

UNDER NORTHERN SKIES

By

J. C. Allard

*“Aye, when my soul shall sally forth
Let it be to the naked North...”*

Robert W. Service

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Postscript

Author's Note:

I cannot remember a time when I didn't feel drawn to the North by some irresistible internal compass. My favorite bedtime story as a child was about a moose-hunting, anthropomorphized bear named Pierre, who wore snowshoes, lived in a log cabin and used a rifle to procure moose meat and seal skins for his family. Later I thrilled to Saturday mornings and black-and-white television images of Sergeant Preston of the Northwest Mounted Police and his brilliant dog, Yukon King. Still later came all the times I would ditch my schoolwork to devour the written works of Jack London.

Then there were those times with my grandfather. Riding in the car, working in his shop, or the vegetable garden—given any long stretch of time, he would recite the poems of Robert W. Service from memory. He would recite them so often that any member of the family could repeat the words right along with him.

For ten weeks in the summer of 1968 I traveled to Alaska for the first time, my parents having concocted a grand adventure before I started my senior year of high school. The people, places and events of that trip, and two subsequent ones, have lived in my mind and heart ever since. I often imagine that all my other days are just time between trips north.

This book grew almost by accident from a trilogy of articles I was working on for an outdoor sporting magazine. With the sculpting, shaping and encouragement of many hands, it arrived in its present form, but its errors are mine alone. The characters are real and the scenes as factual and as accurate as my memory can make them. The conversations all took place, but the recounted dialog is no more than the best I can recollect. Journals have helped me verify facts, but I've never been one to record

conversations. I've done the best I could with the dialog and leave it to the reader to judge.

For me, the passion remains. All that stirred me as a child stirs me still. The north of our planet remains in large measure a place where man is a transitory resident. The weather is wild. The land is wild. And the people are unforgettable. Whether it is Alaska or the Yukon or the great sweeping expanse of the Canadian Shield extending from the Northwest Territories into Labrador, the land and its inhabitants remains compelling. My love for the north also extends across the seas to Greenland, the northern fringe of Scandinavia and even Russia.

J.C.A

Highview

October 5, 2016

Symphony of Silence

“I don’t know about you, but I’m done in,” Jim announced, as he eased the truck into a dirt turn-out near the spot where British Columbia Route 99 crosses the crest of the Coast Range. After planning for most of a year, we were underway back to Alaska. Jim was returning to the state he’d lived in for five years, and I was making my third visit there spread over three decades. We were two retired Army guys, both wondering where we would fit in next.

For this trip we’d be heading into the bush above the Arctic Circle on a hunt for early season moose and caribou. More than twelve hours from Jim’s place in Olympia and well past midnight, we swung open the doors and let the chill night air of the mountains roll into the cab.

I shivered at the unexpected rush of air. “I’m fried,” I said. “Let’s nap for a little while at least.”

Stepping outside for the first time since leaving our stop for Canadian Customs where Blaine, Washington, touches White Rock, British Columbia, I walked forward into the beam of the headlights. The well-used pull-out was pockmarked with puddles from the frequent rains, as clouds off the Pacific try to scoot over the mountain ridges. I did squats in the bright, white light to ease the kinks in my back and legs. We’d roared along with Vancouver’s evening rush-hour traffic without stopping, and followed the coast around to Squamish before entering the mountains at Garibaldi and Whistler with the late summer sunset.

From Whistler the road is a steep, slow climb almost devoid of civilization and traffic. Now at the top, when Jim cut the engine, a darkness as black as anywhere on earth enveloped us. A silence as deep as the inner chamber of Egypt's Great Pyramid seemed to spill out of the surrounding forest. There was no moon.

"Geez, look at the stars," I said as my eyes adjusted to the plunge. My words were hushed, and I thought, barely audible.

But Jim answered unseen somewhere, off to my right, "We get a little further north and it'll still be light at this time of day. We won't see sky like this again until the end of the trip."

"I haven't heard this kind of thundering silence in years," I said.

Both our voices involuntarily hushed as though we stood in some European museum in the presence of something great. I twirled in slow circles, my head tilted as far back as I could to take in the whole fantastic sweep of the sky. After a minute a slow ticking from the cooling engine invaded the silence.

"All the same, these stars are glorious," I said. "I haven't seen a sky like this in a long time. The nebulae look like clouds. When Gail and I went to Alaska in '01, we never saw a sky like this one. Cruising among the islands of the Panhandle, all we saw was clouds and fog."

"It's cold up this high," Jim said. "Let's get inside and get some sleep."

"I know I haven't seen a sky like this since I was in the Mojave at Fort Irwin," I answered. "That was thirty years ago."

Jumping back into our seats, we slammed the truck's doors against the chill. Tilting my chair in search of a comfortable angle for sleep, I could see the stars almost as well as from the outside. Succumbing to an urge to quote Robert Service as my grandfather often would, I repeated, "...the stars o'erhead were dancing heel and toe..."

"Yeah, well, it'll be daylight before we know it," Jim said from his side of the truck, where he flopped back and forth in an effort to get comfortable. He finally settled with his cap pulled over his eyes to shield them from the starlight and his arms folded across his chest.

My legs felt cramped against the firewall and I fought to make myself as diagonal on the seat as possible. The junction of the seat and its back dug into my hip, so I had to lay as flat as I could, my face to the ceiling. "I'll drive when we pull out of here," I said just as Jim seemed to settle in one spot.

Sleep didn't come so soon for me. Looking through the glass at those constellations slowly turning the night away, my mind drifted to a star-filled night from thirty years before. Retired two years, scenes of my former life often played across my mind, especially just at the edge of sleep.

* * * *

The first Tuesday in November dawned like any other late autumn day in the vast expanse of the Mojave Desert. One moment it was dark and frigid and silent, and the next the gliding disk of the sun chased away the dark, first changing it to grays and russets and then tones of pink on the hillsides. The cold lingered for a while, reluctant to loosen its

grip. The silence remained unchallenged day or night, dark or bright, unless the wind was a sound or a rarely seen raven found its voice.

After nearly two months in the field, Task Force Blackjack, the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division, stirred slowly. We were tired by then. Two months of constant training, bitter cold by night, broiling heat by day, field rations, dry shaving, and weeks between showers wore us down. The strange nighttime climate turned the steel of our tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces into refrigerators—colder inside than out. Lucky ones like me had a Jeep. Its hood provided an hour or two of warm dozing as the engine heat dissipated.

Usually the last ones in at night, Private First-Class Etheridge, my driver, Sergeant Hilton and me, a First Lieutenant, would ease into the company perimeter and hunker the jeep into some arroyo or behind a sand dune so that we'd be the last ones disturbed in the morning. Hilton and his tool box always travelled with me as my rapid reaction mechanic. I was the company XO and responsible for all the maintenance; having Hilton with me often facilitated repairs. Sergeant Hilton was from Maine and I liked having another New Englander as company.

Others didn't appreciate the situation as much as I did. The Motor Sergeant didn't like one of his mechanics away from his control. The Captain didn't like that I was "fraternizing" with an enlisted man. And Hilton's peers envied the little privileges that came his way because he was always with me. But since the situation seemed to work, no one made much of an issue out of it.

We spent our days and nights keeping the company's vehicles running, chasing repair parts, and orchestrating the rescue of the inoperative machines scattered across a huge maneuver space. We slept behind the dunes when we could.

Inculcated with Major Robert Rogers' "Standing Orders for Rangers" rule #15-- "Don't sleep beyond dawn. Dawn's when the French and Indians attack"-- we were generally up and alert before the rays of the sun angled down into our hidden positions. At a designated moment every engine in the company cranked so that our notional enemies wouldn't be able to tell the exact number of vehicles we had. Radio checks were made and gear stowed while platoon leaders and non-commissioned officers scurried about checking and rechecking. Eighteen months after the fall of Saigon and less than two years into the congressionally mandated "All-Volunteer Force," there were plenty of reasons to check and recheck.

With the checks completed, we filed past the mess truck in pairs to grab some chow and return to our positions on the perimeter. No one was allowed to gaggle around the mess truck, and idle chatter had long since left us anyway. Officers almost always ate last. That way everyone knew that all the troops were fed.

Seeing me, and trying to keep track of our scattered tanks and other equipment, Captain Gunn would say something like, "Did you get one-five up last night?"

"No, sir. The power pack's blown. A new one's coming out this morning. We'll get it set and bring the tank to where first platoon is training today."

"Okay," he'd respond in his East Texas drawl, as he turned away to address the First Sergeant.

That would be pretty much our only conversation until sometime in the evening, unless he called me on the radio with something urgent. In the year we were together, we never had a genuine conversation that I can recall, unless it was about the rock group, Iron Butterfly. Captain Gunn loved Iron Butterfly.

Gunn was an aviator, something he never let anyone forget, specifically a Cobra gunship pilot, and he was enduring his assignment as our boss, wishing daily for a speedy return to the skies. He knew nothing about tanks, and so left the First Sergeant and me fairly well alone to run the company for him.

Instead, he was given to sitting in his office alone, when we weren't in the field, dressed in the blood-stained flight suit he'd been wearing when he crashed in Vietnam. He spent six months in a body cast, but no one ever determined if he'd been shot down or the tail rotor just came off in flight. He kept the bloody suit in a foot locker behind his desk most of the time. When a dark mood took him, he would sometimes put it on and sit in silence doing routine paperwork, or staring out the window.

Dead set on inheriting his father-in-law's ranch in the Texas Hill Country, he spoke often of cattle. When he did, he'd stand up straight, his spindling frame and blanched complexion making him appear taller than he really was.

As for me, I kept my distance. I was too much of a "Yankee" to suit him anyway.

He never approved of the way my Jeep was decked out, which was one of the reasons we eased it into hiding places rather than pulling into the command post, where Gunn and the First Sergeant hung out. He didn't like the raccoon tails we flew from the

twin antennas, or the chrome lug nuts, or the Eight-ball Etheridge made into a gear shift knob. He thought those looked “unprofessional.”

Besides, there was always tension around the command post, real and imagined. There was the daily grind of running things and keeping it all in order, but the captain and the First Sergeant didn’t like each other very much, so I preferred to stay out of the way. The First Sergeant thought our boss was a “Prima Donna fly-boy.”

“Hell, that sonofabitch spent his war sleeping in sheets and air conditioning, when I had my helmet for a pillow. What does he know about running a damned company?” the First Sergeant would rage at me.

I preferred to stay gone from the command post as much as I could without it looking funny. I had my own rage about the captain.

Captain Gunn also disdained my handlebar mustache and the way I wore my pistol turned backwards and slung low on my left hip. I copied that way of wearing it from a photo of Charles Lindbergh wearing his that way during a tour of airfields in the South Pacific during World War II. Even though I was smart enough to turn my holster around whenever the Battalion or Brigade Commanders were around, Captain Gunn thought I was being “flippant” and lacked “discipline.”

By that first week in November we’d been eating sandwiches for breakfast every day for more than a month. Our Brigade Commander, “Iron Mike” O’Connell, came up with the idea of serving us two sandwiches and a canteen cup full of black coffee for breakfast each morning as a way “to save training time.”

His creation called for two pieces of white bread with a fried egg and two slices of fatty, over-salted bacon in between, then wrapped in aluminum foil, so everyone could grab their allotment and “move out smartly,” as the saying went. I always thought the cooks stomped on the little packages before setting them out for us, because every sandwich I got was smashed when I unwrapped its foil. In any case, these grease-soaked gut bombs earned the title of “Egg O’Connell’s” and later “Egg McFuckits.”

Returning to where we’d stashed the Jeep in the wee hours, I started eating while Etheridge and Hilton finished theirs. We gingerly held the sandwich by its foil wrapping, trying to avoid all contact with our fingers or clothes. The dust that enshrouded us would instantly turn to grit in our mouths if we touched the grease dripping from the package. The truly intelligent among us saved a can of C-ration peaches or applesauce to wash down the horrid breakfast.

While chewing my sandwich, something of a breakfast revelation came to me. I realized that before we returned to home station in the third week of December, our “battles” in this desert would be longer than the total length of all the Arab-Israeli wars from 1948, 1956, the Six Day War of 1967, and most recently, the October 1973 Yom Kippur War.

“Where we going this morning, L. T.?” Etheridge asked when I had a mouthful of egg and soggy bread.

“We’ll get Sergeant First Class Broadus and the 88 and go see if we can pull the pack out of one-five before the new one shows up from the rear,” I said, referring to the

Motor Sergeant and our big M-88 tank retriever. A monster of a vehicle, the M-88 was like a tow truck for tanks and artillery pieces.

“Hopefully we’ll be able to reach them on the radio and not have to go all the way back to the rear to lead them in,” I said to no one in particular.

“But if we have to go to the rear, we could stop at the PX,” Sgt. Hilton chimed in, sounding more hopeful and awake than he had since sunup. “We could use a resupply of pogie bait,” he said, referring to anything sweet and edible in a package.

“Yeah, true enough,” I responded, thinking of the miles of desert we’d have to negotiate to get all the way into Camp Irwin proper and then back out to wherever the company might be tonight. There was no telling how many breakdowns we’d have to chase and make repairs before nightfall. Going to the rear would be a real distraction. As appealing as a trip to the PX might be, along with a drink of cold water, the trip to the rear would take several hours of precious daylight and make us eat dust the whole way. There would need to be a compelling reason to make that trek.

It was near mid-morning when we finally got SFC Broadus, a couple of mechanics, and the big M-88 tank retriever the several miles to where A-15 lay in a dry water course, looking like a sick elephant abandoned by its herd. The four-man tank crew, having had nothing but C-rations and sun-warmed water for twenty-four hours, begged for any alternative food we might have. The guys shared some warm Cokes with them before we helped them disconnect and remove the faulty engine.

Broadus was his usual gruff self and rode Hilton pretty hard. Etheridge helped as much as anybody, though technically, as my driver, he didn’t need to. I think he wanted

to take some of Broadus' heat off of Sgt. Hilton. Not wanting to undermine the senior sergeant, I stayed out of it, even though I chafed at my guy getting grief he didn't deserve. Broadus' beef was with me, not Hilton.

The sparring didn't last long as soon both Broadus and I were tied to the radios, trying to sort out other maintenance issues and calls for assistance. I learned there would be no help from battalion in getting the new engine out to one-five. They were too swamped with maintenance issues across the five companies to respond to my request. We weren't the priority, but I silently cursed them anyway. Under the blazing noontime sun I pitched the radio's microphone in disgust. It bounced off the seat cushion and back into my hand. We'd have to make the twenty mile trek to coordinate with the California National Guard people who ran the maintenance depot, and then lead the truck with the replacement engine on it out to where one-five sat in the sand.

I called the captain and gave him a situation report before leaving Hilton with the 88 crew to finish pulling one-five's power pack. I didn't feel right about leaving him, but I didn't feel right about taking him with me when his peers had to sit and broil in the sun. I did promise to bring whatever pogie bait he wanted from the PX.

As Etheridge and I pulled away, the radio spoke with an unidentified voice. "Don't forget my medicine." I recognized the ghost voice as the First Sergeant activating our secret arrangement for whenever I got to the rear. I wondered if anyone else recognized the disembodied voice over the airwaves.

The sun was down before we finished setting the replacement engine into one-five and had it hooked up again. The run back to the post, picking up the engine, stopping at

the PX, and getting back out ate up several hours. While we finished up with one-five, Etheridge led the truck driver from the maintenance depot back to a main road that would lead him home. From there it was up to him to find his own way back.

About then, Etheridge took a radio call telling all of A Company's dispersed elements to rendezvous at some remote map coordinates in the far northwest corner of our maneuver area. He hustled back to tell me the CO wanted everyone there "ASAP."

"I wonder what's up," Hilton said. And I had no answer for him.

I had no idea and said so with little grace. "Maybe a maintenance stand-down to fix some of this junk," I speculated. I directed the guys to turn on the Jeep's headlights and the boom lights on the 88 so we could see to finish up and get out of there. It was a good five or six miles to rendezvous from where we were still piecing things together. I figured in war we'd have to chance it with the white light, so why not here when the boss was calling us in.

After more than an hour of bumping across the dark terrain, leading the repaired one-five and the behemoth M-88, we closed in on the rendezvous under an emerging canopy of stars. We saw white light coming from the mess truck and knew that something unusual was up.

The tanks and other tracked vehicles were lined up fender to fender like in the motor pool. Soldiers lined up at the mess truck like it was a lunch cart at the beach.

"Brigade called an admin halt because of the election," the First Sergeant said to my unasked question. And even before I could dismount the Jeep, "You got my medicine?"

“Today’s election day,” I said half aloud. “What a cap to the Bicentennial.”

“The Mess Sergeants all knew about it early and we’ve got real chow tonight. We’ve got fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and ice for the milk. You got my medicine?”

“Go grab some chow before it’s gone,” I said in turning to shoo Hilton and Etheridge toward the mess truck. “We can park here for now.”

I rummaged in the back of the Jeep for a second and came up with the paper bag containing a six-pack of Hamm’s beer that I silently passed to the First Sergeant. He felt its weight and turned without a word, moving quickly over to his own Jeep two dozen paces away.

The site was like nothing else we had known in this desert. Small clusters of soldiers talked among themselves or picked at the remains of their meals. Some lounged on top of their vehicles. The usual gaggle surrounded the command Jeeps, listening for radio traffic or waiting to hear some tidbit of gossip from one of the officers or senior NCOs. The dark night sky arched overhead above a horizon castellated by mountain peaks to the north, west, and south. Only the east showed a smooth horizon.

As the night’s cold slowly settled over the place, soldiers went to their kit bags or some other place where they had a stash of extra clothing. Some slung into the arctic parkas we’d been issued and most of us thought silly when we first saw them. Who would need a parka and fur hood in the desert? Others donned field jackets and wrapped wool scarves around their necks. Still others dug out college sweatshirts or high school letter sweaters and pulled them over their regular uniforms.

Brigadier General D. K. Doyle, the Army's desert expert, had said in one of our pre-deployment lectures, "Water in the desert is for drinking and vehicle radiators. Don't waste it shaving." He also informed us that the Army didn't make the proper clothing for the cold of the desert. "So get yourself a sweater. I don't care what it looks like. Use it to keep warm." He gave tacit approval from on high for us to look like some kind of cross between a collection of frat boys and a gang of dust-covered thugs.

In the autumn windstorms or more often on clear nights, the desert air grew frigid. I wore a Navy blue wool sweater that my wife had knitted for me. When I wore it with my beret and smoked my pipe, the First Sergeant always called me "Monty." I didn't wear it often in daylight. Captain Gunn did not approve. He wore women's pantyhose under his uniform to keep warm, but I preferred my thick wool sweater made by loving hands.

The sounds of clean-up came from the area around the mess truck and the chatter there rose whenever soldiers by twos reported from the platoons to assist the cooks with the nighttime chores. I leaned back in the Jeep seat, letting my dusty boots rest over the dashboard, and dug out my pipe and the fresh pouch of Captain Black's aromatic tobacco I'd bought at the PX earlier. Tonight there was no taboo about striking a match or cigarette lighter.

I assumed Etheridge was dozing in his seat beside me, but from under the rim of his steel pot he mumbled, "Now this is living." The captain had his Jeep driver and the First Sergeant's driver struggling to pitch a tent for the bosses' sleeping quarters. The smell of the heavy canvas, still warm from the sun, overcame the good smells from the mess truck.

Whenever a radio squawked, its little yellow indicator light blinked on in syncopation with the rush of sound. Hilton wandered off to find some of his buddies and I wondered where he'd gone, in case I needed him or we got a call to go. But with almost the entire company here in the space of a football field, no calls came.

Big Bill Wade, the Platoon Sergeant of 2nd platoon, strolled up to ask me about getting the wrecker sent over to his platoon so they could use its air compressor to blow the dust out of the air cleaners on the tanks. I roused Etheridge and dispatched him to find SFC Broadus and guide the wrecker over to where 2nd platoon's tanks occupied the end of the line.

Wade had received the Silver Star for gallantry in action during the only tank-against-tank engagement of the Vietnam War. He was smart, conscientious, and would go to the mat for his guys. I respected him, but a month earlier we'd come to blows while disagreeing over my priority of maintenance for his platoon. Luckily, the First Sergeant was the only witness and we three resolved never to speak of it again. Lucky for me, Big Bill Wade only landed one punch.

Around ten o'clock someone produced a transistor radio and placed it on the fender of the tank nearest to where the captain was sitting. They tuned to a station from LA or Vegas, searching for the incoming results of the election.

Fifteen or twenty of us gathered around the radio to listen to the first news we'd heard in days. The less interested were already spreading their bedrolls onto the broad front fenders of their tanks, or across the engine grill covers on the rear decks to sleep with the residual warmth of the last running. A few dragged out cots and unfolded them

wherever there was level ground. Those old enough or motivated enough to vote had pretty much forgotten about the election. I'd filled out my absentee ballot weeks before and now hoped my wife had remembered to mail it along with hers in time to be counted.

Of course, the President would be re-elected. Everyone knew that. He'd been in office barely more than two years, survived two assassination attempts, watched Saigon fall, and ended our "long national nightmare" by pardoning former President Nixon. Of course, he'd be re-elected.

America doesn't elect peanut farmers from Georgia. In this country we elect James Knox Polk, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Warren Gamaliel Harding, but not someone named Jimmy from Georgia. Even though when appointed Vice-President to replace the disgraced Spiro Theodore Agnew, Gerald Rudolph Ford had said, "I will not be a candidate for president in 1976," of course he would be a candidate and be re-elected.

The voices narrating that night from the little, battery-powered radio, about the size of two cigarette packs, sounded tinny and shallow. At first it was difficult to hear, and the captain barked once, for quiet. From then on everyone was silent save for the occasional cough, or the clink of a Zippo opening and then snapping closed again. If anyone spoke at all, it was a whisper.

At first not much real information came across. It was just talk—commentators filling in the time until some real results were known. It was just a trickle for a long time, results mixing with opinions and speculation. Local announcers would cut away, switching back and forth to national anchor desks with their temporary staffs of pundits and analysts.

Slowly the fog of information lifted. The trickle of results surged into a little stream and then a bigger stream. Surprise fell over our little crowd and a murmur began to swell. No one saw this coming. No one understood what was happening. Expectations began to fall away, though none of us were really tuned in enough to have very formed expectations.

As the night deepened, the voices on the little radio began to call the races and tabulate the results. At first it looked as if the President would be ahead, and then it seemed to go the other way. And in some places it was too close to call.

Someone said, "Ford will make it."

Another voice from the darkness said, "He's got it."

Most of us were silent, lost in our own thoughts, just listening to the tinny voice from the little radio sitting on the tank fender. Some voices I recognized, well-known news people from the important networks or big newspapers. Some of the voices used words like "surprising" and "upset" and "turnaround." "Watergate" got mentioned often throughout the night.

Even with Watergate, Agnew's resignation, Nixon's resignation, and the fall of Vietnam and the end of our involvement there, the election was a pretty routine and undramatic thing for America. But for our little band and others like us on the DMZ in Korea, or patrolling along Germany's East-West divide, or a hundred other places across the globe, the words of the commentators felt as though they were talking about an election in Botswana, for all our connection to it. We stood in a little huddle, surrounded

by darkness and blending smells of fried chicken and unseen desert flowers that bloom in the night.

I lost track of time and never looked at my watch, but I knew it was late when the radio said that we had in fact, elected Jimmy from Georgia.

I heard a voice near me say, “Holy shit.”

Further away, but still clear, someone with a long breath said, “Fuck me.”

Someone asked the captain, “Will there be a war?”

“No, you dipshit,” snarled the First Sergeant, but the captain never responded, if he even heard the question.

Mostly there was stunned silence. No one knew what to say or to think or to do. We just stood there for long minutes trying to take it in, trying to make sense of it. I felt frozen in place, but eventually the group began to break up, drifting away to bed down. I found myself back at the jeep with Hilton and Etheridge, and though it was a familiar seat, I felt a bit disoriented.

As he fumbled with his sleeping gear, Etheridge said in my direction, “Will the Russians attack us, you think?”

Hilton took a swing and slapped Etheridge with his beret saying, “Didn’t you hear the First Sergeant, dipshit?”

“Ow, I heard him,” Etheridge shot back. “But they elected a Democrat. Johnson got us into Vietnam. Truman got us Korea. Roosevelt got us World War II and Wilson

got us World War I, and they're all Democrats. Every last one. Seems to me there's a good chance we're going to war with Russia."

It took me a minute to respond with "No, I don't think so," trying to say it with more confidence and assurance than I felt. "They've got no reason to do that."

Like the others around me, I dragged out my dust-covered folding cot for the first time in days. I set it up next to the Jeep and laid my sleeping bag down on it, carefully unfolding it to keep the dust caking the outer cover from falling inside, where it would become a gagging, choking nightmare. I snuggled the bed up against the side of the Jeep, where I would have a degree of protection should some vehicle come along in the night and not see where people were sleeping.

Once, back in Texas, I'd just missed getting crushed when an M-113 armored personnel carrier ran over my cot. If Hilton hadn't reached down with one hand and lifted me, sleeping bag and all, onto the hood of the Jeep, I'd be dead. We heard my vacated cot splinter as the dark shape of the personnel carrier swept by just inches from where we huddled on the hood of the jeep.

Our little campsite grew quiet. There was no perimeter. No defensive positions. No guards. I don't think anyone even set up a radio watch. I know we didn't. Etheridge, Hilton, and I crawled into our sleeping bags with no thought to monitoring any radio traffic.

"Geez, will ya look at the stars," Etheridge said as he tilted backwards on his cot. "There must be a billion of them."

Tossing my pistol and holster onto the Jeep seat and taking a last look around before stripping down and zipping myself into my cocoon, I saw a figure on the edge of the line of tanks walking toward the east. From the way he was hunched I knew it was the First Sergeant, carrying his “medicine” under his arm and looking for a quiet spot to be alone for a while. After four tours in Vietnam, all in the field with Cav units, and a couple patrolling the East German border, I didn’t begrudge him a little breaking of the rules. For a second he was silhouetted against the sky, but then he disappeared behind a great finger of windblown sand.

Zipped up against the cold, I lay on my back and looked up into the maw of stars overhead and thought of Alaska. Getting back there seemed suddenly more appealing than usual. Still stunned, I cast my thoughts at those stars and let my mind roam toward Death Valley over the mountains to our north, east toward Las Vegas, and then west toward Los Angeles. The stars seemed to quiver up there, but they offered no answers, at least not to me.

Was it irony? Was it fate? Was just a big, national joke? Here we were stuck in this stinking desert wasteland, when everybody else was electing Jimmy from Georgia. A peanut farmer was now the Commander in Chief.

For a moment I thought about Alaska. It often came to mind in quiet times. I pictured it all vastness and silence. It always seemed to me to be opportunity and challenge and refuge all rolled into one. It felt like we might need a refuge.

Not long after falling asleep, I was jerked awake by queer panting and yipping noises all around me. Something brushed my cot and I bolted upright, panicked that I was

being run over again. When nothing happened, I peered out of the face hole in my sleeping bag, not wanting to unzip and let in the cold. Like phantoms, a dozen coyotes swirled around the cots and among the vehicles. They ran and dodged, twisted and turned, led by their noses in a frantic search for chicken bones.

* * * *

Jim's poke at my shoulder broke the trance that passed for sleep in my case. "It's getting light," was all he said.

"Oh, God, already?" I muttered. "I'm getting too old for this."

"Come on. Time to get moving."

"I'm up," I said as I untangled myself and stumbled more than stepped out of the truck's passenger door to answer nature's call. A mingling of fog and cloud drifted over the gravel pull-out area like smoke. The bright sky of a couple of hours ago had vanished.

Returning to the truck I went to the driver's side to take my turn at the wheel. Jim went around back to check the trailer before we started heading north again.

"Alaska by tomorrow," I called out, but Jim didn't answer. He couldn't hear me with his shaking on the trailer tongue to make certain it remained secure.

The Pool

“Are you looking for something?” Jim asked.

“What?”

“You keep sitting up and looking out the window,” he said, throwing a quizzical look my way.

“Oh, I’m watching the mileposts. I’m looking for mile 777,” I answered as I stretched my tired back and legs.

“What for?”

“I’m trying to remember a place where I fished with my grandfather back in ’68. It was right near milepost 777.”

Tell me again how old you were then,” Jim said.

“I was 17. More than halfway to 18.”

The terrain, the spruce trees, the willow along the creeks, the fireweed, the rolling hills, all seemed familiar, but the paved surface of the road still felt strange. Where before we’d known mud and gravel and dust, now a hard-surface road ran – complete with painted lines.

Still half asleep despite the almost two-hour nap we’d taken where the Cassiar-Stewart Highway intersects the Alaska Highway just west of Watson Lake, I fought to clear my head and not miss the mile marker.

“Fishing was good here, so close to the road?” Jim asked with more than a hint of skepticism in his voice.

“It was, then. I was riding in my grandparents’ camper and we just pulled off and went down to the river. The pool there was in a bend and it held some huge Dolly Vardens. I can picture them now, down near the bottom and fanning the current with their fins. There was a bazillion grayling feeding on the surface. I took them on a fly that I tied myself.”

The spot was barely visible, but I recognized it as we went by. A wall of willow covered the steep banking which ran from the side of the road down to the water’s edge. Spruce trees mixed in near the bottom, where the angle of the bank leveled out just a bit. The surface of the river shone glassy through gaps in the vegetation.

“There it is. That’s the spot,” I said as we cruised on past.

Jim gave one quick glance and a grunt from deep in his throat as the scene I’d been looking for slid behind us. He didn’t slow down. Instead, he sped up, building momentum to carry us up the long hill that began just a couple of hundred yards further west. Even though I wasn’t driving, I could feel the weight on the utility trailer we were towing as we started up the long grade.

The spot that had played a starring role in the movie of my memories slipped out of sight. I would’ve liked to stop and try fishing the pool again, but we didn’t have time this trip.

* * * *

I was daydreaming when Grandpa braked and pulled his camper off to the right side of the long gravel highway. As he shoved in the clutch and dragged the long stick-shift lever into second gear, the thick, tawny dust cloud trailing behind suddenly caught up to us. The cloud shrouded the white pick-up truck and the black and white camper perched on its back in a choking pirouette of powder-fine grit. Leaping into a well-practiced and coordinated move, Grandpa and I rolled up the windows and closed the wing vents to keep some of the gritty cloud outside.

“There was a stream back at the bottom of the hill. We could pull off and wait there,” Grandpa said, as we came to a stop.

I hadn’t noticed the river off on the left and through the trees just before we started to climb the long hill. There were so many rivers and streams on the left, on the right, flowing through the numerous bridges and culverts we drove over, that I’d stopped paying much attention to them.

“Alright,” Grandma replied from where she was squeezed in the middle of the bench seat, sandwiched between Grandpa driving and me resting against the passenger door.

My parents and brother, following behind in the other camper, had dropped back and were no longer in sight behind us. The holdup was probably nothing more than another flat tire, but my grandparents always got nervous when they couldn’t see the other vehicle. As soon as they couldn’t see the trailing rig in the rearview mirror, they’d pull over and wait. A couple of times they’d even turned around and driven back in the opposite direction until they linked up again. Their nervousness or caution, or whatever it

was, always seemed to rankle my parents, but nothing was ever said about it whenever Grandpa or Grandma were around.

I agreed with my parents. Grandpa could adjust our speed to let them catch up, but we didn't really need to sit and wait for them, or drive back the way we'd come to try to locate them. They couldn't get lost. There was only this one strip of dirt road through the wilderness.

Grandpa let the dust dissipate before he coaxed the camper into turning around and headed us back down the half-mile long hill we'd just come up. At the bottom he eased the truck onto the stony shoulder and carefully braked to a stop. Once again the dust cloud swirled, first catching up to us and enveloping the rig, and then slowly flattening out and spilling back to the ground, coating the bushes and trees on either side of the road in a fine beige powder.

Pulling himself forward against the steering wheel and raising his cap visor high on his forehead, Grandpa looked past Grandma and past me at a nameless river just barely visible through the dense stands of alder and willow that grew below the raised bed of the road. "Want to try fishing?" he asked.

"Sure, I do," I said, making certain to sound grateful for the opportunity. We hadn't taken any time for fishing in days, even though we'd driven by hundreds of interesting rivers and creeks and dozens of enticing ponds and lakes.

"Well, get your gear and let's go," Grandpa said, as he snapped up the door handle and stepped out.

“I’m going in back and do some chores,” Grandma said, as she scooted across the bench and slid out the driver’s door behind him. “I’ll be inside while you boys go fishing.”

I leaped out onto the stones and dust-caked grasses at the side of the road, stepping quickly to the camper door to grab my fishing gear. Before plunging down the embankment, I stopped to gather my gear into a bundle I could maneuver through the tangles of brush between us and the water.

I cannot recall now why I moved my fishing tackle to my grandparent’s camper. We may have planned to fish that day. Perhaps I took it along just in case. Perhaps I had left it there after some earlier fishing. In any case, it was riding inside the camper along with Grandpa’s.

We were on that stretch of the Alaska Highway where it crosses back and forth, in and out of British Columbia and the Yukon Territory. One minute we were in the Yukon and the next back into BC, but rarely were the boundary crossings marked. There were just too many of them along that section of road. A milepost stood nearby. Once hammered into the ground straight up and down, it now leaned a few degrees, tilted by uncounted snows and thaws, rain and freeze-ups. Milepost 777 marked our progress as just 27 miles beyond the half-way point between the beginning of the Highway at Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and its end, up ahead in Fairbanks, Alaska.

Down over the embankment the water moved behind the curtain of vegetation. It was a good-sized stream, more like a river. The water swirled and boiled, but from where I stood, I couldn’t see any whitewater. The dark blue-green of the water indicated some

depth and I thought it looked promising, even though it was close to the road, and my view of it eclipsed by the dense vegetation growing between the road and the water.

A cascade of small stones rattled down the bank and dust rose like smoke kicked up by our churning feet as we slid through the weeds toward the water. We thrashed our way into the alders and jungle of willow to a flat gravel bar where the soft swirl of the stream hooked away in a broad, gentle curve. We hoped our abundance of noise would scare off any bears that might be trying to catch fish or nap in the brush. With rods held over our heads, we threaded them through the shrubbery to avoid getting tangled when the branches snapped back at us like leafy flails.

Breaking out of brush and landing on the bar was a surprise. It felt like stepping off a New York City subway train at rush hour onto an empty station platform. Relieved to work free of the tangle and find firm footing again, we stood on the gravel edge and admired the sweep of the river. The shower of stones rolling off the bank ended, its sound replaced by the bubble and gurgle of the turquoise water.

Grandpa carried the spin-casting rod the family presented him to celebrate his retirement after 44 years of public school teaching. Ready to go, he went right to the water, moving upstream, casting as he went.

I held my hand-me-down, three-piece bamboo fly rod that my Uncle gave me. It carried an ancient reel that I had liberated from the trunk of an abandoned car in the junkyard near our house. My fingers fumbled and twitched as I strung the fly-line through the ferrules of the nine-foot rod. In my rush, I had to try three times to fasten the leader onto the fly-line. I swore under my breath as I struggled with the knot.

“Damn it. Come on,” I pleaded with my uncoordinated self.

I handled the long rod like an amateur, but the previous summer in Quebec I’d had great luck making brook trout rise to a mass of black deer hair called a Cooper’s Bug. I’d tied that fly myself, copying it from a book. Anxious to try again, I waved the stiff stick of bamboo over the water, very afraid of snagging the fly in the brush behind me.

