Yearning wild: Confessions of a recovering alpha male

R. Glendon Brunk

The University of Montana

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Yearning Wild:
Confessions of a Recovering Alpha Male

by
R. Glendon Brunk
B.S. The University of Alaska, 1974
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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

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Yearning Wild: Confessions of a Recovering Alpha Male

Chairperson: Ronald Erickson

The writing that follows is a memoir of my years growing up in the Midwest, and my first twelve years in Alaska, 1968 through 1980 - the same period that a massive petroleum field was discovered and developed in Alaska's Arctic. Of any other period in Alaskan history, these were the years of the greatest social and environmental decline, a trend still underway today.

Those first years in Alaska were also ones of great change in my own life. The complication and subsequent decline of a place that I loved from the start, in so many ways paralleled the complication and decline of my own life. What follows is more than memory, then. It's an attempt to look more closely at causes, at the underlying roots of decline, both personal and otherwise. It's an attempt to look through the lens of my own life at the attitudes and perceptions that I carried that led to the loss of things loved. At the same time it is an attempt to look broader, to look at the attitudes and perceptions that dominated Alaska those years, attitudes that still persist.

What follows is a record of my own process, a process of coming to see that my own attitudes and perceptions, my cultural conditionings, were much the same of most other men. I also began to see the rage, the frustration, the desire and emptiness that fills so many men's lives. I began to see how these feelings are projected outward, onto women and children, onto other species, onto the earth.

In examining my own maleness it was impossible not to see the broader scope, in particular the scope of maleness in Alaska's decline. Like it or not, frontier is essentially a male phenomena. Frontier, in some odd way, is about war, about conquering something we perceive needs conquering. Frontier is about economic opportunity, about amassing wealth. Frontiers, indeed most of men's activities in this modern, industrial world, are about controlling, dominating, accumulating, utilizing, stripping, extracting, dividing, managing, too often about plundering.

This is a work in progress, a record of my own coming to understand maleness and how that maleness reflects on the world. It is an attempt to open to the changes men need to make in themselves, an attempt to define the first steps men need to take in healing men, and ultimately what men, in co-operation with women, need to do to re-imagine the world, to create a sustainable and workable world, where women and men and all species live together as equals.
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The wilderness falling into disrespect, deteriorating and being destroyed, is a reflection of our own fate.

- Robert Hinshaw
"Testament to the Wilderness"

Foreword

The Intention of Remembering

My earliest memories are ones of yearning for the wild, for a place and way of life that had nothing to do with the life I was born to. I don't know where it came from, this desire. There was nothing about it founded in direct experience, nothing relative. It seemed to come from some unconscious place, from some other life that I'd lived in another time. All through my childhood and adolescence the desire for wild pushed at me. It was just there, in all my thinking and feeling, festering like a sore under the surface of a life lived painfully in the bland and predictable environs of northern Indiana.

I was twenty-three years old when I left for Alaska, determined to make a life there. It seems now, in some way, all my stories turn to those first years I spent in Alaska, especially the years I spent on the river. Those were the free, innocent times when I believed that I had come to a life that suited me completely, when we lived on the edge of the wild, and I thought I existed only to drive dogs. They were not always easy or sensible years, but of the fifty years I've lived, if I could choose, those are the ones I'd choose to live over. At least I would choose them if I could know then what I know now. There would be some things I'd do differently. For starters I'd pay more attention to the balance of things. And I'd know how greed and the ways of men can turn
something beautiful into something else entirely. I’d choose, too, to expect less of people around me, to be more forgiving. I’d choose to love better, to give a whole lot more to those who need giving to.

Perhaps it was the time: the late sixties and the seventies. We were children of the sixties, alive with the idea of a limitless future. It was the age we lived in, a time of dreams and revolution. And for some of us the dreams were ones of returning to wilderness, of finding something so wild and untouched that it could pass for two hundred years ago.

What did any of us know? We thought we knew enough: all you needed to live well was to be young and to have radical notions. All of us were determined to live differently than we’d seen our parents live. Most of us who came to Alaska were bent upon carving out something different for ourselves, something with more substance than what we’d been given by the dented America of Richard Nixon, the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King, the wasted images of Viet Nam and Hollywood. We were all trying so hard to go back to something we’d heard about, to another time, to connect with old values.

But something went wrong; what we came for wasn’t supposed to die in front of us. In the late sixties oil was discovered up in the Arctic. The North Slope they called it. It was a time of big change in Alaska. Little did any of us actually understand what was underway. We watched the oil people move in. We witnessed the big companies take over Alaska, and a lot of us took their jobs and the big money they offered. We were all too lost in our own stories to really understand the bigger one taking place around us, to see the end of one good thing and the beginning of another that was not so good at all.

Truthfully, though, what was I personally capable of seeing? Those were the years I lived mostly for the promise of that first deep snow, for the
slow pulse of darkness that brought the cold time, for the season when
nothing interfered with driving dogs. Nothing.

If only someone had told me that those times were bound to be lost, that
the harder I pursued the dream the quicker it would be gone. If only I could
have seen the trap of my own self-absorption. But what does any young man
see of his life when he's so lost in the making of it? What do any of us see?

It was the Last Frontier. It said so on our license plates. One last gasp of
the American notion of manifest destiny and conquest. One last best place to
subdue and alter. Like it wasn't good enough the way it was. What is this
compulsion of industrial man for altering things, for taking something pure
and unspoiled and simple, and turning it into something complicated and
soiled and ugly? What is this need to create something else out of what is
already close to perfection? How "civilized" does a place have to be before it's
altered enough to be predictable and bland. How many Golden Arches does it
take?

If there is one harsh reality in the world we live in today, it's how much
has changed in the last twenty-five years. Something's underway, the
ecosystems of the planet are being altered at an alarming rate of speed, the
complications of life spin off in ever greater orders of magnitude. Earth-wide
we are in a downward social and environmental spiral that's unmatched at any
other time in history.

The writing that follows is a memoir of my years growing up in the
Midwest, and my first twelve years in Alaska, - 1968 through 1980 - the same
period that a massive petroleum field was discovered and developed in Alaska's
Arctic. Of any other period in Alaskan history, these were the years of the
greatest social and environmental decline, a trend still underway today. In
those twelve years, Alaska went from a vast, essentially uninterrupted
wilderness, a paradise really, with only small pockets of human habitation
here and there, to a state split into a series of corporate and political fiefdoms
controlled by men who endlessly tout the same tired lines of progress and
economic growth. Alaska is still the nation's frontier, it carries the nation's
dreams in many ways. But they are conflicting dreams, dreams of having it
both ways: both wilderness and development, both freedom and increasing
amounts of regulations and restrictions, both solitude and relentlessly
expanding populations. As with too many of humankind's dreams, the dreams
taken to Alaska are sadly illusionary, based on faulty and dysfunctional
perceptions.

Those first years in Alaska were also ones of great change in my own
life. The complication and subsequent decline of a place that I loved from the
start, in so many ways paralleled the complication and decline of my own life.
What follows is more than memory, then. It's an attempt to look more closely
at causes, at the underlying roots of decline, both personal and otherwise. It's
an attempt to look through the lens of my own life at the attitudes and
perceptions that I carried that led to the loss of things loved. At the same time
it is an attempt to look broader, to look at the attitudes and perceptions that
dominated Alaska those years, attitudes that still dominate.

In the process of looking I began to see how my own attitudes and
perceptions, my cultural conditionings, were much the same of most other
men. I began to see the rage, the frustration, the desire and emptiness that
fills so many men's lives. I began to see how these feelings are projected
outward, onto women and children, onto other species, onto the earth. I've
also begun to see how much the complications of my own life are directly
related to my male perceptions. I see the ways I thoughtless and self-absorbed
moved through life, made my way as men apparently always have, pushing women and other species and earth aside, doing what I perceived needed doing, making my own way, shoving and demanding.

In examining my own maleness I have begun to see the broader scope, in particular the scope of maleness on the so-called frontier of Alaska. Like it or not, frontier is essentially a male phenomena. With the discovery of oil, the male/female ratio in Alaska went from two to one, to something over five to one in a little over a year. Frontier is about men doing manly things in a masculine fashion. This does not mean that women are not there on the frontier. They are, but they are there in significantly lesser numbers, and they are, in the language of addiction psychology, primarily there as enablers, there to create support systems for men to go off and do what men perceive they need to do.

Frontier is about economic opportunity, about taking wealth from the land. Frontier, in some odd way, is also about war, about conquering something we perceive needs conquering. Frontiers are more than a geographic notion, they are about power: corporate, political, economic. Frontiers, as are so many of the manly activities in this modern, industrial world, about controlling, dominating, accumulating, utilizing, stripping, extracting, dividing, sub-dividing, managing, too often about plundering.

In the ways that men dominate women, men dominate the earth; the root causes are the same, the same disregard for the unknown, a pitched battle with some mysterious side of our own natures. "Open her up," they said of the last virgin frontier in North America. Drill her, mine her, de-nude her, manipulate her, carve her up, all in all, boys, fuck her, use her up till she's all gone.

That's what we did, me and a whole bunch a lot worse than me. I was
both a participant and a witness, held by a fascination and yearning for the wild, and paradoxically determined to take my own share of it as it went down. I participated in the male-fornication of Alaska, of a place so sweet and open, so ready to love us. But we did not know how to love in return. All we knew was how to take. Perhaps it's a risky thing to use the word "rape in this context," because rape is such a devastatingly violent and personal invasion of a woman's body. But if the earth is a body, if Alaska is part of the earth, then rape is an appropriate term. Men have raped her, and men continue to rape her, because in some dark, convoluted, psychological relationship with the feminine, we mistrust her, we hate her, hate her moods, her darkness, her coldness, her mystery, ultimately hate her beauty.

Through the examination of my own life I've begun to see the ways that we (both men and women) carry and pass psychological wounds and flawed perceptions from generation to generation. I've begun to see how these wounds and perceptions determine our relationships with each other, with other species, with the natural world. Said in reverse, the state of the world is a reflection of modern humans' collective psychological and spiritual dis-ease. This is particularly so, I believe, around the questions of maleness,

What follows, then, is a work in progress, a first step in attempting to understand maleness and how that maleness reflects on the world. It is a first step in what I intend to be an ongoing process. Because I firmly believe that until we, all of us, both men and women, understand the male perceptions and attitudes that dominate all cultures -- all the ways that we are unbalanced and ignorant because of hierarchical and patriarchal notions -- we cannot hope to understand what we need to do to sustain ourselves socially and ecologically. If men don't begin to examine men, and if men don't begin to change dramatically, not just Western men, but Middle-eastern men, Asian men,
African men, the whole manly lot of us, the world is most likely going to continue ever more quickly on its downward spiral.

There are new frontiers. But they are not physical ones. The new frontiers we moderns yearn for are ones of re-imagining the world, ones of re-inventing ourselves, of turning our downward spiraling, destructive energy into an upward spiral of hope and renewal. We men in particular must re-imagine our relationships. Men's work, at the most basic level, is to end violence, violence against women and children, against each other, against animals, against the earth. It's my hope that the pages that follow will be one small part of opening this new frontier.
I can't say I intended to take up racing sled dogs when I first went to Alaska. The dream I carried with me, when B.B. and I first drove that long, dusty torture of the Alcan back in 68, was to get a few dogs for running a trapline in the winter. I was a hook and bullet fanatic back then. I had the Jack London notion of it: a little log cabin in the bush, thirty or forty miles of trapline through pure wild country. I'd take martin, mink, wolf, wolverine for the cash we'd need. Hunt moose and caribou for food. Sno-machines were still fairly unreliable affairs back in the sixties, so I figured I'd do it the old way. Dogs wouldn't break down, they could do the work of pulling me from set to set. I'd feed them the carcasses of the animals I trapped, something you couldn't do with a sno-machine. Life would be good; B.B and I would be living the dream.

The fact is, some of the dream did come true. But not right away. It took some getting used to, the possibility of so much freedom. I'm reminded of sled dogs I've seen that have spent their whole lives either on a chain or hooked in a team. You turn them loose they won't leave their chain circle. That much freedom is just outside their perceptions of themselves. My first years in Alaska weren't that extreme. After all I did get there. But there was still some caution to the adventure, some experimenting with the notion of that much
room, that many possibilities.

Our first several winters we spent in Fairbanks. The first was a nightmare, one I'll get around to talking about it later. The second winter we moved into a little shack of a place on the outskirts of town. B.B. had a job at the hospital, and I was working seasonally for the Bureau of Land Management and going halfheartedly to college in the winter, so I had a lot of time on my hands.

Our next door neighbor had a few malamutes, big, slow footed, heavy browed, black and white brutes, bred more for the AKA show rings of New York and Los Angeles, than for anything useful. You could always tell when he was about to take them for a run, because bedlam suddenly reigned in the neighborhood. Those malamutes would set to moaning and screaming, beyond themselves over the possibility of a change from the boredom of life on their chains. My neighbor would hook one dog, all slobbering and eager. He'd bring up the second, hook it, and then get right into the business of beating the two of them with a two foot length of garden hose filled with lead shot, just to keep them from killing each other. By the time he had four or five of them hooked up he'd broken up at least a half dozen fights, was down to his shirtsleeves, his parka and hat stripped off and thrown in the snow, too sweated up and beat himself to enjoy driving them all that much.

Once he took me for a ride. He went through the usual hook-up routine, flailing and hollering. Finally he got the last one hooked. With a split second lull in the action he hollered for me to get in the sled. I leaped in and he handed me the garden hose. "When they start to fight, just jump out and whale the tar out of them," he yelled. With that he pulled the tie rope and we careened out of the yard. We made it to the river, a distance of no more than half a mile, before the wheel dogs got into it. I leaped out and whaled on them
and they gave up pretty quick. But that didn’t keep the swing dogs from going at it next. I worked on the swings for a while, my neighbor yelling all the time, “Lay it across their noses! Their noses! That’s what gets to em!”

It took a couple more stops before those dogs finally settled down into a lazy trot, tails up in the air, looking like nothing at all had ever happened. I failed to see the romance in that kind of dog mushing; it looked like a lot of unnecessary work. I still carried the notion of a trapline with me, though, so I kept my eyes and ears open for a dog team.

Later that winter I went to one of the races put on by the Alaska Dog Mushers Association in Fairbanks. Dog trucks were backed up to a half oval of tie-off posts behind the start/finish chutes. Mushers unloaded dogs and tied them around trucks. The mushers with the lowest bib numbers hooked dogs to sleds tied off to the posts. I was surprised at the size and the looks of the dogs there. Rangy, wiry, light framed little things, many of them more houndy looking than how I thought a husky was supposed to look. And there was every possible color — reds, whites, blacks, black and whites, grays — very few of them with the white masks I thought real huskies were supposed to have. And another thing I noticed: there must have been close to three-hundred dogs there, pure bedlam, dogs yet I never witnessed a single fight. Mostly all these dogs wanted to do was run, they were crazy to run.

I still wanted to get some dogs, for recreation if nothing else. One Saturday in late October I saw an ad in the News-Miner: “Dog team. Good honest race dogs. Will sell cheap.” There was an address listed.

I got in my pickup and drove to a house in one of the better residential areas in Fairbanks, set nicely back off the street on the Chena River. I knocked and a man in his late thirties came to the door. I explained to him
what I was there for. "They're my daughter's dogs," he said. "She's been
racing the junior races the last couple years, but she's lost interest in dogs.
More into boys now." He pulled on his parka and we walked around behind the
house. There were five dogs tied along the river bank, all typical racing
huskies as far as I could tell. They ran circles on their chains, excited. Except
for a black one, more squat than the others, scarred and gray at the muzzle, He
just stood there at the end of his chain, eyeing us steadily.

"That one," the man pointed at a nicely built blonde male, "he's a young
one showing good promise as a leader. We call him Swede. The other one
there," he pointed at the silent black dog, "he's a good leader, a fine gee-haw
dog. We bought him up in an Indian village on the Yukon. Name's Blackie."
The grizzled dog's ears perked up, attentive to his name.

"You have to watch him, though," the man said.

"Watch him?"

"Yeah, the Indians used him to hunt moose with him. So he sees
anything that looks like a moose, he's off the trail and after it. My daughter
was driving the team on a new trail, and they came up on a horse standing out
in a field. That little black son-of-a-bitch bolted off the trail, took after that
horse, led the whole damn dog team under that fence and out across the field.
Brushed her off on the way. The horse went through the fence on the far
side. It's the god's truth, he had the whole works half way through that fence
before the sled got tangled up enough to stop the team." He stepped over to the
black dog, reached down and scratched its ears. Blackie wagged his tail, but
with little enthusiasm. "When you drive him," he added, "you just have to stay
alert for anything big, that's all."

I eyed the other dogs a bit more, asked a couple questions about them.
They all looked pretty good to me, though I wasn't all that sure what I was
supposed to be looking for. "They're an honest bunch," he said, "but I'm tired
of feeding them for her. You take the whole works today, I'll let you have
them cheap."

I can't remember what I paid for the five. I'd guess at the most, $250,
which even then was a lot less than you'd pay for just an average, retired gee-
haw race leader. I gave him another $50 for the dog houses and chains, tied
the dogs in the back of my pickup and took them home. B.B. greeted me at the
back door. "You got them," she said. "Now what are you going to do?"

"Start driving them," I said.

At that point B.B. was still one to go along with most of my schemes; she
still took her wedding vows to love, honor, and obey pretty literally. She had a
damn practical streak in her, though. "Don't you need a sled, and some tow
lines and harnesses to do that?" she asked.

I thought about it. "Yeah, I guess I do. I'll build the sled, you sew some
harnesses."

I built five little bon fires in the back yard, thawed through the frost
layer (still only a few inches in early November), then drove heavy ribar
down through the thawed spots, for tie-up stakes. B.B. set to work making
some harnesses out of nylon webbing. Evenings after school I worked on the
sled in the living room. I'd taken a pattern off my neighbors freight sled, just
scaled it down to what I thought might be race sled size. Only I figured I would
build a new improved model out of plywood. None of that traditional bent oak,
ash, or birch for me.

The sled when finished weighed about eighty pounds, and had runners,
glued and laminated out of plywood, with about as much flex as railroad ties.
The following Saturday I hooked my five -- Blackie in single lead; Swede, and a
little brown female named Rosie in swing; at wheel a white dog named Karo,
and another brown dog by the name of Brother.

Brother was one of a kind, a character with one blue eye, one brown. He later distinguished himself by lifting his leg and pissing on an unsuspecting Republican campaigning for US Congress. The politician apparently never noticed; he walked out of the kennel to his next appointment with Brother’s mark on his left suit leg. (Unfortunately, Brother’s congressional target made it to Washington and is still there today, one of the most truly ignorant and irresponsible men alive. But that’s another story, I may get to later.)

Pissing on visitors was just one of Brother’s talents. He was also good at making it look like he was working furiously, when in reality he was just keeping his backline tight enough to create the illusion of work. This was a game he later paid for on several occasions, that is once I learned what a real working dog looked like.

I got them hooked, and we blasted out of the yard. Not more than a couple hundred yards down the trail I began congratulating myself on the fine sled I’d built. I relaxed a little, pulled back against my laminated plywood driving bow, the sled hit a bump, and the driving bow broke off in my hands. I staggered backwards with the bow in my hands, landed on my butt, and watched my dog team disappear into the distance.

It was such a sinking feeling; all I could think of was the pile of hair and blood I was going to find when I finally caught up with them. And I felt terribly disappointed in myself (not to mention my new sled design.) Because the first rule of driving race dogs is never, under any possible circumstance, let go of the sled. If you hook down to go up and work on a dog, or untangle, move fast, move close to the sled, move close to the team. So if they pull out the snow hook you can fall on something -- the sled, the tow line, a dog, anything
attached to the main operation -- to act as a drag.

I can't name the number of times I've careened down the trail on my stomach, holding on to the gang line or the tie-up rope. Or other times -- not that many, thank goodness -- I had to walk home and get the sno-machine and look for a lost dog team, because something happened beyond my control on the trail. One time I got knocked unconscious by a tree branch overhanging the trail. When I came to my dog team was gone and I wasn't all that sure where I was. I found the team later, off the trail in a swamp, tangled and scared, one dog that had a habit of laying down if the team got going too fast, drug to death. It's the worst feeling, thinking of your dogs lost or the whole team stoved up from running crazy. The bottom line is most every dog team I've ever seen delights in leaving the driver behind. They're bred to want to go, to run fast. It's all easier without a driver.

It took me an hour or more of walking, tracking, cursing, knocking on doors and asking people if they'd seen a loose dog team, before I finally found them, tangled up and happy as truant children in somebody's back yard. I untangled them and drove them home, hunched over the sled minus the driving bow, holding onto the side rails, looking like a northern Quasimodo. Blackie took every gee-haw command, like the veteran he was. It was clear he knew a whole lot more about driving dogs than I did.

After my grand mushing debut' I invested in a used racing sled, and shortly after that acquired two more dogs. One was a de-barked (some experiment by the US Army), bald-faced blue-eyed male named Zero, which was indeed what he was. The other, a supremely wild and psychotic gray dog named Boo. Boo came from a hard-case of a dog musher, a rodent-eyed, bulb-nosed man once convicted of man-slaughter in a bar room fight. He was no
kinder to dogs than he was to humans. Boo grew up a pup in his yard, and apparently nowhere in that experience did he garner any evidence that humans could be trusted. If anyone tried to get close to him he would desperately throw himself against the end of his chain, eyes rolling white, spittle flying. Boo would lunge over and over again, desperate to break away. He was an unusually strong dog, made even more so by the adrenaline that pumped in his veins. More than once on the trip to hook him to the sled, he would panic and tow me across the kennel, shaking against his collar, made stronger than I by his fear.

Once you got him hooked, though, he was a dream of a dog. A worker, completely dedicated to getting away from the human standing on the sled behind him. But the routine of getting him hooked got to be too much, and if you had to get off the sled to work in the team, he would spook, try to pull the whole works off the trail.

I made up my mind to gentle him. Every day I'd go out and get hold of his chain and pull him to me. He'd resist every inch of the way. When I got him up close to me I'd sit on his dog house and pull his head over my legs. Then I'd run my free hand all over his body. Wherever I'd touch him he'd flinch like he been hit with a cattle prod. I'd speak to him, low voiced, over and over, "Boo, it's okay," assuring him that he was in good hands, that there was nothing to fear. I'd do this every day for a half hour or more. By the end of winter Boo got to where he'd tolerate being handled that way, but you still couldn't trust him not to panic if it was something other than that particular routine.

I began to get the hang of riding a sled. I started hooking Swede up in lead with Blackie, using the old veteran to teach the young one commands.
Swede took to commands fairly quickly, though there was a stubborn streak in him; sometimes he just decided it was not in his best interest to follow my directions. Then it got down to a test of wills between us. I usually won, but Swede never made it easy. He was hard-headed; so was I. Swede was the first dog I whipped.

By the first of December, interior Alaska sun is just a dull faded orange tease hanging low on the south horizon. You're down to only three to four hours of diluted sunlight each day. The sun's extreme low angle makes those hours, even at noon, more like twilight. The interior also only gets no more annual precipitation than your average western state. What does come as snow, though, stays on the ground all winter. An average winter, there's at the most a couple feet of snow accumulated by spring. The winter of 1970, though, it snowed a lot. It started snowing in October, big feathery flakes floating down, day after day. It kept snowing in November. By December we had so much that it was above the tops of the windows. We had to tunnel out the front door, and dig down to the windows to let in what little light we had.

It took a lot work, too, to keep the training trails open and packed. In places the side berms were up above my waist. Open places the wind would blow the snow up in big drifts, and then beat the surface into a hard crust. Where it had drifted a lot, you never knew how deep it might be. Once in the open field behind the house I stopped the team and hooked down, intending to go up and untangle a dog. By mistake I stepped off the edge of the trail and instantly disappeared into snow well over my head. I could see the sled up above me. I struggled, wallowing and packing the snow beneath me, until I could reach up and get hold of a sled runner. With the runner spreading my weight across the trail, I pulled myself up and onto the sled, relieved and thankful that the dogs hadn't pulled the hook.

By mid December the snow got so deep that moose couldn't negotiate it.
Hundreds out in the bush died of starvation. Dozens more died on the railroad tracks. Others came into town seeking plowed roads, hard-packed trails, parking lots, anything that allowed them to move more freely. There were hungry moose everywhere. Drive along a plowed road and you were likely to encounter a moose that refused to yield right-of-way. Children waiting for the school bus had to be on the look-out for irritable moose. A page one picture in the News-Miner showed a woman feeding a moose pancakes from her kitchen window. Every day there were articles of some confrontation somewhere, or of some act of humanity toward starving animals. Blackie, true to his obsession with big animals, was close to apoplectic. It got so that he was so often off the trail that I had to start running him wheel, back where he couldn't pull the whole team off with him.

Swede took over in single lead. Because I was taking classes at the university during the day, I had to do most of my training at night. After a day of classes I looked forward to going out into the darkness, loved the escape of it, the large silence of dogs moving quickly along the trail, their breaths rising in great vaporous clouds.

One moonlit night, moderately cold, maybe twenty below, I hooked my seven. Swede had been showing signs of tiring of single lead, so at the last minute I hooked Blackie up there with him, figuring I'd take my chances. We left the yard and crossed the field behind the house at a good pace. The trail entered the woods on the far side of the field. We cut through a place where willows draped over the trail. I pulled my arm up in front of my face to ward them off. The dogs speeded up, and I thought to myself that they wanted to run tonight. We broke through the willows, and I looked up just in time to see my leaders close in on a full grown bull moose standing in the trail.

Blackie bayed like a coon hound and leaped for his head. Swede and the
swings joined him. The moose was mad, its ears laid back flat against its head, its breath coming out in big white clouds. He struck hard with his front feet. The neckline joining Blackie and Swede snapped. Swede went spinning.

Blackie leaped again. The moose struck again and this time one of the swings screamed in pain, sending Blackie into even more of a frenzy.

I was off the sled with my whip in my hand. I ran up and flailed at the moose, trying to turn it up the trail and away from the dogs. But all I succeeded in doing was make him madder. He shook the dogs off and started after me. I ran from it, the way we'd just come. I could hear him breathing behind me, laboring, breaking through the crust of the trail.

Because I could stay on top the trail, I could just manage to out-run him. He gave up on me after maybe twenty yards, turned around and went back to the dogs, now hopelessly tangled. Blackie, though, was still willing. The moose stepped into the team again. It struck with its front feet again and again. I could hear loud pops, what I thought were bones breaking. At one point the moose grabbed a dog up in its mouth, by the its back skin, and threw it back down on the trail. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would not have believed a moose would do that.

I came back with the whip. The moose was tiring, though the same couldn't be said about Blackie. He was still lunging, barking wildly, dragging the whole tangle of dogs around behind him. The moose went down on his front legs, weak and panting. Blackie grabbed him by the nose again. I got hold of Blackie's collar and pulled him off. I took the butt of my whip and beat him over the head with it until he went limp in my hands. Then I threw him off in the deep snow on the other side of the trail, hoping he'd act as kind of an anchor in case any of the other dogs still had designs.

The moose struggled up on all four again, weak and weaving. I took the
whip and drove him a short distance up the trail. Then I went back to the sled and pulled the whole works around. Blackie came to, shook his head a couple times, then started for the moose again. I grabbed him, unhooked him and loaded him in the sled, took the neckline dangling from his collar and tied him to the back stanchions the best I could. Then, with quick glances back over my shoulder for the moose, I set to work untangling the rest of the dogs. Amazingly enough, they all seemed to be capable of movement, though all but Blackie were pretty subdued. He still struggled to get off the sled.

We limped toward home. From what I could make out in the dark, all the dogs seemed to be moving okay. At least they were all on their feet. Back at the kennel I set the snow hook, then went in the house without unhitching. I called from the back entry way. “B.B., I need your help.”

She flicked on the light, and took one look at me. “What happened?” she said. “You look like you’ve been in a fight. You’ve got blood and hair all over you.”

“Moose,” I said.

We went out and unhooked. In the beam of a flashlight we examined each dog. They were stiff and bruised, a few cuts here and there, but as far as we could tell there were no broken bones. Blackie was quickly recovering, just another day in the life of a hunting sled dog. The best that I could figure, the popping sounds I’d heard when the moose struck were the sounds of dogs or the moose’s feet punching through the crust of the snow.

The next day another musher who lived close called me. “I was out on that trail that leads up to your place,” he said, “and it looks like somebody had a hell of a tangle with a moose up there. There’s blood and hair all over the place.”

“Yeah,” I said, “you got that right.”

The rest of the winter, driving dogs was a nerve wracking experience. I
took to carrying a rifle strapped in a scabbard in the basket of the sled. Several local mushers who got into scrapes with moose ended up having to shoot them. I knew one woman musher who spent the better part of an hour under her sled, while a moose raised havoc with her dog team, killing a couple.

I raced my first race in January, an amateur seven dog class put on by the Alaska Dogs Musher's Association. Amazingly enough I won it. I entered a few other amateur races that winter, won another one, and placed high in all the others. I figured there was nothing to this racing business; it was just a matter of a couple years and I'd be the world champion. The truth is I was hooked. Like a lot of others who experience sled dogs, I became obsessed with the sport.

That spring, with the snow all gone, I staked Boo in the side yard, out of sight of the other dogs. "Boo," I said to him, "you're gona get to like me if it kills you." My strategy was to become the only living presence in his life, to break him down, to get him to accept me on my terms out of sheer loneliness.

Come evening I'd throw an old army mattress in his chain circle. I'd roll up in my sleeping bag and sleep and talk to him before I fell asleep. Talk to him when I woke in the middle of the night, with the sun just barely below the horizon. Talk to him for breakfast. "Boo, you crazy son-of-a-bitch, you're gona calm down, it's gona be all right."

B.B. was impressed by my dedication. "You sure know how to win a dog's heart," she said. "I have to tell you, though, it's not doing much for mine."

The first couple nights I doubt if Boo slept at all. He just laid at the end of his chain, hind legs coiled up under him, front legs straight out and pointed at me, alert, his eyes fully attentive to my every move. By the third night he may have dosed off some. The fourth night I woke up and he was asleep, laid
out on his side, a little slack in his chain. The next night he wagged his tail when he saw me come out of the house. When I walked into his chain circle he stepped toward me tentatively, but then would not come all the way. "That's okay," I said to him, "you're getting close."

It was two more nights sleeping with him before he finally gave in. I came out of the house and he ran a little excited circle on his chain. "So you're glad to see me," I said. He wagged his tail. I knelt and held out my hand. He came to me, let me frisk his ears before he pulled away. "I'll sleep with you a couple more nights, then you can go back and join the others."

My patience with Boo was one side of my way with dogs. I loved dogs, I had a way with them. The whole sport felt so right for me: outdoors, working with animals, competition, a sport that required knowledge in a number of disciplines. It seemed like I'd found a way of life for myself.

I need to say it here, just get it out of the way, that I'm aware of all of this being mostly about what I wanted. I know as I write it that B.B. stands in the background of it all. It comes out that way, I guess, because that's the way it was. Alaska, the place in the bush, a dog team, they were all my dream, my push. And I went at it my own way. In my mind, perhaps for a while in both of our minds, B.B. was there to enable it, to back me up.

I suppose, in the way of all young people we learned what we had to learn the way we had to learn it. We did our best. I can't speak for B.B. now. What I can say, not that it would change anything, is that if given the chance again there's things I'd do differently. I'd give it all more thought. I'd carry less of me into everything. But that's not the way it was.

We moved out on the Tanana River in 1974, a place that came close to my dream. There was a little community of dog mushers who also settled along our
stretch of the Tanana and out on the Alaska highway, six or seven couples total, all of us in our mid to late twenties.

Winter was our season to drive dogs. Those short days, with the sun just a tease on the south horizon, a sun that limps up late in the morning and disappears again by two-thirty or three in the afternoon. Winter is the time of long, dark, brutally cold nights, when the air stabs at you, and the northern lights dance holy across the sky. Many of those nights we would hook short dog teams or take skis, drive on moon-lit trails, to gather in one cabin or another for potlucks and saunas.

