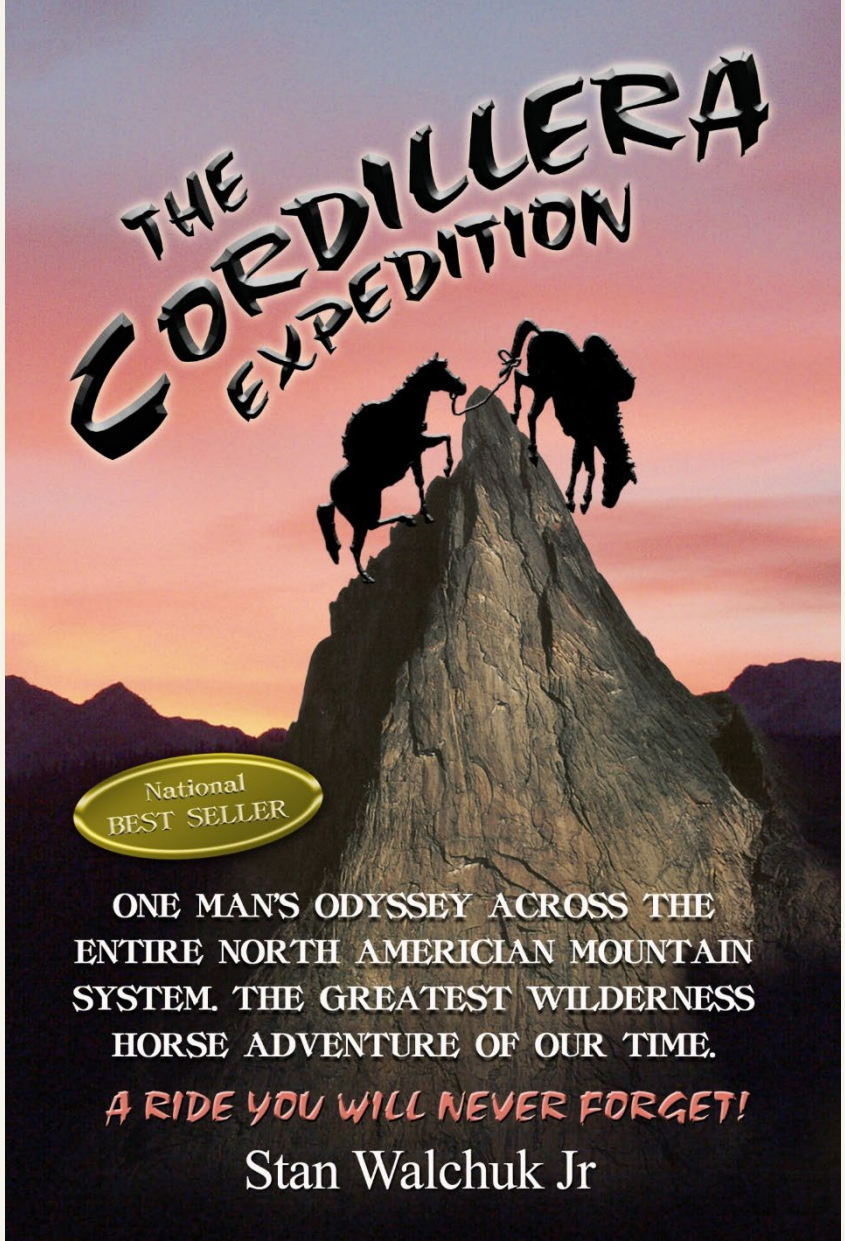


THE CORDILLERA EXPEDITION



National
BEST SELLER

ONE MAN'S ODYSSEY ACROSS THE
ENTIRE NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAIN
SYSTEM. THE GREATEST WILDERNESS
HORSE ADVENTURE OF OUR TIME.

A RIDE YOU WILL NEVER FORGET!

Stan Walchuk Jr

*Dedicated to my Mother,
Alice*

THE CORDILLERA EXPEDITION

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FACTION

The *Cordillera Expedition* book did not require extended exaggeration or fabrication in-order to stir excitement in the telling. In fact, death, drama, acute interest, and interesting people, were, at times, true companions of the expedition. This was apparent when, in the act of writing this manuscript, my memory forced me through many tears and shivers. Now, in the reading of the manuscript, it amazes me how true to spirit this book remains.

However, *The Cordillera Expedition* was one man's impression. It was mine. There was one man's diary and recordings. They were mine. Had you come along your impressions would, by the differences of each person's being, have been quite different. It is impossible that Bill MacDonald or Brian Wolfe hold the same interpretation of events or feelings as this book portrays. It is impossible that the Sikhanni Indians had the same impression of our entourage as I did. It is impossible to provide the reader with the exact dialogue and the proper gist of each discussion. In essence, this book is absolutely true to my experience, however, through the variables of interpretation I am loathe to call it fact. Fact does as fact is. The *Cordillera Expedition* book does as the Cordillera Expedition is, but for the different impressions from possible interpretations.

For reasons you will better understand after reading this book, I believe the Cordillera Expedition is much larger than life; most certainly much larger than my life. Because of this and the tremendous public support I received, I was not allowed to retire from the thousands of hours of film, book and live presentations made. It was a commitment that, regardless of financial standing, was tied to the success of the journey and the reflections

of my salvation. If the reading of this book provides your spirit with any amount of positive fortification, then I am a happy man.

PRELUDE

In the year 1982 three men set out from the northern plains of North America with pack and saddle horses in an attempt to reach the Pacific Ocean. One thousand wilderness miles, eleven mountain ranges and twenty-two river crossings later, one of them reached Wrangell, Alaska. This is an account of that incredible journey. It was one of the longest, most rugged wilderness journeys ever - a truly great adventure in our lives.

There is little exaggeration or extended drama in this story. If death is the bitter end-all, then reality was harrowing enough. Although survival often became the question of the minute or the day, it is not a survival story. Mostly the inexperienced or accident victims balance the borders between life and death in the wilderness domain. It is a story of mountains; the spirit of the people that keep them, the courage and saga of adventure, the bane of bog and deadfall, the treasure of flora and fauna -not of challenge or winning, but of the life within a wilderness pilgrimage.

If there is a moral to this story it is that fear is a condition that lurks behind the corners in the convolutions of ones' mind. Fear does not lurk behind the corners in the convolutions of mountain wilderness.

* * * * *

Note: Life in the high mountains is not for common men; the heroic air is much too rarified for them.

CHAPTER I

THE LEAVING

Take a good look at North America. It has a face wrinkled with mountains. Looming ragged mountains and gentle forested mountains, all designs and all climates. They create terrestrial havoc; scabble here and corrugate rampart there. But no-where, *no-where*, do they stretch so magnificently as along the western front of the continent. From the Arctic to Panama, a giant granite snake, a colony, the cordillera (mountains) laid down range by range until they roll into the Pacific Ocean. They begin their march rising from the foothills or busting from the prairie, a few hundred miles across or a thousand, they really don't care.

In the Canadian north they reign supreme. Still larger than a man's dream they direct and they demand, and men watch, and men comply. The trappers of the Rockies, the hunters of the Spatsizi, the fishermen on the Stikine, and the pilots above; always, always, watching.

Take a very good look at the North American mountains because what you see is more than the first white travelers could have known. Alexander Mackenzie's river route to the Pacific Ocean became his mistake to the Arctic Ocean. Finally Pacific-bound, his diary bleeds anguish as mountain rivers smashed them and human condition haunted them. David Thompson played winters' fall boy. Braced against mountain blizzards he begged a meager salvation from Indian tepees. Lewis and Clark earned their land crossing with fortitude and compliance "the want of bread I consider trivial, provided I get fat meat; as far as for the species of meat I am not very particular, the flesh of the dog, wolf, horse, having from habit become equally familiar".

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A few hundred years means little to mountains; some wind and water erosion, more or less trees, more or less ice. And if *you* made your way across the wilderness cordillera you and the earliest adventurers will have shared many similar glories and vexations. Of course, in the modern age you would probably choose to drive your way across on one of the many blue highways, and reach out, and touch the windowpane, and smell the pine, car freshener. But what would be your affinity with life and earth from an adventure through a windshield? We *wanted* to know Mother Nature's wrath; the swamps, dank forest, rivers, canyon, loneliness, and to know her honour; the wildlife, the sun, the peace, the spiritual union of biological man with the earth, and to meet the people who have never been divorced from that union by flossy society.

We would spend a man's energy and know a 20th century wilderness pilgrimage. On foot, man and horse, over eleven mountain ranges, across rivers twenty-two times, a distance greater than one thousand miles.

It was a journey of many journeys; the adventure of one life and of many lives. I tell you this now because I am one who made it. I tell you this now because providence gave nine lives to ensure the telling. My dream is to know and share mountains. Mountains greater than a man's dream, greater than my dream, and so I will watch, and I will comply.

For the next three and one-half months I will be your companion. In this you have no choice. It would be naive to expect a companions' trust without providing some concept of the mind's eye that guides my vision, my story.

Call me Stan Walchuk. To my Ukrainian-Polish relatives I will always be "Stash". That must be Stanislaw in the process of growing up. Before I grew up tough and mean, made first string on the football team and beat up the neighborhood ruffian, some friends called me "Sparrow". It was "Stud" at University, and that handle cost more female company than it won. Upon graduation it became "Stan the man" and upon planning the Cordillera Expedition, it became "Stan the man unusual". After successfully

completing the Cordillera journey and after earning Best Documentary and Best Producer awards, many people call me “Sir”. My relatives still call me “Stash”. Someone told me that I am thirty and a young friend recently called me “fossil”.

Aquarius the water bearer keeps me aloof, absent-minded and, according to the horoscope, creative beyond some minds. It also keeps me in the shower until the hot runs out. My key words are dichotomy and flexibility. Never have I known one lifestyle and always has change been the norm. My favourite saying is “easy but not sleazy”, the difference between wise use and your basic arm-pit-an.

If variety in education and occupation could be described as the spice of life, then I have been living a bowl of hot chili. Somewhere between being held prisoner in elementary school and writing this book, life has dealt me these blue-collar flirtations: construction labourer; cement and dump truck driver; loader operator; surveyor; gas jockey; car washer; oil rig roughneck; Chicken-on-the-Way delivery; horse guide and outfitter; sporting goods salesman; Fish and Wildlife Habitat improvement; construction contractor; biologist; teacher; filmmaker; writer.

Hindsight explains the past and after minimal reflection it is apparent that the Cordillera Expedition should have been predicted. Mother tells us that at the age of three months I began exploring well beyond the perimeter of the family picnic blanket. Most babes crawl to the blankets’ edge, then startle themselves wondering what madness drove them so far from cuddling, pablum, and canned peaches. Mom claims her wayward infant would crawl past the blanket’s edge, into the tall grass, then stare back with beady eyes and jungle vision, alone, on the outside, looking in.

Actually, mother didn’t have to tell us these things: independent, detached, on the outside looking in. Indifferent and lonely in modern society, an inherent bond with Mother Nature. Wilderness was simply freedom in its purest form and offered a free flow of energy and a quality experience that remains unchanged. The places change, sure, but the peace,

the harmony between mind, spirit, body, and nature, more real and more solid than sidewalk cement. The reality of communion between earth and soul, rocks and dirt, molecules and healthy food. A pledge to the earth as natural and vital as breathing. Not wilderness romance but the root existence that directs attitude and behavior.

Those that know this commitment to the earth have also known the crucifixion from the material society called ‘normal’, and painful labels from minds that consider themselves a significant entity. Build a road, a dam, maybe mine a mountain, and a part of our world, our reality, our soul, our spirit, is destroyed. How numb were the senses of this five-year-old without so many words to explain the confusion of lifelines twisted in the concrete of society.

So there you have it. A kid in the city growing up with a bittersweet relationship with the woods. Staring out from society’s windows, wanting to touch and feel the woods and be alive. Alive in the woods and wondering why I was so alone.

And then the great day came. Jeekyll the woodsman and Hyde the civil servant could no longer pretend compatibility. It was a matter of identity. A choice must be made, and the conditions of each possibility painfully obvious.

I could continue a life of career and civilized circumstance, or, I could assume the responsibility of my inner being and pursue true aspirations, *if* I had the guts to be independent and the courage to brave the loneliness. And so it was, forsaking civilization for the clarity of mountain slopes and the uncertainty of adventure.

* * * * *

If you were intended to spend your life searching for the great truth, you would have been born a great question. But you were not born a great question. Curious, yes, but needing to search for some profound means to an end, no. You were, on the other hand, born of the flesh and blood of the

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earth and your parents, and you need very specific things: warmth, the need to belong, a healthy food getting relationship, love and sharing. If you find this difficult to accept, then just watch the Sikhanni Indians in the North American mountain wilderness. Don't ask them, they do not speak English very well.

* * * * *

The evening was shrinking. Late winter snowflakes drifted lazily upon my little house in Entrance, Alberta. A neglected fire cast tiny flickers from the Franklin stove. There was no turning back now; I knew it and I could feel it. Six months from now we will have completed a truly amazing land journey, or I will have died trying. There could be no compromise. Once again, I picked up the paper off the table, its formidable message burning in my mind:

NORTH AMERICAN CORDILLERA OR BUST!

I am hereby totally committed as participant on the North American Cordillera Expedition of 1982. I hereby give my total willingness to cooperate with all members and to complete my duty to my utmost capability. Barring death or serious injury I am committed to the Pacific Ocean.

SIGNATURE:

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Stan Walchuk Jr.", written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

Each member would sign three copies. Mine had been signed with a stick pen and my own blood, lanced from the ends of two fingers. Bill MacDonald had signed three copies. Terry Forbes, friend and fellow

teacher, had not signed, finally deciding to spend the coming year touring Australia. There were many who wanted to join but few who could prove worthy of such an adventure.

Adventure! What a romantic word! Its very utterance draws visions of distant islands, rugged mountains, and the tawny color of the adventurers that kept them. I chuckled. How often I had used this word during correspondence with historians. “Do you know of any previous crossings since the early explorers’ of the entire North American mountain system by land through wilderness? We will attempt our wilderness adventure with pack and saddle horses.” Replies came back not at all or negative. We could find no similar journey previously completed. Some replies came back hinting of mockery or implying selfish motives by stating simply, “What are you trying to prove?”

Trying to prove? Nothing!! Who Cares?! We wondered how many of our correspondents thought us some sort of nuts, wilderness jocks with pine needles for brains and willow bark for underwear. There is the trouble with adventure. It sounds too romantic. The reality of frozen hands, backwoods toiletry and saddle sores is much less poetic. It seemed that most book-boggled historians would not offer the adventure seal-of-approval unless the story was one hundred years or older. Perhaps true adventure needed to ferment into something rare and delectable, savoured by the senses like old, fine wine. Certainly, people like Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, Alexander MacKenzie, Lewis and Clark, and John Bowie, were developed through the aging process, invariably the final product accentuated beyond reality through time and the fine art of storytelling.

Perhaps our journey across the entire North American mountain system suffered in the public domain because of the debatable sanity of similar adventures and their mass media promotion, “Wong Fong skis Everest with an Airways parachute, Nestlee’s skis, Fangalo windbreaker and all the while chewing Strident gum.” “Albert Clyberg circumspets the south pole with snow machines.” “Jumpin’ Jeremiah Jack hops to

McKinley infamy on a pogo stick.” It is not difficult to imagine why the stable element of our society would classify adventurers as eccentric. After all, one-third of the world is starving, much of the rest of the world is oppressed by freedom sapping governments and military regimes, and some yo-yo needs to crawl around mountains yet!

But in the very dynamo of life, in the restless spirit, in the very stomach of adventurers, lives *real* adventure. Adventure wound into the fabric of their life, a reason to live, life without it only a poor facsimile of life. The desire born in hearts and minds motive enough for the experience. The haunting loneliness, the awesome power of natural forces, the curiosity and splendor from a beast or a flower, the hearth of a campfire, all drawing cards to the gamble. A prophecy of “To Thine Own Self Be True” and the guts to practice the preaching. The individual whose romantic spirit cannot or will not allow that all there is to life is the morning shower, coffee break and the Saturday theatre. The fear of singing “Is that all there is?” Forever over a bottle of beer has driven them or frightened them into endless search, even haunted search, for adventure. To them the word ‘challenge’ means little.

You can bet that when that final nuclear blast blows (hopefully never), that some brown-faced, tight-lipped nimrod, will be banging pitons into the perverted cracks of a precipice. That a host of pectoral bound canoeists suck foam in some horrendous northern rapid; that some Kipling graduate tends to desert parched lips. For some, the thrust of spirit and energy is well beyond confines of daily triviality and social norm.

The phone rang.

“Stan? Bill here, how’s it hangin’?”

“Like a horse; how was your ski trip?”

“Lousy, too much snow, hardly skied to the cabin, and this dumb dog...”

“What dog?”

“Oh, this girl had a Black Lab along. It was so tired from running through the drifts we nearly had to carry it out. No kidding. Anyway, do you know if Terry is coming or not?”

“No, he didn’t sign the papers. I guess he decided to go to Australia instead. Why?”

“Well, there’s this friend of mine. I worked with him in Edmonton. His name is Brian Wolfe. Anyway, he was up here skiin’ and he really wants to go. He’s so excited he won’t take no for an answer.”

He didn’t take no for an answer. The Cordillera trio was set. Brian Wolfe, the youngest member at twenty-five, and the easiest going, was the least experienced with horses, but willing to learn. What he lacked in wilderness experience he made up for in first aid experience. Formerly an ambulance attendant with a solid knowledge of emergency aid and the necessary fortitude to perform under pressure, Brian accepted the responsibility of designing the first aid kit. He put together standard gauze and ointment and extra supplies of painkillers and antibiotics. Brian was lean and more than fit enough. He was, at the time, apprenticing as an electrician and would forfeit summer employment.

Bill MacDonald, the eldest member at thirty-one, was the most careful with details and concern for the human condition. A solid background as seasonal Park Warden in Jasper National Park, he was apprenticing as a plumber. Bill would handle the very important job of gathering food stuffs and packaging them in proper containers. Bill’s commitment was obvious in his concern for detail with equipment and stock. He would also terminate his employment as acknowledgement of the uncertainty of hardship and schedule.

I was twenty-six and probably the most experienced in difficult wilderness travel. I definitely had the hardest head of the group and was the person with whom the idea took seed from years of north country travel and map study. Living in the village of Entrance, Alberta, and teaching at the high school in nearby Hinton, provided me a valuable combination of being

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able to care and train the horses at the Entrance ranch and receive assistance with equipment preparation from the high school shop. Harry Collinge High and its staff had been both understanding and supportive with tools and supplies for building extra tough pack gear.

In March of 1982, this letter was drafted and sent to all members:

NORTH AMERICAN CORDILLERA EXPEDITION (1982)

PARTICIPANTS; BRIAN WOLFE, BILL MACDONALD, STAN WALCHUK

Barring any major circumstance it is now assumed that we have all indicated the commitment of participant in this incredible journey. If you accept this letter and its meaning then you will have a personal and moral obligation to carry out this trip to your utmost capability. Enclosed is a summary of what the journey might comprise and, hopefully, some of the requirement for success. This is not an ultimatum or an opinion but simply a representation of knowledge and guidelines. Further discussion will lead to changes and additions. We must be very particular about gear and commitment.

COMPROMISE:

Your time, money, mental and physical strain...for...a once in a lifetime adventure and feat that may prove, at opposite extremes, disastrous or euphoric.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

Stress - from travel day after day and isolation.

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Strict time scheduling - If we delay 20 minutes each morning for forty travel mornings then we have lost 800 minutes, or, 40 to 60 miles. This is something we must avoid.

Constant care for each person's two horses; hoof checks, pegging, etc.

Courtesy for others yet great strength from within.

Photographic responsibility, both 16 mm movie and stills.

Some of the most beautiful country on earth and some of it very trying; deadfalls, forest, etc.

EQUIPMENT:

Horses - Two each; medium to medium small; not fat or sway back; faster than average walking pace; not nervous or difficult; 4 to 15 years of age; good feet, shod about mid-June with an extra set of shaped shoes; good health; flu shots.

Pack equipment - All in premium condition; comfortable saddle. All can be provided by Stan. To be discussed.

Shelter - Five oz. urethane-coated nylon Whelan lean-to. Three extra nylon flys for emergency shelter, covering gear, etc. Lean-to provided by Stan.

Foot gear - One pair of flexible hiking boots, high top rubber lace or rubber bottom - leather upper lace boots, one pair camp shoes (good runners).

Clothing - One brim hat (cowboy), two wool toques; 4 light wool, 6 cotton sport socks; two wool, two cotton loose pants; two light sports or cut-off pants; two light underwear; one very sturdy tear-resistant rain suit with head piece; four under shorts; two cotton gloves and two leather gloves (prs); two t-shirts, two light cotton shirts, two heavy shirts or

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sweaters; medium wool jacket or synthetic lined; wind-breaker or anorak, insulated vest.

1. Sleeping gear - light sleeping pad; warm bag, preferably synthetic with liner.
2. One extra wool blanket aside from wool horse blankets.
3. Two axes, one three quarters Hudsons' Bay, one full length.
4. One bow saw with four extra blades.
5. One compact cook stove with three pints fuel.
6. One sturdy day pack each.
7. Food - to be discussed.
8. Other personable - towel, soap, toothbrush, pot, to be discussed.
9. Pain killers, penicillin, first aid, to be discussed.
10. To be discussed.

Although this letter may seem pre-mature we must realize that there are many preparations, like pack equipment and horse arrangements, which should not be delayed. Also, if you commit yourself then you can keep an eye open for worthwhile gear, etc. In all seriousness, do not blow the difficulty of this trip out of proportion. There have been many packers that have traveled greater distances in the past, however, they may not have been confined to a particular route. Think seriously because once you commit yourself it is a one-way street, but, with the commitment comes a definite excitement and anticipation. There should be no regrets. Sweet dreams!

* * * * *

As departure day drew closer all activity narrowed. Walls were decorated with ropes, reins, bridles and cinches, all in various degrees of

completion. Sewing seams, cutting pieces and punching holes was activity performed nightly in a specific fashion that catered to my need and my fancy. As usual my dog Quinn, a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling retriever, sprawled on the rug.

“Now look at this Oonits-noonits.” (short for Quinn).

“This here is a soft nylon lead rope, tough enough for the whole way. See, and this here is the way you braid, this strand through here, and this one over here, and then... the loop on the end. Don’t need no snaps breaking. See, and then, to finish... Hey! numnuts, you listening?”

Quinn stretched a back leg and exposed his stomach.

“No, I ain’t scratching your belly; don’t you know how serious this is? Pay attention dimple dork.”

Quinn just barely thumped his tail.

“Suppose I didn’t take the time to fiberglass the panniers, and suppose we didn’t buy them fiberglass packsaddles, and suppose I went el cheapo and used rotten leather webbing instead of nylon. In other words, suppose we broke down out there. Then what? Eh noots? I’ll tell you what; you wouldn’t be the first redhead dog to make the Pacific across the entire North American mountain system, no sir, noots. You’d be the first redhead I’ve eaten for supper. You get that?”

Quinn sighed and pulled his leg back over his stomach.

* * * * *

School halls miss kids on weekends. They become hollow and sad. I wanted to tell my uncle Walter Walchuk that it wasn’t always like this, and I waited until we entered my classroom. The science room was void of plant and animal life in preparation for summer holidays, and the painters had run over the rainbow the students and I had painted on the front wall.

I gathered desks and doubled them side by side across the room. Then the plastic sealed maps were spread and linked trail to trail across the entire Cordillera. It was impressive; it had to be. Every inch of map a rugged

mountain, remote valley, or a new stream or river. Over fifteen feet of maps reeked with adventure and we gazed without purpose or speech. It was a treasure unfolded; the key for a dreamers' dream to be. I felt proud somehow, like my borderline madness had the sanity of precision, planning and thought; something that my Uncle Walter, a man of intelligence, education and control, could, appreciate.

“Gee, that’s really quite a distance; you really think you can make it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“It sure looks like a lot of rough country. Why did you pick this particular route? Did someone travel through there before?”

“Well, if you look at a map of North America, the mountains are narrowest at that point.”

I found a world globe on the window ledge.

“See, if you go north, say across the Yukon and Alaska, it must be thousand miles as the crow flies across all of the mountain ranges. Same down here around Utah and even into Mexico. But through here, it’s only four or five hundred miles as the crow flies from the flat country to the Pacific Ocean.”

“And what if the crow has to lead a horse?”

“Ha! Well, that’s a good question. I honestly don’t know. If you go carefully along these trails, or what used to be trails, it should be about six to eight hundred miles to Stewart, B.C, leaving from just north of Ft. St. John.”

“Trails? You mean there’s trails through there?”

“Well it shows trails, but I can’t see it. I mean, there’s outfitters and things, maybe trappers, but in some of these wild places I can’t imagine much for trails even where they show trails. When I talked to the Forestry and Wildlife people up at Ft. Nelson and Ft. St. John, they couldn’t tell me anything at all about trails.”

“What’s this place here? Does anyone live there; maybe they can give you some advice.”

“That’s Ft. Ware. Yes, that’s what we’re hoping. It’s an Indian village and they should be able to give us some kind of info.”

“Honestly, it just seems like such a great distance; so much rough country. What is your schedule like? When do you think you’ll make the coast?”

“At first we thought we would be back at our jobs for early September, then Bill suggested we quit our jobs because it might be wishful thinking on our part. Now I’m beginning to think he’s right. Why quit if we’re close to the Pacific because of a job responsibility. I have applied to the School Board for a one-year leave of absence...” Walter seemed concerned, fixed to his mind. Maybe it was concern for his horses. He had provided two of his horses for the journey when two of mine came up with mild founder.

“Well Stan, I don’t know. You seem to know what you’re doing. It looks like you’re going to need a lot of good fortune and the grace of God. We’ll pray for you Stan - Germaine and I and the kids.”

“I appreciate that. I’m going to need it.”

“You know Stan, it just seems the whole deal about the film could be so important. I mean, wouldn’t it be something having a record to share with people afterwards.”

“I know it is. I’m not sure just how, but I think it’s important too.”

“Who is that fellow at the television station who seems interested?”

“Ken Nelson. I’m meeting with him tomorrow.”

“How much, did you say it would cost to make a film of this sort journey?”

Now there was a question larger than a forty foot movie screen. “I have some of my own editing equipment. Let’s say, to rent a 16mm movie camera, buy batteries and mm, and then develop the film afterwards, about four thousand. You know, even if that’s all we did, at least we would have something to share with school kids and show people.”

“And what if you wanted to make some sort of production, say, for audiences, groups, maybe T.V., that sort of thing?”

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“There’s another ball game. A budget for a one-hour documentary done properly runs over one hundred thousand dollars, but you know, that’s just the point. Why go to that expense? I’ve shot film before; I have some editing equipment. Look, why worry about what to do with the film until I get back. Who knows, I may not even....

I... just think. It would be terrible not being able to share the experience with those that would really get something out of it.”

Uncle Walter is a man of grade and spirit. He provided a cheque for two thousand dollars.

Ken and Lloyd Nelson ran Rocky Mountain CATV with a positive conviction so that when someone said it can’t be done, that was *them* talking. That’s when getting it done became interesting, even fun. They built the television station on positive conviction. Perhaps that was the reason they found the expedition exciting and, unlike others with more limited vision, could treat my plans more seriously. Ken was a man of the bottom line, and after lengthy discussion, the groundwork was laid.

“OK Stan, so you’ve got two thousand from your Uncle Walter and you need another two. Tell me why I should invest my money. What’s in it for me?”

“O.K.. O.K...look, it’s just not possible to explain where I’m coming from, or how important this whole thing could be, or even why I really feel I am going to make it, but somehow I just know. Look at it this way - if I make the Pacific, that film has got to be worth something, and I’m telling you now, that I am going to make it, or die trying. And if I die trying, that film is still going to be worth something, and you’re going to own it.”

* * * * *

Here was a place of contradiction. The Overlander Lodge overlooking the upper reaches of the Athabasca River of breathless Jasper National Park, the log structure mellow with ages of rustic hospitality, and a meeting, a meeting that promised fire enough to scorch the log walls.

Mountains looked through the sitting room window but I couldn't see them. I hoped Bill's girlfriend Ilene would come; she would be a good mediator. A stuffed elk head stared blankly at a stuffed sheep's head and after twenty minutes, neither had changed their gaze. Amazing.

They arrived. Ilene had come. We exchanged hellos and Bill began.

"It's no good; I don't like it."

"Geez Bill, what's no good? What's any different? Nothing's changed."

"Look Stan, it's not just the money."

"Well then, what?"

"Everything; the truck, the horses, everything. Why should we pay you and then you go out and buy yourself a truck?"

"What? Is that what you think? I get a truck out of the deal and some horse stuff and do it with your money?"

"Ya. Ya, that's what it looks like."

"Bill, what am I supposed to do? Provide a truck and trailer? Pound the heck out of them over a couple of thousand miles? And for what? Because I'm a nice guy? And then provide the horses too?"

"Look Stan, you didn't have to use your horses; we could have got our own."

"Dammit, we talked about that. Where are we going to find someone who is going to give us the setup that Rocky and Ann are providing for me at the ranch? I don't think you know how lucky we are."

"We're all in this together; we're all pitching in, but you're the one who seems to be getting the stuff out of it, and with whose money, Stan. Ours."

"Honestly, I can't believe it. Your money? You think I can get six horses rigged with saddles, packsaddles and riggin' and who knows what else, for what? a couple of thousand?"

We both stared at the floor below our red faces. Ilene sat quietly as a symbol for communication and sanity. Bill continued.

“I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem right, and it’s not just the money. Those horses need more work; I could hardly catch that Pinto. How am I supposed to ride him? And that white mare looks pretty skinny. I don’t think she should go.”