The bend in the stream carved a deep pool against the near bank. The water scoured out a boulder field visible five or six feet below the surface. There, big Dolly Varden trout held in the current, lazily fanning to hold themselves in a position to suck in whatever food washed downstream. “There are big trout here,” I yelled to Grandpa, “I can see ‘em.”

“Go get them,” he called over his shoulder as he cast his spinning rig in the flat water at the base of some rapids that fed the pool. This riffle was water I could hear from the road, but couldn’t see until we got down beside the stream. “I’ll work up this way,” he said, pointing upstream with his left hand and holding tight to his casting rod with his right.

Staring into the turquoise-tinted water as it bubbled and swelled with the force of the current, I thought back to Hemingway’s *Big Two-Hearted River* that I’d first read in seventh-grade English class, and fifty times since on my own. I imagined myself Nick Adams, staring down from the railroad bridge into the pool holding the big trout.

I finally succeeded running the line out through the guides and then fought to keep control of the leader. The consistency of spider web, it fluttered in the breeze and kept dancing away from my outstretched fingers. Groping the air with my waving hand, I

tried to snare the clear filament of leader. “Come here, you sonofabitch,” I swore at the elusive hair of monofilament as I swiped back and forth at the sky.

Finally catching it when I turned and let it drift across the darker background of the willows and alder bushes, I carefully laid the rod on the ground and let the leader drape where I could see it when I reached for it again.

I rummaged through my fly box and couldn’t find the Cooper’s Bug. It wasn’t where I thought it was and my heart sank. “Damn it all,” I mouthed, stirring the little pile of flies in the box with my finger. But no amount of stirring produced the Cooper’s Bug.

Instead, I tied on something called a Black Gnat. It looked similar to the Cooper’s Bug but smaller, and had light colored wings above the black body. It would have to do. I knew it would perform like the Cooper’s Bug. First floating high on the surface of the water and then, as the hairs and threads soaked up water, it would slowly sink like a drowning insect.

My hands shook even more as I tried to tie the little fly in place. Never good with knots, I just made sure it wouldn’t come off when I cast.

Waving the rod, I stripped out line and watched to make sure it didn’t snag a bush on the back cast. The alder and willow bushes grew thick and right to the edge of the water in places. Any one of the branches could grab my fly if I used a conventional overhead cast

I tried a roll cast, flipping the fly with a flick of my wrist after picking just some of the line off the water. The action sent the fly-line rolling forward in a series of two or three large loops with the ten feet of gossamer leader rolling out last and laying the fly

gently on the surface of the water. The wide gravel bar worked to my advantage and got my fly out about halfway across the flow, where it started to turn into the pool. I could see a dozen trout hovering just off the bottom.

The fly rode the surface and swept along in the graceful arc of water. It drifted over the fish I could clearly see, but they ignored it. These were big Dolly Vardens. Some appeared two feet long. They held fast to the bottom, idly fanning the current with their fins. Their olive backs and light-colored spots stood out down where the water turned from turquoise to cerulean.

If they were feeding, it was on terrestrial things that washed down to them, or perhaps they were picking off hatching larva just rising off the pebbles. They had no interest in things above their heads. I pulled in the line and made another of my amateurish casts with the same result. I cast again. Still nothing showed an interest.

Trying to reach further across the pool, I let the toes of my sneakers dip into the ice cold water when I made my fourth cast. I rolled the fly back upstream, drifting it as naturally as my old leader and crude knot would let it. As the fly crossed into the shadow of a tree on the opposite bank, something smashed into it. A fish struck the dark fly and dove for the bottom.

It dove, but not before I saw the dorsal fin break the surface. The fish looked like a torpedo with a sail. Even though I only knew it from books and fishing magazines, I was certain it wasn't one of the trout. It was an Arctic grayling, and he fought the bamboo rod with violent lunges and twists of his head.

“Got one,” I shouted towards Grandpa. He shouted something back, but I couldn’t hear what it was.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see him standing fifty yards upstream, his khaki- colored pants and shirt and paint-spattered work boots gave him a janitorial look. The black frames of his eyeglasses beneath his dark blue cap stood out against the ashy tone of his face.

Without any waders to take me closer and without a landing net to scoop him with, I horsed the fish in. Holding the rod high, I craned him toward the gravel beach. I thought of Hemingway’s words, “There was a long tug. Nick struck and the rod came alive and dangerous, bent double, the line tightening, coming out of the water, tightening, all in a heavy, dangerous, steady pull.” In my head I was Nick Adams and this grayling twice as grand as any Michigan brook trout.

Lifting the rod tip higher, I pulled him out of the water and swung him towards the shore. His full weight stretched the leader and bowed the rod in a delicate brown arch. Just as the fish’s body reached the edge of the river, the Black Gnat’s hook pulled out and the fish struck the shore with a slap, his tail in the water and his head on the stones. I froze.

This was the first grayling I had ever seen. The fish’s bluish-gray body was shaped something like a trout—narrow and streamlined. It had a splatter of black spots like many kinds of trout or salmon, but its skin had scales like a perch or a bass. Its mouth was small and dainty like a trout, but the massive dorsal fin took almost a third of

its body length and waved like a sailfish's or Marlin's. Near panic at the thought of losing this prize, my breath came in gulps.

If I moved wrong it might flex its body once and be gone. For an instant I looked into the deeper water, and then toward Grandpa, and then back at the fish. I set the butt of the rod in the stones and let the rod fall like a tree cut with an axe. Stepping into the water up to my knees, I scooped the fish with my outstretched hands and catapulted it another five feet onto the narrow beach.

Relieved with its escape blocked, I hopscotched ashore, water pouring from my blue jeans and oozing from my sneakers. I straightened up and looked over at Grandpa.

"Keep him." Grandpa's call carried the length of the pool. "We'll have it for supper."

I set the fish with the amazing fin where he couldn't flop back to the water. Too excited to resume fishing for a moment, I stared at the unexpected beauty of the fish, his jaw panting and his gill plates gasping the air he couldn't breathe. I looked up and around at the river as it continued to swirl and loop around the bend, and then the mountains beyond. I glanced at the sky gone to a non-threatening, yellow-gray overcast.

Leaving the fish where he lay dying, I eased my rod out of the brush, smoothed out the line and cast again into the same spot. Bam. Another grayling smacked the fly. "Got another one," I yelled.

"More for supper," Grandpa called over the sound of the water, its gurgle punctuated with the splashes of my second grayling as it thrashed the surface of the pool.

Fighting him for five or six minutes, careful this time not to put too much strain on the leader, I eased the smaller fish toward the shore, trying not to spook it. Scenes from *Big Two-Hearted River* played along in my head as the feisty grayling pumped against the rod's tension and stretched the delicate leader. Placing the second fish on some fine gravel with the first, I hoped he'd die quickly. It took four casts and drifts to tempt a third grayling to strike. But it hit just as hard as the others and gave a good fight all the way in. I was smiling broadly as I pulled him ashore.

Grandpa abandoned tossing spinning lures at the reluctant trout hanging on the bottom of the pool and came to see my fish. We'd fished together often since his retirement two years before. We'd hiked to remote New Hampshire beaver ponds in search of diminutive brook trout. We waded brooks roaring with spring run-off and cast after pickerel on summer evenings. Reaching into the brush he cut a willow branch with his pocket knife, strung my three fish, and dunked them in the water to rinse off the bits of sand and gravel that clung to their bodies.

At the sound of traffic and a horn from the road above, we glanced up to see the top of my parents' camper pulling up in yet another cloud of dust. No doubt they were wondering why Grandpa's truck faced south in a spot where there was no apparent reason for stopping. Doors slammed and the sound of voices carried down to us as Grandma came out beside the road to join Mom, Dad, Douglas, and his dog, Shadow, a crazy, undisciplined mix of spaniels.

Accepting that the fishing was over, Grandpa and I plowed into the brush again, fighting our way up the slope. I carried the willow branch with my fish in my right hand, as my left struggled to thread the long rod through the muddle of branches. The nine feet

of bamboo felt like a lance that I struggled to keep from breaking in the tangle of shrubbery.

When we regained the road and the campers, I felt on top of the world. Holding my fish high, I shouted, “Dinner!”

There were cheers and smiles from everyone. They were curious about the strange- looking fish with the oversized dorsal fin, and the dog bounced up and down, trying to put his nose to the grayling as I held them above his reach.

It was another flat tire that had delayed my folks. But I didn’t think much about it as I put away my rod and tackle bag. I was far too excited about seeing the fish strike my fly and then landing them after a violent fight.

Grandpa wrapped the three fish in waxed paper and put them in the refrigerator as we stowed everything again. I couldn’t know then that this was the last time that I would fish with my grandfather. In the weeks remaining on the trip we never pulled the rods out again, or went through the complication of getting licenses. In the fall came my senior year of high school, then college and after that, the Army. We spoke of getting back to it, but like the unfinished skeleton of the fishing boat we’d started in his barn, we never did go back to it.

I changed places with my brother and went back to our truck, as we got going toward Fairbanks again.

Topping that long hill a half mile west of the pool, with Mom in the middle on the bench between me and Dad, and Shadow curled up at our feet, the truck’s alternator light started flashing...

* * * *

“Are you really into fishing?” Jim asked as we crested another hill.

“I was back then.”

“I never got into fishing,” Jim said. “Hunting, yes, but not fishing. I don’t know why, I just never did.”

“Even when you lived in Alaska?” I asked. “Man, the salmon and grayling and the Dolly Varden trout are spectacular.”

“I ate plenty of salmon and halibut, but fishing for them never really interested me,” Jim said, sounding a bit like he was in a confessional.

“I caught my first trout when I was four,” I said. “My grandfather – my mother’s father – not the one I was up here with, took me.”

For an instant I could feel that May morning in New Hampshire before the leaves have fully come out, when the brooks run full with snow melt and spring rains. I could see my grandfather in his green rubber hip waders below his sport coat, tie, and Homberg hat.

“That’s one of my earliest memories,” I said. “But that grandfather died when I was in the first grade, so it was my father’s father and my step-dad’s father who really took me fishing. But that spot back there was kind of the end of it.”

“You really got into it?” Jim asked.

“I did. From third grade well into high school, it was what I lived for. My friend Jeff and I spent every moment we could on the Concord River.”

“Thoreau’s Concord River?”

“Yes, that Concord River. Hell, I learned to swim in Walden Pond. We’d fish the brooks and smaller rivers like the Shawsheen in the spring for trout. But when the water warmed and the stocked trout either died out or went into the deepest holes, we’d go for bass and pickerel in the Concord, or places like Wilson’s Mill Pond or Fawn Lake. We loved to throw lures after pickerel.”

“I never knew you were so into fishing,” Jim said.

“Oh, I was, but except for introducing it to my son, I’ve only kept at it sporadically. Somehow it just slipped away. But, I brought along the fly-rod my guys gave me when I retired. I’ll be trying to augment our diet with some fresh fish.”

The Girl on the Train

Breakfast, and the wake-up effects from the pot of tea that the nice woman at the roadhouse brewed for me, wore off as Jim and I got close to Whitehorse. Into our third day of driving with stops only for gas, food, and twice for short naps, we were beginning to tire.

I thought reaching Whitehorse would spark some real excitement after all the years since I'd last been here. Having visited Whitehorse twice before, I felt this would be a homecoming of sorts. But it wasn't only me that had changed in thirty-eight years. The highway doesn't even run through town anymore. The road runs along the bluffs to the south and by-passes almost everything. Only the distant hills looked as I remembered them.

Jim was driving and we'd said little since leaving the roadhouse near Teslin, more than 100 miles from Whitehorse. With plenty of fuel still in the tank, Jim pressed on through the Yukon's capital without stopping.

"This stuff wasn't here last time I came through," I said, waving my hand at the chain stores, parking lots, and auto service centers on the outskirts. "And neither was that."

I sat up straight at the sight of the big modern airport off to the left, with its glass terminal building and commercial jets parked at the gates. The acres of buildings and tarmac and planes looked like a rent in the fabric of forest. I hadn't expected Whitehorse to stand still, but seeing it so changed hit like a splash of cold water. Recollection doused under a wave of reality.

“Things have a way of changing,” Jim said, giving one quick glance towards the big passenger planes.

“They sure do.”

The huge swath of the airport looked out of place against the miles and miles of dark spruce forest and the bright overcast of northern sky. The sun penetrated the overcast, glinting off the glass of the terminal and the lacquer-like paint on the planes.

I was disappointed not to see the town, and a little sad not to take the short side road to Miles Canyon and the rapids in the Yukon River. But by keeping up our routine of stopping only when we needed fuel, and combining fuel with food and driver changes, we planned to be in Fairbanks that night.

As we passed the last side road that led into town, I realized I wouldn’t get to see the old railroad depot. In a couple of miles we’d be back in wilderness, but my thoughts were on the weathered depot and that August morning in 1968 when I met the girl on the train.

* * * *

She sat alone near the front of the train car. I noticed her as soon as I entered. As my family and a small crowd of other passengers spilled onto the car, I also found a seat to myself, two rows behind where she sat across the aisle, but near enough to see that she was high school age and very pretty.

The girl wore a dotted mini-dress and had a gray athletic jacket with yellow-gold leather sleeves draped around her shoulders to ward off the morning chill. The jacket had

a large letter “W” on the right breast, with “cheerleader” written across it in script. She wore her strawberry blonde hair in two long pony-tails that framed her face and were tied with bright bows of florescent pink yarn.

After two months on the road, living in the cramped spaces of a truck-camper with my parents, grandparents, dog, and little brother, seeing her was like a jolt of pure pleasure. Sitting there, totally unaware of me, she brought my morning into sharp focus.

I couldn’t see her eyes behind her sunglasses but imagined them as pretty as the rest of her. She was reading from a hardbound copy called *The Collected Poems of Robert Service*. I recognized the dust jacket, having seen it in Dawson City a few weeks earlier. The girl and the book stirred something deep in me. We’d been to some of the same places. I had a paperback copy of the same book. I envied her hardbound volume. I didn’t know anyone my age who was familiar with Service’s poems, except maybe the two hitch-hikers we’d spent time with up in Dawson. She balanced the book where the hem of her dress met her bare thigh, her left leg crossed over the right, her ankle slowly twirling her sandal-clad foot.

Though I was sure she hadn’t noticed me, I melted a bit into the high back of my seat, unsure what I would do if she looked my way. Wow, I thought to myself, a cheerleader.

It was late summer as we boarded the daily White Pass & Yukon train. It would take us from Whitehorse to the coast and the Alaska ferry terminal at Skagway. The train and ferry down through the maze of islands of the Alaska Panhandle to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, let us avoid another two-week ordeal on the Alaska Highway.

The couple whom I assumed were her parents sat in the seat in front of her, the woman at the window and the man on the aisle. They looked older than my parents, and the sound of their voices said that they came from the Midwest or maybe one of the Prairie Provinces. When they spoke they elongated the sound of the letter “o” just a bit.

Passengers filed into the car and filled it quickly. The girl and I kept our unaccompanied seats, as did my younger brother sitting ahead of my parents and grandparents, toward the front of the old-fashioned wooden passenger car. The train was a life-line and ran full or almost full, every day of the short summer season.

I was glad we’d be able to get up and move around as the day progressed, even take another seat if we wished, or watch the scenery from another spot in the four passenger cars stuck on the end of the train. And though I’d never try to sit there myself, I was pleased that no one came to take a seat next to the girl languidly turning her ankle.

We got to the depot in plenty of time that morning to secure everything in the campers, collect what we wanted to have with us in the passenger car, and then drive the campers onto flat cars where railroad workers tied them down for the trip over. Cars and campers, travel trailers, and even a tractor-trailer or two hauling freight from the interior to the coast, lined up early to take their place for loading onto the train’s narrow wooden flatcars.

As I watched the yardmen jockey the flat cars to attach them to our train, I wondered which vehicle went with the girl reading Robert Service.

Built at huge expense in money and lives, the railroad rises from sea level at Skagway to 2,900 feet at the summit of White Pass, just twenty miles out from Skagway.

It's a narrow-gauge system that bumps and sways as it follows one of the original routes to the Klondike gold fields. Completed in just two years, the railway eliminated the need for foot traffic over the Chilkoot Pass and the pack animals that carried freight over White Pass. It also replaced the crude boats built on the shore of Bennett Lake to carry those who successfully got up the passes with their supplies down the Yukon River to Whitehorse and beyond.

At 9:30 in the morning the whistle screeched and the train jolted into motion. The passengers bounced and swayed as the train lurched forward. Each car in turn recoiled, first forward, then back, and forward again as the little engines strained to drag the heavy load into motion.

Smiling faces peered around and over the backs of the seats as the passengers gathered last looks at the depot and along the dirt streets of Whitehorse. A few jumped up to open the old, drop-down windows, to wave to people on the station platform or walking along the city's board sidewalks. Others snapped pictures through the glass or thrust their cameras out the open windows. For the first of many times along the way, the conductor's voice came over a scratchy intercom with some barely audible announcement.

The girl didn't seem to notice. She only burrowed deeper into the jacket lying across her shoulders like a cape, and didn't lift her face from her book

Looking over the seat back in front of me and around the heads of the people sitting there, I saw my parents and grandparents in conversation with the couple I thought were the girl's parents. I could hear that they were speaking, but couldn't tell what was

being said over the noises of the train and the voices of the passengers around me. The chatter in the car continued to rise and fall like a wave until we were well out of town.

Beyond Whitehorse Rapids and Miles Canyon in the Yukon River, the spruce closed in along the tracks and seemed to settle those inclined to jump up for picture taking. The wall of trees on either side quieted the noise of conversations, confining the banter to those seated together, stilling the roar that had filled the car.

Enjoying the unrestricted movement, I stood for long periods with my elbows resting on the half-open window frame, drinking in the scent of the black spruce mixed with a hint of diesel fumes from the four yellow and green engines a quarter mile ahead. The wheels clicked across the joints in the track. I liked to step out onto the rear platform and watch the engines and laden flat cars up ahead as we rounded curves. Sometimes the great arc of the train seemed to curl back on itself.

My mother came out to join me and take picture of our campers in the curves. The vehicles rocked against the blocks and chains holding them. Mom braced herself against the railing and leaned way out to snap a picture as the cars ahead flashed in and out of view. Pulling the camera up to her eye, she'd drop it down again and with one hand brush her windblown hair aside. Raising the camera up to her eye again as she leaned into the shot, she said without looking at me, "You ought to go speak to that girl."

"I suppose so," I mumbled just loud enough for her to hear me.

Snapping off the picture, Mom immediately turned to go back inside. Grabbing the door frame to keep from stumbling as the train pitched and rolled, she turned and fixed her eyes on mine saying, "Her name is Janice." Before I finished hearing, "Her

name is Janice,” Mom was gone. Back in inside she moved down the aisle with a dancing little gait as the train pitched and swayed, but I held my place on the platform a while longer.

Fascinated by trains of any sort, Dad and Grandpa moved up and down the cars, watching the progress around the curves and chatting with other passengers. Where are you from? What do you do for a living? Where did you go to school? Wherever we went, it seemed one of them would encounter someone they knew or someone who knew someone they knew. I sometimes marveled at the easy way they both could engage strangers.

Grandma, too, would enter into conversation with anyone. Always warm and cheerful, she had something nice to say to everyone. However, she much preferred not to partake of the undignified dance in the aisle, so she did her conversing from her seat by the window.

Slipping back inside, I saw the girl on her feet and leaning over the back of the seat in front of her, talking to her parents. She’d put her arms into the sleeves of the jacket to keep it from slipping off her shoulders and set her book on the seat beside her. She didn’t notice as I slid back into my seat.

Sixty-nine miles from Whitehorse the train stopped at Lake Bennett. All the passengers got off in a chattering mob and filed into the big yellow station house for lunch. I tried to walk behind the girl as everyone spilled off the train. I tried to weave through the crowd to stay near her, but soon lost sight of her in the crowd. I searched the

faces converging toward the open door of the railroad station, hoping that no one near our age would suddenly appear and ruin whatever chance I had at knowing her.

Sitting on a rocky shelf blasted from the hillside, the station overlooked the big lake. The deep blue of the lake, the bright yellow of the station's paint, and the dark green of the spruce trees in the noontime sun almost hurt our eyes on leaving the shade of the train car.

In 1898 and 1899, Lake Bennett hosted 10,000 and more gold-crazy Stampeders who paused here briefly to build rafts and crude boats that would carry them and their required ton of supplies down a chain of lakes and then the Yukon River to the goldfields near Dawson. Deserted now except for the train station and a small cluster of abandoned log buildings blackened by sixty or seventy years of exposure, the spot looked like a movie set.

The station's kitchen staff served lunch on long family-style tables in the big main room of the station house. Diners passed plates of roast moose, potatoes, boiled cabbage and rolls to strangers beside and across the table.

I got a seat next to my twelve-year-old brother, Douglas, on a wooden folding chair from another era. The girl was a couple of places away, diagonally across from me. At one point I said, "May I have the butter, please?" She looked up at me and almost reached for the butter dish, but the old guy sitting next to her beat her to it.

"Thanks," I muttered.

Those finishing lunch quickly wandered outside to take pictures and walk up to the long abandoned log church that the Stampeders had left behind. Stepping out of the

bright sunshine and into the deep, shadowed gloom of the church entry, I nearly bumped into the girl stepping from the darkness into the light. “Hi,” she said, drifting by.

“Hi,” I said, as the old log walls swallowed me up.

The train whistle pierced the windless afternoon air and called us all back to the cars we’d left barely an hour before. Standing by the steps up into our car, I got ready to help my grandmother climb onboard. She passed and reached for my hand to steady herself on the stairs, and as she did, she leaned towards me and said, “Aren’t you ever going to speak to that girl?”

“Oh, I will, Grandma,” I replied half-truthfully. I meant, I will if conditions are right and no parents are hovering around supervising, and no little brother is dancing around being a pest, and if I can think up something artful to say, and only if she doesn’t look at me like I’m a complete dork.

From Lake Bennett the train climbs toward the pass and the boundary between Canada and Alaska. The mountains close in and the scenery becomes spectacular. Snow on the highest peaks. Jagged ridges. Cascading streams sweep off the mountain sides and roar along far below the train. After the pass, comes a twenty-mile brake-straining descent into the harbor town at the narrow head of Taiya Inlet. It felt like some sophisticated amusement park ride that was taking us through fantastic scenery.

The train seemed like it was heading for the sky. The forest beside the tracks grew thin and fell away, replaced by low bushes, mountain grasses, and the scree left by glaciers. Here and there stunted, twisted facsimiles of trees clung to the slopes or sheltered in the cuts made for the train tracks.

The curves tightened. Sometimes it seemed as though the front of the train would meet the rear going the opposite way. Passengers snapped their cameras in every direction and gawked at the scenery through the open windows or from the platform at the end of the car. We all took turns going out on the platform to experience the view in the open air that bore more than a hint of diesel fumes as the engines labored to climb the grade.

My mother joined me on the platform again. “Her father’s a veterinarian and they’re from North Dakota,” she told me. “She’s going to be a senior this year.”

I fumbled for a response, but nothing came to me. I was convinced that the cheerleader would shoot me down in flames. She had to have a boyfriend waiting for her back in North Dakota. My mother’s and grandmother’s attempts at social engineering were confusing and knotted up my stomach. I had no history of walking up to pretty girls I didn’t know and talking to them. Besides I had a girlfriend of my own waiting for me back home.

The train rolled across Dead Horse Gulch on a wooden trestle more than 200 feet above the boulder strewn valley. Perched on the slowly bobbing platform at the end of the train, the views tightened my throat, and my chest felt heavy thinking about the 3,000 horses and mules that died trying to carry gold seekers’ supplies across the gulch and over the pass.

And just as I was about to start breathing again, I turned toward the open door into the car and there she was, coming out to share the view. “Hi, again,” she said.

“Hi,” I said. And a long second later, “Again.”

“Isn’t this beautiful,” she said, with a catch in her breath and a move toward the railing.

“Hang on tight,” I said automatically. “And move very carefully.”

I couldn’t quite believe they let us sway out there, 200 feet above the bottom of the gorge. I figured any second the conductor would be shooin’ us inside. But he never came.

“I’m Jan,” she said turning her head toward me. “Actually, it’s Janice, but everybody calls me Jan.”

“I’m Jim. Actually it’s James, but I don’t like it.”

“I’m going to call you Jimmer. If that’s okay.”

She could’ve called me anything she wanted.

She was maybe four inches shorter than I and her hair was shining in the afternoon sun. She still covered her eyes behind sunglasses, and she had a way of tilting her head toward her left shoulder when she looked up at my eyes and spoke to me.

“You’re a cheerleader,” I said, acknowledging the slightly oversized jacket she wore. “What’s the W stand for?”

“Wahpeton. It’s in North Dakota,” she said. “It’s where we live.”

“Oh,” I replied knowing it sounded inane. “I’m from Massachusetts.”

“Do you know the Kennedys?” she asked crinkling her nose in an appealing way and with just a hint sarcasm in her voice.

“Not hardly,” I responded, “but I have seen their place in Hyannis.”

The wind blowing up the gulch swung her pony-tails across her face. She pulled her arms tight across her chest snuggling into the unbuttoned jacket to hold in whatever warmth could be provided when you’re wearing a mini-skirt.

Below the trestle a faint line still marked the route of the old trail. Down there, the bones of three thousand horses and mules grew gray and brittle in the wind. Up on the swaying platform the wind danced along the hem of her skirt, and I quickly looked up as the breeze whipped her pony tails across her face like a veil. The ends of her hair brushed my shoulder, my cheek, my ear like a silken lash.

I felt the eyes of every passenger in the train car boring into the back of my denim jacket, and hoped she wouldn’t notice my involuntary shaking. Leaning into the wind and diesel fumes, I shouted, “Did you know three thousand horses died down there?”

By the time our car eased back onto solid ground at the end of the trestle, we were having a real conversation. “What’s your school like?” “What’s North Dakota like?” “I’m in a rock band.” “I play the flute.” “Is that your brother up there?” “Are you a senior?” “What are you going to do next year?”

The brakes on the train screeched and squealed in slowing our descent. The long length of cars swung into the curves like a snake held fast by the tail. In a year’s time engineers would blast a new route across the face of the cliffs and the great trestle would be abandoned to the wind and the occasional ravens that roost on its deteriorating girders and tie beams.

By 1982, a highway pushed inland from Skagway would make the railroad obsolete as a lifeline. Now it just hauls tourists from cruise ships as far as the top of the pass and back down again to their gigantic floating hotels.

We passed a sign marking “Inspiration Point” and got our first view down the long valley to the town of Skagway and the northern reaches of Lynn Canal, where the throngs of gold- fevered Stampeders came ashore after steaming north from Seattle, or Portland, or San Francisco. The peaks to the left and right glowed with the late afternoon sun, but the valley ahead was already in shadow. The spruce and fir trees looked black against the sides of the canyon.

I froze when the train entered the only tunnel on the route. Standing alone in the dark next to Jan, I didn’t want to make a wrong move. What would her parents think? What would my parents think? In the tunnel, smoke and fumes wrapped around the train like a noxious blanket. Once, and then twice, the car lurched into a curve and she tilted into my chest, her delicate giggle rising above the crunch and grind of the train. I only unfroze when we cleared the shaft of the long tunnel. She smiled at my discomfort.

We watched in silence at passing Bridal Veil Falls. I pointed out remnants of the old horse trail on the opposite wall of the canyon, and the spot where White Pass City once stood, its people long dead or living somewhere in a home for the elderly. We read the sign identifying Black Cross Rock that came loose during construction and entombed two railway workers beneath it. And in the distance we saw the white, blue, and yellow paint scheme of the Alaska Ferry Lines ship tied up at the docks of Skagway.

A few people came and went from the platform, but we paid no attention. Jan and I never went back inside. We stayed put as the air grew colder when the train entered the deep shadow of the canyon. Once again the dark spruce trees closed in on either side of the track. We felt the train level out and slow as it worked its way towards the town. It crossed the Skagway River several times over wooden timber bridges, but as we neared the coast the scenery mellowed out with the gradient.

The train inched its way into the station. The cars rocked and wheels screamed as it reached its stop. Trainmen uncoupled the flat cars from the passenger cars and pulled the flat cars to a place where the drivers could ease their vehicles off in a long line. A small yard engine pulled the passenger cars into the station proper.

Jan had to rejoin her parents for the drive over to the ferry dock. Though I'd only stood next to her for an hour or so, I immediately felt the loss of her presence. I hadn't noticed the cold shadow of the canyon when she was next to me. The wind, the fumes, the noise hadn't mattered while she was standing there. I hoped I would find her on the ship.

Grandpa and Dad drove the campers the short distance to the ferry. Grandma, Mom, Douglas and I walked with Shadow, our dog now freed from his all-day rollercoaster ride, shut up in the camper on the flatcar.

Jan was waiting at the top of the gangway when I rushed up the planking a little over- anxious to meet her. But her smile told me she'd been anxious, too.

Loading all of the trucks, vans, cars, campers, travel trailers and passengers took a long time. It was well into evening before we sailed. Everyone spent the time exploring

the ship and walking the decks. Jan and I spent most of our time standing at the rail just below the ship's bridge, talking the time away.

Her family had a stateroom for their one night's passage to Juneau. My family didn't spring for such luxuries, and we would live in our camper down in the hold. We couldn't cook down there, but we could use it for sleeping.

I didn't care about sleeping. I wanted to spend whatever time there was with Jan. Her presence banished all desire for sleep. I told her about my band, The Soul Purpose, no doubt embellishing our musical talent. I told her about wanting to be a forest ranger. She told me she had an older brother studying to be a doctor but working summers as a smoke jumper for the U.S. Forest Service in Montana. She told me that North Dakota State University had a forestry school. And she told me she was going to be a veterinarian, like her dad.

We never once mentioned the on-going campaigns to replace President Johnson or the election coming that fall. Neither did we discuss the war, the assassinations, or the race riots that tainted the rest of the year.

She was easy to talk to and I instantly regretted that I couldn't stop in Juneau. Why hadn't my parents figured to stopover in Juneau? My family had two days and three nights onboard the ferry, but Jan would be gone before sun-up the following morning.

I was leaning on the rail, resting my head against my arm when the captain sounded the ship's horn just above us. Jan screamed, grabbed my arm and popped a contact lens out of her eye. An Alaskan twilight. A gray painted deck. And a lost contact lens. My dad happened along and helped. So did Douglas. But I found it. Spotting that

tiny, grey speck on the vast prairie of grey steel decking felt like hitting a home run with the bases loaded in the ninth inning. Handing it to her I touched her small warm fingers. She bubbled with relief at having the little lens recovered.

Jan and I went into the ship's lounge and shared a coke and some greasy snacks as the captain moved the ferry across the bay to the smaller town of Haines, where more vehicles and passengers crowded on board. We went back to the rail and watched the Haines waterfront, as night settled over the forests of Douglas fir and Sitka Spruce that came right to the water's edge. We stayed at the rail when the ship got underway for Juneau, and then watched the stars and talked of Robert Service's poems and how a few weeks before, we'd both gone to a reading at his old cabin in Dawson. On the fantail, away from the ship's lights, we watched the wake dissolve into the distance.

It was late when Jan's mother came to collect her. Or, it was early. She had a sympathetic tone when she told us Jan needed to "get some sleep" and get ready to leave the ship in Juneau.

Alone again, I resisted the urge to go down to the car deck and the cramped camper packed in with all the other vehicles. I walked the decks for hours picking my way among the scattering of tents that travelers had set up to avoid paying for a stateroom and then climbing the stairs from deck to deck. I sat for a while in the lounge among an assortment of people dozing in chairs. I didn't want to take a chance of going below and missing Jan when she left the ship. I didn't want to sleep through good-bye.

The captain nosed us into Juneau's ferry landing in the first light of dawn. The ship bumped lightly against the pilings and the captain ordered a quick reversal and then

a shutdown of the engines. Juneau-bound passengers scrambled to exit the gangway or drive their vehicles off. My grandparents rose early to say good bye and exchange addresses with Jan's parents, but there was no time for any long conversations.

Jan sat in the cab of their camper between her father driving and her mother beside the passenger door. She leaned over to wave as the truck started up the ramp leading to the pier. I hoped she'd blow me a kiss, but she didn't. She just smiled and waved. I raised my hand to meet hers.

I never asked her if she had a boyfriend waiting back in Wahpeton. And she never asked me about a girlfriend, either.

As the ship backed away from the landing, a gray dawn struggled to reveal Juneau. Puffs of fog rose over the dock pilings and washed out the few lights burning along the waterfront. Tail lights from the departing vehicles tinted the fog a kind of rose color.

I made my way down the stairs and ladders to the car deck and found our camper in the gloom. I entered the camper quietly so as not to disturb anyone and climbed into my bunk. I tried to imagine ways of seeing her again, but fell asleep, lulled by the throbbing hum of the ferry's engines.

* * * *

"What are you smiling at?" Jim asked, looking once at me and then back at the road.

He looked tired. His beard was already beginning to show and when he pushed his cap back off his forehead, his light brown hair, though still cropped on the sides military style, looked matted. In a fleeting thought, I wondered if mine looked similar.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about one time in Whitehorse when I was a kid.”

“Must be some kind of good memory, judging by that smile,” Jim said.

“It is,” I said, struggling to get comfortable in the seat and pulling my hat down to cover my eyes. “The best.”

Joe and Donn

Eight miles beyond Whitehorse, the highway splits. The main route continues west and north toward Haines Junction, and on to the Alaska border. The Klondike Loop veers off, more to the north, in the direction of the gold fields of 1898, around Dawson City.

Jim was still at the wheel when I spotted the familiar road branching off to the north. “We went that way the last time I was through here,” I said, as we shot past the fork in the road.

“When was that, again?” Jim said, not taking his eyes off the road.

“The summer of ’68. A lifetime ago.”

Turning to look out the window, I saw the road to the Klondike disappearing behind us as we drove on, determined to cover the remaining 600 miles to Fairbanks that day. We had planned for three days of near round-the-clock driving to cover the same distance that had taken more than two weeks back in 1968.

“I wish we had time to go that way,” I said over the noise of the road. I wanted to see those places again. I wanted to revisit my memories of events and people who had helped to shape me

“No time,” Jim said shooting a glance my way. “Too far out of the way. We’ve got a lot to do before we meet Frenchie on the 18th.”

“I’d still like to get back to Dawson sometime and travel that road over to Chicken. It’s beautiful up there.”

As we pulled away from the junction I thought back to that earlier trip. I knew that twenty miles or so up the road to Dawson is a side road that leads to a primitive picnic spot on the shore of Lake Laberge. Our little caravan of two pick-up trucks with campers, with my mom and step-dad plus my brother and me in one, and my dad's parents in the other, pulled in there so that my grandfather, the inveterate reciter of Robert Service poems, could stand "on the marge of Lake Labarge," as Service wrote in "The Cremation of Sam McGee." I remembered my grandmother snapping a picture of Grandpa wearing his white Stetson hat, with his back to the big lake.

I also remembered the river town of Carmacks, where river steamers used to stop on their way between Whitehorse and Dawson City. We had crossed the Yukon River there on a big steel bridge which replaced the ferry just a couple of years before we got there.

"We'll stop in Haines Junction," Jim announced, interrupting my thoughts and pushing down hard on the accelerator to get us up a long grade. "We need gas. And I need some food."

"Alright," I answered. "I'm ready when you are. I could use something to eat, too."