The women tried hard to be the women of their grandmothers; that was the notion they had for themselves, and that was what we men expected. They would collect off in their own corner and talk recipes and baking, canning meat, summer gardens, children. We men, holding to the roles we had defined for ourselves, would talk of our own things — hunting, fishing, log building, boats. We talked of a lot of things. Whatever our conversation was, though, without exception it would always eventually turn to dogs. Dogs ruled us. We were all obsessed with dogs.

Once B.B. suggested that she and I begin socializing with a new couple she'd met in Fairbanks. "Do they talk dogs?" I asked her.

"They don't have any dogs," she said. "They're just normal people."

"I'm not interested in any normal people," I said. "I've got nothing to talk about with them." And that was it for me and any socializing with regular people.

We talked dogs. We talked of "jumps", the way a good one strides full out and eats up distance. That long, lose-jointed, almost reckless reach that no other canine, not even the wolf or the greyhound possesses. In fact, it's a way of moving that no other animal on earth can duplicate over distance. None. A
Cheetah will outdistance a top dog team two to one for the first four hundred yards or so, but be left behind, exhausted, in half a mile. A horse might stay with a sprint team two miles, at the best three or four. Basically, though, six or seven miles and everything in the animal world is left behind, and that's just when racing huskies are warming up, just settling into their full stride, down into that rhythmic, hypnotic pace that's like lyrical poetry. In some regards I can think of nothing more beautiful. It's still that way for me, and it's been fifteen years now since I drove that last good team, the one that Jenny led. It's been fifteen years now, also, since I left the river.

We talked of the whip, too. How to put that edge of fear into a good dog, that extra desire that's instilled by pain. Beyond the quality of the individual dog, beyond the point of desire and toughness, it then gets down to who's driving them. It's about how he or she works with them, how capable he or she is of getting into their minds. Good dogs can either be made better or worse by the musher. It's a delicate balance. The highest compliment you could pay someone was to say he was a good dog man, even if who you were paying the compliment to was a she. "A good dog man" meant that musher could communicate with dogs, could get all they had to give. In those days it usually meant that person had learned to use the whip. I suppose it's still that way for those driving dogs, but I know, too, some things have changed.

I first learned the fine points of whipping a dog from Denis Christman. Those of us who lived along the river were all fairly accomplished Alaskans, experienced at a lot of things that had to do with living in the bush. Denis, though, was the center of our community. He was only twenty-five years old when B.B. and Cara and I first moved out on the Tanana, the youngest of us all, but even then the resident expert on everything. Denis was a man's man; he
worked hard at out-manning us all. Not that he needed to. He stood at least six foot five, and weighed over two-fifty. He was big, yet he moved light on his feet, athletic and easy, the way some big men do. So easy that at times he appeared almost dainty. I know he wouldn't like me saying so.

He started driving dogs when he lived in Minnesota. But like most people who have dogs outside, he knew where the center of the universe was. For racing sled dogs Alaska was it, the place with the best dogs and the dog experts. Shortly after getting out of the army Denis brought his dogs north. In just a few short years he had gained a reputation as a tough dog man. But then Denis was good at most anything he undertook, anything that is except hold a job. He hated working for somebody else, so schemed every possible way to avoid it. Dogs were one of his schemes. Raise a lot of pups. Cull ruthlessly. Prove out the best ones and sell them for big dollars. No attachment. No sentimentality.

It was just he and I in his cabin that night. The propane lights cast a soft yellow glow against the log walls. Denis sat in his big red recliner chair pushed up against the back wall. He wore a green plaid shirt, a down vest, and still had on his red wool stocking cap and Sorrels. We were talking about "getting it all out of them", how to take a dog beyond what they want to do, beyond what they think they want to do. Denis stood up in the center of the room, reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a three foot, shot loaded, braided kangaroo hide "signal" whip. "I'm never without this," he said. "Would feel undressed without it." He balanced the whip in the palm of his hand for a second. "A three-footer like this is the best; you can work them over close." He took hold of the butt end, circled it once at his side, and then with a quick flick of his wrist cracked it hard. "You got to put the fear of god into 'em." As he spoke he reached down and pantomimed the act. "Pull 'em to
you by their backlines with one hand and jerk hard. As you jerk, whip 'em with the other till they scream and struggle to get away.” He put a few strokes to his imaginary dog, then straightened and frowned. “If they lay down and give up, they're bullet bait. You want the ones that'll go through the front of the harness to get away from you.”

It was his way of driving dogs, and the way of most men who drove dogs then. But Denis was harder than the average; he drove dogs with the cold intensity of a samurai, almost like they were the enemy. He had a reputation for producing tough minded dogs. Maybe they weren't all that happy -- “sour” we called them -- but as Berney Turner, a dog sage from North Pole, said, “Those sons-a-bitches that old Denis turns out can sure eat up the ground when you pull the leather.”

The next day I had a ten dog team out on a training run, a bunch I'd picked out that I thought needed a little tune up. I focused on a little black and white dog named Sophie, a known lazy one that would give it to you only sporadically. I had her hitched one pair up from the wheel dogs. I drove the snow hook in where I knew it would hold well, pulled the whip from the pocket of my parka and moved quickly up to Sophie. As I did I hollered her name. “Sophie! Sophie!” When I got to her I grabbed her by the backline and jerked her to me, began to cut her rhythmically with the whip, hollering at the same time, “all right!”, in what we called a “fear voice”. Sophie screamed and lunged just like Denis said she should, and the rest of the team began screaming and lunging with her. I'd whipped plenty before. But had never given much attention to the fine points, to the psychology of it. Developing finesse with the whip, in my mind, took me one step closer to the dream.

Denis also instructed me on how to kill the quitters. “Hold them head
first between your legs," he said. "Draw an X between their eyes and their ears, put the muzzle right there where the X crosses and pull the trigger. They never know what hit 'em."

One out of four made it for him. The rest he killed and piled on the river ice in front of his cabin, to wait for spring break-up to sweep them away. Sometimes I would think of his pile, think of it spinning on an ice cake after spring break-up, passing Indian villages along the way, twisting and tumbling along the Tanana, out to the Yukon, and along the Yukon until it entered the Bering Sea, where some Eskimo in a kayak spotted it on an ice flow, a gruesome testimony to some human gone amuck.

But such thoughts didn't stop me. I made my own pile. I drew the X's and pulled the trigger and watched them quiver into death. Any pup showed any weakness of any kind I killed it. If killing and whipping were any measure of a dog man, by that spring I was a card carrying member. Those first winters on the river I began to learn how to turn out tough-minded dogs. I learned to strike and yell and flail until they pulled away from me in open-eyed terror, until sometimes flecks of blood spit like fire from the cracks of their noses. I could holler a command, and watch sixteen dogs drop their heads and tails, bow their backs, and scramble for life. There was something so powerful about it, so addictive, about the feel of the driving bow jerking alive in my hands. Even writing about it now, these years later, I still feel the draw of it.

But there was a whole lot more to driving race dogs than just learning to use the whip. It took me a while to understand exactly all that it took. It didn't take me long, though, to learn that a good dog, one with the desire, doesn't need much fear in them. They need just enough to put an edge on, that little extra that's like insurance. A good one is giving it all to you anyway, so you
don't ask for more unless there's a lot at stake. Demand too much and you take the desire out of them, you break their spirits and they never come back from it. There's a lot of stories of whip men whose teams laid down on them and refused to get up. Many times I've seen the hard driver's dogs refuse to leave the starting chute, or their leaders bolt into the crowd or duck off the trail the first chance they get. Some drivers never figure it out. Some, I guess, can't do it differently; the rage they carry has the upper hand.

Driving dogs well, like most things, is about balance; it's about patience and holding onto a dream, without letting your desire push you into things that don't work. Driving dogs well is about driving yourself well; it's having enough ego to believe you can do it, but not so much ego that it gets in your way, that it rules the decisions you make. You don't have to be a good person to drive dogs well. You just have to be good at driving dogs.

I began to learn some things. Denis was the one who taught me how to "get what they had". It took me some time, though, to figure out just what it was I had learned, to understand that I had not learned balance, not in most things.
Growing Up Mennonite

I was born into a Mennonite family in the midwestern United States, Valentines Day of 1945, six months prior to the end of World War II. I'm often intrigued by how little I remember of my childhood. It's as if a gray blanket were thrown over my experience, a blanket with tiny moth holes through which shafts of moted light filter, bearing faint colors and smells, small recognitions that give my early life only a rough context. I suppose, like everyone else, my memory is selective, given to convenience. Mine is resistant to recall a childhood that was so entirely bland and forgetful in so many ways. Mostly all I remember, from a very young age, is being bored, and later counting the days until I could leave the Midwest and my family. I know, too, the other part of my selective memory is that so much of my growing up was so entirely painful.

I feel some embarrassment admitting my inability to reconcile the events of my childhood. Here I am an adult, a supposedly mature man; I'd like think that I could embrace my childhood for what it was. After all, I've done a lot of work around the relationships that dominated it. But like it or not, this is not my reality. When I return to my childhood I still feel the grinding dissatisfaction, the boredom that dominated each day, as if I'd been born in the wrong place in the wrong time to the wrong family. I recall mostly only yearning, craving, dreaming of something else, something wild and far away, something more alive and adventurous then the cautious, bland, predictable life of an Indiana Mennonite community.
There was a security, though, to being a Mennonite; you knew your place and could be assured of extended family. That is if you were willing to hand over your identity to the dictates of the group. Then (and now) one could travel to any number of communities in North America and find relations. Mennonites know Mennonites by Mennonite names -- Yoder, Miller, Gingrich, Slabaugh, Lehman, Mast, Wenger, Yost, Nunemaker, Hartzler, Bontrager, Lapp, Schrock, Weiss -- all good, solid, Germanic appellations that promise tables laden with solid food and piety.

A few years back I was hitch-hiking down the east side of Africa. For some spell I'd seen few very whites, only the occasional English colonial clinging to some outpost from the good old days of empire, or a Peace Corps volunteer or missionary in some backwater. In a small rural village in northern Zimbabwe I ran into a Mennonite missionary from Kansas. She was a gentle woman, gray haired, in her mid sixties I'd guess, kind and patient, the quintessential Mennonite missionary who'd spent her whole adult life in Africa. I told her my last name. "Brunk," she reflected. "Oh yes, you're of the Virginia Brunks. Your cousin George, what a wonderful evangelist he is. I attended his revival once when I was back in the States on furlough. A wonderful service." She pondered a moment. "Let's see, your father ... yes, I think I've heard of him. Wasn't his family in Mississippi for a while, part of that new community near Gulfport? He married a woman he met at Goshen College didn't he? Now who was she?"

"Cleo Cook," I said, "from Iowa."

"Cook's English," she said. "I take it your mother wasn't Mennonite."

"No, she was," I assured her.

"But not originally," she replied. "Her father or grandfather must have converted sometime back. She's from Iowa. What family beside Cook was she
connected to there?"

"Wenger," I said.

"Oh of course, that makes sense. The Iowa Wengers. I know one of your cousins who's in Kansas. He teaches at Hesston College." And then she proceeded to line out most of my relations, the connections, the ways she and I were almost blood relatives, clearing up, along the way, any misperception I might harbor that my Brunk lineage was of German Origin. "You're of the Swiss Brunks," she said definitively. "They landed in Virginia way back when."

To have been born a Mennonite was to be expected to accept ones ration of simplicity, not a simplicity born of thoughtful choice, but a simplicity dictated by a rigid code of "shoulds" and "should nots". In all matters you should be humble. You should not associate with sinful people. You should tithe all income. You should not smoke, drink, dance, or fornicate. You should practice stewardship. You should not derive satisfaction from worldly things. You should honor your father and mother. To have lived in a Mennonite community was to have lived in a community of eyes. And a community of contradictions.

When I say what I've said, I'm well aware that I've begun to reveal my distaste for organized religion. Not just modern Christianity, but all of it, Buddhism included. To some degree or another I see the same control, the fear that underlies so much of the dogma. I chafe at the subjugation of people the world over to so-called human spiritual authority, how people hungry for spiritual connection give away their own power to the stifling doctrine of male dominated thought systems.

My father was a good Mennonite, an obedient man, a servant of
authority, completely taken by the rigid tenets of his religion. He would not
dance, drink, smoke, swear, or fornicate. And as are all good Mennonite men
he was a pacifist; he refused to go to war, would not take human life, would not
raise his hand against another man in any way. He would, though, strike his
children. He did so often, impulsively, a hard knot of anger twisting his
handsome face. I know now that he did not strike his children because he
thought it was the right thing to do, but because he knew no way not to.
Easiest said, unexamined anger owned my father, turned him against himself
and those he loved.

I know this: I resist writing about my father. The best I can come up
with is that he embarrasses me, that his anger, and my own, is in some way
wrong, that we should have known better. I'm ashamed I guess, ashamed to
acknowledge that he passed on the imperfections of his father and
grandfather and great-grandfather before him, that for the all the ways I
resisted him, I too took them on. I know these are not reasonable, objective
emotions, particularly given I have some perspective on my life now. They
are, though, what I have.

My earliest memory, strangely stands out clearer then many that follow.
How much is reality and how much is the way I want to remember things, I
don't know. But the way I have it is this: I'm with my family and we're on
vacation, lost in the western hills of South Dakota. I am three. I stand on the
front seat of a Robin's egg blue, 1948 Oldsmobile, between my mother and
father. My father drives, his solid, workman's hands on the wheel, the same
hands that can grip and twist an apple in half in one effortless motion. His
gray-green eyes stare intently at the road ahead, the muscles along his jaw
cl pinched hard at a barely held wrath. My mother sits quietly, her left arm
across the seat back, as if trying to assure my two older sisters, who sit behind
us, that all’s well. We climb a road that twines like a snake through black, pine covered hills. At the top of the grade my father stops the car, parks it at the edge of a large clearing. A small, low roofed barn sits squarely on the clearing's high side. A man wearing a cowboy hat and boots stands in front of the barn.

My father opens his door, gets out, then holds his arms out toward me. "Come," he commands. "We'll ask directions." I scramble across the seat to him. He takes me in his powerful arms and lowers me to the ground. Together we pass through a small opening in the fence, then walk hand in hand up the hill, just the two of us, climbing slowly, toward the barn and deep pine woods beyond.

I ask myself now, why this particular memory? What makes it stand out? I suspect there's two parts to it. The first comes as no great surprise; it has something to do with my father. His influence -- in some ways my unknowing acceptance of his ways, in others my resistance to who he was -- has shaped so much of my life. The other part is the nature of it. The mystery of the hills, the unbroken forest. For a lad born in the flat, scoured fields of the midwest, the Black Hills of South Dakota were my first hint of wildness. Even at that early age they effected me. Clearly, most of early memories have something to do with nature, with a yearning for something I could not yet define at the time.

My second memory: I stand on the green lawn that slopes from our old weathered, yellow farmhouse, past the leaning barn, to the pasture beyond. At the far edge of the pasture trees break the horizon. Through the heat haze of a southern Michigan summer day, my eyes hold those trees, hold their green coolness, feel the feathers of their leafy crowns. I crave to enter, to explore, but I'm too young to go alone. "The woods" we called them, a place my father
didn't farm, a remnant, an island of mystery in a checkerboard sea of corn fields and pastures. This is a pleasant memory, one that carries the affinity I felt for the farm I was born to. I'm aware that this is the last pleasant memory of my childhood, the last of childhood innocence.

When I was six my family left Michigan for Indiana. We moved to a community dominated by Mennonites, a town that was supposed to possess better opportunities for my father. He'd quit the farm a year earlier. He'd hated farming, and now desperately wanted out of the Oldsmobile factory where he'd worked nights on the assembly line for fifteen years. In Indiana he took up carpentry, began building homes on his own.

The town we settled in was home to a Mennonite College, a collection of plain, red brick buildings, and plain people engaged in indoctrinating young minds in the ways of service and piety. The college was a big part of my parents' decision to locate there, as my oldest sister was of college age, my other sister only four years away. It was an unspoken assumption that we would all attend there.

We settled south of town in a house that my dad had built. There were no woods nearby, only corn and soybean fields. A bit more than a mile away a brown-stained and polluted river slogged its way through land as flat and featureless as a table top.

I missed Michigan terribly. Each day in school I sat and day-dreamed of the pasture below the farm house, the woods, the brushy curve of the creek below the pasture. I was enrolled in the first grade, in a school so overcrowded with war babies that we first graders had to gather in what had once been a cloakroom -- thirty of us festered in a 12X24 room with no windows. To reach the door we had to crawl over the rows of scarred desks in front of us.
Because I was so restless, labeled a "trouble maker" by my new teacher, after only my second day in attendance, I was made to sit in the front row closest to her. The front row had it's disadvantages -- there was a stigma attached to being assigned to it -- but it also had one great advantage: there was only one desk between me and freedom.

The teacher, Miss Mast, was an emaciated, mousy old lady, her dust colored hair pulled into a severe bun behind. She was the caricature of the old maid school teacher, except for one thing: she sported a goiter, a knob of flesh and gristle at her throat about the size and color of a small cantaloupe. I was fascinated by the anatomy of Miss Mast's throat. In some strange way it kept me sane. I watched her goiter float up and down as she talked. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to have a lump that size in my throat.

One day in early spring Miss Mast announced that she had a new bird book to give away if any one student was willing to take on the task of learning all the names and identifications of the common birds of Indiana. It's extra work, she said, it will require the student to give up recesses in order to study.

I was amazed to watch my hand lift itself into the air. I had nothing to do with it; my arm was in open rebellion against my most common sense, a Judas of an appendage. Miss Mast was amazed too. She wanted to ignore me I know, but there were no other hands in the air. She covered her disappointment gracefully, solemnly reminded me that this was not work to be taken lightly. I nodded seriously, and for all the following weeks of precious spring bursting full beyond the thick walls of the cloakroom, I studied birds. I memorized the characteristics and habits of mourning doves, gray catbirds, bobwhite quail, and brown thrashers. By mid May I had all the common birds of Indiana, all their names and habits, colors and calls in my memory. I was
an elementary school bird savant. Miss Mast, in a fit of unaccustomed kindness, acknowledged my dedication, asked me to make a presentation to the class. I crawled over my desk, stood straight in the front of the class, and gave my first grade colleagues a little primer on birds they might see outside the classroom: robins and cardinals, red-headed woodpeckers, perhaps a blue heron if we could manage to escape to the river.

Then, in a little ceremony, Miss Mast presented the bird book to me. I took it solemnly (a book I still possess), then crawled back over into my seat. Once there I felt for the first time in my life the let-down of a goal achieved, the process gone, and nothing real or meaningful beckoning in the future.

*The Little Golden Book of Birds.* This is all there is? I asked my self. This tiny little book? That afternoon, for the first time in four weeks, I emerged, blinking and pale, onto the asphalt playground for recess.

By age nine the best that could be said of my academic life is that I endured. Each day was a test of my mother's will (that I go to school) over my own (that I run away west and become a cowboy). During recess I often played alone, along the fence bordering the railroad tracks behind the school. I was drawn to the tracks, not because of a love of trains, but because the tracks harbored the only uncultivated and unhoused strip of land within a mile of my home. The tracks were a mystery, a tangle of red sumac and elderberry, black locust and dung colored weeds, cutting straight as a die through a land of solid predictability. This particular day I spied a dead possum lying tattered gray and grinning at the edge of the tracks. At the bell I returned to the classroom, more anxious then ever to be done for the day.

After school I rode the bus home. There was no dallying around as I changed my clothes and put on an old pair of hip boots that I'd rescued from
the county dump. Actually, for a nine year old those hip boots were more like chest waders. I tied them with lengths of baler twine to my belt. They hung in black rubber folds below my knees.

I set out the mile over frozen fields to school, clomping laboriously in my size eleven's, stepping high over rows of stubble corn. At the tracks I climbed the fence and found the possum. I glanced across the playground at the rear of my red brick school, felt it's prison bars, the gnawing boredom it represented for me. I turned away, hefted the possum by it's tail and climbed the fence again. Through the pale gray light of Indiana winter evening I walked with the wire-haired carcass bumping hard against my leg. The scabrous skin of the possum's tail twisted over knuckled bone, sending little electric-like shocks through my hand and up my arm. As I walked I imagined my other lives. I am the Blackhawk warrior who walked these fields a hundred years ago, a bold hunter returning with meat for my family. I am a mountain man crossing open ground, alert and ready for the Blackfeet, carrying a beaver I've trapped back to my camp in a thicket of willow. I am a Sioux scout, my face painted with vivid slashes of black and red. I stalk like a puma toward a pioneer cabin at the edge of the plains. From the rear of the cabin, light from a window pours liquid into the half-light of winter evening.

A woman stands working at a sink, a woman with serious features, her brown hair pulled closely against the sides of her head. She is almost pretty, her eyes brown, kind, but at the same time stern. She looks strangely like my mother. I am a boy again, born to the wrong family, in the wrong place, at the wrong moment in history. This I know: the woman on the other side of the window will absolutely not tolerate a dead possum in her sterile kitchen. Neither will she take kindly to a son who scavenges dead animals from the railroad tracks. Not unlike most children, I see my life as a deep pit of
misunderstandings. I am an accident, born into an unjust world.

* * * * *

My mother. How do I write about her, the emotions and complications of that most basic of relationships? How does one, in a few pages, distill the experience into some meaningful, objective form?

This memory of my mother working at the sink, the altar of her home, to provide for her family, and me standing in the twilight of a winter evening looking in at her, knowing her and not knowing her at the same time, and she with no awareness of my presence there in the back yard looking in, in a certain way sums up the core of our bond. To have lived with someone as familiar as my own life in one way, yet in another way as complete a stranger as one might imagine, is how it was for me. She was not there to dally or to spend time in frivolous pursuits; my mother was a worker. There was rarely a time, early morning till she crawled weary into bed at night, the whole eighteen years I lived at home, when I can remember my mother not engaged in some form of labor. She did it unsmiling, convinced I'm sure, that her worth was in her work. Only one period of time, with the exception of a couple of short family vacations, do I recall that she stopped work. That was when, in her late forties, her heart failed the first time. She lay wan on white sheets in her bedroom, only a door away from her kitchen. It seemed inconceivable to me at the time that this woman could be down, that her energy could flag. With her illness our household was thrown into confusion. My two older sisters tried to step into my Mother's shoes, but there was no way either of them could carry her load. My father seemed strangely absent. When I try to recall his role during this time, I can remember no incident with him. He was no doubt working also, terrified, I suspect, that he would be left alone with three kids and a God who was reputed to be a God of love but ruled with an iron
hand.

My mother was no slacker, and no slackers were allowed around her. Within days of the heart attack she began to direct housework from her bed. "You should be ashamed," she'd say to me, "of not doing your share." "You should be ashamed" was one of several "shoulds" my mother's employed in the business of learning guilt. Pushed by the rigid notions of her Antibaptist ancestors, her opinions about most things should were as willful as her labor. If one was to have an opinion contrary to my mother's, one had better be ready to know how and where it came from. She gave all of her children this gift, without intending to, of opinion and debate; if one hoped to survive with a modicum of self identity, one had better be ready with one's own views and a capacity to be able to defend them in the face of almost certain disapproval.

Among her three children, in the have-ones-own-opinion-and-defend-it-to-the-hilt department, I took the lead. From early on I resisted. On my second birthday, my mother reported in my baby book: "He definitely has a mind of his own. Getting him to change directions once he has his mind set upon something is a full time job." Later, on my fourth birthday she wrote: "His sisters try to get him to cooperate in games, but he insists on doing things his own way. R. certainly has a mind of his own."

I must have known at the start what I was getting into. Some way I had the sense that it was going to be either sink or swim. That came clear on all fronts.

My father came by his rage honestly. His father, my grandfather, was a hell-fire and brimstone preacher whose eyes blazed with a fierce light. In his old age his ire had grown so great that he could no longer find a Mennonite church to minister to. Rejecting the Mennonites as too meek and stuck in the
past, he joined a Pentecostal faith. From that pulpit he railed against any who were vain enough to doubt the god of judgment and vengeance that was his. My father cowered in his father's shadow, and suffered great self-doubt from his endless criticisms. All others in the family were expected to cower also, but my mother resisted, refused to give in to my grandfather's dominance. For this she paid a heavy toll. My grandfather was open in his disregard of her. "She should obey you," I once heard him say to my father. "She took the vows to do so, and she should obey you." My father said nothing to my grandfather in return.

I was nine years old and in the midst of a disagreement with a friend in the front yard of my parents' home, an inane childhood squabble, when my grandfather, painting the trim on our house, sprang down from his stepladder, strode briskly across the yard and struck me several open-handed blows across the face. "You spoiled child!" he spat through false teeth, "behave yourself!"

Through the tears of my own fury I spat back, "I'll never speak to you again, old man." And I never did. I carried my grudge against him like a weighty stone. Holidays when the family gathered I avoided any contact with him, invented elaborate excuses to avoid showing up at the dinner table. When my grandfather lay in the funeral home two years later, dead from a stroke, I refused to look into his casket. All I wanted was to be away from him, from his memory, from all that he had touched.

But escaping the legacy of anger among the men in my family was not that easy. My father, contrary to what one might expect, seemed not relieved by my grandfather's demise, but lost. He struck more and criticized harder, as if afraid in some way he was not living up to his father's expectations. He labored under a visible conflict between his anger and another part of him
that I know longed to prevail. In saying whatever I've said about my father, I
hear my own condemnation of him. In no way is this my intention. In all
fairness I must say that anger was not all there was of him. Because as often as
his eyes would cloud with frustration and rage, oddly close to this rage was an
infectiously charming humor.

I wonder if it's not true that for people filled with rage to maintain
some semblance of sanity (whatever sanity means), humor is the counter-
balance, the balm the keeps the fire of rage from consuming all. My father
could come up with the unexpected and laugh like no one I've ever known.
Certainly his humor could take some odd twists.

I was six when my father and I traveled together in a new, dark blue
Oldsmobile, just the two of us, from our home in Michigan to investigate our
prospective new home in Indiana. Pre-Interstate, we followed a two lane road
that ran straight south through miles of winter fields, and the little look-alike
main streets of the central midwest. In a small town close to the Indiana
border my father slowed and pulled left into the parking lot of a Dairy Queen,
the new rage in dining, the first of the fast food, fast life franchises that
would before long alter forever the character of these little communities.

I was interested in what my father might be up to, but not willing to
believe that we truly might be getting a treat without me asking. My father
looked over at me. "What'll you have," he said.

"You mean an ice-cream cone?" I asked.

"Anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Anything," he said. "A cone, a malted. How about a sundae?"

I was astounded, this was not my father. I know him well enough to
know he's fairly predictable, that he's not often spontaneous. The best
strategy for living with him is to not hope for anything too good, anything above disappointment is a bonus.

But I decided to trust him this time. I gave it some thought. "I'll have a large cone," I said, "dipped in chocolate."

My father got out and returned shortly with two large, chocolate dipped cones. He handed mine through the window on my side, then stepped around the rear of the car and slid in behind the wheel. We ate in silence. Ice cream and chocolate dripped down my chin, over my hands and my arms, dropped an abstract expressionist splay of vanilla and Hershey across the front of my white t-shirt. I finished, secretly pleased with my good fortune. My father looked over at me, eyes twinkling. "You want another one?" he asked.

I was beyond understanding. "Another?" I replied weakly.

"Another," he nodded.

"You mean another cone?" I said.

"A cone," he said.

I was convinced there had to be a major hitch somewhere, but I also didn't want to blow it if there wasn't. "Yeah," I said with hesitation.

He got out again, this time returned with just one cone. He slid in on his side and handed it across to me. I began again and my father just watched.

This is turning out okay, I thought to myself. If it was possible, I relished the second cone even more than the first, taking it slower, getting into the gestalt of licking and dripping. By the time I finished I was my mother's worst nightmare; I had Dairy Queen armpits, and my t-shirt was no longer Christian white. I could tell my father was trying not to laugh. And I was trying to decide if that was good or bad; am I the dunce or have I done something right? "You want another?" he asked me.

I was too far gone to be astounded now. I really didn't want one, I felt
terminally full and on the edge of nausea, but with instincts honed by five years of scarcity, I agreed.

"Another large with chocolate?" he asked.

"Maybe a medium," I said.

"Okay." He got out and returned with the third cone, handed it to me.

I began slowly this time, took a couple licks, then rested. I was clearly not going to be fast enough. Gravity took over, and the cone and its contents moved down my arms across my shirt front, into my lap. My father began to laugh, full and out of control. Tears came to his eyes. He slumped forward and banged his head on the steering wheel. He struggled for breath. I've been a big hit, and I don't have a clue why. Between gasps he turned to me. "You've had enough?"

"I think so," I said.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

It was weeks before I could bear the thought of vanilla ice cream again. Months before the word "chocolate" ceased to set off a Pavlovian eruption in my stomach.

The point is you never knew with my father. So the best strategy was be prepared for the worst. Consider anything else above anger a bonus. The one consistency in living with him, in never knowing whether it would be anger or laughter that came from him, was a pall of constant tension in our household.

We had a dog that had come to us as a stray, a simple minded cocker spaniel that cowered and peed at the slightest hint of conflict. Once it crawled up on an old couch in our basement, and I watched, horrified, as my father swung a claw hammer full arc against the dog's head, and drove it spraddle
legged onto the floor.

"Why'd you do that?" I yelled.

My father bristled. "Don't raise your voice to me. You know that dog should not be on that couch." He turned away. "Get it out of here."

I carried the dog up the stairs and out into the backyard, took it to my favorite spot under a spreading Chinese elm, and sat with it in my arms. With my shirt sleeve I blotted blood that oozed from an ear, convinced the dog was dead. Eventually, though, I felt it stir, watched it shake its head dazedly and come to life. And as it did, my own rage grew, turned inward and festered against all authority, against a god who would make men in the form of my father, a god who was the center of the religion that held him so.

The Mennonite religion is a more complicated and incestuous game than just names. There's brands of Mennonites, defined by their level of conservativeness. Born a Mennonite you know the order you're born to, and you're trained to look askance at all others as being either too conservative or too liberal. On the far right there's the Amish. The Amish still drive horses and buggies, farm the old ways, and won't use buttons, electric, or telephones (unless they belong to someone else). They no longer actually consider themselves Mennonites, because somewhere in the 1700's they decided to split off from the main body of Mennonites, claiming at the time that the mainstream was becoming far too worldly. Among church historians, though, the Amish still fall squarely into the Antibaptist tradition, offspring of that band of seventeenth century malcontents and religious misfits, led by the Dutch zealot, Menno Simons, who fled all over Europe and finally to America to avoid violent persecution by the "heathen" Catholics. Then, among Mennonites, Catholics were held to be the absolute lowest possible form of
Christianity. I clearly remember the implication made by ministers and elders, that Catholics were not true Christians, but some distorted, hard hearted amalgamation of pseudo-Christian and pagan. After all, the logic went, any institution that baptizes unknowing infants cannot have a true sense of the being's soul in mind. Baptism is a decision to be made by an adult. "Adult", not officially defined, was the time when peer pressure and concern over a trip to hell got strong enough that a youth made a public decision. In my case I was thirteen. What did I have to lose? I figured.

After the Amish come the Conservatives, who are split into several orders according to region. Conservatives, referred to by the more liberal orders as "black bumper Mennonites", are allowed to drive black cars, but they must paint the chrome black in order to avoid appearing too worldly. Closely related to Conservatives, but worlds apart over one issue of doctrine, are the Holderman Mennonites. Both Conservative and Holderman woman are required to wear coverings -- little white, cheesecloth looking head caps worn to demonstrate their constant obedience to a male God. Somewhere in the doctrine debate, though, Holdermans and Conservatives split over the issue of just exactly how a covering should look. The Conservatives stood firm by the traditional, flat, inconspicuous little skull cap, much the design worn by Jewish men. The Holdermans, on the other hand, thought a more bonnet-like design, with chin strings, was the ticket. Strings, though, it should be mentioned, never to be actually tied under the chin.

The Conservatives thus stand right of the Holderman, because these strings they considered worldly. Enough's enough, they told the string wearers, shape up or hit the road out. The Holdermans did just that, and now throughout rural areas of Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, and Pennsylvania you can see women with strings on their coverings, driving black Buicks and Oldsmobiles
with black paint peeling from the bumpers.