“O.K., O.K. We agreed that it would take some time to get the horses ready. There’s still lots of time to work on them; you know that, and that mare just lost a foal. Let’s not make a decision about her until next month. Look Bill, I know things are not perfect, but I’m doing what I can. What else can I do?”

We sat for a moment and I continued.

“Bill, I’m just not sure what you want me to do. It’s good that we talk this thing out, but what am I supposed to do? Are you saying that you and Brian shouldn’t put anything towards the horses and vehicle use? Even after that is what we decided in the first place?”

Again we sat silent and then Bill continued.

“Why should Brian have to pay twelve or fourteen hundred? How is he supposed to feel when I put in six or seven hundred?”

“Bill, when Brian came in it was just you and I because Terry had backed out. That meant we had enough horses and my trailer would do. I already explained to Brian that him joining would mean purchasing more horses, an extra truck, gas and equipment. He knows that; I talked to him about it.”

“I know. It just doesn’t seem fair.”

“I don’t know. It seems like I’ve got a hundred things on my mind. Sometimes I don’t know what’s fair and what isn’t. Honestly, it’ll be so good to get going; to get all this crap over with and everything. I just don’t know what to think. If you don’t think you want to put in anything; if you think I should pay for everything, I don’t want to have any more problems. That’s what we’ll do.”

“That’s what I mean Stan. The costs, the shoeing, the transportation, every-thing; we could have figured it all out and just split.

“O.K. You’re right. We could have done it that way, but we didn’t. We decided that you and Brian would put in what you thought was fair and I would handle the preparation of the horses and vehicles. So now what; now what are we supposed to do?”

“How much does Brian owe yet?”

“Four hundred. He’s paid eight and he owes four.”

“How about if I put in two more and we tell Brian that that is enough.”

“Alright. If that’s what you want, then that’s your choice. Alright.”

* * * * *

I slouched at my desk at the front of the class. The students were working on another quiz, one of many these past few weeks. The haggard science teachers’ golden rule,” when in doubt, give them a quiz or lab write-up. When desperate, have them mark it as well.” They couldn’t see me dozing behind the *Outdoor Life* magazine. Sally, the little fat girl with the big mouth in row two woke me up. “Mr. Walchuk, you sleepin’ again? We been finished for ten minutes.”

I stiffened and dropped the magazine smartly. “Don’t worry about it, o.k.?”

“Yeah sure, you’re tired all the time, then every morning you’re crabby. You know you sure been mad all the time.”

“I am not mad all the time!” “See, there you go again.”

“Look, I’m just busy with lots of things, o.k. In a week you won’t have to worry about it.”

The room was silent; the students keen on the rise and rally. “Sure Mr. Walchuk: you spend all night workin’ on your horses stuff; I know cause Danny and Joe been helpin’ ya and then ya go out partyin’ every night.”

“Enough!”

You could have heard a snail drop. “Pass your lab reports up to the front; you can mark them next class.”

After the rustle subsided Sally continued with grade nine remorse.

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“I’m sorry Mr. Walchuk. I didn’t mean to get you mad and everything. It’s just things aren’t the way they usta be. I’m sorry... Say, you gonna play your guitar for us again? Before school’s over? Maybe tomorrow?”

“Well...uh...well, I suppose. I guess. Well, why not, sure, why not, sure.” She glanced at her criminal cohorts.

“Geez Mr. Walchuk, I hope not.”

The bell rang and the students giggled their way out of the room. I looked down at the reports on my desk and saw Sally’s on top of the stack:

LABORATORIE REPORT ON CUTTING UP A FROG

PLAN: I will get afrog and a sharp nife, which I will cut opin the frog whilst he is alive, I will studdie caiffully his innards, for the purupuss of gaining scientifik knolledge.

PART ONE: Mr. Walchuk gave me afrog, a nife, and a pan of stuff like Jello. I grapt the frog by his hine legs, and beet his head on the edje of the lab bench so he wood not bicht. When he was woosie and ready for scientifik investigashun, I stuck thumtax in his feets and pinned him against the Jello with his bellie in front.

PART TWO: Soon the frog began ones again to kick, and feering his eskapo, I scientifikully rammed the shiv in his stumak. Ther was a stickie dark redfooid which ouzzed out from whence I stabbed him. This was kind offun so I druv the shiv in him again. Soon he began to kick less and each time I stabbed him andfinally he kicked not at all. I went to Mr. Walchuk and got a new frog.

CORDILLERA

PART THREE: I through what was left of the oldfrog in the bascet then put the new one in its place. I was determint to learn more from this frog by conduktung a more scientifik experiment. I made too insessyuns one across his tummy and the other up and down. I poelt the skin and so I could see better. It was kinda silvarry inside so I cut keeper and found his innards, which I scientifikully scoupt out with the spoon.

PART FOUR: I got a woodin handliledfork in hand and put upon the frog. I turned on bunsen burner and held the frog who kicked not much to terrible now above it. Soon the small of roasted frog filled the labb and Mr. Walchuk made me share him with the othur kids.

THE END

* * * * *

It was a time for guessing the negatives; addressing the potential for break-down and trauma. A time for removing romantic blinders and thinking about sickness, appendicitis and the like, loss of gear, and most realistic, the break-down of gear. We had extra nails and fiberglass for the pack boxes, awls and heavy thread for top packs, cinches, leather and nylon rigging and clothing. Effort had gone into strengthening the saddles but the sawbuck packsaddle trees were a concern. One hundred and seventy pounds of gear would be slung and wrapped around the poplar paddles and 2x2 birch forks, all handmade by Felix Plante. But what if the cross pieces broke? What if the paddle split from the cross pieces? Would the fiberglass and nails hold under the pressure of gear being knocked against trees and horses rolling for several hundred miles? The more I pondered the better the man-made plasti-glass Rolide pack saddles looked. I bought three, threw

them in my truck and headed for Felix's. It was fitting that Felix should live on a great rise of land; above all else with geography and wisdom; above all else with horse lore and wilderness experience; above all else with sensitivity and spirit. Yes, it was fitting that this ninety-year-old legend live high above all else.

Near Entrance I turned off the pavement and shot upwards on a great gravel slash. It was better the way it used to be, when the road wound a narrow cut back and forth through aspen. Then one had time to absorb nature and resonate how the time would be spent with this gem of a man. The road may have become fast and easy like those who built it, but never Felix.

Talk to old people once in a while. In your eyes they can see the reflection of an old person or a friend. In the crux of their treasures they hold friendship on a pedestal. They shake hands gently in the knowledge that true forces glide softly through the blizzards of life. The rough of their skin offers depth and purpose beyond sensory perception. Three years now I had been turning up that gravel road. Not many are home nowadays but Felix had been home a long, long time. The pleasant little log house that watched his children grow sat only paces from high modern blue and white trailer. I grabbed the pack saddle and knocked at the door.

"Hello!" He said in his strong and positive way. It was always good to hear hello from Felix.

"It's me, Stan," I said. "Come in, come in."

I entered and was, as usual, pleased to find Felix his usual smiling self. We grinned at each other.

"Sit down," he said, and I sat down in the same chair I always sat in. He is a handsome man, square shouldered, a good amount of dark hair, hands steady and firm and looking smart in his black leather jacket. A vogue roll-your-own hovered in his mouth. I worried about the condition of his lungs. He smoked incessantly and I often wondered if oxygen had the capability of transferring itself through a black Glad garbage bag. At other

times I wondered if his tenacity with years was the result of some secret. It has been said that if one sleeps on the left side, one's life span is ten years less than it is when one sleeps on one's right side; the blood lays heavily on the heart when one lays on the left. Sleeping on one's back is next best to the right and on one's stomach next worse to sleeping on one's left. So I asked Felix. "Felix, when you sleep at night, how do you sleep, on what side?"

He looked at me strangely and said, "I don't sleep on the side, Stan; I sleep on the top."

"No, no," I said, "I mean do you sleep on your back, your stomach, or on your left or right side?"

"Oh, oh, what do you want to know that for?" "I guess I'm just wondering."

"Well, I guess mostly I'm too busy sleeping to find out," he laughed.

"Oh I don't know Stan. I guess sometimes on my back, sometimes my left, mostly my left side I suppose." I changed the subject.

He looked at me wondering what interest the packsaddle would have, then asked a question he asked about twice a year. "So, what's new? You married yet?"

"Married. No, why? Are you?" He grinned.

"Well thought maybe you married that girl you brought here last time." "Oh no, just a friend; a nice girl but she would never make the Pacific. I can't marry anyone now."

"You never know Stan, you never know."

"Oh, I think it would take someone tougher than that, someone like you."

"By God," he said, "if I was twenty years younger (70) I wouldn't wait one minute, no sir, no way boy."

"I believe it and you would probably make it too!"

"I can tell you, I wouldn't quit. Have to make it." He laughed. "Felix," I said. "I'm worried. I have been thinking that the wooden

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sawbuck might break, and if they did, we may not be able to fix them to hold. So, I bought these fiberglass ones. Now, I'm not so sure about them. What do you think?" I handed him the saddle. He turned it around a few times, eyeballed the twist of the paddles, examined the cross pieces, and then said, "Not too bad; I've seen worse. You see here, the front here, a little too low; bad for a horse with high withers. Boy you got to be careful with that; could rub bad, this one. Mind you, I've seen worse. And maybe the paddles are a little small. The twist isn't too bad. You using those pads you made?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you should use two, or a blanket under anyway. "We have extra."

He handed back the saddle. "You think that nylon riggin' is better than leather?"

"Yes, it is much stronger; won't stretch or rot." "I don't like it."

"Why not?"

"I guess I am too old to change now." We smiled and looked at each other. "Felix," I said. "What will be the worst thing, the biggest trouble?"

"The rivers, Stan; watch the rivers."

* * * * *

The ranch was always a marvel. You would never guess it was there being hidden from the highway by a strong width of pine and poplar. Visitors who entered the ranch were greeted by elegant log houses and guest cabins. Then there was the large field that seemed forever busy with scrub soccer games. Past the soccer yard lay the network of barns, sheds and feeders, all cemented and sturdy. But it was the gray post rail corrals and fences that usually drew my attention. Bordering the many fields they narrowly escaped for a meeting with the horizon or a distant forest. I wondered: did those endless fences take ten men one year to build, or one man ten years to build?

I grabbed the wood rail gate and swung it wide. It always felt good to grab the wood rail gate.

“Hey cowboy!”

I was startled. Bill and Brian were sitting under a tree drinking beer.

“Yo!” I answered. “You’re early. What time did you get here?” Then I remembered. Bill mentioned he was coming early and would take the pinto for a ride. The horse was inexperienced and Bill was dissatisfied with how difficult the horse was to handle. We agreed that I should work with the horse and I was desperate to know if he was now satisfied with the horse. I could be faced with trading saddle horses and would lose the horse I had best come to know.

“Oh,” Bill replied. “I’ve been here since about one. Wanna beer?”

Brian opened and handed me a beer. I sat down. Brian asked me something I would rather have avoided.

“So, are you ready to go?”

“No, dammit. Honestly, exams, clean-up; geez, I’m in a buzz.” “You’ll be ready to go tomorrow eh?” he questioned.

“Well, I’ve got lots to do, but I will.”

The pinto stood tied to a tree with Bill’s saddle on. “So, did you go for a ride?” I knew he went for a ride.

Bill just looked at me for a moment. Oh damn, I thought, trouble. He didn’t like the horse. He’s going to want to trade.

“I’ll tell you, I’m a little surprised.” Oh shoot.

“That horse has come a long way since the last time I rode him.

I’m impressed.” Oh good.

A blue car pulled up. She came. She said she would but I didn’t think she would.

“I got to go; I’ve got company. It’s important.”

Brian and Bill eyeballed the petite gal and echoed cat calls, “oooooooo....WaIchuk, you sleaze, you slime, you snake,oooooooo... where’s her mother....oooooooo.”

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When I was a little boy all my cousins and multiple aunts and uncles would pile into Grandma and Grandpa’s farm’ house at Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas time. Everyone’s foibles grew roots as we rubbed elbows at mealtime, brag time and feather bed time; just like in Johnny Denver’s song. My multiple aunties would say about me, “such a sweetheart, so quiet, he sleeps just like an angel; I thought he died and went to heaven.”

Then as the years went by, I breached puberty and they would say “such a charmer, what a sweetheart, oh those bedroom eyes. He will be the first to get married.” Then they would wink. You know, I actually believed them. Things were so simple then. Find a good honest, pretty girl, fall in love, buy a car, get married and live happily ever after between fights. Sure.

We walked slowly down the gravel trail, winding through trembling aspen and holding each other’s trembling hands. I kicked at stones with my feet until conversation seemed reasonable.

“I don’t know, I just don’t know,” I said.

“Then why did you call me? What did you want me to come for?”

“C’mon, that’s not fair; after all we’ve been through...”

“Well, so what am I supposed to say? What are you trying to say?”

“Dammit! I don’t know what to say! Everything, everything is so incredible; happening so fast, it just feels like I’m in a daze. Even now.”

“Am I surprised?” She giggled. “I don’t call you dozy for nothing.”

The trail led us past the horse pasture and into tall woods. Mountains peeked between the trees from fifteen miles away. We stopped. I took her in my arms and she reciprocated.

“Thanks for coming out to the ranch; it means a lot to me. Are you going out somewhere tonight?”

She put her head against my shoulder. “I think so. Everyone is partying at old road.”

We stood silent for a moment then my words came, empty in space.

“What do you think, about us, I mean. Somehow, I think it’s just as well I’m going. Maybe it’s better I lose you this way than lose you staying here. Oh God. Am I going to miss you.”

I held her close.

“I want to know how you feel about us. I need to know.” “I care,” she said.

“That’s all? You care!”

She backed away from our embrace.

“Well, what difference does it make? You’re going anyway.”

I swallowed my heart and tried to short cut the tears that began to well up inside me.

“You’re right,” I said. “I know. Sometimes I am so dumb. Sometimes I wish I wasn’t such a sap. Oh man, why does everything have to be so crazy? And so what now? Am I supposed to feel nothing? So we just go on living eh? What do I say? I don’t need you so much?”

She picked my face off the ground and held me. It was a futile statement. Our minds were already letting go but, in my heart, I was grabbing desperately for meaningful moments to hang on to. Lately it seemed that emotion was something akin to a speeding locomotive gaining momentum if only to make the crash that much more dramatic. I held her close.

“Man, it feels so good just to hold you. You know, I think basically, we are just two horny people.”

She giggled. “Hey, speak for yourself.”

“You know me: I was just trying to paint a picture of our future.” We chuckled a bit and then I corralled her eyes.

“Hey,” she started excitedly. “Are you serious about that pillow?” “Well sure, we’re getting married next week.”

“Stupid. Are you really taking it with you?”

“Hey! Am I ever! You will have handcrafted the only yellow and purple pillow to make a wilderness journey across the entire North American mountain system. Right on, eh?”

She laughed. “Just one more day, then you’re going?” “Yea, just one more day.”

We held each other and memory didn’t want to let go. There was so much I needed to say. “You want to hear something silly? Do you know how much I cared about you? All of that time I spent by your side, the walks, the doctors, the hospital. I really fell in love. How could I not fall in love? And all the time everyone talking behind our backs as if they knew something. You can’t imagine how hard that was, you just don’t know.”

She turned away.

“Well I’m sorry; it wasn’t exactly a holiday for me either. It was confusing, a dream. I don’t know what I felt.”

“Yea, well, I did; I knew. Do you hear? I knew I would have stayed by your side. I couldn’t have left you. And what was I? Really. Some convenient guy? Whoopee ding, a shoulder to cry on.”

“C’mon Stan. That’s not fair. You know I cared.” “You cared; sure, you cared.”

We walked silently back to the corrals and her car. The silence was painful and feelings of guilt began to draw upon the harshness of my words. I could never know the torment of her position.

“How do you feel, I mean physically?”

“O.K. I have stomach cramps sometimes, but they said I would. I stopped her. There needed to be a firmness in our parting. “Please, I need to know. Will you write? I know you said you would, but, I mean, I need to know. I need to know if you want to.”

* * * * *

Every town in Western Canada has a local tavern in a local hotel. Somewhere, somehow, maybe on the wall, maybe in a dark corner, maybe in the

music box, maybe in the faces, there lives an aura that says, “Texas was here” or “Cowboy hats welcome”. In Hinton, Alberta that place is the Timberland Hotel. This day would be a repeat of most days that final week. Coffee and a donut at the local bakery with times for stabs at placement of assorted items in my overloaded mind; where did Quinn run away to? Will he be back in time to leave? Don’t forget to pay that heating and phone bill. Is there enough money in my account to cover my loan payments while I’m gone? Is that eighty dollars of penicillin a waste of time if it goes bad in the hot weather? Is that white mare strong enough? Don’t forget to call mom again; thank goodness I got a year’s leave of absence. How long will it take to forget about her; it feels like forever.

And after coffee and a donut, and after a light supper and drive, as natural as the flow of energy from high to low, my existence made a slow blend into the Timberland woodwork. The process of dissolving my many peculiarities of life and destiny into the norm of everyone’s good time.

But this evening, this final night before our departure, things were different. I was more conscious than six beers said I had a right to be. The din of the tavern and laughter of my friends could not erase the gravity of my tomorrow. The thoughts that I had so easily caressed and tossed about these past months rooted firmly in my mind, then gained momentum, first as intensified echoes, then eventually as blood pounding about my temples. It was I who drafted this scheme, and now had to live with it; to lasso the greatest geographic snake on our continent. It was I who must now ride and stick that snake like none before. It was I who must digest the venom injected by this pilgrimage of life.

So long good friends; you have been so good to talk to. So long good music; you have been so good to dance to. So long old world; you will get along just fine drowned in beer and dressed in Auld Lang Syne. And this final night, this last fling, this end note to a twenty-eight-year-old lyric, offered no peace.

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And so it was. Bill MacDonald, park warden turned plumber; Brian Wolfe, ambulance attendant turned electrician and myself, Stan Walchuk, construction worker and biologist turned teacher; turned against the odds. Oh yes, and Margaret and Ford. Margaret was the result of a trade with a friend. Although I had not known her long, she was a good companion albeit some what old with her 72 half-ton Chevy chassis. She strained faithfully, her half-ton chastised to an oversized stock trailer. Ford, on the other hand, was a virtual unknown. A one-ton flatbed wooden stock side boards I had accepted as a bargain, trusted not at all until I tuned it in and only a little since.

We lurched onto highway 16, blew our horns goodbye along Hinton frontage and watched nobody care. Clouds curled from the mountains behind us, then twisted and spat as they marched east toward the prairie. Drizzle quickly turned to rain and then pouring rain, but nothing could dampen the excitement that squeezed my innards. We were off!

Paved highway peeled away and foothills melted in the gloom. The forests, rivers, fields and towns became vague memories in tired minds, and each of us settled into our thoughts. Through Edson, Whitecourt, Fox Creek, we rolled, stopping once for a burger. At Valleyview we stopped to check a thumping noise; it seemed to grow steadily louder. Fords right wheel nuts had loosed. I wondered if Ford was formulating a plan to kill me. A few more miles and he might have. We traveled painfully slow in the downpour and reached Grand Prairie, Alberta, well after dark, very wet and very tired. We strained through rain-streaked windows for a suitable motel. Farm implement dealers, car dealerships, some restaurants and then the motels: Diamond Inn-whirlpool-sauna-24" color tv-room service - no; Sally's Motel - no; Prairie Inn-singles 42.95 - yes.

The horses rocked restlessly. We left them in the motel courtyard and walked down the street to McDonalds. Dinner was a solemn event, even with Ronald McDonald prancing about the wallpaper. Bill posed a question and the three of us made a stab at discussion.

“What we gonna do with the horses?”

“I know, doesn’t seem like a lot of places to leave em.” “Why don’t we drive them out to a field someplace?”

“Think so? Hardly seems worth it for a few hours; we’ll be on the road again in a few hours.”

“Groan.”

“Well maybe, at least we should let em out and tie em up.” “Guess we could, but where we gonna back up the truck to, and besides, what’s the difference if they’re tied up standing inside or outside?”

“I don’t know, they seem pretty restless. The brown one has been kicking the snot outta that truck; it’s a wonder the box isn’t busted. If he gets them going the whole place is going to wake up.”

“Naaaa... think so? I think they’ll settle down. Ever see them PMU lines, or how those outfitters haul them in semis two days in a row?”

“Peeuw, what?”

“Not peeew! PMU, pregnant mare’s urine, for birth control pills. They stand in their stalls September until March.”

“In the same stall, all the time?”

“Seven months, same stall, hundreds of horses in long barns.” “Unreal, eh?”

“No kiddin’.”

“Well, I still think we should unload em; just too bad we’re in the middle of town.”

Back in the motel courtyard I climbed Ford’s stock racks. The horses were a sorry sight, all drooped and drizzled out. “OK boys, it’s like this; we’re too tired to go on so we’re gonna stay here tonight. No munch ‘n around for you boys tonight. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it.”

They listened, ears perked and concern on their faces, all of them except for the brown one. He didn’t even let me finish explaining. Boom. He arched and cocked a back leg, ready for another shot at the wall.

“Hey! You brown puke! You wanna wake the whole place up?” “Geez!” I grabbed his halter and contorted his nostrils. “Look, see this. This is hay. I’m gonna give you some if you promise to quit being a stupid jerk.” He ate the hay; so did the rest. Stupid question. Boom! Boom! Boom!

Wet clothes peeled themselves and I stood half naked in front of the mirror. Some rain-soaked scruff with puffed eyes stared back through slits and said, “You fool, go to bed, you can hardly keep your eyes open.”

“O.k.” I said, and passed out.

In the name of justice it is terrible what happened, this night of all nights. In the deepest of sleeps, my exhausted mind was a stone under fifty fathoms. Then some scum-brain turned on the lights. “Stan, get up; c’mon, get up.”

What? No, no, it can’t be; I’m dreaming, I’m dreaming. Please, please, I’m dreaming. Yes, yes, I am dreaming, light beams, an operating room. Leave me alone. Go away, go away! Above the din, Doctors Wolfe and MacDonald stabbed terrible light beams and fingers at my sensibilities, and their words became horribly clear.

“He’s still sleeping. C’mon Stan, let’s go, we gotta go.” I would fight.

“Leave me alone, go away, leave me alone. I’m tired; go away.

I can’t open my eyes.”

“C’mon, the horses are wakin’ everyone up; manager gave us the boot. It’s that damn brown bugger. C’mon, let’s go.

Doctor Wolfe saved my life. “I’ll drive, you can sleep.”

Each new day breaks like new birth, with a rejuvenation of life and spirit. Two-thirds of Margaret’s seat and bumpy pavement could not rob the freshness of my awakening. Bill was driving. I sat up, poked the sleep from my eyes and tried to feel like after my second cup of coffee. Margaret wound her way down a poplar choked draw.

“Good morning, how do you feel?” Bill asked. “O.K. now. Geez, I was tired. Where are we?” “Coming down to the Peace River.”

“Honestly Bill, you mean you haven’t slept yet? Why don’t you let me take over?”

“Brian’s stopping at Ft. St. John; why not just take over there.”

“Sure.”

The hill bottomed and the wide Peace Valley melted upstream and down-stream into distant V-shaped horizons. The oil wrappings of the Taylor refineries laid spectacle one-half mile across the river. As we rode across the bridge, it was easy to ponder the first white travelers as they paddled and poled their birch bark trading canoes upstream to trade and downstream laden eastward with beaver pelts.

In fact, the first recorded white man to cross the North American mountain system worked his way upstream past this point one hundred and eighty-nine years ago. On about May 27, 1793, Alexander Mackenzie and a company of traders, trappers and guides lunged their way upstream towards the Pacific. His description of the Peace River Valley with its rolling grass-run hillsides and draws was something akin to a northern Shangri-La. He provides vivid description of “Elk and buffaloes grazing in all direction.” But he had more important goals in mind. His task was to find a land route to the Pacific Ocean in order that the North-West fur company could infringe and even outstrip the American and Russian fleets who were plying and making a fortune with the Pacific otter fur trade. His motives were self-gain and allegiance to the Nor’Westers, with whom he was a major shareholder.

History classes from a bygone era had provided me with one peculiarity that I had somehow not forgotten. Alexander Mackenzie wintered downstream from this point a couple hundred miles or so at the junction of the Peace and Smoky rivers. In his diary he talks of the hectic preparation and need to leave early in season. As it happened, the canoes were packed May 3 by seven or eight in the evening. Common sense would tell anyone, we would think, that leaving at that late hour would mean traveling only a couple of hours before light conditions required setting up camp for the night,

which is a chore in itself. It would have made practical sense to get a fresh start an hour or so earlier the next morning, but Alexander, a hard-headed Scott, decided to push out in the late evening! I wondered if perhaps many of our adventurous heroes from the past completed their journeys by combining European stubbornness and material drive with native Indian knowledge and their common sense.

Most certainly these hardy adventurers must have wrestled painfully with all sorts of wilderness demons. So minimal must have been their means. But then, that may have been their saving grace. For them, it would have been cold feet, chapped hands, backwoods toiletry and pemmican breath, both before and after their departure. For us, it was a hot bath, after shave, steak and salad bar, and rock video one week, and squatting in a rose bush with cold feet, chapped hands and constipation, the next. We had already passed Dawson Creek, British Columbia. This northern farming stronghold lived on the verge of killing frosts and wet, cold, fall harvests. Bumper crops and grain elevators busting at the seams one year were painfully offset with disaster years when cut grain would lie in mile long swaths under a foot of field water. On main street sits the concrete pillar that makes its way into every vacation guide north of the south pole. “ALASKA HIGHWAY, MILE 0”. When the American army decides something is necessary, especially if the alternative is becoming a Nazi or Communist, watch out! Mother nature or not!

The highway was seen as a necessary lifeline for provisions to the northern defense and offense systems of Alaska and Canada. A major attack from across the Bering Strait was anticipated. Furthermore, the north had proven oil reserves, something necessary for engines on people killers and the road could serve as an exploration, and, hopefully, oil transport line.

Numerous stories float around the north country as a reminder of how the American army boys came to work on the highway in sub-zero winter conditions poorly supplied. The Dawson hospital was literally overflowing

for better than a year with injured and frozen road workers. A Canadian trucker was edging his way along the highway during construction and stopped to ask a black American worker what he thought of this big country. He replied, "Hey fella, you could put all this country in one little corner of Texas."

Later that fall five of those army boys looked west over the snowcapped mountains, mountains that look deceptively close in the crisp fall air. They decided that with a few days rations they could cross them, hit the Pacific, and be on an ocean liner south to Texas! After two days travel toward the mountains they still did not get to the first mountain, and began to return. The last one came back seven days later, having existed on berries. Their conclusion; pretty big place, this north country.

The reputation of the highway itself has grown steadily from fifty years of swearing at the one thousand miles of relentless, dust choking, hair pin, windshield cracking, horror, that God must have had very little to do with. When I first traveled the highway in the early seventies I was told the reason the road had no straight stretches greater than one-half mile in length was so enemy bombers could bomb only short sections at one run. Later, a wise old trapper told me a moose was flown from Fairbanks to Dawson Creek, then let loose to wind his way back to Fairbanks. The surveyors were then in hot pursuit of the moose with bright florescent tape. Either way, for years the reputation the highway earned was legitimate. Now, however, we found ourselves cruising at highway speed over fine blacktop.

The Alaska Highway winds geographically north by north-west. On the east side of the highway begins an evergreen studded monotony that rolls and slips forever to the Arctic Ocean or the Hudson Bay. It is called the great northern plains. On the west side lies the magnificent, first ranges of the rugged Rockies. Dare any Whitehorse-bound lawyer, accountant, or mortician to drive the highway and remain unaffected by the glory, want, and loneliness of the countless ridges and sweeping vistas. In the still of fog-

laden mornings the mountains lay ghostly and distantly enchanting. In the clear of fall bite, they loom a bold eruption of nature's erotic bosom.

None of us wanted to talk about the rugged wall of mountains that spied on us for miles on end. If we were to speak honestly, we would say, "Hey, yes, those mountains are incredible. I wonder if they are going to kill me? I wonder if they are going to kill me next week or next month? I wonder what it will be like drowning in a river? I wonder what they will say when they cry at my funeral? I wonder if I am really someone who belongs out in that trackless wilderness or if I have just made the biggest mistake of my life. I wonder why I have put this damn noose around my neck. For God sakes, somebody help me."

Like so many Alaska Highway service stations and coffee stops, Trutch Mountain Lodge just popped from the spruce. Its' position high on a west facing ridge provided a special glory with the first ranges of the incomparable Rockies across the valley. The lodge was a hive of activity at the supper hour.

"This is one of the places I stopped when I came up at Christmas," I explained to Bill and Brian. "I hope that Jerry will remember me."

"What's his last name?"

"Aven. I think the whole family pretty well stays here."

The past Christmas I ate Yukon smoked salmon, cross country skied under the chin of a humungous bull moose in Kluane National Park, danced unnamed dances with the Haines Junction natives at the bands' "go crazy Christmas dance", had a huge snow laden branch crash down upon my quickly submerged nakedness at Liard Hot Springs, and froze my face waiting for a ride in front of a "No Name Brand" service station at sixty-five below. I also had coffee with Jerry Aven.

We parked the vehicles and, sure enough, there was Jerry in and out of the main doors. Jerry Aven, a very big man in a T-shirt, speaks with a slow tongue and moves with deliberate motion. Deliberate motion is a sign of wisdom, at least with Jerry. One automatically assumed that his thoughts

are being placed with the benefit of time and lay in his brain with permanence and position. He had done well for himself and his family coming to the highway as an equipment operator and now the owner-operator of a lucrative operation.

The big man eyed us as we walked up the staircase. "Hello." We offered our hands.

"You probably don't remember me; my name is Stan. I was here at Christmas, about that horse trip."