When we cleared the top of the hill and started down the other side, the road stretched out in front of us like a khaki-colored ribbon between the miles and miles of black-green spruce on either side.

"There's a place just beyond Haines Junction called Sheep Mountain, where you can see Dahl Sheep," I said, recalling the map I hadn't unfolded for hours.

“Yeah, I know it,” Jim said. “We’ll stop there and take a look, see if we can spot any sheep.”

* * * *

The hitchhikers came from Milwaukee and when their Fiat convertible died, somewhere in Saskatchewan or Manitoba, they started north with their thumbs out. I met them when they joined our caravan one afternoon in July of 1968. I was riding alone in the camper and they came through a blaze of sunlight when the back door swung open. They tossed in their packs and climbed up to join me in the semi-darkness behind the cardboard that blocked the views, but protected the glass from stones tossed about by traffic on the gravel road. Only one uncovered window on the right side facing away from traffic let in any light.

“Hi, I’m Donn. And that’s Joe,” the first guy in said, jerking a thumb in the direction of the guy struggling up behind him.

“I’m Jim,” I said, suddenly feeling invaded as they flopped down at the table with me, their packs filling the floor space. Dad threw the truck into gear and pulled up onto the road again. Too late to save us and the backpacks from getting thrown around, my mother called into the intercom, “All set back there?”

Not all set, we hung on until the ride smoothed out a few seconds later, when the wheels touched the level decking of the Pelly River Bridge. Then we wrestled ourselves into comfortable positions at the table and stared into each other’s faces, like strangers meeting on an ocean liner. Without hesitating, Donn launched into conversation.

I hadn't spoken to someone near my age (my meeting the girl on train was still a couple of weeks away), except my twelve-year-old brother, in more than a month and Donn was so animated; I was taken aback. They were hitchhiking to Alaska on their own and I was amazed. To me, high adventure was taking my turn at driving our camper or sometimes helping my grandparents with their driving. Dropped into my afternoon, Donn and Joe stunned me with their Woody Guthrie hobo appearance and swagger.

Reacting to a patch sown on my denim jacket, Donn asked, "You own a Harley?"

Feeling like I'd been caught cheating on a spelling quiz, I swallowed my embarrassment and admitted, "No, I just like them."

Like me, Joe was headed into his senior year of high school, but Donn said he was nineteen and that he'd been to community college for a year and was Joe's sister's boyfriend. He'd hitchhiked to Alaska the previous summer, as well. Donn seemed confident and experienced. Joe seemed more subdued and thoughtful.

Both came from old German families steeped in the beer-and-bratwurst traditions of southern Wisconsin. Tall and lean to the point of skinny, Joe was fair, his hair tending toward red. Donn the shorter, darker, stockier of the two, was the talker. Stories and conversation spilled out of him like a fountain. Joe was quiet, answering questions when shot his way, and observing everything.

Donn wrote folk songs and carried a guitar that he placed carefully near where he'd dropped his pack. Joe said he wrote poems and kept a journal. Donn dreamed big and chafed at the confines of college. "It doesn't seem relevant to my life," he said by way of explanation. "I want to fly airplanes and homestead in Alaska."

“I’m going to college to study forestry,” I said.

“That’s cool,” Donn said.

“But I think about joining the Army. Get it done and then go to college. I could learn to fly helicopters and then fly for the Forest Service.”

“Cool,” Donn said again.

Joe didn’t offer anything just then, he was softly blowing into a harmonica he’d pulled from his pocket, but I knew he was thinking, like me, that senior year seemed awfully far away. And not very relevant, to use Donn’s word.

“I met your Dad in the washroom at the campground this morning,” Donn pitched in, as Joe searched the notes of a chromatic scale. “That’s why he stopped back there and picked us up.”

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“To Dawson with you, and then over to Tok. We’ll cut down to Anchorage. I’ve got friends there from last trip that we can stay with. Maybe we’ll pick up a job to get some money. We want to take the train up toward Denali so we can scout for a homestead. Then we’ll head back down to Milwaukee to get Joe back in time for school.”

“And maybe we won’t,” Joe mumbled from behind his harmonica.

I asked, “What does the train have to do with finding a homestead?”

Donn explained that the railroad running between Anchorage and Fairbanks would drop someone in “the bush” anywhere along the line that they wanted to get off, and pick them up again when they flagged another train.

“What about bears?” I asked.

“We’ve got protection,” Joe chimed in and pointing to the take-down version of a Winchester .30-30 rifle protruding from his pack.

I knew lots of guys who dreamed of some adventure or another, but I hadn’t ever met anyone near my age that was living one. Riding down the Klondike River Valley we talked of music and girlfriends and Donn’s idea to drop out of college, find land for a homestead, and get on with life.

We all bounced along as the road followed the valley of the Klondike River. From what Joe and Donn and I could see out the one uncovered window, the riverbed had been scoured by gold dredging and great heaps of stones snaked along the ruined course of the stream.

It was late in the day when Dad and Grandpa steered the campers into town and began to inquire about a place to camp. Some locals sent us up a steep, winding road to a field that straddled a ridge just under a landmark peak known as The Dome. Joe and Donn camped in the open next to our two rigs, overlooking the old Gold Rush town of Dawson. We had a great view of where the water from the Klondike joins the powerful current of the Yukon River.

After supper I carried my sleeping bag to Joe and Donn’s campfire and spread it on the ground along with theirs. Satisfied from eating but starved for companionship my own age, I reveled in spending the night outside with them. Donn was already strumming his guitar and singing “Michael Row the Boat Ashore,” a folk song popular a few years

before. He'd look down at a list of songs taped to the edge of his guitar and choose the next one to sing.

Joe stared into the fire, his hands gripped around his harmonica, his lips playing a soft accompaniment to Donn's singing. These were quiet, end-of-the-day songs, not anything raucous. I didn't speak during the songs. I didn't want to risk the privilege of my inclusion. We looked like three arriving 1898 gold seekers.

The July sun never quite sets in that part of the world. As we sat and talked by the fire, we could watch the sun dip low on the horizon; but even at midnight we could still see over the river and the high opposite ridge, to blue-grey hills beyond the border, in Alaska.

Sleep sometimes comes hard under the midnight sun, and though we grew quiet, we talked far into the night. "I've got a girlfriend back home," I announced wanting to put myself on par with Donn.

"What's her name?" Joe asked.

"Carolyn."

Donn sat up and tossed a stick on the fire saying, "Hey, bring her up and we could have adjoining homesteads."

"We could do that. That would be cool."

I immediately thought of a cabin out on the landscape, and bringing Carolyn into this vast paradise. For a moment I saw us hewing a life out of the bush country and envisioned us neighbors with Joe and Donn on homesteads of their own. I saw complete

freedom and wild independence. No school. No nine-to-five jobs. No obligatory military service. No war, hot, cold or otherwise.

Riding along on my romantic vision of Arctic bliss, I was captured by the possibilities. But even then I felt them as just possibilities. Something about the idea didn't ring true. Much as I could picture it, I didn't know the first thing about building a cabin. I knew even less about growing crops in the Arctic. I wasn't too sure about butchering a moose or caribou or skinning foxes for cash.

Somewhere down deep I was pretty sure that Carolyn wouldn't share this vision. She sang in choirs, played the viola, and wanted to become a social worker like her mother. Still, I was carried along with the idea as we sat and talked by the fire. From there, our world was filled with possibilities and I saw them all.

I returned to my family in the morning and we set off to pan for gold in Bonanza Creek. Cheering and jabbering with each tiny flake in the bottom of the pan, we sandwiched the inconsequential bits of gold in Scotch tape and carried them away as souvenirs. Joe and Donn spent their day doing laundry and purchasing some needed supplies.

In the afternoon we wandered the dirt streets, peering into homes and businesses abandoned by their owners when the gold played out. We saw stores with goods on the shelves and restaurants with tables still set, though guests hadn't been in for fifty years.

"Would you look at that," my grandmother exclaimed over and over, as we walked in the lupine and fireweed that grew tall beside the rotting boardwalks and yards of the old town.

That night I returned to the campfire with Joe and Donn. They would leave the next day, anxious to get moving again toward their goal of scouting out a homestead plot. They welcomed me with calls of “Howdy” and “Hey.” Donn ripped a series of chords on his guitar at my approach.

We watched the blue-grey hills to the west and the play of evening sunlight on the broad current of the river. Joe drifted into playing “Shenandoah” on his harmonica, and I descended into a beautiful melancholy.

Sensing their freedom wasn’t exactly boundless, I asked Donn, “If you don’t go back to college, what about the draft?”

“I guess I’ll just take my chances. Maybe I’ll join the Air Force and try to get stationed in Alaska,” he responded. “That way, I can work on the homestead thing.”

I hadn’t thought of my own situation that way for weeks. Despite the fact that I was a dreadful student, my family and I and nearly everyone I knew saw me on a trajectory toward studying forestry in college. The draft and the war weren’t part of that equation. Not much was said about the draft, or my abysmal grades, in our house.

When Donn spoke of the Air Force, Joe made no response. Like me, he still had a few months until he had to register and get a draft card. I actually looked forward to having a draft card. But the draft itself, the possibility of conscription, never seemed real to me. It didn’t seem real because I knew I would do something voluntarily which would preclude the draft.

Getting drafted seemed an act of indecision to me. An act of inaction which gave away one’s right to decide, to choose. I expected to choose the time, place, and branch of

service. Getting drafted seemed to me the option for guys who hoped never to be called and hid out at home, giving their fate to chance. Men in my family served; some way, somehow, they served. They didn't sit on their couches waiting to be summoned. I liked Donn's idea of joining a service and getting sent to Alaska. That idea sat me straight up and rattled through me. That idea had real possibility.

The sad, familiar notes from Joe's harmonica made me ache to cross the river and enter the hills beyond. And at the same time, I wanted to remain in Dawson. I tried to imagine explaining the feeling to Carolyn, or any of my friends back home. Service called it "The Spell of the Yukon," and I felt it. I wished the feeling would last.

Walking down the hill to the ferry landing the next day with Donn and Joe, I put off saying good-bye and rode the ferry across the river with them. We parted on the other side, where Top of the World Highway begins its sixty-mile climb out of the river valley and over the far ridges toward the border. They hustled to snare a ride among the vehicles exiting the ferry. Trotting along the line of exiting vehicles, they both flashed a hasty wave in my direction, but we never really said good-bye.

I watched for them from the returning ferry but didn't see them walking up the road. I assumed they found a ride. As I stood along the ferry's downstream railing, I wished that somewhere up ahead we would see them with their thumbs out and stop to pick them up again. Leaving the dock, I walked slowly up the dirt street and away from the river.

* * * *

I jolted alert as Jim pulled off the road and into the gas station at Haines Junction. The empty trailer we were towing bounced over potholes as Jim eased up to the pumps. A big concrete statue of a bull moose glowered down at the spot where the road to the coast and the Alaska Highway come together. It looked ready to charge the cluster of businesses vying for north-bound and south-bound traffic.

“Where have you been?” Jim asked as we came to a stop.

“I guess I dozed off for a minute,” I answered. “I was thinking about the last time I was up this way.”

“Ha. You’ve been gone a lot longer than a minute,” Jim snorted. “Come on. It’s your turn to drive, so let’s get the gas and back on the road.”

Recalling the Road

“The boundary’s coming up in a couple of miles,” I called, loud enough to rouse Jim from his dozing in the passenger seat.

“Good,” Jim answered, sitting up and squinting against the bright afternoon light. “Let’s stop there and then I’ll drive for a while.”

We’d been making good progress all day, passing in and out of areas of bright sun and then just a few miles further on we’d run into overcast and threats of rain.

Approaching the border between Canada and Alaska, we were in one of the in-between states of high overcast and bright light. I’d been watching for moose the whole time Jim had been sleeping, but hadn’t seen any. The country was perfect moose habitat, but still nothing showed itself as we sped along.

“I want to take a picture of the boundary sign, when we stop,” I said, as Jim squirmed around trying to get comfortable again. “And I’m beginning to believe we’ll make Fairbanks tonight for sure.”

“We’ll be there tonight, no problem,” Jim mumbled from beneath the bill of his cap, as he tried to gain another couple of minutes rest before our stop at the border.

I pulled the truck off the highway and into the little parking lot with the big wooden “Welcome to Alaska” sign at the western end. There were no other cars in the lot, and silence reigned when I shut off the truck’s engine. Getting out to stretch felt good. We’d been moving almost constantly for two and a half days since we left Jim’s place in Olympia, Washington. A few minutes to walk around felt like a gift from God.

There are no border crossing formalities where the Alaska Highway crosses into United States' territory from Canada's Yukon. The U. S. Customs stop is located in Tok, Alaska, still more than ninety miles ahead of us. Fairbanks lies another 200 miles beyond that.

"I didn't see this spot until I was leaving Alaska when I came up here in '68," I said to Jim, as I snapped a picture of the welcome sign and the squat stone obelisk that marks the actual border on the 141st meridian.

"Why was that?" Jim asked.

"We went north to Dawson and then over the ridge to Chicken and joined the highway again at Tok," I reminded him.

"Oh, yeah," he said, but I'm not sure he really remembered the story of visiting the goldfields along the Klondike that I'd told him earlier.

"The guys who cut and maintain this swath must be supermen," I said, referring to the twenty-foot wide cut that really marks the border. It ran as far as we could see in either direction, from the St. Elias Mountains in the south to the Arctic Ocean in the north. The two countries maintain a clearing along the boundary for almost 700 miles.

"Must be a hell of a job to trim trees and cut brush for 700 miles."

"I'm glad I ain't got to do it," Jim answered.

"It would be a good area to hunt," I said, thinking of all the moose, caribou, and bear that must pass back and forth over the 700 mile-long opening in the forest. "I

wonder if they can see the line from the space station, like they can the Great Wall of China.”

“And if we don’t get going, we’re going to be late for our hunting,” Jim said.
“We’ve still got three hundred miles to go before we call it a day.”

Jim got into the maroon Toyota pick-up on the driver’s side. I climbed in on the passenger side to take another turn at resting before I took the wheel again somewhere deep inside Alaska. And as Jim pulled us back onto the highway, the empty trailer we were pulling banged and rattled over the rough edge of the road.

I wadded up my jacket for a pillow and wedged it between the seat and the window so I could fold myself into a nap, but sleep didn’t come right away. I stared out the window, watching the miles of white and black species of spruce trees which seemed to go on forever, broken up every once in a while by patches of tundra already starting to turn brown and gold with the approaching autumn.

Watching out the window and hoping for sleep to come, I thought of that other time. That time when so much was just beginning.

“Funny how my mind wants to keep playing scenes of my first trip up here,” I said, convinced that sleep wasn’t coming.

“It doesn’t seem funny to me,” Jim replied. “That was a big deal back then.”

“It was for me. I’ve spent the rest of my life trying to get back here.”

“And now you are,” Jim said, as we slipped into silence.

* * * *

In the summer of 1968 the Alaska Highway was 1,500 miles of gravel and potholes that ate up time and tires. Big commercial trucks showered oncoming vehicles with stones and gravel hurled through the air as if by bursting artillery shells. The barrage broke windshields, punctured radiators, and dented hoods, doors and fenders. When it rained, the big trucks sprayed sheets of mud that coated everything within range. The rumble of a big truck was followed by a wall of flying mud that struck the windshield and driver's side window with a resounding slap, obliterating the view.

The first time it happened we all jumped and shouted, stunned at being blinded. Automatically, my dad pulled his foot off the accelerator and groped for the wiper switch. The arcing wiper blades smeared the slurry into an inescapable curtain across our vision. I sat on the right, next to the door. My mother was wedged into the middle between me and dad, where she had to contend with the gear shift and the high hump of the transmission pushing up into the floor. Shadow, lay in the well across Mom's and my feet until the sound of the mud and gravel striking the windshield brought him climbing into our laps, nervous and shaking.

The wipers swiped across the glass, thinning the coating of mud a little bit with each pass. Thankfully it was raining hard enough to help rinse the glass and Dad slowed, but didn't have to stop. If it wasn't raining hard enough, the alternative was to stop and get some water to splash on the windshield and try to flood the mud away. Cars and trucks didn't have windshield washers in 1968. These periodic mud baths became a frequent and routine occurrence as we made our way north, and we soon gave up flinching when flying mud slapped across the glass and the offending truck roared by us.

Before we'd gone a hundred miles up the highway, a coating of dust and mud encased our truck and camper. It was thick enough that my brother and I used our fingers to scrawl messages like "Alaska or Bust" on the sides and rear of the camper. Laughing, we turned the mess into art. Our handiwork entertained us for weeks as the dirt grew too solid to wash off in ordinary rains.

Any vehicle with an unprotected fuel tank might kick up stones from below that could jab through steel. Watching helplessly as their fuel spilled out onto the roadbed and left them stranded, many saw their entire trip drain away. Passing these hapless folks, some with a knot of kids and pets and piles of luggage clustered around their wounded car, "I'm glad that's not us," we said over and over again, ever grateful that our fuel tank was concealed in the truck's body and out of the reach of flying debris.

"Hallelujah," Dad exclaimed as he downshifted for more power and whipped his head to check the mirror, seeing if Grandma and Grandpa were still behind us.

At Dawson Creek, we swaddled our little caravan with screens to protect the radiators, plastic bubbles to cover the headlights, and cardboard armor covering all but the most necessary windows. Douglas and I snatched cardboard boxes from the trash behind stores. Dad and Grandpa trimmed and then taped them over the windows. Dad stood on the picnic table at our campsite as he struggled to reach the windows up high.

Through Fort Nelson, Watson Lake, and Whitehorse and on further, we rode protected from the onslaught of stones, but not from flat tires, split wheels, and mechanical breakdowns. "There goes another one," someone sounded off when a tire let go.

The milk bought in Dawson Creek ran out in little more than a day. The fruit and vegetables soon after. Grandpa and I caught trout and grayling from roadside streams a couple of times, but our diet went to bland soon after passing Fort Nelson.

“It looks gray,” my brother sneered that first time he poured the powdered milk mixture onto his breakfast cereal. I thought the same thing, but knew my mother wasn’t one to suffer complaints. My brother wasn’t finicky, but the prospect of gray-looking water poured over his cereal killed his appetite. With no access to fresh eggs or bacon, and her not wanting to spend the time making oatmeal, the only choice for us was cereal wet down with powdered milk and water. Oatmeal would’ve gotten the same powdered milk and water treatment anyway, so might as well have the easier stuff spilled from a box.

“You want coffee?” she said looking directly at me from her stance at the little galley stove, and with an inflection like it was an everyday question.

“Yes, please,” I answered, hoping that my voice would not betray the fact that it was anything but an everyday question. My mother had never asked me before if I wanted coffee. This was something new.

I was getting further and further from home and moving toward the future. Like others my age, I thought I knew the answers. I thought I had an unassailable plan to breeze through senior year, go to college and have an exciting career in the U.S. Forest Service. The war in Vietnam was never far from my thoughts, but from here it seemed remote and unimportant. I knew guys from my school already serving there. I saw such things as a consequence of being born male--scary, but maybe regrettable if I missed it?

I swirled the coffee in the plastic cup, taking tentative sips, unsure I wanted to drink the whole thing. I had to doctor the coffee with the powdered milk and a lot of sugar, but I finished it in two more gulps. Not drinking it would have been something of a retreat.

I didn't like the bitter taste, but I drank it while trying not to show that I didn't like it or found it anything but a natural part of my morning routine. Mom didn't make anything seem unusual either. She never mentioned it.

When Douglas finished his drab bowl of cereal and bounced up to take the dog for walk, Mom slipped onto the opposite bench where he'd been sitting, and placed her own cup of coffee on the table across from mine. As I set the empty cup on the table rather harder than it needed, Mom said, "Get out so I can finish my chores. Go see if your grandparents need anything this morning."

I swept my cup off the table and into the dishpan beside the tiny sink beside the tiny stove and stepped toward the door. As my hand hit the door handle, Mom said, "Don't forget to ask if they need you to drive this morning."

Moving up the highway I thought about two things: whatever appeared outside the window, and Carolyn. I missed my girlfriend. Missing Carolyn ached in a strange, unfamiliar way. I had never missed another human being the way that I missed her, but I suppressed it and didn't talk about her. There wasn't anyone to share my ache with. Douglas was too young to care and my parents were always lukewarm about the relationship. They thought we were "too serious" about each other. Perhaps we were. I

only knew how I felt, and away from her, I was in pain whenever I found myself with nothing else to think about.

Carolyn was the essence of a pretty New England schoolgirl: gray-green eyes, freckles and wool skirts, sweaters with Peter Pan collars, and silky brown hair that turned up in a flip at her shoulders. She was two years younger than me and a year behind me in school. On mornings when the bus dropped me at the school's door, I'd sprint against the incoming tide of students to hike in the direction of her house, intercepting her as she walked to class. I'd walk the rest of the way with my arm around her shoulders or with my hand tightly around hers, our fingers intertwined. Often I'd kiss her good morning behind one of the great oak trees that lined our route. Equally often, we'd barely make the final bell.

Confined in the camper with my parents and brother 4,000 miles or so from home, I felt the separation from Carolyn more with each passing mile. Watching the dark green wall of spruce forest and willow tangles go by, my thoughts tumbled over and over our last day together, lost on a blanket in the protection of sand dunes and sea grass, behind Crane's Beach on Cape Ann. Wrapped tightly in each other, we promised to stay in love as we tried to wish away our powerlessness. The reality of our separation stretching from the final bell at school in June into September broke something in me, and I clung to her like I was drowning. I was afraid of losing her and everything else I had back there at home. Riding along staring at the road ahead, I recalled the salty taste of her tears, the soft sweep of her hair across me and the warmth of her skin.

On the road I had little rituals that I used to conjure her. Whenever I saw the North Star I thought of her. In my pocket I carried a Kennedy half-dollar that I'd seen

into two pieces so she would hold one half and I would carry the other until I got home again when we'd touch them back together.

I sent her a steady stream of postcards from all across the continent. I wrote her letters when I was alone long enough to fill a piece of paper. But it sometimes took days to find a Canadian post office to buy the proper stamp. I'd run to mail my letters while dad gassed up the truck, had a flat tire fixed, or my mother bought groceries. I got some letters from Carolyn at our prearranged mail pick-ups and frantically tried to escape my family to find a spot where no one would see me read her perfume-scented pages, the letters S.W.A.K. printed on the flap of the envelope in her beautiful script.

If I had time, I'd duck behind some ratty gas station or sit on a rock beside a stream and tear open her pink or blue or yellow envelope, anxious to see her lovely handwriting and read her thoughts. If we were leaving right away, I'd often carry her letter unopened in my pocket for hours until that night's campsite and chores were done, when I could walk to some private place and read in the twilight. The pocket holding an unopened letter always seemed to radiate warmth.

Three or four times I tried calling Carolyn from a payphone. But the further we got from home, the more it cost and the harder it became to keep track of the time zones. At \$10 or \$12 for a three-minute call, it crushed me when she wasn't home, leaving me to fearful fantasies that she'd found someone to take my place. One time her father said, "It's too late, James. She's gone to bed," and hung up. Three minutes' worth of coins clinked down into the phone like a Vegas slot machine.

Crossing Canada I took up cigarettes. I thought it was cool to get away from the family and smoke MacDonald cigarettes I bought from a machine. I didn't smoke at home. It didn't fit my Boy Scout image. I thought a pipe was a sure sign of distinction, and I loved the smell of my uncle's tobacco, but I didn't know any 17-year-olds who smoked pipes. I tried a pipe a few times, when I was ten or eleven and very dedicated to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

I bought a \$.69 corn cob pipe off a cardboard display in Mrs. Law's post office and store. She never questioned me as I went in a couple of time a week with a quarter to buy a pack of cigarettes for my dad. I guess she assumed the pipe was for him as well, but after the can of Prince Albert tobacco I'd found along the roadside ran out, I didn't have a source of supply.

I kept up with the Canadian cigarettes until my mother found the pack in my jacket pocket when she was getting ready to do laundry while we were stopped in Thunder Bay, Ontario. She threw it down on the camper's table where I was sitting and said, "Don't let your grandmother see you with those." My gut tightened, and though she never said another word about it, right then my interest in smoking waned. Grasping her silent disapproval stole all my desire for cigarettes. I didn't buy any more.

I did smoke again, but it started as a joke. In Calgary, we dressed for the famous annual Stampede. We made every effort to look like cowboys to attend the world's biggest rodeo. Everyone thought I looked genuine with my big black hat and string tie and blue jeans, so I completed the look by picking up one of Dad's little cigars.

Tucking it into my lips and squinting like a Deadwood gambler peering across the top of a straight flush, I tasted the acrid brown wrapper. When Dad said, “You want a light?” I answered, “Sure.”

Bending to his match, I puffed the fire alive and released a cloud of dense aromatic smoke. Strolling through the expansive Stampede grounds, I must’ve looked like a genuine 17-year-old wannabe cowboy from Boston, shrouded in a haze of cigar smoke. I bit down on the little cigar. A cigarette can dangle, but a cowboy holds a cheroot straight and tight between his teeth.

A couple of weeks later we were camped somewhere along the Alaska Highway and sat outside watching the twilight that never quite fades. My dad held up another of the little cigars to me as he reached for his own, and I again said, “Sure.”

We fired the cigars to life with the same match, releasing a cloud of smoke that swept the mosquitos away on its drifting vapors. Not wishing to break the spell, I never asked why he included me in his ritual. Dad and I just sat there watching the evening and blowing smoke into the trees.

Two nights farther up the highway, Dad and I left everyone else in a campground and drove on in our rig, searching for an all-night service place that could repair the flat tires we’d accumulated. We were out of spares and needed to get them fixed before we found ourselves with no way to swap out a flat. Mother and Doug and Shadow squeezed into Grandma and Grandpa’s camper for the night, and Dad and I drove on toward the midnight sun, smoking cheroots and looking for someplace to get the tires fixed.

I'm sure Dad thought it was just a chore to get done, but it was grand adventure to me. Heading down the highway with the thin ribbon of not-quite-setting sun in front of us, switching out the driving as one or the other of us got tired and dozed in the passenger seat, we let the wind pull the cigar smoke out the windows and into the chilly night.

* * * *

A shaft of late afternoon sun pierced through a dark cloud and snapped me awake. "Where are we?" I asked, looking towards Jim but shielding my eyes with my hand.

"Just coming up on the junction with the Taylor Highway. Tok shouldn't be too far."

"There's where the Taylor comes in," Jim said, pointing towards a sign indicating the turn for the towns of Chicken and Eagle, Alaska.

"Hey, I remember this place," I said, looking at a strip of pavement leading into the hills to the right. "This is where we came in from Dawson, last time. That leads to the Top of the World Highway. Man, that's some beautiful country up there. I saw my first caribou herd up there."

"On our next hunt, we ought to go up that way and try for caribou from the Charlie River Herd," Jim said

"I think we'd better finish this one first," I said, as we crossed Tanana River Bridge. "Your friends are expecting to put us up in Fairbanks, and we wouldn't want to keep Frenchie waiting."

Looking back to the right, I could see the hills, bright and green, almost reflecting the late afternoon sun.

* * * *

Morning on the Top of the World Highway awakens every sense, with the road flowing through a vast country toward the border crossing station at a place the map called Boundary. Near the road's high point we stopped at a pull-out to enjoy the views radiating in all directions. It was cold and windswept, but the views seemed endless as all six of us scrambled for jackets.

Climbing on some big rocks that the road crew had pushed into a border for the pullout, I spotted another first for us. Ptarmigan.

"Oh, what's that?" my mother fairly shouted. Passionate about bird-watching, she had spotted the movement, same as I had.

"Ptarmigan," I shouted back against the wind, though I didn't know enough to tell whether these were willow or rock ptarmigan, and wouldn't know now, either. "There's lots of them."

A sign of the wild sub-Arctic and of how far we had come, these grouse-like birds flushed as Doug and I and the dog got near. Darting in and out of the rocks and low bushes, they flew much like quail do in the Lower 48

Rushing over, Mom tried to get a picture with her little point-and-shoot camera, but the flushing birds were too fast or too far away to ever show up in the picture. But Mom tried anyway. "It might come out," she said, holding up her little Kodak. "Come

see these,” she called over to Grandma and Grandpa, who were just getting out of their truck. “Ptarmigan.”

At forty, Mom was stunningly good looking. Five feet, four inches tall and about 110 pounds, she was shapely and agile, with no hint of gray in her dark chocolate hair. Sprinting after those departing ptarmigan, she made you think she could catch up to them. Every guy I went to school with wanted to hang out at my house, just to look at my mom.

She had on long pants and a jacket zipped up tight under her chin as defense against the wind whipping across the tundra. But she still wore the open sandals she was hardly ever parted from. She had some boots for hiking somewhere in the camper, but almost never wore them.

My mother would’ve fit in with the mothers of Sparta. Showing no fear except in her eyes, she’d stand in the doorway and urge her warrior sons to, “Return with your shield or on it.” She believed it was her solemn duty to raise her sons to leave the nest. If we were not in school, we were shooed out the door anyway. Out we went, in all seasons and in every type of weather. Only allowed to return for meals, we spent our time outside pursuing anything our imaginations conjured. Returning to the nest “when the streetlights come on,” rarely were we asked where we’d been or what we’d been doing.

Mom and Dad expected in the coming year I’d be “out the door,” and our travels together would come to an abrupt end. I know she harbored deep fears about some of the possibilities in front of me, but she would not give voice to her misgivings, nor would she attempt to block the door.

Just then Grandpa turned around and went back to the truck to collect their binoculars, and then hurried over to where we stood. We thought both Grandma and Grandpa were old, but at 64 they weren't, really. He was tall, lean, but not skinny. She was short and heavy. A former semi-pro baseball player, he almost always wore a ball cap that he sometimes paired with one of those collarless athletic jackets with a varsity letter tacked prominently on it. Grandma purchased the first pair of pants she'd ever owned just for this trip. Retired from decades of teaching school, he algebra and she elementary school, both Grandma and Grandpa were never without eyeglasses.

Passing the binoculars first to Grandma and then around to the rest of us, we observed dozens of ptarmigan flitting through the low tundra bushes. Mostly brown, the birds were showing patches of white because the summer was already fast passing and soon they would be turning the all-white of their winter camouflage.

I was energized to see these grouse-like birds rocketing out of the tundra. Each bird, to me, said we had made it and now stood a world away from home. For all the ache of missing Carolyn and my other friends, I felt a thrill at doing something as extraordinary as travel to Alaska. "Man, is that neat," I said aloud, but to no one in particular. Ten minutes later and we were re-stowed and resituated in our seats, ready to move on.

We led out as usual. Grandma and Grandpa fell in behind. We hadn't seen another vehicle all morning, but Dad checked both ways anyway before easing back onto the gravel highway. Shifting through the gears to bring us up to cruising speed, checking and rechecking the mirrors to gauge the dispersion between vehicles, our tiny caravan had the feel of a military convoy. Like a column of tanks or other military vehicles, our two

drivers adjusted the speed to keep the trailing camper out of the dust cloud spun up by the vehicle ahead when it was dry, and out of the spray of mud when we passed through rain showers.

Thinking about us as a convoy got me wondering about the wider world as we closed in on U.S. territory again. We knew very little of outside news at that point, and I wondered what was going on in the world. The Tet Offensive and the Siege of Khe Sanh ended in the spring before we left home, but what was happening in the aftermath? President Johnson had announced his decision not to seek re-election in March, but who was in the race?

Bobby Kennedy had been assassinated in early June, just before we left home. Three days later, Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassin was arrested in London. What was going on now, I wondered? And what about the Pueblo? Were we ever going to get the North Koreans to release our prisoners? Did anyone care that they were still there? Many believed we'd go to war when the North Koreans first fired on the U.S.S. Pueblo and seized her in international waters back in January. That never happened. And now, eight months later, the crew members not killed in the assault languished in prison camps.

In those last few miles, as we drove from Dawson City toward the Alaska border, I wondered about the things that gripped the United States. The world to the south of our little caravan felt dark and sinister to me. I assumed we would soon learn of new tragedies and newly revealed threats. I knew that being seventeen protected me from some of what was out there, but I also felt that protection would soon be gone. Looking out through the mud-speckled windshield at the endless stretch of ridges and hills and

broad tundra plains, I was excited about our reaching Alaska at last, but uneasy about connecting to reality again when the trip was over.

Just before noon we spotted the American flag flying above the tiny border crossing station, still several miles ahead over the rolling windswept terrain. We pulled over and got out to walk around again. Seeing the flag flying way in the distance and slightly below seemed strange after so many days in Canada.

Grandpa brought out the binoculars again and Mom said, “There it is...Alaska.” Watching the flag through the binoculars, Grandma exclaimed, “The good old U.S.A.” Douglas chimed in, “Yeah, the good old U.S.A.”

Looking across the sweep of tundra to where the flag stood straight out in the wind, leaving no doubt whose flag it was, I realized that until this morning I hadn’t thought much about the war or the other raging fires at home. I’d had that one brief exchange two nights ago with Donn about his draft eligibility, but not much else since we entered Canada the last week in June.

To our amazement, no one manned the border crossing station. There was no sign of a border except the flag flying straight and stiff in the wind, and a weathered wooden sign that said “United States Customs,” and underneath that, smaller letters proclaiming “Boundary, Alaska.” Leaning out the driver’s window and peering at the wind-battered entrance to the little building, Dad gave out with an elongated, “What the..? There’s no one here.”

“Well, isn’t that funny?” Mom said, looking around and momentarily sounding exactly like her own mother, with the inflection piled onto “isn’t” and “funny.” The

notice on the door said customs clearance had relocated to the village of Tok, where this road rejoined the main stem of the Alaska Highway. We had expected at least the usual battery of questions. “Where were you born?” “Where are you going?” “Are you bringing anything into the United States?” We didn’t even get the perfunctory, “Have a good trip.”

Dad hopped out and yelled back to Grandpa as he pulled their rig in behind us, “It’s closed. It’s moved to Tok.”

As a gust of wind swirled into the cab through the open door, Mom shouted, “Let’s go. It’s cold.” And Dad performed a bit of jig as he hopped back into the driver’s seat and swung the offending door closed.

Laughing to myself at the irony of this “homecoming,” I thought about Joe and Donn crossing here less than a day ahead of us. Were they riding with someone or were they walking the sparsely traveled road, watching over their shoulders for the prospect of an on-coming vehicle? Were they as surprised by this empty border crossing?

Ever since we’d stopped to watch the flag from back up on the ridge line, I’d been assuming we’d more formally cross back into the United States. I didn’t expect a brass band or an honor guard or assembled Customs agents shouting “Where have you been? We missed you.” But this felt like America had retreated, abandoned the frontier. The little white building looked like a forlorn outpost deserted by its sentries. I felt as if we were sneaking back in unchallenged, but the flag snapping and cracking in the wind under that bright blue sky gave us all a little boost of pride. Even without officials on site, we all felt something special about where we were.

Dad eased the clutch out, and over the border we went, back in the United States and under a clear sky dotted with puffy white clouds. In our vehicle we cheered at having reached Alaska. I don't know if there was any cheering in Grandma and Grandpa's truck, but I think something like cheering went on.

Underway again, I wondered some more about what we might hear for news. Had there been any assassinations since Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy? What about the race riots that had been boiling up in the big cities ever since May? Were the reforms of Alexander Dubcek and the Prague Spring taking root in Communist Czechoslovakia? What really was going on in Vietnam after Khe Sanh? I had no answers, but felt uneasy about what the answers might be.