Next left is Old Order Mennonite, the branch I grew up in. The Old Order was a big climb up the worldly ladder from Amish, Conservatives, or Holdermans. Old Orders could drive cars of any color, though I never recall a red one, and did not paint the chrome black. By the time I was in my teens, my parents' congregation (always the trend setter because it was affiliated with the College) voted, after considerable and heated debate, that it was okay to own a TV as long as one watched only "wholesome" programs. It was the same debate that had gone on over radios before I was born, and when in my teens, over coverings (women were no longer required to wear them), and later over dance (still not sanctioned), and divorce (not Biblically sanctioned, but a hard reality in a fast changing world). The Old Order, far from what their name implies, has grappled more than any of the other branches with the secular pressures of the late twentieth century. Beneath it all, in all honesty, I think there is a keen desire to live honestly, to love well. This, I hope, is the gift I took with me.

Further to the left, and for other Mennonites hardly worth noting, are a small group called The General Conference Mennonites. The General Conference are pacifists still, but so liberal on most other matters that, as my father once said, "they're almost as bad as Methodists." In high school, one of my best friend's father was a General Conference minister. He was even known to have a drink of wine now and then. My father didn't approve. "It's a disgrace for a minister to behave that way," he said.

Mennonite was not the life for me. I know it weighed heavily on my two sisters, too. Particularly my middle sister. She chaffed under the rules, and in minor ways rebelled - she danced and went to movies, out of college married a man my parents did not approve of. But with any rebellion there
was always the oppressive guilt, the self-questioning that took the enjoyment out of being one’s own person. Both my sisters suffered terribly the barbs of guilt, long after they had left the church, even after they were married and had their own children. The stamp of Mennonite had sunk deep into their psyches.

For some reason I took on less of the guilt. Perhaps it was because I was the youngest. I suspect, too, it had to do with my maleness; there was always the unspoken message that boys would most likely sew some wild oats before they would be ready to come fully into the fold. Not that I was guilt free. No, there was plenty of shame around my inability to be "good", as my parents called it, by my seeming helplessness in the face of sin. And too, there was my own rage. By the time I was ten or eleven the contradictions, the oppressiveness of the religion weighed heavily upon me. I began striking out with my own anger. Once a poor southern kid, a migrant farm worker's son who lived in a shack by the railroad tracks, pushed me from my seat on the school bus, bumped my nose and made it bleed slightly. In response I grabbed him by the throat, and with dark determination pushed him to the aisle floor, and there pummeled him in the face, over and over again, until finally his own blood pumped dark red from both nostrils.

I paid for this transgression, was not allowed on the bus for the rest of that school. The migrant kid moved away at the end of the school year, with a misshapen nose and most likely his own growing rage.

School was hell. I was bored, restless, full of resistance. I wanted only to be outdoors, to be exploring the river bottom or the railroad tracks. Still I tried to make it in school; I began each new grade determined to behave. But soon the boredom took over, the ludicrousness of sitting captive when there other more interesting possibilities outside the schoolroom. In the seventh
grade I came head to head with my teacher, a born-again Christian by the name of Mr. Slaughter, who made us pray each morning, and who each Friday held what he called "Bible day". From the front of the classroom Slaughter prophesied the end of the world. "All yea who sin must be made right in the eyes of the Lord," he cried. "Believe in the Lord Jesus or burn in hell." The boys would sit mum and scared. A few of the girls would begin to cry.

I hated Slaughter, hated his authority, his smug, self-possessed Christianity. I would argue with him until he would lose patience and send me out of the room to stand in the hall. On one occasion he came out and shouted at me. "I've had it with you!" He shoved me. I shoved back. He slapped me. I struck back, hit him twice -- once in the chest and a glancing blow to the face -- before he wrestled me to the floor.

They kicked me out of school. My mother, to her great embarrassment, had to go the principal and ask that I be allowed to attend again. Had it not been for a long list of complaints against Slaughter by other students' parents, it's unlikely I'd have been allowed back that year. The principal said I could return on one condition: that my desk be moved to a cloakroom. There I was to spend the remainder of the school year, seven or eight weeks, alone.

My mother agreed to the conditions, and that night told me in front of my father. "You did wrong," he said to me. "I can't condone what you did, striking him like that, even though I think the man is wrong to preach that stuff in school the way he does. You return to school and do what you're told."

I returned and took up residence in a tiny 6 by 8 foot room, a full floor away from my former classroom. Slaughter came to see me each morning, said just enough to convey my assignments, then turned and shut the door behind him. Each day with spring bursting full outside, I sat alone peering through a tiny window at a single maple tree ringed by black asphalt. The
tree became my friend. I spoke to it, told it my troubles. Over the weeks I watched it open to the sun, bud and sprout leaves. On the last day of school I prayed to the tree, not to the god of my father, but to some other possibility that I was only vaguely beginning to sense. Please make me good. Make me learn how to behave. Please show me the way to be happy.

I came home from school one autumn day, the maple trees in front of the houses along my road, blazing in full autumn colors, gold and red and copper hues. I could not bear the feel of autumn. I knelt on the carpet in the living room and buried my head in my arms on the seat of the easy chair. I felt such a deep inexplicable sorrow for something I could not define. My mother came into the room and saw me crying. "What's wrong, child?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm just sad. I don't know why I'm sad."

My mother knew of my struggles at school, my resistance, the acute boredom I dealt with. I didn't know it then, but in later years she shared with me how helpless she felt, how locked into a system that wasn't meeting any one's needs. "Is it something that happened at school?" she asked.

"No, it's just I feel like the world is dying," I said. "I feel living things are dying everywhere."

I know my mother wanted in every cell of her body to comfort me then, to hold me, to reach out and tell me she loved me. But she couldn't. It's not a mystery to me that my mother's heart would be the organ that failed at such an early age. There was a tug of war in her, a pull between her natural instincts for loving and the subliminal messages in her youth not to show it. Never once in the first forty-five years that I knew her did I ever hear her say "I love you", not to her children, to her husband, to the family dog, to no one. I know that she carried a deep regret for that omission, because when in her
eighties she once said to me, "I know I never showed any of you how much I loved you. I just didn't know how. That's the way I was brought up. I wish it could have been different, but it wasn't."

I know little of her youth, only that she adored her father, who, for a Mennonite, was a considered a very progressive man in his community. My mother was proud of the fact that they had the first car and first flush toilet in the county, and that he was very progressive in his farming methods. He died young, when my mother was only ten, leaving his wife, a good, hard working Iowa farm woman, and four young children.

I can only guess at the messages in my mother's youth. What I do know is that the death of her father effected the family greatly. Her mother had to sell the farm. With the proceeds she opened a boarding house in South English, Iowa, and there scrambled to make a living. She drew into herself, a woman lost behind a veil of inexpressible grief for her loss, leaving her children shut off and alone. My mother was loyal to her, though. She worked hard in the boarding house, until, through the generosity of an aunt, she got the opportunity to go off to college. Her mother died when she had just begun her sophomore year. Shortly thereafter her favorite brother died also, of heart failure.

My best guess is that so much death and her mother's inaccessibility left a mark on my mother, instilled in her some notion that trusting love was a risk too great to take. Showing or expressing love was not a possibility for her, never her forte. And she knew it, made no move to correct it. What I know for sure: this notion kept her locked away from those who needed her the most.

I don't hold anything against her. She did love, though it took years for me to figure exactly how. She gave in ways she could, generously, without a
thought to herself. She worked endlessly for her children. And she had one
guaranteed way to show love. In the grip of inexpressible feelings, her
solution was always to eat. Another pot roast. More potatoes. Cakes, cookies,
pies. As she grew elderly, she softened, became more open and nurturing with
her grandchildren. But with her own children, some things remained the
same. Meeting her again after a long separation, within minutes
conversations with her would still turn to food. Eat, fill those empty places. A
pie's as good as an open heart any day.

That autumn day of my inexplicable sorrow was no different. "Come,"
she said, "I'll make you a sandwich, a little snack before dinner. That'll make
you feel better."

But food was not going to fill the hole in my heart. That was 1956, seven
years after Aldo Leopold's first published his radical notions of conservation,
in *A Sand County Almanac*. He for one was beginning to see that the way we
were doing business on the planet was not sustainable. Against great odds he
began to sound the alarm. And now, forty-some years later, we still debate the
obvious. Still we have so far to go in the recognition of who we are.

But I knew none of this when I was eleven, I had read nothing of
Leopold, knew nothing of conservation, and yet, I can honestly say, it was not
just the advent of autumn. No, at the risk of sounding dramatic, I know then I
felt the earth turning inward, had a sense that the world I yearned for no
longer existed intact, that its remnants were fast being obliterated even then.
The sorrow I felt then for the world is still the sorrow I carry. Now though,
with knowledge, it often ends in anger, a rage of frustration and helplessness.
As I write this, I recognize that I feel ashamed to admit this is so. I feel
apologetic for my anger, though it should be no surprise to me that anger is a
part of me.
I was twelve when my parents decided, without consulting me, that I was old enough to be "introduced to culture". They dragged me, protesting, to a winter lecture series given at the Mennonite college. There I was forced to sit through endless symphony orchestras, the drone of a lecture on the challenges to Christianity in the evil empire of the Soviet Union; a black gospel singer, with an immense bosom (the high point of the event for me), who sang spirituals deemed appropriate for a Mennonite audience. The same black gospel singer, it should be noted, who also because of old laws on the municipality books was not allowed to stay in town overnight. I did notice this discrepancy, my parents' disapproval of it, and their unwillingness to say or do anything about it.

I was made to wear a gray wool suit, my mother's choice, a medieval hair shirt, an instrument of torture. Encased in the scratchy hair of ignorant, complacent, docile sheep, my legs turned to red chaff. I considered myself a prisoner of irresponsible, unreasonable adults, and vowed if I was ever have children to never force "culture" on them, to treat them with respect, to allow them to be ignorant if they so choose.

I squirmed my way through each event, with my mother leaning over me and repeatedly whispering her lecture series mantra, the same one she used during church services and visits to my grandmother in the nursing home: "Stop squirming. Sit Still!" Clearly, there was no justice in my life, no hope. I was convinced that I was about to become the same mindless drone as the animal whose fleece tortured me.

But one night turned out differently. We drove to the college through great feathery flakes of snow falling soft in the headlights of the Oldsmobile. The event that night was to be a slide show on Alaska, delivered by a couple
who actually lived in the Arctic. The lights dimmed, and images of moose and bear, herds of caribou, snow capped mountains, endless, nameless rivers filled the screen. For a child raised without TV it was magic, a release from painful symphonies and Christian lecturers. I was fascinated, enthralled by this place called Alaska, by the actual knowledge of a place so wild. My gray suit ceased to itch and became survival gear for the challenges of the north. My mother's "sit still" mantra went unused that evening.

Later, on the way home, I told my parents that as soon as I was old enough I was heading for Alaska. I was going to build a cabin on a river, raise a sled dog team, live off the land. My father peered hard through the windshield into the snow still falling. "Yes," he said, "once I thought I'd head for the wilds, too. But things change, you know. You'll change your mind."

"I'm going," I said firmly.

"We'll see," he said.
Pacifist Wars

There's not much point in going into many of the details of my high school years. It's enough to say that my dis-ease with the confinement of the world I lived in got no better. My acts of resistance took on greater proportions, more drama. I rebelled in the only ways I knew how. I dressed like James Dean, wore my hair longer than anyone else in my class, drank and smoked (the early sixties being pre-drug, in the Midwest at least), and continued to resist my teachers. It wasn't much in the way of rebellion, but it was the best I could do given what I had to work with.

I had some outlets. By the time I was fifteen I had a large collection of guns -- muzzle loaders, shot guns, .22's, an old 303 British Army Enfield. I was proud of them. As soon as the hunting seasons opened in the fall I hunted virtually every day. Beneath the gray autumn skies of northern Indiana I stalked for quail, pheasants, and cottontails. Nights I'd coon hunt with some friends out in the country, who kept coon hounds. We'd spend the night crashing through cornfields, wading the swamps in the river bottoms, wet and shivering and happy, following the excited bay of hounds. The next day in school we'd sleep through most of our classes.

I fished, also. In the spring I went out at night and by lantern light speared rough fish, carp, gar, and dog fish. Summers I'd cast for bass in farm ponds and lakes. In the winter, after the lakes froze, my dad and I fished through the ice for bluegills and crappies. We kept an icehouse on one of the local lakes, and evenings after he got off work, together we'd head for the
Fishing was the one thing my father and I shared. He loved to fish. With a casting rod in his hand he became another person, patient, fully engaged, his gray eyes alive and intent. When we fished together, those were the few times we ever talked honestly with each other.

My other big outlet was books. From an early age I became a prolific reader -- history, philosophy, literary fiction, most anything I could get my hands on. I used books as an escape, an alternative to the ordinariness of my life. Through books I became aware, at some level, that ideas excited me. I could lose myself in the movements of history, the smoke and pithiness of wars, the notions of great men. I read and read. It's strange now, trying to recall, the books that stand out. Few do. There were Jack London's works: *White Fang* and *To build a Fire*. And A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky*. That book set off a scramble in the town library for books about mountain men. I read them all. I'd say there was no particular book that turned me any one way, perhaps with the exception of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. That book stuck with me. I wanted to be on the road myself, a beat, a bum. I wanted to jump trains, and live in the steamy, back road places. The other book which stuck was *Catcher in the Rye*. I understood Holden Caufield, though I was disturbed that he had not made it out west like he wanted, that he'd ended up in a mental hospital. I looked at Holden, and I determined that I would not end up like him.

But there weren't many books that stood out. I can think of none of the classics that grabbed me. No, the influence of books was more a collective, a synergy of ideas that pushed me out of the conservative world in which I lived, into a world of other possibilities. Relative to my reading, most of my high school classes, the ideas being taught, seemed irrelevant, elementary, condescending. From the experience of my reading I challenged my teachers, refused to take their directives as gospel. I know most of them dreaded me in
their classes. I know now that I dreaded myself in those classes.

There was one exception, an English teacher by the name of Neil Short. He was neatly groomed fellow, hair oiled and parted with a geometric precision. He was recently out of college, organized and still breathing as a teacher. I hope by some chance Neil Short reads this, because I want him to know that it's true that one teacher can make a difference in a young person's life. He must have sensed something about me. Or maybe all he did was take the time to figure out that I was bored to the edge of insanity. Whatever his motivations, he was involved enough to challenge me. "This is lazy," he once wrote on an essay I'd turned in. "It's the work of a self-promoted retard. Please see me after school."

I showed up in his room after the last bell. "Take a seat," he said. I did. He sat on the desk in front of me, looked me full in the eyes. "You're a pretty smart kid," he said. "Do you know that?"

"I guess," I said.

He shook his head sadly. "It doesn't do you much good, though, just helps you slide by. You think you're getting by with something, but the truth is that chip you're carrying on your shoulder is so big it keeps you from seeing who you are. And who you are is wasting his life."

I sat there, taking it in, trying hard, though, not to look too involved. He paused, pulled out his grade book, checked the columns, then looked up again. "I know you can do a whole lot better than you are. You can, and I expect you to. Do you hear me?"

With that he dismissed me. Afterwards I tried harder in Neil Short's class. My senior year I determined I'd work at all my classes; I'd show the bastards. I got straight A's that year, except for one. Neil Short gave me a B. I probably deserved a B. It's strange, though, because beyond that one time he
talked to me, I can't recall anything else that Neil Short did that had any effect on me. No papers or assignments stand out. I only recall his expectation, his recognition of me that one time.

Perhaps all Neil Short did was take the time to expose me to myself. Whatever it was he did, I remember him. I often think, too, of the bright, curious, independent thinking students in so many schools today, public and private alike, who struggle with the system. My heart goes out to them. If only our culture valued education enough to encourage curiosity, to support dissent instead of trying to squelch it. If only we would shape learning around the individual, instead of settling for teaching to the most common denominator. That bumper sticker, "It Will Be A Great Day When The Air Force Has To Hold A Bake Sale And The Schools Have All The Money They Need," is a sad commentary on where as a culture we've put our priorities. It's a lot more than money, though. It's about fear, about those in control pushing for conformity. And it's sad. Especially when history reveals that all cultures fail miserably when curiosity and healthy dissent are discouraged.

It didn't help my situation, either, that my father, after a series of declining jobs as a carpenter, then as a truck driver, took over as the head custodian at my high school. I was cognizant of his reasoning: better to have any job, one that's steady, than to be without a job. He often spoke of the Great Depression, what it was like to live through it. I only recall him once, though, acknowledging how those times had shaped him personally. We were fishing together. Somehow our conversation had turned to work; I suppose, in my own determined way, I had declared that I wasn't going to get stuck in some dead end job, ever. I don't recall him getting defensive about what I said. His response was more just a recall, a quiet declaration. "You can't know what the
Depression was like. Since those years, always looking for work, always out of money, and not being able to go back to college, my greatest fear is to be without a job. You can't know what it felt like not to have a dime to your name."

There seems to be so much irony in that fear. He never got to finish college. Found himself with a wife and a family, debts, an old familiar story for so many men. Whatever his circumstances, whatever his fears, they kept him from doing what he most wanted with his life: to be a high school history teacher and a basketball coach, and he ended up a custodian in a high school, every day working around history teachers and basketball coaches. The further irony is that he had a son, in that very same high school, who loved history and would have loved to have a father with whom to play basketball.

Everyone liked my father; he was a hard working guy, friendly with everyone, students and teachers alike. He was always the first to get the news of my latest misdemeanor. In one of his softest times toward me he acknowledged that his presence there could effect me. "I know it must be hard on you, me being there," he said. "I remember how it was when my father was the teacher in the school I attended. I was expected to be better than everyone else." He paused, like he was remembering that time. Then he closed quickly. "I don't like the teachers coming to me about you, especially that Miss Grogg. I think she's too hard on you."

Miss Grogg. Somehow the name always said it all for me. She was an angry, controlling, bitter, old maid of a school teacher. Her eyes flashed with a vile determination. We would, if Miss Grogg had anything to do with it, obey all the rules. I can honestly say that the four years I was in high school, Miss Grogg made me her most personal vendetta; she was determined to break me
one way or the other. She took great pleasure in inflicting pain. Her one most annoying technique was to pull ears. Not just little tugs, but real yanks that set off spasms of pain through the side of your head. She taught typing. She walked up and down between the rows of typewriters, a warden, a wooden ruler in her hand. If you were typing incorrectly she smacked you across the knuckles with the ruler. I set her up. She came down the aisle, glaring left and right. As she approached I switched to the hunt and peck method. She smacked me. I grabbed her ruler and pitched it across the room. It clattered against the far wall. "Don't you ever do that to me again," I said to her. "I'm sick of you doing that."

She reeled back in surprise. Her voice quavered. "You are not to do that. You are not to ..." she pointed to the door. "Out of my room. Out right now. Go see the principal."

Once more I made the trip down the hall to the principal's office. He was an ex-marine, a law and order kind of guy, who tried to run his high school like a boot camp. Luckily that day I got the assistant principal, a mild-mannered fellow, a couple years from retirement, who just wanted to be liked by everyone. He heard my story. "Wait outside my office," he said, "I'll talk to Miss Grogg."

He came back ten minutes later. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to suspend you for three days. Miss Grogg insists on it."

I believe this: that life provides opportunities for all of us to learn certain lessons, that we are thrown together with people who give us those opportunities. In this regard, Miss Grogg and I were one symbiotic pair. Whatever it was, though, that the two of us were supposed to learn, I have the feeling we both failed at it miserably. The way it was left: it was my duty to make her life as miserable as she attempted to make mine. I think we both
succeeded at least at that level. "Your father is such a nice man," she once said to me, "how did you get to be such an absolute waste?"

"Easy," I replied, smart assed and full of my own self loathing, "It just comes naturally."

It hurts to say so today, but I felt ashamed of my father being there. I resented his caution, the fear of life I saw in him. Why, I reasoned, couldn't I have a father who was accomplished at something significant? Why not a father who lived an adventure? By extension, the shame I felt for him, I felt for myself. I had to act out, because he never did. I was determined that I would not become like him, in no way would I settle for the mundane.

By my early teens my own questioning of what appeared to me as oppositions in his principles led to more and more disagreements between my father and me. "Why," I would say in response to some direction he had given me, "should I do it your way."

"Because," he would reply, his voice hard as ice, "I'm your father, and I say so."

The tension between us finally came to a head. I must have been around fifteen, and my father, who then easily outweighed me forty or fifty pounds and had arms like hawsers, decided I needed a "paddling", as he called it, "just to keep you from getting too big for your britches."

"Bend over," he said to me.

I looked him in the eye, shook my head. "No," I said, "you're not going to touch me."

"Don't talk back to me," he said, and started for me.

I put up my fists. "Don't," I said. "You're not going to do it. I'll fight you if I have to. You better know I will."
He stopped. He looked steadily at me for a moment, and then like a fire dying, the anger in his eyes dissolved and in its place came a mix of sorrow and relief. It was as if in that moment he saw me for the first time, and in the process of seeing me he finally saw himself.

He said nothing more to me, just turned away, as if he had finally been relieved of some onerous duty. At first I felt relieved, triumphant. But then these feeling quickly turned to defeat. Because in turning away from me he pushed me further away from him, for I wanted him to fight me, in some convoluted way to prove that he at least loved me that much.

I find myself cautioning myself not to be too hard on my father as I write this. I know it has something to do with not wanting to appear that I've not forgiven him, that I still carry some adolescent grudge for what was. When I ask myself, have you forgiven him? I answer in the affirmative. I know I have, that he did his best. In writing this, though, I have had to expose my father. It's what was. It's what shaped me. It's a big part of what shapes most men, either a father present or absent, a father as a positive figure or one to push against. In this last regard, I know that he gave me a gift; without intending to he gave me incentive, a negative determination to not be like him. By extension I became absolutely determined to be what I wanted for myself. True, it's been a gift that has generated extremes, for all my life since I've gone to the far ends of things. And it has been a gift that has taken some time and struggle to own, to make peace with. But that's okay; I in no way regret where it's taken me.

There were two very positive experiences during my high school years. Neither of them took place in my home town, not even in Indiana. I had a friend in church who loved to fish; he was obsessed with anything to do with
fishing. I was just a step behind him in the obsession of it. He was a year older than I. His father was a physics professor at the college. Between the eighth grade and my freshman year his parents planned a trip all the way to the Oregon coast, and he the only child left at home had to go along. His parents encouraged him to ask a friend, so he invited me. I had been working on a farm during the summers, so I had some money to go.

We left in mid July, stopped and fished first in the Black Hills. There all I recall is a mink mincing along the stream edge, casting about for scent, and suddenly discovering our stringer of trout. Made bold by hunger, he grabbed the whole works and began to pull. We chased him away, but he came back several more times, before we relented and tossed him a small one.

Next we crossed into Wyoming, where for the first time I felt something that seemed buried deep within me from another time -- the thrill, emptiness, peace of wide open space. I saw for the first time the Rocky Mountains rearing up high against the endless emptiness of a western sky. We fly fished on the Madison, the Firehole, the Gibbon in Yellowstone, and I saw elk and bison, and I knew, without a doubt, that I was leaving Indiana as soon as I could.

We made it to Oregon, the damp, fog dripping coast. I saw big trees and big forests there. I fell in love for the first time, with the country and with a young woman. For the first time I felt that twisted mix of sexual craving and soul yearning that comes with infatuation. She was my friend's older cousin, years older than I, but not so old that my heart was not taken. I couldn't speak to her, could not look her in the eye. I was too awe struck. That summer I felt for the first time the longing of love lost, the hurt that comes with leaving, of abandoning both a country and a woman. I was changed. Life after my return to Indiana became one of counting days until I could leave again.
The next summer, come August, I joined my friend, another friend of his, his father and married brother, on a trip up into the Boundary waters of northern Minnesota. We launched two canoes on the southern edge of the wilderness and paddled north up into Canada. We caught fish -- smallmouth bass, wall eyes, and northern pike. One night we fished from the canoes along a rocky shore. My friend's friend hooked a monster. He was a bona fide sportsman, younger than I, but fishing with only four pound test. He fought the fish for close to an hour, the other two of us in the canoe with him paddling frantically when the fish made a run. Finally the fish tired and he pulled it alongside the canoe. It was too dark to make out exactly what he had; all we could tell was that it was big. He grabbed it by the gills and pulled it over the side of the canoe. It was an immense northern. Later it weighed in officially at over twenty-five pounds, big enough to make the Field and Stream fishing records for that year.

We saw black bears, and once I thought I heard a wolf howl. We were out for over two weeks, and it all passed too quickly. When we came back to the landing I remember wanting to turn around, to paddle north again, this time just keep going, to never return. But return we did. Back to Indiana, and my second year of high school. The day after I got back I found myself in the halls again. My face which had been clear of any blemishes over the summer, broke out into one of the worst cases of teen-age acne known to man. I was a young man in the wrong place at the wrong time in history.

Sports might have been an out. I was sought after as an a football player, because of my size and speed and determination. I practiced some, half-hazardously and, and in time I was rejected. "You're a natural athlete," the head football coach said to me my sophomore year, "but you don't know
how to take coaching. It's a damn shame, too, because you're a tough son-of-a-bitch." I wanted to play football, I know I did. But something inside me, some sense of not being good enough, some part of my father I know now, kept me from succeeding at it.

Toughness. Beneath all the fights and resistance and confusion, there was always another part of me, an observer who carried a deep regret for all that was happening. The observer shook his head and wondered if there was not another way to do things. *Who are you? Why must things go this way?* But what came to the surface was toughness, a determined hardness. Ironically it was such a contrast to what was expected of a young Mennonite.

But that's not what I was. I was something else, something not defined yet. What I knew of myself was that I had to get out of the situation I was in, to be as far away from the bland predictability of life in the Midwestern United States I could. That was my definitions, to push away, to resist. I wanted no hindrances, none from religion, educational institutions, family. I wanted to be free.

I think of the nature of that freedom I longed for, and for some reason this scene comes to mind: I was still in high school, walking through a bare branched oak and maple woods, beneath the leaden skies of Indiana November, with my first shot-gun cradled in my arms. I pulled up on reflex and shot at the whisper flight of a large bird passing close overhead. The huge form crumpled, and tumbled, badly broken into the duff of newly fallen leaves. I approached the bird, a great horned owl I could tell, still alive, sitting propped up on one broken wing. It didn't struggle, just watched me, it's marble eyes resting open and possessed of some deeper knowing than I understood then or perhaps ever will. I don't know why, but I thought of my grandfather. I felt both rage and sorrow then, rage at my own misunderstandings, and sorrow at
the end of flight, of taking the freedom from something that I longed for myself.

I shot the owl again, sprayed it's brains across the ground. I have killed dozens if not hundreds of living things since, deer, moose, caribou, bears, wild sheep, wild geese, and in some private way I regret killing them all. None, though, do I regret more than killing that owl. If I could have the gift of one act in my life being reversed, just one, I think it would be the killing of that bird.

Toughness. The cocker spaniel survived my father's hammer blow, eventually to get killed by a car. And I survived. My senior year I kept a calendar above the head of my bed and marked off the days until graduation. I went to the graduation ceremony with my Levi's rolled up under my gown. As soon as the ceremony was over, I asked a friend to turn in my cap and gown. I went out in the parking lot where another friend waited in a green, 57 Ford station wagon he'd bought for the trip. We had it loaded with everything we thought we'd need to start a new life. Without good-byes to anyone we spun out of the parking lot and headed west. I recall that first feeling of leaving, because it's still the same feeling I get to this day when I'm leaving somewhere, striking out for another. It's scared and lonely, and it's excited at the same time. But I knew what I wanted. My friend, on the other hand, wasn't quite so sure. I'd guess he was homesick before we made the Indiana/Illinois line.

In that act of leaving I began my look for another way for my life. I carried with me a keen desire to know something different, to explore in all ways. With me I carried also the acts of men that had hardened me against myself, and in the process had hardened me against so much of the world. In
some ways those hardened surfaces meant survival. In other ways they would come to haunt me.

My friend and I drove to Oregon. We went back to the town I'd visited on my first trip there, four years earlier. I went to the state employment agency and the woman there told me the only job in town was one operating a dozer, the night shift in a sawmill. "I can do that," I said.

She sent me to the mill with a slip of paper for the foreman. He wore a silver hard hat, had two fingers missing on his left hand, and held his cigarette with the two remaining. He looked at me dubiously. "You're pretty young," he said. "Where'd you learn how to run a Cat?"

"The farm," I said. I was referring to my limited experience on a tiny John Deere dozer on the turkey farm where I'd worked between my junior and senior years.

We went outside to the mill yard, an old blue spruce mill, cavernous and abandoned, except for a huge pile of sawdust, a yellow D-7 Cat, and a massive and complex conveyer belt that crossed the river from a new mill, which spewed tons of sawdust out on a pile. The job was to stack the pile higher, and when called for, push sawdust into another conveyer belt that fed a huge boiler furnace in the old mill.

"So show me your stuff," the foreman said.

The little John Deere on the turkey farm wasn't the D-7 Caterpillar we were looking at now. I stepped up to it, examined it and realized I didn't have a clue how to start it. "I don't believe I know how to start this model," I said.

He looked at me, a little smile on his face. "Yeah," he said, "these models can be a little tricky."

He started the Cat, and jumped back to the ground. I crawled up and took
the seat. It was all fairly easy from there; one dozer is essentially just like the next. You've got hand clutches and foot brakes. Apply both on one side and you turn. Except a John Deere has the clutch and brake built together in the hand lever. It took me a stab or two with the hand levers before I remembered that fact and got my feet into the action. The other thing you have to know: pull the blade lever back and the blade comes up, push it away from you and the blade goes down. Push it further, lock it there, and the blade will float. You use the float backing up. Forward, on a soft surface, the blade will dig in and cause a hell of a gouge.

I pulled back on the blade lever and made a good show out of lifting and lowering it. Then I pulled back on the main clutch, locked it in, and jockeyed the Cat around a little bit, left then right. I locked the left track, and spun quick. I backed with the blade floating. I popped her into neutral and pushed the throttle down. That was about all I knew. The foreman walked over to me. “You got some idea of what it's about,” he said. “I'll give you three days to prove yourself.”

He explained the job. “See that little light up there.” He pointed to a bare light bulb dangling on a cord from the peak of the mill building. “When that comes on and you hear a bell, you fire this mother up and push sawdust into that conveyor belt until you see the light come on again. When the stack under the conveyor belt from across the river gets too big, you push it up on that other pile there. The only other thing you need to know, you're late for work, you're fired.”

The foreman checked in with me every morning. On my third morning he told me I'd learned a lot in a short time. “You've got a job unless we go on strike.” he said. “It's looking more like we will every day.”

It was lonely work. I was the only employee there at night, beside the
fireman up in the boiler building, an old coot of a guy named Ernie who I only saw once a night, when I took my lunch break. The old mill was spooky. A foggy mist floated up off the river, covering everything in heavy dew. Often I imagined figures sneaking through the fog, fading like ghosts into the darkness. The massive timbers that held up the mill building threw eerie shadows across the yard. I was restless, bored, not doing what I'd come west to do. The friend I'd come out with was getting more and more homesick. He half-heartedly looked for a job. The morning after I proved out on my job I met him for breakfast in a little diner on main street. The waitress brought us coffee. We ordered. He fumbled for words. “I’m going back,” he said. “I’m thinking of joining the army. I’m going to take the car.” He left that afternoon.

I had rented a room in a boarding house. I couldn’t sleep during the day because of the log trucks rumbling by my window. I felt lonely, cast out into the world without a sense of how to operate there. I could not conjure up an image of what it was I wanted to do; my venom during all my adolescent years had been focused on pushing away, not on embracing anything. I was so numb with rebellion that I could not feel the possibilities of the world I stood in.

One event stands out in my time at the mill. I met another young fellow at the boarding house, a polite, quiet guy about my age. He was down from Portland, working over in the big mill across the river. “How’d you get the job,” I asked him.

“I know somebody,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, and I left it at that.

