

But other times I felt as if I was under the curl of a dark tide. I wasn't sure what I should have been doing with my life. Living alone in a cabin and being employed at a seasonal job in my mid-30s — perhaps when I should have been making a family, finding a steadier source of income or developing the writing side of my career — made me question my life choices. No one knew my 34th birthday came and went. By the end of the third week, my summer's worth of chocolate bars was gone.

I wish I could go back and tell my younger self: You're doing fine. Be grateful to be in this beautiful place. Don't spoil it with fretting over the future. Enjoy the fishing, identify a few new plants, read a few good books. But that's the trouble with seasonal employment: You always need to be thinking four months ahead to line up your next job, your next home, your next friend's driveway to park your car in. It's hard to live in the today when you're under pressure to figure out tomorrow.

My isolation was put on pause when my friend Paul flew from Buffalo, New York, for a weeklong visit. Paul had driven up to Alaska with me on that first trip 12 years earlier but hadn't been back since then. He now worked at a cardboard factory. He was paid well, but he hated the midnight shift and found the work unfulfilling. A year before, his girlfriend of eight years, for whom he'd bought an engagement ring, cheated on him and left him with a Dear John letter. He was still emerging from the wreckage.

We went on a 23-mile hike along the coast, carrying an 8-pound portable electric fence. Paul comes from an expressive Italian-Irish family, so the emotional range he brought to our expedition was a good complement to my stoic temperament. I shouldered every burden silently while Paul loudly moaned about every bruise, scrape, bump or rash. The flip side was that Paul, when in a good mood, would constantly express awe about the scenery, the animals and the adventure. I was happy he was there.

After our first day of walking, our feet were rubbed raw by sand that had crept into our socks. We took a break and followed a creek into the woods, which led to a lagoon of cold water, slick rocks and long quiet sloughs packed with fish. Sun shafts broke through the forest, shining light through the clear water on schools of silvery fish. We'd happened upon an enchanted lagoon, a fisherman's dream, and it felt all the more special knowing how few people on the planet knew about this place.

I'd been trying and failing to catch a fish for weeks, and now I could clearly see at least 50. We spent an hour or two getting bites. We waded through the lagoon to pull out stuck lures. We fought and lost epic battles. Finally, I watched Paul muscle in a 15-pound monster. Seeing the wild delight on his face during a low point in his life made me inexpressibly happy. Later, as we cooked the fish over a driftwood fire on the beach, Paul said, "For all my life, I'll never forget this."

Many of us who feel stuck in cities or suburbs have some symbol of wilderness that reminds us that there's another existence out there — one that, maybe just maybe, we'll get to live. Paul was determined to see a wolf on this trip. For Paul, the wolf represented a simpler way of life: a sensory-based existence spent in the open air, not one stuck inside the cold corners of a factory. For me, back in my late teens, it had been the grizzly bear. I'd thought of the grizzly as not just an apex predator, but as apex wilderness — the wildest, most ferocious, most dangerous embodiment of the natural world. And I used to think that to get close to one would be to confirm that, yes, I had finally made it into true wilderness.

Paul needed wilderness for escape, for revival. I once needed this, too. I believe I used to have recurring dreams of grizzlies because something within me was nudging me to get out of the suburbs and find adventure and truth in the depths of wilderness someplace far away. In waking life, I imagined that Alaska could possibly connect me to ancient sensations, to a core self. I may have been propelled by the exuberance of youthful romanticizing, but I do think the Arctic mountains I'd scrambled up and the close encounters I'd had with wild animals made previously terrifying things — job interviews, speaking in public, talking to women — slightly less terrifying. Wilderness can be not only a portal to the past, but a portal to a wilder, better version of you.

But I no longer needed solitude or transformation. I was living the way my younger self had wanted to, but I wasn't that young man anymore. The improvisational nature of my life, which once had felt enlightened and deliberate, now felt disorienting and, in jobs like this one, unnecessarily risky.

And I no longer felt mystically drawn to bears. Especially after my many encounters that summer. Rarely did bears so much as look at me, but there were a few close calls. One cranky bear clicked its jaws at me as we walked past each other on the beach. An adolescent bear approached me as I fished off the coast until I screamed it away. Another used a horizontal fence post to step over the electric fence encircling my cabin and rubbed its back against a timber column on my porch, waking me from a nap. I was rarely terrified, but I was always in a state of hyper-vigilance. I missed going on carefree walks and jogs. I grew tired of the low-level fear I always had humming in the background of my mind, the steady drip, drip of cortisol in my bloodstream.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I was walking in circles. Without knowing how to get to the next stage of life, I was falling back on my established work patterns and crisscrossing the country following the rutted paths of my old range. My constant state of movement was its own form of stasis.

I was tired of missing friends' weddings. Of making close friends at seasonal jobs and never talking to them again. Of having my nose stuck in a book in some forgotten corner of the Earth. My malaise wasn't so much due to the place, but my foreignness to it and the solitary circumstances I found myself in. Unlike the Alaska Natives who have lived in the region for millennia, I wasn't surrounded by family, friends and fellow tribal members. This wasn't home, and I wasn't sure where home was.

As fall approached, the weather got windier and rainier, and the planes stopped landing on the beach. The sedge grew tough and stalky, the salmon run ended, and the bears moved into the woods and hills as they prepared for hibernation. I found myself feeling something worse than fear or loneliness — nothing. I started to live more in the stories of my books than the reality around me.

That summer in Lake Clark National Park, I went into the wilderness, and the wilderness told me to leave. Sometimes the right journey isn't to venture into the wild, but out of it.



When the season ended, I drew up a list of all the towns in America I might like to start a new life in. I didn't know anybody in some cities. Other cities appeared to be made up entirely of unwalkable urban sprawl. All seemed unaffordable. Ultimately, I bought a one-way flight to Scotland, with the idea of roaming a new continent and maybe starting a new life.

On that trip, I met my future wife at a book festival. We now live in a small suburban house in a quiet village. I have a kid, a mortgage and a driveway of our own to park our car. In my 20s, I'd never imagined living in such a place, but, at present, it feels right.

Sometimes I hike the Highlands of Scotland, where there hasn't been a wild bear for over a thousand years. It's nice not to have to constantly worry about bears invading my tent at night. I feel safe, but sometimes when I look over these bare, empty hills, I feel like they are missing something. That I'm missing something. Perhaps it's that which makes the land come to life. That which makes an ecosystem seem healthy and whole. That which can haunt nightmares, enchant dreams, inspire feelings of wildness and freedom, or summon uncertainty and terror. Bears beckoned me one decade and scared me away the next. And, who knows, one day they just might call me back again.