Heading down the road towards Tok and our first real stop inside Alaska, I thought about guys I knew from school. I thought about Dave Crosby from the cross-country team, already serving with the Air Force at Tan Son Nhut, or Ben Hoa, or was it Danang? His letters to Carolyn irked me, but I couldn't tell her not to write back to a guy serving in the war. Letters from a girl back home had to be good for any guy stuck out there, biding his time and wondering if he'd ever get out. I just prayed those letters weren't the same kind of letters that she wrote to me.

I remembered Harry Sweeny who dropped out half-way through last year and rode his beloved motorcycle to the recruiting station. Now he was in the Army someplace. I thought Steve Jones must be in basic training by now since he had enlisted last spring before graduation. These guys weren't really in my crowd, and I assumed they'd chosen the military to get out of some trouble in town, but hey, they were doing

something. They were making a stand for something. I didn't know exactly what that something was, but I admired the stance.

Terry Reed was a few years older and in pilot training. He'd graduated while I was still in junior high, and had gone on to college at Texas A&M. Now he was through college and already a lieutenant in the Air Force. Him, I admired. I thought I could do something like that. Ten months later his pilot training would carry him to a fiery death and twenty-five years listed as "Missing in Action" before his family would receive a little box containing bits of his remains.

I felt myself straddling two worlds. I felt the war closing in. Before long, I would have to decide something. I would have to deal with it in some way I didn't yet understand. I didn't want to understand. I dug deeper into the protective blanket of being seventeen.

I'd been heading myself toward the Forest Service since fourth grade, when I read a story about smoke jumpers. I was well fixed on that compass azimuth now. We even had a loose plan for the return leg of our trip, to visit the smoke jumper school in Missoula, Montana, so I could see it for myself.

Rolling into Tok seemed a bit anticlimactic for all of us—certainly me. The little town is something of a gateway to Alaska for those coming up the main highway, but it didn't feel like much of a gateway to me. We passed through the officialdom of customs with all those anticipated questions, but it lacked the punch we'd been expecting back up on the ridge, where the U.S. flag strained to survive in the relentless wind. Tok was like every other settlement along the length of the highway.

Routine chores banished my thoughts about the war for a time, the same chores we all did whenever we stopped. One of us had to walk the dog and see that he got a drink of water. Dad or I would check the tires to see if we could detect any leaks, before a tire went flat. He or I would also check the tension on the turnbuckles securing the camper to the truck bed. With fuel stops we'd wash the windshield and use a small broom to sweep dust out of the cab.

We weren't inundated with any news in Tok. It was just an ordinary afternoon at a wide spot in the Alaska Highway. I didn't meet anyone concerned about world affairs. Like Canada, Alaska seemed a world unto itself.

While eating lunch in the camper after going through Customs, Mom happened to say, "Maybe you'll work up here somewhere with the Forest Service."

"Maybe," I answered cheerfully. But there was much I didn't know.

* * * *

"Hey, you still with us?" Jim called as he steered the truck and trailer off the road and toward the gas pumps. "It's getting late and we still have a long ways to go before we get to Fairbanks."

"I need a drink of water," I replied. "And I'm starting to wish we were already there."

"It's your turn to get the fuel," Jim said over his shoulder, as he headed inside the building.

Watching him walk toward the dilapidated building that served as the center of activity in Tok, I saw that he looked as stiff and sore as I felt. The unfolding miles were exacting a toll since we'd pulled out of Jim's driveway and away from the big yellow ranch house with green trim that he'd spent a year designing and almost another year building. For just a moment, it seemed as though we might not make Fairbanks before closing the day. We might have to pull over somewhere and get some real sleep.

"Yes, I'm still with us," I called after him as I moved toward the gas pump and patted my pocket to make sure my wallet was there.

Fly-In

The small, blue and white airplane pitched and bucked as it crossed over the last of the mountains on the route. We cleared the final ridgeline by fifty feet. Piled in the back of the plane with the gear, I braced against its tubular frame as Ron “Frenchie” Drouin banked and turned hard to the left.

The plane’s three-blade propeller clawed at the prevailing wind and my stomach seemed to rise up into my throat. The ground fell away beneath us. Like a roller coaster passing its apex, we went from fifty feet above the ridge to 1,000 feet above the ribbon of river in seconds, without actually changing altitude.

Jim turned his head toward me and shouted over the roar of the engine, “There it is. That’s where we’re going.”

His fingers pointed through the windshield and spinning propeller to a spot several miles in the distance. There, the bare rock mountains closed in from the north and south. The river disappeared where the wall of mountains came together.

“Yeah, I see it,” I shouted back, though I’m not sure he heard me above the sound of the engine.

Frenchie, our skilled but gnome-like pilot, and Jim had headsets and talked to each other over the intercom. Strapped in the rear seat and surrounded by a small mountain of equipment, I didn’t have a headset. After two-and-a-half hours in the air, my head was ringing from the noise.

A gust of wind slung the tail of the plane to the left, and I grabbed for something to hang onto as Frenchie pressed hard on the right rudder pedal to straighten us out. For a moment, I thought of the plane as a giant raptor soaring above the river valley.

Jim turned in his seat again and shouted, “About five more miles.”

I smiled and gave the thumbs-up sign, but didn’t try to yell a reply. I just pressed myself deeper into my seat and hung on.

As the mountains ahead grew larger, the river seemed to disappear into them. Above us a high, thin overcast dimmed the sun, but the air was dry and everything below stood out sharp and clear.

Frenchie turned the crank above his right shoulder to lower the flaps and throttled back a bit on the RPM. The plane began descending at once. I could see Jim and Frenchie’s face muscles moving, so I knew they were speaking, but I had no idea what they were saying. With the power cut back, the plane bucked and twitched from side to side, and it looked to me as if Frenchie were lining us up to land in the river.

He twisted the crank again for more flap and cut the power even further. It felt like we were riding a bouncing elevator down from the top of the Empire State Building.

Just when I thought the wheels would touch the water, I saw he was going for a slender strip of gravel riverbed just to the left of the flowing water.

We flashed past a red and white plane, similar to ours, parked next to a large blue dome tent and a smaller orange one. Then the big, oversized tires touched down. Frenchie cut the rest of the power and the tail wheel hit the ground with a loud clunk. Millions of

small, round stones, washed for eons by the river, dragged against tires and tail wheel. The friction brought us to a stop.

Looking forward between Frenchie and Jim, and through the whirling propeller, I saw what amounted to local air traffic control, a stick with a faded and flapping length of plastic tape tied to it. The stick stood in a pile of stones with the desiccated skull and antlers of a bull moose perched on the pile.

“Welcome to Colleen River International Airport,” I yelled over the noise.

As soon as I said it, my mind flashed back to another touchdown, ten years before. I recalled the squeal of the tires against the pockmarked runway. Hasty repairs covered the holes in the concrete made by mortar and artillery shells. The sun lit up a bright August morning. Bombed and gutted houses stared across the tarmac like skulls on a sunlit shelf. And on a wall speckled with bullet holes someone had spray painted in English, “Welcome to Sarajevo.”

As soon as Frenchie shut the engine down and the blades of the propeller stopped turning, a second of silence filled the cabin. Then I heard the clunk of the door latch and the sharp snap of the seat belt buckle as Jim moved to jump out. He pulled the rear door open and began hauling our gear out of the way so I could climb out.

I almost fell to my knees when my feet hit the gravel. The ringing in my ears caused a wave of vertigo to sweep over me as soon as my brain perceived the silence and vast expanse of the place. My legs were stiff and cramped from three hours packed in with all our gear. They felt tighter than they had during any of our stops driving north on

the Alaska Highway. Regaining my balance, I was stunned by the sheer mountain wall rising from the far side of the river, less than 200 yards away.

It looked like a desert, bare and rocky. The mountains in front and behind us and all around us appeared devoid of soil and vegetation. Plants grew only in obvious watercourses. Miles and miles of empty tundra extended in every direction.

A chill wind bore down on us from the northwest. On the very top of that closest mountain, a bizarre rock formation stood against the sky. It looked like the eye of a needle, a giant hole through the rock showing blue sky beyond.

“That looks like the Arc de Triomphe up there,” I said, reaching for my camera.

“Come on, we’ve got to get moving,” Jim shot back. “No time to play tourist.”

Frenchie helped us tumble the gear out of the plane and, while we moved it piece by piece closer to the river, Frenchie made a slow inspection of the plane. He ran his hands along the propeller blades and along the plane’s skin as he walked around it, looking for anything unusual. He paid close attention to the oversized tires. When he finished, he strolled toward the campsite by the red and white airplane.

Watching him walk off, I thought he looked like a guy on his way to the mall on any Saturday. Jim and I were dressed for the field, but he was wearing blue jeans and tennis shoes. He had a light khaki-colored cotton jacket on over a sport shirt. No hat. No gloves. Over sixty, short and pudgy and wearing glasses, he didn’t look anything like the bush pilots I’d seen in books and magazines.

I assumed he knew the pilot of the red and white plane, but other than snapping a picture of their camp, I wanted nothing to do with that party. I wanted to inflate our raft, stow our stuff and get underway. I was anxious to get our own hunt started.

By the time Frenchie returned, Jim and I had everything moved, and had started to inflate the raft's pontoons and piece together its rowing frame. We stopped to help Frenchie push the plane around so he could take off. With Jim lifting the tail and Frenchie and I each pushing on a wing strut, we manhandled the plane into position so he could lift off with the wind.

"You got the spot?" he asked through the open door.

"I've got it in the GPS," I said, confident that I could figure out how to extract the coordinates of the pick-up point from the cigarette-pack-sized plastic device I carried.

Frenchie hit the starter and said something else, but I couldn't understand what it was through his thick French-Canadian accent and the noise of the engine turning over. Jim helped him swing the door closed and we both stepped back out of the way. Hardly giving the engine time to warm up, Frenchie pushed the throttle to full power and rolled to take-off. Jim and I waved, but Frenchie never looked our way.

Roaring like an enraged animal, the plane bolted down the stony runway and flung itself into the air. When sunlight sprayed across the shiny white wings and top of the fuselage, I thought again that it looked like a giant raptor against the vastness of the river valley. Before we walked back to the raft and the pile of tents, stove, food bags, packs and our rifles, the sound of the plane was gone. Only the wind and the sounds of water cascading over stones remained.

Taking turns operating the foot pump, we bent to the monotony of filling the big, sky-blue pontoons with air. As we slowly brought the raft to life, I thought the day was already a long one.

Back in Fairbanks, when I had drawn back the curtains and let in the perpetual daylight of August, Denali's gray-white bulk floated 125 miles away, like a ghost above the muskeg plain of central Alaska. When I looked out the window after dressing in my field clothes, the rising sun that had never quite finished setting splashed colors of orange and gold and traces of pink across The Great One's summit pinnacle.

Since then, we'd packed the truck, left our friends and hosts and followed the Steese Highway one hundred and thirty miles to Frenchie's place at Circle Hot Springs. After off-loading the truck and packing and repacking everything into the plane to Frenchie's satisfaction, came the three-hour flight to stand under the wall of the mountain, trying to push air into the eighteen-foot-long pontoons.

"Hey, don't fall asleep," Jim called, when he looked up from putting the aluminum frame together and saw me staring up at the mountain, my pumping gone listless.

Jolted back to paying attention, "I won't," I called, and pumped frantically for several minutes.

With the pontoons firm and full, we strapped on the tubular aluminum frame and put the oars in the rowlocks. Next, we installed some small pieces of plywood for our feet to rest on and placed the plastic seats on their posts, the oarsman in the middle for

balance and the passenger on behind. We strung a net between pontoons up forward, where most of the gear would ride.

“Let’s get this thing in the water,” Jim said, as he put on his Gore-Tex windbreaker against the chill. I put on my windbreaker as well, and we both put on hip waders so we’d stay dry while launching the raft.

Grabbing the “D” rings on the tip of each pontoon, we struggled to drag the heavy raft the last twenty feet to the water, even without the added weight of our gear. Digging our feet into the stones and leaning over, we pulled and strained to move the raft inches at a time.

At the edge, we positioned ourselves in the center of each pontoon, at the rowlock. Then we lifted and dragged the final few feet to the water. In shuttling the cargo onboard, we realized the river was fifty yards wide, but only inches deep at that point.

With the bill of his old camouflage Army cap pulled low, Jim squinted downstream, studying the course of the water. “We’ll never be able to row here,” he said. “We’ll have to walk it to deeper water.”

“I hope nothing’s going to tear the pontoons,” I replied. “But I think most of these rocks are like golf balls.”

“The raft is pretty tough,” Jim said. “I used it here five years ago without any problems.”

With that, we placed our loaded rifles where we could get them in a hurry and shoved the raft into the current. It grounded in less than its own length, so we shoved again, the fabric of the pontoons humming as it rubbed over the stones.

Each of us took a line fastened to a “D” ring and walked along with the bumping, ungainly craft. When it stuck on the bottom, we shoved. When it floated free, we high-stepped to keep up with it. I thought about French-Canadian voyageurs working their way across the continent in canoes made of birch bark and hauling a ton of freight or beaver pelts.

For more than half a mile we walked alongside the raft, pushing through the shallows. Sometimes, when it would float free a little ways, we’d hop on and ride. Gradually the garish colors of the other hunters’ tents and the outline of their airplane began to disappear. With every shove or pull on the ropes, we were leaving civilization and entering solitude.

As the river built volume, the raft floated more and ran aground less. Close to a mile downstream the water deepened beyond the tops of our waders. Just in time to avoid a soaking, we clambered aboard and Jim took the first shift at the oars. We still grounded in the riffles between pools. I’d jump off and push, the raft vibrating like a sewing machine as it slid along the bottom.

Two miles further on and Jim spotted a place to camp on the right bank. We were well away from the hunters at the landing strip, and tired. Stopping appealed to us both. The spot was on a high banking where the imperceptible current of a slough flowed into the main channel of the river.

Jim pulled hard on the oars to free us from the growing power of the river and turn us up into the torpid water of the slough. Free of the grip of the river, Jim steered us into the bank like he was parallel parking a car.

“Hold us here and I’ll go scout out a campsite,” I told him as I tied a line onto a root sticking out from the bank. I made a graceless scramble up the bank in my hip waders, but once on top I saw it was a suitable place to stop for a couple of days. There was plenty of soft, dry moss to set the tents on, a small depression was perfect for a fireplace, and a level spot to set the cookstove.

“Come tie us off better,” he answered.

Once we had the raft secured with lines fore and aft, we unloaded everything we’d piled on just a couple of hours before. Before setting anything up, we walked in a semi-circle between the river and farther back up the slough, checking for signs of game or bear that might become a problem. Seeing nothing, we returned to the pile of gear, set our rifles down, and got to work.

When I went to fill the water bucket from river, the moving water cast a spell over me. “Clear enough to read a newspaper six feet down,” Jim had said.

It was an unreal blue color, like the eyes of a freckle-faced, black-haired Irish girl I once knew. At the mouth of the slough, the river scoured a pool seven or eight feet deep at the deepest part. At the upstream edge of the pool, the water hissed across a shelf of fine stones before scooping deep to pop back up downstream with gurgles and murmurs. Standing in the silence of the valley, the whole array of the Davidson Mountains in front of me and a screen of black spruce trees behind, I thought the river was talking to me.

Jim stood on the bank above me when I turned to go back to camp with the water jug. "I'm going to go get my fly rod," I told him, as I pulled myself up the steep embankment.

Hurrying back to the campsite, I set the water near the stove and searched around for the case with my fly rod in it. A delicate little rod, I brought it along not really expecting to do any fishing. The rod and reel were a gift from 'my guys,' orchestrated by Sergeant Major Crouse when I retired two years earlier. No doubt I'd bored the Sergeant Major to near death with my fishing stories as we traveled the country those four years we were together. To make me put up or shut up, he'd seen to it that I had a fine new rod and reel to use.

I took it out of the case for the first time that evening we were camped on the Colleen River. I put the rod pieces together, lining up the ferrules so that the line would run straight and play out without hanging up. I looped on a leader as fine as a strand of spider web.

Poking around in the one fly box I'd brought on the trip, I stirred at the loose flies with my finger tip, but I knew what I was looking for.

I pulled out the Black Gnat that I'd used to catch grayling with my grandfather 38 years before. Fastening it to the leader with no more skill than I'd had back then, I snatched up the rod and headed to the river.

"I won't be long," I said, as I walked by Jim.

“Take your time,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.” He was still unpacking and setting up the kitchen area as I walked away. For an instant I felt a twinge of guilt at ducking the chores to go fishing, but it passed as soon as I heard the flowing water.

Standing on the open bank above the first big pool in the river, I looked down for a long minute, studying the water. I decided to wade across the slough and enter the river just below the riffle at the head of the pool. I moved slowly in the water, being careful not to overtop my hip boots with the frigid water. The idea of filling my boots and getting sucked under that cold water actually scared me. The water ran cold enough to steal the breath out of anyone.

I felt around with my feet for unstable rocks that might trip me, and slid the boots along when I moved, in case the bottom turned slippery.

The water came to mid-thigh when I reached the spot I’d picked out. I could feel the pressure crushing the boots against my legs. I also felt the cold boring into me, despite my heavy socks and wool pants inside the hip boots. I spread my feet and dug in my heels against the force of the current.

The open banks made for easy casting. No trees threatened to snatch the fly on the back cast. Looking upstream, the mountain with the hole in the rock on top still dominated the scene. Its lower slopes were in shadow now but the faint beginnings of Alpenglow played across the summit. I couldn’t see the hole in the rock from this angle, but I knew it was there.

The water in the pool flowed like molten glass. Even with the direct sunlight gone, I could see rocks and small stones on the bottom. I remembered the big trout I’d

seen lying in a similar pool that last time I'd fished with my grandfather. As I unhooked the Black Gnat from the little metal keeper on the rod, I thought of Grandpa and wondered what he'd think of this trip. I was now only slightly younger than he'd been when we fished the pool beside the highway.

Stripping line from the reel and flicking the rod tip to pay it out, I cast into the flow. The line floated in coils in front of me. Holding the rod in my left hand and the line in my right, I worked my arm back and forth, letting the line pull through the ferrules and make a loop in the air. I tried to picture a clock face in my mind, saying to myself, "Ten and Two. Ten and Two." Stop at ten o'clock on the backcast and two o'clock on the forward cast.

The rod felt lithe in my hands and though rusty, my cast formed up well enough. The line when released shot out, carrying the delicate leader, with the beat up old fly on the end arcing over the pool. The leader laid down in the surface tension like a hair, right on the seam where the bubbling water of the riffle stilled with the depth of the pool. I released my hold on the line as soon as the fly hit the water, letting it sweep along in the current, appearing as natural as possible.

"Good," I said out loud and to no one, pleased that I could still get the fly out there.

As the fly drifted along on the surface, pulling the leader and then the line along with it, I could hear the sharp cracks Jim made breaking some dry spruce for the fire. The hisses and gurgles of the river masked but couldn't hide the sounds of our incursion.

When the drift of the fly pulled the line straight it looked unnatural, so I lifted the rod tip and began another backcast. I false cast twice and let the line go on the third. It shot across the front of the riffle and dropped the fly almost where I'd laid it the first time. Except this time the Black Gnat settled just below the surface instead of riding above it.

Waterlogged, the fly rode underwater like a just-drowned insect. With the sun behind the mountains, I couldn't see the fly as it drifted this time, but I watched the line as it followed and began to count, "one thousand one, one thousand two." Before I could say one thousand three, a fish smacked the fly, leaping completely out of the water in the process.

I knew by the gigantic waving dorsal fin that it was a grayling. My first grayling in thirty-eight years. I snapped the rod tip up too fast, putting too much strain on the thin leader. "Take it easy, you idiot," I told myself. "For God's sake, don't snap the leader."

"I got one," I yelled over my shoulder toward the camp sixty yards away. "I damn-well got one," I said to the river through clenched teeth.

The grayling dove deep. He ran for the deepest part of the pool and then shot to the surface, leaping two feet into the air. Going deep again, he ran for the far bank and then shot to the surface again, slapping the water with his tail.

I tried to play the fish with the line clutched in my right hand, but when he turned and ran towards me I dropped the line and started cranking up the slack with the reel. Lifting the rod high with my left arm, I tried to keep tension on the line. Too much tension and the leader would break, but not enough and he might throw the hook.

Coming right below the tip of the rod, he chanced another leap. With the line vertical I worried that he'd flick his tail and cut the leader when he dove again, but somehow in that instant out of the water he missed and the leader stayed taut.

When the grayling dove again, I let him take line. With the rod bent double, he stripped the reel freely. The ratchet on the reel sounded a steady whirl, louder than the noise of the river, as the fish pulled towards the bottom. All I could do was hold the rod tip high to keep steady pressure on him. For a long minute I had no control.

Thirty yards downstream he reached his zenith and began to tire. "Sweet Jesus," I whistled through pursed lips. "Come on back."

Whenever the line went slack, I took it back with the reel, turning the reel spool with my right hand as I fought him with my left. "Don't horse him," I thought, recalling my grandfather's words. "Nice and steady," I told myself. "Come on, baby."

The fish came in by inches. He tired, but he never surrendered. He didn't make any more leaps, but he stayed deep and never ceased pulling. I knew he was a good fish, heavy and strong. He had that little 4-weight rod at its limits. I held the butt of the rod into my stomach and pointed my hands downstream. With my elbows in tight to my sides I felt the full power of the fish, and I thought back to that day 38 years ago, beside the highway, when I'd landed my first grayling.

Now, as then, I didn't have a net to help me land him. If I tried to lift him out of the water with the rod, the leader would snap for sure. Trying to grab him with the river only six inches from the tops of my hip boots risked a dunking and days of drying out. I'd

have to try to ease him on shore and hope that he wouldn't throw the hook before I could get my hands on him.

I looked for a spot on the bank and started backing towards it one step at a time. I'd feel around on the bottom for a solid spot to shift my feet and ease my foot up and over to the next footing. At the same time I reeled in more line, dragging the fish toward the bank with me.

The actual shore stood a foot above the edge of the water. Getting there involved a dance of reaching backwards with my right foot while trying to balance on my left and keep reeling in line at the same time. I rocked back and forth trying to be sure my footing was solid. As I stepped and swung around, I caught sight of Jim watching from the high bank above.

"You got him yet?" he called down.

"Just about." I gave a glance toward where the fish still thrashed at the end of my line. Bumping against the shallows, it took up the fight again.

Jim's red suspenders were the only swatch of color against the dark backdrop of spruce and gray clouds spilling over the mountains to the south. His dark brown hip boots, olive hound's-tooth shirt, blue bandana tied at his throat, and the camouflaged Army cap made him look a part of the terrain. The breeze whipped at a lock of still brown hair lying across his forehead. He stayed on the bank and witnessed the last moments of my fight with the fish.

The fish fought all the way in, but when it struck the stones where the river and the land came together, it went limp and stretched out to its full length. Gasping, it lay

still. Played out. I took a chance and increased the tension on the line. With the rod bent in a U shape, I craned my captive away from the water. When I looked up, Jim had gone back toward camp.

I pulled some line off the reel to let the rod relax so I could set it down. Then I moved between the fish and his only route back to the water. He was a monster grayling, pushing his genetic limits. His sail-like dorsal fin covered my hand.

Using the leader as a guide, I ran my hand along it to locate my old Black Gnat and dislodge the hook. I wanted to release the fish to the river as soon as possible. But the hook wasn't in his jaws. In that first vicious strike he had swallowed it deep into his gullet. Without tools I knew I could never retrieve it without doing fatal harm to the fish. My heart broke a little bit. I wanted to let it go. I wanted to send it back to the pool, wanted to give him his life.

"He swallowed the damned hook," I yelled in the direction of camp. "I can't get it without killing him."

"We'll have him for dinner," Jim's voice carried back to me.

If I cut the leader and left the fly in him he might survive. He might live to old age, king of the cold, clear pool. But that fly in his throat meant a lot to me. I'd owned it since I was in fifth or sixth grade. It was a reminder of the last time I fished alongside my grandfather, and I didn't want to give that up.

I killed the fish and recovered my fly. I pushed the hook back on the little metal loop on my rod and reeled in all the excess line so I could carry the rod. Then I cleaned

and skinned the fish there on the river bank, letting the current carry away the innards and skin so they wouldn't attract bears or wolves.

I cut a piece of willow and fashioned it into a hook to carry the fish by his gill plate. Able to work better at the campsite, I postponed cutting the fillets until later. Then I picked up my rod and staggered up the steep part of the bank. On top I stood for a long minute looking down at the beautiful pool, torn between fishing some more and getting our supper started.

The meal won out and I followed the faint trail of crushed tundra plants to camp.

Dances with Caribou

Jim and I rode the big, blue pontoon raft downriver, propelled along by the swelling current. After a couple of hours and a half dozen miles we pulled hard for the south bank, where we established our camp among some stunted spruce. Out of the wind, the site offered a dry place, comfortable for sleeping on a millennia's worth of accumulated spruce needles. The bank was steep and covered with a miniature forest of baby spruce and a scatter of young willow, but it also held some old spruce stumps that made ready moorings for the heavy raft.

I scrambled to the top of the bank while Jim stayed in the raft to pass me our gear. After we had the gear unloaded and stacked, we scouted around for a level spot to set the tents, and found one with a convenient fallen spruce log to use as our kitchen. Accustomed to the routine by now, we worked mostly in silence, keeping our eyes and ears attuned for caribou crossing the river or trotting down our side of it. While we worked we kept our rifles slung across our backs or within arm's reach.

Jim may have camped here five years before on his earlier hunt through this country, but he never said. He never talked much about that trip. I know his partner that time proved something of a challenge. Successful in their hunt, the time together spoiled any forming friendship. Now, if they happened to pass in an airport concourse, Jim said he would pretend not to notice.

Jim doesn't suffer fools lightly. He's a thinker who doesn't engage in a lot of banter. He works out what he wants to say and then says it without excess words. The crow's feet in the corners of his eyes and his tan complexion speak of someone who's

spent ten thousand days in the elements. His face has the kind of expression that makes me think of an Old West marshal—eyes on the horizon. But when he smiles, he smiles with his whole face.

Behind where we set the tents and arrayed our gear, bare, low hills formed a wall to the south that blocked any distant views in that direction. But looking northward across the river, a broad alluvial plain stretched from the willow tangles at the water's edge toward the Davidson Mountains, the easternmost peaks of the Brooks Range. Beyond the quarter-mile wide expanse of scrub willow sprouting from the gravel of once and future river courses, a vast tundra prairie gently sloped upwards toward the distant mountains.

Intermittent streams flow down from the mountains, their routes across the tundra revealed by the willow and spruce that seek the moisture and the windbreak of the gullies. By following the streambeds, the dwarf trees extend their reach deeper into the Arctic, but less than halfway from the river to the mountains we could see that even the hardiest trees eventually surrender. Only tiny tundra mosses and lichens reach the mountains.

On the other side of the range the tundra plain sweeps downhill to meet the Beaufort Sea and the Arctic Ocean. Now designated as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, this space between the mountains and the coast is the ancient summer home and calving ground for great numbers of migratory caribou. In spring they move north over the mountains, and in fall they return south to their wintering areas in the big river valleys of the interior.

Jim and I worked fast to set up our campsite. We put up one tent for sleeping and one as a shelter for our packs in case of rain. Downwind and a ways off, we dug a latrine. In the opposite direction we stashed our food away from the tents. We hoped any marauding bear or wolves would take it from there rather than smash up the campsite.

After an early supper of a freeze-dried noodle concoction, we sat drinking steaming cups of something sweet that Jim called Russian tea. There was tea in it. There was also that powdered orange stuff, Tang, and a lot of sugar. Besides water from the river, it was our only beverage.

As the sun settled toward the horizon, the mountains began to glow with orange and pink light. Watching the high ridges to the north, Jim said, "If we don't see anything right from here in the morning, we'll cross over and work our way toward that low pass. That suit you?"

Setting my cup on the ground to cool in a little level spot, "Sure," I said. "Anything's alright with me."

With our plan established, we finished cleaning up the meal and got into our sleeping bags, surrounded by the twilight that suffices for night in the late summer Arctic.

In the morning we set out just as the sun started to warm the day. We rowed across the river and secured the raft to a driftwood log deposited on the north shore by some flood. From there we trekked toward the low pass in the mountain ridge, fairly certain we'd intercept some animals coming south.

We rested after an hour or more of walking in silence and at a spot where the open plain begins to rise more steeply toward the mountains. We sat in a dry patch of

tundra and made a lunch from some energy bars and long drinks of water while admiring the sweeping vista. Awed by the beauty, we barely spoke.

Suddenly, three caribou burst from one of the many folds in the ground, this one about two hundred and fifty yards away. A cow, a juvenile, and a bull bringing up the rear. Heading in the wrong direction, they trotted north toward the pass, still at least a mile above us. Jim rolled up onto his knees, pulling his binoculars from his shirt pocket. I reached for my rifle and rolled into a prone position. I wrestled the rubber covers off my telescopic sight and peered down the rifle barrel in the direction of the running animals.

“You ought to take him,” Jim said as he studied the animals with his binoculars, “He’s good.”

“What about you?”

“No, no. You’re up first.”

Jim pushed his old camouflaged Army cap back on his forehead to get it out of the way of his binoculars. “I’ve shot caribou before, you haven’t.”

We speculated that these three were startled into turning back by wolves, or a bear, or perhaps even our scent. In any case, they kept up a steady stride toward the north.

Willing my pulse to slow down and my chest to stop heaving, I tried to get the bull in my sights before he put too much distance between us. He stopped and my shot shattered the stillness, but was an obvious miss. The bull stood alert but showed no fear. His gaze fixed in our direction as the breeze rippled through the sand-colored mane at his throat.

I jerked the rifle's bolt handle to eject the spent cartridge and chamber a new round. My second shot was also a clear miss. The bull cocked his ears toward the sound, but didn't move. I lay in the prone position, my body pressing into the ground. The rifle's pounding recoil slammed my shoulder and hurt even through the padding of my Gore-Tex shell and heavy wool shirt underneath. Blam! My third shot rent the air and sent a sharp pain into my collarbone and down my chest without fazing the bull any more than the first two shots.

Immediately, the blast from Jim's rifle exploded next to me and felt like a pencil being driven into my right ear. I flinched involuntarily, but the bull collapsed in a heap—stone dead. "That's how it's done," Jim said through clenched teeth.

Wilted by my poor shooting, I muttered something congratulatory in Jim's direction. We sat for a minute collecting ourselves before walking the space between us and the downed bull. The cow and her calf sprinted toward the pass. We watched them climb the slope as we maneuvered through the knee-deep tundra vegetation.

Jim speculated that my shots had been deflected by some stalk of tundra grass. "We need to set up a target and check those sights," he declared, thinking that in our travels my sights might have been knocked out of alignment. "We'll find something to shoot at and pace off the distance."

"I guess I'd better find out," I told him. But down deep I was sure that nothing more than poor shooting was the cause of my misses.

On reaching the bull, we saw he was a good-if-not-great specimen. He would provide a decent amount of meat for camp and for packing out. We worked fast at the

butchering to avoid getting stuck way out here when the twilight descended. Each cycle of the sun brought a higher ratio of dark to light, and blundering our way back across the river in the gloom with seventy-pound loads of meat seemed an unpleasant prospect. The chance of bumping into a bear somewhere in the willow thickets along the river while strapped to a pack full of fresh meat seemed even less desirable.

The mid-day sun glinted off our knives as we parted the layers of fat, allowing us to roll back large sections of the hide and expose the meat underneath. As we worked, I sensed something watching us. Turning my head, I saw the cow and calf standing a hundred yards away. Still as statues, they stood observing us and trying to comprehend what had happened to the bull. They remained there, not moving for ten or fifteen minutes while they processed what we had done. Then they turned and slowly moved uphill toward the pass. Somewhere up on that high ground they should encounter kin moving south and rejoin the march, away from the coming winter. Silently I wished them well, and for a few seconds I studied the blood drying on my hands.

The meat went into cheesecloth bags and then into the nearly empty packs we each carried. Piling in as much meat as we could and still manage to lift it, we began shuttling loads to the raft. We each made two round trips, hauling a load down and then going as fast as we could back up hill to collect the second load. And though we had no difficulty seeing where we left the raft, it was more than a mile away. Halfway to the raft with the first load, Jim's COPD began kicking in and every hundred yards or so he stopped and took a pull on his inhaler. His eyes would widen as the vapor drifted into his lungs.

Like me, Jim is a retired soldier having spent thirty years in uniform. Though a native of the California coast, he's hunted large game all over the American West, plus Alaska, and even classic old-style hunts for steinbok, chamois, and driven pheasants in Europe. Our trip sprang from a conversation at the kitchen table at my house in Maine, when Jim said, "We better do this, before we get too old."

"Don't die on me out here, old man," I chided, trying to make light of the dire thoughts in my head. I don't think he heard my admonition. Years spent in the Field Artillery made him hard of hearing. At least, I don't think he heard it. He didn't react.

Though barely three years older, Jim was already impacted by a lifetime of cigarette smoking. The long walk under the heavy loads squeezed the breath in him and he rested often. But he never set his pack down and we made the same number of round trips. When everything else was done, Jim brought down his trophy last, the bull's antler rack.

In the early evening we returned to our camp among the spruce. Laden with the weight of the meat, our raft was a heavy pull across the river. Against the opposite bank, we struggled to secure the raft to its mooring before the current carried it away.

Jim selected a spot a hundred yards or so from the camp, where we erected a crude platform of driftwood and spruce poles for storing the meat. We piled the meat bags on the none-too-sturdy platform and strung an aluminum foil 'space blanket' as a sun shade over the top. Up off the ground and shaded as much as possible, the meat forms a crust that prevents spoilage for several weeks. Our ancestors knew this well, and

before the advent of refrigeration, every home in America hung meat to dry in a similar fashion.

Keeping the pile a distance from camp reduced the threat should a bear or wolf pack decide to raid our larder. Not having permits to shoot wolves or bears, we resolved early not to contest with other carnivores for our supply of meat. If something came for an easy meal, they would have it.

Later we sat watching the sun set and the full moon rise on the other side of the sky, while we cooked our freeze-dried noodles and other bits, augmented by fresh caribou tenderloin and backstrap. The caribou transformed the bland packaged stuff into something wonderful. And we enjoyed our best meal since the grayling I'd pulled from the river several days before.

Somewhere among the hills to the south a solitary wolf gave a brief howling serenade. Feeling the spell cast by the wolf, we talked in subdued tones while we ate and made plans.

'I'm giving up my moose tag,' Jim announced.

Though permitted for a moose and caribou each, Jim decided that he would pass on his chance for a moose in order to take a second caribou. Alaskan game laws allow for substituting the valuable moose permit for another animal of 'lesser value.' Caribou being far more plentiful, the state readily accepts taking two, so long as one is taken using the higher priced moose permit.

An experienced Alaska hunter, Jim decided he didn't need to shoot another moose. He said he would rather try for a bigger caribou than the one we were eating.

Being still so high, that is, upstream, on the river, we really had little expectation of sighting moose anyway. Not until we traveled many more miles downstream would we encounter favorable moose habitat.

Tired from hauling the meat, we slept the next morning until the sun was well up. Time of day makes little difference to a caribou hunter. The strategy relied on placing ourselves along one of the migratory routes and waiting for them to come to us. In late August thousands of animals move from the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge southward, along routes first blazed at the end of the Pleistocene.