He had a car. Mid week he asked me if I’d like to go home with him that coming week-end, spend the night with his family. I agreed. Saturday
morning, after I got off work, we headed up along the coast highway to Portland. He was quiet, so we talked little on the way. All I remember of the trip itself is pulling into city, then climbing a winding street. The higher we climbed the bigger and more palatial the houses became. We reached the top of the hill and he swung the car into a crescent shaped drive-way. At it's apex stood a Tudor mansion. Giant conifers graced carefully manicured lawns. The house was bigger than any house I'd ever seen anywhere. "This is it?" I asked.

"Home sweet home," he said.

I recall the astonishment I felt that there were actually people who lived in places like this. It was the movies come alive. I actually knew someone who lived in a house bigger than the biggest barn back home.

We walked up to the front door. His mother, a gracious and attractive woman, met us there. I suppose in those first minutes I revealed all my small town naiveness, the hick kid I was. I gawked at the interior of the house. The front foyer was immense. The floor was lain in gray slate tiles, the walls walnut paneled. A vaulted ceiling angled up into a higher vaulted ceiling that towered over the front living room. A series of balconies, fronting upstairs bedrooms, hung over the living room.

His mother showed me to my bedroom decorated with Indian art and a Navajo blanket on the bed. "I hope you'll be comfortable here," she said.

I assured her I would be. We had a nice lunch, served by a maid, on the back patio. I felt ill at ease, awkward in my Levi's and cowboy boots, though his mother never gave me any reason to feel that way. Later I met his older sister, and she seemed fascinated by my story, my small town background, my determination to ramble. I played her a song on my guitar. She was delighted. I guess to them I was a novelty, a rustic native from the interior.

That evening, my friend went off to visit a neighbor. I was sitting
watching TV by myself in one of the side rooms, when a large, confident, middle-aged man entered and introduced himself as my friend's father. "So," he said, "you're working for us are you?"

"I don't know," I said, "I'm working for Georgia-Pacific."

He laughed. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

"No," I said.

"I'm your boss. I run Georgia-Pacific out here. I guess that kid of mine wouldn't tell you that. He's pretty quiet about most things." He smiled. "How do you like working for us?"

"I like it okay," I said.

"Good," he said. "Welcome to the family. Make yourself at home."

The mill job lasted a couple weeks before the Woodworkers Union, which had taken a big chunk of my first paycheck for joining fees, went on strike. The foreman handed me my final pay. "You're a good worker," he said. "You need this job back when we get this thing settled, it's yours." I thanked him. I had never felt more liberated. Free, finally. No one to answer to, a couple hundred bucks in my pocket, the big road out there. I determined the time had come for me to turn Jack Kerouac. I wanted to find a life for myself, I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but it had something to do with rural, with wild, with living some other way than I'd lived my first eighteen years in the Midwest. Of course, Alaska was on my mind, and to this day I can't put together exactly why it was I just didn't head north. Perhaps it was the distance and my lack of experience. I know also that my draft board was always in the back of my mind. It was in every eighteen year old's mind then. Viet Nam, like it or not, infested everything we did. Whatever freedom I felt was always tempered by the subliminal recognition that the freedom was only temporary, an illusion, because the soiled jungles of Asia waited. That, or
college, or a decision to resist.

I hitch-hiked up to Seattle, and found myself totally intimidated by the big city (a discomfort that I only overcame much later, in my mid-thirties.) I decided to go back to the Rockies and get a job as a horse packer. I hitched east. Two days later I found myself in northern Idaho where I looked up an outfitter named Brownie outside of Coeur d' Alene. Brownie was dressed cowboy, packer's boots, a pouch of Red Man protruding from his hip pocket. "What the hell you want to pack horses for?" he said. "You ain't got enough troubles just livin'? You want to add more misery to your life?" He spit a brown stream. "It's a fact, horses'll bring you nothing but misery."

"It's what I want to do," I said. "I know something about horses." And it was true. I'd had a couple horses when I was in grade school. I knew I could handle horse; I had a way with animals.

"Well son," he said. "I'm gona do you a favor, I'm gona save you from yourself. I'm not gona give you a job. It may not seem like a favor now, but I tell you what, a few years from now you'll thank me."

I suspect now the guy didn't have a job for anyone in the first place. He may not have even been the owner of the outfit. It was most likely the dramatics of some true west character that he played. But I wasn't smart enough to know any of that at the time. I was pretty disappointed. Packing was apparently not a burning desire, though. Because I didn't push the issue with anyone else in Idaho. I'd heard about the country up around Libby, Montana, and I determined to go see it.

Another day and a half I was in the town of Libby. The streets were dusty. Heavily forested mountains reared up in all directions around the town. I felt small, kind of lost, unsure of just what I was up to at that point. I sat next to an old man at a diner counter. He wore a battered black Stetson, had several
days of gray stubble on his face, and his breath smelled of wine. He asked me what I was up to. I told him I was bumming around. He said that he’d been buming around since the thirties, and that he was going to keep buming until the day he died. “Where you from?” he asked me.

“Indiana,” I said.

“Good,” he said, “that’s what I’ll call you.” He stuck out his hand.

“Mine’s Nevada.”

He told me of work over in the wheat fields around Lewistown. “You want to go over there and give it a try?”

“Might as well,” I said.

“You’ll have to loan me a few bucks for the train fare,” he said.

I loaned him a twenty, and we caught a train for Great Falls. In Great Falls we caught another train called the Galloping Goose, a car and engine built together, that ran to Lewistown.

We bucked across the wheat fields east of Great Falls, big open empty lonesome country with little mountains ranges hunkering squat in the distance. The Galloping Goose stopped at some little town along the way. Nevada looked out the window. “I tell you what, Indiana, I’m going to get out here and see an old friend of mine. You want to stop in with me?”

“I guess not,” I said.

“That’s okay,” he said, “I’ll catch up with you in Lewistown.”

“I’ll see you there,” I said. And I was naive enough to believe him, even to think I’d get my twenty bucks back. Nevada was my first experience with one of a whole breed of men who still wandered around the west then, maybe they still do, itinerant drifters, going from ranch to ranch, from drunk to drunk, fall-out of the restless American dream.

In Lewistown I went to the employment office and signed up for work
on the wheat harvest. I took a chair and waited in the call room. I was the only one there. The clerk said it was so slow because almost everyone in that part of Montana was at the Fergus Country Rodeo. I waited anyway. Early afternoon a grizzled looking and seriously bow-legged rancher came into the office and stumped up to the counter. He wore thick glasses, a brand new white Stetson, and a blue western shirt that still had the package creases in it. The clerk called to me. “Mr. Sawyer here needs a truck driver and combine operator. You up for that?”

“I can do either,” I said.

Ralph Sawyer came over and stuck out his hand. “My place is out by Christina, about seventy miles north. You want to work, I pay fifteen a day, board and room.”

I accepted and we went out together and got into his car. We pulled away from the curb. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a ticket and handed it to me. “To get into the rodeo” he said. “My whole family’s there.” We pulled into the parking lot of the rodeo grounds, amid an array of battered pickups, horse trailers, and dusty cars. We parked toward the rear. Ralph told me to meet him back there at the car after the final event of the day.

It was my first experience with rodeo. I was pretty taken by the cowboys, the bucking stock, and most certainly the cowgirls dressed in tight jeans. That day I developed a yearning to meet a cowgirl. It was a yearning that ached like a solid hunger for weeks after, particularly when I actually met one and could barely talk to her. I was so damn shy, so unsure of myself with the opposite sex. I couldn’t imagine a cowgirl being interested in any geek kid from Indiana. Yet the hormones raged, and I yearned.

Ralph Sawyer’s family was definitely the most bizarre collection of
folks I'd met up to that point in my life. And Ralph led the pack. That night on the ride home, he introduced me to grandma, a deaf old woman, whose eyes crackled with a barely held insanity. And Ralph’s sister, aunt Dorothy, an obese woman who acted as a surrogate mother to Ralph’s three kids. His wife, I learned later, apparently one of the most beautiful women in the county, had died young and unexpected a few years earlier, leaving him with the three children.

It was dark when we got to the ranch. Ralph showed me the bunkhouse, introduced me to the hired hand, a half-blooded Indian by the name of Orville Two-Crow. Orville was an immense man; his boots looked twice the size of mine. And I made out right away that he was slow, maybe even slightly retarded. That night in the bunkhouse I tried to sleep, but it was very difficult because of Orville’s snoring, and the constant rustle of mice. There were dozens. I would just about get to sleep and a mouse would run across my blanket. Once one even landed on my face. The next morning Ralph hollered, “rise and shine!” outside the bunkhouse door. I was not ready to rise or to shine. I staggered out the bunkhouse, bleary eyed and irritable, into a Montana half dawn. Wheat fields and grazing pastures, most bigger than any one farm back in Indiana, stretched wide in all directions. I went into the house for breakfast. Another local rancher and his three boys were there to help with the harvest. Aunt Dorothy was frying eggs in pan in a couple inches of bacon grease. The table groaned under an array of meats -- antelope venison, mutton burgers, bacon, some little beef strips -- pancakes, cream and hot cereal, fried eggs. Orville clomped in. Ralph told us all to sit down. Grandma and the kids came to the table. Aunt Dorothy joined us from the kitchen.

"Let's pray," Ralph said, and he began the grace. He prayed a while,
thanked the lord for the food, asked him to bless the harvest, talked some about
the sinners of the world, then suddenly he broke into wild gibberish, a high
pitched, sing-songy rant. I didn't know what was going on. My first thought
was that he had lost his mind. I peeked up and looked around the table.
Nobody but me seemed to notice. Ralph's head rolled around on his shoulders,
and you could see the whites of his eyes. Suddenly he stopped. Everyone
around the table said amen and dove into breakfast. I was a little worried about
what I'd gotten myself into. I wasn't sure what I'd witnessed.

Later in the day I asked one of the neighboring rancher's kids what it
was I'd witnessed at breakfast.

"Oh, he was talking in tongues," the kid said. "He's got the gift, you
know? He's full of the Holy Spirit."

It was the first time I'd ever heard anyone speak in tongues. I vaguely
recalled reading about it in the Bible once. Ralph, and everybody else in the
neighborhood were certified holy rollers. But Ralph was the one most on fire.
He claimed to never sleep, said he didn't need to because he was so full of the
Holy Spirit. He sat up all night in a chair in the living room, his false teeth
soaking in a cup beside on an end table, reading his bible through his thick
classes. During the day you could catch him taking little cat naps, but I think
it was a fact that he rarely if ever slept a regular sleep.

The month I spent there I got a whole education on Pentecostal
religion. The second morning I was greasing a combine and Ralph came up to
help me. He put his grease gun on a grease zerk and pumped. "Are you
washed in the blood of the lamb," he asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure what you're asking."

"Have you been saved?"

I felt my ire well up. "I was baptized," I said, "I grew up in a church.
But I'm not much on religion."

"Maybe you weren't part of the true religion," he said. "What I offer you is true religion. The gift of Christ."

"I've had plenty of that," I said, and knew I had to get this issue straight with him. "I tell you what, I'll work for you, but not if you're going to try to save me. I've been saved enough. You bug me about religion, I'm out of here."

"Okay," Ralph said, "but I'll pray for you."

We worked long days. I mostly drove an old grain truck, with brakes that bottomed out on the floor boards, back and forth to the elevator by the railroad tracks in Christina, a one store with post office, and school house crossroads settlement. I must have been allergic to the wheat dust; I coughed and hacked almost continuously. Coughing and the mice in the bunkhouse made sleep a chore. By the third day I made in my personal vendetta to rid the bunkhouse of mice. I found an old wind-up trap in the machine shed, a Rube Goldberg affair with a set-pan that flipped the victims into a holding cage, where they waited their extermination like inmates on death row. The first night I went into action I caught nineteen on the first set. Their gnawing on the side of the cage made it impossible to sleep. I got up in the middle of the night and drowned them in a five gallon bucket. The next morning I had a half dozen more. Orville was impressed by my dedication. "You sure are a trapper," he said. "First morning in a long time I ain't had one in my boot."

We had a little damp spell where we couldn't cut wheat. Ralph asked me to go to town with him for a combine part. He drove staring straight ahead, and out of the blue started talked about his wife. Told me what a beautiful woman she was, how everybody liked her, how she died of breast cancer. "She was a good wife," he said. "And I was a full-time sinner, a drinker and a carouser, one of the worst. After she died I took it pretty hard. I became a
sure enough drunk, spent most of my time in the bars, hardly spent any time at home. One night I was coming back from Lewistown, blind drunk, and my truck ran off the road and turned over in a ditch full of water. I was pinned under the steering wheel and drowning fast. I could feel my lungs filling. I cried to God, "Help me God! Help me!" And God heard me. He came down and lifted that truck off me. I felt him pick it up and flip it over." He peered though his thick glasses at me. "Believe me, God reached down that night and he spared me. I've been a Christian ever since."

I know this: Ralph had some kind of transformational experience that night. Everybody who knew him agreed, he was a seriously changed man. The death of a special woman must have turned things a certain way for the whole family, but who knows what was in place before? Grandma wasn't really all that deaf. She pretended to be, and everyone treated her as if she was. But when something was said she didn't agree with, she'd start shouting hysterically, ranting, particularly at her daughter, Dorothy. Finished, she'd settle back into her deafness, totally oblivious to any sound. Timmy, six or so, the youngest of the three children, was a sweet and strange little boy. He refused to wear boys clothes at home; wore frilly dresses and girls shoes. Played with dolls and had all the affectations of a prissy girl. I've often thought of him, wondered how hard it must have been for him growing up in the cowboy country of central Montana.

We had Sundays off. While the others headed for church, I'd catch up a big pinto gelding and ride out across the plains. I'd chase antelope or mule deer, then lie in the sun on the slope of a stock pond and watch the clouds push past. A cousin from South Dakota came to visit, a beautiful cowgirl about my age. I fell instantly in love. We loped across one of the big pastures one Sunday afternoon, then pulled our horses up on the rim of a big stock pond.
We got off, sat close to each other in the grass, and watched mallard her and her brood busy on the pond. But I was too shy, too unsure of myself to suggest anything to her. It was hard enough just to small talk.

One Sunday Ralph talked me into accompanying the family to church in Lewistown. I agreed, mostly because I wanted to go to town. We weren't too far into the service and the preacher started shouting and calling on the Lord to come enter the service. "Oh come down dear Lord! Oh come down and be with us here!" People in the congregation started waving their arms and jumping up and shouting hallelujahs. Some started talking in tongues, the whites of their eyes showing, their heads rolling around. Ralph in the front row was giving it all he had. Things were building to a big crescendo, when the preacher left the pulpit, came back along the aisle and stopped by me sitting on the end seat of the back row, poised for a quick get-away. He stepped up to me and grabbed my head in both hands. Eyes closed, head tipped back, he started calling for my salvation: "God, precious God, please come down and save this young man! Save him Lord, for he knows not what he does!"

I felt pretty stupid sitting there, like I'd been duped by old Ralph. They finally gave up on saving me, and I slunk out the door and went for a walk through Lewistown. Again I felt alone, without any notion of what I was up to. There was no homesickness to it, just an emptiness. The wheat harvest was about complete. I made up my mind to quit, decided to head back to Indiana. It was not a decision based on anything close to common sense. I was drifting, unsure of anything, anxious. The cowgirl cousin from South Dakota had got me thinking about the girl I'd dated my last year in high school. I thought it would be nice to see her.

I told Ralph as soon as all the wheat was in I was going to head out. He urged me to stay on, said he liked the way I worked, he needed help with
round-up the next month in the Missouri River breaks. It was tempting to stay, to try a little cowboying. But I felt suffocated by the constant religion, the oddities of the ranch.

My last day there the head of the community school board came to see me. "We need a teacher at our school," he said. "The woman we had last year just up and quit." He was referring to the little school a couple miles from the ranch, a quintessential turn of the century one room school, with an enrollment of a dozen or so kids in all eight grades.

"I've got no college degree," I said.

"You have some college, don't you?"

"None," I said, "but I'm thinking of attending."

"That'll do," he said. "You could take it temporarily until we find a qualified teacher."

I turned him down, though there's been many times since I've wondered what it would have been like to teach at age eighteen. I already knew most all the kids in the district. It might have been worth it, just to let Miss Grogg know how far her most wasted student had come in such a short time.

I went back to Indiana and enrolled in the Mennonite college. Why, I've often wondered what pulled me back. Writing about it now, all I can recall is the emptiness I felt, the distance I felt from the possibilities of the world. What brought me back to a place I detested so? I suppose some of it was familiarity. And there was some notion that maybe this time I could make peace with it. And too, there was some sense that I owed my parents something; I knew they both wanted me to attend college there.

Adolescence for me was such a strange mix of yearning, yearning for
nature and freedom, and feeling stuck. I'm aware of a strange form of inertia that was often my main reality, an inertia that has plagued me at times throughout my life. Inertia may be a common human disorder. For me, the discomfort of being stuck has to build enough, become so uncomfortable, that I'll finally act. When I do act, it's usually to some dramatic length, some exaggerated response.

Ironically enough, at age eighteen, I chose pacifism. Mine was not a religious decision, though I'm aware that my religious background influenced me, at least introduced me to the idea of an alternative. Really, what can an eighteen year old know of the philosophical and moral questions of war. Mine was a decision based more on an unwillingness to give my life to something that even then made no sense to me. I determined there was no way I was going to Viet Nam, wanted no part of the government's war or the army's authority. I decided I'd try for conscientious objector status, and if that failed I'd head for Canada. I made my declaration to my draft board and waited for the consequences.

Those were the first vain-patriotic days of the war. Some historians make the case that in many ways those years at the beginning of the sixties were the turning cusp of time between a time of American simplicity and innocence, and the time when the country had to begin to honestly see itself. Feelings ran high. My draft board was composed of World War II veterans, stern men, none of them given to much sentiment for conscientious objection. The head of the draft board was a shop teacher in my high school. He'd spent most of the war in a German prisoner of war camp, and he made no bones about the fact that disliked "god damned c.o.'s."

Once you were registered, you had to stay in touch with your draft
board, report any change of status in your life. As long as you were in
college, you would usually be temporarily deferred. Drop out of college, it took
the draft board several months to catch up with the fact. By then, you could be
back in college. It was a big game, one a lot of us got adept at playing.

After returning to Indiana I made it one semester of college. I was not a
good student. I seethed at Indiana, at the blandness, at the cautious people
there. I did my best to break all the rules at the college. A week into my
second semester, one evening a friend and I decided we'd had enough. We
dropped out of school the next day and headed for Arizona in my 55 Chevy. We
pulled into Tucson the first of February. Within a couple days we both had
miserably paying jobs as laborers on a run-down dude ranch owned by a rich
alcoholic. We lasted a couple months, before my friend, a year older than I,
received his notice of induction into the army. In less than a month he was to
report back to Indiana. We quit the ranch, took our meager paychecks, and
blew most of them in the border bars and brothels of Nogales, Mexico. Then we
drove back to Indiana. He went into the army, and after a couple weeks
hanging around my parents house, I took off again, this time to follow the
wheat harvest from Texas north. I bummed all that summer, following a
string of harvest jobs Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, before I finally got tired of the
round the clock push of the harvest and quit. I headed for Colorado. A mile
past the Colorado-Kansas line my 55 Chevy blew a piston. I hitch-hiked back to
Syracuse, Kansas and traded it to a garage mechanic for a supposedly recently
overhauled 51 Chevy sedan.

Fifteen miles into Colorado my new vehicle began to overheat. I pulled
off on the shoulder, pushed up the hood. Steaming water spit out a crack in
the head. I'd been had.

I walked across a field and got some water from a farmer. I re-filled the
radiator and limped into Colorado Springs. There I had my first encounter with a homosexual. Naive kid that I was, it took me a couple days in his home before I finally figured out this guy was not just being friendly to me, he wanted my young body.

I fired up the Chevy that evening and got the hell out of Colorado Springs. I made it to Pueblo, Colorado, where I pulled into a filling station and sold my Chevy to a guy working there, for $150. He gave me another $20 for my box of tools, and I hitch-hiked out of there, east. A college guy from Arkansas picked me up and took me all the way to Little Rock. From there I bought a plane ticket to Chicago, and from Chicago hitched back to Indiana. Within a week I got a job running a dozer on a gas line construction project. I stuck with that job the rest of the summer, then enrolled back in college that fall.

I made another semester, then headed for California, this time in a beautiful, black 57 Chevy two-door hard-top that I'd bought with my gas-line earnings. I went to work on a thoroughbred horse ranch in Southern California, spent the rest of the winter and most of the summer there, before heading back to Indiana again.

I enrolled in college a third semester, but it was clear that my time for the place had finally reached the limits. I rebelled - smoked, drank, danced, pushed hard against all the rules of the college. I had a girl friend who also pushed against things. The student dean, a gentle and serious man, called me into his office toward the end of the semester. “You might consider that you don't fit in too well here,” he said. “Perhaps another college would suit you better.” It was his passive way of telling me I was kicked out.

In January of 1966 I stood before my draft board in a windowless room
of the county courthouse. The head man looked at me disdainfully. "I know you," he said. "I remember you in high school. You were a troublemaker there, and you still are." He paused, pushed some papers across the table toward me standing there. "I think you're a god damned chicken, that's what I think. But I know also, that you're just ornery enough to go through with this thing. I can't see you ending up in jail doing anybody any good." He picked up the papers. "You've got thirty days to find a job that's considered in the public interest. You find it, you report back to us. You serve two years, and you serve with good behavior. If there's anything but good behavior, anytime young man, and you go immediately to prison." He held the papers out to me. I took them. "Get the hell out of here," he said.

I know this: I had it easier than many who opted as conscientious objectors. My draft board looked at me as tainted material; I had been brainwashed by religion. Little did they know.

I wanted out of town. I went to Denver, a city with a lot of hospitals, with two other fellows from the Mennonite college. We all found jobs there as psychiatric technicians at Colorado Psychiatric Hospital(CPH), a branch of the University of Colorado Medical Center.

At CPH a new world opened to me. My small town, rural experience took on new dimensions. My first day on the job I stepped onto Ward 2-South, checked into the nurses station, thinking I would at least get an orientation. The head nurse was busy charting. "Go out and introduce yourself to the patients," she said.

I went out and walked around the day area, a institutional green, high ceilinged room with iron grates over all the windows. I said hi to everybody, a whole range of adolescents, both boys and girls, some sitting quietly, others playing pool, a couple engaged in a game of checkers.
I felt utterly foreign and intimidated by the strangeness of the place. I picked a particularly quiet appearing boy with hair that looked like it had been hacked off with a hoe. I sat beside him. "What's your name?" I asked him.

He looked at me and smiled shyly. "Bugs Bunny," he said. "I'm Bugs Bunny."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "you want to see me hop?"

"That's okay, maybe later," I said.

"No," he said, "I can hop. You should see me. I really hop good."

Another nurse came into the day room. "You the new technician?" she asked. I said I was. "They need you for E-S-T."

I had not a clue what E-S-T was. I followed the nurse's directions through a labyrinth of halls, down into the basement of the old building to the room number she'd given me. I opened the door. Inside a middle-aged nurse, and a young psychologist (I learned later), wearing a gray business suit, attempted to get a thin elderly woman to lie still on an examining table. She was toothless, her gray hair tangled and wild, dressed only in a white hospital gown that fell open at the back. She struggled against the two. "No," she whined, "please don't shock me again. No, please don't. I'll be good. No please..."

The psychologist looked up at me. "You the technician?" I nodded.

"Grab her shoulders and hold her down. After I shock her, make sure she doesn't swallow her tongue."

The nurse moved to the woman's feet. The psychologist spoke to the woman on the table. "Muriel, behave yourself. You've had plenty of these before, you know we're just trying to help you. You'll feel better when it's
done.”

“No please, please don’t shock me ...,” the woman continued to protest.

The psychologist opened a little wooden box with what looked like a ham radio inside. It was plugged into a wall socket. He twisted a couple dials, then attached electrodes from the machine to the woman’s head.”

She screamed, “No, please!”.

“Hold her tight,” he said, and quickly punched a switch on the machine.

The woman stiffened. Her eyes rolled back in her head, revealing only the whites. Then, like a fish pulled from the sea, she began to flop violently on the table.

“Get her tongue,” the psychologist said to me. “Keep her from banging her head on the table.”

I did what I was told. I grabbed the back of her head with my left hand, then fished between her gums with the right. I managed to get hold of her tongue, pinch it between my thumb and forefinger, and hold it. After what seemed a long time -- though the whole procedure must not have taken more than a minute -- she quit flopping. Her jaws relaxed and then her body settled into a series of tremors, like a fish dying. “You can let go of her,” the psychologist said. “Sit with her a bit. When she looks to be coming back, you can roll her up to her room on 2-West.” He put folded up the wires and put them back in the box. Then he and the nurse left the room.

I sat with the old woman. I had not a clue of what I had just witnessed. Later I learned of electro-shock therapy, this technique of scrambling peoples’ brains, with the random possibility that whatever results will some way help their depression or their inability to play by someone else’s rules. Later I worked with patients who had had dozens of treatments. Each treatment they seemed to sink deeper into a world of darkness, of despair.
Each time, though, they became more manageable.

E-S-T was my introduction to the world of the broken, the lost, the diagnosed insane. I learned quickly how to be a psychiatric technician. I learned the adrenaline rush of Code 3: that urgent call over the public address system for technicians to drop whatever they were doing and run to subdue an "out of control" patient, or to put down a riot. I took some pleasure in being the one they called if special attention was needed on a particularly tough patient, if a situation was considered dangerous. I was known as a tough, determined, fearless technician.

Another time I tackled a run-away boy on one of Denver's main streets. He fought me. I got him in a hammer lock and started leading him back to the hospital, him shouting all the time that he was being mugged. A silver haired man stopped his car, got out and demanded that I stop violating this child. "We're from the psychiatric hospital," I grunted. "This kid's a run-away."

"No I'm not," the kid yelled. "I was just walking along the street and this guy jumped on me."

The man looked confused. "You sure you're from the hospital?"

"Look," I said, "I've got keys." I pulled my keys from my pocket. The man backed off, and I led my patient back to the ward.

Once I watched a ninety pound girl, stark nude and "out of control", twist the leg from a metal bed and punch it through the solid wood door of a "seclusion" room. "I want out of here!" she kept screaming. "I'm not crazy, you're the ones who're crazy! You're all god damned crazy!"

All of the technicians in the hospital were c.o.'s, most of us from Mennonite backgrounds. We were all learning lots of new things very fast. The joke among us: the only thing separating the patients and some of the
staff we worked with was who held the keys.

Ward 2-South was an adolescent ward. I liked working with young people, even though I was only a couple years older myself than the oldest patients on the ward.

The second year I worked at CPH, LSD hit the streets in a big way. The staff on 2-South began to deal with the first wave of a new phenomenon sweeping American culture. We dealt with the victims of openly available hallucinogenic drugs. There are a hundred memories. I once cut a thirteen year old, sprite of a boy named Deny, down from a closet rod, a knotted tie around his neck, seconds away from death by hanging. He had been having flashbacks. Another time I held the gushing razor cut veins of a macho, eighteen year old rodeo cowboy, until the emergency medics could take over and save his life. I watched adolescents, men and women on other wards, rage against their parents, rage against the world, rage against dinner or a TV show or the way another person cut his hair.

The experience of Colorado Psychiatric was the beginning of a process in my own life. Through the observation of others I began to observe myself. I observed others' anger and for the first time began to get some inkling of my own. I was a pacifist, yet in so many ways I was like my own father, I was at war with so many things. Not all of this was clear, not by any means. But it was a beginning, a process that continues today.

For the first time in my life, also, I left my own story at times and became an observer of the broken, battered victims of a culture struggling with itself; I became aware of its victims. Through their pain I first began to develop some very small notion of my own. It was not a deep awareness, though, only the beginning of a process, the cracking of a door. There were no grand revelations, only the first questions of what has been since, for the
most part, an examined life. I am thankful for that experience at CPH.
Gone Alaska

I was learning a lot at CPH, but I was also counting the days until my two years were up. Four of us c.o.'s pooled our meager salaries and bought an old army jeep. Virtually all my days off after we bought the jeep, I spent up in the mountains, skiing in the winter, backpacking and fishing in the summer, hunting in the fall.

It was on a fine autumn day, the wind blowing gusts of yellow aspen leaves through the air like fluttering snowflakes, that I killed my first mule deer buck on a forest and sagebrush slope in western Colorado. I shot poorly and the deer ran some ways before he dropped. I approached him cautiously, then stood over him, feeling for the first time that mix of awe and pain and sadness that comes with killing. There was also a strange regret with it, some sense that this thing I'd done was inevitable, but I wished it could be different.

The feelings passed, or settled somewhere out of consciousness, and I appraised the buck's antlers. I had killed a male of another species, and I had the proof of it, a trophy of my own prowess. By extension, but most likely unconsciously, I believed that I had in some way, too, affirmed my own maleness.

The outdoors of Colorado, the hunting and fishing, supported what I planned for my future. I knew two things for sure. The first, my reaction, when I got out, I was not returning to Indiana. The second, an affirmative, as soon as I could I was heading for Alaska.
* * * * *

My second year working in the psychiatric hospital I met B.B. I first noticed her in a staff meeting, a tall, thin, dark haired beauty who caught most peoples' eyes. In the crowded meeting room, with Doctors and psychologists, nurses and technicians, she stood out, an unfamiliar face, yet at the same time, somehow familiar to me. The psychiatrist introduced her. She had been assigned to the ward as a student nurse.

The next day she came into the day room where I was playing pool with a severely schizophrenic boy named Scott. Scott's technique was to take a shot, and if he missed, to just pick up the ball and put it in the pocket. I was trying to get him to play by the rules, patiently explaining after each shot that he couldn't just pick up the balls like that. Scott was having none of my suggestions. "It's the way I play pool," he said. "Scott's rules."

"Yeah," I said, appealing to logic, "what if I do the same thing?"

"You can't, you're not Scott. I'm only Scott."

I let him play by his rules, then, which brought the game to a quick finish. Then I summoned my courage and introduced myself to B.B. She smiled. "Oh, you're the one who's supposed to orient me."

I showed her around the ward, explained what I knew of working there. I can't remember how I asked her out, but at some point I did. She accepted. Within a couple weeks we were in love.

Her parents, who lived in Denver, objected strongly to the idea of her being with me. Her father, a retired Navy officer and veteran of the Second World War thought my c.o. status was an abomination. He told her that he wanted nothing to do with either of us if she married me. Her mother told her I was an uncouth barbarian who sat on her kitchen counter and wore cowboy boots.
For her mother my choice of foot attire said it all. I've wondered at times if they hadn't been so set against me whether or not B.B. would have gone ahead with the wedding. I think probably not. As it was, though, I represented an escape for her, a statement of independence, and a chance to flee two very dominating people. She even said as much years later when our marriage was on the way down.

I was such an innocent with women. True, I'd had a couple girl friends in high school, and I'd dated a woman at the Mennonite college, but none had been high scale romances. I was riddled with hormonal pulses, but routinely abstained from sex. Not because there were no opportunities. My abstinence was an almost pathological fear of being tied down, of getting some girl pregnant and losing my freedom. While I yearned for connection, at the same time I was deathly afraid of being connected too much.

B.B. offered something different for me. She was taken by my enthusiasm for heading to Alaska. She saw in me as an adventurer, both my desire for a different life and my pacifism, different than the boys she had dated in high school and college. And I, for the first time, saw a woman who would be part of my dream. I think we were in love, at least as much in love as either of us knew about love then.

The agreement that underpinned our June, 1967 marriage was that we would leave for Alaska as soon as I got out of the service. It was not an agreement of mutual accommodation. She agreed to follow me as women have done with men for as long as men have dreamed restless dreams. She nurtured my ideas, yielding in most ways, scared out of her wits, and too scared to say so.

We were married in a glass-fronted chapel that looked out onto the alpine slopes of Long's Peak, a beautiful sun strewn day. The chapel was full of friends from the hospital and B.B.'s college. Neither set of parents were
there. We hadn't asked them. I don't recall that I even told my parents I was
getting married, until the night after the wedding. We stood at the front. The
minister began the ceremony. B.B. looked radiant, wearing a very modern,
above the knee white dress. I did my best to appear casual and involved, but I
was scared, damn scared. I should not be doing this, tripped over and over in
my mind. When the preacher asked will you take this woman in sickness or in
health, I thought to myself, no, I shouldn't do this, but out of my mouth came
"I do". Was it all just out of stubbornness, out of a sense of duty? I still don't
understand all of it. I know there was a big dose of "should" in it. I should be
ready to be married. I should be ready to settle down. After all, I reasoned,
I'm of that age. People get married when they fall in love.