Jerry grinned, "Oh, I remember alright." "Great, but I bet you didn't think I'd be back!" "Oh, I didn't say that. C'mon in fellas."

After some brief discussion Jerry excused himself and, during the next few hours, we made conversation with members of the family and drew some conclusions. Jerry and his son Terry and son-in-law Jeremiah, were all keen on horses and wilderness travel. Jerry had thought for years he would like to attempt a wilderness journey toward the Pacific. They were able to provide specific information about the first one hundred and twenty miles, about as far as the Muskwa. The Prophet River was flooding and the first seventy-five miles up the Prophet had more than twenty crossings, which meant serious consideration of an alternate route. Driving back down the highway and heading west up Nevis Creek was the favorite of Jerry and sons.

We decided unanimously that one day was needed for rest and organization. We were sure the horses would agree and, much to their pleasure, we drove three miles down a forbidding grade and unloaded them on the grass rich banks of the Minaker River. Back at Trutch we rented two rooms in a construction trailer network Jerry had set up for such occasions. A hot shower and bed never looked better. Later Bill and Brian occupied themselves discussing the journey with the Avens while I slung my camera over my shoulder and headed down the road to enjoy the still evening.

The sunset red in the west and the mountains mimicked a dragon's back next to molten fire. The soil underfoot was a warm embrace so welcome after

four hundred vehicle miles. The quiet night provided a romantic ambiance for the melt of vast forest and mountain; the sum of which was so much nothing, so much loneliness, so much emptiness. Soon my heart would be laid bare against the incomparable purity of the wilds. I prayed that my soul would find grace with her ladyship Mother Nature.

Would my assimilation to wilderness travel be a natural progression of events? Would my spirit prove a worthy companion? In other words, did I have the fortitude and peace of mind to deal with the hardships and long lonely nights, weeks, and months? When the transformation from teacher and socializer to wilderness traveler reached later stages, would I be man enough to accept the new reality? And would my character flex into new form with candidness found from the acceptance and understanding of both the old and new. Perhaps I would be forced to pretend temporary allegiance to a task wrongfully accepted and ultimately break under pressure. During the long nights to what extent would past ghosts of wrongful deeds and inherent weakness play demon and rob the peace? I wondered.

Were my almighty words so much blarney or did they come truthfully from the root of my existence? In the viewfinder of my camera there came the dragon's back and the etching of trees. It seemed this prize would be nice to share.

Ten in the morning came much too soon. I awoke to find the small room quiet enough to yawn and rub the sleep from my eyes. Brian and Bill had been up for some time and chose then to come crashing into the room. Pretending to be asleep didn't do much good.

"Rip Van Walchuk in action. Get up sleepy head." "Hang on, eh. I'm not done scratching my perishables."

"C'mon eh; we got things to do. We brought you the Trutch morning news."

"News? What news?"

"Well," Brian said. "For one thing, Jerry seems to know what he is talking about. Like he says, the Prophet River is a mistake. The trail is not

so good and there could be twenty crossings before the turnoff to the Muskwa. Bill and I don't figure the flooding river is worth the risk."

"I suppose," I said. "Getting wiped out so soon would be a hard way to go."

"That's what I was saying." Bill added, "It would be awfully embarrassing getting scratched out so soon."

"Well," I thought, "how high is the river. Has Jerry seen it lately?" Brian looked at Bill. "Didn't that neighbor guy tell Jerry it's higher than it has been all spring?"

"Yes," confirmed Bill, "and they were both saying the Nevis Creek trail makes the best sense,"

"It looks to me like it's so much farther on the map. What does Jerry figure; he's been most of the way to the Prophet that way."

"About fifty more miles." Bill suggested, "About two days more travel. I don't know Stan; it seems like a fair trade to me."

"What about Speck?" Brian asked Bill. More Trutch local news. "What's a Speck?"

"Jerry doesn't figure we're gonna make it,"

"What!" I cried. "He said we've got one of the best outfits he's ever seen going in there. He was just saying how the group that went in two weeks ago had nothing but blood horses!"

"Now don't get excited Stan. He says we need an extra horse." "Well, we don't have an extra horse. Did you tell him we talked about an extra horse and we didn't think it was worth the hassle; that we could walk or rest when the horses got sore?"

"Yea, yea," Brian contributed. "I don't think Jerry is crazy about walking and I don't think he thinks we will be either. What he is saying seems to make sense."

Geez, I thought. Sleep in for an hour and already the plans are changing.

“Anyway,” Bill continued. “He said he has the right horse for what we need.

He says it will follow and he’s offered it to us.” “Offered?” I buzzed. “At what? Alaska Highway prices?”

“Bill guffawed at my skepticism. “Give us a break eh? The guy is practically giving us the horse. You know he really seems to be pulling for us. I think if he could, he would love to go.”

“So, what do you mean he’s giving us the horse?”

“He says take the horse and when we’re done using it, we can bring it back or sell it and send him the money. He says four or five hundred is good enough. I think we should take him up on it. It’s a bush horse. We need that horse; we need horses out there that know this country, that know what they’re doing. And it’s hobble broke too.”

We took him up on it.

* * * * *

This was going to be interesting, maybe even fun. “How far do you figure the horses are? I yelled ahead to Jeremiah. He just kept bouncing along. Why does he have to trot? I complained to myself. He must be some kind of an iron man; my guts are getting knocked all over the place. I yelled louder, “How far do you figure the horses are?” He tilted his head back about as far as a horse fart would deserve. I knew he heard me. Another damn cowboy who chews snuff instead of Trident and picks his teeth with coyote bones.

About three miles later I began to moan faintly when finally he led his horse into a mud-bottomed creek. He let his horse slurp water. I caught up and quickly pretended everything was cool. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of seeing my weaker side; no way was I going to ask him again how far he thought the horses were. I knew darn well he heard me. I checked my saddlebag to make sure my granola bar and large intestine were still there. My horse sweated profusely.

Jeremiah folded his arms casually over the horn then pointed across the creek. “See that grassy flat? I been tryin’ to lease that now for five years, but the buggers won’t give it to me. If we’re lucky the horses are in those willows someplace.” He was cool all right. All he needed now was a toothpick in his mouth. He edged his horse over, reached out, snapped a twig, and used it for a toothpick.

Geez, I thought, at least we’re off the trail; at least we won’t have to trot with those willows all over the place. Jeremiah’s horse climbed up the bank and onto the flat. “Heeya!” he yelled, and they took off trotting and running through the forsaken willow brush. The trouble with running a horse through brush is that no sooner than you shut your eyelids and flash your hand up in order to save your face from extinction, another branch is ready for the kill. It is a scary business. The best solution is to lower your head as a battering ram and latch on to the saddle horn like a blood tick. Never be afraid to yell loud from pain since those around you will think you are courageously egging on your horse.

The horses were not on the grass flat and Jeremiah took off mumbling briefly about another couple miles. It was a good thing he knew where he was headed, but I could not understand what the hurry was. I held on and yelled in mad pursuit. For another few miles we pushed bush, crossed creeks, trotted down trails and watched the mountains loom closer.

“How far have we gone,” I yelled hoping that would be understood as “where in the heck are we going?”

“We should be there soon.” Never expect a straight answer from a cowboy. The more crooked their legs, the more crooked their answer. Another mile or so and in a little pocket of meadows stood the horses like big sore thumbs. We got off our horses.

“Jeremiah,” I said. “You want a job. The pay is lousy, but you can have all the clear water and mountain scenery you want.”

“Not this year,” was all he said. It’s hard for a cowboy to talk when his lips are engaged in battle with Copenhagen.

“So,” I said, eager to get back to the horse trailer. “Which horse is it, that one with the specks over there?”

“I’m not sure; that might be the one, but maybe we’ll look around a little.”

Great. Just great. We wandered around for about a mile and finally concluded that there were four or five horses off on their own.

“You know Jeremiah,” I said back at the herd of horses. “That speckled one sure looks like the horse Jerry was talking about.”

“Well, I’m not so sure, but we had better take him. It could be.” We made the stock trailer by about three in the afternoon. It was probably the hardest four-hour ride I had ever known. My horse was in lather and we were both in labour. Jeremiah calmly dismounted - one of these guys who wouldn’t sweat in a four hundred yard dash or if the devil held a mortgage on his mother. If Lucky, my saddle horse, knew that we had just gone through this ordeal only to leave on the Cordillera journey tomorrow, he would have trampled my face into the dirt.

Back at Trutch, Bill and Brian waited in anticipation as I unloaded my prize. I led the horse in small circles like a Roman after battle displaying the finest member of the enemy’s harem.

“Nice looking horse,” Bill said. “Looks good and strong. His feet could use some trimming though. A gelding eh?”

“Were they hard to find; where was he?”

“See that mountain? That one there?” I pointed. “You’re kidding,” Bill said.

“No, pretty good little ride; no problem.” I lied just like John Wayne.

Jerry appeared and I wondered if he was surprised that Jeremiah had not left me in the dust. After all, Jeremiah is his son-in-law; he must know what kind of an orangutan he is. Well, there I was, kept right up, and brought in Speck too. Jerry stopped short of the group. He looked at the horse and his eyelids widened in overtime. He stood speechless for a moment, obviously exasperated. “Oh no,” he moaned, then bent slightly

forward and it seemed he was examining the underside of the horse with bionic eyes.

“Oh no, what?” I said. Everyone was silent.

“You got the wrong horse; this here horse is King!”

I sat down on the trailer fender. King was an ugly horse. I couldn’t look at him. Jerry was uglier than he was yesterday as well. If they expect me to go out there again, they’re nuts.

“What’s wrong with this horse; wouldn’t he be alright?” I pleaded. “I mean, couldn’t we take him instead? Brian, Bil I, is it alright if we change his name to Speck?” Nobody wanted to say a word. I had hoped Jerry was a good man, but there were not many churches around. Finally he spoke, “Sorry fellas, but we need this horse. Where’d ya find him?”

“Way the heck and gone over there,” and I stretched an arm across the Minaker valley to the farthest mountain. For crying out loud man, have mercy!

Terry Aven, Jerry’s son, spoke up. “You know, I think I know where Speck must be. We’ll go out again.” Terry is a good man.

Bil I saddled Lucky and went out with Terry on another ordeal. Lucky is a stupid name.

* * * * *

Most everyone has reflective moments. A time during which reflections and thoughts meet heart or lack of heart and result in decision. It may be those few minutes before sleep when ideas take shape and chase across one’s mind like satellites through space. It could be when muscles and senses rejuvenate in the surroundings of a hot bath. Or possibly one of those fleeting moments when we shut ourselves off from domestic bombardment, like reading the newspaper.

The small bedroom was silent, except perhaps for the occasional squeak of my bedspring and the distant purr of the light plant. Curtains shut

out the yard lights and severed twenty-four-hour service from the reflections of my mind.

The satellites of my mind provided a brilliant display, all legitimate subjects to ponder. When I opened my eyes they took several moments before melting through the walls. I closed my eyes and it happened again:

Question: Is there anyone other than myself who experiences similar mental phenomena in those final moments before sleep? Specifically, on regular occasions, just often enough to know there can be no mistake about it, I close my eyes for sleep and instead of darkness, I am greeted by the distinct gradual formation of an individual's face. I say 'individual' because the face is clear and unmistakable; faces of unknown characters with curvature and depth in their lips, noses, and wrinkles. They have an edge to their jaws and always the right color to accentuate the individuality of the person's personality. They look at me, stare at me, expecting me to know them, to rush for them, but I can't. Then, with the definite purpose of a motion picture dissolve, the face blends and contorts into another distinct face and personality. Again and again, they are interrupted only if I open my eyes. After several minutes of this private screening, they decide to perform elsewhere and disappear.

This night the faces appeared distinct but overly familiar. The first face was a squarish face, with serious thin lips yet alive with the gleam of intelligence and scheme. I groped loosely to place the face but as usual, the dissolve began. Tonight, however, the dissolve was incomplete; the face contorting painfully into separate grotesque perversions of the initial structure. The face haunted and struggled for permanence but instead, slipped into oblivion.

I opened my eyes. I probed my senses. One has little control over events from uncommon energy levels. I wondered if tonight's surprise performance was a subconscious continuation of thought about a unique adventurer who headed up the same valleys we would travel, but under much different circumstances.

Earlier in the evening, Jerry provided us with a vivid description of an eccentric French entrepreneur, Charles Bedeaux, who, with an elaborate entourage of Citroen half-tracks and one hundred and twenty odd horses, made an attempt to gain the Pacific.

Apparently, a one-time dishwasher and waiter in New York, this man carved an elusive kingdom from providing his services as a world renown labour efficiency expert. In the mid-thirties this man rolled through Dawson Creek and Ft. St. John with Citroen made half-tracks and trucks loaded to the hilt with an array of gear that the local residents found not only difficult to comprehend but difficult to recognize. Imagine, a wilderness journey through hundreds of miles of forest choked draws, raging rivers, canyons, deadfall and rugged passes, outfitted with the critical-cases of vintage wines and champagne, boxes of ladie's shoes and lingerie for Bedeaux's wife and her maid, caviar and dainties, motion picture equipment, surveyors' equipment, bath tubs with hot water capacity and odds and ends that escaped question.

Can you imagine the surprise and gossip from local grubstake farmers, cowboys and trappers? What logic could they possibly provide for this unbelievable madness! It wasn't surprising that Jerry said he was some kind of German spy searching for a base of operations in an inaccessible mountain hideaway. A foreign accent would encourage suspicion and uncertainty in the minds of the same farmers and wranglers who flocked to his side in an effort to provide gear, stock and services. It didn't matter that he was an arrogant grim-faced nut; he was paying two, three, or many times the going rate for any services at a time when the value of a paper dollar was exaggerated from recent depression years.

Charles Bedeaux became something of a local industry, purchasing goods, services and stock with a one hundred percent profit. Many began new grain or beef spreads and businesses with Bedeaux money.

I wondered if some of the locals did believe he would make it. This man who built his material domain from a tremendous thrust of technology

and labour efficiency was also bent on imposing his principals on Mother Nature. Pity anyone who might tell this flamboyant mind that he could not outsmart his way through some raw forest. It was easy for Brian, Bill and I to laugh at his absurdities, but did those around us think similarly of our attempt. It was easy to speculate on his motives for a crossing of the entire North American mountain system. After all, he must have had motives, possibly evil political, or money motives. But then, what did those around us, and, for that matter, those we would meet on the journey, and after the journey, consider the purpose of our journey? I hoped our modesty and simple goals of affinity for the adventure itself would not lay a groundwork of ugly accusations and pointed fingers.

A comparison of Bedeaux's expedition with ours could prove educational. He left the road near Nevis Creek with half track vehicles and one hundred and twenty odd horses. It would have taken untilnoon to pack that assortment. They had to feed dozens of mouths. We left with seven horses and fed only three mouths. Meal time would have been a good place for cowboy humour on their journey but one hundred and forty pancakes plus arguing over dirty dishes must have cut into travel time. Charles Bedeaux hoarded a private supply of wines and champagne. We had a small bottle of vanilla extract. Charles Bedeaux had portable toilets; we had to do our thinking elsewhere. Charles Bedeaux's half-tracks required a swath a dozen feet wide cut through brush and forest whereas we would slink through any shape or design of aperture large enough for a horse's nose. Charles Bedeaux would spend his evenings throwing orders, demanding approval of his schemes and guffawing at the doubt from lesser minds. We would probably debate whose turn it was to open the can of beans. Charles would relish the caviar and crepes from his hand-picked maid whereas we would relish not even relish itself. Charles had his wife to impose his male domination upon and we, alas, forgot the salt peter. Charles Bedeaux probably spent hours wondering just how he should spend his millions. Myself, on the other hand, would spend hours hoping the telephone

company would lose my phone bill. In essence and in practice, we had nothing in common with Charles Bedeaux. Like the group that left a few weeks before us and had returned two weeks later, Charles Bedeaux would not reach the Pacific. Jerry did not know how far he did ply, but he supposed somewhere around Fort Ware, about two hundred and ninety miles from their beginning. Jerry did say there were some mechanical remains, technological bones, rotting somewhere out there.

In that dark and stuffy trailer room, with nowhere to go but westward into the wilderness, and no one to whisper the secrets of my heart to, now and possibly forever, it was easy to tell Bedeaux, "I told you so". Just what division of hell spawned his attitudes that he should insult the grace and eternity of the natural earth with his noisy and aloof imposition. His failure was but a smile upon my face and a green light in the formation of our small army. Enough thinking for tonight. Let Charles rest. In the future these sacred moments before sleep should be patterned to reflect notes of positive nature.

Seven a.m. came in a rush. It was time to leave. First we must find and load the horses three miles beyond the lodge and then we could enjoy a final cup of coffee and bid the Avens farewell. We crammed the numbered pack boxes with heavy canned goods and hardware on the bottom and lighter powdered and dried goods on top. We piled the gear into Margaret and Bill and Brian drove her down to the Minnaker River where the horses were hobbled and grazing. Terry and I followed closely with Ford. We backed up Ford against a dirt pile. Most of the tracks headed downstream but after a half hour search, we found no horses. Back at the vehicles we decided to split into two groups. Bill and Brian followed some fresh tracks upstream along the river and Terry and I headed up a cart trail.

Soon we came across fresh tracks and inside of an hour we had four of the six delinquent horses loaded on the Ford. After brief discussion Terry and I headed after Brian and Bill who, we hoped by now, had located the two missing horses. We had only gone a few hundred yards when, in the

distance, we saw them coming with the horses. We walked back to the trailer and opened the end gate, then headed back for Trutch. Ford lugged slowly up the gruelling three-mile grade. Terry made a reasonable comment. “I wonder if we should have helped Bill and Brian load the horses?”

“Oh,” I said, “the horses are good loaders by now; it shouldn’t be any problem.”

There is a truism that repeats itself in numerous outdoor books, magazines and rap sessions. Never plan outings in groups of three. Beware, they say, for the natural course of events leads two of the three to become closer comrades, therefore leaving one as the lonely number, and we all know the erratic thoughts possible from lonely minds. But the Cordillera Expedition was no two-week outing subject to triviality. I felt it was a major long-term commitment that, regardless of friendship, would require superhuman strength from within. I had managed to convince myself that being too close would provide a false sense of security because those times when peace and understanding must come from within, it may be too easy to expect it from a companion who is likewise searching for an identity. Greater independence in activity and responsibility would also provide less room for dissention during trying times when we will have tired from each other’s bad breath and dirty laundry. I knew that we could have helped Brian and Bill load the horses. Terry’s comment rooted a fear that they might become upset, feeling they had been slighted. Maybe I was being silly; maybe it was nothing worth mentioning. Maybe I was beginning to feel like the third man out. Maybe I expected to be third man out. Maybe loneliness was an accepted part of my life, and I would not risk one ounce of energy, one grain of thought, toward the fear of empty solitude when it was better spent on accepting and completing the task at hand.

At Trutch, Terry and I sat at a booth with hot coffee and a large bag of jujubes, my farewell to junk food. Brian and Bill pulled up alongside Ford and came in the coffee shop. They took a self-serve coffee and joined Terry and I. We exchanged small talk, except for Bill. He seemed especially silent

and I supposed he was uncomfortable with me. Perhaps Terry sensed it as well. He left us for chores elsewhere.

Bill is a good-natured soul but when upset he dawns firmness in his voice and a slightly reddened complexion. He fixed me with his eyes.

“So what’s the big idea?” He asked with some degree of control. “What do you mean?” I knew what he was talking about.

“Oh c’mon Stan, just who do you think you’re kidding? We go down to the horses together and you get your horses loaded and then just take off.”

I nodded slowly in doubtful acknowledgement. I felt a confusing combination of worry and guilt; worry that Bill chose to make an issue of the situation and guilt from the possibility that I had indeed been insolent.

“Look, Stan,” Bill continued. “We’re in this together. You don’t seem to appreciate that. We’re supposed to be able to depend on each other for our lives and you can’t even help with the horses.”

I objected. “What’s the big deal? We’re talking about loading a couple of horses here, after we already loaded four in the truck. You’re making it sound like some major ordeal. I really don’t think it’s such a big deal. Someone could have been hurt down there. But we’re still talking about loading a couple of horses in a trailer.”

Bill was upset. “Look, if we can’t get together on these things, then what’s the point?”

“The point is you were loading two horses a couple of miles from the lodge and making it sound like I’m guilty of something. Are you telling me you don’t think you can depend on me if the going gets tough?”

There was dead silence. Bill felt the weight of his next statement. Maybe it was appropriate that he didn’t answer. Maybe it was appropriate that he request Brian’s opinion. “Well, alright,” Bill said. “Brian, what do you think?”

Brian was assuming a role that appeared destined. He had a level disposition in a shifting conversation, the value of a respectable final vote in

a tie. I believed he assumed his position with ambiguity, but then, they must have reached some terms of agreement while driving Margaret up to the lodge.

“I agree with Bill. Stan, we’re not saying you’re gonna cop out, but I think we have to feel we can depend on each other. I think that’s pretty important.”

The discussion was now to a point where we could agree on concepts although none of us could be certain of the principles involved. Principles are expressed by action and no one would guess about actions we would be taking very soon, under circumstances and consequences we could not predict. The pressure from the questions, the doubts, the personal sacrifice, the forfeit of other dreams, the fear of the unknown, had now reached the peak of a precipice after a long uphill climb. We had a choice. We could jump off the edge from the pressure and scream in relief as we sailed to the ground smashing the journey apart altogether, or, we could glide back down the hill, relax, tell ourselves that it will be a major relief to get the damn thing underway. After all, it was now; no more waiting.

We jumped in the vehicles and left for the trailhead. Jerry and Terry would drive the vehicles back to Trutch where Margaret and Ford would patiently wait the verdict.

CHAPTER II

INTO THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

The puffy cumulous clouds separated. North America could be seen clearly by the angels looking down through the ragged hole. Alexander Mackenzie shifted a large white wing and peered downward, breaking concentration from the card game. This annoyed his friend greatly.

“Look Alex, how long ‘ave we been up ‘ere?”

Alexander Mackenzie maintained his downward gaze, his eyes as dark and set as the clouds were white and undefined.

“One hundred seventy-eight years, three months.”

“And it’ll be one thousand years as not afore ya finish a blasted round! Whyn’t ya ferget them mountains; they’ll be the death of ya, manner a speakin’ acourse.”

But Alexander only sharpened his stare. “Lookee there MacKay, there goes another bunch; these from the north plains, north o’ the Peace.” MacKay sighed deeply. He looked down obligingly.

“Alex, tis no great affair, ya know they try half dozen times a year. You be the first to cross the mountains and that cannot be redone. Let’s be done our game. Please.”

Alexander looked at MacKay, the lines of his face a driving concern.

“Nay, MacKay, t’was not I, t’was we.”

“Aye, aye,” nodded MacKay. “We indeed, and we bein’ the crew of us, most of us who are hotter headed now even than before, if ya get my drift.” He grinned downward.

Alexander looked upon the table, seeing everything and nothing, still wrapped in concern. MacKay studied his friend.

“Still achin’ yer heart poor Alex. I kin sympathize, but see ‘ere, ya may ‘ave been denied proper credit fer ya journeys, die’n a poor man and such, but had ya known ya would have done the same anyhow, the travellin’ spirit was in ya.”

MacKay paused. Alexander still stared blankly, either deep in thought or searching for feelings that evaded him.

“And lookee ‘ere Alex. Ain’t hardly a lass or a lad don’t get fed up wi’ yer crossin’ of the North American mountains. Alexander Mackenzie, 1793; Alexander Mackenzie, 1793.”

MacKay was getting worked up; bad for his heart.

“And ya know darn well we’re as deserved as you for fame! If that’s your concern, but t’was yer name on the party, not ours.” Alexander’s face was red with the bite and truth in his friend’s words, but he remained silent.

Alexander Mackenzie spent the day apart from company, peering down at the group of seven horses and three riders. He marveled at the power of horses but wondered at the painfully slow progress. His swift bark canoes seemed superlative in comparison. Mostly he wondered why; why cross mountains when nothing new and important to the Crown could possibly come of it. Maybe, he thought, they too had the spirit and if they did, he had sympathy for them. The new age was much too confusing for an angel from the seventeen hundreds, and he sensed that those with the spirit would find the new age an alien place.

* * * * *

One thing certain, on July 6, 1982, when we packed and saddled up at mile 178 of the Alaska Highway, we felt like we belonged. The powerful sway of the horses demanded harmony from hip and groin, and it was given smoothly. The endless puffed clouds that quickly rolled by were appealing in comparison with the roofs of our vehicles and bedrooms. The civilized burdens that we had shouldered so long suddenly evaporated and we floated along in perfect rhythm with the squeak of saddle leather and pack boxes.

We were off! Hi-Ho Hi-Ho! It's Off To The Coast We Go!

Tighten Those Cinches And Grab That Rope! Onwards And Upward
How Far No One Knows!

The first five miles could have been labelled boring; a good beginning stretch. Our path was an old exploration road through rolling forest. It angled southwest for three miles at which point we were to find an old well site. At that point, we were to turn west toward a large valley; the gate of our Rocky Mountain entrance. The forest on either side was an uninteresting march of black spruce and moss.

We each led one horse and Speck was the first horse to have free head, a privilege it quickly abused by trotting into the trees. Several thumps against the trees convinced Speck that the ugly wart on his back was a permanent fixture. From that moment on Speck would be the wisest and most dependable packhorse.

A clearing appeared ahead. Could it be the well site? I turned to shout back to Bill and Brian. "Does this look like the turn-off?" I pointed down the cut line that pierced westward.

"It must be," Brian chimed.

Bill pointed to the mouthing gap of a U-shaped valley. "That must be the valley we head up. I think we've traveled at least three miles." After a couple of miles on the new trail we began to edge south, cutting past the mouth of the valley. We stopped for a break, tied the horses and pulled the maps.

"Gee," Bill said, "doesn't look so good huh?"

"Yea," Brian added, "looks like the road heads south."

We unfolded the maps. "I can't believe it; that has to be the valley," I said. "Unless it is the next one south, but it doesn't even look like there's anything there."

We sat down over the maps and discussed which valley should welcome our outfit. The map contours and granola bar crumbs told us the original valley was the best bet. We gabbed for a while then looked at each

other and chuckled. “Good start; two hours on a cat road and already we’re lost!”

We continued on the trail hoping it would soon swing west. It did. For some it would have been a meaningless beginning. But for us, we had just met our first concern; had our first discussion; made our first agreement and watched it become our first successful decision. Our outfit strung along gracefully and we carried the smiles of good company. We would never know a valley so perfectly westward as this first Nevis Creek Valley.

Roughly ten thousand years ago the earth’s atmosphere was about ten degrees colder than now. This meant that when it was time to rain, it snowed instead. It also meant that accumulated snow did not melt but compressed into ice and increased in size in a southward direction from the Arctic. There were no hockey players back then, just cave men and women with cold feet, but it was very important for other reasons. When the blanket of ice pushed up against the outer ranges of the Rockies, they crushed and rounded the rough edges and ground the valleys smooth. When the earth’s atmospheric temperature rose again, the ice receded. The melting ice action and water further eroded and leveled the mountains.

It was the smooth edges of mountains that first welcomed us. Mountains with graceful curves, alpine meadows alive with grasses and flowers and sweeping pastures with trails that caribou and sheep frequented.

The three of us were rubber-necked as we absorbed the scenery and checked and double-checked horse packs and rigging. As the evening progressed the large undersides of puffy clouds darkened and spit on us, lightly at first, then steadily. I delicately slipped my raincoat from the saddlebag with one eye on Lucky’s ears, one eye on the trail and one eye on my noisy raincoat. By now Lucky should have been used to noisy objects and busy activity. The crumply rustle was a good spook test. There were many rainy days ahead and the sooner the horses became accustomed to our rain gear the better. I slung the reins around the horn and stuck an arm in one of

the sleeves. At that time the wind caught the bulk of the coat and tossed it up over Lucky's ears.

There were a number of possible responses. An airhead horse would have bucked, leaped from the trail, and burst through the bushes. One mile later it would have asked questions. A hammer-head horse would have jumped ahead pushing and throwing itself at the next horse, frightening itself over the horse it was leading because it appeared to chase it, and generally throw the string into havoc. A respectable horse would rebel like a fourteen-year-old about to lose his allowance. He would jump and snort just enough to let you know that no self-respecting life form would subject him to such an injustice. Lucky was a self-respecting horse.

We were well into the valley by six or seven p.m. Bill was in the lead. I yelled up to him. "Hey, Bill." He turned around. "Do you think we should make camp soon?"

"I've been looking," he replied. "No sense pushing things. How far do you think we've gone?"

We had gone probably ten or twelve miles and we were well into the valley. A small stream soon cut our path, rushing down from a side hill. We crossed it and found a pleasant stand of poplar in a small glade to our left. There were the signs of an old camp; corner posts of a slab table, camp-fire stones, and a few haphazard half-rotten tent poles.

The clouds dissolved and we regained the sun's favour at the close of our first day. The wrangling tasks seemed relatively organized. We all pitched in with packing, saddling, and removing tack. Camp chores were planned with more control. Brian would cook one day; Bill the next; me the next, and so on, and so on.

I searched the lower trunks of evergreens for dead twigs then started the supper fire with my Bic. Bill scooped a pail of water.

"So Brian," Bill looked at me and winked. "What's for supper, prime rib? Caviar ala Croissant?"

“Not today,” Brian retaliated, while he caressed the tops of his ears. “Today it is macaroni ala Kraft.”

“What,” I cried. “What kind of an example is that on our first night out?”

“Oh,” Brian said, pretending rejection, “if you want we’ll throw in a can of Click and Crap.” Meanwhile Brian continued to massage his ears.

“Gee, Brian,” Bill said smiling, “I hope feeling up your ears doesn’t become a nightly affair.”