We knew they crossed this river as singles and in small bands during a two-or three-week period. Hanging around our camp offered a better-than-reasonable chance to encounter animals. During breakfast that morning we saw several swim the river up and downstream of the campsite. I ran to intercept them, but all were too far away for a shot.

Taking our time, we did camp chores and occasionally looked around in case any animals moved in our direction. On a brief exploration of the river bank where I went for water, I discovered a long-discarded gallon can that once held aviation fuel. Resenting its presence in the landscape, I pulled it out of the tundra and returned to camp with it. I wanted to carry it out with us, but I wondered what Jim would say about hauling it along on the raft, or what Frenchie would say about loading it on board his airplane.

Jim suggested we use the can as a target to ascertain why I had missed my shots the day before. Setting the old can out on a gravel bar in the river about three hundred yards from camp, we decided to take alternating shots at it to ensure that my rifle was properly sighted-in, and to compare my results with his.

Jim had three near misses. My glancing hit on the third shot won me a beer, to be collected at the first roadhouse we encountered on the road back to Fairbanks.

When we started hunting again we decided to split up and cover more ground, looking for game trails or crossing points along the river bank. We decided not to cross the river again ourselves. That was too much work.

Jim set up in an area just behind the camp from where he could observe one of the places we'd seen them swim the river. I followed the game trail parallel to the river, to see if I could intercept one as it came out of the water further downstream. I moved slowly, keeping out of sight, but never beyond the sound of the river as it tumbled over its gravel beds or swelled into the deeper pools. The constant sound of the flowing water masked any sounds I made moving along.

Late afternoon caught me napping. Leaned against an unusually large spruce log, my back felt comfortable and I relaxed on the soft, dry ground. I had a good view of both the river and the bare hillsides to the south. Between me and the hills lay Alaska's closest thing to a meadow. Wide, flat and quite dry, it was perfect for passing a herd of southbound animals. I reckoned I was about 1/3 of a mile from camp.

When the shot exploded, reverberating among the hills and swirling amid the willow and spruce before dying out against the far mountains, I knew that Jim had another caribou. His shot jerked me awake. I scanned the area and saw nothing. There was no second shot. That meant Jim had another one down.

I grabbed my gear and slung my rifle across my back as I started towards camp at a dead run. Or, as much of a dead run as I could achieve wearing hip waders over my

heavy wool pants and thick wool socks. I plodded as fast as I could go, ignoring the spruce boughs as they slapped at my face and body. The trail was narrow with walls of spruce making it into a kind of evergreen tunnel. It was still daylight, but the sun was too low to really light the trail.

I hurdled over downed trees and bounded over mud holes. As I ran I thought, “The faster I get to Jim, the easier time we’ll have in dealing with another big batch of meat.”

Deer scatter when threatened, sometimes following an older doe acting as a leader, sometimes running alone. When the danger passes, they regroup and go about their business. Only the youngest bucks accompany other bucks. Mature bucks remain solitary unless following a group of does. Not so with caribou.

Caribou exist in blended herds of bulls, cows and the young, but bulls often travel in bachelor bands. If something happens to a caribou, its companions hang around trying to figure out exactly what happened, much the way bison do. Once they perceive what happened, they move on.

Nine healthy bulls stood in a loose arc forty yards or so from Jim and the bull he had dropped. They watched intently as Jim approached their deceased companion. They didn’t bolt until Jim got out his camera and took a flash picture. They fled in my direction when the sudden burst of light startled them. Had I waited and held my position, nine prime bulls would have come right to me. In sprinting towards Jim, I gave up the opportunity for an easy shot at a good one.

Instead, I met the panic express thundering down the narrow game trail that followed the river bank. Head down and breathing hard with my rifle slung across my back, I met the leader almost head on. He tried to swerve, lifting his head as he did, so I missed getting skewered on his antlers. He plowed into me with his neck and chest, knocking me to the ground and steam-rolling past me. My speed pushed him into the spruce on one side and his bulk knocked me into the spruce on the other side.

I bounced off the springy bows and fell in a heap on the soft carpet of spruce needles as he slid by, hell bent on getting away from me. I threw my arms up to protect my head when the second and then the third one bounded over me. A little break in the action separated the third bull from the fourth, and I staggered to my knees, tugging at my rifle to get it off my back.

Number four bumped me with his long left side, throwing me back against the spongy green wall of spruce as he tried to squeeze past me kneeling in the trail. I struggled to hold the rifle upright and work the bolt-action to chamber a round. The fifth one nudged me with his right side as he tried to pass on the left and drove me face down in the center of the trail. I felt the brown spruce needles mash against my face and slide into my nose, mouth, hair and ears.

I sputtered and spit and bounced back to my knees, still trying to slam a cartridge into the chamber and take some kind of aim. In swinging the rifle around, I snagged it on a spruce bough and it momentarily refused to come around.

I again fell against the spongy wall of dwarf spruce, ducking my face into my arm pit as the sixth one leaped over me, barely missing me with its hooves. At the same time I

frantically tore at the rubber protective caps covering the lenses on the rifle's telescopic sight. The caps hold on through tension provided by two strands of rubber that stretch taut when the caps cover the fore and aft lenses. I inadvertently turned the device into a sling shot, and I last saw it dangling from a tine on the left beam of number seven's antler as he disappeared down the trail.

I stared dumbfounded at my disappearing scope cover when the eighth one hit me with his forelegs and knocked me to the ground, pushing my face once again into the bed of needles.

He stepped on my left arm and right thigh as he galloped over me, but my heavy clothes and the mattress-soft ground kept him from doing any damage. The only thing I saw of number nine after he jumped over me was his whitish posterior vanishing down the trail. In silence I sat, then crouched, and then slowly stood in stunned disbelief. Alaska's caribou bested me twice in two days.

I only wanted one of those critters. Why hadn't I been able to shoot? Because it happened so fast, I told myself. I couldn't react. I couldn't act.

After a few minutes spent collecting myself and brushing the hoof prints, spruce needles and dirt off my clothes, I resumed my slow jog to Jim's location. When I called out he steered me in by shouting back. I found him standing in the grass at the head of the clearing. He was already at work dressing out his caribou. I saw immediately it was a fine, big bull.

My arrival confused him. Why hadn't I remained where I was? Why didn't I wait for the bulls to show themselves at my end of the meadow?

“If you’d stayed put, you should have been able to pick off a nice one,” Jim said.
“They were all good ones.”

Disgusted with myself, I gave him a thin outline of events at the other end of the long meadow-like clearing, lightly glossing over the part about meeting the bulls on the trail. “They ran past me. But I couldn’t get a shot. They were moving too fast.” Still stunned, I stood there rubbing the sore spot on my arm where the one had stepped on me.

I said nothing about being asleep when the whole thing started.

In the fading daylight we knew we had to finish cutting up Jim’s bull and get the meat moved to the cache with the meat from yesterday before we could do anything else. We worked quickly, but the semidarkness caught us with the job only half finished. We continued to work, using our headlamps and the light of the full moon that drifted up over the trees. We only stopped to re-sharpen our knives.

Near midnight we finished extracting the last of the meat and got it all into cheesecloth bags like the other batch. Then we shuttled the heavy bags in relays the two or three hundred yards to our store pile and placed them on the stack.

In the odd light of the full moon and the not quite set sun, I said, “I’m glad we didn’t have to pack this stuff like yesterday, but I hope the carcass doesn’t bring in a bear. I’d feel better if it weren’t quite so close to camp.”

“I’d rather a bear goes for the carcass than comes here and takes this meat,” Jim shot back. “But we need to watch out in any case.”

Back at the tents we first cleaned up in the frigid water of the river, scrubbing to get the blood off our hands and forearms. Then we prepared something of a supper before flopping down to sleep, exhausted from the work of cutting and hauling the meat.

I got away just after sun-up the following morning. Not wanting to talk about my failures of the two previous days, I was content to hike out alone. I climbed up into the hills behind the camp and hunkered down by a small pond, surrounded by tundra vegetation already turning the russets and golds of autumn. Even though the caribou had ample opportunity to drink while crossing the river, I thought one might visit the pond. I sat against a tree, trying to remain still but shivering until nearly noon, when I munched on a granola bar from my pocket and the sun finally brought a measure of warmth to the day. I stayed out all afternoon and saw nothing but an occasional raven that perched in the tree above my head.

With both his game tags now filled, Jim remained in camp all that day, performing his own particular brand of surgery. Working with a set of scalpels and meticulous care, he caped out the head of his second caribou for the taxidermist. He labored for hours making certain that the skin came off intact and unmarred for a better appearing trophy later on. Jim then preserved the cape with a generous dusting of the rock salt we carried with us.

I spent a couple of hours scanning with my binoculars for caribou along the river, in the river, on the hills, and even toward the far pass near where Jim took the first animal. Nothing showed itself.

Feeling cramped, I needed to move, and so started a long, careful stalk on the heights above the river. I took myself downstream for any sign of the animals that ran over me the afternoon before. Again, nothing showed itself. Those animals were miles away, probably even out of this river's drainage.

As the afternoon merged into evening, I came down off the ridge and followed the familiar game trail beside the river, back in the direction of our camp. The caribou either show up or they don't.

Before I reached that portion of trail that I'd been on the day before, I came across a massive set of antlers attached to the skull of a huge bull that died or was killed a year or more before. It lay on the tundra as if casually discarded, giving no hint of what happened. The smaller bones were long since carted away by scavengers.

I couldn't guess its age from the teeth still in the skull, but the bases of the antler beams were bigger around than my forearm so I assumed he was fully mature. I took a picture but left the relic on the tundra for the mice and other bone chewing critters.

I found Jim at work on dinner when I returned to camp. Again we had the freeze-dried stuff augmented by choice cuts from the fresh caribou and the same hot, sweet tea. The pieces of backstrap and tenderloin enlivened the boring bits of reconstituted pasta. We had a small fire going to ward off the chill and the combination of meal and warmth and moonrise punctuated the moment. It was comfortable sitting there on the mat of spruce needles, feeling the heat kicked up by the fire.

“We ought to get moving tomorrow and drop down a few more miles,” Jim said with his eyes shaded by his cap visor and the firelight flickering against his unshaven face.

“I suppose so,” I answered, my eyes fixed on the moon where it hung between the spruce boughs. “But it is comfortable here.”

The day darkened into almost night as we talked by the fire. In just a few days, summer would be gone from this valley and autumn fully underway. Seasonal transitions compress in the Arctic. What takes weeks in the Lower 48 happens in days north of the Yukon River. The changes that take days elsewhere happen in hours where we sat. I tried to remain optimistic about getting a caribou myself.

We let the fire use up our small supply of wood and neither of us moved to look for more. We opted for the warmth of sleeping bags over the remnant of warmth in the dying fire. I found myself reading John Knowles’ book *A Separate Peace* for the first time since high school. It seemed a world removed from my tundra bed.

I doused my headlamp and burrowed into the bag like one of Kafka’s creations. Against the other wall of the little tent, Jim was already snoring into the folds of his goose-down cocoon. Up in the hills beyond the meadow and the pond I’d spent so many hours watching, a pack of wolves sang their senectuous songs.

The Gates of Valhalla

The next day we packed everything and floated several miles downriver under a gray and threatening overcast. Potential places to hunt seemed so unappealing that we just kept drifting on the current until we came to level shelf on the south bank to set a new camp. The bulk of a mountain lay across the southern view, its slopes rising into the dull, lead gray of the clouds.

I got away early in the morning. A light gray streak of daylight crossed the eastern horizon as I wrestled into the same clothes I'd been wearing for two weeks. First, my much loved silk turtleneck that kept the winds off my neck. Second, the polypropylene pullover shirt. Then I struggled into my green wool pants and red and black plaid wool shirt. My sweaty wool socks hadn't quite dried from the day before, and forced me to stuff my feet into the hip waders that protected me from the even wetter surface of the tundra. Last, I slipped on my wool, fingerless gloves and watch cap.

By the time I poured some boiling water into a cup of instant oatmeal flakes and stirred it into a paste, the sky was a light blue-gray. When I used the same cup to make sweet tea, the sun was edging up over the mountain ridges across the boundary in the Yukon.

I decided to travel light, even though I'd be hunting alone. I chose not to wear my binoculars dangling around my neck. I pulled my compass out of my breast pocket and replaced it with extra energy bars for lunch. From our camp I could see the area I wanted to hunt, so I took only one water bottle along.

I was glad to leave my backpack behind. I figured if I did shoot a caribou or a moose, I'd come back for it, or I'd call Jim on the walkie-talkie and he'd trudge out to meet me with a pack and all the tools we'd need for extracting the meat.

I finished the last swallow of rapidly cooling tea and tossed my cup next to the stove with the other things waiting to get washed. "Alright. I'm out of here," I said as I slung my rifle to my right shoulder. The sun was almost up, but there was no warmth to burn away the night's chill.

Jim looked up from where he crouched pouring river water out of a collapsible plastic jug and into our dishpan. "Call on the radio if you get something."

"You'll hear the shot if I do get one. I'll check in at noon, but otherwise I'll keep the radio off."

"I'll be monitoring this one here, just in case," Jim said.

I moved toward the dense wall of stubby, little willow trees that separated the course of the river from the mountain ridges to the south. The willow looked impenetrable. The branches of each tree intertwined with every other tree in reach. The roots ran along the surface of the ground like a confusion of snakes and spilled over the low shelves of former riverbanks making it difficult to step onto the next level.

The clouds, fog and weather threats of yesterday all disappeared after a soft rain during the night. The day dawned cloudless, dry and bright. We might still encounter caribou, but the chances seemed slim. We'd made the transition away from caribou country to moose territory, sometime during our float downstream the previous day. Heading into the thicket of willow, I sensed I wouldn't see any more caribou this trip.

With his tags filled, Jim would remain in camp from now on, acting as self-appointed 'Camp Bitch,' cooking, cleaning, organizing, guarding the drying meat supply, and dozing in the warmth of the afternoon. Conscious of my time running out, I felt I needed to hunt, and hunt hard. The notion of returning empty-handed rankled me already, though our pick-up was still several days away.

I felt the cold as I set out, but exertion would warm me soon enough. I was glad to have left my extra clothing behind.

Heading south, I went straight towards the mountain that had so intrigued me the evening before. Now it stood tall and clear against the morning sky. Some of its folds and gullies remained in shadow and would be even colder than the air surrounding me. But the open ridges and flanks would be warm for most of the day.

When I plunged into the willow, I found it as dense and tangled as anything I'd seen before. It was like the jungles I remembered from Panama and Honduras, except without the heat and humidity. The stands of willow formed a belt, girding the approaches to the mountain from the river side. The twisted willow thickets ran from the edge of the river as far as I could see up or downstream and for about a mile toward the open slopes of the mountain.

The combination of not wanting to make noise and the nearly impenetrable snarl of intersecting branches made for slow going. Sometimes it took five or six minutes to move six feet forward. Often the ground dropped away as I stumbled into a former braid of the river. Keeping quiet while climbing out was impossible.

Down low the willow shrubs exist in a jumble of roots, fallen limbs, driftwood, stones of varying size and any other debris swept down on ten thousand years of spring floods. To my advantage, the now dying autumn leaves on the willow branches rattled and chattered in the breeze, making it difficult to hear but also masking the racket I was making trying to get through it. I thought of Jim a few times, back in camp, eating a lazy breakfast by the fire as I plunged and bucked ahead.

My hat, suspenders, rifle sling, and knife sheath all reached out to snag every possible branch and twig. Frustrated, I gave up, tucked my hat into my shirt, but could nothing about the rest. Pushing forward, the branches seemed like knitting needles aimed at my face and eyes. I sometimes found myself with my face buried in the crook of my elbow, trying to ward them off.

Often I'd stumble as I tried to steer my rubber wader boots around the snarl of roots and trunks reaching up at me out of the well-washed stones. Twigs and leaves found their way into the tops of my waders and slowly made their way down to pick at my ankles, or worked their way under the soles of my feet to stab me like little stilettos. Keeping them from slipping down past my shirt collar was like swatting flies.

The chance of meeting a bear in this confined and opaque place haunted my thoughts. I knew that surprising a grizzly in dense cover offered a dangerous, worst-case scenario. Many times an unexpected encounter has ended with both the bear and the human dead. Thoughts of a horrible mauling churned in my gut and up and down my spine. I might survive for a while in excruciating pain, but even if Jim could find me, I'd likely die of shock and blood loss long before someone could fly here and then fly me out

to a hospital—even if we had a way to notify them, which we didn't. I held my rifle as ready as I could in the brush and fought the urge to flip the safety off.

I pressed on but worked to control my breathing and a powerful urge to return to camp. More than I wanted a moose or a caribou, I wanted to avoid a grizzly at close quarters.

About an hour in, something on the ground a few feet away caught my attention. Shifting in that direction, I could see it was something man-made. It took a few seconds to realize what the object might be. A piece of thin metal, like foil. Having found a rusted gasoline can a few days before, I knew others sometimes came into this region.

Where on Earth hasn't someone been?

We came by bush plane, landing on a gravel bar miles back up river, close to where the forming stream spills out of the Brooks Range. Others arrive the same way and hunt the territory on foot, or by rafting the river, just as we were. Still, the metal fragment seemed an intrusion. An affront.

Battered. Tossed. Drowned by a host of floods and pummeled into the stones of the river course, this bit of some industrial process struck me like an unanticipated insult. It tore the solitude of the place. I swore at it and cursed its presence.

I forced my way past the metal fragment and through a maze of roots and bushes for maybe ten or fifteen paces when I saw, protruding out of the stony ground and willow wands, the shiny aluminum body of a plane.

“Oh, crap,” I mouthed. The shock of seeing it coursed through my arms, across my shoulders and up the back of my neck. I shook once, from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. A plane.

A plane from long ago. Crashed? Abandoned? Discarded? Obviously not recovered. It appeared to date from the 1940s or early 1950s. It had that look. The river had polished away all traces of any paint that once covered it. Only bright shining aluminum remained. No wings. No tail section. Only the fuselage protruded from the old riverbed.

I figured it crashed somewhere up river and rode here on the floods, tumbled and swirled and carried along on turbulent waters, not unlike the turbulent air it once knew. The plane’s carcass stuck out of the ground in the same attitude as it once flew, nose high, tail down. The engine and propeller were torn away. Stones from the river and dirt half-filled the space vacated by the engine when it ripped free. I glanced around for some sign of the missing engine or propeller, but didn’t search for them.

What were once windows were now holes, like the shadow-eyes of a Jack-O-Lantern. The polished skin glistened even in the gloom under the willow branches. The pilot’s door was slightly ajar and tilted, the top hinge broken.

Where had it come from? Who was its pilot? Where was it going? What happened to it? The plane’s history fascinated me, though I found its physical presence made this already creepy tangle all the more unpleasant.

Logic told me no human remains would still be there. Any remains would have long ago disappeared or been removed by rescuers. But I also knew that planes disappear in Alaska every year, many never found. This might be one of those.

Irrational thoughts told me the pilot's skeletonized remains still clung to the controls in some last vain attempt to stave off crashing. Fate or damned bad luck made it my responsibility to check.

In the closeness of this dense tangle of willows I didn't want to find a human skeleton any more than I wanted to meet a bear. I envied Jim his relaxing day in the sun. Moments passed as I debated my duty and my curiosity and my revulsion. For long minutes I stared at the plane and did not move. I felt transfixed. My toes grew cold against the damp inside my rubber waders. My three weeks of beard started itching. I hesitated. I dawdled. I volleyed with my aversion to look.

At last I moved forward and leaned in where the window glass was missing from the pilot's door. Nothing. Like the outside of the fuselage, the river had wiped the inside clean. Only fragments of instruments remained. There were metal seat frames and control wires, but no humans. No pilot. No passenger.

Relieved, a smile ran across my lips as I stepped back and let out a breath louder than I expected or wanted. I chuckled at my display of nerves, bouncing the little sound of laughter off the surrounding tangles. I moved away quickly.

I left the plane and struggled to put some distance between it and me. A curtain of willow soon separated me from the remnant, and I felt relieved. I hoped another spring flood would bury the wreck deep in the river bed—never to be seen again.

Raised to leave no trace, I resent signs of human activity that contaminate wild areas, especially special places like this one between the Arctic Circle and Arctic seas. Discarded fuel cans and wrecked airplanes intrude on the sanctity of the place. So do snow machines that crush fragile tundra plants even under five feet of snowpack, leaving tracks across the landscape that live on for decades before the vegetation can erase them. Looking down from the plane as we flew in, I was appalled by the near permanent tracks of snow machines. They reminded me of aerial photos I'd seen of the Nazca figures in Peru, all crisscrossed with vehicle tracks.

Only the cleansing action of spring floods can remove traces of human activity from the river valleys. I wished for a cascade of snow melt and spring rains to run down the mountainsides, to mash the old plane into the rocky soil beneath the valley floor.

Fifteen or twenty minutes further on I sensed the ravens. I'm sure they were there the whole time, but I hadn't noticed. At first I only heard them up there, somewhere above the canopy of willow branches. Single birds barked as they flew a parallel course to mine.

When the roof of leaves thinned in spots, I could see them. One raven, every couple of minutes, flew an azimuth-straight course, past me, toward the mountain. Mystified, I strained to see through the leaves and branches.

It seemed as though ravens for miles around were headed to the same rendezvous. Pulling some branches aside I could see them, one after the other, on a course to a spot where the slope of the mountain met the level of the river valley.

About two hours out from camp I finally broke free of the willow. It ended when it met an edge of tundra bog. Here, waters draining off the mountain slopes collected, and only the most moisture-tolerant plants grew. The bog occupied twenty acres or so along the base of the mountain.

The bog's plants grew no more than a foot tall, in a spongy mat of vegetation overlaying a morass of water and mud many feet deep. In the corner closest to the mountain's upslope, a pond of perhaps an acre in size shimmered in the morning light. It appeared out of place in the vastness of mountain ridges and broad river valley. Somewhere on the little shelf between the pond and the mountain's rise, the ravens lighted. I heard their chatter, but couldn't see them.

Stretching to make myself taller didn't help. Neither did ducking and weaving. I could hear them, but they were down on the ground, hidden from view.

Skirting to the southeast, I walked the boundary between the awful willow jungle and the bog soup. Thinking the pond as a water source for resident moose or perhaps passing caribou, I moved with care, anxious not to disturb any game nearby. I saw nothing but the vastness of the place and heard nothing but the ravens.

When this mountain first came into view yesterday afternoon as we drifted on the river's current, the weather was deteriorating and I imagined I was seeing the home of the gods. Clouds and mist swirled around its summit. Before falling asleep I had scribbled in my journal, naming our camp—The Gates of Valhalla. Now, with its rounded peak clear against the sky, the mountain towered twelve or fifteen hundred feet above the little pond

that glimmered before the mountain throne. Slowly, I followed the sound of the ravens, wondering if they were heralds for gods on the slopes above.

I was in the open and exposed. I wished I hadn't left my binoculars back in camp. The ravens reluctantly gave ground at my approach. The big, raucous birds flapped up and away as I closed in, but gave me no clues why they were there.

Stepping into a scene of devastation, I finally understood what brought them there. In the confined space between the pond and the start of the mountain slope, the mutilated remnants of a moose lay scattered over a quarter acre of marshy tundra. The ravens were in something of a feeding frenzy, free of foxes, wolves and other competitors. Water covered the bottoms of my boots below the ankles, and moose parts covered the soggy ground as if blasted by a missile.

I assumed some unseen hunters had beaten us to success here and already removed the meat and trophy. There was no rack or even a head scattered among the bones and tatters of hide. The butchering seemed to have been done in a frenzy.

We had not seen any hunters or heard any aircraft since our arrival upstream more than two weeks before. I wondered who might've been here. Someone rafting ahead of us? Inuit come overland from some remote village or hunting camp? Someone flown in on an unseen and unheard plane? No tracks. No trash. No sign of other humans since our landing on the gravel bar so many miles and days back to the northwest. I didn't believe we shared this valley with another hunting party.

Glancing up and around, I reveled in the panorama and tried to understand what the scene told me. Contaminated with recent death, the pond hardly seemed a place for

me to lie in wait for another great bull. And yet, a motion disturbed the tundra grasses in the far corner of my vision—a wrinkle in the fabric of the morning.

I looked into the distant edge of the bog, perhaps five hundred yards away. There, the bog grasses merged with a scatter of stunted spruce trees, no more than eight or ten feet in height. The trees appeared to be fleeing the wall of willow that extended in a long line parallel to the river. Something brown undulated in the grass.

A sense of relief washed over me. Long days and long miles of hunting finally offered a chance to engage some game. This might be the mate to whomever lay spread around me. I hoped this was a big, rutting bull coming to challenge the obvious scent rolling through the surrounding terrain. If it were a cow moose, I couldn't shoot, but at least I'd know there were other moose in the area.

I crouched, putting a wader covered knee in the soaked ground. Better balanced, I felt steadier as I shouldered my rifle and waited for the moose to get close enough for a shot. The scope danced a little before it settled. Through the lens I saw the tawny undulation almost invisible against the yellow-browns of the tundra grasses. It was a massive grizzly bear. Bigger than any bear I'd ever seen, it was headed straight for me as I knelt in the middle of his moose kill. In my zeal I had assumed the brown patch running towards me was a moose. But I was mistaken.

No human hunters had killed this moose and scattered it over a quarter acre. The bear running toward me had done it, and my presence in his dining room affronted him. I slammed the rifle across my chest, squeezing it into my palms. Erupting out of my crouch, I blasted into a run up the mountain flank. My boots, striking the dry ground of

the slope, sprayed dirt and rocks in a bid for purchase on the rising ground. Glancing back, I saw the bear sprinting in my direction, the huge muscles on his sides rippling as all four of his powerful legs pumped him forward.

Military training had taught me to “fight for key terrain.” That means taking and holding the high ground. My brain started chanting the mantra, “fight for key terrain-- fight for key terrain.” Breaths came in gasps. My wader-clad legs churned at the sloping ground. Panic swelled in my stomach as I reached into my pocket for the little walkie-talkie radio and switched it on.

“Jim, Jim,” I gasped into the little black box the size of a cigarette pack, “a bear is after me.”

Jim’s instant response leaped across the airwaves. “Don’t run.”

“Too late. I’m already running,” I shouted into the little radio.

“Quit running and shout at him.”

Though well clear of the moose carcass when the bear reached it, my departure made no apparent difference to him. He turned like a sports car and charged up the slope after me. As the gradient increased, my boots flailed at the loose soil and began to lose traction. My lungs burned as I tried to build speed in those clunky rubber boots.

The sloping ground eased slightly and there was a flat rock just a few steps ahead. Sunk in the ground like a paving stone, the rock was about the size of a desktop. A sudden and momentary calm drifted over me.

“This is as far as I go,” I thought. I sprinted the last few feet to the stone, and told myself, “I’ll make my stand here.” I flicked the rifle’s safety switch off and turned to face the oncoming bear.

The bear never slowed. He bore down and rushed up the hill towards me. His huge feet covered twice the distance with each step as I had. All four paws dug into the hillside as he clawed towards me, his tongue looking bright red and teeth a brilliant white against the brown of his fur. His eyes were tiny black dots set high on his broad face.

Not having a permit to hunt bear, I had no legal right to kill it except to save my life. If I shot the bear, I might answer for it before an Alaskan judge, hundreds of miles away. I didn’t want to kill it in any case. Wrapped around my fear, a more subtle voice told me, “He’s a beautiful animal.”

The bear stopped ten yards from where I stood on the stone—just thirty or thirty-five feet away. He rose to his full height, at least nine feet, and roared, with his forepaws batting at the air. He dropped to all fours, with his ears laid back flat against his head, his teeth making staccato clacking sounds like pistol shots. With his powerful front legs and paws bigger than my head, he started to tear at the ground, sending chunks of dirt and tundra plants spiraling left and right. With his feet on the ground he looked about the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. The distinctive hump between his shoulders was at my eye level and I’m confident he weighed a thousand pounds and more. I didn’t dare look away, but I felt the ravens hovering above me somewhere, waiting to see what happened next.

The bear bounced to his full height a second time and alternated roaring and clacking his teeth in his fit of displeasure. Recalling Jim’s admonition to shout at him, I

opened my mouth to yell, but nothing came out. My throat constricted. My tongue felt thick. My lips moved, but no sound came out.

Nothing but the bear's reverberating growls disturbed the morning. I tried to cough, to spit, and to clear my throat. I frantically wagged my tongue. On the second try I managed to hiss like a cartoon snake. The third time a slightly louder hiss followed by a not-so-loud sound, like when the doctor sticks a tongue depressor down your throat. That sound fell out and trailed off into the vastness. It was a pitiful counter to the bear's rage.

The bear dropped again to all fours and inexplicably turned away from me. He teetered for a second and then lunged downhill, building speed with every step. He covered two hundred, then three hundred yards over the tundra in seconds. When he reached the boggy flats at the bottom of the hill, water sprayed from all four feet as he ran.

Overcome by euphoria the moment I saw him dip downhill, I pressed the radio button and spoke, "Jim. He's gone."

I think Jim replied with, "Good" or something that sounded like, "Good." At that moment and nearly a quarter mile away, I saw the sports car-like turn again as the bear spun around, agile as a cat. He never hesitated or caught his breath. Putting on another burst of speed, he started my way again. He ran full tilt, back in my direction. He blazed through the moose kill and started up the slope a second time. His blonde-brown fur rippled as he ran. His claws tore large divots from the ground. His eyes fixed on me, he steamed ahead. His run down the hill and the return took, maybe, half a minute.

I only had time to squeak into the radio, "Oh, no, here he comes again."

Jim's voice came back at me, loud and clear, "Fire a warning shot," as the bear roared into the same spot he'd taken before. He bounced onto his hind legs again and let loose alternating roars and teeth clacking. Again, he hit the ground and flung clods of dirt and clumps of plants into the air, standing to swipe at the air with his forepaws, and then down again to swipe at the ground.

Jim said to fire a warning shot, but I hesitated. I had just three rounds-- two in the magazine and one in the chamber. A soldier for more than three decades, the voice in my head said, "Do you really want to expend one third of your combat power on a warning shot?"

I had little confidence that I could stop a charge from thirty feet with the two remaining rounds. I didn't think I could work the bolt fast enough to even get a second shot before the bear could be on me. He was too close. I could kill the bear, but not before he could eviscerate me. Someone would find our two corpses entangled together, fertilizing the tundra with our blood.

In this moment of indecision my real voice returned. I coughed out a sharp, "Go away!" The grating rasp of it startled us both.

The bear froze and went silent. Everything went silent. No wind. No ravens. My heart barely beat. He didn't move. I didn't move. His small black eyes that looked like licorice drops pasted on his broad, brown face, blinked once, twice. His pink-red tongue snaked out and slapped across his nose. His sides heaved and he made a noise like the huff of a blacksmith's bellows with each breath. A small white cloud shot towards me

from his nostrils each time he exhaled. Then he turned, more like spun within the length of his body, and dived down the hill once again.

He ran through moose viscera and bounded across the bog. He passed his previous turn around point and kept going. I lost sight of him when he melted into the scattered spruce at the far western end of the bog, where it blended into thicker vegetation. The play of light and shadow on the dying tundra grasses looked exactly like the colors on the grizzly's hide.

I felt glued in place in place, my rifle in a death grip. I scanned about with my eyes, but did not move. There was no better place, no more vantage, no safer retreat, the stone under my feet my island in a sea of wilderness as good a place as any, should he come back at me a third time. I waited for another charge.

Several minutes passed before I allowed myself to think that maybe he wouldn't return. Slowly my pulse slowed and my breathing resumed a more natural rhythm. A breeze stirred through the grass. I felt it tug at my legs and run across my dry lips. Another two or three minutes passed before I fingered the rifle's safety to the "on" position.

Still more minutes passed. I began to get a sense of how Churchill felt when he said, "There is nothing quite so exhilarating as to be shot at without effect."

I regretted not having the courage in the moment to reach for the camera in my pocket to get a picture of him as he stood, waving his huge paws at me. I felt lucky. By any measure I was lucky; lucky to see the great bear, lucky to be alive, lucky to not shoot the finest bear I ever saw.

I felt lucky, but not enough to hang around. I had no wish to encounter the bear again. So I looked toward the summit of the mountain and moved in that direction. I turned off the radio to save the battery in case I needed it again. I figured to put as much space as possible between me and where I last saw the grizzly. I would climb to the summit and pass down the other side of the mountain before resuming my hunt.

The adrenaline stirred up by the bear took a long time to drain away. I sat for a couple of hours watching for game from a dry spot of tundra. When nothing appeared, I walked for miles without tiring. I stalked through likely spots where a moose would be resting in the warmth of the afternoon. I felt the energy of my encounter with the bear pulsing in my arms and legs.

As the afternoon lengthened, high clouds began to replace the spectacular blue sky of the morning. The air cooled, but never got cold. With the passing hours the lack of game or any fresh sign grew mystifying and then frustrating. I'd never seen finer game country than this. Yet, no game appeared. No evidence of game appeared, either. I replayed in my mind everything I knew about deer species habits and couldn't figure their absence. I understood that the majority of caribou probably crossed the river upstream of where we started hunting, and were almost certainly far to the south of us by now. The absence of any moose baffled me, though.

In the softer light of evening, I reached the river again. I heard the muted clatter of its whitewater before I saw it. The deeper pools that filled the space between the rapids gurgled and bubbled as the moving water swept into rocks and spruce trees laid over in the current.

I refused to march in the direction of camp. I was determined to continue hunting as long as the light lasted. I watched both river banks for indications of crossings. I waited near places I thought might bring a moose to drink. I worked at moving in silence. I scanned any shadows and places that looked as though an animal might pass there. Nothing. No tracks. No scat. Nothing. The valley seemed empty.

September days in the Arctic hang balanced between summer and autumn. The sun floats on the western horizon, never quite setting, but the useful light disappears. The stars come out and the moon rises, and on clear nights the Aurora Borealis appears to dance across the northern sky in ghostly apparitions of greens and reds. I returned to camp in darkness, though a thin line of sunset and daylight clung to the west. The stars were out, but the waning moon not yet up, and the dome of the sky not yet dark enough for the Aurora to show.

The smell of campfire smoke reached me when I was still a couple miles out, long before I saw anything of the tents, the firelight, or Jim. He eventually heard the crunching of my footsteps on the river's gravel before he saw me come into the circle of light. I strode over the stones and occasional stick of driftwood, drawn in by the smell of the fire. As I swung around a clump of willow, the fire came into view, the final punctuation to my long day's journey into night.

Jim sat close to the fire, a cook pan or perhaps a stick in his hand, his eyes downcast, and his feet outstretched toward the flames. For the first time in days, Jim hadn't bothered to wear his hip boots. He didn't need them staying around this campsite. Without the waders, his heavy canvas pants showed above his lug soled hunting boots, the right one hastily repaired with a couple of turns of duct tape to keep the broken sole

from flapping. His olive shirt looked like a dark strip between the open halves of his puffy goose down vest. The dancing yellow light of the fire shimmered across his face and gave it a devilish look.

Drawing closer I heard the crackle and spark of the firewood and saw the embers floating in the direction of the river but rising on the breeze until the night smothered them with darkness.

I walked straight to the fire and knelt down, extending my hands to warm them, even before I slipped my rifle off my shoulder. I pushed my right hip out to keep the butt of the rifle from grinding in the stones and gravel on the ground.

As I turned my head to speak, Jim's welcome stunned and stung me, the same as if he'd pitched a stone in my direction.