Even though we married in spite of her parents objections, and didn't
even consider mine, in another way we married to accommodate all of them, to
make ourselves right in their eyes. My parents would have certainly been
horrified to think of their son living in sin. I was still trying, still attempting
at some level to please them.

I'm not sure what B.B. thought. I'd guess she had her doubts, also. But
we were caught in the cusp of time between people getting married for
practical and economic reasons, and a newly budding time when people were
just beginning to experiment with marriage as something else. A couple years
after we were married it became routine for young people to live together
before marriage, to experiment with each other, to test the waters. So many
times I wish we could have. I say this, and then I think of our daughter.
Would she be in our lives? What a hole there'd be without her. I content
myself with this knowledge: B.B. and I, regardless of the pain we brought to
each other, also brought something beautiful into the world.

I was discharged from alternative service early February of 1968. B.B.
and I went back to Indiana where we both took short jobs, B.B. as temporary nurse in the local hospital, and me as a carpenter's helper. My parents took to B.B. right away. We stayed with them and saved everything we made the next six weeks. Toward the end of April we figured we were ready. We had over five-hundred dollars cash, a 1962 Toyota Land Cruiser convertible, and a new, little thirteen foot, Shasta travel trailer. I have a picture of the two of us standing in front of our rig parked behind my parents house. We're holding hands, and we're both smiling hugely, like we owned the world. B.B. has her hair cut short. She's so young and beautiful. I'm decked out in cowboy boots and hat, and I'm thin as a twig, head tipped back, looking so damn sure of myself.

We'd splurged and bought the little travel trailer as a hedge against the rumors we'd heard that housing was hard to find in Alaska. We figured at least for the summer we'd have a place to stay once we got there, wherever "there" was going to be. We'd also heard that vehicles, trailers, just about anything you could get up the highway was worth a lot more money in Alaska. If times got tough we could sell the trailer.

My parents stood together on the back lawn and waved good-bye as we pulled away. We headed northwest. Cut across Illinois, then angled up through Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Dakota, into Montana. I wanted to show B.B. where I'd worked north of Lewistown, the Sawyer ranch. And I thought we should have a look at Montana, just in case Alaska didn’t work out for us.

We crossed the Canadian border west of Glacier Park, then cut north up through along the Rockies through Banff and Jasper National Parks. From Jasper we headed northwest to Dawson Creek, mile zero of the Alaska Highway.
Much of that first trip up the Alcan is lost in my memory, but I recall a few things. One scene in particular stands out vividly. We were camped in a campground just before Dawson, knowing the next day we'd be on the highway. I sat at the table in our little trailer, while B.B. did something at the stove. I felt this deep sadness come over me. I began to cry, and I was never given to crying then. B.B. turned away from the stove. "What?", she said to me, "what is it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Here I'm doing what I've always wanted to do, and I'm ... I'm scared, I guess. I don't know if what we're doing is the right thing."

"Please don't say that," she said. "It has to be the right thing. It's what we're doing."

"I guess," I said, but I couldn't feel it. Instead I felt fear, the real fear of a young man facing his life for the first time, the reality of stepping up to dreams and seeing that dreams are only choices, and choices can lead you in so many different directions.

B.B. came over and sat at the table with me. She reached across and took my hands in hers. "We'll be all right," she said. "Won't we?"

"We will be," I said. "I just got a little scared, that's all."

We stopped in Dawson Creek and I took a picture of the mile zero milepost. The Alaska Highway was still an adventure then, not the hard-surfaced, tour bused trip it is today. Seventy miles north of Dawson Creek, just beyond the outpost town of Fort Saint John, the road turned to gravel. From there on it was all gravel, nothing hard surfaced, all of it hard, all the way to the Alaska line. Dust, miles of dust and grit in your mouth, and flats and broken springs. A thousand miles into it I remember crossing a bridge with a wooden planked surface, stopping on the far side and backing over it again,
then forward again, just to recall the feel of tires moving smoothly. It seems impossible that only that long ago, 1968, it could have been so different than it is today. But if there's one hard reality in the world, it's that so much has changed everywhere in the last twenty-five years.

There were moose along the road then, in numbers. We saw a couple bears, and once a lynx crossed the road ahead of us. I sighted a bald eagle in the southern Yukon, a mature bird sitting in a tree at the edge of a clear running river. It was my first sighting of a bald eagle anywhere, a rarity in the sixties because of toll DDT had taken. We marveled at a sun that barely set. The first week of May we'd made it far enough north that you could read a newspaper outside around the clock.

The country opened me and my doubt faded. I felt joy, like I was coming alive for the first time in my life. High adventure. North, through places whose names read like a Robert Service poem -- Fort Nelson, Muncho Lake, Watson Lake, Whitehorse. North to the future. We left a place where gas sold for 26 cents a gallon, to come to a place where road houses along the highway were selling it for an unbelievable 90 cents. We watched our money dwindle. But it's a Canadian gallon we would often remind ourselves, a quart bigger.

B.B. and I were a product of the times. A lot of us, children of the sixties, came north while our urban contemporaries passed flowers and acid in The Haight. It might be said we were drawn north looking for the same things. Only our flowers were the miles of nothing and everything, the endless vistas where mountains poured across the horizon like armies of white ghosts. Our acid was the thrill of something new and unspoiled rushing into our lives.

It took B.B. and me twelve days to make the Alaska border. We had a
hundred and fifty dollars left. I have another picture of a skinny, smiling kid, dressed in tight Levi's and cowboy boots, standing by a big roadside sign reading, "WELCOME TO ALASKA". Behind the sign the country stretches immense in all directions. It was A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky* come to life: "It was land without an end, flat now and then rolling, going on clear to the sky. A man wouldn't think the whole world was so much. It made the heart come up. It made a man little and still big, like a king looking out."

At Tok Junction, the first town across the border, the Alaska highway continued on to Fairbanks, and another highway headed south toward Anchorage. We stopped and talked it over. "Where do we go, B.B.?" I asked her.

"I'm thinking Fairbanks," she said. "Remember those people we met on the highway from Fairbanks, they offered us a shower. I really want a shower."

So of all the places we could have ended up in Alaska, Fairbanks won on the promise of a shower. We headed northwest along the broad valley of the Tanana River, through the delicate greens of newly leafed birch and aspen. South of the highway, snowcapped mountains towered like sentinels over a flat foreground dotted with unnamed lakes. Wild rivers ran from the mountains, inviting, challenging, demanding to be explored.

We pulled into Fairbanks on May 8th. It was an exceptionally early spring in the interior. The aspens on the hillsides north of town budded a delicate green, a sharp contrast to the town itself. Fairbanks had a raw, temporary feel to it. Buildings looked like they'd been thrown together in a high wind. Most of the outlying roads were still gravel. Downtown, evidence of the early gold rush still existed: old log cabins sat askew, settling into the earth like tired old elders. But still it was all new for us; a feeling of possibility permeated everything, it was all there just waiting for a young man and
woman to make the most of it.

A lot of us sixties children were showing up, all of us looking for much the same thing. And it worked for a while; we hadn't learned about the myths; everything was possible. We were the contemporary mountain men. The vanguard before the covered wagons. Others were there before us, some for thousands of years, but not many. In the whole state there were less people than in the city of Omaha. We joined the old-timers of the thirties, forties and fifties already there, and the Chamber of Commerce suits already trying their best to make it into California and Des Moines, and the GI's protecting us from the Red Menace. And we got down to the business of making a life for ourselves.

The place was big, lots of room, plenty of room for sixties hippies and their elder cousins. Touching it, wanting to own some of it, carrying the confinement of the farms of Illinois, the cities of the east, the towns of Idaho, wanting to open our arms and let it all in. We just wanted a piece of it, our own little corner of the "Great Land" as they called it. To hell with the ones who follow. Love this place till death do us part.

The people who had offered us a shower were kind and generous, the way most everyone was in Fairbanks back then. We ended up parking our trailer on a piece of land they had on the edge of town, and using their phone number as a contact for jobs. B.B. and I started looking for work right away. On the second day I heard of a Bureau of Land Management job, operating a Cat on forest fires. I made an appointment to see the guy hiring. I was full of hope, excited, particularly given that the US Customs officials at the border had discouraged us about expecting to find work in Alaska.
The guy doing the equipment hiring at BLM was a gruff, cigar smoking, good-ol-boy, close to retirement. I told him my experience with dozers. "You don't look like a goddamned Cat operator to me," he said. "You look too goddamned young and green to be much of anything."

I rose to the bait. "I'm a goddamned good operator," I said. "And I don't have to take any shit off of you to prove it."

That was it, the interview was over almost before it began. I left feeling like I'd blown any chance of a job with BLM, ever. I berated myself. Why the hell couldn't I just get it right, just let some things go? Why did I have to be so damned stubborn? I didn't want to face B.B., so I drove around Fairbanks for a while, discouraged and scared. When I got back to the trailer B.B. was gone, out walking I supposed. There was a note from our highway friends taped to the door. "Call the guy at BLM," it said, "ASAP."


I could barely contain my excitement. "Thanks a lot," I said. "I apologize for cussing at you."

"That's no problem," he said. "I like your spunk. You'll probably make it up here."

A week later B.B. got a nursing job at St. Joseph's Hospital. She was delighted, though the wages were not what she had hoped for, less than she would have made in Denver. That summer I fought fires all over the road system of Alaska. I made the unbelievable wage of $4.25 an hour, the highest wage paid to any of the emergency fire fighters. The Cat was an old D-8, 2U cable blade (pre hydraulics), a monster relic from the fifties. It was hopeless in soft ground, slow as glacial ice.

I loved fire fighting, loved the acidy smell of tundra and spruce
burning, the combat-like excitement, though I nearly lost my life once on a fire up the Elliot highway north of Fairbanks. I was running tandem with another Cat, pushing hard to cut a line around a couple thousand acre blaze. The other Cat broke down, so I continued on alone, pushing and backing, pushing and backing, leveling acres of spruce and birch, opening a scar across the country that would take a century or more to heal. I know now I was devastating the country a whole lot more than any forest fire was, but none of that occurred to me then. It really didn’t occur to anybody in the land management business, and if it had, nobody would have listened to them anyway.

I kept running, and had just made it to the back side of the fire when the wind shifted ninety degrees and began to blow hard in my direction. In no time I could see the fire racing toward me, yellow flames torching the tops of the spruce, white smoke bellowing up above the flames into an immense anvil shaped cloud. I spun the Cat and popped it into high gear, pushed it as hard as I could, attempting to retrace my fire line back to the road. The Cat’s tracks slapped loose, clanked like demons. I thought I might make it. But within a minute of thinking I might, the fire jumped the line ahead of me, shooting wild flames a hundred feet into the air. I could feel the heat of it, but I was determined not to leave the Cat. My only recourse was to turn and run away from it, down a steep hillside.

The lip of the slope pitched off miserably, and below me it was nothing but steep and rocky and tangled up with brush. I headed down anyway, and in less than a hundred yards came to a drop off that would have been pure suicide to take with a Cat. I locked the brakes, the Cat pitched so steeply forward that sitting in the seat I was essentially standing upright. I turned in the seat and watched the fire crown the hill above me, then just as quickly lose power as it
dropped out of the drive of the wind. It was still coming at me, though, only a lot slower now. I figured all I could do was wait to see if the wind might shift again, or the fire might just burn itself out on the slope. I knew, though, if it got too close I'd have to abandon the Cat, do my best to make my way down the cliff on foot.

I was lucky; in a short while the wind switched again, and the fire above me died. I decided it was now or never to get the hell uphill and out of there the same way I'd come in. I tried backing up, but the tracks just spun helpless in the loose soil.

I was left with two choices: One, shut the Cat off and leave it there, hoping the other Cat could come later and cable me back up the hillside. But that idea didn't appeal to me. In the way of young, impetuous men, I wanted to get out my own way, didn't want to admit I'd been beat.

The other choice, because I knew the Cat could pull itself if it was pointed front wards uphill, was to spin the damn thing around. I knew that spinning it was going to be a risky and tricky maneuver; the hill was clearly steeper than what a Cat could take sideways. I didn't let myself think about what would happen if I didn't pull it off -- the Cat would roll with me on it, twelve tons of steel, bouncing and careening all the way to the bottom of the ravine. The key, I knew, was to spin faster than it could tip.

I didn't think about anything beyond that. I didn't want to think about anything. I was a kid trying to be a man, and I just acted. I pushed down on the brakes with both feet, reached down and unlocked them. I pulled the throttle back full and the stack belched black. I pumped the hand clutch on the left side, then grabbed the main clutch with my right. I took a deep breath and simultaneously engaged the main clutch, disengaged the left hand clutch, and pulled my foot off the right brake. The cat began to spin, the right track
gripping and driving, pivoting hard off the left. We hit the full slope and the big machine rocked sickenly downhill, the uphill track coming up off the ground. "Come on baby!" I hollered. That big yellow hunk of steel hung there a split second, what seemed an hour at least, then still pivoting, rocked the other way and slammed down into a full uphill position. There was no celebrating, no stopping. I kept her full throttle, tracks spinning and gripping, bouncing and rocking, slowly gaining the hill. We punched through the smoldering remains of the fire and over the rim of the slope, and there I stopped her.

The whole pivoting process could not have taken more than a couple seconds. The uphill, twenty. My heart raced. My mouth was cotton dry. I felt nauseous from the adrenaline rush. Only when I'd made it back to the road did I let myself think how close it all had been.

The fires slowed down the middle of August. The job was a good one, but I knew it would end when the fire season was over. I had only one problem at BLM, a foreman in the equipment shop who was a hard rock of a man, ex-navy, ex-smoke jumper, and a rabid nigger hater, gook hater, a hater of most anything that wasn't white Irish Catholic. It was odd dealing with him, because I know at some level he liked me, but the absolutes he carried wouldn't allow him to admit that. On more than one occasion he would publicly berate me. Eyes squinting cold, "you were one of those goddamned yellow bastards who were too chicken shit to fight in the war."

"That's not it," I'd say.

"Bull shit, too fucking yellow bellied to stand up for your country."

"It was a philosophical decision," I'd reply, "It was an unjust war."

"The hell, there isn't anything such as an unjust war when it's your
country telling you to fight. You go, period. It's your duty."

The irony of his ranting was that he'd never gone to Viet Nam, either. His blind allegiance to country was an anathema to me; I could not understand it then and still can't what it is in the human spirit that leads so many to mindless obedience. I'd guess the punishment he inflicted on me was more about his own self doubts, his own self loathing. But I don't recall understanding any of that at the time. All I knew was that when I was on the fire base he made my life pretty miserable. I remember my anger, the times I wanted to fight him but held my temper. I remember my own self doubts. Was I a chicken shit?

I made some good friends at BLM, though. I was standing in the BLM messhall line, and I met Tom Ballantyne. He'd been working on a survey crew that had been out in the bush for most the summer. His crew just come into town for the week-end. I'd just come off a fire, was hungry, and black soot and sweat from head to toe. Tom looked at me. I looked at him. "You're dirty," he said to me.

"Damn perceptive of you," I said.

"What you working at?"

I told him I was operating a Cat. We filled our trays and sat down together. Tom told me what he'd been doing. He'd ridden a bus from Michigan to Alaska the year before, arrived in Fairbanks just after the first snowfall in October. He had always dreamed of trapping in the north, so he inquired around and learned that one of the best trappers in Alaska was an old fellow everyone called Herman the German. Herman had a place out on the big bend of Beaver Creek, an achingly pretty stretch of country at the base of the limestone cornices of the White Mountains, just a short flight north from Fairbanks.

Tom chartered a plane to take him out to see the German. He landed on
Herman's strip, and got out and asked the German if he could trap with him for the winter. Herman was a sure-enough German, stubborn, opinionated, impatient, pretty much known as a recluse, even though he had a German wife living at the Polaris Hotel in town. But Tom won him over, promised that he'd leave if it didn't work out. He killed a moose for himself. Then the German showed him how to make martin sets. Tom caught a few martin and turned them over to Herman. The rest of the winter they trapped together, snowshoeing over 150 miles of trapline. In the process they developed a close friendship. As Tom discovered, the old guy was lonely as all hell. He hated to see Tom leave to come in and take the BLM job.

Over that mess-hall table began a friendship, a mutual sharing of a love for the wild, a shared philosophy about a lot of things, that's still alive today. Even though Tom now lives outside Boston, we still do wilderness trips together, a couple of old guys, as he says, trying to hold on to the past.

The middle of August Tom and I both quit our BLM jobs, agreed that we hadn't come to Alaska just to work. We figured we'd go down to south-central for some fishing and hunting, and we set ourselves set up for a grand time. We borrowed a canoe and bought some other gear with our last paychecks. Early morning after our last day at work we left. B.B. waved good-bye to us from the trailer door.

We drove the Land Cruiser back along the Alaska Highway, close to the Canadian border. There we cut into the Indian village of Northway, and put in on the upper Tanana River, a big silty affair, more river than I'd ever been on before. It was on that float that I saw my first wolf, a beautiful black creature we surprised sunning itself on a sand bar; it was laid out like a dog in front of a fireplace. One of us must have scraped a paddle against the side of the canoe, because the wolf stood quickly. But it didn't run. It just watched us approach,
its head lowered, sloe eyed and calm. We were within a hundred feet of it, maybe less, when it turned quickly and disappeared like a phantom into the willows.

I was excited. A wolf was my idea of pure wild. And here we were no more than a couple miles off the Alaska highway. What, I thought to myself, must it be like way out in the bush. I knew I had to experience that kind of wild soon.

We went on down through Anchorage, a town I immediately took a disliking to. I'm often reminded of Joe McGinniss's book, Going to Extremes, where he described Anchorage ten years later, during the pipeline boom:

Anchorage was a boom town, nervous and greedy, afraid that the music would stop, afraid that the money would run out. A town of Texans and Teamsters and pickup trucks, bars and liquor stores, pawnshops and guns, country music, massage parlor, Baptist churches, public drunkenness, and an alarming rate of automobile accidents. But there were new restaurants, too, with wine lists and fresh flowers on the table. And new office buildings rising fast. With the oil had come the professional classes - lawyers and stockbrokers and real estate developers - grinning and bearing it; putting up with the winters; cashing in.

The Anchorage I saw in 1968 was poised and ready to become the Anchorage McGinniss saw ten years later. For me it felt the quintessence of all I'd hoped to leave behind. Urban. The worst facets of All-America collected in one small boom city, a playground for the Chamber of Commerce sharpies.

We left fast, and carried on south to the Kenai Peninsula, and there I was introduced to another part of Alaska, so different than the interior of Fairbanks. Temperate rain forest, gray skies, mild and maritime. We paddled the canoe on a huge glacial lake, and battled tail-walking, gill rattling, silver salmon for the first time in a clear water tributary. No fish I know fights like a silver salmon, pound for pound.

The Kenai was still a fairly wild place then, the towns small and quaint.
The town of Homer, nestled in one of the most strikingly beautiful settings anywhere on the planet, was still a little dirt-streetered village depending mostly on fishing. The hoards of tourists and back-to-the-landers that have invaded Homer since were still more than a decade away.

On the way back to Fairbanks we detoured up to Talkeetna, where we’d heard of a stream at the foot of the Talkeetna mountains where there was supposed to be fantastic salmon fishing. We loaded our backpacks and followed the Alaska Railroad tracks for several miles, then turned east into the bush on an old Cat trail.

It was supposed to be a six mile walk from the railroad tracks into the creek. The day was warm and overcast. We took our time, hunting grouse along the way. I have one picture of that walk, of this sun tanned kid wearing a battered Stetson. His eyes are alive, afire, and he’s grinning like the whole world has been made up to accommodate his desires. He’s got a grouse held up by its hind legs in one hand, a Remington twenty-two automatic in the other. There’s a red blood spot on the grouse’s head, where the bullet passed through.

Two times on the way in we saw black bears lope off the trail ahead of us. It was late enough in August where the sun was noticeably dropping earlier each evening and the nights were coming full dark again. Before we made it to the creek it began to get dark. With the day so overcast, in a short while it was pitch dark, so dark you could walk smack into a tree before you saw it. We stumbled along, taking turns leading, working at staying on the trail. Finally we made the creek. We could hear the water running a ways below us, down what we sensed was a pretty steep bluff. We decided we’d best make camp right there, figure how to get down to the creek in daylight.

I can remember only one other time that I’ve experienced a night so dark. We literally had to get down on our knees and feel along the ground
with our hands in order to find a spot to camp. We managed, though, found a nice level area that felt to be pretty free of brush. We spread a tarp and our sleeping bags on top, and crawled in.

Throughout the night I kept waking to sounds of something big crashing through the brush close to us. Finally early morning it got light enough I could begin to make out the gray shapes of trees. Tom was still breathing softly. I heard a noise close and sat up in my bag. There, less than fifteen feet away, stood a black bear up on its hind legs. It snorted at me, then turned and scrambled into the trees. I scooted out my bag, stood and inspected our surroundings. We were just at the edge of the bluff, our campsite located directly in the game trail that paralleled the creek. The soft mud of the trail was solidly covered with bear tracks. Big one, little ones, some that looked a lot like grizzly tracks.

Later in the morning we climbed down to the creek. The water was red, filled bank to bank with migrating salmon. The sand bars and mud along the edge of the creek were a jumble of bear tracks. I've not seen a place since where black bears and grizzlies shared the same locale the way they did along that creek. That's how thick the fish were. A bear's personal feeding territory needed to be little bigger than the swipe of his upper legs.

We caught fish until our arms ached, red salmon and rainbow trout both. We managed to avoid any serious bear encounters, though the possibility kept us both alert.

Tom and I made it back to Fairbanks. Tom headed back out to Beaver Creek, where he intended to trap another winter with Herman the German. (His stay was cut short, though, by a letter from his draft board.) A couple days later I enrolled for the fall semester at the University of Alaska, in Wildlife
Management. Even though I wasn't too excited about going back to college, B.B. and I agreed it might be the best thing for us in the long run. She had a job. We figured we could get by.

We sold our trailer (I used the money to pay non-resident tuition at the University) and rented a little one room frame cabin close to downtown Fairbanks. 1968 was the winter that the first Hercules airplanes began roaring overhead, hauling load after load of construction materials up to the Arctic, the "North Slope" they called it, to begin development of what was reputed to be a massive new oil discovery. That winter was just the simplest warning of the changes that were to follow, but I don't recall having much sense then that things could change all that much. We knew rentals were hard to find, and rents were starting to climb because of an influx of people looking for work on the North Slope. B.B. and I felt pretty lucky to get a place, although $85 dollars a month seemed like a lot for what it was.

1968/69 was also one of the coldest winters ever. It turned sixty below the end of December, no wind, the air piercing cold and still as death. We cranked the oil stove up almost as far as it would go. The stove would cook along pretty good most of the time, but every now and then something got into it and it would start to rock back and forth and make loud whooshing noises, like the whole operation was about to launch itself into space. The windows of the cabin frosted over on the inside, solid opaque. Frost crept up the walls, half way to the ceiling in the corners furthest from the stove. Water spilled on the floor five feet from the stove would freeze solid in a matter of minutes.

It was a dump of a cabin, in a part of city, but there was no city water or sewer. The neighborhood was a mish-mash of houses and cabins and mobile homes, all packed together on tiny city lots. Everybody had their own wells and septic tanks. We knew the ground water was seriously polluted, but gave
it little notice until a month or so after we'd moved in, when the water started coming out of the tap frothing like soap suds. It smelled like a combination of soap and sewage, and when it sat in the toilet it turned brown with a vile blue-green scum on top. We investigated a little and discovered that the well we were getting our water from (piped from our landlady's house) was about twenty-five feet away from the neighbor's septic tank. Our landlady was from Fort Smith, Arkansas, a place she never let anybody forget she wished she still was. She carried a geriatric toy poodle around with her wherever she went, had the biggest bee-hive hair-doo I'd ever seen on a women, and on the coldest days of the winter still wore her gold-lame' go-go boots inside or out. "Don't worry about it," she said when I brought up the water situation, "it won't hurt you. I've been using it for years. Look at me."

I knew this: we were not experiencing the pristine life I'd promised B.B. before we left Colorado.

The fuel oil for the stove, stuff we paid close to a dollar a gallon for, was stored outside in fifty-five gallon drums, lined on their sides on a stand, and piped together. Somewhere around sixty-two below, always the middle of the night at any rate, the oil in the line would congeal and the flame in the stove would die. B.B. would shake me awake, and in her soft voice she'd say, "the stove's gone out again." I would creep out from under the monstrous pile of blankets we slept under, dance from foot to foot as I put on my winter gear and pulled on my boots. The only door outside would always be frosted shut. I would kick it open and stagger out into the cold, the air stabbing at my nostrils, my breath charging out in huge vaporous clouds reflected under the yard light. I would shuffle around behind the cabin, labor down on my hands and knees and scoot on my back under the oil barrels. There I would lay and thaw the lines open with a propane torch, the feeble blue flame pulsing against the
darkness. Some nights I'd have to get out of bed two or three times, until late
morning the sun shone feebly enough over the south horizon that things got
warmed up into the low minus fifties. One night I got up four times. Five in
the morning I shined my flashlight on the thermometer hanging outside the
front door. Through the dense clouds of my breath I made out minus 70, the
thermometer's bottom limit. That December and January the mercury never
rose above minus 40 for thirty straight days. I didn't get the Land Cruiser
started for two and a half months, and even if I had we would have frozen
quick under that canvas top. B.B. took a cab to work, which ate up a good deal
of our budget. I hitch-hiked to school, a distance of about ten miles. We lived
in a dreary world of darkness and ice fog, a frozen soup of car exhaust and
chimney smoke. Some mornings the ice fog was so thick that a car couldn't
have seen me if I had been wearing neon lights. I walked and walked, and
learned how to take care of myself in extreme weather.

B.B. and I scraped along that winter. The cab fare and oil costs kept us
on the edge financially. One week, just before her paycheck, we were down to
peanut butter and white bread, and a single can of tuna. A kind neighbor must
have sensed something about us; he brought over the front quarter of a moose
when we were gone, and propped it up inside the door. I came home that
evening, it was still perfectly frozen. That's the way people were in Fairbanks
then, friendly, always looking how to help a newcomer, a Cheechako as they
called us.

When the cold spell finally broke the first part of February, and the
temperature shot up to minus twenty, it felt like a heat wave. People walked
around outside in their shirt sleeves. B.B. and I were both relieved, yet
prideful that we had made it through, and that we were closing in on the end
of our first winter. I don’t remember feeling discouraged by anything that
first winter. I do recall, though, developing a serious respect for extreme cold, a respect that verged on fear at times. With that fear was an edge of loneliness, of a notion of puniness in the face of something very large. In the exaggeration of interior Alaska winter, I could not help but feel the nearness of death; one slip, and life gone in a matter of minutes.

How we could maintain such optimism in the face of the reality we lived that winter, I don't know. I guess some of it reflected on the way B.B. and I were still connected then. We were in something together, two youngsters taking on the world in our own way. We were close friends that winter. I'm not sure romantic love would have described it. Though I know I was in love; I was in love with a place, with all the possibilities of it, with the freedom that it promised. All I cared about was becoming more a part of it, to invest myself more fully. I think, too, B.B. felt much the same. For both of us, though, it was clear that the particular circumstances of a shelter had to change.

Spring finally came. "Breakup" the Alaskans called it, when the snow and ice melts, and roads and backyards turn to knee-deep mud, and garbage and dog turds show up most everywhere. People bought tickets for the Ice Pool, the lottery for when the ice officially moves on the Tanana River at the little down-river town of Nenana. The birch and aspen sent out their first delicate green buds. Great honking flocks of geese passed overhead. We had made it, our first winter. We were on our way to being Alaskans.

But the city depressed both of us, it was not what we'd come to Alaska for. Besides, our landlady wanted to raise the rent. She made no bones about Fairbanks becoming a boom town, and that she liked it. Like she said, she could make a lot more renting to some construction workers than she could to "a couple of college kids".

B.B. and I made a decision. We scrounged what money we could, and
bought a 10X12 white canvas wall tent and some rough-cut 2X4's and 1X6's. I loaded them on a pickup I borrowed from a friend at the university, and hauled the whole works out to piece of state land in the Goldstream Valley, twelve miles north and west from downtown Fairbanks. With an ax and bucksaw, I cut a trail through the bush into a nice stand of white birch, a couple hundred yards off the road. I cleared a spot, then hauled the lumber in on my back and built a deck and a frame for the wall tent. I stretched the tent over the frame, then built a bed and some rough kitchen counters inside, and a screen door to keep out the mosquitoes. B.B. moved out with our few possessions the end of May. We had to haul water for drinking and cooking. The outhouse was just a hole in the ground and a pole over it, wired to two trees. The cooking facilities were a Coleman stove. I dug a hole down to frost and buried an ice chest for a refrigerator. It wasn't what we'd left in Colorado, but still we called it home.

At best, we were squatters. And we were not alone. Others of our generation, caught by the rent gouging in Fairbanks moved out onto state land. Our closest neighbors were a couple B.B. had met through her work at the hospital. They had heard what we were up to and decided they wanted out of town, too. A week or so after we moved in, they put up their tent fifty yards through the trees, and moved in.

But I wasn't satisfied; I wanted to be further out in the bush, further away from anything to do with the city. I wanted the life I'd come north for. With neighbors close, I didn't feel so bad about leaving B.B. behind to fend for herself. I took another job for BLM, this time as the foreman on a trail crew that was to lay out and begin construction on a twenty-four mile recreational trail up in the Crazy Mountains, a hundred miles north of Fairbanks, the first recreational trail ever built in the interior of Alaska.
I was twenty-four years old, the only white man and the youngest, in charge of a crew of four Inupiak Eskimos from the wind swept, bleakness of Saint Lawrence Island. My foremanship was one of those simple assumptions made by a dominant culture: the fact that I was white, could write tolerably well and speak English with a Midwestern accent, somehow made me capable of leading these men. Saint Lawrence is one of the most remote places on the planet, lying midway between Alaska and Siberia in the storm thrashed Bering Sea. It makes for tough and seriously capable people. I knew next to nothing about anything. These men I worked with lived on the edge of nowhere and thought nothing of it. They were possessed of hunting and survival skills handed down through the centuries, men just one or two generations removed from the primitive. They knew a lot about a lot of things.

I took to the work, loved it, at the time could not imagine anything fitting me any better. We set up our first camp by helicopter, twelve miles off the Steese Highway. Thereafter we backpacked huge loads of supplies in off the road. We worked through June, searching out routes, staking, cutting side-hills and switch-backs, building cairns. Meantime, B.B. was getting up every morning, putting on a white uniform and driving the twelve miles over dusty roads to her job at the hospital. Once a black bear tried to get into the tent with her, and she banged on a pot with a wooden spoon until it went away. Another time she came home from work, and scared a bear out of the tent before it could do a lot of damage.

We came into town the first of July for fresh supplies, and for the Eskimos to take on a little of Fairbanks, which meant mostly hanging out in the bars on Second Avenue. The visit was short, only a couple days, and even then I remember wanting to get back out into the bush. B.B. seemed to be doing okay. She didn’t complain much about anything, about the hardship of
living out there without water and commuting to work every day. I think she took some pleasure in taking on a life so different than what she'd been born to. I know now, also, that was the summer our paths really began to take different turns. It was imperceptible to either of us at the time. Nevertheless, I can look back now and see the beginning, the opening for B.B., her first hint to herself that she had abilities, that she could be more than a city girl, a nurse, a woman who defined herself by a man.

Meantime I was up in the Crazy Mountains, and I was gaining some new sense of my own self. It was August, and we had gone some time, over a week as I recall, without any fresh meat, subsisting mainly on macaroni, canned beans, and Hershey bars. We were all big meat eaters, and everyone was tired of the diet, though I suspect I was more than my crew. Because every day they managed to supplement our store bought fare with birds' eggs and greens and who knows what else they scavenged off the tundra. They got a big kick out of offering me the more questionable morsels. "You want this little egg?" Bill Soonagrook would say. "It's got a little bird growing in it?"