“It’s not funny,” Brian mumbled. “They’re all red and swollen.” Bill and I looked at each other holding back mild hysterics. “What?” Bill acted serious. “What happened?”

“Sun, I wasn’t wearing my hat. Used to always happen when I was a kid.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have had your hair cut,” I added, “It made your ears bigger.” Bill and I tried hard to hold back the smiles.

“It’s not funny.”

Bill and I looked closer as Brian rubbed Noxzema over the tops of his red and swollen ears. We looked at his ears then at each other and broke into laughter. I had to hang on to a tree. “OK you guys,” Brian said calmly, “No pork and puke in your macaroni tonight.”

We decided later that Brian would not become the master chef of the group, but not until after I decided I had forgotten my cutlery at home. “Are you serious?” Brian said, and they both laughed as if I had sun-burned and swollen ears.

“It’s not funny.” I said.

“Here,” Brian said. “You can use my spoon.” He handed me a tiny sugar spoon.

“Ya, ya, sure, I get the small spoon and eat macaroni half as fast as your big spoon. Sure, sure, tricks. I’ll make my own.”

I found a flat chunk of wood and carved a spoon. Actually it was more like a humungous tongue depressor, equipment for a heavy-duty dixie cup. Great for macaroni; bad for soup.

I suffered a tremendous buzz that night; the material hum from seven hundred vehicle miles still rolling by; the stress from one hundred and seventy students and their final reports; the emotional trauma of releasing personal commitment to the wind; the preparation of the journey and the fear of the journey. All of it had rubbed my nerves raw as polish from sand-paper and the ringing in my ears and buzzing in my mind was a small price for the abuse I allowed myself. A good reminder for when these days became memories lost in miles. Enough was enough and this first night on the trail my worries were collectively filed in the 'ignore' bin in my mind. Even so, it was difficult to sleep.

Morning came early. My night toque slipped off and I withdrew my cold head into the folds of my orange Dacron bag and canvas cover. Her fragrance came through so clear, wafting from my little purple and yellow pillow in the freshness of a crisp summer morning. I wondered how rested I was and concentrated on relaxing my senses. There it was, the buzz in my ears and head. It bothered me. It should be gone by now. It was unfair that the buzz should be there. The thirty bouncing miles ahead would give the day a chance to clear those raw nerves. Perhaps.

Bill and Brian would sleep another hour or two; that would be good. I dozed for a few minutes then heard the rustle of their sleeping bags and some early morning chatter. They were discussing the horses. Oh my goodness, the horses. Where were the horse bells? Bill and Brian shuffled out of their tent and gathered ropes and left.

It pleased me that they went after the horses. I needed one more hour of rest desperately.

It was a perfect day for weather in perfect country for scenery and on a perfect trail for riding. As the day rode by, the man-made cat trail became too perfect, an insult to the wilderness thirst we had waited so long to

quench. The horses rode solid and confident with their heavy packs. A horse pack should be snug and wrapped firmly to the body of the horse. As the horse walks, the movement of the pack matches the sway of its gait. A good horse that accepts its' job will accept the movement of the pack in coordination with its own movement, the result of which is a minimum friction between the pack and the horse. A bad horse will deliberately set the pack in a rhythm unmatched to the gait of the horse, fighting it and encouraging the pack to loosen and sore the horse. One of the ways to judge the attitude of the horse to its pack is to watch how the pack sways. If it rolls side to side with the walk of the horse, that is fine. If the pack rocks back and forth, the horse is not working well with its pack. The other packhorses in an outfit are always the best means of comparison. We stopped at brief intervals for drinks from crystal streams. Mostly we rode silent; once in a while talking or singing just to hear our own voices. Bill led just ahead and Brian followed at the rear.

“Bill?” I questioned.

“Did you have any trouble catching the horses this morning?”
“Without that grain we sure would have. Good luck when we run out of grain; that brown one is a real bugger. I don't think he is going to get any easier; he just doesn't seem to like people. Brian and I were talking about rotating the horses and keeping one or two tied up every night.”

We rode on, discussing horses and trails. It was good to be on our way, good to look forward to the wilderness ahead, man's country, God's country. The valley was protected on either side by a green, gray, blue, and purple array of peaks, draws and basins. The map indicated we would keep this pleasant grassy valley for a good twenty miles at which time we would drop down to the Besa River. There had been other horse tracks on the trail and, much to our surprise; they increased in occurrence as we penetrated the first ranges. In the early afternoon we rode through a set of groomed grassy fields, turned a bend, and found ourselves smack on the doorstep of a shack. Lucky

stopped dead and riveted his eyes into the forest beyond. Through the trees came the whinny of other horses. Lucky replied.

“Hello. Anybody home?”

Immediately the door opened and an old man appeared, ducking his head under the sagging doorframe.

“Hello,” he said. His face was pale for someone who must have spent the last few days in a sunny bush camp.

“Hi,” I said, “Getting ready for hunting season already?”

“We usually come in a bit early,” he said, then stepped outside followed by a middle-aged white gal and native guy. Bill and Brian edged up. They smiled and we all exchanged hellos.

“Where ya headed?” She grinned. Gaps showed between unclean teeth. She was a camp girl, ruddy complexion, long brown hair stuck with sweat and soot, and shiny blue jeans with a few spots of dried batter showing.

Our horses flared their nostrils and twitched their ears in disapproval of the foreign objects and smells.

“We’re headed up to the Muskwa River through Keily Creek,” Bill explained.

“Oh, ya,” she acknowledged. “Gonna do some hunting up there?” “Well, no,” Bill said, “actually we’re heading through to Fort Ware, we hope.”

They stood silent for a moment.

“Oh wow, you sure got a ways to go. That’s quite a trip.”

We would have told them we were going to the Pacific but we thought that Fort Ware would give them enough gossip to chew on for a few evenings. Bill continued, “Ya, we were wondering if maybe you’ve been on the trails; we can sure use some advice.”

“Oh boy,” the gal said. “I haven’t been up that way myself, but John here is the man to talk to.” she indicated the old man. I expected the native fellow would have been the most knowledgeable with trail information but

he retired to a stump in the rear. We had to wait a moment for the old man's delivery.

“Well, you know, it's been a while since I been up that way, I can't tell you much past the strip and Keily cabin.

“Air strip?” Brian questioned.

“Oh, just an old bush strip; won't be no one there now.”

“How about here to Keily Creek; is it a good trail? I imagine you travel it quite a bit,” I said.

“No, no, don't go that way much.” He looked at his partner. “Pete? You go that way much?”

“No.”

“Well,” the old man continued, “I know there's some soft stuff; I remember there's some soft stuff.”

We were getting nowhere fast.

“What side of the Besa does the trail to Keily follow?” Let's see him get out of that one.

“Let's see now. You come down to the Besa, then you cross, well, now, maybe not quite yet; there's gravel bars there somewhere. Yup, we rode on the gravel for a ways there. Let's see, if I remember, you cross the gravel to the east side, but maybe not quite, and then before Keily you gotta cross back. You gotta watch for that bog there, but it's not so bad. It's been a while now. You know, I hear they been through Redfern and down the Akai to Ware.”

Bill and Brian and I looked at each other.

“We were wondering,” Bill cut in, “where we turn off this cat trail to the Besa River.”

“Oh well,” the old man ignited. “That's just up about ten miles, past the second big creek. Let's see now, yup, the second. There's an old camp on the left of the other side of the creek and willow flats on the right. Just past aways; watch for the trail sneakin' off to your right.”

We bid our farewells and wished them a good hunting season. We rode beyond hearing and Bill busted out, “Hey, did you catch anything that old fart was talking about?”

“Are you kidding?” I said.

“If you ask me,” Brian advised, “they picked him up drunk in Vancouver and unfortunately he hasn’t made good progress.”

We rode steadily along the big valley and by six o’clock had not come to our turn-off to the Besa; at least we didn’t think so. We crossed streams several times but none had a camp that we could see. The day had turned into a thirty-mile grind, too far for tender muscles. I thought perhaps we were trying to prove up to a macho wilderness traveler image too fast. Camp was set next to the trail on an open pine bench. We tended to the packhorses first. Always unload the packhorses first; the saddle horses can wait.

“Hey, you better come over and look at this,” Brian beckoned as he examined Speck’s side. “Looks like a blister.”

Just great, I thought as I walked over to Speck. Only our second day.

Then Bill moaned as he slid the sawbuck off the brown horse. “Same thing over here.”

I examined Speck and found a hand-sized swollen spot from the saddle contact. The brown packhorse so fondly called jerk or puke had a slight swell from the front cinch. We were dejected. We expected sores; the horses had to get tough; but not on the second day.

“What do you think the problem is?” Brian searched for logic. “I don’t think it’s the pack,” I said. “They seem to ride o.k.” “They sure haven’t been slipping or anything.” Bill added, “I think maybe the packs are too heavy; they’re not used to it.” “We sure don’t want to lose Speck,” I advised.

“That’s for sure,” Bill agreed. “We’re damn lucky to have him.” “The brown one’s not so bad. Why don’t we give Speck tomorrow off.” Brian suggested. We examined the horses further and Bill was concerned.

“You know, if this is any indication, you realize this is only the second day; we could be in big trouble.”

The night came softly, so quietly and so pleasant. The song of horse bells settled concerns and the flicker of campfire flames danced waltzes with the shadows on tents and boughs. I thought of her. She fought bravely towards the front of a busy mind and heart. For a moment she reached out and touched my heart, and it was sorrowful, and my mind knew better and forced her behind the ranks of immediate concern. The campfire would prove better meditation, as it has since man became the keeper of fire.

Much emphasis has come of fire’s role in the development of modern man because of its ability to heat and cook. But what about the significance of the fireside as a place for discussion; the meeting table by where minds leaped forward from scheming, planning, assorting, agreeing and reaching cooperative decisions that resulted in attitudes and actions? Imagine the bonds of friendship welded, the ceremonies performed, the rituals agreed upon, the hunts planned, the food-getting relations developed, the shelters constructed, the development of tools and craft, and so much more that grew from discussion around the warm hearth of the simple campfire.

We lounged by the fire. “We’ve only begun,” Bill reflected, “and already it feels like we’re way out here.”

“We are,” Brian grinned from between a moustache and eight o’clock shadow. “About forty miles out here.”

“But it really feels like it; yesterday was a buzz.” Bill contested. “I know.” I sat up and warmed another side of my face. “It feels like I am really and truly here for the first time.”

“Gee guys,” Brian still grinned, “don’t get sentimental on me now.”

I changed the subject. “So, do you have enough room in your tent?

You know, there’s lots of room in the Whelan.”

“No, we’re o.k.” Bill said. “If Brian would just forget about Lynn and quit trying to hug me. He keeps asking me to put my shorts on backwards.”

“Sure, Bill,” Brian retaliated, “and if you’d quit farting, maybe my eyes would stop burning:”

“Oh sure,” Bill chortled, “listen, after a deluxe meal of macaroni puke I assume no gastronomical responsibility.”

We grew distant from the words of our conversation. Each face loomed a thoughtful orange beacon for man’s accent.

“Well, the weather’s sure good, eh? Considering how lousy it’s been,” I said.

“I know,” Bill continued, “can you imagine the difference it would make if it decided to rain like it was coming up here?”

“Stay in the tent all day,” Brian advised. “Then I could play with myself while tasting your farts.”

“There you go playing with yourself again. Lynn, Lynn, Lynn. You’re gonna have to learn to control your biological urges.”

“Damn,” Brian said, “Forgot the salt peter.”

The night was deep with sleep but the gremlins of the early morning stole the darkness and pried open my eyelids. What sixth sense beckoned my awakening? Something stirred close to my head; too close. My heart jumped. I took quick stock of my situation. My toque was still snug on my submerged head and I lay on my right side with the gray dawn sneaking in through a crack in my sleeping bag. I remembered placing the axe along the top of my bag and the slug shotgun along the side of my bag, now behind me; the same side the noise was on.

It shuffled again. No mistake about it, a loud rustle in the leaves behind my head. God, whatever it was, was moving closer. My heart began to pound against my wishes. Think, think, should I turn slowly and sneak the gun. No. No way. It would hear or see my first movement; I wouldn’t have a chance, an invitation to get snuffed right in my bag. Damn it was close. Why did it have to be so close? Why couldn’t I have woke up a minute sooner?

It began to move again. Oh God, it’s sniffing and scratching right behind my head! Fear gripped me and in spite of my cool I was frozen,

paralyzed. Oh God, no. It's clawing my bag! And then I could feel claws brush against my toque. The blood seemed to rush from my head in cartwheels and my eyes cringed shut. The claws scratched and the sniffing confirmed a greater horror. Oh God, why so soon. Why now? We've only just begun. Please, please, not now; not yet. Blood pounded my temples. Please, please, don't bite my head. Just don't bite my head; my legs, anything, just don't bite my head. I felt a pressure squeeze up against the back of my head. A hundred thoughts flew through my mind in an instant; move, fast, grab the gun. No, no, yell for Bill and Brian. No, no, stay quiet. Where's my knife? It should be here by my pillow; stick him under the front leg, you know where. Don't think of anything, just stick him. C'mon you bastard, you think I'm easy meat? You son-of-a-bitch; not without a fight!

I forced my eyes open. Oh God. The lighted slit was gone. Instead there were hairs; long, brown quivering hairs. I shut my eyes. Oh God, a grizzly. Please, please, not my head, not my head. Give me a chance, that's all, just give me a chance.

The pressure was gone. It was quiet. Move, move, now. No, you fool, he's watching, waiting. I forced open my eyes again. There were no hairs. Where is he? Now's my chance; I have to move, now, don't wait; slowly for the axe, turn on your belly and feel for the axe. My motion seemed an eternity, every instant my last. I felt the axe. Ok you bugger. I opened my eyes and pulled back the folds of my sleeping bag. The campsite leaped into view. Oh my God. There it is. A bloody brown porcupine!

“Bill! Brian! There's a porcupine attacking our camp!”

“What?” someone muffled. “Whatza? A bear?” someone mumbled.

“No, a porcupine!” I grabbed a confused running shoe and pitched it with amazing velocity. Whump! It struck the equally confused porcupine. I took a few hurried steps toward the saddletree.

“What's going on out there?” Bill yelled. “I told you, a porcupine!” I yelled back. “What's that? A porcupine?”

I took stock of my situation. My heart began to beat regular and I thought that sanity should prevail. “Well, uh, what if it chews the saddles; he’s headed for the leather. They chew leather you know; one chewed my stirrups bad a couple of years ago.”

“Shoot im,” someone said.

“What? With my shotgun? Use your .22.”

By this time the unconcerned porcupine had climbed up the tree with the saddle pole and saddles.

“You think we should shoot him?” Bill asked.

“I don’t think he’s gonna listen if we ask him not to eat our saddles, and I don’t feel like taking him for a walk.”

Bill got up and bid the porcupine farewell. I lay quietly in my bag and promised to cherish life forever. We all went back to sleep until well into the morning. The regimented traveling hours I had so strongly suggested and defended were quickly becoming the laughingstock of tired bodies, sore horses and even porcupines.

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Speck frolicked in his packless freedom rushing up and down the line of horses. “Hey you big turkey!” I whistled a stone that came from a collection stored in my pocket for just such occasions. Whap! The stone smacked his pack box and startled all the horses, but best of all, Speck. Horses understand physical imposition much better than English. Of course, they live in a very physical world, although they do have an explicit and even a subtle form of verbal communication. It consists of whinnies for hello and acknowledgement, snickers for approval, snorts for dissatisfaction, whinnies for concern and farts for no reason at all. Speck acknowledged my threat and waited for a gentleman-like entrance back into line.

One-half hour from morning’s camp, a large stream ran over a red-pebbled bed and cut our cat trail. In the spruce, a few yards beyond the

creek, some long tent ridgepoles had been leaned for rot-proof protection. This must be the place. Yes, there was the trail inconspicuously leading into a willow flat on our right. Ha! at last! Past our man-made trail into the big, beautiful wilderness country beyond. God's country. Ha! Ha! How I've waited for you! Stop us, just try and stop us! We've got your number sucker!

Ahead in the great distance a mountain rampart with peaks in endless directions would soon force us north or south; the Besa River riding along below us in a similar direction. It was north down the Besa that we must ride, and likewise the trail must turn.

I turned off the cat trail into the willows. I looked back to see Brian and Bill watching us melt into willow thickets. Swish went the willows against pack boxes. I strained to hear questions from Bill and Brian about the choice of my route, but there were none. Swish went the willows against their saddle horses and packhorses as they rode onto the willowy trail. Clink, clink, clink, the last of the steel horse's shoes clattered with the exposed rock on the cat trail and then came the pleasant plod of feet on soil. We drifted above the willow tops smoothly. Nothing in this grand and powerful mountain display paid any notice of our humble entrance upon the paths that belonged as much to the children of Mother Nature as it could have to human intruders. A westerly breeze watered my eyes, spiders crawled along my spine and scalp, and humour tickled my chest. I giggled thinking about all of the aimless trails clear through from here to Siberia. We sifted along so saintly, only the pock of hooves to mark our path.

The sea of willows maintained themselves as we dropped down to the Besa River. A pretty yellow finch bobbed and dipped over our heads in wonder of our flotilla. The scenery was as fine as any that could be drawn with the finest sable brush. The grand array of Rockies across the Besa proved a background finer than any canvas. We dropped steadily until finally the trail led us through large poplars bordering the river. The rush of the river spoke loudly from between the bark of the big trees. Undergrowth

founded in the gravelly ground and a canopy of large heart-shaped leaves starved the sun seekers and dappled shadows on the ground.

We glimpsed the river at odd moments and it seemed deep and solemn. The river was obviously in flood from recent glacier melt. The glaciers that brightly decorated nearby mountains threw down a force to be reckoned with. We knew we would have to cross soon and we knew the best thing going for us was the intelligent choice of the crossing place, but I supposed the best crossing would be where the trail led us to cross. The horses sweated lightly under snug cinches and they nor us suspected of the rude awakening destined at the first river crossing.

The trail kicked off a dirt bank and lost itself on the rock of a gravel wash. Water teased and jabbed at the little holes between those stones at the water line. I got off Lucky and waited for the pack string. The outfit clambered onto the gravel and twitched ears and turned heads up and down the river.

“Well,” I sounded above the din of the river. “I guess this is it.” We examined the lay of the water. There is such a thing as reading river crossings for horses, much as a canoeist would read the water for the passage of a canoe.

Generally, you want the horses to keep their footing, unless you know you are going to have to swim, then you want a good place to exit, slightly down stream. Avoid large boulders. Look for the type of waves as the indicator’ of the depth and size of the boulders beneath the waves. Examine the rise and run, the pre-rapid run, the rapid descent, and the following pool. Nearly always the crossing and ease of exit is best just above the start of a rapid. But the system loses itself when the far bank does not cooperate. If the water runs deep against a steep bank the horses cannot climb out and with a frustrated horror will surge their way downstream. There are many graves that lay testimony to the result of horse and rider lost to struggle in a river.

I declared, “It doesn’t look too wide.” Brian and Bill reserved comment.

“I don’t think they’ll have to swim much, maybe just before they climb out there.” I pointed to a little dead channel of muddy water that crept from a slash in the clay bank and fingered into the river between clay pads.

“I don’t know,” Bill shielded his eyes from the afternoon sun and squinted to the far side. He raised his voice in struggle with the bold river. “What if we miss that landing? Looks pretty mean downstream.”

“Well,” I forced, “if we just start up a little, and just swim a little to that spot, we should be ok.”

I reached down and began to unlace my boots. “Stan, maybe we should look for a better crossing.”

“Where?” My response was abrupt. “It didn’t look any better what we just rode along, and this is where the trail crosses. Look at that big bank down there, we can’t stay on this side.”

The horses stood, glad for a rest, swishing tails and generally unconcerned. Brian stiffened in his saddle.

“Maybe this is the place where we ride down the river and come back to the same side, the double-crossing Jerry was talking about.”

“If it is, the river is too high anyway.”

“Yea.” Bill added. “I’m sure not about to float around that bend to find out. This river couldn’t have been this high when Jerry came down here. No way.”

“O.k. look,” I tightened my grip on the packhorse lead rope. “I may as well try. Just wait to see what happens.”

It’s an obedient saddle horse that will take my word for every guided step through bog, mud, gnarled branch and steep grade. It is a sorry saddle horse that doesn’t. Lucky would have plenty of opportunity in the hundreds of miles ahead to be a sorry horse, but here at the Besa River, he was obedient.

We rode upstream a hundred feet and rode into the river angling slightly downstream. Boulders played with footing but the strong solid legs won over each slip. Water rose steadily. It pulled against Lucky's knees and twenty yards from the far side caught hard on his belly and splashed against my boots. I lifted my legs jockey style and gripped the saddle horn. Then, suddenly, Lucky dropped forward and disappeared, head and all. I gasped and groped as ice cold water grabbed my groin and waist. In the same instant, Lucky's head flew out of the water twisting and chucking. Water sprang from flared nostrils and Lucky surged forward against the push of the river.

"Hey-ya" I screamed. "Go, go, go" With no thought but survival itself Lucky lunged in fear. The pack rope wrenched hard against white knuckles and I glanced back at the packhorse that had its big white eyes aimed downstream. Lucky had the same notion and I wrenched the reins hard against his big neck. With no time for debate Lucky found muddy ground and fought up the muddy bank. The horse stood for a moment shaking with surprise and fear, then shook the evil water off like wet dogs do.

Bill yelled something I could not interpret. "What?" I yelled back. "Yell louder, I can't hear." "How is it?"

"Wet! Cold!"

"Do you think we can make it?"

"Yees," I shook my head up and down. "Start higher up; don't let your horse's head down!"

They stood silent. I didn't think they heard me.

"C'mon, let's go" The river mocked my effort with its constant roar.

They still stood there, not discussing, just standing. "C'mon!"

"Stan," Bill sounded barely above the chop. "I think I'm gonna look some- where else."

"What for?" I screamed. "I already made it!" The longer we stood and talked the more the violent wickedness of the river unsettled us and played with decision. Bill and Brian discussed something beyond the strain of my ears.

“The heck with this,” I babbled just loud enough for Brian and Bill to gather my frustration. I gathered the rope of my packhorse, tied him to a tree and plowed back into the river. We swept down quickly but after a dozen yards or so, Lucky found the rocky bottom and pulled up the gentle gravel bar next to Brian and Bill.

“Here,” I hooked an arm behind the loose rope of a packhorse. I’ll take another horse; let’s go.”

We headed into the water again, this time followed closely by Brian and his packhorse. Again we dropped into the bottomless murk but this time Lucky kept his head above and we struggled onto the mud without the previous shock. I turned just in time to see Brian’s face bent in fear as his horse forced his head downstream. Down the middle of the river they swept; Brian sawing on the reins and his horse twisted and terrified in sprayed water.

“Noooo!” I yelled. “Turn him!” My echoes dashed hopelessly against far banks. At first it appeared they would drift beyond sight around a sharp bend but then the packhorse caught solid ground and reefed back hard. Brian and his horse flipped back and submerged.

“Oh my God,” came hidden in my breath. Then, like a cork in sewer water, Brian and the horse popped to the surface. Brian swam complete with leather chaps and boots like a buoyant snake for the far side. It seemed incredible that the heavy wet chaps and boots would allow such buoyancy. He hit the brush-covered bank with speed and grabbed onto a far-reaching sweep, still in the water but past the grip of death. The packhorse managed to head back and trotted with grunts and whinnies back to his buddies.

Bill yelled for my attention. I’m going back upstream.” “What?” I cried in disbelief.

“I’m, going to look for a crossing upstream!”

“What for? Brian’s already across. Lead two and the third will follow. C’mon, let’s go!” I beckoned with my arm.

“It’s too dangerous,” Bill yelled, and then he rode off with his packhorse up-river. The two remaining horses did not follow.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” I screamed in anger as I plunged again into the river. Once across, I grabbed both horses and crossed for the last time. The packhorses stood drenched and shivering with cold and fear. Lucky breathed deeply and I rubbed his neck with appreciation; he was a regular hero.

I sat down exhausted and numb from ice-cold water. I removed wet boots and clothing and dug into the top pack for dry goods. The pack boxes sat at an awkward angle.

“Stand still,” I shoved the horses off balance as I lifted the box. Geez, the darn things weighed a hundred pounds. I unpacked the horses and water rushed out from the pack boxes. The top packs with our clothing were dry, thank goodness.

The horses perked their ears toward the forest and Bill appeared, weaving through the trees and leading his packhorse. “One hell of a lot better up-stream; didn’t have to swim at all.” He was dry.

“Where’s Brian?” he glanced around.

“Geez,” I thought, “where is Brian?” I looked toward the river. “I don’t know; he should be here by now; maybe we better go look.” Brush crackled in the forest and we looked to see Brian struggling with chaps in hand, in sock feet and soaked to the skin.

He walked by us “What happened?”

He said nothing and sat by his horses; then lay back taking deep breaths. “You alright? What happened? We were just coming to see if you were alright.”

Brian appeared flushed and shivering yet strangely calm. Bill walked over and sat beside Brian. “You lose your boots?”

“Yea,” Brian put his arms over his eyes. “Yea, I did.”

“That didn’t look very good. I think we got off lucky,” Bill said matter-of-fact. “I guess I’m a little surprised,” Brian said softly. “I nearly

bought it; I thought you might have come to give me a hand.” “I saw you make shore; I thought you were ok. I didn’t think anything was wrong,” I said.

Bill added, “I went up and found a better crossing. What happened?”

“Well, first of all I never made the shore.” “What!” I said.

“I grabbed a branch but couldn’t lift myself out. There was no bottom. The water went under the shore, under the bank. I kicked my boots off. I wanted to let go. I don’t know how I lifted myself out. I didn’t think I could do it.”

Bill was solemn. He got up and dug for dry clothes. Brian was silent. The sky was gloomy.

“Well, now what do you think, Stan?” Bill jerked off his wet socks. “You still think it was a good crossing?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means Brian nearly got killed. What are we supposed to do now?” Bill shook his head in disbelief. “You don’t seem to care about much except maybe that camera of yours. I’m just wondering if it doesn’t make sense for us to head back.”

“What! Because we’re all wet? This is only the first crossing!” “That’s right,” Bill reddened. “The first crossing and already one of us nearly bought it!”

Brian lay still, pulling his mind and body through the shock of his ordeal.

“Bill, we knew these things were going to happen; I don’t see it as a reason for quitting.”

“Oh c’mon Stan; he doesn’t even have any boots now.”

“Is that all? Boots, you’re worried about boots~ He’s got rubber boots and runners; he can even use ours.”

Bill mocked a laugh. “Get serious, across the Cordillera in gum boots! I can see it now.”

“It’s not as if he can’t get another pair. There’s bound to be some’ in Ft. Ware that he can get.”

“Ft. Ware? What do we know about Fort Ware? We don’t even know if there’s a store there.”

“Ya, well, Bill, there’s people there, and people wear boots.

There’s bound to be an extra pair we can buy.”

I was furious that there was talk of quitting so soon but tried to contain my anger. Go ahead and quit, dammit, I thought in the back of my mind. We both know I got no right to decide for anyone but myself. Brian began to shift uncomfortably. We knew this would be his decision. Now was a time for courage. He sat up and put arms on his knees and hands on his face and said, “I’m o.k. I can wear my gum boots.”

It was a good trail to the river and we expected it would be a good trail beyond the river. But there was not much of a trail at all. It was a sorry afternoon as we picked an obstacle course down the riverside. Brush and deadfall frequently forced renegotiation. A large branch hung loosely. Lucky closed his eyes, bent his neck down and pushed through. Like ten branches before it, I grabbed it, grunted an effort, and twisted it to the ground. All sorts of brush and sticks; dead ones, green ones, skinny ones, fat ones, gnarly ones, smooth ones, and I wrenched them, slapped them, and busted them.

A thick stump reached out from a dangerous angle and caught my right thigh, bruising my leg under the heavy leather chaps. I pivoted the leg to hang loose and pulled the lead rope. “Whump!” The packhorse banged its box and jostled to the side. Brian followed close, his slumped figure unconcerned jello on the back of a horse. “Whump!” sounded his packhorse. Brian remained expressionless. His gumboots stuck black and shiny from under his chaps.

“Damn,” I muttered. Snap went another pesky branch. No way. No way, no way am I gonna feel responsible. What the heck is a pair of boots one way or another? A hollow sadness framed my stomach and pleaded with my mind. Look guys, I thought. I don’t know what you think; that’s your

business. But I've had enough. And it has nothing to do with caring; you know I care. You know as well as I the pain from dealing with friends, and so what you do is your business. I'm not gonna criticize or condemn. You live with yourself. You wanna quit? Then quit. I refuse. I refuse to confuse myself with the anguish of trying to understand your problems, your skeletons in your closet. I can't do anything about them anyway!

We rode through a glade of aspen poplar and into a grassy meadow.

A trail took hold, first cutting tall thin stalked grasses, then at the far end of the meadow, disappearing into a soggy green carpet. Lucky's foot broke through the mat and into the mire. He groped and lunged, all legs sucking and pushing, throwing brown loam from the suck of his hooves. Now, at the edge of the coming forest, we leaped for solid footing but instead, drove headlong into a tangled deadfall. Lucky and the pack horse stood knee deep, shivering and sides heaving.

Brian and Bill stood back. "Heeya!" Bill directed the horses on solid ground and into the woods. They weaved past me through heavy timber.

"Better over there?" "Yup." They rode by.

"Let's go!" I cranked the reins around and we fumbled back through the mire and onto hard ground.

It was well past lunch. Three hungry stomachs won over indifference and the musing's of three wilderness travelers. The horses were tied at the lunch place. The river hummed along clearly, a sorry reminder. Brian sprawled out on the moss while Bill chose a downed log. Bill put a piece of sliced canned meat on a slice of store-bought bread. "I'm gonna walk to the river," Bill said as he handed Brian the meat. "Somehow I can't believe the trail being this bad. It must have crossed back somewhere."