"Why the hell didn't you call me?" His voice held neither anger nor rancor, but the rebuke was clear and unvarnished. "I thought you were dead and I've been sitting here all day trying to figure how I would tell Gail."

I saw the toll of hours on his face. I could see his shoulders slumped with the weight of it. I could see the shadow of it on his face.

In my escape after the bear left me, when I turned the radio off, I had not thought to call Jim and report that I was safe. He had to assume me dead, killed by the bear on his second attack. At best, I could be mauled and slowly dying out there somewhere.

He had no solid notion where I might be. He didn't know my plans and I hadn't shared a compass heading with him. He only knew that I'd gone south toward the

mountain. Jim had no way to search for me or even signal, except to keep the fire going in case I might drag myself back towards the smoke. He had heard no gunfire and could only assume that the bear had gotten me. He said he'd tried many times throughout the afternoon to raise me on the radio, but the only thing he'd heard was the soft rush of electrons when he pressed or released the talk button.

“Oh, Jeez, I'm sorry,” I stammered.

It was paltry and inadequate. I groped for words. I'd been so euphoric, so lost in my own thoughts after meeting the bear that I'd forgotten about calling Jim. I'd even forgotten my promise to do a radio check at noontime. In all the hours since the bear left me, I'd never once thought of the radio in my pocket.

Jim never uses many words, but his face reads like a book. I could see the hours he'd agonized and I struggled for something to say.

Before I could find a reasonable response, Jim said, “I made supper. Get a plate.”

We filled our plates and ate by the fire, avoiding the drift of smoke.

“This is good,” I said hoping the acknowledgment offered amends. “What's in it?”

“That's the last of the caribou backstrap,” he said without looking up from his plate. “If you don't kill something soon we'll have to cut up one of the roasts to make this dehydrated crap edible.”

As we finished, we sat for a long while watching the night. I told Jim of the plane in the awful willow tangles, and of finding the moose carcass. I tried to recall for him every detail of the bear, except for my terror when I looked into its face.

I told him of my long slog around the mountain, and what this whole river valley looks like from up there. But I did not mention how I enjoyed the afternoon in the sun, on my side of the mountain, while he agonized the afternoon away, here on his side.

Looking downriver, I saw the black bulk of another unnamed mountain silhouetted against the night sky. I'd passed down a finger of it on my return to camp. Someone high up on the flank would have a commanding view of the river and adjoining countryside. I knew where I would hunt in the morning.

Requiem

The morning after the bear encounter started slow. As usual, Jim was up and out in the first gray light of dawn. But I burrowed down into my sleeping bag and tried to go back to sleep. I was stiff and sore from my encounter with the grizzly and all the extra miles I'd walked.

Floating somewhere between wake and sleep, I waited for the rays of the sun to poke over the ridges to the east and warm the tent with their beams of light. Outside, I could hear Jim pumping up the pressure in the stove's fuel tank and then turning the valve to send a jet of vaporized fuel rushing toward the burner. The crunching clank as he set a pot down on the burner brought me fully awake. I couldn't hide from the day any longer.

My socks hadn't dried much even though I'd spread them out before climbing into the bag the night before. I knew they'd stick as I tried to force their dampness into the perpetual damp inside my hip boots waiting outside the tent.

"What's it like out there," I called to Jim.

"Same as it's been. Get out here and see for yourself."

"Throw me my boots, would you?" I said, as I struggled to finish dressing within the confines of the tent. Just as I threw back the nylon entrance flap, my boots came flying toward me, as Jim tossed them and then moved off toward the spot where we cached our food, fifty or sixty yards from our campsite.

I danced, pulling those boots on over my damp clothes. As I did, I glanced up at the mountain I called the Gates of Valhalla overlooking our camp by the river. The rising sun sprayed across the tundra slopes of the mountain, but the shallow folds in the ground remained in shadow, dark shadows, where anything might crouch.

“I told you it was the same weather,” Jim said, with a wave of his arm at the bright, cloudless blue sky. He came into camp carrying packets of powder that would become our breakfast.

“We’ve been damned lucky with the weather,” I said, trying to sound more enthusiastic than I felt. What I really felt were those shadows, the ones working their way across the face of the mountain.

“You are going out this morning, aren’t you?”

“Heck, yeah, I’m going. I’m going to work toward that ridge.” I gestured toward a large finger of land a mile or so to the east. “If I can gain a little elevation, maybe I can see down into those damned willow thickets. The dark brown of a moose should stand out against the gray of all that willow.”

“If you don’t connect, we’ll pull out tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll get going just as soon as I’ve eaten something,” I said, pouring some hot water into my cup of oatmeal flakes.

We ate sitting on some pieces of driftwood we’d dragged up from the riverbank. Mostly we ate in silence. Every couple of spoonful I’d glance up at the mountain and recall minute details of my encounter with the massive grizzly the morning before. For

reasons I could not understand, that bear halted his attack and retreated, leaving me untouched.

Jim never said if he was angry about my forgetting to call on the radio to tell him I was okay, after the bear backed away. I knew I'd let him think the worst for eight or ten hours. Still embarrassed, I kept my head down and spooned the unadorned oatmeal into me as fast as I could. Despite my reluctance, I needed to get back out there and hunt. Getting a moose would make up for my blunder the day before.

"I'll grab my stuff and get started," I said, as I scraped the last little bit of oatmeal out of the bottom of my cup.

The sun felt warm and good where I sat on my piece of driftwood, and getting started held little interest. Another day of wading through that jungle of willows, trying to move as quietly as possible, made me feel tired. I hadn't seen any fresh moose sign the day before, and that bear was out there somewhere not too far away.

The morning was beautiful, as soft and warm as the Arctic ever gets, but I didn't feel like hunting. I could've sat for a long time and sipped some of our sweet tea while I watched the sunlight play across the mountains.

"When I get down there," I said. "I'll work that ridge where it juts towards the water, first. If needed, I'll work further down river this afternoon."

I expected Jim to say something like "Be sure to take your radio," but he didn't. He didn't say anything, so I said it.

“I’ll stop ten minutes out and give you a radio check. I’ll call in again at noon and two o’clock.”

“Okay,” was all Jim said.

I stuffed some energy bars into my pockets for my lunch. This time making certain to take them along, I hung my binoculars and compass around my neck, buttoning the compass into my shirt pocket and tucking the heavy binoculars into my parka so they wouldn’t flop around. Just before stepping off, I crawled part way into the tent to retrieve my rifle from where it lay all night next to my sleeping bag. The sun made the tent like an oven, and I backed out quickly rather than start sweating in my wool clothes and parka.

“Whoa, it’s warm in there,” I said, scrambling out on my hands and knees, dragging the rifle behind me.

“I may crawl in for a nap after I’ve finished with the chores.”

“Well, you can think about me trying to claw my way up that hill,” I said, waving my rifle in the direction I intended to go.

“Hurry up and get a moose and you can quit humping all over Alaska.” The hint of sarcasm in his unaccented baritone was as evident as a poke with a sharp stick.

I stepped around the back of the tent and away from the little clearing with its carpet of moss and sedges. Out of sight at once, I called from the swarm of willows. “I’ll make a radio check in ten minutes.”

Weaving and twisting through the willows, I tried to move as quietly as I could. But my heart wasn’t in it like it had been the day before. My feet were sore and my steps

made click and clack sounds in the stones of the old riverbed. My ankles felt weak and it seemed as though I was walking on a floor covered six inches deep in golf balls.

The air was warm and I soon overheated. My feet began to sweat in the rubber boots and I unzipped my parka as far as I could without setting the binoculars swinging. I carried the rifle slung over my shoulder and not the least ready. Dodging left and right, I steered around the clumps of leafless willow bushes.

My move toward the promontory was more of a hike than a hunt. I had a sense that the landscape was empty of game. I felt the mountain where I met the bear off to my right and had to fight the urge to move left, closer to the river.

“Jim, Jim Cox, radio check, over.”

“Yeah, I hear you loud and clear.”

“Roger. I’ll check in at noon.”

“Roger. Out.”

He didn’t say it, but I thought, the radio works fine when you remember to use it. I felt bad when I thought again about the look on Jim’s face when I returned to camp the evening before. The silent radio in my hand brought the feelings back.

With the little radio back in my pocket, I moved on. The thickets were empty. No birds. No animals. No recent sign of anything. Here and there willow shoots showed scars of browsing many weeks old. I tried to stay interested but I was moving more than hunting.

A mile east of our campsite, the willow thickets came to an abrupt end against the steep sides of a finger of land that formed a wall between the river to the north and the flank of the mountain to the south. The crest was several hundred feet above me, but I knew there was no game up there. The slopes were devoid of cover.

I started up immediately. It was a relief to escape the stinging willow slaps. The huge bluff was covered in a desert of dry-growing tundra plants no more than a foot tall. The fields of tundra had already gone to gray, russet and brown with the autumn.

“There’s no moose hiding up there,” I said to myself as I started up.

On the ridge I turned and walked several hundred yards to a rocky outcrop that seemed to soar above the river and the immense landscape around me. From my perch on the rocks, I could see a territory the size of Rhode Island. Everything was silent except for the wind playing in the folds of my parka and the occasional barking of a raven.

My plan was to sit and be still for a while, using my binoculars to scan the thickets below, both river banks, and the gullies where water sometimes ran down off the heights of the mountain. Anything as large as a moose would be easy to spot from my seat on the promontory.

The color of the river this morning reminded me of the color of the water in the Drina River in eastern Bosnia. I remembered looking down from a similar promontory ten years before, across the river from the hellhole that was then the town of Foca. The town including the highway bridge across the river, was in ruin. Serb forces had killed or expelled nearly all their opposition and established detention centers known as rape camps, where several thousand Muslim women and girls suffered unspeakable horrors.

I had thought then that the approaches to Foca looked like Alaska, spiny, snow-covered peaks in the distance, a brown plain that looked like tundra that was dotted here and there with dark stands of spruce trees, and then the descent into the river valley where the town lay. But the comparison soon faded. Foca was nothing like Alaska. Both had shaped me, but Foca had been ugly against the great, sweeping beauty of Alaska.

“I’m glad it’s only the color of the river that compares to here,” I thought. Alaska, or really anyplace north of the 45th parallel has always been a sanctuary for me, a place I was always going to, but never quite getting there. Life sent me elsewhere for the most part. And now in retirement, I felt cut off from so much of what I knew.

I scanned the terrain the way an archeologist would lay out a deliberate grid to discipline his searches. With the height I could see the smoke from the campfire Jim was tending. And off to my left I saw the marsh and little pond where I stumbled upon the moose kill and the irate grizzly the day before.

I fixed the binoculars on the area around the pond, searching for the telltale blonde tones of the bear. My mind played over my memories of the encounter. I saw again his anger and how close he came to me. I hoped I wouldn’t spot a moose near the pond. The prospect of going back down there sent a little shiver across my shoulders.

When I spotted the small flat rock where I stood as the bear confronted me, or I confronted him, I let the binoculars drop to my chest. I found I preferred looking at the spot as part of an unmagnified view.

I ate an energy bar from the stash in my pocket and checked the time. Snuggling against the rocks to hide from the wind, I closed my eyes and waited for noon.

“Jim Cox. Jim Cox. Radio check, over.”

“Roger, over.”

“Roger, out.”

“Hey. You seeing anything?”

“No. The sign is weeks or months old.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m on the high ground east of you. Where the river bows around that big finger.
You can probably see my red shirt with your binoculars.”

“Roger, over.”

“Roger, out.”

The pop of static and the slight hiss as the radio went silent triggered a memory even older than Foca.

* * * *

The radios crackled with short, snippets conversations about something happening in Charlie Company. Outside the command track it was dark and cold. November in central Texas is like that. Charlie Company was somewhere off to the north, rehearsing the lead in a night attack. The colonel was on the radio. His call was for me, one of the lowly lieutenants. Battalion commanders don’t usually concern themselves with junior staff guys.

Captain Ball had a quizzical look on his face as he jerked his head in the direction we assumed the colonel to be and said, “You’d better get going. He wants you for something.”

I quickly checked the map coordinates, grabbed my helmet, and roused my driver to crank up the jeep. The moonless night revealed few clues about where we were going, but I knew this terrain like I knew no other place on earth, having maneuvered over it night and day for almost three years. There wasn’t any bush I hadn’t seen before. As we bounced along, I wondered why the colonel would be calling for me.

We were headed toward Antelope Creek, a nasty obstacle for tanks and other heavy things most of the year. It ran west to east across the entire maneuver area with no way around it. It had to be crossed at a few known fording sites that cut down the steep sides of the creek’s canyon. Otherwise, it was just a big impassable ditch that controlled everything trying to move north or south, just as it had in the last century when bands of Comanche warriors moved through here on their way to and from raids on Mexican settlements and isolated ranches further south.

In winter the creek held plenty of water, and then only a couple of fords would be usable. In summer it was nearly dry, except for occasional flash floods brought on by violent thunderstorms that would sweep down from the Panhandle.

As we drew close to the canyon, the driver and I could see a glow from headlights among the cedars and live oaks that grow dense in the creek bed. We knew immediately something unusual was going on. No one ever used white light in the field. White light meant that heavy equipment was working to recover something. If the colonel was down

there in the creek with all that white light going, something was seriously wrong and he somehow attached my name to it.

We picked our way along, knowing we were nearing the top of some cliffs. I was navigating and the driver steered the Jeep where I told him. Watching the stars overhead and feeling the wind across my face, I located a cut that led to the trail into the canyon. At the bottom we rode through shallow water, sending waves radiating out from either side of the jeep. For an instant before the water closed in behind us, it looked like a miniaturized version of Moses' parting the Red Sea. Turning west we followed the watercourse upstream. Heading toward the glow from the lights, we kept ours off.

Forcing through brush and around rocks along the creek bed, we came into the circle of light where several Jeeps were parked, their lights shining into a stagnant pool of water. Several figures milled about, their giant shadows projected onto the cliff face on the far side of the creek. In the pool a tank lay on its back in four feet of gray-green water. The missing driver's escape hatch revealed a black hole in the belly of the tank.

My insides felt like a knot when I saw that hole where the escape hatch should've been. A scene of sheer panic played in my mind as I thought of the driver trying to lift its 100 pounds or so to free himself as the water came flooding into his upside down compartment. Meant to drop away from an upright tank when the driver released its lever, the heavy hatch would've just stayed in place with the tank upside down. Terror must've caused him to lift it with enough force to fling it into the creek.

If, and only if, the turret was rotated to the right position would it have been possible for the gunner, loader and tank commander to drag themselves past the cannon's

breech to a possible escape through the chaos of the driver's compartment. Otherwise, they would have to exit through the top hatches now in contact with the bottom of the creek. My mind leapt to imagine their injuries and their fright as they tried to escape the rising water.

"Holy shit," I said, though no one heard me as the driver pulled alongside one of the other vehicles and cut the engine. We hopped out and strode to the edge of the water. Soldiers stood staring at the bulk of the tank, all 52 tons of 'rolled homogeneous steel' on its back, looking like a giant dead turtle.

Anyone could see what had happened. The tank had come from the south, and in moving along the top of the canyon had somehow driven over the cliff and plunged fifty feet into the creek, flipping onto its back as it fell.

"Where's the crew?" I asked.

"Already medivaced," a voice answered.

It seemed strange that I hadn't heard the chopper coming in or seen any lights as the pilots hunted for a safe place to set down. But just then, a hand touched my shoulder and I turned to face the colonel. A head taller than I, he looked down and got right to his point. "I want you to take Lt. Green's body to the hospital," he said without introduction. I saw the body in the shadow below the beam of headlights. It lay half in and half out of the creek. The feet and legs were firmly on shore. The chest and arms bobbed in the dark water.

Stunned, I made no reaction for a moment. I saw Captain Buckley, the Charlie Company commander, out of the corner of my eye. It looked like he was trembling. Perhaps he was cold from the damp night air.

“Yes, sir,” I said without asking for clarification. It wasn’t a time to quibble, but I was thinking, “What in hell does this have to do with me?”

I looked around and saw Dave Vance, the Medical Platoon Leader, standing next to a field ambulance. “Oh, good,” I thought, “At least we won’t have to pile him into my Jeep.”

“Dave, get some medics and a stretcher over here,” I called, trying to sound calm and in control. The colonel moved away in the direction of Captain Buckley. Frank Velleca, the Battalion’s maintenance officer, was nearby working out the physics of righting the tank. In the background, radios in the Jeeps crackled and hissed with conversations. Everybody was calling for updates, but I never heard anybody answer.

Vance and his medics came up with a stretcher and unfolded it in the gravel beside the creek. The four of us, maybe there were five, moved to pick John Green out of the water and lay him on the stretcher. At the edge of things where the harsh light from the headlights turned to half-light, we lifted the body and slung it onto the stretcher. I say, slung, because John Green was a big guy and we had a tenuous grasp on him.

I had him by the ankles, his dead feet in his wet boots, kicking me in the chest as I lifted. And though I was at that end, when we raised him off the ground I could see he’d been decapitated. Vance looked over at me and in his Tennessee voice said, “That’s why he didn’t go in the medivac chopper with the others.”

Someone produced a poncho and we tried to wrap it around the body for the ride to the hospital. It would take an hour and maybe more to get him there. The poncho seemed like a good idea.

The ambulance was nothing more than a Jeep with a red cross painted on an oversized canvas top that covered metal racks for holding four stretchers, two up and two down. It carried people or corpses, but no one got treatment riding in a field ambulance. When we loaded John's body in, we slid him headfirst so no one would see that he was headless, though his feet hung out the back. A medic drove with Vance in the passenger seat, and they led on the way out of the gulley and to the hospital. We followed in our jeep, keeping our chins tucked into our chests because of the cold night air. The whole process took no more than six or seven minutes.

All the way I stared at John's boots protruding out the back of the ambulance. They bounced and swayed at the edge of the light from our headlights as if he were alive and kicking. I thought perhaps we should've found something to lash him to the stretcher so some of his dignity might remain and we might be spared watching his lifeless legs flail about. I also realized that I hardly knew John. He was one of the new guys, a Texan. I knew he had a wife and a small son, but little else. Tommy Evans was his good friend and another platoon leader in Charlie Company. They fished together and had cookouts and dinner parties with their wives. Why the colonel summoned me, and not Tommy, for this task mystified me.

At the hospital entrance they were expecting us and directed that we drive around to another door, where the living seldom come and go. Orderlies helped with the

stretcher. Someone official asked what I was there for and I said, “I’m here to retrieve his sensitive items,” meaning anything he had on him that needed to be accounted for.

I steeled myself to rummage in his pockets, but I was most concerned with his pistol and the classified code books we all carried around our necks, called Signal Operating Instructions. We wore our SOI on a cord around our necks for security and tucked the book down inside our shirt or jacket to keep the thick wad of paper from flopping around. Given that John’s head was missing, I thought the signals book might be missing too, and when the sun came up we’d all be on our knees out there in the creek bed looking for it, lest it somehow fall into the hands of the Communists—if any Communist agents were wandering in the brush country of central Texas. Same with his pistol. I knew it should be in a shoulder holster tucked under his left arm.

Before we did any retrievals, Vance and I found ourselves in a discussion with the mortuary person. He asked who this was and we told him, “Lt. John Green, Charlie Company, 1/7 Cav.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure, we’re sure. His name’s on his shirt. Check for his dog tags and wallet.”

The wallet was there, but no dog tags. Either he hadn’t worn them or they’d come off in the accident. I told the attendant to look for a huge Texas Aggie ring on John’s left hand with his wedding band. But, the Aggie ring wasn’t there either. He probably didn’t like to wear that big hunk of gold in the field. Or, it too might be lying somewhere in the creek bed.

The medical staff took over handling the body, and someone handed me the pistol and the code book I was supposed to find and return to government control. John's personal effects I left undisturbed. I figured they were none of my business.

As I walked back to the Jeep, I stuffed the pistol into my belt and the blood-soaked code pages into my shirt. Vance remained at the hospital a while longer, but my driver and I immediately headed back to the field. It was a long, cold ride, though the night air felt good. Taking big gulps of the air, I was slightly less queasy as we drove along with the accompanying dust cloud trailing off behind.

In the dark we picked our way to where the support base was hidden and I reported to Captain Ball. Everyone in the battalion knew what had happened and the training exercise was in shambles. Those not on guard or radio watch drifted away, but I was too keyed up to sleep. I was raw and on edge. If I closed my eyes I saw creepy, sick views play across the backside of my eyelids.

I knew that by now Captain Buckley, the chaplain and Tommy Evans were knocking on an apartment door in the middle of the night to tell John's stunned wife that he was gone. It was really the captain's and the chaplain's official duty, but Tommy was John's friend and someone must've thought his being there would soften the blow. I'm sure they were right, and I was certain mine was the easier task.

I thought about my mother getting that same news 26 years before when my father's plane went down in the Sea of Japan. All she got was a telegram from Washington. There was no friend and no chaplain to help soften the blow. My grandfather handed her the telegram while my grandmother held on to me.

Too spooked to sleep, I laid down across the hood of my jeep, using my bedroll for a pillow, and spent most of the remaining night staring at the stars. The familiar monotonous roar of generators helped me float along, and for a while the heat from the engine radiating through the hood kept me warm. But if I closed my eyes I saw those awful boots again. Once I got out my flashlight and looked at the muddy marks those boots left on my chest. And just when I got my breathing regular, a radio would squawk and I'd jolt to full alert again. I could've moved away from the sounds of the radios and the guys on night duty, but I didn't want to be alone out there under some cedar bush. It was a lousy night.

By mid-day several officers drifted back to the accident scene. I was one of them. Real senior guys from on high put in their perfunctory appearance. Maintenance types gyrated around trying to figure out how to recover the tank. Charlie Company guys stood around looking dazed and waiting for someone to tell them what to do. Dave Vance and one or two others walked with me along the edge of the cliff scanning for evidence. We casually swung our feet at broken cedar branches looking for debris that might be hidden underneath. Following the marks in the dirt, suddenly I was in and of the horror.

The tracks left by Green's tank told the story. Clearly he'd been lost and his driver was driving blind. They had no idea where they were in relation to the cliff. There was no sign of braking, just two parallel imprints leading straight over the edge.

The sun was high in the sky and felt warm on my shoulders as I approached the rim. The air was calm and heavy with the scent of crushed cedar and mesquite. Twisted stalks pointed this way and that, pulverized by the weight of the passing tank. Some

reminded me of petrified cobras rising from a snake charmer's basket, though no music sounded except the rhythmic crunch of our boots in the dirt.

One of the medics who'd been some ways down over the edge approached me and held out a wadded up bundle made out of a sling from a medical kit.

"What's this?"

Pushing the bundle towards me, the kid said, "It's Lt. Green's face. I found it on the ground."

A wave of dizziness swept me as I lifted my two hands to meet his outstretched arms. I locked my eyes on his and tried not to betray any emotion as we both clasped the bundle for an instant. The cloth seemed to pulse with a current of electricity as I held it straight out in front of me. A voice in my head whispered, "Steady...don't blow it," as I said, "I've got it."

The soldier dropped his gaze and stepped aside as I carefully slipped the bundle into the cargo pocket of my pants without unwrapping it. The medic withdrew without looking my way again.

I'm left-handed, but I put the bundle in my right-side pocket. I wished the thing as far away from me as possible. The sensation of electricity passed from my hands to my thigh. Even concealed by the weight of my pistol slung low off my right hip, I could feel the bundle pulsing against my leg. "Steady," the voice in my brain said again as I turned to walk back up the slope toward the jeep.

Vance caught me before I'd gone very far. The smell of dust and cedar clung in our throats when he said, "You want me to take those remains in the ambulance?"

"No, I've got it now. I'll see it through," was all I could think to respond.

Early on Thanksgiving morning I met Tommy at the funeral home, a large, graceful, dignified edifice that seemed to be one of the most prosperous businesses in all of East Texas. I'd driven there to give him a break from standing watch over John's casket and seeing to the needs of the bereaved. I wished I was home to salvage something of Thanksgiving, but home was hours away. John was a hero in this town before dying, and now we were returning him to his loved ones.

Tommy showed me to the little room where John's flag-draped coffin reclined under a spotlight, the colors on the flag bright and clear in the beam of overhead light. After a couple of minutes staring at the flag, we escaped into the sunlight by a side door. On a small terrace we smoked cigarettes with one of the sergeants Tommy brought with him, and then he drove me to the house to pay my respects to the family.

On the short drive, Tommy reminded me that this was our second Thanksgiving in a row away from home. "Last year we were eating canned turkey in the desert," he said, letting his voice trail off, his thoughts no doubt straying back to scenes of our three-month deployment in the Mojave Desert the previous year.

"It's three for me," I responded feeling hollow. "The year before I was the Staff Duty Officer on Thanksgiving."

It was a nice house on a quiet street. It was John's in-law's house, and the living room, dining room and kitchen overflowed with aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors.

Food was on display everywhere. Everyone come to care for the girl they'd known since she was a baby. The crowd of people welcomed me with firm hands and voices louder than I thought fit for such an occasion. The house hummed with conversations.

Through the doors to the back patio I saw a happy, smiley little boy running and being chased by young women, his aunts, I guessed. These women stepped in to take care of the boy so his mother could grieve freely. I wondered who had done that for me when I was even younger than this boy.

Tommy seemed to know everyone and was accepted like a member of the family, but I was uncomfortable and on guard. I didn't want to do something wrong. I wanted to do for them everything I'd want done for my own people. I wanted to show them that John's life counted for something and that his death was somehow noble. I wanted them to be proud of him and also proud of us who stood there silent and fidgety.

After a few minutes, John's mother-in-law took my arm and led me down the central hallway of the large, one-story house. This end of the house was silent and still. Here she quietly opened a bedroom door and ushered me in to meet John's wife.

The spacious room was completely dark, with heavy drapes drawn across the windows. I could hardly see to walk, but managed make out a figure on the bed propped up by pillows and sobbing, her anguish as palpable as anything I'd ever heard before. She was broken and barely aware of our presence. Her mother leaned down and quietly told who I was and that I'd come to take care of John, which brought forth a burst of ragged, labored breathing and more sobs.

I wanted to withdraw and run from her pain, but her mother waved me forward and patted the coverlet for me to sit down on the bed. I sat as gently as I could, awkward in my dress uniform. My coat tugged on my tie, which tightened around my neck. Her mother silently withdrew as the girl seized my hand and held it like a vise. Her whispers thanked me for coming, but her blotchy cheeks and tortured eyes told me her dreams were shattered. For her, and the boy running in the backyard, everything was different now.

She thanked me again for being there and I lied to her. I told her I'd been with him and that he'd felt no pain. I told her that he had just slipped away. At that she seemed drift off. Whether she fainted or fell asleep, I didn't know. She fixed her eyes on the dark drapes with the bright sunshine on the other side and wasn't with me anymore.

I stood and backed toward the door on my toes, not wanting anything from me to add to her darkness. In the hall I moved toward the light and the sounds of good people trying to do right things.

The next day we returned to sit through services in the church where John was baptized, went to Sunday school and married his sweetheart. It was a church where preachers talked in that peculiar East Texas twang and felt the Spirit deeply. The Battalion Chaplain participated and bungled his eulogy, mispronouncing the names of John's close relatives. Seething, I clung to my pew, my knuckles turning white with rage.

The two fathers escorted the widow to her seat and then back up the aisle when the service ended, but it looked more like they were carrying her than escorting. John's

son proudly marched in, holding hands between two of the young women detailed to look after him.

After the service we gathered in the little graveyard under live oak trees, the family and close friends in white chairs beneath a canopy set close to the open grave. Charlie Company was there in force, Captain Buckley out in front beside the guidon. The rest of us made a little formation of our own off to the side, at the edge of things.

The preachers said some more good words, but I stared at my feet when I heard the chaplain's whiney monotone. I thought again about John's boots coating my hands with mud and pressing creek water into my chest.

When Captain Buckley called it, we stood to attention and the firing party snapped off three volleys from seven rifles—twenty-one guns, as befitting a dead soldier. The flag detail folded the coffin flag and the colonel made his entrance. He presented the flag to the bleary-eyed widow clutching her hankie, her shoulders heaving. "On behalf of a grateful Nation..."

Half a football field away and out of sight, a bugler sounded taps. The notes rose in the autumn air to mingle with the branches of the oaks, and dance among the headstones.

* * * *

Seeing nothing more than a far off raven riding thermals above the river, I gave up sitting still and hoping to spot a moose. I dropped down over the far side of the ridge and worked through the willow thickets there all afternoon.

I made my promised radio checks with Jim and tried not to think too much about the bear and the events of yesterday. I dangled my feet in the river letting the chill water ease the soreness. I didn't do it for long. The frigid water would coagulate my blood if I left my feet in there for more than a minute. The sun-warmed stones felt good when I gently rolled them against the bottoms of my feet.

With the stones pressed against my feet, I suddenly realized I was happy. I was grateful the encounter with the bear went my way, but also very glad to have had the chance to look a great bear in the eye. I still had my dreams, when so many guys like John Green had theirs snuffed out somewhere along the line.

When the sun started down the backside of the sky, I worked my way towards camp, looking for moose the whole way.

Showdown at Strangle Woman Creek

The sign appeared as if springing from nowhere. After ten days without spotting anything fresh, suddenly under a brilliant blue and cloudless sky, there were tracks in the toffee-colored mud at the river's edge.

Instinctively, I pulled hard on the oars to turn the big raft toward shore before we drifted past.

"Tracks," I hissed at Jim, my jaw clenched with the effort of pulling on the oars. Reacting, Jim scrambled into the bow, preparing for the bump and grind of landing.

He leapt overboard and fastened us to a pile of driftwood leftover from the spring floods that sweep this and every other watercourse in the valley when the snow melts. I struggled with the oars to hold us in the current. When Jim grabbed the bow, the stern wanted to swing with the force of the river and float off downstream. I fought the drag of the water against the long, sky-blue pontoons by pushing backwards with the downstream oar.

"Come on, damn it," Jim grunted as he leaned backward to counter the weight of the raft.

He grabbed one of the lines attached to the tip of the upstream pontoon and backed farther ashore, gaining some leverage over the heavy raft.

"There you go," I called. "You've got it."

We staggered on shore as the boots of our waders sank into the mud and gravel mix that formed a bar where a sluggish little creek drained into the glacial blue water of the river. We stood for the first time since leaving our last camp, many hours before, and

many miles back upriver. We bobbled about until we limbered up again after sitting so long. But our focus was on the tracks a few feet away.

Moose tracks. Bending over, I touched the deep imprint in the mud. It felt warm in the direct rays of the sun. The tracks told a clear story. Here a big bull had met a receptive cow and they'd gone off together up the sluggish little creek.

"These are only a couple of hours old," I said, trying not to sound excited. "Three at the most."

"She came straight down along the creek," Jim answered. "And it looks like he followed her."

Likely the cow wandered along the languid slough called Strangle Woman Creek, browsing on willow shoots as she went. Where the frigid waters of the main river met the warmer, slower water of the creek, she paused for a drink. The bull caught up to her here.

With the rut fully underway, the tracks told us that she'd accepted him and they'd moved off somewhere close by to mate.

"He's somewhere right around here," Jim said.

"Those are big tracks. You think he's legal?"

"Oh, yeah. He's legal. Just remember, there's about three feet between the tips of his ears. And if you can see another foot of spread on either side of his ears—then he's good and legal."

That year the state of Alaska required fifty inches across the widest part of a bull moose rack for it to be legal to shoot. "But, if he's got four brow tines on one side you

don't need to worry about the fifty inches, that's the one exception," Jim reminded me.

"But look at that track. He'll go at least fifty inches."

The bull's track sank five inches into the mud and was as big as the length of my hand. Seeing it recharged my enthusiasm and swept aside the emptiness of the previous two weeks.

Already supposed to be winging our way south, we had talked that morning to our bush pilot, via the little walkie-talkie Jim carried in his pocket. When Frenchie flew over our camp, we let him know that we wanted three more days to hunt before he returned to pick us up. So before flying off he told us of a pick-up point further downriver and promised to notify our families of the change to the plan.

Jim, my more experienced partner, bent down to study the deep impressions left by the moose. The tracks told us he was big, perhaps large enough to be the dominant bull in the whole area. As Jim stood up again he said, "This guy might be the Big Kahuna, running off other bulls and taking all the females for himself." Excitement I hadn't felt in days welled up in me. I wanted to find him, and hoped that he'd prove legal to shoot.

We decided that I would hunt the rest of the afternoon. Jim would organize the camp, beach the raft, and cache the caribou meat, using some of the driftwood around to build a platform somewhere in the shade to keep the meat bags off the ground and as cool as possible.

The spot where Strangle Woman Creek eases into the main channel of the Colleen River made a poor camp: sloping, muddy, scattered with driftwood, and cramped.

"This is a pretty crappy site," I said as I looked around.

“Yeah, but we’re here to get you a moose, not for camping,” Jim countered.

Filling my pockets with energy bars, I took some water, slung my rifle over my shoulder and crossed the little creek in three steps to study the tracks some more. I was glad to leave the campsite to Jim as I set out following the creek bed away from the river. I moved as quietly as I could into the willow thickets that flourished wherever there was water.

I tried to follow the tracks, but the moose left the muddy creek bed two hundred yards from its mouth. I soon lost their trail among the acres of stones that paved the entire river valley and the patches of tundra plants and stunted spruce that grows anywhere the river hasn’t scoured.

The afternoon sun felt warm on my back as I worked through the willows, my eyes searching the ground for more moose sign. The interwoven branches of the willow once again made moving quietly almost impossible. My movements looked like a dance or some weird form of martial art. I ducked and twirled and twisted and weaved to avoid snapping the noisy branches in my face. Sometimes I’d raise my rifle straight into the air with one hand and try to quietly push a willow out of my way with the other hand. Other times, I’d push against the branches with my back and try to roll myself off the shrub without making any noise. The dry, dead leaves sounded like a baby’s rattle whenever anything shook them.

I tried to keep myself moving into the wind, but with all the bobbing around I was sure my scent flew into all corners of the valley. I craned my neck to see over the willows to find higher ground. I needed to break out of the willow to regain the silence.

Reaching a shelf of old river bank, I sat for a while, leaning against a fallen spruce. I tried not to doze in the warm sun as I listened for sounds of moose moving through the thickets. But the only thing I heard was the low whistle of approaching winter from over the Brooks Range. The sun felt warm, but the wind had a bite that said snow could be along any day.

Sometime in mid-afternoon I crossed open ground, an empty expanse of tundra dotted with spruce trees. These white spruce look like spires of green with clumps of needles growing at the end of branches. They made me think of drawings by Dr. Seuss. The intense cold of the Arctic winter limits the tree's height, most growing no taller than fifteen or twenty feet in a hundred years.

A curious boreal owl lifted off from the very top of a sentinel spruce and flew in circles around me, close enough to touch. Here at the northern limit of trees, everything is curious about strangers. The miniature raptor seemed to want to make eye contact and its expression seemed to say, "Who are you, and why are you here?"

For twenty minutes or more the dainty little owl flew in orbits around me or flew away only to return in moments. Sensing we were both tiring of the game, I moved on as the little owl returned to his observation post at the top lone spruce a hundred yards away on the tundra.

I stayed out until well into evening, circling to the west, away from the creek and then working my way back to the east along the river until I found the campsite again. I entered the glow of campfire light tired and empty-handed.

I was well past just getting concerned about being empty-handed. Jim had his two caribou, but so far I had nothing and we were running out of time. The thought of

returning home without getting either a moose or a caribou felt like a weight. I picked at my supper with no enthusiasm. In three days Frenchie was coming back to pick us up whether or not I shot any game.