"It's all yours," I'd say. "I'm not all that much into little birds."

"Okay," he'd say, "but you don't know what you're missin'."

"I'm sure of that," I'd say.

Or when we'd catch some grayling: "You want this fish head?"

"No thanks."

"The eyes, they's the best part you know?"

"No thanks, I'll stick with the worst parts."

"Okay, suit yourself." And then he'd make a big show of tipping his head back and dropping the fish head between parted teeth. He'd chew with exaggerated pleasure, eyes half closed. When he was done he'd shake his head in mock concern. "You white guys sure don't know much about eatin'. Kinda
worries me."

One day late August a small herd of caribou came down off the mountain above us, and literally walked through camp. The season was open, and at that time, south of the Yukon, we were allowed three apiece. I had an old 30-30 Winchester 94 along, so I leaped out of my tent and dropped three: two small bulls and a yearling female. The Eskimos were delighted and got right to work butchering. They had two of the caribou skinned and quartered, and the head of the yearling boiling in a five gallon Blazo can, before I managed to get the skin all the way off mine. The old man on the crew, Jimmy Walunga, came over to help me finish up. He shook his head in disgust when he saw that I'd cut the skin on the legs off half way below the elbow. "You messed up a coupla' pretty good pairs of muk-luk tops," he said.

"I didn't know," I replied.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess that's right."

What did I know? I'd killed them; those Eskimos wanted me to know how to make muk-luks, too? Besides, I was more interested in the antlers than any muk-luks. I cut them off the heads of the two bulls, and indicated I was going to keep them, was intending to pack them out. The Eskimos were astounded. "You can't eat them things, you know?" Jimmy said. "They ain't even gona make no soup."

To them, keeping antlers was on par with holding onto the price tag from a cellophane wrapped beef steak -- that is unless you needed antlers for tools or carving, which wasn't our case. But in the way of tolerant, patient, humorous people, they accepted my strange white man notions, my ignorance of the practicalities of life. They even helped me pack the antlers to the road, and stayed mum on the fact that we transported them in a US Government vehicle, a big violation of federal employee code.
Shortly after killing the caribou, late August anyway, with the high country tundra turning red and rust browns, I brought the crew into town over a weekend. B.B. and I were glad to see each other. We spent two days together, picking cranberries and blueberries, connecting again after so much time apart. In the morning, though, she was sick, nauseous and vomiting. “Maybe you got the flu,” I said to her.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

That Sunday night, both of us scheduled to return to work the next morning, B.B. and I lay close together on the mattress in the wall tent. It was half dark. She pulled away from me. “You’re probably going to be upset,” she whispered.

“Why?” I asked.

“You just are,” she said.

“Well, if I am, I’d like to know why. I don’t want to have to guess,” I said.

She was quiet a moment. Then the words came out in a rush. “I’m pregnant.”

I was stunned. “How?” I said. It was inconceivable to me that I could be a father. “How could that be, you’re using birth control?”

“It doesn’t always work,” she said. “Sometimes it doesn’t. That’s just the way it is.” She paused, then got it all out. “I know you don’t want a child. I know you don’t. But I just want you to know that I’m going to have this baby. I want it.”

I left the next morning, left my morning sick wife behind, and returned to the hills. The days that followed, as I worked, the questions just kept running over and over in my mind. What did it mean to be a father? How was
this going to change my life? How would it change B.B. and me? I had never wanted kids, reasoned that I wouldn't want to put them through what I'd experienced growing up. I'd never even entertained the idea. Nothing had really changed yet, except now I felt my world closing in, felt all that freedom I'd sensed when we came north, just slipping from me. I write this all now, I'm aware my absolute self-absorption. I'm aware, too, of a kid who didn't have much of a clue how to live life. He hadn't been given those lessons. Mostly all he'd learned to do was react. And now, just when he was reaching out for something for the first time in his life, the consequences of those reactions were catching up to him.

I returned the end of the summer, and come October we abandoned our tent camp and moved into a little 12X24 two room wanigan on the outskirts of Fairbanks, the place where I was first introduced to malamutes. "Wanigan" is from the Canadian Cree I'm told, the word for lean-to or shelter. In Alaska wanigan refers to the add-on for a mobile home. But the wanigan we moved into had nothing attached to it. The guy we rented it from had moved the mobile home down to the Kenai where he had some land. "You want the wanigan," he said over the phone when I called about the rental, "you can have it for $125 a month. Don't call me if anything goes wrong. It's your baby." I thought at the time, if he only knew.

I had elected not to return to college. BLM had offered me a winter job, and I figured with a baby coming I'd better take it. Both B.B. and I were up to simple living, not that we had a choice. Our wanigan had no running water, just electricity, which was more than a lot of us back-to-the-landers had. And a heater fired by propane, which was, aside from electric, the most expensive way you could figure to heat a house in Alaska at the time. Not to mention that
propane ceases to flow at forty-five below, something that I was yet to learn.

No running water was no big chore. We hauled it in five gallon jerry cans. B.B. took showers at work, and I at the university. The toilet, which sat in a corner of the tiny bedroom closet the door, was a little travel trailer affair that you had to pour water in to flush. It dumped into a shallow, cribbed cesspool which was froze solid by the middle of December. We had no outhouse, so we took to doing our toilet affairs in plastic bags stretched over a five gallon bucket. When the bags got full we’d tie them up and stick them outside the front door to freeze. When I got a dozen or so bags stacked up, I’d haul them to the dump. Poop-cicles, we called them.

That winter was another cold one. My BLM job ended the last of December. The idea of fatherhood seemed so distant to me. It still all seemed like a mistake. But I couldn’t avoid the evidence that it wasn’t; B.B. was getting bigger and bigger. Still, each day she drove off through the ice fog and darkness to her job at the hospital. Her can was a VW Bug, a miserable vehicle in the cold, even with a gas heater. I taped up all the cold air vents so the thing would run as hot as possible. It didn’t help much; still she had to drive with an ice scraper in her left hand, scraping madly to keep the windshield from frosting over inside.

B.B. went to work the first day of March, worked her whole shift, came home that evening and changed clothes. An hour later I took her back to the hospital. “Sit with me,” she said. “I will,” I said. I sat beside her and held her hand, helped her with her breaths. She had introduced the Lemaze technique of child birth to Fairbanks. During her pregnancy she ran a class, and she had pushed for the rights of pregnant women almost from her first days there. She was determined to her baby in this new way.

But for all her preparation, her labor was a long and hard one. I know
it was, but I find it difficult now to try to recall any of it. All I can remember is that it had been a gray day. And my recollection of the hospital room is gray. My mood was gray. The only detail that I remember clearly is that B.B. lay on her back and I sat at her left hand, because she was so totally left handed, she even preferred holding hands left-handed.

I'd like to think I stuck with her into the early morning, at least until a nurse asked me to leave. Why else would I leave? Even though I know then that the medical minds in control saw the father as an abstract part of the whole process.

I can't remember what I did after I left her side. Did I wait in the waiting room? I don't think so. Or maybe I went to a bar across the street from the hospital, the old International Hotel? Some part of me thinks I went back to the wanigan and returned later, after B.B. delivered. I can't recall any of it. Was there that much denial in it?

I know this: I didn't go into the delivery room with her. B.B. asked me to. And I could have, not that the doctors in Fairbanks at that time approved much of a father being there. But B.B. was well thought of at the hospital, despite her heretical notions of child birth. They'd make an exception for her, they said. And I said I didn't want to be an exception. But the truth is I didn't go in there because I was scared out of my wits. Try as I might, I could not find a connection to this baby that was about to be born. I felt out of control of my life, lost, unsure of what I was supposed to become, how I was supposed to be beyond the moment of birth. It had been enough trouble trying to figure out who I was before all this.

I have some regrets in my life. One of the biggest is that I did not find a way into that delivery room that gray morning in March, twenty-five years ago. I look at that child now, and I wish I could have seen her come into this
world. In some way I think I could know her better, maybe in some way I'd know myself better.

Cara Nicole Brunk, a sweet, healthy baby was born the afternoon of March 2. I first saw her first through the window of the maternity ward, when a nurse held her up for me to see. It was just like the movies. The father stands on the other side of the glass, awkward and unsure of himself. The baby is a prune, a red-faced little Winston Churchill. There is the sense with all of it that lives are about to change. One way or the other things are not going to be the same.

We brought Cara home, and got into being a family. She slept in a tiny little crib in our tiny bedroom. Several times a night she'd cry, and B.B. would get up and feed her. Again, I remember so little of it, other than the first year or so there was never a night without her waking. Only one event stands out vividly. We had a big mottled gray tomcat named Schultz, a charmer of a cat, just an adolescent when Cara was born. Schultz slept with B.B. and me each night. When we brought her home we worried a little that he might not take to Cara. But we needn't have, right off the bat he seemed to sense she was important. In fact, he actually seemed protective of her, something we at first discounted. One night, though, I came up out of a deep sleep with Schultz standing on me, mewing frantically and kneading my chest. I heard strangling noises from the crib. I jumped out of bed and turned on the light. Cara was rapidly turning blue, her blanket wrapped around her throat. That cat most likely saved her life. There's no doubt he knew something was wrong with her.

I have this picture of me lying on the couch in the Wanigan. Both Cara and Schultz are sitting on my chest. We're all laughing, even the cat. I like
that picture a lot. I had unreasonable affection for that cat. A couple years after the crib episode a loose sled dog chased Schultz up a tree and held him there for most of a day. By the time I rescued him, his kidneys had backed up and he was in tough shape. I took him to the vet, but there wasn't much the vet could do. I brought Schultz home and sat with him as he died. That was one of the few times in my life that I cried openly and out of control. I guess the cat opened up some part of me that had been waiting for a long time to grieve. I cared for that cat, perhaps in a way that I could not care at the time for my own daughter. It was more, too. I believe there were tears in it for me, some release of grief that had been building for a long time. The tears had to do with a recognition, however unconscious it might have been, of the loss my boyhood, a good-bye to innocence, a forced march, finally, into the world of adulthood.

The next spring we bought the wanigan and the lot it was on for $4,300, only to discover the back half of the wanigan was sitting on the neighbor's lot. It was late May I got a guy to move it for me, an old-timer who had moved a lot of houses around Fairbanks. He jacked it up and got ready to back an old army trailer under it. The timbers on the trailer looked weak, splintered away up by the goose neck. "You sure that thing will hold my house," I asked him.

"No problem," he said, "I've moved a lot bigger houses than this on it."

"Okay," I said, "You're the expert."

I stood watching as he lowered the house onto the trailer. He just got all the weight off the jacks when both timbers on the trailer cracked simultaneously and the wanigan crashed to the ground. I suppose there's some metaphor that could be made of that moment, but I'm not going to stretch for it right now. "It broke," I said.
"I'll be god damned if it didn't," he agreed.

It took him an extra day to jack the thing up again, replace the timbers on the trailer, lower it again, and this time move it to its new location on the front center of our lot.

I built a foundation out of treated timbers under the wanigan, then lowered it carefully. Along one side I added two little bedrooms, and off the back rooms for a utility room and bath. They were just rooms, though. Unfinished, because we still had no water. I figured once we got the money to drill a well and we could get running water, then I'd finish them. But we had the shell of a house started. We'd finish it Alaska style over the next few years -- a window here, a door there, maybe even an inside wall or two. Between expenses for sled dogs and a new child, my schooling and the necessities of life, though, it would take some time.

I had the outside walls roughed in, and a temporary roof over the new addition, when B.B.'s parents called and said they wanted to visit us. They wanted to make amends, would like to meet their new granddaughter. I hurried, did the best I could to get the bedrooms insulated and sheetrocked before they arrived. The day before they showed up I worked twenty-four hours straight, doing what I could. We still had no running water, no toilet, but at least we had an outhouse now, and our child had her own little bedroom.

The visit didn't go well. A day after their arrival, B.B.'s mother announced that we lived like barbarians, and that she was appalled that anyone would live with a new child in a place like this, meaning both the house and Alaska. Her father suggested that he had been right from the beginning, I was a waste, worse than a draft dodger in his mind. He hinted that B.B. should divorce me as soon as possible and come back to Colorado.

Mostly all I remember of that visit is hanging out in the dog kennel a lot,
something that was soon pointed out to me by her mother. "You never work on this house," she said to me. "All you care about is those damn dogs. Look at all the work that needs to be done here."

That did it. I suggested that they might find better accommodations at a hotel downtown. They said they would do no such thing. The next morning B.B. drove them to the airport, several days before their planned departure. We didn’t hear from them again for a couple years. I know B.B. felt terrible about that visit, felt she was in some way responsible for the way things went. I know she struggled daily with the difficulty of her parents. I know, too, that I could not provide for her what they had not given her. Hard as I tried, I could not.
A River Place

B.B. and I made a life for ourselves in Fairbanks. We stayed in the little wanigan house for four more years, just kept working on it until it was a full-fledged home. That first summer we owned it was also the summer my parents, both newly retired, drove a pickup camper up the highway for their first visit to Alaska. I was already back to work for BLM when they got there, this time surveying another recreation trail into the White Mountains. My parents took to the life right away. Dad planted a garden, then put a new roof over the wanigan and the addition. He built a porch off the front, and sided the whole building, so it looked from the outside like it had been planned to look the way it looked. Then he went inside and built kitchen cupboards. Both my parents worked all summer on that house, and I'd never seen either of them so happy. They both loved Alaska, and when they departed in the fall they guaranteed us they'd be back.

And my parents did in fact come up two more times during those four years. I'm glad we had those summers, the short amount of time I got to spend with them both when they were at ease. My mother loved traveling, loved being on the road with their camper. She still worked all the time, cleaning things, cooking, but she seemed to do it all with more pleasure. In Alaska my father was like he was when I fished with him as a kid. He laughed a lot. He was relaxed like that.

And Cara was growing up such a sweet child. I know no other way to
say it - sweet. Blonde and blue-eyed, not the dark hair and eyes of either of her parents. Even at two years she had the easiest disposition imaginable, a lovable child in every way. And there were times I even felt the pleasure of being a father, times I could feel my heart open and a new way of feeling take the place of the fear that was so often there. But those times were short lived. I understand now how angry I was much of the time, angry at B.B., angry at things I could not name. I was a man who had taken on a hard shell, determined to have my own way in most things. I demanded a lot of myself and everyone around me. I was too demanding of that sweet child, I know that.

But I was acting a role I had learned from my own father, trying to fill the same empty places, holding onto the notion that I needed to control those around me in order to feel that I held something of myself. One thing I can say that I did right: as far as I can remember I never hit Cara. I had figured out that much, that there was something inherently wrong with the violent acts of my father. B.B., too, held the line on violence; she had had enough of it from her own father. For all the ways that she may have unconsciously sought her father in me, hitting a child was one of them that she would not tolerate. I'm thankful to her for that.

After three years I quit working at BLM, decided I needed to get back in college. I went back to the university in the winters, worked on a degree in Natural Resource Management. And I decided, too, that I wanted to work for myself, that working for the government was not. Leo Olesen, a friend from the university, and I studied how log houses were put together, read a book on log building, and then went into the log building business. Our first summer we got contracts to build three cabins. We took our time, did some nice work. By the next summer we had more log work than we could handle. I liked the money, liked working for myself, but my craving to be in the wild places kept
pushing at me.

In the summers I began to take time off work to travel up to the Arctic. Most of my trips were to hunt; hunting and fishing were the only ways I knew to go in to the wild then. My first trip to the Arctic a friend, a veterinarian at the army base in Fairbanks, and I flew up into the Brooks Range to hunt Dall sheep. The lake we landed on was remote and high, marginal altitude for a float plane. According to the bush pilot, Paul Shanahan, no one had hunted there before, to his knowledge no on had ever even landed on the lake. Years later I ran into Shanahan up on the North Slope, and he told me that the pilots up in that country had taken to calling the lake Brunk Lake after we landed there, because as he said, "no one else was ever crazy enough to want to go in there before you came along."

Shanahan was a red headed wisp of a man, looked like he weighed about eighty pounds, and was one of the best bush pilots going anywhere. When you flew with him there was just this indisputable sense that you were in good hands. Once he was flying an old Twin Beech on the mail run between Fairbanks and Barrow, and both engines on the Beech quit at the same time. As he told it to me: "Without engines those things glide about as gracefully as a goddamn cement block. All I could do was take her into a lake and try for the shallow end, so she wouldn't sink to the bottom and drown my ass." Which is what he managed to accomplish, only he broke an arm and a collar bone in the process. And both doors got jammed, so he couldn't crawl out of the plane. Somehow he managed to struggle into a sleeping bag he had with him. There he sat in freezing water up past his waist for over twenty-four hours, before the Civil Air Patrol located him by his emergency beacon.

The country I talked him into taking us was indeed wild. The mountains around the lake were gray talus domes, broken here and there with patches of
sparse, pale green tundra, typical terrain of the southern central Brooks Range. There was no sign that any other humans had ever been there, though I'm sure at one time or another the occasional Eskimo had wandered through them, looking for game or on his way to trade with the Indians to the south. It was (and still is) against the law to shoot sheep the same day you fly, so we couldn't hunt the day we landed. So we took our time setting up camp at the edge of the lake, then we glassed the mountains. In the space of an hour, we counted over twenty legal rams in the hills around us.

The next morning we got up early and climbed a mountain at the head of the valley. Within a half hour of climbing we came up on a beautiful full curl ram. He stood staring at us less than a hundred yards away, white and muscular, horns perfectly formed and unbroomed, alert but not particularly afraid. My hunting partner wanted to take only a record book sheep; if he couldn't kill big, he said, he wouldn't kill at all. He told me to go ahead and shoot. I crept forward a few more steps, dropped down on my knee and shot. The ram hunched, then sprang forward out into space. He landed hard on rocks thirty feet below, then tumbled sickenly, ass over tea kettle down the mountain, finally flopping to a stop on a rocky outcrop just above the valley floor.

I climbed down and touched him. He was a beautiful animal, his horns miraculously undamaged from the fall. Once again I felt the mix of sorrow and regret that I'd come expect with killing. I have a picture of that moment. I'm still a fresh faced kid, though this time I'm sporting a sparse beard and my lower lip is pouch full of snOOSE. A camouflage hunting cap shades my eyes. I'm wearing a tan work shirt, green down vest, Levi's. I have one leg over the sheep's body, my rifle propped up between my legs. My hands, one grasping each horn, are covered with blood to up above the wrists. There's blood, too,
all over the sheep: its horns and head, the cape of its chest, a big red patch on its shoulder where the bullet exited. The sheep's lower jaw is skewed off to the right, broken in the fall. I'm looking straight into the camera with no hint of a smile. It was a serious moment for me. That, or I was just trying my best to look the role of the hard mountain man.

We skinned and caped the sheep, cut it into quarters, and packed it back to camp. That night we fried back-strap on the camp stove. There's no better wild meat than sheep. None that I know of anyway.

The next day we hunted up a steep mountain across the lake. Late afternoon we made the peak, topped a slight rise, and there less than a hundred feet from us stood thirteen legal rams, two of them a curl and a quarter, one even larger. They just looked at us, curious, not at all afraid. We had a long ways to go back down to our camp. It would be seriously dark by the time we got back, particularly if we had to deal with a dead sheep. My partner elected not to shoot the biggest ram, reasoning we could come back the next day in full light and kill him then. That's how confident we were of taking a big sheep there.

This account may not mean much to non-hunters, but in the last half of the twentieth century sheep hunting is not supposed to be as easy as it was for us in those mountains. Certainly it's virtually unheard of to have that kind of selection. The sheep we stalked had clearly never been hunted, and most likely had never seen humans before. They saw no threat in these clumsy, slow, two-legged creatures. We experienced something that's essentially impossible to know now, just twenty-five years later.

We agreed we would get up early and climb again. But the next morning we woke to the tent sagging in our faces. Mid August, true to the unpredictability of weather in the Arctic, a foot of snow had fallen during the
night. There was no way we could climb in those conditions, so we spent the rest of the week camp bound, never saw another sheep. The day Shanahan was due back the sun came out and the snow began to melt. He came in the early afternoon, we loaded up and flew out, and I've never gone back. The following winter the state of Alaska pushed a haul road through the Brooks Range (to the North Slope oil fields), the first road ever in those mountains. It came within a few miles of Brunk Lake. I talked to a friend who worked for Alaska Fish and Game a couple years after the road had gone in, asked him about the sheep in those mountains, and he told me they'd mostly been shot out after the road went in. The country was altered forever.

I had mixed feelings about my presence in those mountains, even then. There was the thrill of being in country that was essentially unexplored (at the time that whole range of mountains was just a white blank on the USGS maps.) But with it I also had the sense of participating in the death of something, of seeing the end of true, pre-industrial wilderness. I suppose it could be said that we experienced the last of an age, we were part of an old world dying. As we were, we were also entering another age, one not at all as inviting or as right for the soul. Today I feel both sorrow and gratitude for having had that experience. I hold those mountains and moments of my youth in my mind with great affection.

I kept looking for wilderness, though. The next year I flew with a couple friends up onto the North Slope to hunt Caribou. We took the commercial flight to Deadhorse, the staging area for the newly discovered Prudhoe Bay oil fields. This was my first introduction to oil development in the Arctic. What I saw shocked me. Drilling rigs, ten stories high, towered above a flat horizon. The tundra around was scarred and cut with roads and winter trails. Deadhorse itself was a boom camp, acres of trailers and rough plywood
buildings, equipment yards, and pipe facilities. Everything looked like it had been thrown together in a big hurry, a graphic and ugly contrast to the tundra world of lakes and ponds and wildlife it was altering. I could not shake the reality that just four years earlier nothing had been here; it had been purely wild country. I couldn't know, either, that what I was seeing then was only the most minute beginning of what the Arctic would come to in a few more years.

We hired a bush pilot in Deadhorse and flew a hundred miles east into what had only a few years earlier been designated by the federal government, via the efforts of Olaus Murie and Bob Marshall, as the Arctic Wildlife Range (later to become the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.) The country we flew over astounded me. Dramatic. Wild. Immense. Big, braided rivers ran out of the mountains, across the rolling emptiness of the coastal plain, into the ice choked Arctic Ocean. The high mountains to the south of us were like none I'd ever seen before. There was a mystery to them, an exaggerated wildness, that demanded exploration. A few hanging glaciers graced the highest, but unlike mountains further south, glaciers were not a dominant feature of the landscape. These mountains were an extreme in all ways, recipients of three and a half months of twenty-four hour a day sunshine in the summer, when everything comes fully alive, and in the winter months of total darkness, when they are beaten by some of the harshest weather on the planet.

We flew up into the foothills and landed on a gravel bar of a river whose name I can't remember, if it even was named then. The pilot agreed to come back and pick us up in ten days. It's conceivable, with the exception of a small Eskimo village on an island miles away off the coast, that we may have been the only human beings in the Wildlife Range at that time, an area larger than the state of South Carolina.
There were a few caribou scattered in the hills around, but no large
bulls that we could see. The next morning, though, we woke to thousands
around our camp: cows with knobby kneed little calves at their sides; gangly
yearlings; big, fat, slick sided bulls; all restless, grunting, the sesamoid bones
in their feet clicking (a unique characteristic of caribou). This was an
entirely different experience for me than those first caribou I shot up in the
Crazy Mountains. The scale of this was beyond understanding. Enough so that
my rifle was not my first reaction. I just stood there amazed in my long
underwear, and watched an abundant flow of life across the harsh cut of an
Arctic landscape, a sea of antlers bobbing and catching the sun in a thousand
ways. I thought it then and still do today, that Caribou migrating in large
numbers is one of the most extraordinary sights, something surreal,
something from another time.

On that first trip into the Arctic Wildlife Range I also discovered that
killing caribou can come too easy at times. That day and part of the next, we
would glass several hundred large bulls at once, taking our time, looking only
for the largest antlers. We would make a selection and shoot, and a bull sag
dead. The others around it would run off a ways then stop and stare back at us,
ignorant of what we were or what we were up to. I've often thought I might
have some sense of what the old time bison hunters must have felt --
limitlessness, the blood instinct rising up from the offer of sheer numbers.

That first trip to the Arctic Wildlife Range captured me in a way no
other thing I'd done before in Alaska captured me. It was the scale of the
country, a sense of unlimited space, the primal nature of it all, that touched
some ancient part of me. It was as if I was being born back again into
something familiar; in some way being there met the yearning I had known
since I was a kid.
I knew I had to have more of it, that one trip there would never be enough. Reality lurked at the edge of my fantasy, though. With my determination also came a dim understanding that I had to hurry; I was part of the last gasp of America's three-hundred year push to tame and develop a whole continent, to turn it all essentially to industrial ends. I couldn't extend myself fully into all the philosophical notions of it at that point in my life, but I understood enough to know that "The Last Frontier" that the promoters talked about, was just another way of saying that we stood at the apex of something that had defined America since the beginning. That something was ending, and we were turning into a new time which seemed to hold little invitation for me.

B.B. and I knew for certain that Fairbanks was changing a lot faster than we liked. That first winter of 1968, with the Hercules flying overhead and the price of rentals jumping, had only been a small hint of what was to come. The last frontier was filling up with boomers. Every sleeve-ball construction vagrant, coke dealer, pimp and hooker who could afford the price of a one way fare began showing up in Fairbanks. They came like flies drawn to dog shit, and teamed up with the Chamber of Commerce sharpies and the big corporations, and got right with the program of turning a quiet little town in the middle of the wilderness into a den of thieves. By 1972, Fairbanks had gone from a one or two murders a year kind of town, to a murder a week. Hookers and pimps and coke dealers prowled the downtown streets, and old-time residents who had never locked a door in their lives stood in line at Samson's Hardware to buy dead bolts and locks. For most the simple tasks of the seasons became complicated, and life took on a surreal and clumsy dance. It was boom time, crazy making time.

B.B. and I talked about what we saw happening. Land prices were
shooting up astronomically. Tracts of shoddily built houses sprouted up like thistles all over the place, houses that would not have done well in California, let alone a place a hundred and twenty-five miles south of the Arctic Circle. A big Fairbanks developer, a local politician also, bought the homestead fields behind our house, built a mini-mall and several hundred condominiums on them, then paved a parking lot. With that the dog training trails out of our house were obliterated. On the Chena river bottom below us, the same developer side-stepped Fairbanks zoning ordinances (what few there were) and put in a several hundred unit mobile home park, cutting off any other trail access we had to the Chena River. B.B. and I agreed, it was time to move. In my mind it was time to move a long ways away.

I was only a year away from graduating from college, and I had no plans for using my degree. I was coming to understand my motivation for going to college in the first place; that I did a lot of things mostly as a reaction to my father. He'd never been able to finish college, I needed to. He was stuck in Indiana, I needed to go to extremes way beyond that. My reaction to him was a mixed one. One part of it was a determination not to be like him. Opposed to this was a desire to please him, to give him some vicarious pleasure. Love and hate indeed can come so close to one another.

My last couple years in college took up a lot of time. It didn't keep me from accumulating dogs, though. Whenever there was an extra few dollars in the banking account, I'd talk B.B. into spending it on something related to dogs. I trained as much as I could, but it was spotty. Fortunately, B.B. began to take an interest in them; she took over some of the training, and did the racing in the winter, entering the seven dog races and women's races.

All I really wanted to do was be done with school, to get on with my life, which interpreted mostly into sled dogs, wilderness, and hunting. The idea of
land, of finally breaking free of Fairbanks, continued to push at both B.B. and me. We heard of some land that might be for sale out on the Tanana River, thirty miles southeast of Fairbanks, from an ex-Minnesotan dog musher by the name of Denis Christman. Denis already lived out there on forty acres that he'd purchased from an old timer by the name of Joe Kager. The land was several miles off the Alaska Highway, had no road access, only access by footpath or river. It was ideal dog training country, flat with lots of winter trails. It sounded about right to me.

Right after breakup the spring of 73, I launched my canoe on a side channel of the Tanana called the Piledriver Slough. I floated the Piledriver out into one of the main channels of the Tanana, entered a big, braided, charging river there. I held a USGS map with the section marked on it on my knees, kept the canoe lined out in the quick current, at the same time studied the map and the bends and forms along the river. It wasn't long before I passed Denis Christman's cabin nestled among the trees on the north bank. I knew I was getting close. At the far outside of a long bend I steered into a low cut bank, steadied the canoe there, and stepped ashore. I immediately liked what I saw. I pulled the canoe up on the bank, then walked out through the woods. Mature stands of white spruce dominated, larger along the river, grading smaller the further you walked inland. Mixed among the spruce were a few over-mature white birch, bent and gnarled like old men. The understory was a mix of prickly wild rose, high and low bush cranberries, willows, all spread over a yellow-green sponge of sphagnum moss. There was no sign of any human activity. It was as fine a piece of virgin river bottom as one could imagine.

Close along the river's edge I came upon a place where a moose had bedded down in a little moss filled depression. Off in the distance, across the
river on the south horizon, the great wild peaks of the Alaska Range reared up white and bold against a blue azure sky. I stood there and knew I would be back, that I wanted this land and I wanted a new life that finally came closer to what I'd come to Alaska for. The front door of the cabin would go where the moose had bedded down. A good omen, I reasoned.

The land I stood on was part of an original hundred and sixty acre homestead that had been proved up in 1924 by a fellow named Wallace. There was no indication anywhere that Wallace had ever lived on any of it, no old cabin, no stumps, no sign of a clearing. It was the law back then that you had to clear ten acres and plant a crop to "prove up" as they called it. But the reality of homesteading in Alaska in those days was that it was pretty much a federal give away. Often all a homesteader did was stake a claim and wait the required time; the government never got around to inspecting the claim, just handed over a deed when the time was up.

In 1932 Wallace traded it to a Fairbanks grocer named Busby for a winter grubstake. Busby never lived there either, and ten years later turned it over to Joe Kager, in return for Joe building Busby a cabin in Fairbanks.

Joe Kager had sold forty acres of it to Denis the year before I looked at it. Denis wanted to make sure whoever bought the rest of the homestead was a dog musher, so he told me about it. When I looked up Joe to ask him if he was interested in selling the 120 he had left, he was in his late seventies, and had been in Alaska over sixty years by then. He was a wiry little man, a life-time bachelor, thin and dried out as kindling. The lines of his face all turned upward like he'd spent a lifetime being agreeable. It was mid June when I first talked to him, full, twenty-four-hour a day sun outside. Joe sat in a worn, red easy chair in the living room of his cabin in downtown Fairbanks, the shades all drawn, about four feet away from a blazing oil stove. I guess like a
lot of the old-timers he’d had his fill of cold, was suspicious of getting too involved with summer; everybody knows it’s too damned short-lived to trust, anyway.

I took a seat on a yellow plaid couch across from him. Joe looked at me and smiled. “What can I do you for?”

“Would you be interested in selling that land out at Thirty Mile,” I asked him.

He considered it a moment. Then he shifted a little closer to the stove. “I suppose I would. I got no use for it. Hell, last time I was out there was 1952. No, maybe it was 1951. 51 or 52, guess it don’t matter that much. It’s been at least twenty years anyway. Then all I did was go out there and cut a cord of wood. Brought it back into town and sold it.” He chuckled. “I wasn’t even sure I was cuttin’ it on my land. Course it didn’t matter back then. Times were different. That was when there was still a bridge over the Piledriver Slough. Flood washed it out shortly after.”

“So you’d sell it?” I said.

“Sure,” he said, “but I ain’t gona sell it for what these real estate fellas are gettin’ for land around here. It’s ridiculous what they’re askin’.” He paused, shifted in his chair. "I ain’t gona charge what they’re askin’,” he said. “I’m only gona ask what’s fair.”

“What do you figure you have to have for it?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “I’m thinkin’ two hundred an acre. You figure that’d be too much? You do, I’d be willing to negotiate.”

I did my best to appear casual. With the oil boom underway, land around Fairbanks was going anywhere from a thousand to three-thousand an acre. Not river land either, but just raw land, no easy water, maybe permafrost on it, certainly no good timber. “That seems like a pretty fair price.” I said. “You
take payments on it?"