Several minutes later Bill returned. "I'm sure it's over there, but I don't know how easy it's gonna be to cross."

We finished a quick lunch, tightened the cinches and rode to the river's edge. The water ran straight and even with no rapids, and only the steady mound of waves reaching up and clipping along.

“Let’s go Lucky!” I spurred my horse for what appeared a gentle far bank. “You gonna try?” Bill watched me hit the water.

“May as well.”

Lucky walked easily on-the stone bottom. The water split smoothly around his legs. We deepened steadily until the water caught his belly. We pushed along, my right foot high above the curling water on the upstream side. We were across. We clambered up the bank and stepped square onto a perfect trail.

“Hey,” I screamed across. “It’s here!”

The valley broadened to the point of uncertainty. We road into the end of a large field and from all directions mountains and valleys filtered towards us. The large field became a huge field, unnaturally flat, and at the center sprawled an assortment of barrels and boxes, leftovers from airstrip maneuvers.

“This is the airstrip, eh?” Brian commented as we pierced the smooth gravel and dirt strip. The horses fanned out and pranced gladness for losing the confines of a brushy footpath. Bill rode in lead, but with a note of hesitation. His horse jumped with a start. “Hey, what’s your problem?”

I laughed. “Your lead rope is stuck under your horse’s tail.”

Bill held his horse still and yanked on the rope. The horse jumped a crow hop as the horse rope jerked free. “Hey, you dipstick!” Bill appeared to have entered a little britches rodeo. “Settle down. Hey!” We stopped to gather our wits. “I guess Keily Creek must be west up that valley there.” Bill pointed up a major valley.

“What do you figure? Should we make camp here?”

I scanned the trees for the cabin I knew should be here. “Over there,” I pointed to the glare of something metal. “There should be a cabin here if this is an air strip.”

Keily Creek should have been clean and clear, but it rushed a smokey whirl only feet in front of the cabin. Nicely limbed spruce stood aimlessly around the cabin patiently waiting as horse ties.

“We may as well unload. Even if we don’t use the cabin we can camp here.”

“O.k. Lucky, today’s your lucky day.” The heavy saddle slipped off smoothly. Brian wrestled with his top pack. “Here, let me grab this side.” We walked the pack off the back of the horse and dumped it on the ground.

A clink, clink, rattled in his pack. “Brian?” I asked as Bill looked on. “What’s that? You have glass in there?”

“Oh, dunno, just something in my pack.” Bill had a grin but went on unloading gear.

“Well,” I said, “let’s go have a look at that cabin.” “Looks pretty new, its not rotten or anything.”

“I wonder if anyone’s around.”

“I doubt it, not until hunting season.”

“From the way that old man was talking, they don’t come here much even in hunting season.”

“No, there’s not much horse crap around here.” “Is this still their hunting area?”

“I dunno, thought so.”

I stepped on a stone and my legs buckled like I had broken kneecaps.

“Geez that’s hard on my knees; how’s your legs?”

“I feel real good,” Bill said. “I thought I’d be a lot more stiff than this.”

“There ya go,” Brian said. “Playin’ with yourself again.” “Gawd, Stan, do you believe this guy?” Bill shook his head.

“Brian, you’re a genuine perv.”

“O.k. I’m sorry; let’s see, o.k. I’m not very stiff either, but I’d feel a lot better if had my boots.”

We chuckled and Bill kept an eye on Brian to see if his humour was for real.

“Sure, go ahead, laugh,” Brian said. “You’ll be cryin’ later.” “Oh, and how’s that?” Brian ignored us and began to sing “Squaws along the Yukon

are good enough for me...” Bill cut in, “wearin’ those gum boots; please Lord give me three...”

“Just wait,” Brian tried hard to hold back his laugh. “Just wait.” They smiled at each other then headed toward the cabin.

“Anybody here?” Bill knocked softly. “Dave’s not here!” Brian bellowed.

“Brian! What if someone’s in there?”

“Sure, and there’s a McDonalds just past those trees.”

Bill gently lifted the latch and forced open the door. “Creeeeee,” the opened door to a black hole. Cabin smells wafted to our nostrils; stale flour, musky blankets, old magazines, dirty dish towels and mouse turds. Our eyes adjusted to the sight of an orderly interior with the appropriate fixtures.

“Looks alright, eh?” I said as we moved inside.

“I get the big bed,” Brian said, “and you two can share the other one.”

“You don’t think they’ll mind?” Bill said as he tested a chair. “O.k.,” I said, “I get the bed and you can sleep with the horses.”

We snooped like kids in a candy store, touching and turning whatever was handy. Brian sifted through a shelf over the bed. “Hey,” he grabbed a magazine. “Look at this guys. Far out. Recreation,” and he flipped open a Penthouse centerfold right before our eyes.

She was gorgeous. Soft blonde hair that floated curls around her shoulders. Big, bright, blue eyes and a cheerleader smile that seemed to say, “lay back and don’t worry about a thing.” Round sensuous lips played open my mouth and a lean dashing tongue mimicked the finest sensitivities of passionate sex. Her full round breasts perked proudly, culminating in the frankness of petite girlish nipples. Her tiny waist cried out for the flow of my delicate touch while her navel laughed with carefree giggles. And her hips, oh those hips, they should have implied motherhood but instead defied puberty and rebelled vivaciously lean, the forever friend of a sixteen-year-old nympho.

“Get that away from me!” I screamed and ran out the door.

I trotted over to the gear pile and grabbed the cream healing salve and Blue Kote aerosol disinfectant. The horses tugged on their tied leads and shivered wondering who was going to get the spray this time. “O.k. Brown Puke, show me your cinch sore.” I reached up to caress his neck. His nostrils flared at the smell of the medicine and he jerked wildly on the lead, then shoved me over and cocked his hind leg for battle. “Well you bugger; you mean bugger.” I lashed the thick work rope to a tree in front of the horse, then walked around his rear and up front again. Then I pulled the rope snug forcing the little packhorse into a treed prison. Twice more I tied the horse tight with the big rope. “Now, sucker, take this!” Psssst went the spray can. The horse jumped madly but had nowhere to go. “Ah ha!” Psssst, psssst, psssst.

“Stan! What the heck’s going on out there?” Bill hollered. “Nothing, just giving the brown people-hater some medicine. “Come here.”

“In a sec.”

“You better hurry. Brian’s in trouble!” “What’s wrong?”

“I’m gonna kill him.”

“O.k. I’ll give you a hand in a sec.”

“Better hurry, before he drinks all the rum!” “What rum?” I ran into the cabin.

“Do you believe this guy; he brought a bottle of rum! And the cheapo won’t give us any.”

Brian sat resting in a chair with his legs crossed. He had a silly grin on his hair-grizzled face. A full bottle of rum sat on the table. He looked like a Centre Street rubby. “You shoulda brought your own,” he smiled and poured himself a shot in a small glass hustled from a shelf.

“You snake.” Bill whined.

“Ohhh, guys, you don’t really want any do you?” He sniffed his prize. “I was gonna wait till Bedeaux Pass to celebrate, but what the heck, it’s Friday night.”

“No!” My eyes bulged wide. Invigorating rum molecules landed in my nostrils. “He’s serious! He’s not gonna give us any!”

“Hey look, I warned you. I told you you’d get yours. See what happens when you bug me about Lynn.”

“Ohhh,” Bill and I rhymed, “C’mon, be a pal.”

“Well,” he sipped and smacked his lips. “Tell you what; promise never to bug me again, and I don’t have to make supper tonight and I’ll give you a taste.”

“Sure, buddy, ol’ pal,” Bill winked at me.

Brian poured us a small shot each and we drank it exactly as fast as Brian did his. Then we had another round, then another, and another. A half hour later I pulled out the movie camera and set it up in front of the cabin so we could say hello to our moms. Bzzzzz, the camera hummed. “Hurry Bill, it’s your turn.” Bill staggered in front of the camera, bent over and red faced, “Hiya ma, howya doin’” he waved, then buckled over as we roared with laughter. “O.k. Brian your turn!” Brian walked straight and serious, peered into the lens of the camera and thought his reflection was his mother. “Mom, is that you? Hi, mom,” he held his hand up. “It’s me, Brian, ah... ah...” He started to laugh and crawled out of the picture. We howled. Then we got together, looked into the camera and waved hello to everyone out there in TV land.

“Oh Geez,” I said. “My stomach’s sore. I can’t laugh anymore. Let’s go and finish off what’s left.”

“Naw,” Brian headed for the door. “I think I’ll save it for Bedeaux Pass. Maybe the Muskwa, if you’re good.”

“What? You can’t be serious. That’s cruelty. That’s mean.” “Bill, he’s serious; knock some sense into him.”

“Oh c’mon, Brian.” Bill said, “If Lynn was here you wouldn’t do this.” We held back chuckles.

“O.k. guys, that’s it; no way now. Suffer.”

The following day was a day of rest, rejuvenation and drying. We rested sore legs and fannies and settled jostled stomachs. The horses celebrated in the biggest field they had known since the home pasture. The cabin lifted our spirits. It was an assembly of luxury amidst the wilds. The stove, table, beds, chairs, towels, even cutlery, filled nicely the spirit of social belonging that we had so abruptly lost.

There were two holes in the plywood outhouse seat, one that said “his” and one that said “hers”. I peed in the ‘his’ and sat on the ‘hers’. There was even toilet paper under the Edwards coffee can. I had ridden hundreds of rough miles and some of them in very long days, and I had never acquired a saddle sore. But now, there was definitely something bothering me down there, down there where its always dark. I searched for and found the welt I expected. “Ow!” I probed it gently, running my forefinger up, across and down. It was firm, and shaped like a Volkswagen, and it was tender, oh so tender. Must be full of blood, I thought. Neat trick. Only four days riding and this happens! I pulled my pants on and went fishing.

For the next few days we would ride the back of a three- humped camel. First up Keily Creek a few miles then over the ten-mile hump of a 6,500 foot pass and down to Richards Creek.

Then in the same fashion over to the Prophet River and next, over to the Muskwa River, the river that would lead up to Bedeaux Pass. Each camel valley to our left led directly west up to rugged knife- edged mountains. We left the cabin at the crack of dawn.

“Piece of cake.” I told Lucky as his powerful hind legs pushed up a steep dirt bank. It was a good trail, an obvious trail. We followed a tiny stream upward in a willowy draw and we knew at its head would be a mountain saddle and pass. Trees gave way to harsh exposed clay and we topped over what we thought was the pass to find we were on a false rim, separated from the distant pass by a huge willow and grass plateau. The early morning fog seemed to coagulate into large blots and vapors that lifted off shiny slabs of mountain stone like serpents’ tongues.

“Hey,” Bill said, as he got off his horse to rest. “Look over there.” To our right a formidable mass of granite and shale cliffs and peaks were embalmed in an enormous blanket of fog. The fog weaved and curled around ragged stone protrusions. It was a grand mirage, an eerie ritual planned specially for our passing. Then I saw them. No, then I heard them. Later I saw them. “Hooowoooo... Hooowooooooo...” My God, it was a mournful sound. We riveted and strained to see them. “There!” I muffled a cry. “There! Over there!”

“Where?”

“Look, up that light green grass slide; see, they’re just coming up from the bottom. Look, they’re coming out of the fog now. They’re headed into that Rocky face...”

“Ya, now I see them. I see four. Four wolves.”

The wolves stopped. They stood perched on rock ledges. Fog wafted up and around them. They were the actors in this special theatre and they spoke of the wild spirit, the bringing of death, the survival of those most vicious. They themselves were gray ghosts. “Howooooooo...”

Hooooowoooo... howw-wooooo...” Then, as mysteriously as they appeared, they melted into the fog. Three gray wolves, and one white, a huge white - white as the pockets of snow that shimmered above.

As we rode across the willow plateau the warm sun burned the fog and by noon exposed a candy-blue sky. We struck paths and followed them, but after two lost miles discovered they were caribou trails leading deceptively towards folly. We doubled back and rode for a saddle that had little choice but to be our pass. As we neared the summit, the wind quickened and clouds sailed by. Finally, on top of the saddle, we pulled the map. Brian clenched the wind- rattled treasure. There was no grass; just dwarf lichen, so the horses stood and rested, with manes and tails flung horizontal. “Woosh,” my cowboy hat blew off my head. “Auugh”, the neck string jammed against my wind-pipe.

“Quite a sight, eh?” Bill’s voice strained against the howl of wind. “Ya, I wish it wasn’t so windy.”

“Feels like it’s gonna lift me right off.” “It’s happened before.”

“Just straight down the valley; that big valley that cuts across down there must be Richards Creek.”

“How far do you figure?”

“I dunno. What do you think; about seven or eight miles?” “Sounds about right.”

“Too bad there’s no trail here.”

“Ya, we’re probably better off riding down the ridge aways before dropping down to the valley bottom.”

“I think so.”

“Once we’re in the valley, we’ll hit the trail again.”

We rode the ridge briskly, braced in our saddles against the battering wind. About a mile along the ridge and up among the mountain tops we saw what should have been a hallucination. “Look at that!” Brian pointed excitedly. A bull moose trotted across a large bald plateau. It looked ludicrous, a horse on a pool table. “What the heck is he doing up here?”

“Beats me; unreal eh?”

“Maybe he’s trying to get into the wind, out of the flies.” “Why is he running? I don’t think he saw us.”

“The wind is blowing our scent.”

We angled down from the ridge toward the floor of the crammed valley that would lead down to Richards Creek. At tree line we found ourselves looking down a quarter mile descent. I yelled back to Brian and Bill.

“Going down this steep is too hard on the horses; we’d better walk them down.”

“C’mon Lucky; Packy you can go free.” With lead rope in-hand I stepped out and slid five yards over willow and moss. I jammed my feet in the steep grade then leaped to the side in desperation as Lucky came barreling behind me like a dog sitting on his rump. He jammed his stiff front

legs into the ground and halted abruptly, precisely on the spot I had vacated a second before. “Hey, guys!” I yelled up at the unseen outfit while rubbing dirt from my neck collar. “This is scary. Stay sharp and be ready to jump out of the way.”

Our seven-horse circus slid down the dangerous slope. Once I reached the bottom I hollered directions. The big green slope was ripped with mud trails that the horse hooves churned. It appeared that a herd of caribou had migrated down a neck breaker after taking lessons from lemmings.

On the valley bottom, we searched for a trail, but instead found choking deadfall.

“I can’t believe it:” Brian spoke with dirt streaked on his cheek and mud splattered on his glasses.

“Can’t believe what?” I said as I turned backwards and forced myself between needle-lined spruce trees. “What happened to the trail?”

“I think we should have stayed on the ridge a lot longer.”

“I think so,” Bill agreed. “Stan, wait up. I’m gonna grab my axe.” I turned to answer him and noticed Bill favoring his left leg. “What happened to your leg? Are you alright?”

“Oh, horse clipped my ankle; I think I’ll live.”

We halted and Bill lifted his axe from the scabbard. The horses stood patient. As usual they were glad for a break from the scratching brush. I massaged Lucky’s chin. He jerked his head up and perked his ears. “Hey, what’s a matter fella? Don’t you like my scratchin’” He looked into the brush. “Cluck, cluck, cluck” came a noise from the bush.

“Hey, guys, there’s a partridge in there.”

“Is it a Ruffy or a Spruce Grouse?” Brian asked. “I dunno; sounds like a Ruffy.”

We looked at each other and our mouths began to water.

“What do you think? It would be nice to have some fresh grouse.” “O.k.” I said. “If it’s a Ruffy.” I slid the shotgun from its scabbard and felt my way towards the bird. There it was. It bobbed its head with each

nervous step. Its tail was fanned and it measured the threat with a beady black eye. It was a Ruffled Grouse. Boom!

By supper time our band of sweaty, scratched, brush pushers, emerged from under ten-foot alders into a beautiful open valley beside a pristine mountain stream. I slipped my foot into the stirrup.

“I’m gonna ride.”

“May as well, can’t dance.” Brian said as he and Bill lifted themselves into the saddle. With the height added with the horses under us, we immediately noticed white shiny barrels in the middle of a poplar grove at the valley center.

We tied the horses at an old campsite with scattered white fuel drums.

There was no airstrip and we concluded it must have been a chopper base for oil exploration. .

“Nice grass.” Bill bent down to put hobbles on his horse. “Better than at the cabin.”

“What about that white horse?” Brian recalled an earlier discussion. “You know how hard it was to get close to her this morning? Should I hobble her?”

“I think we better,” Bill said. “It’s been hobbled before; it needs to learn some manners.” We hobbled the white pack mare and let her go. She didn’t move. “Hey,” I slapped her behind. “Get going, get!” I slapped her again and she jumped with her front feet. She struggled, then dropped to her knees in frustration. “Hey, you stupid horse!” I slapped her again and she lunged ahead onto her feet then stood, her head low and badly quivering. Bill shook his head with disappointment. “I’ve seen dumb horses before, but this one takes the cake.”

“Well,” I said, “If it stands there long enough its stomach will make it move. Let it get hungry. It’ll move... stupid horse.”

We rushed partridge stew supper in anticipation of fishing the first promising stream we had found. This was the treasure we had come for, long summer evenings spent-soaking up the finest in wilderness splendor

and peace on earth. Alpine meadow and mountain tops hugged close all around, the finest gift of geography. Richard Creek was clean and pure, and it meandered from pool to riffle like a free-spirit wanders across the land. There must be a thousand streams in identical northern settings. I had known many in northern British Columbia and the Yukon Territory and they were always precious and sometimes loaded with grayling or trout. "Plop" the small spoons and spinners hit the water; "plop, plop," We fished the evening through, sometimes watching where we cast the lure; sometimes watching a hawk or eagle streak the sky; sometimes watching the horses jangle their bells as they popped their heads above willows. We didn't catch anything in the crystal stream, but it didn't matter.

That night the last flickers of the fire cast shadows on my Whelan lean-to and I sensed that all of us had a similar thought. If the trails got worse instead of better, we were in for a bigger battle than we expected. We could hope for good trails, and we did, but the truth was, what we expected made not a lick of difference. We were subject to what abuse Mother Nature dealt us and that was that. There were two camel humps before the Muskwa. Three days later, these notes had been entered into my diary:

JULY 11

Trail from Richard Creek to Prophet was great at first, following a meadow for seven or eight miles; then, while dropping down to the Prophet, it was terrible, bog and bush. The pinto packed today and Bill rode Speck. We rode through a bog and the pinto broke through and got stuck in the mud. We hurried and took off the pack. Then three of us prying on the pinto got him out in a hurry. I said to Bill, "I wouldn't mind taking some film of us getting the horse out." He said, "If you don't mind losing a horse." So we all pulled him out in a hurry. The Prophet crossing was no problem as it is slower than the Besa. We have located a trail that should take us over to the Muskwa tomorrow. If we hope to go to the Muskwa in one day we have to

get an early start. We need a day to go smooth, please; just one good trail from beginning to end. We all feel healthy and although our gear has taken a beating, nothing is serious yet. As the days roll by “now” seems more important than past lifestyles and loves. I’ve heard it said love is really eighty percent availability. I don’t think I agree but depending on your definition of love, there could be some truth in it. Sleep well.

JULY 12

Well, we got it! Great trail to the Muskwa. We don’t know why or who, but I said please, and there it was. We made maybe thirty miles and are now camped about eight miles up the Muskwa. We rest tomorrow. Looked like good Stone Sheep country. Saw two female and two calf moose. The trails are polluted with game tracks, mostly caribou. The trail along the Muskwa seems decent; we wonder for how far. Another good sunny day. When have these mountains seen seven days of continuous sun? If God is watching then we thank you. We are in deep woods, one hundred and twenty miles from the road. Any serious illness could be catastrophic. We are in good spirits. Good night.

JULY 13

A day of rest, what should have been and what was. Slept in, took a dip in the murky Muskwa, repaired gear, and reflected. As with all reflections, they just stared back with no answers. Who made the existing trails? Bedeaux? What keeps them open? Game? Is Bedeaux Pass passable? I guess someday very soon I will know the answer to the last question. It has started to drizzle just now. About time. Looks like sock-in weather, otherwise we move tomorrow. Due to the size of this country we travel for hours and still see the same mountain. It is difficult to comprehend anything past Ware, yet, we all feel that if we reach Ware, we can reach the coast. Dear God, may love win in the hearts of my family.

CHAPTER III

GLOOM AND DOOM

It has been said that personal development occurs through one's lifetime in stages. One sort of floats through the months or years occupied by the daily tasks and thoughts at hand. Then, some profound event or events hurls one's attitudes, understandings, and activity, through a metamorphosis, a fast change, so that one is encouraged to assume a new position of mental attitude and status. As I sat in front of the fire the evening of the thirteenth, the fire crackling and wood collected, I felt that we were being forced to accept a new dimension in life: The wilderness traveler. All our lives we were led to believe in the material component of our personal existence; that we should aim our lives toward occupational and social status; become an engineer, teacher, electrician or something else useful and respectful. Buy that big house; plan that holiday; wouldn't it be nice to have that car. And the future - don't forget the future. Have you picked your retirement plan, invested in bonds, paid your health care, and maintained life insurance?

But here we were, being forced to accept the conditions of our present existence. Sure, it wasn't forever, or was it? This country was huge. Every day's travel was a speck on the map. The Pacific was not even a comprehension. It sure felt like we were out here forever. In the awesome power of rushing rivers, whistling wind, and immense mountains, we were being forced to accept our existence as a very humble existence indeed. We were not unlike the animals around us, subject to the same paths, same blessings and wrath of Mother Nature. We too were preoccupied with food and shelter. And everywhere was the normality of death. There was hardly

a day when the bones of something did not stare at us from an untimely grave. We were forced to acknowledge our own vulnerability. We could place statistics of vehicle deaths, illness, world starvation, ailments of the workforce, and our own social interactions in the proper neural groove of our minds. Since children we have been patterned to modern social behavior and we practiced the proper-programmed response. But in what places of our mind and in what corners of our hearts could we dig up the proper mental and spiritual response to the activities and thought we were now subject to?

It started to drizzle. The sky was gone. About time we had some sock-in weather. I crawled into my dacron bag, hugged my pillow and tried to understand and accept. I fell asleep.

“Yo,” I mumbled as Bill poked me awake. “Why,” I mumbled to myself, “is Bill always up so early?”

“I guess we should get going; it’s not raining.” he said. Bill fed and encouraged the campfire. Early morning light and fog from low clouds rendered the earth deathly still. In the lonely gloom before the awakening of the world, Bill spoke for the comfort of his voice. “You know, this log still had embers glowing this morning.”

Brian rustled in his nylon bag and rubbed against the inside of their tent. Bill shuffled about sorting pots then disappeared over the riverbank. “Swish, swosh,” came the sound of Bill scooping water from the shallows. He walked back to the fire rubbing his hands. “Man, is the river cold this morning!”

“Ya,” I said. “What is it? Forty miles to the glaciers?”

“That Mt. Sheffield looks pretty rugged and full of glaciers on the map.”

“Think we’ll make it there today?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t trust this country, you know what Jerry’s neighbor said, how rough it is.”

“Ya. I guess we’ll find out, should make it there in two days.” “Brian and I were talking last night,” Bill said abruptly. I looked at Bill wondering

what made this conversation with Brian any different than every other night they would converse before falling asleep.

“We were thinking that things are a lot worse than we expected.”
“What do you mean?” My pulse skipped.

“Well, for one thing, we’re making slower progress. We should have been at Bedeaux Pass by now. For another, the horses are having a harder time with the bush. These are supposed to be the best trails and they’ve been terrible. Spent most of yesterday sewing and fixing saddles. What’s it gonna be like ahead?”

“Well, it’s been rough all right; but once we get closer to Ft. Ware the people there should be keeping the trails open,” I contended.

“You don’t know that. What makes you think they use the trails at all?”

“Well, I don’t know. I just think they should be trapping and there’s supposed to be some horses there.”

“Well, Stan, I guess you can think what you want, but Brian and I just about decided to go back. Now we’re thinking if we don’t reach Bedeaux Pass by the twentieth, there’s not much point. We’ll never make the coast by October.”

“By October? What’s with these deadlines all of a sudden? We quit our jobs so we wouldn’t have to worry about deadlines! What’s a few days here or there?”

“October is winter in some of these mountains; I know what I’m talking about. I’ve seen it!”

“Maybe, and maybe not. And maybe by the coast it’s a little warmer in the mountains.”

“That’s just it. Too many maybes. This trip is just as important to us and that’s what we decided. We’re going, but we’re not going to be unrealistic about it.”

What a terrible thing, I thought to myself as I lay back on my sleeping bag in the damp morning chill. What a terrible thing.

Bill went to look for the horses and I rose and put on the coffee and porridge. Brian came out of the tent and blew his nose, then came over to the fire to warm up. “Brian, what’s this talk of quitting already?”

“We’re not quitting, we’re just looking at the way things are going. Like Bill said, there’s no point in pretending if there’s no way we can make it. But I’m not going to worry about it yet, not until we reach the pass. You know that pass is still quite a trip in itself.”

“I don’t know, I just don’t know.” I shook my head with dismay. “I’m honestly surprised that there is talk of quitting.”

“Don’t build it up, Stan. We’re not saying we’re quitting yet.” “Well, I hope not. I hope not.”

Flames groped higher as I stirred logs and sticks under the simmering porridge. The water started to boil and I deposited three scoops of coffee into it.

“Hey!” A noise barked from the bush and I jumped with a start.

Bill strode quickly into the campsite. “Did I scare you?” “No, but just a minute while I go change my shorts.”

“Save it. You’ll need to for sure when you see where the horses are.”

“Where are they?” Brian asked.

“Ya know that island about a quarter mile downstream?” “Ya.”

“They’re on it, all of ‘em.”

“What! You gotta be kidding. They got hobbles on. How could they get across! There’s no grass on that dinky little island. What did they want to go on there for?”

“I don’t know.” Bill said, “I couldn’t believe it. There’s no way they’re gonna come back, not with hobbles on.”

We ate breakfast and hurried down to the horses. I hated it when I had to rush my coffee. I was always the last one to finish coffee and wash my face. This morning I didn’t bother to wash my face.

“What are we going to do?” Brian said as we looked helplessly at the bunched up horses on the small sandy island.

“Here guys! Here fellas,” I held up the grain bucket and Brian waved the salt block. They glanced at us for a moment then resumed their standard ho hum, head low, tail-swishing-the-flies position.

I began to undress. “You going after them?” Brian said, “You sure you want to?”

“What else are we going to do?”

“You’ll freeze. That water’s cold.” Bill uncoiled the rope. “We brought it; may as well use it.”

The cold wet grass sent chills up my legs, tightened dimples on my skin and my nipples stood at attention. I lifted my arms and Bill wrapped the rope about my body in odd directions. “What are you doing? Ow!” He adjusted the rope and it slid hard over my left nipple.

“It’s a climbing sling,” Brian said as he helped Bill grab and tie the rope.

“I don’t think this is quite right,” Bill said. They stood back to assess their work. I twisted a little and the rope loosened.

“I don’t like it,” I said and tugged the rope loose. “How about a simple bowline? If I get caught up I can undo it easier.”

“Good luck,” they said as I slipped down the muddy bank.

They braced themselves and let out rope as if I was being lowered over a cliff. Mud oozed up between my toes. Frosty grass tingled my legs. The elements stimulated my senses and shocked me as my body dipped into the icy water. The coldness filled every pore as I pushed deeper, first jolting my abdomen then squeezing my chest and shortening my breath. “How is it?” someone yelled. “Hu... hu...” my voice convulsed, speechless. The rope that arched in the water behind me pulled against my waist. The water reached for my shoulders and lifted my body so that every push of a leg grew soft and buoyant. I would have to swim soon. I began to push water and then, to my surprise, the water receded and my feet once again found solid footing. “Hooray!” I rushed out of the water. “Yahoo!” I turned and shook my arms in victory.

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The final chills of the rescue still reverberated in my core and I shivered. It felt good to feel the life and warmth of Lucky under me as we plodded along this strangely wide trail. “Look how far these trees are cut from the path, look at those axe cuts and those blazes. That one on the right must be forty years old,” I yelled back to Bill and Brian.

We rode past the old sap-stained blaze that for over a hundred years must have served well as a guide post for nameless wilderness travelers, at least one. Brian said, “Oh ya, I see it. You think Bedeaux came this far with the half-tracks?”

“I doubt it,” Bill said. “From what Jerry was saying, the cutting crew was sixty miles ahead of the vehicles.”

“Crazy hey?” I shook my head. “These guys are up here cutting a path wide enough for a truck and the half-tracks broke down eighty miles back.”

“Should have had walkie-talkies,” Brian said.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Bill acknowledged. “I wonder if they had them back then.”

We rode along the riverbank through large old fir. Soon the wide trail ended abruptly and became only a dark ribbon in the mossy ground. The trail then turned from the river and followed a side channel filled with murky water.

“Well, say goodbye to the big trail,” someone complained as he pushed aside the scratch of a limb. We rode along the channel for a quarter mile and it appeared to continue in a large loop away from the river before joining again. “Stan!” Bill yelled. “This trail is no screaming heck; maybe we should cross the channel and stay along the river.”

I turned Lucky and the pack train coiled back against itself, picking up the same trail in return. It is at times like these that horses would have choice words for their masters, if they could speak.

We picked a likely crossing in the stagnant water. Lucky stepped gingerly down the steep bank. Soil broke away and his hind legs dropped with a jolt, giving clear path for the following horses. His feet sunk in the mud and exaggerated the depth of the water. The water edged up to the saddle and I lifted my feet up to the horse's withers. Behind me Bill and Brian hauled through the muddy water legs submerged and grim-faced. Near the far bank Lucky gave a surge of energy and heaved out of the mud. The outfit scrambled up the bank and stood in dense toothpick spruce, mud dripping and chests heaving.