At twilight, a solitary wolf appeared like a ghost and sat, watching us from the opposite bank of the river, not more than forty yards away. “Jim, there’s a wolf across the river,” I said just loud enough for him to hear me.

We continued to eat, but tried not to clank the spoons against the plates. We enjoyed the wolf’s visit and didn’t want to scare it. The old driftwood in the fire hissed and crackled while the wolf sat at the edge of the water, close enough for us to see it panting. Its long, pink tongue drooped out of the left side of its mouth. Its mottled, brown tail curled behind its back.

“Wonder what’s so interesting about us,” I said, as Jim moved to rinse the dishes.

“Who knows? Maybe we smell pretty good. Or, maybe we smell pretty bad.”

One moment the wolf was there watching, and an instant later it was gone, absorbed into the countryside as eerily as it had arrived. I thought I was looking at it, but I didn’t see it go. I never said anything to Jim, but part of me wondered if I’d seen the wolf at all.

Night enveloped us more forcefully and more thoroughly than even two days prior. The seasons change abruptly in the Arctic, taking only hours to do what may take days or even weeks in the Lower 48. The summer evenings we enjoyed just three weeks before gave way to an abbreviated arctic autumn and now that, too, was slipping away.

Sipping tea, we waited by the fire for the stars to show themselves and for the Aurora Borealis we knew would show any day, now that the sky had surrendered to the autumn.

The tea fortified us for a while, but not long. The chill night air soon drove us into the warm cocoons of our sleeping bags. "I'm heading for bed," Jim said over his shoulder as he finished organizing the stove and dishes the way he wanted them

Zipped into my bag, I read only a couple of paragraphs in *A Separate Peace* before switching off the headlamp. The smell of wood smoke and damp, muddy earth permeated the camp and stuck in my nostrils until sleep overcame me.

I went back up the creek bed before sun up, the warmth of my bedroll more on my mind than moose. The predawn chill hovered near the ground, resisting the new light. With no breakfast to warm me, I shivered as I tried to move in a smooth, quiet stride, avoiding the slap of willow branches however I could.

Trying to put some distance between me and the camp, I moved steadily and with less care than the afternoon before. About a quarter mile out from camp, I followed a dry bed where the creek no longer flowed. That season's creek moved in a channel a few yards to the right. The far bank above the tea-colored water was high, well above my head and topped with a dense stand of spruce. The spears of spruce formed a wall along the creek and the small forest beyond were the last real trees between me and someplace in Siberia.

Peering into the dense stand of trees on the high bank to the right, I assured myself that the moose wouldn't be in there. "Too tight for him," I thought as I moved up the dry creek bed and scanned the willows to the left, where I'd been the afternoon

before. I slowed down and focused my attention there, confident the moose would keep to the willows for their morning browsing or come down the dry bed to where it met the creek for a drink. Daggers of sunlight began to pierce through the thick green-black wall on the right and embed themselves in the withering yellow willow leaves to the left. The cloudless sky slowly drifted from gray to blue. Wisps of vapor trailed off the water in the creek. Patches of tundra below the spruce shimmered with a thin coating of frost. My breath rolled like a tiny cloud in front of me.

The world seemed devoid of sound. No wind stirred. No ravens called. The water in the creek crept along without making a noise. I forced myself to move slowly despite feeling chilled even in my heavy clothes. I kept my focus on the stand of willow to the left.

Above the five- and six-foot tall willow bushes, I could see the summits of bare mountains to the northwest bathed in a flood of orange sunlight. I held my rifle upside down in my left hand, my fingers wrapped around the magazine well and the bolt, just forward of the trigger guard, the sling dangling toward the ground.

It was a queer way to carry a rifle, but one that I'd come to find comfortable and comforting in all the hours and miles I'd carried it. The tips of my fingers ached with cold as they poked through my fingerless gloves and gripped the frosted steel and Kevlar of the rifle.

Alternating between looking down for quiet places to place my steps and looking up to scan the willow for any sign of movement or the dark flank of an animal, I moved further up the old creek bed. Somewhere between my thoughts and my steps, I heard

something. Not a voice, but a note. One low, guttural note, issued like a sentry's challenge.

It came as an announcement and a question rolled into a single note. A startling, single note in a vast silence, coming from somewhere above me on that high bank behind the dense wall of spruce trees.

I faced where I thought the sound came from and dropped to my knees. I removed my hat and tossed it aside, oddly believing I would hear better without it. My senses grasped for information, but there was nothing to see except the impenetrable wall of spruce trees high on the opposite bank of the creek, nothing to smell except the damp earth and layers of decaying spruce needles.

The warmth of the rising sun bored into my chest. My eye lids slammed shut and my chin dropped toward my chest as I recoiled against the burning light. I saw nothing and heard nothing. Frantically trying to recall the tone, I bellowed the best note I could mimic. It was an instinctive reaction.

My imitation 'whump' brought an instant response. An answering snort from somewhere inside the wall of trees turned sharp, like the blast of a car horn. Then I heard trees snapping and felt each nanosecond tick by. Straining to see into the woods and blinding rays of the sun, I tried to locate the source of the noises.

I saw waving antler tines and the broad paddles of a big bull moose bearing down on me. In silhouette they looked like the waving fingers of two hands, splaying in shadow across a lit movie screen. The spikes of the tree trunks stayed vertical, but the spikes of the antler tines waved and swung as if whipped by a gale.

In front of the burning disk of the sun, the raking tines snapped off a shower of branches and sent spruce boughs cascading. He may have thought I was a rival. He might have assumed I was a threat. At the very least, he found my presence an affront. So he plowed through the dense growth, determined to drive me from his territory.

For a moment he stood on top of the embankment, swinging his head in a kind of rage. His antlers hooked and snapped four-inch diameter spruce like they were twigs. He looked black as coal against the fire of the sun, and I could only manage to glance in his direction. Over six-feet at the shoulder and standing on a six-foot tall bank, from my kneeling position he looked immense.

Pausing no more than a second, he charged, leaping off the bank and landing half way across the stream in an eruption of spray. Desperate to stop him before we collided, I raised my rifle and flipped its safety switch in one motion, at the same time wishing him to be a legal kill. "Legal bull, legal bull," I shouted inside my head as the waving antlers eclipsed the rising sun. His four brow tines looked like lances and thicker than my forearms.

My vision went black from the dazzle of sun when I tried to look through the rifle scope. Surrendering to something primal, I told myself to point to the right and down in hopes of finding a vital spot on the dark shape running at me. He was much too close for the scope to be of use anyway.

The rifle blast echoed for miles, but I have no recollection of it. Instead, I felt a sharp blow as the recoil drove the eyepiece of the scope into the bridge of my nose, cutting deep and sending blood flowing into both eyes.

Rattled, I felt like I'd been sucker-punched in a bar fight. I jerked the bolt handle by instinct and chambered another round. The second shot came on the heels of the first, but with even less precision.

By luck, the first shot was a solid hit, just behind the left shoulder, that shocked the bull to a standstill twenty feet in front of me. The second passed harmlessly under his belly – a clean miss.

He stood looking at me for a half second, with big horse eyes, trying to figure out what had happened. He blinked rapidly, before turning ninety degrees to his right and walking along the edge of the creek. I could see water draining off his belly and onto the ground. I heard big rushes of air when he breathed in and out.

Blinded by sun and blood, I rose from my knees and into an unsteady crouch. I blinked frantically to keep my eye lids from sticking shut and fired a third shot as he waded back into the creek the way he had come.

Too wounded to get up the opposite bank, he went down gently for such a big animal. First he went to his knees, and then his legs slipped out from under him. He lay with his head resting in the grass and his massive body partly submerged in the languid water of the slough. His heart gave out quickly, his breath and mine coming in ragged gasps at his end.

Silence returned. It was that deep, utter silence of the Arctic. It fell across the scene like a blanket. The event had lasted less than ten seconds. And when it ended I stood motionless. I don't know for how long. I'll always believe it was a long time that I stood on my side of the creek looking at the huge bull on the other side. Then I moved to secure my three bright silver shell casings, scattered somewhere amid the gravel and

muskeg when I yanked on the bolt handle. I pawed among the grass and sedges trying to locate them with an overwhelming desire not to pollute the pristine landscape by leaving some clue of my presence. I found two right away, but never recovered the third, even though I looked for it several times.

The breeze kicked up and felt strange in my hair as I stared across at my bull. My bull. I tried to offer a prayer of thanksgiving in the tradition of the natives, but my word-thoughts tumbled about, totally inadequate. I felt the trickle of blood drying in the corners of my eyes. The sun and the blow from the scope made my head ache.

The little radio in my left breast pocket chirped and squawked. Jim's voice stabbed the silence. "Have you got something?" he asked, fully assuming I had.

"A legal bull," I croaked, "and it's your worst nightmare."

"What?" he flashed back.

"He's in the water."

"I'll be right there. How far are you?"

"About a quarter mile. Just follow the creek. You'll see me."

I sat down on the near bank and let my rubber boots dangle in the water. At least the water wouldn't be over our hip boots. My rifle lay across my lap and I reloaded three rounds from the pouch on my belt. If the scent of the dead moose attracted a grizzly, I wanted to feel prepared.

I heard Jim plowing through the willows along the streambed before I could see him. He came as fast as he could carrying all the tools and his own rifle. He brought the extra knives and bone saws we needed to butcher my kill. He also brought bright white

cheesecloth bags to put the meat in and two packs so we each could haul meat back to the cache by the river.

On seeing me and the bull, Jim broke into a wide smile and offered high praise. There were congratulatory words – words I can no longer recall. But we both had a real sense of satisfaction at now having a moose to go with the caribou.

We waded across the creek together and measured him at sixty-eight and a half inches at the broadest part of his antler spread. He had four forking brow tines that would've gored me well if he'd kept charging. There was back slapping and picture taking. There was retelling and regaling. And there was a bit of reluctance to start the hard work ahead.

The bull's body lay slightly on its side in the water, his huge head on the grassy bank and tilted to the left by the weight of his rack. The moose was too heavy to drag or lift, or even roll over without mechanical assistance. We had to deal with him as he lay.

Jim was the expert and he said we needed to cut down into the moose and remove at least half of the meat before we would take enough weight off him to then flip him over to remove the remainder of the meat. We'd have to reach down into the cold water and raise the bull's legs as levers to turn him onto his other side.

I took out both my knives and set them on the bank, determined to respond to all of Jim's instructions. I wanted to look like I knew what I was doing. We were a team, but I was the junior partner.

Jim flipped back the right side of his puffy goose-down vest and drew the lovely stag-handled knife he wore high on his right hip. He set the knife on the bull's side while

he removed the vest and tossed it higher on the bank, where it draped over some baby spruce. As long as the sun was up, working would keep us warm.

Opening moose hide is akin to cutting wall-to-wall carpeting with a butter knife. Blades dull quickly. Over the next eleven hours we had to stop cutting every 20 minutes or so to sharpen our knives. Jim had this contraption that clamped a knife's blade at a certain angle while one or the other of us scraped it repeatedly over a sharpening surface. It took five or six minutes to re-sharpen each knife.

Standing for long hours bent over the carcass, our backs hurt and our legs stiffened. Even our feet hurt. The only moving around we did was to fill a bag with cuts of meat and move it to a pile we were making on the bank. By afternoon we had to sit for rest breaks. We ate from snacks in our pockets. Finally, in the waning moments of twilight, some eleven hours later, we finished.

It was after dark when we started loading the meat bags into our packs. We each made ten round trips back to camp with meat. We added our loads in the cache Jim constructed earlier for the caribou meat. Once again we hoped no bears or wolves would raid our stash. The alternative to hope would be sitting atop the pile all night with rifle ready and a supply of river stones to throw at any marauders.

Much too tired to cook a meal, we collapsed asleep after snacking enough to take the edge off. The damp, uncomfortable ground went unnoticed.

We slept until the sun was full up. And with that morning's breakfast a thin veil of sadness came over me. Nearly a month in the bush was coming to an end. But there was something deeper, more profound pricking me. I felt something tragic in our elation at my victory over the big bull. He was a magnificent animal. He was the master of this

domain. Wolves and bears wouldn't have threatened him for years to come. Neither would younger bulls.

"You saved him from another long, painful Arctic winter," Jim said, recognizing the cause of my funk.

"That, I did," I replied, but at the same time hoping the great bull's DNA was already growing into another generation just like him.

"That, I did."

A Beautiful Take-off

It was late afternoon when Jim and I quit the muddy camp. The sun had already started its slide down the western sky, and the temperature was sliding down with it.

Two days late for the planned rendezvous with our bush pilot, we risked being declared overdue unless we stood at the pick-up point by the next morning.

At first light we ate standing up to avoid the mud, and left quickly to follow the torpid little creek to the site of my moose kill a quarter mile away. We made extra noise as we moved through the shadows, rifles ready in case a bear had been lured in overnight by the scent of a fresh kill.

With the sun peeking over the tops of the stunted stalks of the spruce trees, Jim and I loaded the last of the meat for the haul back to camp. In the dark the night before, we'd decided to leave the heavy rib sections until morning. Difficult to deal with and to cook, we didn't really want the rib sections, but the law required us to bring out everything useable. Now, one big fan of ribs filled each of our packs and bent our shoulders with its weight, as we hurried back downstream to the place where we'd stashed all the rest of the bags of meat.

We made a final trip back to the moose for me to attach the sixty-odd pounds of skull and antlers to my pack frame and carry it down to camp. As a last gesture before wiggling my way into the pack's shoulder harness, I wrestled the massive hide to cover the remains. I knew scavengers would destroy my handiwork almost as soon as we were gone, but it was my way of returning some of the animal's dignity. I placed the soccer ball-sized heart against the long spine and dragged the hide over it.

“You know that won’t last,” Jim said.

“I know. But it’s something I want to do for him.” Spreading his hide over his entrails seemed the most respectful thing I could do.

We were happy on that last trip to camp. Jim felt good, no sign of his COPD that had bothered him a bit in the early days of the trip. We looked like two guys who had been in the bush for nearly a month, but we were happy. In a sunny open spot, Jim had me stop so he could take a couple of pictures of me under the burden of the big rack.

Back in camp we hurried to shuttle all the bags of moose meat, plus all the bags from the two caribou and load them on the raft. Carrying the meat fifty pounds at a time and stowing it aboard the raft consumed the mid-day hours.

In striking the camp, we moved with care. The hip waders we constantly wore churned the soggy ground into a sticky and slippery mire. We lifted the tents and bedrolls and carried them to drier ground for packing. Then we tramped back through the mud to load our gear along with the meat. The two caribou racks and my oversized moose rack we carefully arranged on top of the pile and lashed them in place. Last, we tucked in the rifles and covered what we could with an elastic net, stretching it tight and fastening it to the edges of the raft.

Jim climbed onto the pedestal seat in the center of the raft and took the plastic eight-foot oars, and I bent over to shove our barge off the little delta of Strangle Woman Creek. I struggled to set it free in the current of the river again. Grunting and straining, I pushed against the weight of the raft and the friction of the gravel.

Jim dug the oar blades into the stones on the bottom and pulled backwards, his face contorting with the effort. Puffing out bursts of breath and arching into his seat back, he tugged against the oar blades' bite. With a scraping sound we gained an inch, then six, then two feet, and then the raft bobbed free.

Reacting to the sudden freedom, Jim swung the long oars in opposing directions to pivot the big blue pontoons perpendicular to the current. As the stern swung around, I took a couple of quick steps through the knee-deep water and hopped aboard – reaching for the two-foot-tall seat pedestal to steady myself.

As the raft and its mountain of cargo moved into the crystalline water of the river, the mouth of the creek swirled with clouds of the mud we'd released from the bottom on breaking free.

“Whoa!”

“We're off,” Jim shouted into the expanse of the Arctic afternoon.

I fell more than sat on the molded plastic seat and let go of the air I'd been holding in for the final leap onto the raft. As Jim began to pull us away, I looked back at the spot where the sluggish flow of the creek entered the bright clear course of the river. I wanted to imprint the place in my mind.

I wanted to remember the small mud bank covered with driftwood that almost hid the creek mouth from view. I wanted to never forget the stunted willow that covered the left side of the creek, and an almost impenetrable wall of spruce that topped the high right bank. Our muddy camp sat a few yards back from the creek's mouth, but by spring no sign of it would remain.

Rounding the first bend in the river, Jim pulled on the oars to keep us in the strongest flow and away from either shore. The campsite disappeared and I knew we were on our way home.

Heading home. Our trip of nearly a year in the making was coming to end, and my first thought was about getting all the caribou and moose meat back to Fairbanks and then the huge job of cutting it into useful selections, packaging it, freezing it, and constructing a box to get all the frozen meat safely back to Jim's place in Olympia. I had never dealt with such a volume of meat before.

The second thing to cross my mind as the campsite faded from view was returning to reality. Jim was headed back to a state bureaucracy job he hated, and I would be returning to Maine to accept a job that for twenty years I'd said, I didn't want to do. Two weeks before leaving home, I'd accepted a civilian position with the Army, working in the same office where I'd once been the commander.

While Jim was at the oars I stayed ready to jump and push or pull us off if we grounded in the frequent shallows. Most often it only took a little effort to slide us into deeper water, but the humming sound of the raft's fabric bottom running over the stones was always worrisome. When I was at the oars, Jim did the jumping off to push.

Mostly we stayed in the current and in our seats. We each kept an eye out for snags-- rocks or submerged trees that could tear the raft or hold us until the force of the water would sink us or flip us over. Then there were the sweepers -- trees leaning out over the water that threatened to sweep one or both of us overboard. Hitting the frigid water that drained from glaciers in the mountains miles away, and weighed down by water-

filled hip boots, we would likely drown before hypothermia had a chance to kill us a few minutes later.

Fortunately we stayed on board, with the oarsman calling out every once in a while “sweeper.” Whoever was on the stern seat had to duck numerous times to avoid getting hit as the oarsman pulled to swing us around the menacing tree limbs.

The lowering sun cast an orange-pinkish light on the high river banks. Where the river cut the banks and exposed walls of gravel, our shadows projected, looking like giants perched on top of a tiny mountainous island.

Once, when I was at the oars, a big sow bear stepped into the sunlight, her head held high and her nose twitching at the scent of our meat bags. Her coat glowed as if she’d waltzed into spotlights on a theater stage.

I pulled hard on the oars to avoid drifting near her. She swung her head from side to side as she worked to pinpoint the source of the scent. Trotting and then running, she tried to keep pace with us as we drifted on the current. The sunlight made her brown fur dazzling when she passed in front of the ten- or fifteen-foot tall, dark green spruce trees.

Fighting an urge to panic, I turned the nose of the raft into to the current and began to row hard. Jim reached for his rifle, but stopped, realizing he’d never get it out from under the netting in time.

I swung my head back and forth, trying to look at the bear and to watch out for snags under the water. Realizing the water was too deep for the bear to walk in, Jim said, “I’ll watch the bear, you keep your eyes on the water.”

Pushing the oars deep, I tried to speed the ponderous raft along and keep it in the deepest channel. I felt the bulk of the camouflaged Gore-Tex jacket over my red and black plaid wool shirt as I stretched forward and pulled back on the oars. The elastic suspenders attached to my green wool pants cut into my shoulders with every stroke.

The river bent in a gentle curve away from the bear and when it did, she abandoned the chase. “That was close,” Jim said, as a small sweeper flashed by.

“That was damned close. I thought she was coming on here with us.”

Two more hard pulls on the oars and I swung us back, perpendicular to the current. We always tried to ride perpendicular to the current as it was easier to push or pull on the oars to keep us from striking either of the banks. It was also easier for the oarsman to see, not having to look over his shoulder to see forward. Soon after the bear left us, the daylight began to fade.

In the failing light we noticed that the river broadened and deepened from the input of a thousand little tributaries now behind us. As the light dimmed we found the bends in the river more complex and difficult to navigate. Somewhere we failed to notice a pole standing on the riverbank, with a weathered length of surveyor’s tape hanging limp and trailing down the shaft.

Straining to read the terrain on the north side of the river, I lifted the oars and called to Jim, “I haven’t seen anything that looks like a landing strip.”

“Me, neither, but I wish you knew how to use that GPS you’re carrying.”

So did I, at that point. I'd carried a hand-held GPS unit the whole trip, thinking I would sit down somewhere and learn to use it. But I never took it out of its case.

Our drifting continued with both of us searching the shore for the spot where Frenchie would fly in to pick us up. We strained to read the shoreline in the dark. The only thing to stand out were the spires of spruce trees, blacker than the dark northern sky behind them.

Unable to see any snags or rocks lurking below the surface, we worried that something would rip into one or both of the pontoons and sink us before we could pull the raft ashore. Whoever manned the oars worked to keep us in the strongest current. We assumed that strong current meant deeper water.

"The river swings right," Jim called, peering around me as I sat as tall as I could manage at the rowing station.

"I see it," I said, louder than I needed to.

I worked to keep us from striking either bank while praying there were no obstacles below. A thick stand of willow covered the left bank, right down to the water. I could hear the stiff, dead leaves rattling in the evening's breeze.

Almost immediately the river swung to the left. "Here we go left," I shouted frantically, seeking my course in the dark.

"You got it. You got it."

Old hand that he was, I'm sure Jim was as uneasy as I. An accelerating current, dark banks only the length of the raft away on either side, possible snags below--I didn't want to be the one to run us onto the rocks.

As soon as we rounded that tight turn to the left, things changed. The north shore opened into a broad field of gravel and small stones. The river straightened and ran that way as far as we could see into the darkness. The north bank was no more than a foot above the river's surface.

"Pull in here," Jim said and I dug the oars in, driving us toward an inelegant landing.

As soon as we heard and felt the scraping of the pontoons in the shallows, Jim leapt over the left side. He stumbled and almost fell trying to get over the oar. Cussing royally, he managed to throw one leg over and, hopping on that one foot, to drag his other leg over and free of the oar.

I shipped both oars as fast as I could and jumped over the opposite side. Both of us stumbled toward shore, each grabbing for the D-rings on the pointed tip of the pontoons. Digging our boots into the gravel, we heaved the raft as far up onto dry ground as we could manage. Without the aid of the river, we could never budge the raft's weight.

Jim dropped the line attached to the pontoon by the D-ring and put his hands on his lower back, and spun around several times, letting loose a string of oaths as he turned.

I flopped down on my knees exclaiming, "Hot damn, we are here."

"We made it."

This had to be the pick-up point. It was a barren plain of old river bottom, 150 yards across and at least 1,000 feet long, made of whitish stones, baseball size and smaller, swept by hundreds of years of river floods.

The stars were out when we started unloading the raft, the extended daylight of summer now gone to autumn's flip-flop of daylight and dark. Polaris hung motionless straight above our heads, the other billions of stars rotating the night away around its anchor.

We built a cache for the meat bags from driftwood collected near the raft. We stuck driftwood poles into the gravel bed to string a space blanket for shading the bags of meat when the sun came up.

We dragged our camping gear to the far edge of the plain and set a hasty camp among some sparse willow that sprouted among the small stones. Using headlamps to see, we pitched the tent and got the stove going. Crouched over the stove with its blue flame of pressurized gasoline, Jim cooked another reconstituted stew, the beam of his headlamp swinging about with every move of his head. Unshaven and in the same clothes since mid-August, we looked like hobos sheltering in the willows.

Warming my fingers around a steaming cup of tea, I glanced at the black bulk of mountains to the north and hanging above the black wall of spruce beyond the plain of stones. The stars formed our ceiling. I switched off my headlamp to conserve the battery and noticed a greenish vapor rising like smoke all along the mountain ridge as far as I could see in either direction. For a moment it sputtered as if dying like the flame of the

stove suddenly turned off. Then it returned shooting higher than when I first saw it. Parts of it erupted with tongues of pink mixing with the green.

“The Aurora,” I called to Jim, no doubt sounding giddier than I wished.

When Jim glanced over his shoulder at the sky, the vaporous cloud expanded to the northwest and southeast. Then it filled in east and west and finally south. Lifting from the horizon it floated across the whole dome of the night. It swept like a faint green and pink conflagration, the stars just pinpricks of white light on the other side of it. Swirling then fading, exploding then dancing, the show went on and on.

“God, that’s beautiful,” Jim said as we stood away from the willows trying to get a better view.

Out in the center, with acres of white stones at our feet, we stood apart, each slowly turning, head to the sky, mouth agape.

“I’ve seen the Aurora before, but never like this,” I said to the sky. “Never like this. What a show for our last night.” My neck muscles tightened as I tried to see it all.

With our lights still turned off we stepped back into the scene of our thrown-together campsite. The sleeping tent was up, but we hadn’t bothered to set up the tent for the packs. The stove and pots lay piled together, clean to protect them from bears, but unorganized. The sleeping pads made a jumble inside the tent, tossed there while supper cooked.

“The northern lights have seen queer sights...” Jim exhaled, choking off his quote from Service’s poem.

“It’s the last night. We don’t need to be so neat,” I said, eager to climb into my sleeping bag.

For the first time too tired to read, I switched off my headlamp and pulled the bag’s zipper closed against the chill. In the darkness inside the tent, I thought I could hear the Aurora hissing like a campfire.

At first light and two feet from the tent’s door, we found a fresh baseball glove-sized bear track in the one patch of soft ground anywhere around us. The sight of the track sent us both scrambling with boots unlaced and shirttails flapping to check the store of meat by the river.

“Nothing’s touched it,” I said relieved, but surprised.

“We got lucky again.”

“Our scent must be stronger than 700 pounds of meat,” Jim said, which got us laughing as we trudged back across the plain of stones to camp.

Over a quick breakfast and before the sun cleared the trees to the east, we planned out the day. The meat would have to go out on the first flight. There was no arguing that I would go out with the meat. “I’ve got more experience up here,” Jim declared, “and if something happens, I’m the one to get marooned.”

My pride and ego would’ve liked more of an argument, but it made sense for him to be the one to wait with the gear for the second lift. The fixed look on Jim’s face told me there’d be no more discussion.

We calculated it a two-and-a-half hour flight back south of the Yukon River. Then two-and-a-half hours to return to the pick-up point. If the plane went down somewhere in between, Jim could be waiting a long time for rescue. As it was, he'd pass the time breaking down the raft and packing everything for loading when Frenchie returned. I got the easy job, take the meat from the plane and load it into our truck back in Central Hot Springs.

After breakfast we walked the entire length of the would-be landing strip, pacing off the distance and throwing bits of old driftwood far out of the way. We used our folding shovels to dig up dead spruce and willow stumps that we thought might interfere with the plane. Huffing and puffing, we chopped at the roots attached to the stumps, rushing to get done before Frenchie appeared.

About nine o'clock we heard the faint sound of a plane somewhere off to the south, the noise growing stronger as the seconds passed. Jim reached for the little battery-powered radio in the pocket of his goose-down vest, the same radio we'd used five days before to extend our stay by three days. Seeing the radio, I silently hoped that Frenchie had remembered to call our wives to let them know we wouldn't be coming out on the expected date.

Spotting the plane, low on the southern horizon, Jim pressed the switch on the little hand-held radio and called out, "Frenchie, this is Jim Cox. Is that you? Over."

The plane grew larger as it closed in on us. Turning to the west, it began to follow the course of the river. As it passed us, he dipped the wing and the radio boomed out in a thick French-Canadian accent, "What the hell you doing there?"

Somewhere out of sight up river, he turned around and came back towards us. Passing by headed east, he shouted into the radio a mixture of French and English, but all we understood was, "You guys in the wrong place!"

Dumbfounded we stared at each other. "What's he talking about?" I asked.

"Damned if I know. That's one crazy, French SOB."

We watched the plane make a shallow banking turn and head back in our direction. Again as it passed a mixture of French and English shouting squawked through the little radio speaker. But we couldn't understand any of it.

The blue and white single-engine plane went out of sight to the west again and was gone for what seemed a long time. Then we heard him and saw him, coming down the river skimming over the stunted trees.

Flaps down, the plane's fat, over-sized tires hit the stones after barely clearing the stand of willows where the river curved. Cutting the power dampened the engine's roar and caused the tires to mush into the gravel. With the sudden loss of forward speed, the tail dropped and the plane came to halt in less than the length of a football field.

Pushing the power back on, Frenchie spun the airplane in our direction and bounced it over the ground to where Jim and I stood, a folding shovel still dangling from my hand. Closing to within twenty feet of us, Frenchie cut the power and switched off the engine. The returning silence was deafening.

The plane's thin aluminum door swung open and out leaped one irate Frenchman. Again dressed in sneakers, blue jeans and a tan cotton jacket, Frenchie looked out of

place two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. Past sixty years old, short, stocky and inflamed with anger, he was bouncing up and down, swearing in French and some in English, and waving his arms for emphasis. We understood a few of the swear words and all of, “You’re in the wrong place,” and “I’m not sure I can take off.”

An escapee from the paper mills of Berlin, New Hampshire, in the mid-1960s, Frenchie had been making his living for forty years flying out of Central Hot Springs, Alaska, and serving nearly all of the Brooks Range and the Yukon River valley. Calling him irascible was kind. With the brown hair of a younger man still on his head, he had the body and demeanor of a bulldog. He reminded me of a bulldog with eye glasses. The longer he berated us, the more steam I thought I could see coming from under Jim’s collar.

Concerned that they might soon come to blows, I threw in over the top of their shouting, “Frenchie, if you didn’t think you could take off, then why did you land?”

It was like tossing a bucket of ice water into a dog fight. Everything ceased and nobody moved, until both of them looked blankly at me. Frenchie blinked his bulging eyes and puffed out his cheeks before spinning about and walking off. He walked to the end of the gravel bed to the marks on the ground where he’d just set the plane down. From there he started striding the distance of the runway, the way Jim and I had a couple of hours before. When he finished he walked to the center of the stony plain and alternated standing with one hand on his chin and pacing back and forth, ten steps one way, eight or ten steps back the other way.

When he rejoined us by the plane he got right to his point. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll have to take the meat over to another strip. Then come back for the first guy and his stuff. But first you gotta to do some work.”

He directed us to remove some more stumps from the gravel while he repositioned the plane. “This is just bullshit,” Jim said as we dug and chopped at five or six stumps that Frenchie said we had to get out.

I had to agree. These stumps weren’t anywhere near where the plane was likely to go. Frenchie was just punishing us for missing his marker along the river the evening before. But we whaled away at the stumps to appease him.

Frenchie taxied the plane as far down the flood plain as he could. Then he had Jim and I help him turn it around and push it by hand another twenty feet farther, so that the tail of the airplane stuck in among the willows to the east. We couldn’t make the runway any longer.

Next, we retrieved the meat bags from our cache by the raft. Jim and I tossed two bags each onto our shoulders and started shuttling. Frenchie supervised from the plane. The blood that soaked through the bags turned brown when it dried. Now each bag looked like the body of a miniature dairy cow, white with large irregular patches of reddish brown.

Grunting and puffing with the effort as we hurried, we went back and forth depositing the 700 pounds of meat in the plane, just where Frenchie indicated. I know he needed to, but Jim never reached for his inhaler. He’d never let Frenchie see that. COPD be damned.

When we had all the meat bags loaded, Frenchie shut the cargo door and went around to the passenger door on the left side. He climbed in and waved us away. We retreated a safe distance while he did his routine checks before firing up the engine. He flipped the magneto switch and the engine turned over with a burst of gray-black exhaust and a dull roar. The three blades of the propeller began to turn and blew up a cloud of dust and grit into the air surrounding the plane.

Frenchie released the brakes and the plane began to roll. The oversized, soft tires started bouncing as they turned, making the plane dribble forward. Frenchie wiggled the rudder and elevators to test them as the plane continued forward. Shoving the throttle to full power, the white and blue aircraft leapt ahead, gaining speed. We heard its body vibrate with an electric-sounding buzz in the otherwise still morning. He was airborne before he used half the runway.

It seemed like he was coming back before the sound of his leaving finished dying away. He had set down on his preferred runway upriver, threw off all the meat bags by himself and come right back to us. He skimmed over the spruce trees on the other side of the river, missed the tops of the little willows and set down just as he had before.

Ready with my rifle, jacket, sleeping bag and one meal package, I barely had time before Frenchie waved me aboard to shake Jim's hand and say, "See you in a couple of hours."

I placed my stuff as carefully as I could in behind the seats and climbed up next to Frenchie in the cockpit. Jim fastened the door for me and waved his hand as Frenchie

advanced the throttle. I hated leaving Jim on his own, but we were airborne before I could complete the thought.

In less than five minutes we were down again, next to the pile of meat bags. Frenchie let the engine idle while I got out to lift all the bags into the cargo bay once again. Huffing and straining, I'd grab a bag, sling it on my shoulder, step to the plane and toss the bag in, trying to stack them low and stable so they wouldn't shift around once we took off. My chest was heaving and I was out of breath when I threw the last bag on top of the pile. I couldn't imagine how Jim kept doing it with his compromised breathing. I was so out of breath, I nearly missed the step when I tried to pull myself back up into the passenger seat.

I struggled into the seat belt as Frenchie jerked his thumb, indicating a set of headphones hanging from a hook above the windshield. I slipped them on as he started to ease the throttle back to power. I looked forward through the whirling propeller and thought, "This damned runway looks shorter than the other one."

Frenchie taxied as far as he could and with a burst of power spun the plane around, its little tail wheel scraping an arc in the gravel. Lined up with the open ground ahead, Frenchie raised up in his seat straining against the seat belt to reach the brake pedals. As the engine surged to full power, he mashed down on the brake pedals with all the pressure he could. He had the plane caught between flinging itself forward in response to the churning propeller and staying put, held tight by the brakes.

The tachometer showed the RPM climbing toward a little red line made from a piece of colored tape and stuck to the glass of the gauge. The plane shuddered and

bucked, the tail trying to lift. Looking calm, Frenchie let the RPM rise a couple more notches on the dial. Then he snapped his feet off the brake pedals and plane lurched forward.

“Pretty quick for an old guy,” I thought, as we started rolling through the gravel.

The fat tire below me outside the window seemed spongy as it flexed, bounced, and stretched with the weight of its load. As the tail came around, stones spun off the tailwheel in a two-foot spray. My right hand gripped some of tubing of the frame above my head. Frenchie reached over and patted a piece of the frame over the dashboard, indicating I should hold on there. I grabbed for it with my left hand as we gained speed. The vibrations made my hands feel numb as we rolled. The only sky I could see was above the willows with their dead leaves and the dark spruce behind them.

Firm and steady, Frenchie drew back on the yoke toward his ample stomach and the nose of the plane started to rise. We cleared the willows by six or eight feet, and the blue-green of the river flashed beneath the wing. We cleared the spruce on the far bank by 15 or 20 feet a half second later. I glanced to the right and saw a bull moose galloping through another stand of willow, anxious to escape the intruding airplane. He swung the great weight of his antlers in a mild panic as he ran.

Frenchie reached up and turned the crank to reduce the amount of flaps he had deployed, and we immediately began to rise. The plane bucked and pitched as the wind hit us, and Frenchie dialed back more flap to smooth us out.

Frenchie never spoke to me after I climbed in next to him. He didn't look at me either. He faced forward, but his eyes would roam over the gauges and instruments every

few seconds. Two or three minutes out, he banked sharply and turned to the left. I would've turned right, with the wind, if I were at the controls, but it wasn't my airplane and, in a hurry, he went left into the wind. We bounced and swayed as he kept the full power on, the noise of the engine deafening, even with the headphones on. Frenchie climbed to break out of the ground effects and the turbulence. I hoped the cargo would stay put and not cause any trouble for us by shifting around.