"Sure," he said. "What can you afford?"

We agreed on a couple thousand down, payments of two-hundred a month, no interest, until the whole hundred and twenty acres was paid off. "It's good to see some young fellas take over up here," Joe said as we shook hands on the deal. "I'd be out there with you, too, if I could manage it."

When I graduated from college the spring of 74, I made a commitment to give sled dog racing all I had, to turn professional, and in my secret heart to become the best at it. I had over twenty dogs now, counting pups. Blackie was gone, too old, too slow, I'd sold him to a recreational musher. I'd bought a young new leader by the name of Annie, a real character of a dog, sometimes with more human qualities than dog. I started running her up there with Swede, and right off the bat she began pushing him in every way. It had become increasingly clear, too, that Brother and Boo and Swede didn't have the same speed as the new young dogs I was raising, so I sold them to a fellow training for a new distance race called the Iditarod.

B.B. and I agreed that it was time to move to the river. There we could put all we had into dogs. The move was the beginning of the dream we'd come to Alaska for in the first place. My own fantasy was to stay out there on the river, train what I had, work on the pups, and then in a year or two show up in Fairbanks with a top team. The wunder kid from the bush. I knew I had a lot to learn.

Earlier that spring, with the sap full up in the trees, I'd come down from the Piledriver landing in my canoe. I spent two days cutting forty-four good house logs: fine, straight-grained, hundred and twenty year old white spruce, all within fifty yards of where the moose had bedded down. Leo Olesen, my
building partner, and I stripped the logs with peeling spuds made from the leaf springs of a 49 Chevrolet pick-up. We laid the bark out in long, white, pitchy strips right where the trees had fallen. And then I got Denis to come down with his horse and skid them up in a pile next to the house site. There I ricked them, so I could turn them with a peavey now and then, so they’d dry straight.

We decided we’d move out to the river by the end of summer, depending upon whether or not I could get a cabin built there before winter.

Just before I’d graduated I’d gotten a job offer to go to work up on the Charlie River, running a river boat and outfitting a camp for a group of scientists studying the Charlie for Wild and Scenic status. I told Leo Olesen I’d like to skip log building that summer; the Charlie work sounded a lot closer to what I wanted to do. I left the first of June, ran a river boat full of supplies up the Yukon and into the lower Charlie, where I set up a big camp. The Charlie was a fine, wild river then, running tannin stained but clear. It flows north from a low range of mountains to join the heavy silt of Yukon between Eagle and Circle. In high water I would take the scientists upriver in the boat, far up into the headwaters, where the slope of the river ran downhill like a chute, and the bends cut tight through duff-colored rocky bluffs pitching straight up off the water. Sometimes wolves would lope off gravel bars ahead of us, or white Dall sheep scramble up the cliffs. I think back on it, that was as fine a summer as one could imagine. But I’ve heard the Charlie’s changed now; like so many places that have been officially designated wild, it’s become a recreation destination. I don’t know if I could stand to go back. But I guess that’s not the point of this.

The point is I was liking my work. I figured to stay with it as long as I could, so I knew it would be a push to get a cabin up on the Tanana before
That summer I rarely made it into Fairbanks. Only a couple times to see B.B. and Cara. And one other time when I got a radio message from B.B. that my 66 year old mother had had a heart attack and was in critical condition in a hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. I fired up the boat in the middle of the night, ran down the Yukon with the midnight sun full over my right shoulder, to Circle, a distance of thirty miles or more. There I got in my pickup and drove fast over the Steese, that two-hundred miles of gravel torture that connects Circle with Fairbanks. It was early morning when I pulled up in front of the house. B.B. met me at the door with a plane ticket in her hand. "You've got less than an hour to get cleaned up," she said. "Your plane will make Cleveland late tonight."

The shock of Cleveland after six years in Alaska was palpable, hard, jangling to all my senses. The hospital was in a ghetto, a shrine to urban decay and blight. I arrived in the middle of the night, ran a gauntlet of security police and attack dogs to find my mother's building. I took the elevator up to the fifth floor, where I found her still alive, attached by tubes to machines and bags of fluid. Her breath came in ragged gulps. She'd had emergency open heart surgery, a tough time of it. I pulled a chair up by her bed and waited. It was early morning before she finally opened her eyes and looked at me. "You're here," she whispered. "I'm so glad you're here."

I spent a week with her and my father, waited until it was clear she was going to make it. Years later she told me that my coming back to be with her was a big part of her decision to work at staying alive. I was glad I'd come, but still, most of the time, all I could think about was getting back to Alaska, back to a life that was such a welcome contrast to my Midwestern boyhood, back to a reality that finally made sense to me. It's embarrassing now for me to admit
how restless I was there, how unwilling I was to stay with my mother any longer than I absolutely had to. I hope it would be different for me today, though sometimes I wonder if it would be. I still feel such confinement when I return to the Midwest.

I flew back to Alaska the middle of July. When I stepped off the plane in Fairbanks it was like coming home after years away. B.B. met me in the lobby. “Welcome back,” she said.

“It’s good to be back,” I said. “It’s a zoo out there. If I ever go outside again, it’ll be too soon.” And I know I believed it when I said it.

I spent the night in town, then headed back up to the Charlie first thing the next morning. It was close to the end of August before I finished up and could start on the cabin.

I went out to the river ahead of B.B. and Cara. I figured I had six weeks, seven at the most, to get a dog yard cleared and the cabin up before the first heavy snows came. I got a couple young fellows who’d worked for me on the Charlie to help. We worked twelve to fourteen hours a day. We set the pilings, notched and squared and set the deck logs, and nailed up the floor joist and decking in three days. Then, with me doing the notching and fitting, and them the grunt work, we made a round a day on the walls. Nine rounds, nine days. Another four days for the gables, and the ridge pole and purlins. It looked like we were going to make it before winter.

Denis had offered me his little cabin to stay in, the one he’d built first, a couple hundred yards off the river back in the trees, before he built his main cabin right on the banks of the river. One night the boys I had helping me headed into town to drink. I had a dog with me, a cowardly half Siberian I was keeping for a friend. And a litter of pups just weaned from one of my best
bitches. I had those pups with me so they could loose in the bush, to get confident about things.

The sun no longer ruled; the nights were turning dark by ten or ten-thirty. I was exhausted from a long day setting logs, so I ate a quick meal of peanut butter and pilot bread, and crawled into bed. Sometime later I came up through a deep sleep to the dog whoofing scared off in the trees. I laid still and listened. The head of my bed was only a couple feet from the door. The pups whined and scratched to get under the cabin. I heard something move heavily outside the door. Then, whatever it was pushed hard against the door, rattling the wooden latch, shaking the frame. I sat up quick and reached for my rifle leaning between the bed and the door. I pushed off the safety, jacked the bolt and felt it miss the shell. The animal outside the door snuffled and growled low, then hit the door a hard wallop. I jacked the bolt again and felt it miss again. I pushed off my sleeping bag and swung my feet to the floor. "Get out of here!" I yelled. I stood then stumbled over to the table, feeling in the dark for the lantern that was supposed to be hanging from a purlin. I stopped and listened. Whatever it was was still snuffling close to the door. "Get out of here!" I hollered again.

I found the lantern, then felt across the surface of the table for the box of Diamond kitchen matches. I found the matches, fumbled one out and struck it. The cabin flared into feeble light. I put the match to the lantern, cracked the valve, and the lantern hissed to life.

I grabbed my rifle again. I'd carried it all summer with the clip full and hadn't given a thought to the fact that the clip spring might fatigue enough for the bolt to miss the lead shell. I snapped out the clip, pulled out a shell and slipped it into the chamber, then stood with the rife held on the door.

I waited. I could hear nothing now, except one of the pups whimpering
under the cabin. I waited several more minutes. Nothing. And then a shot 
crashed through the stillness, reverberating wildly inside the cabin. I waited 
for another couple minutes at least, expecting another shot, but none followed.

With my rifle held ready I opened the door. On the trail to the river I 
spotted two lights coming toward me. They swung wide arcs across the trail, 
playing off the trees in exaggerated shadows. Denis shouted, “stay in your 
cabin, there’s a wounded bear on the loose!” His wife, Cathy, was with him, 
“Yes, stay in there!” she shouted.

The two of them came up and proceeded to describe how they’d heard 
their horse running wild in the corral. Denis pulled out his big flashlight 
and shined it on a bear trying to get over the rail fence to the horse. Denis 
grabbed his rifle and shot. The bear bolted off into the woods, leaving a blood 
trail in the dirt. “We have to look for it,” Denis said. “It’s too dangerous to 
leave it out there wounded.”

I fiddled with the clip, pushed it back into my rifle, hoping this time it 
might work. I grabbed my lantern. The three of us walked out into the night, 
a quarter mile upriver where another couple was staying in a cabin. We told 
them the story, suggested they stay alert. Then we went back to Denis’s place 
and picked up the blood trail. It shone dull rust in the lantern light, and here 
and there the blood spotted a large track cut into the silt. We followed the 
tracks a hundred yards upriver before they cut into the woods. There it 
became harder to follow, but with careful study we managed. We’d made about 
fifty yards when the woods erupted with agonized roars -- Waaargh! -- over 
and over again. Brush snapped and popped just out of the reach of the lantern 
light. We held our rifles ready for the charge, for a snarling fury to erupt 
through our pale circle of light. But none came. And then as suddenly as it 
had begun it ended. The dark woods around us was completely soundless.

I try now to recall how I felt standing there in the dark. It’s strange,
but I don't recall any fear. I felt fear in the cabin, I guess because I felt so helpless. But in the woods, all I can remember is a calmness, a feeling of being exactly where I wanted to be. Mixed with it, too, was a sense of exhilaration. This same mix of feelings I've experienced other times, always when I've been in the most danger. What is it? At the risk of sounding sentimental, the best I can come up with is that it's a moment when my life finally comes to some essential connection, something real, that for the most part seems entirely absent from daily civilized existence.

Cathy broke the silence. “I think we should wait for morning, when we can see what's going on out here.”

Maybe we should,” Denis agreed.

“We were stupid to come out here in the first place,” she said. As far as I can recall that was the only time I ever heard her publicly disagree with Denis about anything.

We retreated to our cabins. The next morning we got up and picked up the trail again. When we approached the spot where we'd heard the roaring, the ground all around was gouged and ripped, small trees scarred and broken. We held our firearms ready, but there was no need to. At the base of a big spruce we found the bear, an old boar grizzly, shot hard, up high and behind the lungs. He was stretched full out on his stomach, his head twisted grotesquely off to his right and up under his leg. I remember thinking that it looked like he had been ashamed to die the way he had. Blood froth rimmed his mouth. His canines were broken and dangling from their roots. He had clearly died in great agony.

He was a big bear, record book, but old and thin, missing back teeth; there was no way he would have made the winter. He was also missing the outside toes on his right front foot, the signature of the bear who had raided
cabin along the Salcha River for years. Glad as I was that he hadn't come into
the cabin with me, I wished him a better death. I suppose the case could be
made that he would have died anyway. But there seemed so little dignity in
going the way he did. But I couldn't admit that to anyone then, particularly to
Denis.

I went back to building that same day. As I worked I felt a sadness for
the bear. But at the same time I felt a joy for living, for the privilege of being
in a place where there were grizzly bears, where there were things big
enough to eat you, where life was not so predictable. I was alive, very alive. I
could not imagine a better life. Beneath that feeling, though, I know now
there was a pale recognition that whatever that life was, most likely it was a
frail existence. Enjoy it now some part of me thought, because it's no doubt
doomed to be short-lived.

We put the first roof boards on in a September snowstorm. Set the
rafters the following day and insulated the next. I put up aluminum roofing,
taken by a fit of practicality. "Aluminum will last forever," I said, damning
the aesthetics. By the end of September we had the windows in, and I'd built
and hung exterior doors.

B.B., and Cara joined me, just six years and five months from the time
B.B. and I had first arrived in Fairbanks. We had a new home, a 26 X 32 trapper
style, with low walls and an open ceiling, and a fine loafing porch on the
front. There was no electricity. Propane lights instead. No running water.
Just a pitcher pump in the kitchen. No interior walls yet. Just one big room
with a barrel stove in the middle, a good enough place to spend a winter.

We moved the dogs in by boat, twenty-some adults, chained along the
sides where they stood eager and quivering, their noses lifted high, sifting the
rich river smells. When we nudged up against the bank in front of the cabin, they pulled hard at their collars to be ashore, as eager as it seemed to take on this new place. B.B. and I led them ashore one at time, tied them in the new dog yard. With the last one tied we stood back and watched them sniff out their new chain circles. “They’re home,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “So are we, I hope.”

B.B. had quit her job as a public health nurse before moving out to the river, so for the first time since moving to Alaska she thought she’d have some time for herself. She set about making the cabin a home and being a full-time mom, and quickly discovered that living in the bush, particularly with a bunch of dogs, was a lot of work. Cara, always a creative child, quickly learned to play by herself. She invented games and began to display a talent for art. It was her job, too, to play with the pups, to socialize them, a chore she took to with great enthusiasm.

Life on the river took on seasonal rhythm for us all. Summers I went back to log building, because log work was the most lucrative thing I could do over a single season. In a few short summer months I could make enough to get through the whole year, leaving the winters free to drive dogs. Most mornings I would get up early, take my river boat up to the landing, then drive the long miles into town to work on one project or another. Summers for me lost the joy of the early years when I had worked in the bush. They became drudgery, something to get through, to endure until winter came. It took a lot to support a family, a growing kennel, and to continue to develop the homestead. The dogs, it was understood, would have to start paying for themselves at some point. But during the building stage, they required a lot of cash input.

Our second summer on the river, the Alaska pipeline construction was
full underway. Leo Olesen and I decided we'd go to work on the pipeline instead of log building. We'd do it, even though the idea of working for someone else, particularly a big construction company contracted to the oil companies, was repugnant to both of us. It was hard, though, to pass up the big money they offered.

My first day to make union call was one of those summer events that have survived in my memory. It was late May, Cara was six years old, and she had a friend visiting, a little girl from up on the highway. I'd brought her in the evening before by river boat. The next morning B.B. was at the stove in the kitchen, making French toast for the two girls who sat at the kitchen table next to a low window. I was gathering some gear in the back bedroom, when I heard Cara call quietly, "dad, there's a bear looking through the window at us."

I hurried into the kitchen, and sure enough there was a full-grown black bear reared up on its hind legs, watching the two of them eat. It had been some time since we'd had any fresh wild meat, so I hustled across the front room and grabbed my rife from its stand by the front door. As I did the bear dropped down from the window and ambled a short ways off into the woods. I went out the back door with my rifle. The bear just stood there and eyed me, not afraid, apparently unfamiliar with humans. I pulled up and shot it in the neck. It dropped like a stone. As I stood over the bear

B.B. came out of the house. "Why'd you do that in front of the girls?" she said.

I looked up at the kitchen window. Cara and her friend stood watching, wide eyed, their noses pressed against the glass. "We needed meat," I said.

"We didn't need it that bad. You didn't need to kill in front of them."

"They should see it," I said. "They should know how they eat." B.B.
turned away to go back into the house. I called after her, “I have to make that union call. I don’t have time to take care of it. You’ll have to.”

She turned back. “I’ve never skinned a bear,” she said.

“It’s no big deal. It’s just like taking the suit off a man.”

Indeed, bears with their hides removed look eerily like a human. B.B., though, as game as she was about most things, was not too excited about taking on the chore of skinning her first one without me there, particularly given the circumstances of the killing. I rolled the bear over on its back and showed her where to cut up the belly and the legs, how to run a knife blade back and forth along the underside of the skin to peel it off in one piece. “Once you’ve got it skinned,” I said, “it’s all just anatomy after that. Use an ax, cut it up into four quarters and two rib sections, hang it all up in the shed. I’ll cut it up smaller, and salt and stretch the hide when I get back tonight.”

B.B. looked at me, pretty exasperated. But I paid her little attention, and hustled off to town. That night when I got back, she had the meat hanging in the shed, and the hide all fleshed out ready for stretching. She was pretty proud of herself, told me she had been well into it when a pair of dedicated Jehovah’s Witnesses showed up. How they found us way back there in the woods is any body’s guess. But they did, and when the dogs barked, B.B. came around the side of the cabin to see who was coming to visit, blood all the way up above her elbows. The Jehovah Witnesses took one look at this wild woman, said what they had to say, then beat a hasty retreat. “I liked having that kind of effect on them,” B.B. said.

The next day I left to go to work on Pump Station 8 of the Alaska pipeline, leaving B.B. and Cara to take care of the dogs. The work was mindless. Union work. The contracts for building the pipeline had mostly been let out cost-plus, which essentially meant that the more money the construction
companies spent, the more they made. My first day on the job my foreman instructed me to look as busy as I could but do as little work as possible. "That's what management wants," he said. The idea was stretch the job, to make as much money as we could for the company and ourselves.

My first day on the job the union steward came up to me and told me I was "pace setting". I thought it was a compliment, until he explained that it wasn't. "The boys are complaining that you're working too hard," he said. "You're making them look bad." He then proceeded to tell me that I'd lose my job if I wasn't willing to slow down. Later I watched the same guy, a master at non-production, spend the better part of a morning carrying a single 2 X 4 around on his shoulder from one job site to the next. Another time he measured my hammer handle, because he suspected it was longer than the union agreement warranted. He was right, it was too long; I had to quit using it. The reasoning went, the longer the hammer handle, the more nails I could drive, thus I'd set a precedent that other carpenters would have to match.

I hated pipeline work. I detested the good-ol-boy mentality, the mindless push for money. The idea of working less yet trying to look busy went against all my instincts. The union workers were like spoiled children; they all fought among themselves over work that none of them really wanted to do in the first place. Steelworkers fought with carpenters, plumbers with electricians. Teamsters fought with laborers. Once the carpenters got into a dispute with the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers because I got impatient and moved a "satellite" (a portable electrical plug-in terminal that weighed about twenty pounds.) Moving a satellite was a big no-no for a carpenter. Anything electrical was the domain of the electricians. If you needed a satellite moved, sometimes you'd wait idly by for an hour or more until an electrician showed up to do it for you. My infraction virtually shut down the job.

And all the unions, when they weren't fighting with each other, fought
with management. They would threaten to “wobble” at the slightest infraction of what was perceived as their “union rights. Once the carpenters threatened to strike because the donuts the Teamsters brought us for coffee break were stale. The whole system was one big ridiculous, adversarial shouting match.

The union men complained incessantly of what work they had to do, even though they were making take-home pay of anywhere from fifteen-hundred to two-thousand a week. Miraculously enough, the pipeline was still getting built, but a lot slower and a lot more expensively than the original projection had it. It was easy to see why the costs were escalating. Yet, the companies blamed it on the environmental restrictions they had to meet. In my mind -- even then I could see it -- the whole mess was a reflection of the kind of mentality and values that had taken over Alaska. And there I was taking part in it. I was ashamed of it, and all I could think about was quitting. “The first snow that hits the ground,” I said to my co-workers, “I’m out of here. The first flake that sticks, I’m gone to drive dogs.”

That fall the first snow came early. True to my word, the macho fool, I quit. The snow melted a day later, and I waited, unemployed, another six weeks for enough snow to drive dogs. If I remember correctly, we could have used that extra six weeks of pay; things got pretty slim by the end of the winter.

It really didn’t matter much, though, where I did carpentry those years. Carpentry was a long ways away from what I really loved to do. I did it for the money, and in the process I gave up my Arctic trips. To compensate, I turned even more to dogs. I got where all I could think of was that first week or so of September, with the aspen and birch on the south slopes turned brittle yellow, and the nights first coming dark again. For the time when I’d hear the first kah-lah-aluck cries of migrating white-fronts making their way south, and
sometimes, more rarely, tundra swans winging overhead in high, ragged V’s, gracing those of us living along the river with their high pitched yodeling. Those were the first signals that summer was ending, that those brutal twelve to sixteen hour work days were going to an end at some point. It meant, too, taking a break from construction and hunting winter meat: killing berry fattened black bears, geese and ducks, and stalking huge black hulks of moose, often standing among the willows as unconcerned and docile as a cow in a pasture. It was the excitement of putting the crosshairs on a shoulder and squeezing slow. And if the shot was right, watching its legs buckle beneath him, falling as if he’d been driven into the ground. After the kill, though, moose hunting became another kind of work. Field dressing and quartering a thousand pound bulk, then packing huge loads over rough tundra, could be agonizing labor. But it was labor a lot closer to what I loved.

Early September was harvest, too: digging potatoes, pulling back the frost blackened vines and turning the soil with a pitchfork, turning up mound after mound of huge tubers. It meant storing cabbages, those famous Alaska cabbages, the smallest the size of basketballs. Autumn was the time for B.B. and Cara to pick wild cranberries and blueberries, to can them in various jams and toppings, for use during the winter. It was the time, too, to get in firewood. It took seven cords to heat the cabin that year.

Autumn was the invitation for the river to change. The Tanana is a big, brown, turbulent, twisting, silt-laden river in the summer, one of the siltiest rivers in the world. Against the sides of an aluminum boat the current grits like number 60 sand paper. But come autumn, as the sun loses its power and the weather turns colder, the glaciers at its headwaters slow their melt and hold the silt. There’s a week or two, the cusp between fall and winter, the Tanana runs as clear as any mountain stream.

Its a guarantee, though, that the thermometer will keep dropping, a
steady day by day decline, until one day the river begins to flow ice. First just
tinkling crystals. Then chunks, collecting larger and larger, bobbing and
grinding against each other. One morning you wake early, because for the
first time in months there's no sound coming from the river. The air's still as
death. You get up and tip toe across the room, poke your nose up against a
frosted window and squint out. But it's still too dark to see anything. The
cabin's cold, so you throw some spruce chunks in the wood stove, make some
coffee, and wait for the sun to poke over the south horizon. When it does it's
only a tepid yellow glow, a winter tease, just enough early light to reflect ice
crystals dancing in the air. Beyond the dog yard the river's frozen solid bank
to bank, a long ribbon of ice and whiteness running from the high St. Elias
Mountains of western Canada to the Yukon and the Bering Sea. The time has
come, finally, when nothing interferes with driving dogs. Nothing.

All my memories of those winters on the river aren't just dog memories.
There are some wonderful times, times I'd love to experience again,
particularly with Cara. Come Christmas, she and I would hook a few dogs to a
freight sled and go out along the river sloughs looking for a tree. "That one,
dad," she'd point at one of the first we'd come to, "that one."

"No," I'd caution her, "let's keep looking. You never know what you
might find if you keep looking." I think now of the messages we give our
children. Never be satisfied, keep looking.

We would look over several and finally make a selection. Then I'd cut it
and tie it on the sled. The trees was always sparsely branched, typical of sub-
Arctic spruce, so once I got it inside the cabin I'd take a hand drill and bore
holes in the trunk, add branches until it looked as full as any commercial tree
you could buy off a lot in town. Cara and B.B. would make ornaments and
string popcorn, and once they had it decorated I'd add a set of tin candle holders that had come from Germany. Neighbors would come in for our candle lighting. I'd play guitar and we'd all sing carols. Denis, who never sang or played games, who was famous for saying "games are for cripples and old people," would sit close to the tree with the fire extinguisher in hand. "Can't be too careful with fire in the bush," he'd always say. "Nothing worse than getting burned out the middle of winter."

Those were the years we made presents for each other. One Christmas I made Cara a little scaled down racing sled. We had a dog named Bubbles, a retired leader who had charmed her way into being a house dog. Bubbles had had enough cold in her life. Once the weather turned even slightly bitter, Bubbles would install herself so close to the wood stove that sometimes you could smell her hair burning. If you told her to move, she'd look at you disgusted, then reluctantly move only a foot or two. She hated going outside under any circumstances. Her only legitimate sled dog job was to take Cara up to the school bus, which stopped for her a mile from the house, up at the landing.

School mornings I'd drag Bubbles out of the house and hook her up to Cara's little sled. Cara would come out of the house, all dressed in her green winter parka, wolf ruff up around her face, mittens with "gee" (for turn right) and "haw" (for turn left) embroidered on them. She'd step on her sled. "Don't let her buffalo you," I'd say to her.

Cara would tell her to get up in her tiny voice, and Bubbles would reluctantly pull her out of the yard, sometimes trying to turn around at the end of the kennel. Cara, true to her dog musher training, would hop off her sled and correct her, smack her on the nose and pull her around. "No Bubbles!" Eventually Bubbles would get her to the school bus stop. There Cara
would wait with her dog and sled until the bus came. Then she'd turn them loose, and Bubbles would double-time it for home, eager to get back to the fire, the little sled careening along behind.

The summer of 77, three years after we moved out to the river, B.B. said she wanted to go to work in town, that she thought she'd live in there most of the time. "I need to do something for myself," she said. "I'm tired of being without money. I'm tired of it all going for those damn dogs. And besides, I just need a break." She said she could get a woman up on the highway to sit with Cara during the day, nights that she stayed in town I'd have to be responsible for her.

"Go," I said to her. "I'll make out." I know I felt some relief with saying it, because things had gotten increasingly difficult between the two of us. I know too, now at least, that at some level I understood her going was most likely the end of it for us. There was a big part of me, the same part that had wanted to run during our wedding ceremony, that welcomed it.

B.B. went to work as a cook for BLM. Cooking was something she loved to do, she was good at it, and she was excited about giving it a shot on a big scale. That summer took on its own dance for me. My new role as caretaker father was difficult to adjust to at first, but in time I think I came to enjoy it. Cara and I would do the dog chores together once I got off work. It was really the first significant amount of time I'd ever had with her.

As I remember, it was July that B.B. I stopped to visit B.B. at her job. "I need to talk to you," she said.

We met in her living quarters. She sat across the room from me. She was determined to get out what she needed to get out, she didn't hesitate. "I want a divorce," she said.

I'd quit smoking two years earlier. "Give me a cigarette," I said. A
cigarette was my first reaction.

"Why?" I asked.

She looked at me sadly. "Because I'm just not happy. I'm tired of living the way we live. I want something different, and I know I'm not going to get it staying on. You have to let me go."

I knew she meant it. There was a certain way B.B. could say things, not often, but when she did, you knew she'd made up her mind and there was little that was going to change it. "I don't know how to do that," I said.

"You have to figure it out," she said. "Because I really am leaving."

I left there an unhappy and scared man. I didn't know what any of it meant, and I wasn't very prepared to find out. On the long drive out to the river that day I felt as alone as I'd ever felt, I had no sense of the future, no recognition of any possibilities. I had taken a lot for granted for a long time.
Desire

Big rivers are dynamic, restless, always seeking and cutting new channels, bends forming and re-forming, great chunks of land and timber demolished and swept downstream to form land again somewhere below. Northern rivers like the Tanana, new rivers in geologic time, driven by huge seasonal loads of water and silt, are particularly active. Shortly after we moved out on the Tanana the current began cutting chunks of land from in front of the cabin. Great chunks of silt would splash off into the current. Full grown spruce would tip and twist downstream, bob in the current for a few days, then tear loose, taking more land with them. What had been a safe distance to the river diminished steadily. One spring the current cut ninety feet from in front of the cabin, the next, during a rainy spell, fifty feet more. At night I would have dreams, nightmares really, of the cabin tipping into the river, those of us inside thrashing in the freezing silt-laden water, struggling for breath as the cabin sank to the bottom.

The summer B.B. decided she wanted out of our marriage was the same summer the state of Alaska, awash in billions of dollars of oil revenue, in conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers, decided they needed to dam off the Piledriver slough for a Fairbanks flood control project. They did so without consulting anybody along our stretch of the river, then followed the dam with a causeway across the Piledriver. Again without asking, they built a new road from the landing, through my land and several miles beyond.
Electric and telephone were to follow, and life along that stretch of the river was to be altered forever.

The state's idea was to open a new area for settlement. Politicians spouted panacean visions of new farms and villages. They spoke of grain fields stretching beyond the horizon. The far north was to be the new bread basket of the world. Nobody bothered to ask if viable grain crops could be grown in a short, ninety day growing season. Or if they could, would there be any market for the grain. No, the development minds were on a roll, rolling back the frontier, making a new world out of America's last wilderness. There was all kinds of noble talk in their sell of it.

B.B. and my marriage did not end easy. At least for me it didn't. I suppose I could go into all the details of it, all the pain of it. It's probably enough to say that for the first time in my life I went into a deep depression, came face to face with my own vulnerability, the first glimpse of the extent of my own self-absorption. Life became more difficult than I had ever known it. I turned down work, just dropped out of doing most things. Mornings I would take Cara up to the woman on the highway. Then I'd come back to the cabin and just wander around the property. Times I would sit at the river's edge and just stare at the mountains in the distance, and not have one sane or soft thought go through my head for the entire day. I quit sleeping and eating. Sometimes thoughts of letting go of life would push into my mind; there seemed so little good about life. I felt my sanity slipping, felt my mind turn completely dark, turn hard and against itself. I find as I write this I can't really describe the feeling of it. The best I can come up with is to say there was just a complete emptiness, a bottomless despair, and nothing I could do seemed to alter it. At times it would scare me enough that I would force myself to consciously focus on walking, on literally just putting one foot in front of
the other. Most days it would take me the whole day just to get through my dog chores. It went this way for weeks, before it finally got through to me that I was going to have to move the cabin; the river had cut within eighty feet of it and was still coming fast. By the end of the summer it would be gone if I didn’t do something about it.

I better understand now the retrospective acts of grace that come to one in dark times. There were probably dozens of them for me that summer. Two, though, were big ones, perhaps big enough to have kept me alive. The care of my daughter was one. Each evening, each morning, I had to care for her. I did my best, though I know there were many ways she needed more of me that summer than I gave her. The other was a cabin to move. In that project I found a glimmer of my old determination; there was no way I was going to lose that cabin. I cleared an acre or so behind it -- hand cleared most of it -- then (the new road making it possible) walked in a D-8 dozer and bermed up the stumps. I cut two big spruce, cabled them and drug them under the cabin (which was up on pilings). Then I spread the spruce poles, cross-cabled them front and back with smaller poles, and took a chainsaw and cut angles up on the butts. Essentially what I had when I was finished was a huge sled built under the cabin.

I jacked it up, cut the pilings off, then lowered the whole works on the sled. I fired up the dozer. Backed it up and hooked it on the sled. I poured the coal to the dozer. It bucked up once, the tracks spun in the silt, and then the tracks gripped and the whole works started to move. I Pulled it about two-hundred yards straight back off the river, over a hole I'd bladed out for a crawl space. Just as I hit the far edge of the hole, the tracks started spinning again; that was a far as it needed to go. I suppose there's a lot of metaphors that can be made for summer: the river, whatever it symbolized, cutting into
our lives; the fact that seven years earlier I had to move the wanigan before we could get started with our lives in town; and now here it was, our marriage ending, and I was moving another one, this one the dream house. I suppose the metaphors could go on. I got a new foundation built under the cabin, not pilings, a real foundation this time. The power company ran electric into it by the end of the summer, and I wired it, installed running water, a bath, a washer and dryer, all the things that would have made B.B.'s life a whole lot easier.

All through the summer I urged her to give it another try, told her I'd give up dogs, make some big changes, I'd be less demanding, would participate more in her life. She finally agreed to give it a trial. But to make it work, she said, we needed a change of scenery, a new perspective. I went along with it. We turned our cabin over to another dog musher, in return that he take care of the pups. We enrolled Cara in a home schooling program, loaded up the race dogs for a fellow in upstate New York who had leased them for the winter. The idea was to deliver the dogs, then drive on to New York City, where we'd catch a plane for the Bahamas. We figured that's where we'd spend the rest of the winter, as far away from dogs and Alaska as we could get.

But on the way to New York we stopped at a dog race in Minnesota to turn our dogs over to the fellow from New York. It was there I turned up a guy from Ontario who wanted to sell a whole kennel - - sixty dogs, sleds, harnesses, a new dog truck -- all dirt cheap. The irony of it was his marriage was on the rocks and he needed to get out immediately. I told B.B. about it. "I think we can make a pile of money at it," I said to her. No racing, I promised. Just a business deal. My idea was to drive around to races in the midwest, sell off the dogs, then drive the truck and gear back to Alaska in the spring. Sell the rest of it there. We'd make money, pay all our winter expenses, and still have a
good time. And true to my word, I'd not be racing. If by spring she still felt
dogs were the culprit in our marriage, I'd give them up. B.B. went for it. I see
it now, she did it to give it one more try, one more shot at doing it my way.