"That wasn't as bad as I thought. It looked worse," Bill said.

I examined the forest floor for signs of a trail. "But there doesn't seem to be much of a trail here." We struck out along the river shore dodging small dense water flood spruce and wondering how far we could go before having to cross the channel again. My packhorse walked around the wrong side of a spruce sapling. I held the rope tight on the horn, dragging the packhorse's chin over the end of the bent sapling. "What are you doing? You dumb head." I accused him of negligence. The horse didn't reply but trotted up to slacken the uncomfortably tight lead rope.

"What dense stuff," Bill condemned the motley spruce thickets. Lucky dropped down a bank for another channel crossing. Bill continued, "This whole valley seems to be turning into channels." Pools of shallow water rimmed with water plants riddled the mud flat.

Lucky neared one of the pools and his front dropped until his chest broke the mud and water. "Hooold it!" I screamed and spun off the horse only to see myself sink up to my knees in mud. Lucky sprang to his side flopping legs in the sticking mud. He fumbled and dropped on his side, then gained his feet under him again and lunged out the way he had come.

We were forced to ride along the channel in a direction ninety degrees and away from our upstream destination. All morning we dodged in and out of busted fir, uprooted trunks higher than a man's head and dense river shore black spruce, alternately being poked and scraped. All morning we flogged

through dead river channels littered with piles of twigs and sticks pushed by floodwater along upturned trunks, mud stuck logs, and the bruised trunks of live trees. The channels were alternate routes for seasonally swollen water or sometimes, the channels were the result of a mountain stream rushing down then crawling along the flat valley like varicose veins before dumping into the river. It began to rain steadily and the dampness crept in under the rain suits. We began to feel the sorry sight that we looked. We picked our way around a slough, bumping into the odd deadfall, then worked along the gravel strewn river. The tight timber became impassable and we cut up an old channel overgrown with dense trackless willows.

“No moose tracks!” I bellowed as I clung head low to the saddle horse. “No moose in his right mind would come in here!” Willows bent and scratched as the horses forged over them. I removed my glasses and guarded my face against the rebound of flexed branches. Still, that night and every night for the next two weeks there would be painful red welts and scratches from battles with resilient branches. “Hold it,” I moaned as Lucky shoved against another bush. “I

dropped my hat.”

“This is a real hell hole,” Bill leaned over his saddle horn. “How far do you think we’ve gone?” He was flushed and his shirt was torn.

“Not very far,” I slung my arms up over the saddle and leaned against Lucky in rest.

“Ya,” Bill said sharply, “and about ten miles in this crap. I wonder what the trail is like on the other side. Maybe we should try to cross somewhere?”

“There should be somewhere we can try,” I said and walked back to a packhorse that had his box knocked back and out of position. “This horse’s cinch is too loose.” We repacked the horse, then continued.

We headed for the edge of the river and found a stretch of open, hard bank. The river was wide and water flowed level with just enough ripple to indicate stones not too far below. Bill had the lead and he held up.

“What about here? The river looks not too bad and the far bank looks open.”

Brian added, “If there’s a trail it should be easy to find in that willow flat.”

“I don’t trust this horse,” Bill continued. “You want to let me use Lucky and I’ll give it a go.”

“Oh, that’s o.k. I’ll just see what it’s like.” I spurred Lucky up to the bank. It dropped sharply into the murky water and Lucky hesitated as I forced him down a crack. He balked and tried to turn back up. “Heeya! Let’s go!” I ribbed him lightly and he slid down the bank. Sploosh! We dropped out of sight! Water rushed around my neck and Lucky came up twisting and frothing water as we swept downstream. Lucky was gone from under me. I held the saddle horn for a moment and kicked with swimming motions then let go as Lucky headed for deeper water. I had to head back for shore but I was being dragged down. My boots! I forgot to unlace my boots! Their weight made it impossible to move my legs and body. I reached down to undo my laces but it seemed more important to keep my head above water. Then Lucky pushed by, heading back to shore. I lunged frantically and latched onto the saddle. With a great heave, I struggled into the saddle as Lucky struck the muddy bank and fought drunkenly for footing. We struggled back up the bank.

We stood along the other horses, both of us soaked and surprised to be in one piece. I could not believe I was still in the saddle. Brian and Bill stood speechless for a while then Brian said. “A lot deeper than it looks.”

I nodded ugly thoughts at the river, then noticed my saddlebags and camera were gone! “My camera!” I moaned. I stared blankly at the bare spot behind my saddle imagining it should reappear. It was gone!

“What’s that?” Bill pointed to a brown blob floating along fifty yards down-stream.

“My saddle bags; it’s my saddle bags!”

As I ran down the bank catching up with my bags I ripped off clothing and boots. The water was immediately deep and I swam hard for a few strokes. My timing was good. I grabbed a handful and struggled for shore but the heavy bags tugged us downstream. A tree stuck out from shore. “The tree,” I thought, “Just make the tree.”

I fought hard and grabbed a handful of branch as I swept by. The tree bent downstream and deposited me nicely near the shore. I was lucky, that was obvious. I was still breathing and my camera seemed only damp in the repellent case. Incredibly, the down vest in the opposite pouch acted as a buoy, keeping the camera afloat.

The rain intensified. We would have been a dreary sight if someone had seen us slogging along soaked and brush torn. Two hundred miles into a northern forest, drenched and cold with gloomy peaks surrounding us, made us the crying line of a Robert Service poem. It brought a hint of tears to my eyes imagining the misery that had consumed us, so I tried not to think about it.

We rode through large poplar with a gravel base that, at some time, had seen the flooding of river wash. Soon rivulets of water streaked the floor. We plopped across them. Then the rivulets broadened to shallow rushing swirls.

The rain pounded down. I wondered what on earth would make the water rush through the trees. But it went from ridiculous to serious as a great rush of water swept against trunks and dodged the horse’s legs. The predicament seemed beyond any thought that could tell us what to do. It was no longer a forest but a forest in a river.

“What the hell is going on!” Bill yelled as he guessed his way along a confusing path at the head of the outfit. “Hell is right!” Brian cried.

Somewhere in our souls, each and every one of us has the ability not to take ourselves so very seriously. To laugh in the face of danger, to mock this horrendous reality as a grim joke.

“Bill?” He didn’t hear me. “Bill!” He glanced back at me. “Would it be o.k? I want to take some pictures of this; hang on while I get in front.”

“Are you crazy! You want to get us killed! The horses can’t stay here!” Bill led on, taking the outfit up away from the river, against the mountain to higher ground.

After an hour or so along high ground Bill led us back to the river. Incredibly, in the most unlikely spot in a thick forest on the mountain side, suddenly appeared a partly built cabin. We tied the horses under umbrella trees then retired, exhausted, to a fire and hot lunch in the cabin. I thought the Gods must be angry with us, venting thier wrath. Perhaps this was the welcoming committee the Muskwa gave all newcomers: deadfalls, a raging river, dead channels, pouring rain, whipping wind and, somehow, as I lay exhausted on the dirt floor of the cabin, I felt we had not seen the worst.

What else was there?

That night found us camped in a gloomy forest near a small creek. There was a fresh blaze etched in a tree that struck off along the mountain side, but no trail. Tomorrow we would try the high trail and give the blaze a chance. It was not a campworth remembering. Next morning we struck up along white blazes that shone fresh every fifty or so yards. Up and up we went in the soft moss and heavy timber, dipping down the draws of every streamlet that found enough water to cut a groove, then up again over a hump. The humps were all right but the dips found us side hilling through brush and deadfall; deadfall that always fell at the worst possible angle.

Up and up we went until we peeked through chance openings with eagle vision. The Muskwa River looked a dinky creek a mile below. Large swamps dotted the flat. Moose cut trails through the swamp grass once in a while a black blob at the end of the bent grass told us of the presence of a feeding moose or two. Up the valley the river maneuvered until there was no river at all, only ragged rock walls reaching with wings up from the river to sweeping snow-capped peaks.

Confident that we had beaten the swampland we once again dropped to the rivers' edge then worked along a solid bank. Abruptly the mountains closed upon us until there seemed no valley at all. All four-footed travelers that headed upstream were funneled by the closing mountains and the trail grew distinct. Soon the mountains we shouldered did not bother to spread a foot and our trail crept carefully along a slope with the river only feet below. Smallspruce choked the precarious trail.

"Well," I laid down my axe after cutting a green spruce growing across the trail. "The trail sure has improved but the trees seem so close to the trail. There doesn't seem to be any box marks on the trees. I don't think people use this trail."

"I haven't seen any blazes since we came down," Brian added. Bill dismounted and dropped to the ground. "I still think the trail must be on the other side, if there is one at all." Bill removed his hat and wiped sweat from his forehead with a bandanna. "Not much here for campsites."

"No," I slid my axe back from its sling. "I'll just go ahead a bit and see what I can see." I walked off.

As I walked along the path I struggled to keep from falling off ledges. The odd tree needed to be axed for passage. After one-quarter mile, the sun was rudely replaced by a two-hundred-foot canyon wall. The river sliced through and, if not for a long sand bar at the base, our journey would have been stalemate. I stretched myself to see what lay beyond but there remained nothing but a guess. I cut a clear path back to the horses.

"Looks interesting," I told Brian and Bill. "The trail is good, then it heads between two big rock walls. If there is a trail it has to go in there somewhere. I think we're gonna have to swim the river in the canyon." The boys were not impressed. We pushed on.

The river allowed us a ten-foot strip of gravel bar when the cliffs forced us to the water. Water churned deep on the far side but the sharp bend provided shallows on our side. We discussed the lay of the water. Bill rode as far as possible under the shale wall then hit the water. Worry tensed my

gut as Bill and his horses deepened and melted into the murky water. They were swimming a streak with Bill's chest and the horse's neck protruding. Tense seconds seemed like minutes. Speck swam well and in a moment they surfaced on the far side. Brian and I repeated the performance.

We explored and found ourselves on a long-forested island. The mountains on all sides dropped as cliffs directly into the river, allowing no valley floor and hemming us in. Echoes transformed the river flow into a river hum; a hum that spoke of power and thrust forever. "Here I go; here I go; here I go," the river said. "Watch me flow; watch me flow. I am big, I am strong, I know from where I've come, and I know to where I'll go. And who are you? No one knows; no one cares, and on I'll flow. Here I go, here I go..."

"Look at this," Bill said excitedly as we rode the length of the island. "There's tree blazes! Hey, over here, the trail!"

"Yahoo, yahoo, yahoooo!" We reveled in the lively bounce of our echoes. At the upper end of the island the trail led again into the river. I said the obvious. "I guess the trail was on the far side and now it crosses back to the side we were on all along."

"Yea," Brian said, "and now we're on this island on the wrong side again. If the river wasn't so high..."

Bill rode into the water angling upstream in an attempt to stay high above a rapid. Water deepened quickly and in a blink he and his horse were swept down.

"No way!" Bill yelled as his horse found footing and crawled back out. He hadn't even made it halfway. "I think this is it."

We camped on the end of the island. Even more than usual we were very torn and very tired. The horses stood, heads low with exhaustion. The island held ample grass for a day or two. At first we turned our stares toward the wonder of the rock walls that formed our prison, but then it was better to ignore their presence in a battle against depression brought along by their imposing loom. The confinement forced our spirit back inside us and we

said little this night. Our thoughts found little to be happy about except, perhaps, that there was a trail, if we could cross the river.

We must have shared at least one thought ... how many times could we cross rivers before someone met death? The law of averages and chance said that it must happen sooner or later. Only the fire offered a glimmer of cheer in our gloomy prison, and even that comfort was lost to the normality of our former lives. We had spent most of our lives in anticipation of tomorrow, and now our tomorrow was stymied by the block-age of ragged catacombs. Every day we hoped for a better tomorrow and almost every day our optimism was dashed with the pain of frustrated travel. It hurt too much to guess and hope any more, and it hurt too much not to hope. The looming wall turned our spirit inside us. We readied for bed. I leveled my bag and started a moderate conversation.

“Remember down river when we first hit the Muskwa?” I asked. “Ya.”

“Well, remember how the water went down every night?”

“Ya. The nights are colder and the glaciers aren’t melting.” “Well, tomorrow morning maybe we can cross.”

“Oh yea?” Bill said. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough today to wonder what’s gonna happen tomorrow. I don’t think a foot of water drop is gonna make that river much easier to cross. I don’t know Stan. Let’s leave it till tomorrow.”

We lay in our bags on beds of nothing. Nothing did the world offer for comfort. Nothing remained to lift our spirits. Nothing came from reflection that made much difference. Nothing could memory dig up worthwhile from my graveyard of experience. The tape recorder used for recording conversation and natural sound felt dry as I pried the Tupperware lid open. I slipped on the headphones, inserted Eddie Rabbit’s Greatest Hits, and lay back. “.Oooooh....

I'm drivin' my life away... lookin' for a better day....for me....Oooooohhh...I'm drivin' my life away....lookin' for a better way....for me... ”

Next morning Bill and Brian ambled about the campsite but did not disturb me. It would be a day of rest. They talked quietly but their words and tone did not carry the light spirit that the bright late morning sun deserved. We had slept long but it was not enough for our tired souls.

“Sure been a lot of moose up here. What did we see so far? About twenty to twenty-five?”

“I guess it's too far for hunters to bother shooting a moose.” “A hundred and seventy-five miles is a long way to pack out a moose.”

“Not as many wolf tracks here as back at Richards Creek.” “No, so. I guess we'll rest today.”

“That young appy and the brown one still seem sore.”

“It's the damn country; they can't walk fifty feet without banging into a tree or pushing a bush, and always going up and down and stepping over deadfalls. Those packs are just rolling too much.”

“We need a normal trail.”

“There aren't no normal trails. I don't know. I'm really wondering.”

“Well, if we rest today maybe tomorrow the water will go down. Maybe the trail is good from here; it's sure good on the island. I wonder if they use it all the way to Ft. Ware?”

“I doubt it; probably an outfitter on this side of Bedeaux Pass. I think we should go have a look ahead. I guess tomorrow morning.”

“What's that?” “Hey, look at that!”

The ground scuffled as Brian and Bill thumped by. Something walked noisily in the water. I jumped up out of my bag, grabbed my gun and was greeted by the friendly stare of a cow moose and her twin calves. Brian and Bill whispered and the moose twitched their large mule deer ears with curiosity. We moved into the open expecting them to run off. Instead, they stood and enjoyed the rare spectacle of three skinny clothed sasquatch. I

thought perhaps they knew sasquatch were harmless. Eventually they sauntered off, but spent most of the day hanging around the far shore. “Jeez,” I shook my head. “I can’t believe these moose.”

The day rolled by aimlessly and we took nervous strolls up and down the three-hundred yard island, airing our restlessness and expressing distaste for our prison. It was not a happy day but the hard times did give us common ground and I thought that bonds between us grew.

The next day dawned with the same restlessness and tired spirit.

Bill was up early and stirred the camp with discussion. “How do you feel?” was my wakeup call.

“Tired, Bill, tired.” It was Brian’s turn to stir porridge this morning. “I’m gonna open a can of bacon this morning,” Brian said, waiting for a reply. No one answered. “So I guess we rest today again.” “Makes sense to me,” I added quickly with visions of retiring back into my cozy sleeping bag.

“Well, you can if you want. I’m gonna try to cross,” Bill fidgeted and appeared tired and impatient.

“Ya, I’ll go too,” Brian said.

No, no, I thought. It’s a mistake. We need rest. Why use the horses? We’re gonna be headed that way tomorrow anyway.

“What for?” I complained. “We should rest. We’re tired. Why burn ourselves out?”

“Well what’s the point?” Bill argued. “Why wait until tomorrow if we can find out what it’s like today? Look at those canyons ahead; what if we can’t get through at all?”

“There’s a horse trail. It has to go through.”

“Where? How long ago? Look at that big burn up there.” Bill pointed upstream to a huge scab of burnt black forest that covered the entire valley.

“Let the river go down. I think we need to rest,” I argued.

“You rest; we’ll be back later.” They saddled up and I watched them head into the river. Damn! I bit my lip with anger and retired to my lean-to.

Again, Bill was swept down but this time ended up in the rapid. Speck's strength pulled them out. They road back to camp soaking wet, dismounted, slid off the saddles, grabbed a climbing rope and axe, and headed into the trees upstream.

I sat on my sleeping bag much too angry to think. I sucked up warm porridge and would have sucked my thumb had it been cleaner. I lay back and slept a couple more hours.

I woke to the hollow quiet of an empty camp. The harsh talk from the morning was dust in the wind, but not water under the bridge. The camp was lonely without my companions. No matter the difference of opinion, we shared the vexations of our self-inflicted position. Together we were unceremoniously ripped from the plastic and packaged containers of civilization. Together we were thrown into the grip of the Rockies. And together we were at least a common denominator, sharing the turmoil and relating the hardship. Apart we would lose the positive spirit of sharing. But in these ponderings grew a fearsome thought. If we felt so different about hardship, about time, about rest, about the purpose of the journey, what were we sharing? Or was sharing only a figment of a positive imagination, now being smashed by having to agree on the workings of the expedition? Hardship was scraping our heart and character bare as snow exposed stone in a wind-storm. The exposure would force us to hold hands and push through the drifts, or blow about hopelessly in different directions.

By the campfires at my movie camera drying out from the moisture of the river crossing and rains. The camera body was warm and it felt good in my hands, a purpose without so many words. I puffed off some loose ash, focused on a canyon wall and pressed the button. Nothing happened.

"Hmmm," I muttered. "Another dead battery so soon?" I dug for one of the four remaining batteries and exchanged them. I pressed the button to start the camera rolling. Nothing! There was film in the body so I slid the camera in my dark sleeping bag and removed the lid and slipped the film out. I inspected the gears and they were jammed. I removed a lid and the

electronics showed the brown tinge of rust. The camera was ruined! “Oh my God, no!” I laid on my bag, stuffed my face in folds and tears slipped from my eyes.

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At mid-afternoon they returned. The walk under hot sun sweat-stained their clothes and black smudge from burned trees smeared their faces. They joked lightly as they settled into the camp. They seemed in good spirits. Why? Did they find the trail? I watched their movements from my lean-to and finally found the frame of mind to ask the questions.

“How was it? Find the trail?” My voice was level, foregoing any glimmer of hope.

Bill stared at me and said nothing. Brian continued to fit himself with clean socks.

“So, find the trail?”

“No, not really,” Bill said.

“No, not really,” Brian repeated. “Not really at all.” “What happened?”

“Well, you can see what happened, Stan. Look at that stuff. It’s all burned out canyons.”

“How far did you ‘go?’”

“I don’t know. How far did we go, Brian?”

“I don’t know eh; far as we could go. Couple miles.”

“You mean you couldn’t go through. Did you go up the mountain at all?”

“Yea,” Brian said. “It’s all burned out.”

“Well the trail has to go through; we have to go through somewhere!”

Bill reddened. “Says who? Look Stan, we just came back from looking. You want to go, go ahead; maybe we could fight through the canyon some place. What’s the use; it’s the same thing all over.” “So what are you saying?” I tensed from concern and feared for the reply.

“What’s to say? If we can’t get through, there’s not much choice is there?”

I grabbed my shotgun and stomped off into the forest.

The burn was more than ugly. It was sad and it caused pain. No matter how dreary the dark forests and willow tangle were, at least there was life. There was the greenery and the fragrance of forest vegetation and loam, and once in a while, one saw or heard the birds or rodents who thrived there. This burn, on the other hand, was black, dirty and smelled like a stale campfire. Every twig that, at one time, grew soft and alive browse for large mammals, was now rock hard as burnt carbon. Branches probed from all directions and instead of sloughing off from a push, ripped and gouged as iron nails.

I walked a zig-zag fashion through a flat. Across the river jagged cliffs and draws should have forced the trail in this direction. One, two, and three hours went by with no appearance of a trail. My eyes stung in the black heat as they strained for a depression in the black ground that could be the horse trail. “Damn! It must be here. I have to find it. I can’t go back until I find it. I just won’t.”

I stopped near a creek for a drink and rest. Along the creek bank green grass sprouted from the ashes and the water ran clear over red stones. It was so quiet. It would be so different if I was alone, so lonely. My pants, shirt, and skin were streaked with black charcoal. Think. Where should the trail go? It’s not along the river. It’s not on the flat. I looked inland to a large assembly of cliffs following the river. Could the trail have gone above the cliffs high up the mountain side? What for?

I walked back to the river then cut straight in for the mountain side, carefully examining anything that could be a trail. There was nothing, no blazes, no paths, nothing. After one-half mile the large rock bluffs loomed over me. I craned my neck upwards in exasperation with the wall, and then I stepped in an obvious depression. A path, some sort of trail. Probably an animal trail. I followed the trail as it hugged the rock bluff. It

seemed to gain distinctiveness then turn sharply up through boulders, headlong into the bluffs. Maddening, I thought. Uselessness! And then I looked up and recognized a small blaze in a scrub spruce. An axe blaze! I ran up the trail into a big groove notched between the two huge stones and the trail was pounded into the ground. Horse poop! There was horse poop! “Horse turds!” I yelled up to the sky.

The next five entries were recorded in my diary:

JULY 17 (SATURDAY)

Today things took a turn for the worse. Bill and Brian went ahead to scout while I stayed in camp. They tried to cross the river first with the horses but could not. Then they hiked ahead and said a canyon blocks our way two miles up. When they came back they say they wish to go back. Now, this evening, they say they will give it one good day and then decide. I believe that no matter how difficult over Bedeaux Pass, I must continue. It is a feeling, it is written. I prayed today in hope of a continued safe journey. It seemed a warm feeling sent down. If we can make four or five miles the next few days (each day), we should be o.k. A cow and two young calves hung around camp today. Cute calves. Let love live and let life continue. Let me not fear death.

JULY 18TH

I am surprised, the trail that we picked up that funneled between the boulders was much better than expected. One must have an attitude of rolling with the country and its whim instead of fighting it. If you try to get through with an aggressive attitude, you can think you’re winning when just around the corner, you get wiped out, or, when you think you’re beat, like Bill and Brian with the canyon, the breaks can happen. It seems that in misfortune there is fortune, and in good there is bad. So, we made good mileage up to Mt. Sheffield. Much cooler now than at the beginning of our

trip. I guess we are together to Ware at least. We get along alright but wish they would forget dates and not worry so much about “quick” miles. We have had it pretty good; it’s just bigger country than we figured.

JULY 19TH

Made very good ‘map miles’ today, meaning we covered ten to fifteen miles along the Muskwa Valley, which was possible due to the valley trail, as opposed to going up and down the cross canyons and hills of yesterday. We are now camped at Bilou Creek with the best grass the horses have had yet. Tomorrow we cross the pass, hopefully to Chesterfield Lake. The mountains here are beautiful and look sheepy, yet, there doesn’t seem to be much sheep sign. At a gravel fiat we found a scratched-out air strip and Don Pecks outfitting cabins - one cook cabin and two sleeping cabins. On the log walls of the cabin was a story worth telling. On the walls were written the accounts of many hunter’s adventures. On the pictures nailed to the logs I saw some of the most incredible huge stone rams ever killed. Don must be the man who keeps appearing in the photos. He looks like one tough customer, lean and mean. It’s one heck of a long way to the tops of these rugged mountains and there doesn’t seem to be much horse sign in this camp. A guide would have to get tough out here or die trying. Back at the Prophet the biggest stone ram that has ever been killed was taken on the Chadwick expedition, and these rams are not far behind. They must measure forty-five to fifty inches around the outside of the horns. The trail stayed very good past the cabin but disaster nearly struck. It scares me to think about it, so I stop myself from thinking about too much, except for now. I don’t think Brian or Bill even noticed. A short way from the cabin the trail cut up a very steep rugged side hill. The trail was etched into the sidewall and on my left hand side I could just about reach out and touch the tops of trees. For some reason, many of the trees had their tops broken off to jagged edges. Near the top of the side hill Lucky had to leap his front feet

two or three feet off the ground on to a slab of crumbling shale. Just as he scrambled with his back legs to get them up to where his front feet were, the packhorse decided to reef back on the rope. Somehow the rope got stuck on the saddle horn. Lucky's front end was so high he started to teeter over backwards and the side and down into the drop. My leg was held tight by the rope and I couldn't jump. Everything happened so fast yet it seemed like it was in slow motion. Just when I felt us about to go over, the packhorse decided, for reasons unknown, to quit pulling. I kept riding like nothing happened. I wonder if I would have been killed or just wiped out. It's cold out there tonight. You can see your breath.

JULY 20TH

The 20th, the day we thought we would be in Fort Ware for sure and we are a good six days away. What is worse is that with all the tough country the horses don't seem to get a chance to rest well. Apache and the Brown one seem to have slightly swollen withers. With a good rest period in Fort Ware, maybe a week, they should be o.k. I feel we can make the coast now, barring serious setback. I am desperately hoping we can get another camera in Fort Ware or get this one repaired before Bill and Brian get too impatient to leave. There are many thoughts and feelings sifting through me today in a never-ending vehicle of reflection. It is important to understand these things so they can be put to rest. I feel my life journey, possibly an occupation, could be more interesting, satisfying, and creative if I completed this film, book, and so the journey. It just seems to be getting more important with time. I love you Mom, Dad, Laurie, Len, Ed, Susie, Jessica, Shelly and Carry.

JULY 21ST

We rested again today because the horses needed it. It was another nice day, but now this evening cloud has moved in, and it looks like it might

drizzle. It sounds like Bill and Brian may want to pull out at Ware. Sitting around makes them very restless, which is something difficult to deal with; being forced to relax in the wilds. Time seems awfully important to them. I have a difficult time accepting the challenge of crossing hundreds of miles of wilderness with horses and then being worried a few weeks one way or the other. I will continue hopefully with them. Sleep tight and restful dreams my love, all loves.

We rode along Fern Lake on Bedeaux Pass. We rode silent and in awe of a gem. The green shimmering water of the small round lake reflected the makings of Alpine meadows and imposing mountains. The far side of the lake was rimmed by gray piercing knife-edged mountains. On our side rolled Alpine pastures sprinkled with willow and fir. We rode pure and clean on the good trail. My eyes drank from this lovely hidden casket and my senses drooled over the treasure. Brian's camera clicked repeatedly.

We turned up from the lake and wound through intermittent meadows to a rise of land one-half mile from the lake. The true pass. I dismounted. "Hey Brian," I suggested, "You want to take some pictures?"

"Good idea, but first I have to turn my watch back one hour," he kidded. "The man says we're entering Pacific Time."

"Don't say that word," I laughed.

The beauty of the pass should have lasted longer but in our bid for miles we rode through in a moment, an injustice after all of the attention and consideration we had showered upon it. During difficult times we elevated Bedeaux Pass a diamond from the rough, the great hope and reason for persevering. Now, the drive for Bedeaux Pass was simply ex-changed for a drive to Fort Ware.

Once we cleared the pass, a grand view emerged from the west. The basin that held Chesterfield Lake could be seen several miles distant. Great forest valleys fingered thick and high on every mountain, indicating an increase of rainfall from the 'rain shadow' of the Rockies. To the northwest,

great grey mountains spires rose abruptly, illusive above dark secretive valleys. We now entered Kwadacha Provincial Park, truly a remote place, wild enough to satisfy the imaginings of any adventurous spirit.

The trail lost itself in the maze of willow brush, but grew clear again as we chose the proper drainage for descent. A stream formed and shoulder-high trees confined the horses, once again, to a single file. In a minute we melted into heavy forest and the trail partnered with the stream and dropped sharply.

In places the mountain fir was crammed so tightly that a stone's throw was ten feet, and a man walking from the path would have to do so sideways. We pondered the old axe cuts that cleared the trail from an era gone by. Down and down we crawled, stopping only to adjust packs that slipped forward from the incessant downhill pound.

The trail entered tall leafy timber and leveled into a jungle forest. The heavenly clear path sorted its way through plants we had never before encountered. Tall broad spinach leaves swished along the horse's sides. Ferns laughed a lime green hello as they bobbed in a light breeze. Nettles and vines wound a squeeze-hold on more admirable trees and shrubs. "Squish, squish." Lucky stepped on another odd cabbage plant and his hooves stained green. Years of animal trial and error verified an intelligent snake path that sneaked through swamps and bogs. The creek flattened with the valley and transformed into a slug of slime-covered sludge. The trail waned in the deep grass of bog edge and tracks left little impression in the soft moss of spruce thickets. Lucky wrestled with a sinkhole. "Go around this soft spot!" The horses walked around.

One hundred yards beyond the short thick spruce a tall line of broad-leafed poplar ran west, leading toward the lake. We headed for the poplars and, once there, crunched on the fine gravel wash of a delta, created each spring when the creek flooded. I strained to catch a glimpse of Chesterfield Lake but it wasn't until a quarter mile later that the silver water peeped

between the tree trunks. It had been a good day. We had traveled fifteen miles.

“Someone has camped here before,” Bill said as he unsaddled his horse.

“I noticed,” I said. “They even leaned all the tent poles under the trees. Did you see the campfire over there?” Brian added.

“Where?” Bill asked.

Brian slipped his saddle over what appeared a drying pole set up by whoever was there before. “Just back about fifty yards,” he said and walked back up the trail. He disappeared in the trees before he bellowed, “Hey, look at this!”

We ran over to Brian and found him reaching up to a large square shiny object. “Gas tank,” he said.

“No,” I objected. “Can’t be. Bedeaux’s half-tracks were left a hundred miles back!” The tank was galvanized metal and complete with a two-foot neck.

“Maybe,” Bill thought, “they packed it on a horse. Maybe they carried something in it.”

“Yea,” I said. “Like booze.” Rumor had Charles Bedeaux packing gas tanks full of champagne on the backs of horses.