The morning stayed bright and clear. A thin layer of high wispy clouds floated high above us a sign of an approaching weather front, that was still hours away. Frenchie leveled off 1,000 feet above the river valleys and things smoothed out. I let go of my grip on the airframe, and we crossed the first of many mountain ridges with 50 feet to spare.

Looking down on the top of the ridge I saw the tundra dotted with surviving patches of last season's snow pack. And running there, between the patches of snow, a string of five wolves heading west toward some unknown destination.

Night Moves

“There’s a moose up ahead,” I said from the passenger seat.

“Where?” Jim asked, hunching forward to stare over the steering wheel.

“About a mile out there. A cow crossing the road from left to right.” I could see the dark brown shape of the moose against the tan-gray of the road surface.

“Damn, your eyesight is better than mine.” Jim squinted to try to bring the distance into focus. “I can’t see nearly that far.”

“I’ve always been far-sighted. It’s stuff up close I can’t see. I can’t read anything anymore without my glasses.”

“Sucks to get old,” Jim declared.

We’d gotten on the road late, and some of the last rays of sun lit up the flank of the moose as she disappeared in the brush on the south side of the highway. In a few more minutes we’d be driving in darkness, the long days of northern summer gone for the year.

Jim and I had burned our daylight with long goodbyes to friends in Fairbanks, a search for dry ice to fill the insulated box in the trailer we were pulling, and finally, shopping for gifts to bring home. Jim’s insistence on sending his granddaughter postcards from the post office in North Pole, Alaska, was our final bit of business before starting our straight-through drive back to Olympia and my eventual flight back to the East Coast.

Waiting in the truck outside the North Pole Post Office, I watched him through the window and thought he looked the part of the kindly grandfather. His beard was

mostly gone to gray and completely filled in after our month in the bush. It made him look older than his 59 years, as he filled out the postcards and placed a stamp that would get the all-important North Pole postmark. I knew little Reilly would squeal with delight in thinking she'd gotten a message all the way from the North Pole. Catching my own face reflected in the passenger side mirror, I could see that I was looking older as well. My beard, once quite red, was now a lush patch of gray.

“Even at cruising speed, I can feel that trailer,” Jim said over the noise of his partially open window.

“Problem?”

“Naw, it's following fine. But I can feel the weight of it.”

“How much you think we're pulling?”

“Well, with the box and the ice, we must have close to a thousand pounds back there.”

“I was thinking we must have more than 700 pounds of meat,” I said.

“For sure,” Jim said, glancing my way. “Between the two caribou and the moose, we've got way more than 700 pounds. Your share may be 700 pounds.”

“It's the most expensive meat I'll ever eat,” I snickered.

“It sure will be by the time you ship it back to Maine.”

With that, we let the conversation die for a while. Jim concentrated on driving and I tried to sleep, knowing I'd need to take the wheel before long.

Our gear, including the now collapsed pontoon raft, filled up most of Jim's truck bed, where the fiberglass cap kept the weather and most of the dust out. The meat rode in our homemade plywood and Styrofoam ice chest, which looked more like a sarcophagus in the utility trailer we pulled. Padded and lashed to the top of the box rode two bull caribou racks and the spread of moose antlers.

Coming north we'd hardly noticed the empty trailer bouncing along behind us, but with its load of frozen meat and tied-down antlers, the trailer dragged going uphill and wanted to push on the downhill runs. We knew with the extra weight that we'd stop for fuel more often going south than we had coming the other way.

"Let me know when you want me to take over," I said.

"I'm fine until the first fuel stop. That'll be at least back to Tok Junction."

We repeated the same routine we'd followed on our way north. Grab some food and switch drivers at the fuel stops. Otherwise, keep going. If we both felt too tired to go on, we'd pull off somewhere and sleep in our seats for a couple of hours.

Past the middle of September in Alaska and the Yukon, darkness closes in like the lowering of a stage curtain. Daylight was gone long before we stopped in Tok. I shivered, waiting for the gas pump to finish, and fought the urge to run inside the roadhouse or jump back into the warm cab of the truck. The night air reached deep inside my street clothes and made me long for my wool hunting clothes, now packed away.

"Man, it's cold," I said, as Jim came strolling back to the truck. "Let's get going so I can warm up."

“Don’t you want to use the washroom before we go?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. I’ll run in quick so we can get going.”

Jim was already reclining in the passenger seat when I returned with a cup of coffee, ready to take my turn at the wheel. The heat radiating through the Styrofoam cup felt good in my hand.

“Next stop, Canadian Customs,” I said, as I steered us back onto the two-lane highway.

With his eyes still closed, his head resting against the door frame and padded by his rolled-up jacket, Jim said, “You’ll want more coffee before we get to the border.”

“Probably, but I’ll get us at least that far before we switch again. You know it was a year ago that we sat at my kitchen table and said we needed to do this before we got too old. And now it’s nearly over.”

After a long pause, Jim responded, “And now you’re an experienced Alaska hunter.”

A mile further down the road and I could tell by his rhythmic breathing that Jim was asleep and sort of suspended against his seat belt. I exhaled a long, forceful breath and tried to will my shoulders and forearms to relax. I pressed down harder on the accelerator and let the truck run as fast as I thought safe. I didn’t want to miss a curve or strike a moose in the dark, but making as many miles as possible before we switched again compelled me to keep the speed up. I had a plane to catch and a new job waiting for

me in Maine, once we dropped the load off at Jim's place. He would take care of shipping my share of the meat to me, and eventually the rack of my moose, as well.

"A new job," I thought. The two years since I'd retired from the Army had been an adjustment, as they say, and a string of failed job searches. Free-lance writing for a sporting magazine had carried me along, as had writing lesson materials for the government, but now I had a real job waiting., a job directing Army advertising and public affairs efforts in New England. I let out a long slow breath and flexed my wrists against the steering wheel. After more than three decades in the Army, I didn't know much about being a civilian, but I never thought I wanted to work for the Army out of uniform.

Jim had gone through a similar experience four years ahead of me. But he'd used his unemployed time to design and build a western Washington dream house so he and Peg could live near their daughters. Then he took an infuriating job analyzing worker's compensation claims for the State of Washington. No wonder he wanted to get back to the wilderness.

Outside the range of the headlights, everything was blackness. I could see in the mirrors the faint red aura of the tail lights, and beyond that, more blackness. The truck seemed like a tiny ship afloat on a huge black ocean, or a plane alone in the sky.

I forced my eyes to concentrate at the limits of the headlight beams. I thought about moose or caribou or even bears wandering into the road. Their eyes would be my first warning. Their heavy coats would absorb rather than reflect the probing beams of the headlights.

A few times I met an eighteen-wheeler coming north, or caught up to one southbound on one of the long hills. As I closed in, the southbound ones would ease over and let me put the pedal to the floor and skirt by. For a moment, the beams from our headlights would merge into an island of clarity in the sea of darkness. Sometimes we'd pass the stationary lights of a roadhouse.

The highway was devoid of tourists. They're almost all gone back south by mid-September, and they don't travel at night in any case. For long stretches it seemed as if we were the only vehicle in the world.

No moonlight diluted the darkness. With Jim asleep, the stars were my companions. I thought the sky looked like some fantastic spray of Jackson Pollock paint drops on a black canvas.

About two hours into my shift, the sky silently erupted. It started slowly like some volcanoes do, and built in bursts to engulf the entire northern horizon in a dance of light. I had an almost unrestricted view. The highway runs east and slightly southeast along that stretch. The Aurora flooded across the northern sky in waves and curtains of gossamer green light. Sheets of light wheeled and swung from the bottom to the top of the sky, draping the heavens in its folds.

I thought of our last night on the river and how the Aurora had danced then. It was like a silent torrent, pulsing and waving its opalescent veils across the face of the night.

"Pretty neat show," Jim muttered from his nest by the opposite door.

Startled, I jerked upright and swung my head in his direction. "It sure is. I thought you were asleep."

“I am.”

He didn't say anything more and burrowed back down. Five minutes further on I could hear the faint rhythmic breathing again. I envied him even the brief, uncomfortable nap as the truck bumped over the none-too-smooth highway. We were beat. We'd gotten eight hours of sleep before leaving Fairbanks, but it couldn't make up for a month in the bush followed by three days and two nights of cutting and packaging all the meat now riding in the trailer.

Jim was a taskmaster of meat cutting. He grew up in his parents' grocery store in California and he enforced some high standards for precise butchering and wrapping of each cut of meat. Every steak, chop, roast and pound of hamburger was cut and trimmed to his specifications, wrapped in wax paper, and sealed with not one, but two pieces of tape.

“Use just one piece and the customers will think you're cheap.”

During our cutting and packaging marathon, Jim often recalled things his father had taught him and passed them on to me.

A friend in Fairbanks not only put us up and fed us, but loaned us his garage, where we worked on tables made from sheets of plywood laid over saw horses. More friends and neighbors loaned us five freezers to stack the packages of meat in so that each package would be frozen before we loaded them all into the insulated box and covered them in dry ice. I'd been so tired near the end that I felt lucky not to have cut off a finger in the process.

Now it felt good to have all those packages wrapped, frozen, and nailed into the 4'x4'x8' box in the trailer. I felt the weight of the load whenever we rounded a curve or

went up one of the many long grades. Heading downhill, I'd feel the slight bump as the trailer pushed against its hitch. The constant pull and push of the trailer helped keep me alert, and the shimmering aurora banished my sleepiness.

Somewhere after passing through an Alaskan settlement called Northway and before the stop at Beaver Creek in the Yukon for Canadian Customs, the other traffic dwindled to almost nothing. Jim wasn't stirring and the Aurora faded back to blackness. Even the scattered roadhouses seemed to withdraw into the enveloping night. Somewhere on that long stretch of road, I found myself thinking about another long night's drive.

* * * *

Near the end of August, 1968, my family's summer trek to Alaska was coming to an end. Our little caravan separated in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, just north of Grand Coulee, Washington. My grandparents turned their camper southwest toward Vancouver, Seattle, the Oregon coast, and on to California. We turned southeast to Spokane, Yellowstone Park, Devil's Tower, Mt. Rushmore, and the Badlands

The morning we drove across South Dakota, we stopped only for fuel and to eat. In Mitchell, South Dakota, my parents cashed their last traveler's check and my dad called his Army Reserve unit. We had heard that the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia.

Dad came back into the camper where we were having supper and announced that with another international military crisis underway, the prudent thing was for us to return straight home. It was time to declare our vacation over.

"I'll take the first shift," Dad said.

“I’ll get the dishes cleaned up as you go along,” my mother said. “Douglas, take your dog for a quick walk.”

All of a sudden the ten weeks of living in our own world was thrown aside. We needed to head for home anyway. Dad would be back to teaching sixth-graders in another week or so, and I would be starting my final year of high school. But this evolving situation in Europe gave everything an understory of urgency.

Could Dad’s Reserve unit really be called to active duty? I wondered. It hadn’t happened when the Soviets invaded Hungary. But it had come close during the Cuban Missile Crisis five years before. With the war in Vietnam and the U.S.S. Pueblo thing in Korea unresolved, maybe this was the boiling point?

I rode up front with Dad as he headed for Sioux Falls and on toward Sioux City, Iowa, but he didn’t say much to explain the situation. We rode with the windows open on a hot night, as the wind roared through and snatched away the smoke from Dad’s little cigars.

At Sioux City Dad pulled over and announced, “I’m beat. I’m going in back and get a few hours of sleep. You ready to take over?”

“I’m ready.”

“Stick with the highway to Des Moines and follow the signs for Rock Island, Illinois,” Dad said as he got out and walked to the camper door.

I went around the front and climbed in the driver's door, adjusted the seat for my shorter legs, and waited. After about thirty seconds, Dad's voice came quietly over the intercom.

"All set," was all he said.

I waited another thirty seconds before starting the engine and easing the heavy truck and camper combination back onto the road. In another five minutes I said to myself, "Sioux City astern," and we rolled into farm country again.

The night was humid, hot and dark. The wind whipping in through the open windows made the air temperature bearable, but no less humid. I tried the AM radio for company and to see if I could hear the latest on the situation in Czechoslovakia. But it played mostly static that pierced my ears like little cracks of thunder. I soon quit trying and shut off the radio.

Traffic was light, mostly just tractor trailer trucks speeding towards Des Moines, or away from it. When one would blast past me in a typhoon of noise and diesel fumes, I'd act like a pro and flick the light switch twice, a signal he was clear of me and that it was safe to pull back in. Most often, the truck driver would flash his red and amber clearance lights as a sign he'd gotten my message. Feeling the weight of my heavy rig, I felt like one of them, trucking through the night.

Somewhere, maybe halfway from Sioux City to Des Moines, I exited the highway and found an all-night service station. I got out to stretch my legs, while the guy on the nightshift pumped my order to "Fill it up."

“Where you headed?” he asked, no doubt thinking it looked strange that I was alone.

“Home, to Massachusetts,” I answered.

“Where you been?”

“Alaska,” I said, though I’m not sure he believed me. I thought I saw his eyes widen and his eyebrows rise.

Dressed in a white tee-shirt and blue jeans, the guy’s clothes were dirty from a long overnight shift in the gas station. He stood a head taller than me and looked older, maybe nineteen or twenty.

“What are you going to do back in Massachusetts?” he asked, as the numbers on the gas pump kept rolling over.

“Going back to school. It’s my senior year,” I told him. “Are you still in school?”

“Nope. I finished two years ago. I’ve been working here since I was fourteen. But no more. I report to my draft board at the end of the month.”

Suddenly aware of the hum of the neon lights above the pumps and the scent of corn from the endless miles of fields that lined both sides of the road, I was a confusion of envy, admiration and gratitude that it wasn’t me doing that.

“That’s cool,” I said, not really knowing if it was, and not quite meeting his gaze.

“Ya, it’ll get me out of this place.”

Just then the pump release clicked in and he put the nozzle back in its holder, the cap back on the tank. “That’ll be \$5.25.”

I handed him my dad’s Texaco charge card and signed the invoice when he brought it to me.

“We could use a good southpaw on our ball team,” he said when he saw how I held the pen and the little plastic tray with the invoice.

“Yeah, but I’m a long way from home,” I said, as I moved to climb back into the driver’s seat. The humidity felt like a blanket and bugs swarmed around the neon lights.

When I started the engine and eased out the clutch, I realized no one inside the camper had stirred, even though we pumped the gas and stood talking just a couple of feet from where they slept. The smell of corn filled the cab as I shifted into high. The corn plants seemed like a wall and the highway a channel cut through them.

The smell of the corn spilled in through the open windows and floor vents along with the roar of hot wind. It made the night feel dense and sticky. I thought about the guy at the gas station and how he’d soon be in the Army. I panicked a little at the idea that the thing in Czechoslovakia would mean World War III, if it wasn’t happening now. I wouldn’t turn eighteen for another four months, but perhaps my fate was already linked to that guy back there pumping gas. I knew Dad was concerned. If he wasn’t, why were we hurrying? We’d been to the edge so many times before. Anyone my age grew up with notions of the abyss—the Hungarian Revolution, the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Six Day War just last year.

Somewhere in the corn I realized that we were east of North Dakota and another chance encounter with Jan was now impossible. I wondered where the two hitch-hikers, Joe and Donn, might be. And for the first time, I realized that I was going home different from who I had been ten weeks ago.

Carolyn. Thoughts of Carolyn rode in on that hot wind too. I wanted to see her. Would our promises hold? Would we still be in love? I tried to imagine that first sweet embrace and what I would say to her, what I would tell her of all I had seen.

What *would* I tell her? What would I tell all my other friends when we tried to pick up where we left off? I didn't even know what song was now number one on the charts.

No matter if the world was in crisis again, returning to Massachusetts seemed dull and so ordinary. I didn't feel ordinary. I'd been to the Yukon and Alaska and British Columbia—even the names seemed to ring with magic.

I saw the sun rise behind the tall buildings of downtown Des Moines. It was a disk of burning red that darted in and out between the buildings. I looked for signs of the crisis in Europe. I imagined that I would see something to indicate how serious events over there were. But at sun-up the city was quiet, with very little traffic. I kept driving and followed the signs for Davenport and Rock Island.

Around ten o'clock Dad's voice came through the intercom, "Why don't you find a spot to pull over and we'll have breakfast."

"Okay."

After breakfast in the camper, we traded places. Mom, Dad and Douglas went up front, and I climbed into my bed to sleep. I missed seeing the bridge over the Mississippi. I missed all of Illinois and Indiana. I slept through fuel stops and stops to walk the dog. I have no idea what the others did for lunch. I know they didn't wake me.

We were miles into Ohio before I woke up. I called into the intercom and asked, "Where are we?"

"Ohio," my mother's voice came back.

I didn't say it, but I thought, "I wonder if there's a war in Europe, yet?"

* * * *

The trailer made that "tunk" sound again against the hitch as I pressed down on the brake pedal and slowed us down.

"Where are we?" came Jim's groggy voice as he tried to unfold himself and sit up.

"Stopping for Canadian Customs. We're back in the Yukon."

"What time is it?"

"It's about two o'clock and we're third or fourth in line."

"We don't see anyone for miles, but you can bet there's always a line at Customs."

"Just another 2,000 miles and you'll be home."

"First things first. We've got a least forty-eight long hours to go."

Sitka

We changed drivers again with a fuel stop in Haines Junction, well inside the Yukon Territory. Jim drifted back to check the load in the trailer while I pumped the fuel. We stretched and groaned with stiffness, fatigue and a strong desire for a real meal rather than gas station snacks.

Beyond the florescent glare of the lights over the fuel pumps, the dark stripe of the Haines Highway branched off from the main track of the Alaska Highway. The Haines Highway runs south for 159 miles over the St. Elias mountain range to the port of Haines, Alaska, near the head of the narrow waterway called the Lynn Canal.

Trying to sound awake, I called over to Jim, “You ever been down to Haines?”

“Once,” he responded, as he pulled on the ropes securing my moose rack and his two caribou racks to the trailer. “We took the ferry out of Haines when I went bear hunting on Admiralty Island. You?”

“I’ve sort of been to Haines twice, but never by road.”

“What do you mean you’ve ‘sort of’ been to Haines?” We were both dead tired, but this kind of conversation helped to keep us awake.

I finished fueling the dust and mud spattered, maroon Toyota pick-up truck and moved to go inside to pay, saying as I went, “Hold that thought.”

When I climbed in the passenger side of the truck after paying the bill, Jim already had the engine running and the heater on to take away the chill of the night air.

“What I meant was, I stopped in Haines back in ’68 when the ferry from Skagway went there to pick up passengers. It was late at night and we didn’t get off, but I looked at Haines from the railing.”

“You know that’s like landing at O’Hare, not getting off the plane, taking off again and claiming you’ve visited Chicago,” Jim said.

“Well, the second time it was daylight. When we made that kayaking cruise in 2001, we left Skagway and cruised by Haines and got a good look at it.”

“You haven’t visited Haines,” was all Jim would say.

“Well, I saw enough of those old, brick houses around the parade field at the old fort to know I could live there in comfort.”

“That’s hardly Alaska down there,” Jim said. “Rain instead of snow, no twenty-four hours of daylight or darkness, and no fifty-below days.”

“I know,” I countered. “It would be like living around Puget Sound without Seattle, Tacoma and Olympia. It’s like Maine, ‘The Way Life Should Be.’”

“Well, you’ve not visited Haines is all I can say.” His argument nailed me with the indisputable.

“No, I guess I haven’t, but I like the Panhandle. I could live there, maybe not forever, but long enough to really experience it. We had a great time in Juneau in ’01. And I loved Sitka. We flew in there to catch the boat and it was beautiful. I’d love to go back.”

By now we were miles outside of Haines Junction and the discussion began to fade. Jim was concentrating on driving and I was ready to nod off. Outside the beam of the headlights it was pitch black. Every once in a while a piece of the Aurora still flickered on the horizon. And the stars were as bright as I had ever seen them. Tired as I was, sleep was more of a trance than real sleep. I tried to brace against the door of the truck and let my head flop back onto the high back of the seat, but beyond being warm and dry, a level of comfort eluded me.

Our conversation stirred up memories of Sitka. Visions of it danced around behind my eyelids, and thinking about it was better than recalling my discomfort in the truck.

* * * *

Sunshine is rare in the old Russian capital of Alaska. Sitka is a place of fog and clouds and sea smoke. Clear days, when Mt. Edgecumbe's volcanic cone stands bright and sharp against the western sky and sunlight beams down through the branches of giant Douglas fir and Sitka spruce trees, sometimes come weeks apart. Most days residents only hear the big planes approaching the airport on the island across the tiny harbor, rather than see them.

Gail and I were lucky. Twenty-seven years married. More than thirty years as a couple and finally I was getting her to Alaska. We arrived on a cloudless morning of bright blue and sparkle on the water. The flight from Seattle through Juneau was as ordinary as the sunlight was extraordinary. No one yet knew that in one month, on

another cloudless morning, the events of September 11, 2001, would forever change the flying lexicon.

The hotel shuttle whisked us to our lodgings, over the bridge that links the airport with the town. With bags dropped, we left the hotel to spend the day walking around. First, to see the onion dome of St. Michael's Russian Orthodox Church, and then gradually through the commercial streets, the docks, and out into residential areas where the forests bump up against civilization.

"I could retire here," I said, as we passed a modest house painted blue, with tall flowers growing behind a picket fence.

"Too far from family," Gail declared without hesitation. "Besides, you're not ready to retire, here or anyplace else."

"No. Not really," I admitted. "But they are going to throw me out in another couple years anyway, and we don't have a plan. I wish we could do another tour in Europe, but it's too late for that now. And if I have another week like the last couple have been, we'll be retiring sooner rather than later."

"What do you mean?"

"My boss. The general. He pitched a fit about anybody who's been deployed taking leave. He wanted to have a meeting with all the region commanders to review the summer training, and he didn't want anyone absent. When I told him that we'd have to forfeit the cost of the cruise if he made me stay, he was not happy. He dug in his heels and dragged the discussion out over a couple of days. When I finally told him that if he caused us to forfeit that money, I'd retire, he was really unhappy. Safe to say, I'm not

longer one of the ‘fair-haired boys.’ And we’re probably off the Christmas card list, but we’re here and he won’t call us back now.”

“Well, screw him,” she said, her bright, brown eyes flashing. “He can have the meeting later.”

“That’s what everyone tried to tell him. Let us have some leave and we’ll get together in a week or two to review the summer.”

“Well, we’re not retiring here,” she said. “It’s just too far away.”

“Irony isn’t it,” I said, as we walked under the giant green boughs of a Douglas fir tree.

“What is?” she asked.

“I’ve been trying to get back to Alaska ever since I was seventeen. One of the major reasons for joining the Army was the idea of getting posted to Alaska.”

“I remember when you said we could drop out of school and transfer to the University of Alaska,” she said.

“A nice, romantic idea at the time, but I lacked the courage to follow through on it. Getting the Army to send us up here made more sense—more practical sense. Of course, here we are all these years later, still waiting for the Army to do it.”

“But they’ve sent us everywhere else,” Gail said.

Around noon, we spotted our friends outside one of the eating places in town. Like us, they were killing time until we all boarded our small inter-coastal cruise ship the next evening. We’d all gone to the same college, married as soon as we graduated, and

then John and I were both posted to Fort Hood, Texas, when we entered the Army. We stayed friends through numerous moves around the country and overseas, always on intersecting paths that finally led to the idea of taking a cruise together.

“There’s a park with walking trails just beyond the museum,” John informed us across the lunch table. “We may as well keep walking as sit in the hotel room.”

“I agree,” I said. “Let’s see as much as we can before we have to sail.”

The paths through Sitka National Historic Park wind along between the cold ocean water of Sitka Sound and the turbulent flow of Sawmill Creek. Great spires of Sitka spruce, western red cedar and Douglas fir stretch skyward above the trails. Shafts of the rare sunlight poured down through the branches as if reflecting off monstrous jewels in the crown of the forest.

The bright beams spill out of trees and onto the ground. The sounds from town grow muffled and the forest becomes a cathedral grander than the old church of St. Michael’s, less than 1,000 yards away.

In July and August, and sometimes even in September, successive runs of Coho, sockeye and dog salmon thrash their way upstream toward shallow natal pools in the interior of Baranof Island. The whipping tails of strident fish make audible splashes above the sounds of rushing water. Brown bears often come down from the slopes of Mt. Verstovia, the Sisters, and Gavan Hill to feast on the in-town easy pickings in the traffic jams of salmon.

At the far edge of the park the trail widens into a sunlit clearing ringed with century-old Tlingit totems. Here, the sanctity of forest becomes the sacred. To the

uninitiated the weathered carvings peer down from their masts in a confusing array of signs and symbols. To the native peoples, the totem's message is as clear as a two-line text is to suburban teenagers.

"Let's get to the museum before it closes," Cathy said, urging us toward the Sheldon Jackson Museum and its collections of Aleut, Athabascan and Yupik art.

The four of us followed the trail back toward town and traded the sanctity of the trees for the splendor of the museum's displays. We wandered among baskets, ceremonial masks, and ancient tools until the staff shooed us out so they could close for the day.

The next day we fell under the control of the cruise ship company. Ushered around in vans, we passengers saw the sights of Sitka until it was time to board the ship in the late afternoon. We saw Castle Hill, where the United States government took possession of Alaska from Russia in 1867. And we were treated to music and dancing by the Raven Clan of the Tlingit tribe.

Finally, the vans dropped us at the dock where our ship, the MV *Wilderness Discoverer* waited. Tiny by cruising standards at just 176 feet long, with room for 100 passengers and crew, the *Wilderness Discoverer* was built to negotiate the narrow, twisting passages of Alaska's panhandle. Its upper deck was decorated with racks of colorful tandem kayaks that we would use to explore shorelines and inlets, icebergs, and kelp forests.

Long before the captain gave a blast of the ship's horn and ordered us cast off from the town dock, we'd explored the ship, stowed our belongings in the staterooms, and taken a place at the rail. Everyone on board seemed anxious to get underway.

The captain used the bow thruster to ease the ship away from the waterfront and pivot into the channel. Making little more than headway speed, he turned the vessel around the complex of islands with the airport on them and ran north in the Western Channel, paralleling a long shore to the east called Halibut Point.

The four of us stood at the rail with most of the other forty-five passengers, watching our progress as the late afternoon turned into evening. The ship inched along among the scattered islands and shoals that confuse the channel. Halibut Point blends into something called Harbor Point, where the channel widens into a small bay. Around Harbor Point the settlement of Old Sitka clings to the shore

The low angle of the setting sun draped the dark green of the trees and the angles of the buildings with an opaque orange light. The snapping of camera shutters sounded above the hum of the ship's engines. A voice from somewhere nearby said, "Isn't that sunlight beautiful."

"It really is beautiful," I said, turning toward Gail. "We are so lucky to have this weather."

As our little ship followed the channel across the middle of the small bay, more of the settlement came into view. The sunlight spilling across the shore suddenly erupted against bright colors of another ship at the far end of the tiny waterfront. A wall of dazzling white on top and dark blue below, divided by a single stripe of bright yellow,

dwarfed the complex of docks and buildings farthest from us. So out of place in the little bay, the thing looked as though it had been driven hard onto the shore rather than tied to the quay.

I knew in an instant what it was. “It’s an Alaska State ferry,” I said, as I fumbled for the binoculars hanging around my neck along with my heavy camera. As I raised the binoculars to my face, I spun the little wheel to bring the yellow, blue and white bulk into focus.

“Oh, my God,” I said, peering through lenses at the four white letters stenciled on the hull, just to the left of the car-loading door, at the stern of the ship. “It’s the *Taku*.”

“What’s the *Taku*?” Gail asked from close by my side.

“It’s the ferry my family rode from Skagway to Prince Rupert in British Columbia back in ’68. It almost looks abandoned over there. I wonder if it is.”

Raising the binoculars to my eyes again, the sun on *Taku*’s paint was dazzling. The colors of Alaska’s state flag looked stunning against the dark water of the bay and the inescapable green of the trees rising from the water’s edge, extending as far inland as any of us could see.

Sweeping the glasses upward along the hull, I could clearly see the replica of the state flag painted on *Taku*’s stack—a blue field with the seven yellow stars of the constellation Ursa Major beneath the single star Polaris. Through the binoculars it looked unoccupied, but not really abandoned. Straining to hold the glasses steady against the movement of our ship, I said, “I can’t believe I’m seeing the *Taku*. I thought she’d have long been in the scrap yard.”

As the captain turned the *Wilderness Discoverer* to follow the channel toward skinny Olga Straight and the sunlight dimmed, the view of *Taku* began to fade. Within a couple of minutes, I couldn't see her anymore. Sitka slipped behind us.

"Was that the ship where you met Jan?" Gail asked, still standing close beside me.

"Well, yes and no," I answered. "I actually met her on the train from Whitehorse to Skagway, but there we sailed together on the *Taku*. Her family made the overnight run to Juneau. But my family stayed on board through Wrangell and Petersburg to Ketchikan and then got off at Prince Rupert."

"So you had your shipboard romance."

"Some romance," I said. "We were only on the ship together about eight or ten hours, and much of that she was in her family's stateroom, and I was in the lounge trying to stay awake all night so I could see her off when we reached Juneau."

"But still..." Gail's voice trailed off.

"No buts. I finally got back to Alaska. And I got back to Alaska with the right girl."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Look at the places we've been, from Hawaii to Mexico to all over Europe. Look where we've lived, from Washington State to Texas to Maine, and a bunch of points in between. I'm sure, alright."

"But are you really sure?" she said, laughing at my discomfort.

"I'm very sure," I said. "I'm very, very sure. Look how close we are to shore."

“Don’t change the subject. You always try to change the subject.”

I looked back over the stern and down the line of our thinning wake into the gloom of dark water, fog vapor, and evergreen forest. I couldn’t see anything of *Taku* or the docks and buildings of the town. The old ship had faded from view like all the years since I had last seen her. The sight of her tied up at the pier as we slid past was like a sweet apparition of a younger time.

I couldn’t explain *Taku* or the train or Jan to Gail any more than I could the mountains, rivers, and glaciers. They were just things that define me and sometimes give me a glassy-eyed stare. In the fall of 1968 I hadn’t done any better at explaining things to Carolyn or anyone else who knew me before I went north. It’s like war. You have to be there to understand.

After I got home to Massachusetts, Carolyn and I did cling to each other for a while, assuming we’d ride it out. But the effects of change have a powerful impact when you are seventeen turning eighteen, and we drifted apart.

“I am very sure,” I said. “I finally got back here with the right girl,”

She smiled at me and took my arm as we walked along.

Olga Strait cuts between Krestof and Halleck Island in what seems like a watery canyon. Further on lie the even more treacherous Kakul and Sergius Narrows, before this piece of the Alaska Marine Highway breaks out into the wider and less-obstacle-ridden, but ominously named, Peril Strait.

With clouds descending, the sun setting and fog rolling in from the Pacific, the captain cut the engines and dropped anchor in the relative shelter between the two

islands. Even though we'd only progressed a couple of miles from the dock in Sitka, he wanted to wait for full daylight before taking us through the difficult maneuvers just ahead.

The small ship rode at anchor in almost complete silence. The water below the hull was smooth and tranquil. The air around us soon wrapped in fog. Passengers reacted as if we'd entered some library and automatically spoke in hushed tones.

In a few minutes a blare of the loudspeaker split the silence, when someone announced dinner in the main saloon. Summoned passengers filled the gangways and passageways as they moved toward the meal.

"Let's find John and Cathy and get seats together for dinner," I said, turning toward the door.

"You go ahead," Gail said, turning in the opposite direction. "I'm going to the room to get a sweater. It's getting chilly."

Leaving the clammy sensation of the fog outside, I moved toward the sound and the light of the big cabin one deck below.

* * * *

"Elk," Jim called out as he tried to bring the truck and trailer to a stop as quietly as possible.

"Where?" I said trying to sit up and not sound groggy.

"Right in front. On the left, just at the edge of the light."

"I see 'em."

“Damn. That’s the biggest bull I’ve ever seen,” I said, shocked at the great size of him.

The giant bull elk stood at the edge of the road between us and a herd of about twenty cows. He knew we were there and placed himself where he could fend off any threat that we might pose to his females. He was massive, both in body size and the spread of his antlers. Even in the weak light of the headlights I could tell that he had a perfect symmetry to his rack and a regal bearing in his stance.

It’s not legal to hunt elk in the Yukon. They aren’t really native to the region. Some enterprising human planted them there in the 1930s, and in the region between Watson Lake and Whitehorse they’ve more or less thrived.

I shook my head and tried to clear the fog. “Damn,” I said again. “I was dozing and dreaming about Sitka, I think. But that is the most beautiful elk I have ever seen.”

Five or six additional cows scampered across the road under the watchful gaze of the big bull. They joined the others just off the opposite shoulder of the road and began to move as a group into the brush beyond. The bull calmly watched them go as if counting their number to make certain everyone was accounted for.

When they had all gone into the brush, the bull turned to face us again for a final assessment of our intention. He looked us over and dipped his head in something that looked like a salute, or perhaps it was his way of saying, “Move along, there’s nothing more to see here.” Whatever he meant to tell us, he swung the weight of his antlers over his left shoulder, turned in that direction, and was gone the way the cows had gone a moment before.

“That was an awesome bull,” I said.

“He was a fine one, alright,” Jim said, letting his foot off the brake and the truck start to roll forward again.

In a few seconds we were back at cruising speed and already putting distance between us and the elk.

“The sun will be up in a little while,” Jim said. “And Watson Lake is just a few miles ahead. We’ll need fuel again and this time we’re stopping long enough to get a real breakfast. We are going to have some real food. You can drift back to Sitka until we get there.”

Postscript:

My rusty folding chair screeched against the floor of the porch as if to answer a loon that cruised and cried somewhere in the shadow of the island across the cove. The open porch of the eighty-year-old log cabin faced the lake and the setting sun far beyond. Tall black spruce and jack pine trees serrated the bottom edge of the purple sky behind the opposite shore of the lake. Two dozen bright stars floated high in Heaven's rotunda above where we sat.

Down the slope we could hear little wind-driven waves whisper through the wild rice and other grasses to break in gentle rhythms against the shore. Once in a while the sound of one of the boats bumping against the dock would float up to where we sat trying to re-rig fishing rods before it got too dark to see. Camp was quiet. It seemed as if all of Ontario had gone quiet, except for the drone of the generator five hundred yards away. Most everyone, staff and guests, was already asleep. The last boat had come in a good half hour before.

"Jase, are you going to set up your camera and try again to get a shot of the stars?" I asked.

"No, Dad, I tried it and it just doesn't get dark enough for them to really show in the picture. They'd be amazing if it got dark enough to see 'em."

"In another month things will be different around here," I said, struggling to tie the knot I wanted. "The sun will start setting earlier and the night will get full dark."

"Except for the picture, I like these long slow evenings," Jason said, looking out over the water to the narrow opening between the cove and the big lake. The two white

plastic milk jugs, moored out there as a warning to avoid submerged rocks encroaching from either side of the channel, gleamed in the low light as though they had some form of illumination inside them.

“You should see it further north. Up near Hudson’s Bay or the Yukon, or certainly in Alaska, it’s still full daylight.”

“I’d like to see it. I’d like to see the Aurora, too,” Jason said.

“Then you should go,” I replied. “You really should go north.”