The dog deal worked out just like I planned. We made a bundle of money,
paid our way that whole winter, drove all over the country, and come spring
we drove both trucks back up the Alaska highway. Once back on the river we
tried to settle in. But within a few weeks it was clear to both of us that it wasn't
going to work. There were just too many old ways between us, ways that
weren't going to change. Early May I told her I was willing to let it go. Within
the week she moved to town with Cara, and I was left alone on the river with
more than seventy racing huskies.

There was so much history between us, so many ways that we'd come to
be partners. Perhaps not like husband and wife. I think about it now, we were
more like brother and sister. I know this: she gave a lot to it. I know also, that
for all my macho ways, I was the one more afraid of letting it go. For all the
ways that our relationship did not meet either of our needs, I was the one who
needed it more. B.B. was braver than I. She was the first willing to risk the
unknowns, the one who entered the real revolution of those years.

That summer was a hard one, but not near the pain of the summer
before. Somewhere in it I began to feel the possibilities of life. At least I
could give all I had to dogs now; the pressure of trying to please anyone but
myself was off. And I met another woman, a beautiful young woman named
Diann, who opened me in new ways. I don't want to go into any of it with her,
other than to say that I was pretty confused about life, about what it meant to
be with someone. She was a good woman, probably as fine a woman as I've
ever known, and I wasn't ready for her. I couldn't think of having children
that she wanted. There were too many ways I was not ready for anything. It
took us two years, though, for the two of us to figure that out.

   I threw myself into dogs, resurrected the dream of the championship. I worked hard at it, put my whole life into it, all my waking energy, even my sleeping energy. My dreams were dreams of dogs, of becoming the best at it. Many nights I would lull myself to sleep by imagining the perfect team, the ultimate leader, swings, team dogs, a flawless dog machine with me driving them. Other times I'd imagine myself in the final heat of a championship race, closing on the front runner, kicking, running, pushing my dog team the final miles. I'd see myself closing the gap, winning by seconds.

   I kept working at it, and learned that whipping was not enough to win consistently. An Indian musher, a champion several times over, straightened me out. He sat in my living room, drank my coffee, and gave me advice I used to beat him later. "You got to put the fear into 'em, that's for god damned sure," he said. But fear, it ain't enough. You got to push 'em until they want to quit, and then you have to find some way to keep 'em going, even if you have to get out there and pull the whole god damned works yourself. Push 'em over the edge, take it all out of them, and then put it back in." He smiled. "You put it back in by showing them you're not all meanness. Give'em something to live for."

   I'm reminded now of the way cops work in pairs to interrogate prisoners. One's mean and forceful, the other friendly. The friendly one can get it all, but the mean one has to be there to provide contrast, to give the friendly one value. You're a top dog musher, you have to be both of them, you have to have two personalities and know how to turn them off and on like a light.

   It took some time, but I began to find the balance of fear and affection
that made champion sled dogs. My own way came to be weighted more toward
affection. The recognition of it was not a sentimental one, though. It was a
practical decision: to win you do whatever you have to do, even if it's be
friendly. With dogs it was ultimately simple: control every aspect of their
being. Become their god, control when they eat, sleep, run, be happy or
unhappy. Break them down then build them up.

I knew I had some good animals tied out in the dog yard, some very good
ones. But I also had known for a long time that without a special front-end
dog, that super leader, there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell I was going to
manage any of it. All my married years I lacked that kind of leader, the one
that could lead a championship team. Mine were all just a notch or two off, a
little too slow, a little too stubborn, a little too easily stressed when the pressure
was on. I needed that one super leader to pull off the dream.

Jenny came to me via friend, the summer B.B. left for good. I'd sold him
a red female -- I can't remember her name -- a couple years earlier. The
female was not that good of a dog. Not particularly a cull either. One just a
notch or two off championship quality, which is why I sold her. So my friend
bred this red bitch to some male he thought highly of, and out of the breeding
got a litter of three pups. The pups were about a year old when my friend,
facing the break-up of his own marriage, came to me.

I poured cups of coffee from the pot that always sat ready on the back of
the stove. We sat at my kitchen table. My friend was clearly not a happy man.
"She's put her foot down," he said to me. "She says it's either her or the dogs." I
knew that one. I felt for him.

"I got these three pups out of that red bitch you sold me," he said. "Two
of them are okay, this one female I think is pretty special."

"Why don't we take a look at them," I said. So we walked out to his
truck, and he pulled the three out and picketed them by short chains to eye
bolts drilled into the bumpers. They were all nicely built and well socialized.
Happy, not shy or intimidated and wild-eyed the way some of them can be if
they aren't handled enough or handled too rough when they're pups. It didn't
take much to guess which one was the one he thought the most of.

We came to some agreement on price. I can't remember what, but I
know it wasn't much. Maybe two-hundred dollars for Jenny, and a hundred
apiece for the other two. I peeled hundred dollar bills off the roll I always
carried in my front pocket, handed them over, and then we tied the pups out in
vacant spots in my dog yard. I led Jenny by her collar. She was reared up on
her hind legs and hopping, the way sled dogs do when they're led; they're
always pulling.

My friend paused before he climbed back in his truck. "That red bitch
will make it for you," he said. "I know she will."

“She will if she's as good as she looks,” I said.

He backed up and pulled out the driveway, fast, like a man leaving
something painful behind. I stood and looked over my dog yard, studied them
the way I often did. There were six rows, ten dogs each, each tied on a five foot
chain, with a plywood house with a water can nailed on it. A wire pen in the
back of the yard held another dozen or so pups.

The adult dogs barked and ran fast circles on their chains, excited by
the newcomers. An assortment of colors -- blacks, black and whites, buffs,
grays, a few reds -- they all had the classic racing build: fine boned and a little
longer along the back than tall, their backs sloping just a tad to the hips,
tucked up and waspy at the waist, front legs thin, set back and angled back
from the chest, back legs poised and taunt as spring steel.

Jenny leaped on top her house, stood curious, assaying the whole
operation. I called to her. She picked up her head and wagged her tail in a polite way. She already appeared right at home.

I know the distaste some people have for anthropomorphising animals; they take the scientific view and say animals aren't capable of feeling or reacting the way we do. They consider animals inferior to humans. I'd suggest those people haven't observed much or spent any concentrated time with other species. They're lost in some convenient perception. If there's a good reason not to assign human qualities to animals, it's because we do more of a disservice to the animals than we do to ourselves.

Anybody who ever spent any time around Jenny would not make the mistake of doubting the super-intelligence of some animals. From day one she was an amazing presence in the dog yard. She learned commands faster and better than any other dog I ever worked with; by the time she was a year old, she was a flawless gee-haw dog. She was everlastingly happy, always ready to run, giddily eager. When I was ready to hook a team I would lay the harnesses out on the tow line. Because most of my dogs would come when I called them, hooking up for a training run was easy. I could turn a whole team loose. They'd run around, checking out other parts of the kennel, until I'd call them up one at a time to be hooked. Jenny was different; she'd never run around. As soon as she was off her chain she'd run directly to the sled and take her position at lead. Sometime she'd grab a lead harness, shake it back and forth, throw it up in the air. I believe if she could have she would have harnessed herself. The three years I drove her I never remember her having an off day, she never had an injury. She was a complete leader. She ran lead in every training run she ever went on in, lead in every heat of every race we ran over the two years I drove her. She had an uncanny trail sense, would immediately know, faster than I could, which direction to take at a trail
intersection. More than once, racing in the lower 48, where the trails were often confusing, I'd come to a confusing place and just holler, "Jenny, take it," and she'd always make the right decision. We won more than one race just on her ability to decipher trails. On top of it all, she loved to race, lived to compete. When we would catch and pass a team, she'd speed up going by. Once we were well out in front, she'd look back at me and smile her dog smile, like she was saying, we sure nailed them, didn't we? I always ran her double lead, rotating several other leaders up with her. Her eagerness and confidence took the pressure off the dogs I ran with her; they could just set a pace and let Jenny do the rest. It made for a lot of depth at the front end of my team.

Her first racing winter, the winter of 78/79, I took my team outside to race. Jenny was just a year and a half old. We won several races in the lower 48 and Canada, never placed out of the money in any race that we entered, there or back in Alaska in the spring. By the end of the season I had accumulated enough points to win the International Sled Dog Racing Association bronze medal for the season. For the first time since I started with dogs we were making good money at it -- race winnings, breeding fees, selling the dogs that were a notch or two off. I had started a dog meat business, a food I designed and had manufactured by a company in Seattle. It sold well, bringing in more money, essentially feeding my dogs for free. I had a full-time dog handler working for me also, so now I had more time to just focus on training, less need to worry about the mundane chores.

I bought a couple more key dogs that summer. I had another young leader coming up, a tough dog named Mary. Maybe she wasn't a Jenny, but she looked like she'd be good enough to run up there with her pretty consistently.

The 79/80 race season we went outside again. I entered a lot of races,
and never placed lower than third in any of them. If we didn't win, we were seldom more than a few seconds out of first. This team was entirely consistent, almost machine like.

Imagine this: sixteen racing huskies stretched out full in front of you, running hard, reaching, striding, punishing the distance. Eight tandem pairs, seventy-five feet from where you stand on the runners of the sled to the noses of your lead dogs. Their back-lines bob here and there, but mostly they're tight as guitar strings. That's what it is to you, music - all harmony and expression of emotion - sixteen dogs working hard, grabbing for more ground. They're bone light animals, tucked up, wasp waisted, moving with the grace of harriers. On a good hard packed trail they'll average twenty miles an hour over distance. Twenty miles in sixty minutes. Places on a good trail you'll hit thirty, even thirty-five miles an hour.

The runners have little pads where you plant your feet. You ride with you knees flexed and loose, like a skier. The race sled is twenty-five pounds of bent ash and rawhide, flexible as green willow, half the weight of your biggest dog. On the straight-aways your hands grip the driving bow easy. Other times it's all white knuckles, a matter of just hanging on and surviving, it's about athletics, balance and guts.

You wear a marten fur hat, the ear flaps tied up behind, a light, powder blue down parka with a wolf ruff on the hood, your racing number over the top, black ski pants, and beaded beaver mitts. Your feet are cased in muk-luks made by an old Indian woman you know, light as ballet slippers -- smoked moose-hide soles, hair-out caribou tops, bands of red and blue beaded trim at the tops. In the tricky places those muk-luks frisk over the trail, run quick little steps, then leap for the runners again.

Riding a sled is all about grace, about doing your best not to make those
dogs work any harder than they have to. When you steer the sharp curves, you tip the sled up hard, ride it on one runner, so you don't pound your wheel dogs. In the long straight-aways and the hills, you stand on one foot and kick with the other. "Pumping" it's called. When you pump you strive for rhythm, for matching the lope of your dogs. Kick. Your leg flies up high and out behind. Kick. The wind cuts cold, wind from the speed you're making. Kick. Your face frosts, a rhyme of white across your beard and back unto your parka hood. Kick. You can feel it now. You look up along the team and see every dog moving exactly the same way, all driving with the same long, easy, ground-consuming lope. It's called "cadence" - a melodic or harmonic progression - that rhythm where sixteen individuals become one thing. No, where all seventeen of you become one thing.

It's taken you ten years of breeding and culling, buying and selling, wheeling and dealing, conniving and cajoling, to get dogs this good. Super sled dogs are no different than super-human athletes. They're set apart from the run of the mill of society. They can run faster, jump further. In any average racing husky the physical ability is a given. But in a top dog it's more, just like in a super-human athlete, something in some way indefinable. There are words that get close. "A good mind," it's called. Which means there is no quit in that dog. None, even given the very worst of circumstances. The good minds possess a determination that supersedes any other possibility. "Toughness" is another word. So tough that pain, real, terrifying pain, must only be a back-ground noise, a nuisance not a hindrance. The other word used a lot is "desire": a bred-in willingness to succeed, to compete. But words are actually meaningless. The very best ones are accidents of breeding, really. Nothing can theoretically be that good.

You carry twenty-eight dogs on your truck, the best bunch you've ever
had. You leave Alaska in December and race all over northern North America -- Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, Ontario, Alberta, the Yukon Territory -- then come back to Alaska in the spring, for the big championship races. Ten of those dogs, the super dogs, the "tens" you call them, have made every heat of every race you've run this year. If only you could get twenty as good, you'd win every race you entered. Instead, each race you sort through the other eighteen on the truck, looking for the strongest, the most rested, the healthiest six to go with your ten all-stars.

Today you're back racing in Alaska. It's mid March, early afternoon, a sunny ten above zero, marginally warm for sled dog racing. You're in the first heat of the North American Championships in Fairbanks. There's two and a half feet of snow on the ground. The trail's bullet hard. The North American is a killer of a sprint race. You run twenty miles each, the first two days, then a thirty on the third. What that interprets to is you use them up for the first two days, just hammer them with crippling speed. You start with sixteen, maybe tomorrow you'll have to drop down to twelve, if you're lucky, fourteen. The third day, who knows how many you'll have left? Most likely you'll be down to ten, the ones that always make it. Whatever the number, they'll be tired, and then you throw an extra ten miles at them. It takes a good dog team to do that third day. It takes a good dog man, to get all you can, to push them to the limit without blowing them up. It's one of those tests that separates the dog men from the dubbers.

So you look up along your team and here's what you see: In the wheel, closest to the sled, there's Chicken and Felix. Chicken's a brown dog, the oldest one on the truck. She's the only certified lazy in the whole bunch, a dog that puts the lie to the notion that the good ones do it on their own. Anywhere else
but wheel, chicken will slack off, fuck around, drive you half crazy. She needs
to be close to you, close where she knows you can get to her quick and put the
leather on her. You run her today because she's tough as barbed wire; you
know she'll never, ever go down, and that she'll make all three days. And you
know, too, when you turn the corner for home, or when you need all you can
get and you pull the whip, Chicken will scream once, then put her head down
and dig; she can move a sled all by herself. You put her in this race because
you know you may need that kind of coming home on the third day.

The other wheeler, Felix, is all toughness, too. That's why he's in the
wheel, that and he handles it so well. He anticipates the turns, throws himself
against the lines, literally looks like he's on wheels when you take the tight
corners. He's totally honest -- willing to work, will never try to cheat on you
-- the antithesis of Chicken. And he glides when he runs, smooth as raw silk, a
total ten.

In front of the wheelers, that's where you've put your weakest dogs, the
question marks. Front of wheel is the least stress, the place for the unproven
ones, maybe a new dog you don't know that well, or one coming back from an
injury. Today it's a white dog named Frog, a new dog you paid nine-hundred
dollars for from a guy in Knik, Alaska, and a black dog named Mary. Mary's
young, only a year and a half, too young, really, to be running in a big team.
But she's got a special edge for a young dog, a total willingness to be there.
She's a leader in the making. Even now you know you can move her up front
in lead if you have to. But you don't want to have to. You don't want to put that
much pressure on her yet. Next year that's where she'll run, up there with
Jenny.

The team dogs are next, the reliables, the pick-up-the-lunch-bucket-
and-go-to-work-every-day kind of dogs. Six of them, back to front. You try to
match them for gait and compatibility. Alex and Coolie run together. One's brown, the other red. They're brothers out of the same litter. They love each other, travel together in the same box, just dig being together. They're the kind of dogs you don't notice that much, because they're always doing exactly what they're supposed to do be doing; they're not making any big production out of it. They're not tens, though, because they come up sore sometimes; they just don't do the speed as easy as they need to. In this race they're what you call two day dogs; you know they won't be in the team on the thirty.

The next pair up are both tens. Doofus is a big rangy, black dog that barks the first three or four miles out of the chutes, just out of the sheer joy of running. He's with his son, Jake, out of Chicken, the only male Doofus won't fight with. Jake's a good one, steady, not showy, though he'll lead in a pinch. Doofus and Jake are sired and grand-sired by a dog named Junior, owned by another musher. Junior's so crazy to run that when he's left behind in the kennel, sometimes he gets so upset, so screaming crazy and wild about it, that he literally has epileptic fits. That's the kind of dog you like to breed, not for the fits but for the desire.

And then there's Adam and Rosie, both tens. Adams' an entirely consistent gray male, a no-nonsense worker. Rosie goes out slow, her backline flopping every now and then; she's slow to warm up. But there seems to be no limit on her speed, or at least you've never seen her look like whatever's happening is anything but easy. You can move her up in lead on the way home if you have to. She's what's called a "coming home dog," one that just pours on the coal after the turnaround. She's out of Chicken.

Next up there's the two pairs of swings, all four tens, dogs unwilling to lead, but eager to run just behind the leaders. Swing dogs are the ultimate athletes, combination gymnasts and long distance track stars. They never
tangle, handle the lines like magicians. If the leaders slack off and drop their back-lines, the swings will spread instantly to stay out of the way. The leaders pick up their lines, the swings automatically move back in close so they can get the most power on their own back-lines. Something goes wrong on the trail, the team starts to ball up, the swings will jitter-step over the lines, like football players running tire drills. If it's really bad, they'll twist, dive and hit the ground, roll back up on their feet, all in one easy motion, just to stay out of a tangle.

Your four swings are all flawless, interchangeable animals really. None of them ever have had an off day that you can remember. None of them have ever crippled or even come up sore. They're "easy keepers," meaning they utilize food efficiently and they never get sick. Lisa and Otter are a matched female black pair, absolutely perfectly gaited. One's blue-eyed the other brown. Both work so hard they have permanent calluses on their hips, where the harness has rubbed off the hair down to the skin. The other swing pair, Knight, gray and white, and Jasper, black and white, are both males you bought as young dogs. Both surprises really. You don't expect to buy dogs that cheap that turn out this good. It was just luck.

Last, it's the leaders. Without the leaders all the dog power and talent in the world is not going to matter one iota. Leaders make a dog team, take what all the other dogs have to offer individually and turn it into teamwork. There are plenty of dogs that will run lead, but there are damn few real leaders. Real leaders, super leaders, just demand to run up there. They'll pout if they don't get to. They're competitors.

Heidi, a little blond dog, is a leader, but she's not a dominant dog. She's really only as good as she is because the dog next to her, Jenny, is beyond description. Jenny's the best there is, the one you dreamed about, the one most
mushers never get to experience. You platoon other leaders to run with her, a
different partner for every race. You have to, because they can't take the
pressure that Jenny puts on them. How much do animals understand? You
know this: Jenny understands winning. She gloats when you finish in first,
looks dejected when the performance falls short. For her it's all about
overtaking teams and passing them, about the giddy joy of racing. She's red.
That deep, almost Irish setter red that doesn't show up very often in Alaska
huskies. When it does, though, it always seems to mean better than most. In
every heat of every race, Jenny is up in the front. She's that good.

You have nothing but words to keep your leaders honest, no reins, no
physical control, only "gee" for right turn, and "haw" for left turn, and
simple "all right's" and sharp little whistles for more speed, and "easy" and
"whoa" for slowing. Not that the good ones are much into whoa; they're bred
to run, not to stop.

You don't say much, though. Driving good dogs means mostly keeping
quiet, means saying only what needs to be said. Because they're tuned to hair
trigger, and talking can just push them over the edge. Your job is to be back
there on the sled, to shut up and ride as gracefully as possible. Study them,
watch for weaknesses, be ready to load a dog if one goes down.

Sometimes everybody looks fine, they're all settled in and your gaining
on the finish, and then all of a sudden one goes down. This time it's Frog, the
new dog in front of wheel. He starts to wobble, just a little hesitation at first,
and then he takes on the motion of a blown tire, wobbling big-time, and the
next thing you know he's down, dragging on his side, like he's been hit in the
back of the head with a ballpeen hammer. You drag him on his neckline a
ways, just to make sure he's all the way out, so he won't struggle much when
you load him. It's about speed now. You hit the brake and in the same motion
set the snow-hook. You’re off the sled running, your knife in your teeth. The dogs still standing start lunging against their lines, thinking they’re in trouble. You reach the downed dog. He’s trying to stand again, trying to get back on his feet, not wanting to quit, not wanting to risk quitting. You grab your knife, cut the back-line, cut the neck-line, pick him up and run for the sled. On the way by you throw Frog in the basket, pull the show hook, holler “all right,” pivot and hit the runners. If you’ve done it right, it’s all fluid, fifteen seconds for the whole operation, start to finish.

The team’s slow to gain speed at first, their concentration, the trance of distance, has been broken by the stop. But Jenny’s working hard at getting things moving again. She’s digging. She winds them up like a locomotive, climb ups into that rhythm again and settles down, and you think they’ll make the finish without any other distractions. Or at least you hope so.

You keep an eye on them as you reach over the driving bow and tie in the Frog. There was no quit in him, no give up, he just pushed himself past the point of no return. He wasn’t in the shape of the rest of them, didn’t have the miles. You made a mistake taking him, a new dog, one you didn’t know that much about. The guy you bought him from said he was good. And you watched the Frog run in the guy’s team; he looked good, in your mind the best one in there. But you should have known better than to trust a new dog in an important race. It’s always ultimately all about you and the decisions you make. It always seems to get down to the old saying: races are won by the dogs you leave at home.

Your policy is if they go down once, that’s it for them; they’re sold as soon as you get back to the truck. It’s a policy that has its flaws. Once you had a black female, a hell of a hard working dog, go down in a fast race in Bemidji, Minnesota. Only a sixteen miler, a short race, the second heat, and she went
down like a stone in water, a mile from the finish. You've got your policy. You crossed
the finish line and sold her there to a fellow from Alberta who had said he'd take anything
you had to sell. He called you two months later, said, that black bitch you'd sold him
had been carrying pups. She had three healthy ones four days after he bought her from you. "She's the best dog I ever drove," he said. "The pups look good, too." That's how hard and tucked up
in the belly she was, how willing to run.

But if you're driving top dogs, they don't go down often. To win you count on the flawless run. In sprint racing seconds count. Loading and hauling one dog can mean dropping several places in the finishing order. You hope you’ve picked the ones to drive this time that won’t go down, that will give it all to you without tipping over. If it’s all working the way it’s supposed to, you the driver become a part of it. You become the dogs and the dogs become you. You think something, more speed maybe, only think it, and the dog team thinks the same thing. You feel them pick it up. It’s not something you can prove. You just know it because you experience it consistently. Because you've put so much of your life into this game, so much energy, spent so much time in the kennel and on the back of a sled. You become the thing you're striving for. You become it. You've crossed the finish line first enough times to get used to the feel of it. You know the warm seduction of a crowd cheering. But that's not even close to the main thing you love about driving dogs. What you love is putting together so many disparate elements -- diet, medicine, gear, dealing, breeding, developing pups, the psychology of training. You love shaping it all into a single thing, the power of that many elements molded together into a single composition, the sheer joy of being the key to the success of it. So you're a dog man, a hero in the making, you've played the game the way you thought it was supposed to be.
played. But there is another part of you that is beginning to question what you're up to, a voice behind everything that you do. Whenever you pull the whip or shoot another dog, there is this other part of you, the observer that stands at a distance, shaking his head, asking: Is this you? Is this determined, single-minded, self-absorbed creature really you? It's the same part of you that still cries at times in the middle of the night, for the end of your marriage, for the distance now from your beautiful young daughter.

I brought them back to Alaska in the spring, and entered the Anchorage Fur Rendezvous for the first time, the world championship of sprint racing. The team was at a peak. The first day racing, with Jenny and a dog named Heidi in lead, I drove them easy, just let them run their own race. At the end of the twenty mile heat we were less than a minute behind the leader. The next day, with ice crystals glittering like knives in the trail, I drove a dog team that was so physically tough, so mentally controlled and responsive to my commands, that at the finish line my sled and parka front were splattered with blood from the gashes on their feet. We were more than a minute of accumulated time ahead of the second place finisher. In a newspaper account of the second heat of the race, I read my own words: "They're a good dog team ... No, I hope I don't have to put them over that trail again ... They would go out tomorrow and do the same thing, but I hate to tell 'em to do something that hurts."

The race was canceled after only two heats, the trail too poor to continue. The headlines on the Anchorage paper the third day said it all: "BRUNK WINS BLOODY ABORTED RACE." I was the world champion, and I was not satisfied. Only two days instead of three. I wanted more. They would have gone another day. Maybe too, I would have broken their spirits. That was
always the dance one played with their minds, to take them too far. I used to
like to think, my determined, single-minded self that is, that I could have
driven that bunch of dogs through the gates of hell and out again.

I took my world champion dogs back to the river place that spring, tied
them out in the dog yard, and settled into another serious and dark depression.
I sat the whole summer there, lost in complete self-absorption. All I could
think of was wanting out, letting go of it all. The dream had come true, and
there seemed to be so little to it. My phone rang, people all over the country
wanting to buy dogs. Young mushers came to my door, asking my advice on
training and breeding. I was the best in the world, the champ, but another
part of me, the observer, kept hounding me: Is this all there is? Is this what
it's really about, Mr.?

Earlier that spring Denis Christman had come down sick. True to his
nature, he didn't tell anybody much about it. He toughed it out, made a man's
game of it. But by late summer there was no getting around the fact that he
had more than just a kidney infection. He was visibly growing thinner. His
voice was weak. Cathy was doing most of the outside chores. I visited him one
afternoon late August. "What's going on with you?" I asked him.

He stood bent, gaunt, his head bowed, one hand up on a canted hip. "The
doctor says I've got cancer," he said.

It was hard to believe. Here was the big man of our community, Grizzly
Den, as we called him, just turned thirty and sick with cancer. "Is it bad?" I
asked.

"I guess it's bad enough," he said. "It's in my kidneys. Chances are it's
in my lymph glands, too." He looked me solid in the eyes. "Doesn't matter
where it is, I'm gona beat it."

A month later I visited him in the hospital, a wracked, shrunken husk
of a man with eyes hanging like dull moons in his skull. A crucifix hung above the head of his bed, the tortured body of Christ with his head lolling in agony. Denis slowly turned his own head toward me. I could see the embarrassment in him, the apology for appearing less than a man. In a voice cracked and dry as summer, he said to me, “this damned cancer’s not gona beat me.” He took a few ragged breaths and closed his eyes. “I’m gona whip it. You’ll see.”

“You will,” I said to him. And I badly wanted him to. I wanted a man who had promised so much to come out on top, to, as he said, whip it. But it didn’t work that way. Three days later he turned his head away from his wife sitting by his side, and he died. A lot of people lined up at his funeral. There was much talk about what a presence he’d been.

I went home the night after the funeral and sat alone in my cabin. I thought about what it meant to be alive. What was life supposed to be about? Was I going to drive dogs the rest of my life? The voice kept nagging at me.

I could not avoid the sense that something else needed doing in my life. There was something in it related to what I saw happening to Alaska, some sense of sorrow for the end of things as I’d first known them. I could not escape the fact that Fairbanks, the whole state for that matter, was continuing to change at a rapid rate. There was a mindlessness to it, a recklessness, an unconsciousness. In some way I was part of that mindlessness; my life was unconscious.

I sat with Denis’ death for a week. I imagined myself dying, tried to vision who would show up for the funeral. Would they have anything good to say about me? I couldn’t shake the reflection of my own death, the emptiness of my life. I would go out into the kennel and study my dogs, try to look into them and find the old thrill. But it wasn’t there. There was none of the old
passion, no sense of a future with them. None, even knowing that these dogs were some of the best, that Jenny was just coming into her prime, and I had some young dogs coming up that looked even better than the veterans. I debated back and forth: quit now or make one more season? Quit now, or prove beyond a doubt that this dog team was the best one going?

Fall, that cusp of time I've talked of earlier, when the Tanana begins to clear, I picked up the phone and called a dog musher in New York who had said he'd take whatever I had to sell. "Come get the race dogs," I said. "Get them as soon as you can, before I change my mind." That night I told my handler I'd sell him all the young dogs and whatever gear he needed, cheap. "Just get them out of the yard before morning," I said.

The fellow from New York arrived at the Fairbanks airport the next day. I picked him up. We got in the truck and settled into the drive out to the river. "You're really getting out," he said. I knew he still doubted it; lots of dog mushers talked about quitting, but few did. The addiction of it held most of us too strongly.

"I figured you'd change your mind," he said, "but I thought I'd better take the risk coming up anyway. I'd sure like those dogs of yours."

"I'm getting out," I said. "I told you you could have them."

"Why are you doing it?" he asked. "You've got it all now."

"I don't know," I said. "I guess there's something else I have to do."

He looked at me quizzically. "What?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I'm gonna try and figure that out. One thing I know for sure, I can't figure anything out when I'm so wrapped up in god damned dogs."

He paid my asking price for all the race dogs, my dog truck, some of the gear. I couldn't watch him load them. I walked through the kennel and said
good-bye to them, to Doofus, Lisa and Otter, Knight and Jasper. I stopped with
Jenny for a while. She knew something was up, just stood there quiet, not at
all her usual eager, squirming self. I reached down and put my hand on her

I couldn't watch him load them. Without looking back I walked
downriver into the woods, sat down on the bank and cried like a child. I stayed
there a long time, looking out toward the mountains in the distance, watching
the current rush by. It was coming dark when I came back to the cabin
several hours later, they were all gone, my yard empty and completely silent
for the first time since we'd moved dogs to the river six years earlier. That
night I slept fitfully. The next morning I got up, and true to my waking ritual
walked through the living room to stand at the front window and look out over
the kennel and the river beyond. There was no movement there, nothing, no
sounds, just an empty dog lot. It struck me then, I realized that for the first
time in years I didn't have to go out and water dogs, didn't have any chores, no
feed to cook, no kennels to clean, no pups to socialize, no perfect dog team to
fantasize about. I was a free man, maybe as free as I'd ever been. It was going
to take some getting used to, the possibility of that much freedom.

So then why did you quit it all, right when you'd figured out so much of
it, right when you were at the very top? You know this: some things have no
easy answers. But you look back at the "you" you're writing about now, and
you see another person, someone else in those muk-luks. All that fellow ever
hoped for was to be as good as the animals he drove, as tough, as reckless.
Perhaps he never was as good as they were. But you know this: he had their
desire. Maybe that's all he ultimately ever had, an inordinate measure of
desire. It filled him like a drug, stoned him, and now you know, too often
shielded him from seeing what needed to be seen. The best you can figure is he quit because he began to see, or at least began to sense he needed to see something beyond his obsession. It was a larger desire that pushed at him, that changed him, larger even than the dogs he drove.

I sold my sleds and remaining gear to another racer, turned my meat business and my cabin over to a friend for the winter. It took less than a week to get completely out of the dog business. I bought a plane ticket to the South Seas. The South Seas, I figured, were warm. I was tired to death of the cold. And the South Seas were about as far away from Alaska and my old life as I could get. I wanted to be that far away from anything familiar.

I spent Thanksgiving with Cara, and Diann, the woman I’d been with for two years. We all said a tearful good-bye in the Anchorage airport. I still recall Cara and Diann standing at the gate watching me get on the plane. A part of me wanted to be a father to my daughter, a partner to this woman. I couldn’t seem to figure out, though, how to meld that part with another part of me that always seemed to push harder, a part that took me away from anything comfortable, anything safe.

I walked on the plane. I recall the take-off, the plane hurtling down the run-way, then lifting and turning slowly out over Cook Inlet. I looked down at the big white, glaciered mountains of southern Alaska reeling below like a slow motion movie. I fought back tears. There was a hole in my heart, a great feeling of loss for so many things in such a short time. But it was not all loss. With it, too, was a small feeling of hope, a sense that whatever was happening in my life, whatever all this yearning was, it was taking me somewhere else I needed to go, it was forcing me to open to some other part of me that had been calling, jostling, nudging for a long time for my attention.
The time had come to listen. I had no choice.

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(Note: Jenny, and most of the front-end dogs from the championship team, led the New York musher's team to another world championship the following year. The year after that he won the North American Championship in Fairbanks with the same dogs. Most of the young dogs ended up in the hands of a Minnesota musher. He won the North American Championship with them a year later. Jenny's offspring, and the offspring of many of that last team, are still running in teams all over the world today.)