“Or like fuel for starting campfires,” Bill suggested. “Jerry says it was one of the rainiest years ever.”

We settled into late supper, but without the fresh trout we planned to catch. We tried but decided with hungry, impatient bellies that the lake was empty. Horses jingled then faded out of earshot. Bill and Brian joked around the campfire. No matter the thoughts on the journey, their light hearts made for good company. We chatted about nothing then Brian stuck his hand out for silence.

“Hey, hey, don’t move.” He stared bug-eyed past the saddle rack. Bill and I turned our heads slowly. There stood a skinny cow moose, twitching

her ears and stepping delicately toward the saddle rack. She stared us down as if to say, “I know I’m funny and you won’t hurt me.”

I looked at her as if to say, “You’re lucky we remembered the groceries!” She stepped forward, looked at us for a minute, stepped forward again then stretched her neck and snout. She scratched the skirt of Brian’s saddle with her buckteeth.

“Hey!” Brian cried. “Leave my saddle alone.” She bit the skirt and reefed back, knocking the entire saddle rack to the ground. “You stupid moose!” He threw a stick and she backed up a few feet.

“Can you believe this?” Bill said.

I looked at Brian. “Brian, you got your camera; let’s try to get a picture,” I grabbed a handful of oats and barley then inched to the moose. She stood motionless, for all I knew, we could have performed a break dance with trumpets and she wouldn’t have run away.

“Here girl, here gal; oats for your belly. Here horsey. C’mon, get your oats.” She stretched her snout and lipped the grain into her mouth, chewed loosely and spat it on the ground. She looked at me like I was the one who was crazy.

We settled back to the campfire before we noticed a calf standing behind her in the trees. “Crazy moose, eh?”

“She sure isn’t scared of anything,”

“No, you’d think she’d be naturally afraid, wolves and things.” “Not as many wolf tracks as back at Richards Creek.”

“No, but you’d still think she’d be scared naturally of foreign things.”

“I know. I can’t believe it.”

There came an enormous wrenching sound from Brian and Bill’s tent. The cow had gripped the top-end of the tent with her teeth and heaved back with all her might. The tent stretched into a new object as tent poles collapsed and tent pegs popped. “Hey! You stupid!” Bill and Brian tossed sticks and stones and ran her back to her calf where she stood then joined me with hard-to-contain laughter. We had never met a moose with a sense

of humour, but agreed she did look a little like Jimmy Durante, and we wondered if Walt Disney could use a comical moose.

The morning fire was always worth starting just for the heat, but it offered so much more. Each morning fire glows peace on earth, hastens communion and offers forgiveness. It strikes its beauty into the heart of each man and woman. It was the morning fire that laid the mellow foundation for the quiet courage to face each day. It was the morning fire that helped us understand.

This morning the heat was especially welcome as cold mists lifted off the lake and swirled dancing ghosts into the trees. The camp slept and I stirred the flames searching for a belly full of heat. I was warm. It was time to fetch water. The lake was glass calm. A minnow dimpled the surface and then another. Long legged insect skeeters raced over the water slipping between clogs of mud, shore sticks and green scud. A gull came from somewhere then cruised the left bank, disappearing with the distant shoreline. A night hawk shot out of the forest from behind and skimmed a streak low across the lake; gone, there, gone, there, gone, through spirals of mist and layers of fog.

On the left bank dead burnt logs were strewn haphazardly in and out of the water. Often green grass fingers led down from the mountain tops, transformed into green forest and managed to reach the lake. Then the shore was clear of debris. Nameless mountains struck upshot in all directions and I supposed, found their roots a half mile below the surface of the lake. Shaggy puffs of white cloud hung tenaciously to depressions between peaks, still sleeping.

The left shore caused concern. It was our route, and it was burned.

Back at the fire Brian and Bill warmed themselves. The cold sleeping bag chilled my already stiff hands as I rolled it tight.

“Stan,” Brian said.

“Yea?”

“I guess I have to get the horses seeing as you got breakfast.” “Ya,” Bill chuckled. “Wish I had some rum to celebrate.” “Celebrate what?” I asked.

“You’re first up this morning. Amazing. I hope you’re feeling alright?”

“Yea, I guess maybe I should go back to sleep for a while.” They looked at me to see if I could be serious.

I smiled. “Actually, I got up early so you wouldn’t see me put poison in your porridge.”

“Jeez,” Brian said, “Wouldn’t have known the difference; tastes like poison every morning.”

It was an early start. Bill mounted and led along the west end of the lake, heading for the south shore, along which we would ride west into the horizon. We had only ridden a couple of hundred yards when the horses held up. Bill came back through the trees on foot. “That swamp is worse than it looks. I think we better have a look.” The swamp was not actually a swamp at all but a stagnant creek. A beaver dam a few yards before the lake created the slough and immediately below the dam the water moved through a grassy flat before dumping into the lake.

“Hiya!” Bill yelled and he forced his horse into the soft grass under the three-foot high dam.

“Hiya!” Brian and I echoed. We slugged into the soft grass and watched it quickly give way to mire. Horses fumbled knee-deep in all directions. We jumped off the horses with reins in hand and together we successfully fought to the solid ground in the forest beyond the creek.

“Damn!” Brian yelled. “Look at that horse!” The pinto had the day off and followed up the rear. The horse had lost considerable heart the past few weeks and now rolled in the mud without so much as an effort.

“What the heck is wrong with that horse?” I yelled.

Bill shook his head. “Doesn’t even have a pack on him.”

“We sure didn’t expect that horse to be the quitter of the bunch,” Brian said scornfully.

“Leave him alone,” I said as we walked over to the lake shore to wash the mud off our face and hands. “Let him sit there for a while and think about it.”

We bent down in a line: three sorry travelers all mud from head to toe.

Bill looked at me with a forced smile. “Good start this morning.” We looked for a climbing rope and Bill unleashed his climbing rope from his saddle. Brian stood looking up into the sky and then I heard it too.

“Sounds like another plane,” Brian said. “I wonder if it’s that same white one we saw up the Muskwa.” The drone grew louder and we looked hard but saw no plane.

“That’s no plane!” Bill said excitedly. We stood speechless. A fishing skiff sped directly our way from the middle of the lake and in the early morning mist, it could have disappeared like a mirage, but it didn’t.

The boat jammed up onto the grass shore. A stout man with a soft complexion stared at us from under a baseball hat. He definitely wasn’t a Fort Ware native and he definitely wasn’t a wilderness cowboy. We stood silent for a moment gathering our emotions after the sudden appearance of another human being. I wanted to touch him to see if he was real. The three weeks of wilderness battle pushed us far from civilization. He stood up in his boat.

“Looks like you’re having some problems,” he said.

“Huh?” We turned to where he was looking and saw the mud- sunk horse.

“Oh, he just gave up on us; let him rest for a while.”

He climbed on to the bow and leaped for solid footing and sunk up past his ankles in mud. “Crap!” he said. “This end of the lake is crap.”

He sucked his way up to hard ground. “Where you from?” he asked.

“We started from the highway,” Bill said.

“Mile one-seventy-eight.” “Mile one-seventy-eight?” he said, amazed. “That’s a long way from here. Why didn’t you come up the Muskwa?”

“It’s flooding,” I answered. “So is the Prophet. We came up the last sixty miles on the Muskwa.”

“Oh, I see,” he said with a smile that must have felt out of place next to three dark-faced, bearded characters.

“Actually,” he continued, “I thought you were some friends of mine who were supposed to be coming up the Muskwa from the highway, but I’ve been wondering about that flooding. Maybe they won’t make it. My name’s Greg, Greg Cranston.” He stuck out his hand. We shook and introduced ourselves.

His knowledge of the area was limited and sketchy, but he had heard of the Ware natives traveling up the White (Warneford) River, if not on horse, at least on foot. He was supposed to guide some fishermen from his cabin. All the while we talked, I was waiting, waiting, waiting for the right moment to ask what I knew could be one of the most important questions of my life.

There have been many profound questions in man’s history, yet everyone seems to idolize answers. We idolize profound statements when they are filled with intelligence, courage and integrity. Perhaps it is because any idiot can ask a decent question, but it takes intelligence to provide an exceptional answer. Still, there have been some profound questions.

My question was not so profound. “I’m wondering,” I said finally. “You wouldn’t, by chance, have a two-way radio at the cabin? It’s kind of an emergency. You see, I’ve been filming the journey and the camera got dumped in the river. Maybe I can get a new one sent to Ft. Ware.” I was wearing my heart on my sleeve and wanted him to know it.

“Well,” he replied thoughtfully, “We do, but we’ve been here for two weeks and we’ve only been able to get the operator once. But I think if we warm the battery it could make a difference. Sure, we could give it a try. But I can’t promise anything.”

“Oh, no, of course not. Boy, that would be just great.”

Bill and Brian listened without saying a word. I remembered the horse. “I guess we’ll get the horse out. After we ride to the far west end, can I walk over to the cabin?”

“Heck no,” he laughed. “It’s way over on the north shore.” “Oh jeez,” I groaned.

“That’s ok. I’ll give you a lift and bring you back.” “ Oh, wow. Boy I really appreciate it.”

“Stan,” Bill said with concern. “Ilene is expecting us at Ware by today. She’s gonna be worried. If she doesn’t hear from us by the end of the month she’s gonna call the R.C.M.P.”

“Well, there’s room in the boat for all of us,” Greg cut in.

“I don’t mind staying,” Bill said. “Just make sure and call Ilene.” Then Bill looked at Brian who had taken a back seat in the discussion. “Sorry, Brian,” Bill said. “I guess maybe you had someone to talk to.”

“Oh,” Brian shuffled his feet. “I can call in Fort Ware.”

Caveman hung onto floating logs and kicked their way across rivers and ponds; tough going, even for big, hairy legs. Later, man developed burning and scraping techniques and hollowed out logs. These were prototypes for early canoes, but still they were clumsy and would tip on a bubble, so the natives were careful to part their hair exactly in the middle. Then came the very fast jump to the outboard engine. Even the first outboards could propel man and boat twenty miles per hour. The first people skimming across deep depths of water must have thought it a spectacular moment.

Water! As far as the eyes could see! Dark! Deep! Hundreds of yards down of liquid-choking death. A million years of man against water. A canoe, a paddle, a dory, an oar, a storm, a battle, a fight against waves and time to the finish, and death by drowning. Gone in a flash. Enter the motorboat. A little throttle and zoom, to the shore and safety! Hopefully.

My knuckles struck purple on the gunwales. We must be going fifty miles an hour! Why, I thought, doesn’t he slow down? What’s the rush?

“How big is the engine?” I yelled back to Greg.

“Seven horse.” A gust of wind caught my hat. Augh! The neck string jammed against my neck.

We beached the skiff on a fine gravel beach in front of a pleasant cabin. Greg swung open the door. “Barb?” A middle-age gal smiled over dirty dishes. “Barb, I’d like you to meet Stan. He and some friends are heading to Ware by horse. He needs to try the radio.”

We chatted as Greg removed the battery and placed it in the warmer of the wood stove. “Have a piece of apple pie?” Barb asked.

“Oh boy, wouldn’t that be a treat!” I ate two pieces of pie. “Here,” Barb watched me wolf down the last bite. “Have a chocolate bar.” I nibbled down an Oh Henry. .

“So,” I asked, “what’s a lawyer doing out here? On holidays?” “Sort of,” Barb said as Greg helped himself to a piece of pie.

“We’re expecting some fishermen. Actually, this was Don Peck’s cabin. It’s his hunting area.”

“You’re kidding. We saw one of his cabins back on the Muskwa. We thought it ended at Bedeaux Pass. This isn’t his anymore?”

“He died last spring,” Greg cut in.

“What? He looked so tough, so lean, in the pictures in the cabin, I mean.”

“He was that, alright,” Greg said. “But he had rheumatic fever for quite some time. Doc said if you don’t have the open-heart surgery you’ve got six months at the most. Died in five months.”

“Why didn’t he have the operation?” “Just the way he was.”

“How old was he?” “Fifty-five.”

“Geez.” I shook my head.

As the battery warmed we walked outside for a look at the countryside. Fishing rods leaned against the cabin. “What’s in here for fish?”

“Mostly rainbows.”

“Nice ones? Do you catch very many?”

“Oh heck, yes, all kinds; some pretty good ones, three-four pounds.”

“Gee,” I said, hoping he would say go ahead and try. “I tried last night but didn’t even get a bite.”

“Go ahead and give it a try. It’ll be a while before the battery warms up anyhow.”

I took a rod and stood at water line. I coiled the foil off the end of a Burnt Almond chocolate bar and had a bite, and then I looked over to where I thought Brian and Bill should be. By now they would be knee-deep in mud, sweat rolling down their dirty faces, digging mud from around the horse and prying, with bruised hands and exhaustion. Frustrated and cursing they would look up across the lake, and there I would be, fishing rod in hand, wind blowing through my hair, sun reflecting off smiling teeth, shirt sleeves rolled up with a Burnt Almond sticking out of my left pocket and the flash of the silver lure as it arcs gracefully across the sky.

“Greg?”

“Ya.”

“Where are the horses? Can they see us?”

“Heck no. They’re way over the far end.” The florescent and silver spoon arced beautifully in the blue sky. Plomp, it smacked the water.

“Let the hook settle first,” Greg issued instructions.

Nothing. I fished for several minutes and thought I had a strike, but that was it. Barb came out. “I think the battery should be ready by now. I put it in the radio. Want to give it a try?”

“Yes!”

Greg handled the receiver and pressed its button. “YX-4642- calling-Ft. Nel-son-over.” The little orange box cackled and buzzed. “YX-4642-calling Ft. Nelson-over.” It cackled louder before a female voice spoke faint, yet clear.

“Come in YX-4642.” Greg handed me the receiver. My heart pounded with excitement.

“Hello? Operator? Fort Nelson?”

“Go ahead YX-4642.” Her voice grew faint.

“Very important. Can you connect me with McBain Camera? That’s McBain Camera on Seventh Avenue, Edmonton. Again; McBain Camera, Seventh Avenue, Edmonton.”

“Roger YX-4642, McBain in Edmonton.” “Yes, roger, roger”

“The little orange box snap crackled and popped as faint voices dodged back and forth. Voices of many locations, volumes, and frequencies, wallowed in the buzz. A telephone was ringing. And then, on a Friday morning at McBain Camera, a faint voice said, “McBain Camera.”

“Listen carefully!” I screamed, “I am calling from a wilderness lake in B.C. Send your 16mm Canon Scopic to Fort Ware immediately. Confirm with Ken Nelson at 865-2245. Do you read?” There was a painful silence. “Do you read?”

A voice came in faint and broken. “Uh, I think...read...16mm...ware...Ken...Nelson...”

“Yes!” I screamed. “Important! 16mm Canon Scopic Fort Ware, immediate. Confirm: Ken Nelson, 865-2245”

The voice came in again, distant and breaking fast. “Confirm: 865-2245...” He was gone. The operator came in briefly, then she too broke up and faded away.

“I guess that’s it for now,” Greg said. “Better than I thought it would be.”

“Yes,” Barb supported. “You’re lucky to get through at all.” “Do you think he heard me?” It was an unfair question.

“Well,” They both shifted uncomfortably. “It sounded good.” Greg said. “I guess you’ll find out if that fellow does anything with it.” Barb added. I sat solemn but with a steady optimism. “I hope so. I mean, I really do.” Greg remembered the call to Ilene. “So much for that call to that other fellow’s gal.”

We slipped outside again. The weather was super. “You mind if I try fishing for a bit again?”

“No, go ahead. Barb is making sandwiches.”

There is a graceful appeal when a shiny lure sails a silver band through forty feet of sky. Plop, the lure slapped the surface. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, now reel in. My wrist rotated little circles and the delicate rod tip dipped with each bob of the darting spoon. Wham, a strike jerked the rod. Wham, wham, it was on. “Fish on!” My eyeballs widened and pulse quickened. “Hey, I got one”

The rainbow trout fought actively and leaped boldly out of the water in defiance of the object in his mouth. It was hooked well. Silver sides flashed loudly with the angle of the sun. Back and forth it darted, peeling short dashes of line from the reel in its more frantic rushes. It tired and I reeled it in steadily, then slid it triumphantly onto the beach. I celebrated with a bite from my Burnt Almond.

* * * * *

The engine slowed and Bill and Brian could be seen resting on the lakeshore. It had been a good holiday. Greg and Barb supported the journey and provided fuel for my conviction of the importance of the journey and film. I wiped the apple pie crumbs from my beard. We landed the skiff. Greg handed chocolate bars to two very muddy and sweaty wilderness travelers.

“It should take about four hours,” he yelled as he bid us farewell from the skiff.

The tree was huge. It fell directly across our path. Twenty yards further lay another downed tree, and beyond that, another. Bill led the outfit around the trees and, as usual, leaving the trail meant a struggle with the wicked under-growth. Undergrowth knew no mercy. Each downed tree added twice the distance and stole strength and time. Leafy vegetation hid the ground. Lucky forced each step in good faith. Three times in twice as many yards he stumbled on hidden sticks and stumps. He tossed his neck and snorted disapproval as he walked onto the clear gravel wash of a creek and, in a moment, plunged back into the deceptive foliage.

At first the burned forest was Intermittent with greenery but now it spread complete. At first it felt a relief from the stuffy forest but now the dead timber was uprooted as far as the eye could see. The dead roots of burned trees offered little resistance to wind and they fell like downed soldiers and lay strewn as so many black matchsticks. The horses lifted their legs high over the logs that lay in their path. A large round log lay across the path and the horses hopped over one by one until Brian's horse lifted its legs and dragged them roughly over the log. The brown packhorse in front jumped with a start. A drop of blood beaded on its right hock and slid down its right hoof. Bill dodged the black logs with practice, sometimes cutting back to the trail and sometimes just picking through the maze. The horses stopped and Lucky jammed his nose in the brown jerk's bum. He struck back a threat with its hoof. Lucky backed up and snorted a curse at the packhorse.

"Brian," Bill called in the distance. "No good here, try down more."

We followed Brian down toward the lakeshore. "I don't know where we're gonna go here," Brian yelled. "There's logs everywhere." I walked down to Brian to find we were hemmed in with deadfall that looked like a scattered corral. We cut through some debris and led the horses fifty yards, then again found ourselves hemmed in.

"What a pig sty!" Brian yelled and again we axed through the debris, this time taking turns with a large tree.

I led the outfit to the lakeshore and walked Lucky right into the lake. The lake bottom was hard with fine gravel and we rode knee deep along the edge, stepping over or riding around logs that lay submerged. If the forest had not been so frustrating we may have laughed at the sight of seven horses splashing a trail through the lake. "This may look like we're nuts, but it works!" I said as we plodded along.

"Ya," Bill said. "If Greg is watching us from across the lake with binoculars, he will say we're nuts alright!"

"Hey," Brian joked, "let's stop and dive off the saddles."

“You might get your wish.” I pointed my hand ahead about a half-mile.

“Those cliffs look like they drop right into the water.”

The debris grew heavy in the water. Dead trees fell from the bank and landed with their tops reaching thirty feet out into the water. Each time I reined Lucky into deeper water and we walked around the ends; sometimes we swam. A particularly thick log blocked our way and again we edged into deep water. We could not make the end and began to swim.

“This is a deep one!” I yelled. “Take your horses out deep!” The outfit followed well, but the free, spare horse decided to cut straight over the log once it began to swim. Swoosh, its’ legs caught on the log and the horse disappeared in a swirl of water. The water churned and we looked on in horror, in fear for the horse and wondering what would happen if we had been on it. Again, the horse’s head dropped out of sight and, with a huge snort, popped up five yards this side of the log.

“C’mon, you idiot!” Bill screamed at the horse, adding to the humiliation.

For two miles we had ridden in the water and wondered how long our luck could last. The cliff began as an innocent ten-foot block but soon loomed over us a fifty-foot rock face. We hugged the cliff in a foot of water. Dark cracks outlined brown slabs of shale and threatened to crash upon us as plate scatterings built up in the water demonstrated. Water lapped against the rock face and the odd small log. We rode with the great hope that the water would not force us to swim, and that what was around the approaching corner of the cliff was a solid beach. A few yards before the cliff, Lucky’s chest dropped into a bottomless hole and water chilled my groin.

“I’m gonna swim!” I yelled back to Brian and Bill. In a hundred strokes we rounded the bend and were greeted by a strip of gravel beach. “Keep coming! It’s ok!”

Lucky touched bottom and walked out of the water. The outfit followed. Bill and Brian were soaked to the waist shaking their heads in disbelief.

“You know,” Bill said. “I really didn’t think we were gonna make it.”

“Me either,” Brian lifted his legs in the air and water rolled out of his gumboots. I didn’t either, I thought.

The reins settled on the ground and Lucky swiped a mouthful of grass. I leaned the axe against a stump and dropped the few yards to the shore. The afternoon sun drew beads of sweat from every man and horse. I removed my hat and submerged my head under the water. After counting to twenty, I lifted my head and let the water run out of my ears. Brian and Bill dropped their reins and joined me. The horses stood munching grass. There was no need to tie them, as there was nowhere to run. In fact, there was nowhere to walk. I bit into a blister the axe had worn into my right forefinger. “How long did Greg say it would take to ride the lake?” Bill asked.

“Four hours,” Brian replied.

“Someone should have a talk with him,” I decided.

Bill took over the lead, walking a few yards then axing an alder branch, walking a few yards then axing a deadfall, walking a few yards, then straddling another deadfall. My shin knocked against a hidden deadfall and I promised to lift my legs higher. But the heat of the day and the strain of the forest dragged our legs. My feet bumped and scratched heavily against the indescribable debris.

We beat the lake and the burn was gone. A small creek whose water led eighty miles down to Fort Ware rolled pleasantly from the end of the lake and we struck a trail down its’ banks. Large leafy poplar provided a green canopy and the forest floor allowed few grasses and many leafy weeds.

Bill stopped walking and wondered about the evening camp. “What do you want to do?”

“You mean the camp?”

“Ya, you want to make camp here or keep going?”

“How do you feel?” I asked a loaded question. It was one we had grown accustomed to. It meant, “I’ll go on if you do!” or “If you’ve got the stamina then so do I.” We were exhausted. The forest pushed us to our limit this day.

“I’m alright.” Bill said. “Brian, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m ok. I don’t think we should go much further, though.” “Ya,” I said, “I think the horses have had a hard day today.” The horses stood changing their weight leg to leg in rest periods. The brown packhorse kept his right hock high. Small drops of blood trickled out of the cut and rolled down the slick hair. I lifted my axe from its scabbard and led Lucky to the front.

Bill looked up at me from his mossy rest and shook his head. “Jeez, I hope this trail gets better,” I shook my head. “It can’t get much worse.”

“Let’s go Lucky.” I headed on foot down the trail wielding the axe against hanging alder and deadfall that we could not step over. “If you see a good place to camp or if someone drops dead, I guess we’ll stop.”

C’mon trail, be good to us. You’ve been rotten all day, haven’t you? But you can be better, can’t you? It didn’t matter what I said, we still had to walk and cut through the sagging alder. We tried to ride, twice, and tried to push through the alder, and each time heavy overhang scraped me from the saddle. Lucky stood patiently as I slid to the ground. Off the trail was a jungle. On the trail, if you could call it a trail, and most would not, it was a part-time jungle.

The setting sun cast orange beams of light through the forest. Every minute threatened a growing darkness and saddened our spirits. Still the forest grew thick and the floor remained weed and leaf covered. A thick clump of alders threw heavy branches across the trail. Once again, I wielded the axe and it was painful in my right hand, my forefinger and palm red with friction and the broken blister burning with sweat. Thump, thump, thump. My arms drove the axe into the branches awkwardly. Suddenly the axe drove through a cut branch with little resistance and it flew to the ground,

its' weight jerking my right elbow forward and shooting pain along my arm. I held my arm in pain, picked up the axe, turned my back against the remaining branch and pushed through.

My arm ached with each step and with each step I grit my teeth in anger. Get mad or give up. I knew the choices; rather I knew there were no choices. The horses sagged under the weight of the packs and the cinches hung loose around empty bellies. The few blades of grass that stood brown and dry near the trail were hardly worth stealing. The horses would not understand quitting, not until grass could be found. Sometime few choices become no choices.

Now the trail led through large poplar, some of them uprooted, and crashed across our path. Maybe now there would be grass, we hoped. But in a minute we shoved into a wall of alder. Alder the saint and alder the wretch, worthy of both callings. For a hungry elk or moose, alder will do. For a smoke fire below suspended fish fillets, moose meat, or mosquito driven horses, it is hard to beat. It even looks pleasant with smooth grey bark, beginning as stalks in a bunch then reaching ten feet out to the side after leaving behind a few upright slingshots. But it is the demon of the path; the force against all who travel. Each branch started from rock solid roots then drove a hard angle across paths and clearings as so many hurdles. And each branch charged back after a push or drive with an axe with amazing resilience. Often green and rarely dead, when it is it is near useless, a cremation of alder wood smolders stubborn with little hope of flame and heat. We hated the alder.

My arms ached at the thought of wielding the axe against the next bunch of alder and so we forced through the pulling tangle.

Our feet dragged heavy and begged forgiveness at the closing of the day. At each bend came a whisper from my lips, "please, please, please, let there be grass."

We dropped down a little dirt trench into a dry wash then up a dirt crack heading for ground level. Then, a dead tree squared across the trail at

chest height stopping us cold. The horses crammed against one another. My arms slung over the log and the axe slipped onto the ground. I could take no more. I hung my head for a moment, then screamed into the silent forest. “You bastard!” The horses jumped back from my madness. “You son of a bitch!” I grabbed my shotgun and rifled a round into the chamber. Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

The limb thumped dead on the ground.

* * * * *

In the confusion of your daily awakening comes the insurance of sanity. In your bed, in your sleeping bag, in your blanket, you are suddenly awake in the quiet darkness with closed eyes. In the sortings of your awakening you might wonder where you are but the sanity always tells you who you are.

I opened my eyes, and the world was dark blue. The wall of the lean-to replied with a breeze. Then I remembered the lake, the forsaken trail, the deadfall and now there were horse blankets for my bed. It must have been a big sleep, a sleep that hid our plight as well as tired muscles. The cobwebs were unshakable. Pots rattled through the forest silence.

I turned in my bag, sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes and stiffness from my scalp. Large black poplar huddled all around. A single stalked palm leaf grew a shadow over my head and its cousins spread single-handed guards around the campsite.

“You’re alive.” Bill leaned his back against a tree and mumbled around a stalk of brome grass sticking from his mouth.

“I don’t know.” I tried to look at him but rubbed sleep from my eyes instead.

The creek rolled by only feet away and the corner of my lean-to pinned the trail from going anywhere.

“I don’t hear the horses. Where’s the horses?”

“They found some grass about a quarter mile down. Brian went to check ‘em.”

“What time is it?”

“Supper. There’s stew in the pot.” I found a bowl of stew, sat back on my bag, ate the stew, checked my shotgun and fell asleep for the night.

It was as if the first night never even existed.

The next morning I was truly awake. The saddle leather felt good in its smoothness. The leafy smells of the forest were heavy with mist. The stream sounded crisp. The horses tossed their heads and pawed the ground impatiently. I tightened my cinch and untied the packhorse lead rope. “Did anyone get a chance to check down the trail?”

“I walked about a mile and a half. Some deadfall, but we should be able to get around and I think we can ride in the creek if we have to.” Bill led off.

“Think we’ll make the Warnerford today?” I asked whoever was listening.

“The Warnerford?” Bill said. “That’s only eight miles. We’ll make it farther than that, eh? I’m thinking we should be in Ware in three days.”

The path was blazed. I wondered if the blazes had been made by a trapper on foot or horse packers. Bill chose a careful route, occasionally picking delicately around logs and once in a while dipping down onto streamside gravel bars. Alder maintained a respectable distance. After a couple miles the boulders in the stream grew large and tricked the horse’s feet, so we were confined to the trails. In the forest uprooted trees had been thrown down in a great fervor.

Bill dismounted. “I think we’re gonna have to walk. This stuff is gonna need axing.” We dismounted and checked our axes finding them secure in their leather lashings. My gun scabbard sat proper in a forty-five-degree angle butt up and forward. I did a double take.

“Oh no!” I cried, “It’s gone! My gun!” I groaned. “Damn!”

“Where’d you leave it?” Brian asked. I lowered my forehead against the saddle.

“I saw it in camp,” Bill said.

“Ya, it’s in the camp alright. I leaned it up against a tree and it’s still there.”

“What are you gonna do?” Brian asked.

“Damn! How could I be so stupid?” I tied the packhorse lead up to his pack box. “I won’t be long.”

Lucky turned with no questions, back against the land he had fought so hard to gain. You ugly bitch forest, you know what the hell you’re doing to us, and now this. “Hiya! Go Lucky! Go fast! Hiya!” Timber raced past us and we dogged wildly around fallen trees and live trees. Green boughs beat against us and leaves sprinkled the air from our attack. “You bastard forest!” screamed as we raced along. “You lose, you snake!” The three miles were eaten up in my madness.

Lucky jerked up against the tree with my gun leaning against it.

The butt was a familiar friend in my hand as it slid into the scabbard. “Heeya! Heeya! Back we go!” The pounded trail passed easily in defeat. We gained the turn-around point, rode another two hundred yards, and found the red pack boxes of the horses peeking motionless between trees. Bill and Brian were not to be seen.

“What’s the matter?” I yelled and then the sound of biting axes echoed through the woods. Fifty yards past the horses Bill and Brian hammered their axes into fallen timber. Brian saw me and leaned on his axe. “Get your gun?”

“Ya, what a mess, hey.” Bill joined us and we shook our heads with disbelief.

We sat on the ground to gather our intentions.

“You know,” I said. “I was watching the creek and most of the way. There were gravel bars. We could probably ride right down the water.”

Sploosh, sploosh, sploosh, sploosh. The horses provided special effects for a dozen elephants in a jungle movie, except when the horses’ hooves rang clear on open stones. Lucky set a fast pace and inside of an hour we stopped on a large gravel bar to wait for the pack outfit hidden a bend behind.

The stream grew into a small river and rushed wildly along, clear in heart and forceful in disposition. A solitary mountain on my left wrinkled my brow with concern as I dismounted. Its barren crown of gray slab rock was just visible above a collar of burned trees that dipped out of sight. Our future looked bleak as ever. Bill and Brian rode up.

“What’s the hurry?” Bill leaned on his saddle horn. “Hurry, why?”

“That’s what we were wondering.”

“I just got here a couple of minutes ago, five at the most.” Brian and Bill dismounted and pulled out the map. “This side of Bedeaux Pass isn’t as good as we thought eh?” I said. They looked at me but said nothing. Brian looked at the map then pointed to two forested bumps a mile ahead. “Those must be the hills there.”

“Well, they sure match the map alright.” Bill said, then continued, “So our trail is supposed to go on the south side of that south rise and Aramis Lake should be right there too.”

We rode across the fast water then Bill walked at the lead through the trees toward the humps of land. The odd time we found feeble axe marks on trees. We began a gradual ascent on the south base of the southern hill and rode, once again, into a blackened and burned forest. The burn heaped debris upon the trail and the horses bore their agony each time their legs dragged over a downed log or got stabbed by iron branches. The trail branched, one path up the hill and another down the slope and along the base of the hill.

“Look!” Bill shouted. Through the trees shone the silver water of a small lake. “Aramis” we sang together. We examined the path and took the lower trail along the lakeshore. Lucky buckled through the sedge-fern ground.

“Bog!” Water seeped into tracks as we hurried and struggled a careful path along the quagmire shore. Once past the lake we repacked two horses that slipped their boxes from the roly-poly work. The sun beat down hard and we drank heartily from the cold lake water.

We continued past the lake and assumed a high dropping ridge that followed a large deep ravine with a silver stream one-half mile down. The stream and our outfit were both heading for the Warnerford River. Hot afternoon sun combined with black dust to stifle our breath. With brief stops we shed our clothing and it dallied carefree from saddle strings. Our skin blackened with soot and sunburn. Brian, in the lead, soon found his path stalemated in a deadfall wall. Bill dismounted and walked never stopping, just taking turns cursing and backtracking. Our orange, red and baby blue T-shirts stained black with sweat and burn. "Ha-chew!" I sneezed as the packhorse in front kicked ash from a back foot. I wiped the black snot from my moustache. "Gross," I mumbled and wiped it on my pant leg.

With every little rise we strained our eyes for a glimpse of the river or at least a big valley that would hold the river. But with each gain of each rise there came another dip and more downed timber. With each disappointment our legs grew heavier and minds more aggravated hoping for a miracle route through the tangle but knowing better.

Supper hour came and went with not even a little stream to quench our thirst. There will be a stream soon, I kept reassuring myself, but the thread of a stream was one-half mile below through a fortress of tangle. It hurt to look down at the water. There will be a stream soon.

"I like it back here," I chuckled to myself as the outfit floated red and orange ghosts through a sea of blackness. "I like it being last so I can go as slow or as fast as I choose," I said to myself. "Are those blueberry shrubs?" I bent down and found little green berries clustered premature on the little plant. "Later." The horses stopped. "Is there water up there?"

"Yea." "About time."

We sat by a little spring that sprang a glitter of water over lime moss-covered stone. Brian had been wearing his leather chaps for a good portion of the day and finally had taken them off. His black rubber boots shone in the sun. "A little cooler without those chaps, eh?" I said.

He pulled up a pant leg and revealed a red fist-sized scrape that oozed shiny. “Yea, I’m not so sure it was a good idea.”

“Where are your chaps?” Bill asked with concern.

“On the saddle horn,” Brian glanced over to his horse. “What?”

Brian mumbled, getting to his feet. “I put them there. I know it.” He looked back through the miserable woods but there was no sign of the chaps. The horses stood quiet with nothing to eat and nothing to bicker about. The dead forest killed any hope for anything except black silence and misery.

Brian, like Bill and I, had no device for measuring the sorrow and frustration that crept into our lives from the hardships and loneliness of this forsaken journey. No past experience and no comprehension so dealing with it had never been invented. Brian stood in the ugly stillness trying to weigh the burden of his loss against the burden of fumbling back through the burn, alone through the evening stillness. Without the precious evening rest, reflection, and recuperation, there could be no tomorrow for him or for us; not one that could be imagined with a sense of hope.

“Brian,” I said as a suggestion. “Fort Ware is only a few days away. Maybe we can make something up there.”

“How far back do you think they are?” Bill asked.

“I was wearing them at the lake and then took them off.”

“I’ll go back for you if you want,” Bill looked at Brian and I thought Bill was considering Brian’s rubber boots and sore feet.

Brian sat down and leaned his forehead into his knees. “I don’t believe this,” was all he said.

The mountains were hidden from us and now the sun threatened to disappear. “Bill,” Brian said, “let me borrow your boots; I’ve got extra socks in my saddle bag.”

The water felt a temporary relief to my belly. My stomach gurgled a conversation between my backbone and the ground underneath. My hand slid from under the back of my head and counted my protruding ribs. Each time a horse snorted my eyes jumped open hoping for Brian’s footsteps.

Instead, Speck's big belly heaved and sighed a shady blob between my resting head and the blue sky.

It didn't make much sense worrying about Brian. It didn't make much sense worrying about anything. Nothing made any sense. It didn't have to make sense for the horses, it just was, so it didn't have to make sense to me, it simply was. Speck farted, twice.

A horse snorted and I jerked my head up for a look. Speck had his head turned into the forest but in a moment relaxed his ears. No Brian. "Speck," I said loudly, "Does anything matter to you? Don't crap me now, tell me true. Do you care about anything? That's what I thought. You're a moron. All you care about is that bottomless pit of a stomach." Speck didn't care about what I said. Speck didn't love me. My mind erased all further consideration and dozed into emptiness.

The dreamy transfer from the vacuum I felt lost in, to the all-encompassing fog of sleep was easy, just a subtle change of texture and movement. The fog before passing out was as gentle as a feather, sliding into a dream transparent and revealing - charred and tall burned timber that ended only with a timeless horizon. In the horrible black land I crouched naked and fearful as a starved coyote in fear of what lurked behind every tree and knoll. Then in a great distance, a tiny finger of an object floated closer through the trees. It drew near with great speed, with a pronounced and eerie aura of a suspended being. I knew it had come for me. Closer the floating being came, and with each moment a high angelic hymn came with it. It was a mystical melodic hymn, the being formless wrappings of mild blue and red. It was not an angel at all, but a man with wide-spread arms, searching haunting, gliding, weaving, with speed greater than reasonable and with size larger than logic. I groveled in fear, whimpered as the man spread his wrappings over my nakedness, glanced upward at the face that I knew was my executioner, upward at the face that would sweep me and my pity away. But it did not sweep me away. It rose above, floating, fixed and haunting, with unmovable out-stretched arms and a lonely sullen

face, a face that belonged to Brian. Then, as if I did not exist at all, it took no notice of me and weaved a disappearing path through distant trees.

Something drew my attention. I turned to find Bill and Brian standing with the horses only a few feet away. They were silent yet their mouths moved in conversation. They led off through the trees and the footsteps of the horses did not break the silence. Their figures were expressionless, more ghost than man. I scrambled after them not wanting to be left alone. They walked on forever and ever in a terrible wasteland. A burnt stench rose from the burnt timber under the blazing heat of a relentless sun. Footsteps stumbled from both fatigue and lack of direction. On and on they filtered through the silent black forest, always out of reach of my desperation. On and on until the sun found itself slipping under the distance.

Then there was a river, a glorious river. They rejoiced and ran to the shores of its sudden appearance. They dismounted and dashed into its glory, but there was no sound. Water rushed all around their bodies and faces, splashed and soothed their scrapes and cuts, and they rejoiced, but it was silent. And on a large island, the horses frolicked in the grass and greenery. Bill and Brian jumped and laughed and shook each other's hands. Then they saw me. They stared silent, as all was silent, and then they beckoned me over with open arms and once again laughed and jumped about with glee. Then their movements slowed in a growing darkness and as they disappeared. There came distant, faint voices of laughter, but that died too.

There was a great violence. "No!" I cried. "Leave me! Leave me!" I was shaken fiercely. "No! No! No!" I cried as my mind's-eye struggled to gain realities before opening to life on earth.

Bill looked down at me. "Stan, let's get going."

I sat up abruptly. Brian leaned over a smoky fire and gathered warmth under gloomy skies. The Warnerford River rolled along deep grey and powerful, a dozen yards from my lean-to. Tiny green poplar and willow leaves rustled above my shelter as a breeze passed. "We've already had breakfast." Brian said.

“Oh, ok, I’ll get the horses.” I looked for the sun. “It’s still pretty early. Is that porridge?”

“Yup.”

I searched about for my pants and they lay dry between my sleeping bag and canvas cover. My socks were still on my feet and my right sock felt odd. My thumbs slid under the white cotton sock and over a tender foot. The sock stuck. “What the ...” Dried blood stuck the sock to the end of my foot. I tugged it free from its blood-bond. A tiny bead of blood surfaced through a crack in the dried blood where a toenail should have been. The toenail hung from the sock.

The horses came in easily from the small island. They licked and tried to bite chunks off the blue salt.

Bill walked over to Speck. “Well,” he said. “Am I gonna ride you today?” He bent down and lifted a back foot. “This horse is really something else, no shoes and I can’t see any difference from when we left. Old iron legs.”

We checked the horses’ feet, tightening and clinching loose shoes. “This white mare is missing one from the front,” I said to anyone who was or wasn’t listening. “I’m gonna pull the other one. We can replace them in Ware.” The fronts of each horses’ legs were scratched and covered with varying amounts of scab.

“You think that horse is going past Fort Ware?” Bill said matter-of-factly.

Bill and Brian saddled their horses as I walked to a gravel bar. Cold water and biodegradable sportsman’s soap cleansed and refreshed my skin. You are what you wear, they say. The blue towel suffered black streaks from past washings and its cleanest section rubbed a firm awakening. As usual, it felt darn good. I sat back on a boulder examining distant forest and peak while scrubbing my teeth. Horseshoes clicked behind me and Brian and Bill rode up.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“We’re gonna look for a trail,” Brian replied. “Be back in a while. We think the trail might be up from the river a bit.”

“What for?” I complained. “We’ve got to go that way anyway.” “Look,” Bill said. “You just do whatever you’re doing and we’ll be back unless you want to come.”

“No, that’s ok.” I resumed brushing my teeth.

A few hours later found us on a blazed trail a quarter of a mile above the river, the river that would lead us forty miles downstream to the Sikhanni Indian village of Fort Ware.

“Is this it?” I asked knowing that it was, as Bill rode in the lead. Axed blazes were barely visible on the burned trees. We rode one-half mile on the trail then struggled along a steep side hill that dropped down to the river. We walked along the slipping grade, hacking at formidable deadfall that slid down the hill. After a few difficult yards we threw down our axes in anxiety.

“This is nuts,” I gave a portion of what I actually felt. “Forty miles from Fort Ware and still no trail! Like, what’s happening! Don’t these people travel anymore?”

“Doesn’t seem like it; not here anyway.” Brian said.

“They must!” It made no sense, arguing with the failure of my own predictions. Bill stood up and looked down the grade. “I’m gonna go down and check by the water. Maybe its down there.” And he groped down the slope.

“I’ll go up,” I said.

The mountainside was an intermittent burn, greenery near bogs and slow sloughs then dead burns most everywhere else. Green grass and the startling bright orange flowers of fireweed retaliated against the black gloom. I fought upward on an exposed shoulder in the winning heat of the late morning. After dropping into a few meadows in search of a trail, I snuck a view toward a soft grassy pass between two peaks, then edged up one side to spy our villainous valley.

Upstream the rugged grey peaks of Kwadacha Park issued a solemn warning against ill-advised retreat. Downstream, as far as the eye could see, thick forest and burn choked every draw, once in a while revealing an uninteresting grey rock-pimple outcropping. The Kwadacha River wound brown, deep and bleak, only sometimes leaving white ribbons of rapids. Depressed and tired, I wound my way back down to the horses. The horses were gone and their tracks led clearly through the white chip - scatterings of axed alder limbs. A few hundred yards ahead the horses said hello. "See anything?" Brian asked. "No, the valley goes on forever; pretty ugly."

"We didn't either. This looks like the only trail." "Trail? What trail?"

"Unless it's across the river."

We took turns cutting with axes, retiring after our arms gave out.

After each round, I lay back on the trail and rested. We logged a slow path, dropping down to the rivers' edge, then coming up against the first dead water channel of what would become a countless battle. It was bad on the Muskwa River, but at least the broad Muskwa valley gave us the option of riding up a channel to find a decent crossing. Now water drained incessantly from inland sloughs and gave us little choice but to dive into the thick timber.

Bill walked inland hoping to find a route around the ten-yard channel, but instead, came up against a beaver dam and a soft-banked slough. "It's no use," I yelled. "I think these channels are streams that come down from the mountain."

"It looks best right by the river," Brian answered.

At the river, we cut some logs to gain entrance to the channel and dropped into the muddy water. "Get going! Hiya!" The horses dropped to their necks in water and mud. They floundered helplessly and we jumped from the struggling horses. Lucky floundered up against Brian's horse.

"C'mon!" I yanked Lucky's rein to the side. Mud and water swished around my waist. "C'mon!" I pulled relentlessly and finally he

heaved himself across, and as he went by, I slapped his rear spurring him into the bush. He stood with the others, sides quivering. “That damn white one!” Someone yelled as the horse rolled in the water, grinding a pack box into the mud. The brown puke turned and rushed down the channel heading for the deep river water. “Grab that one!” someone yelled and we battled in a muddy chaos. One hour later we flopped onto the ground. We were unrecognizable. From pushing, prying, and heaving on horses our arms felt like refuse after an all-night arm wrestling tournament, or maybe after carrying two five-gallon pails of water across a farmers’ field.

We learned the hard way that nothing in this country travels alone, including burns, downfallen timber, and river channels. We repeated the scenario twice more by mid-afternoon; each time hammering together split pack boxes and tossing aside wet and ruined food.

After another hour and two hundred yards of cutting alder, I threw my axe with madness. “This is crazy! I’m gonna try the other side.” Lucky and I found an opening down to the river. We didn’t give a damn about what the far side looked like or how deep it was.

We drove immediately into the deep swirling murky water, Lucky’s backside dropped vertically searching for footing. I clung, swimming to the saddle horn. Brown water swirled around my chest and each powerful stroke of Lucky’s legs surged us ahead. Midway across, Lucky’s back-end came up and I scrambled into the saddle. After forty yards across and a hundred yards down, we neared the far shore.

Lucky dropped his back-end again, searching for footing, then struck the bottom and surged ahead with a big shove of his back legs. He drew down for another push but found no bottom and he sunk hopelessly. He disappeared completely sucking me under with him as I clung to the saddle horn. Grim water filled my ears and nostrils and I struggled for the surface. At the same time I kicked off my unlaced rubber boots. The fact that I had decided to tie my coat and chaps to the saddlebags flew through my mind in praise. As I surfaced, Lucky swam and rolled in the water, legs flailing for

balance. One boot had been kicked off and as I swam for the now composed Lucky, I grabbed at the errant boot. I grabbed a handful of mane and slipped back onto the saddle with the boot firmly in hand.

Down the river we swept and finally found footing on the far side. “Hiya!” I screamed as Lucky scrambled up the bank and into the forest. I turned to see Bill and Brian working their way down the far side, oblivious to my peril blinded by forest debris. We rode a few yards into the bush and I dismounted. I sat on a log, dripping wet and wondering if how close death was made any difference. In the woods there was nothing but huge fallen timber, worse than the side we had come from. We struck the river and crossed back again.

The boot was a good and faith-full boot, carried me over thick and thin. It flopped over in the dirt. The final trickles of water slipped out of its mouth. Two brass eyelets were ripped from their sockets. A nylon lace fell short; it had been melted into a ball stub-end from close contact with a campfire. But that was good. It couldn’t slip back through the eyelet. The red sole was faded and the grips worn down to ripples. It was a good boot.

Bill and Brian walked up.

“Find anything?”

“No, its worse than here.”

Nothing changed. Nothing could change. Face it, eh? For twenty miles nothing was any different. Now you fought for five miles and expect change? You fool.

We struggled late in the day, afraid to quit because we had only made five or six miles. We were afraid to quit because, if we did without trail improvement, the evening campfire would offer little optimism for tomorrow. And we were afraid to quit because the horrible forest offered no home for even a troll.

“Once more,” I mumbled to Lucky. “Once more.” I looked across the river to what appeared a nice open forest. “Into the water, Lucky. Let’s go.” I edged the reins over and we entered the water, sinking deeper and deeper

in the soft bottom and water as Brian and Bill watched from the shore. Then we swam. We swam sturdy and swift, the water cold against my groin and a passing excitement through my body. I grinned satisfaction with the mastery of the river.

A branch stuck up in front of our unchangeable course. “Geez!” I cried as Lucky’s front leg suspended and stuck. The branches rolled under but the log that hid grabbed Lucky’s legs and he kicked violently then rolled under.

“Now, get out of here,” I said to myself and my horse. I threw myself from Lucky, away from the danger of thrashing hooves. I should have removed my boots before attempting another crossing but now my hiking boots dragged me down like Mafia runners. They had to go.

Rolling in the middle of the river I reached down and slipped off one boot, holding it in my hand momentarily. Lucky closed in on my back and frantically I kicked out of the reach of his thrashing hooves. “Hang on to the boot,” I thought. “Grab the saddle horn and hang on to the boot.” But the boot slipped away in the brown water. “No! Don’t lose the boot!” My hand flailed under the water. There, I feel it. I batted the boot upwards like volleyball, but could not grab it. There! I batted it toward the surface again. My hands dodged around where it should have been but instead it bounced off my shin. I kicked at it and knocked it up again. There! I got it! I got it! Lucky and I rolled down the river together and in a few strokes I grabbed his tail; his powerful stroke took us to the shore. Lucky stood knee deep in the shore water as I clambered up to the forest floor. Bill and Brian worked their way through the trees on the far shore. “No way! Not here!” I screamed across the water. We rested for a few minutes and swam back. “How was it?” Bill asked.

“Deep, all the way, and the bush isn’t as good as it looks. It’s all bumpy and lots of deadfall.”

“Where’s your saddle bags?” Brian asked.

“Eh?”

“Your saddle bags.”

“What?” I darted around Lucky. The bags were gone and with them my coat, chaps and rubber boots. My hand touched the saddle where they should have been. I slung my arms over Lucky’s warm back-end, put my face into its soft warmth, and would have cried but for embarrassment.

We found an island with some grass and started the biggest and hottest fire yet. It was much bigger than we needed and much bigger than the wet clothes needed. We stared blankly into the fire. I looked at my fingers and wiggled them. “You’re alive,” I thought. “Not bad, not bad at all.” Truth was, coming so close to death wasn’t so bad. It happened so fast there was no time to worry and when it was over, it was too late to worry. It wasn’t so bad.

I thought everything that could go wrong seems to be going wrong. At least as far as the condition of the trail is concerned, except for the weather. But it was sad to think that if I got killed, no one would know. By the time anyone found out they could have had four funerals. Maybe they half expected it anyway. One thing for sure: civilization sure wouldn’t miss me. You know, you can’t even feel sorry for yourself and get away with it anymore, I thought. “Who gives a damn out here how you feel. No one gives a damn about me.” I leaned my face into my knees.

In the events of the day, and in the groggy reflections that worked through me this night, there was born an understanding that I was part of a force much greater than myself. Be it providence, wishful thinking, or fool’s play, it existed. I wasn’t going to die and, in this most feeble moment, I knew that my worth would never be measured in terms of a city dweller, but as a pilgrim of the natural earth. There was much to do. I wasn’t going to die. But I was deathly weary, right down to the marrow. Sleep came swiftly, a deeply unconscious act.

It should have taken a sledgehammer to wake me, but it was the confusion of voices that did the trick. Three times my eyes opened and closed but each time it remained dark, the stars gone but the sky only a little lighter than the ground. “I guess we should wake Stan.”

“Well, I guess I’ll go after the horses.”

“Why not eat first. I’ll go with you: It’ll take both of us to catch that brown bugger.”

“Even the pinto’s been hard to catch lately. Salt doesn’t work.” “At least the white mare’s been easier to catch lately.”

“Too tired to run anymore.” “Who needs it?”

I tried to lift myself up but the cobwebs that enveloped me pulled me back down. Brian and Bill heard my movements.

“Getting time to go,” someone said.

Piss me off. I forced myself to one elbow. “What the hell is going on here?” I couldn’t see faces very well but guessed they were not smiling. “Nothing’s going on; it’s time to go.”

“Time to go!” I barked. “We didn’t go to bed until eleven or twelve. It can’t be four yet. What do you think you’re doing?”

“For crying out loud,” Bill grinded back. “We’re two weeks behind. You’re the one with all the high flyin’ ideals; travel like an army, can’t waste time, get going by eight every morning or we’ll lose two hundred miles by September, or maybe you forgot.”

“No, I didn’t forget. What do you want me to say? I’m wrong?”

O.k. I’m wrong. I was wrong. We knew a week after we left I was wrong. What’s the point of killing ourselves over it?”

“Oh, c’mon,” Bill poked at me. “You think you’re the only one it’s been hard on? Brian’s lost probably ten or fifteen pounds; I’ve lost fifteen or twenty and there’s no way in the world we can even hope of reaching Stewart at this rate. The last four days you can cover how far we traveled on the map with a fingernail. Let’s just get going to Fort Ware.”

Brian cut in. “If we’re not there by the thirteenth, Ilene is supposed to call the R.C.M.P.”

I shook my head in disagreement. “Maybe, but they’ll wait a few days. What the hell’s the point of being so tired we can hardly walk, never mind the rivers.”

“At the rate we’re going, we’re not gonna make Fort Ware until it’s too late. Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

“Too late for what?” I mumbled to myself. It was no use. All could hope for was to sleep on the trail. I stood up and was swept over by dizziness. I fought the dizzy spell, then staggered like a drunk.

We plodded weary steps one-half mile down the trail. The invigorating chill of the dawn pried on my eyelids but lost the battle. Up against a tangle of twisted fir Brian pulled his axe and chopped away. I wrapped Lucky’s and the packhorses’ leads around a log then lay down and passed out.

The late morning sun climbed high and its’ heat beamed me awake after a fitful rest. Tiny green leaves tickled my nose as my face pressed hard against a carpet of low bush cranberry. Three round green berries, with a tinge of red, fell out of focus an inch from my eye. I popped them into my mouth and crunched their tart bodies. “Ohhh...” I pulled myself up, rubbing needles and leaves from the impressions they dented in my cheek.

Lucky swished his tail at a horde of period-sized sand flies. There was only one type of fly, but we cursed them as sand flies, black flies and no-see-ums. One crawled through the hair on my left arm. Slap. “The damn things are so useless they don’t even have blood in them.” I rubbed my chest smartly then inspected the hundred tiny red welts. The little buggers just crawled into our clothes and sleeping bags to help themselves. Lucky snorted out a nose full. They seemed all wings. “How in the heck can a mouth that small cause so much trouble?”

I jumped to my feet and hurried down the trail. “Geez, Bill and Brian won’t be impressed. Tough. I’m not gonna kill myself.”

It was easy to follow their route. On every deadfall and even repeatedly on tufts of grass were the red stains of blood from the newly opened wounds on the horse’s legs. The hurt from the sight of blood from horses dragging their legs was indescribable. We gave them temporary relief when we wrapped tensor bandages and leather around their shins for protection, but

these shields found themselves tossed to the ground or crumpled around hooves in a matter of a few miles. I could accept that I chose this hell, but I would never forgive myself if we lost the horses in it.

One-half mile ahead they fumbled along, cutting an odd limb of alder. I fell into place then took my turn with the axe, one of several bouts in rotation. Twice we hauled through muddy channels of dead water and twice had to re-pack the horses. At late afternoon we lifted our eyes to a wide clay exposed field with one side slumped into the river.

“Hey, look at that,” I stammered excitedly.

Bill and Brian had already taken notice. “What is it? Maybe scratched clear by bulldozers - bulldozers from Fort Ware!”

We tied the horses and walked the perimeter of the field, meeting back at the horses. We didn’t have to ask for a report of our findings; the disappointment etched in our faces was report enough. Just a slump of clay from an unstable hillside.

“The trail seems to go up here,” I pointed up the mountainside to where I had found old blazes on a tree. “Unless it used to go across before the hill slipped down... Did you see anything on the far side?”

“I didn’t,” Brian said. “No,” Bill said.

“There’s a blaze on what looks like the old trail. Let me go look.” I headed up and disappeared into the trees. Maybe the trail headed along the valley high on the mountainside, but that was a consideration that had been dashed too many times to deserve hopeful anticipation.

I followed the blazed trail and it led high up the mountainside into an old burn. The faint trail was difficult with burnt iron-hard deadfall as usual. There was no point continuing. Back at the horses we pulled the maps. “It looks that way,” Bill agreed.

“How many miles do you think we’ll save?” I directed a question to Brian who was judging distance with his fingers.

“It looks about five or six miles around the bend, and about two or three straight across.” Bill stood up. “So all we have to do is head straight to

the end of that ridge.” He pointed to a formidable precipice about three miles in the distance that led from a shoulder of the mountain on our right, down to the Warnerford River.

“From there,” he added, “it’s only five or so miles to where the Kwadacha runs into the Warnerford. It’s only four o’clock now.” We headed into the forest in a direct south line, ignoring the river’s bend to the east and six mile loop back west. At first our decision to head straight through the woods appeared wise. It was a shallow victory for a hard beaten outfit, but without warning, we found ourselves picking paths along dry humps of land between sloughs and runs of water that swamped the ankles of willow bushes. The Douglas fir trees were enormous, fallen monarchs as wide as a man was tall. There was no stepping over these dead soldiers.

It was the rain that caused the trees to fall. In the rain side of the Rockies all grew fast and huge in the valleys, but as the ground was permanently soggy, there was no need for deep roots. The same rain that gave rich growth killed the trees because the shallow roots could not hold against wind in the unstable ground. They were like the weightlifter with an elephant chest and pencil legs. Every time a tree fell it left a hole that could swallow a horse, literally. There was not much ground left for man and beast. It was nature’s creation of a mine and mortar-bombed field and it offered us the most terrible vexation we had yet known.

Time and again we slugged through shallows. Slop, slop, slop, slop. Drenched socks squished in soggy boots. The horses stole bits of tall swamp grass. Again and again we were forced to stop. We fanned out to find a possible route, and then cut and struggled through. Sometimes we were forced to choose more of an impossible route than a possible route, and we reefed horses out of holes enough times that we would have disagreed on how many.

By mid-evening we knew that the fortitude that we had for so many days drawn freely from, could no longer supply our demands, no matter how frequent the rests; no matter how much cold water we drank and no matter

how often we maddened ourselves for shots of adrenalin. Our faces lingered permanent contortions of stress and filth.

Over and over again we came checkmate against immoveable castles: reading a difficult path, cutting through, leap-frogging to moss islands amidst open water, sinkholes and heaved root pits. Over and over again we stumbled and fell, stumbled and leaped, leaped from the horses jumping on our heels and backsides.

And now, in the graveyard twilight of the tombstone-ridden forest, even the horses stumbled under the packs, with no hope of a fresh assault on solid ground. A small patch of solid ground came along and we rested. Then no ground came suitable for resting, but there was no choice. The horses stood at odd angles, legs in and out of branches, sinkholes, moss and bent willow.

There were no birds with pretty voices, no sunshine only shadow after a canopy of boughs and mountains robbed it. Worst of all, no hope for improvement. It was the closest place on the natural earth I had ever known, or would ever know, to hell. Finally, we dropped to the ground as contorted slinkies, bent and hopeless. The simple movement of a leg was to great an effort.

I had just completed a thirty-yard cut and lead, one that we thought could not be led through, and, as usual, we led through. I waited for Brian or Bill's cut and lead, but they lay defeated, could not move. The horses sagged with heads down and two of them lay down, uncaring of the human threat that normally accompanied this pack-shifting misdemeanor. I dipped my hand into a cold-water sinkhole, the pain from busted blisters meaningless and insignificant.

I looked at Bill and he stared back. Our faces were void of expression or purpose. A dull edged seriousness cleaved heavy on our sorry group, as if our lives were reduced empty and low as they could become; as if nothing could happen that could make our existence more demeaning. If the black raven of death cried over our heads, we would not have had the energy to

loose an arrow for our fight for life and what it stood for. If we had ever known it was over, no matter how we felt, it was now.

Bill's eyes watered and I believe he held the tears of defeat that we all had coming to the surface. Finally he spoke. "Brian and I... we can't." He lifted his forearm against his forehead, then looked around. "It's getting late. We'll have to stay." But there was nowhere to stay. No grass, no flat spot for a tent, nothing. The horses shifted from leg to leg, sucking water each time.

I bent my head and crawled inside of myself for one of the greatest physical battles of my life. "Oh, God," I cried. "Where from here? Why this? Please, where can I find the strength?" I wasn't ready to die, so I wasn't ready to quit.

"Where?" I said to Bill. "Where?" "I don't know."

I crawled to my feet with the help of a log. "The river can't be too far. I'll go look."

"What if it is? We can't go no more. It's getting dark." "I'll go look; I won't be long." If I could only find it....

It is not uncommon for the dull hum of a river to be audible from high on a mountainside, but it is uncommon for it not to be heard fifty yards away. In the falling darkness I plied through the debris and water. After fifty yards, the water gave way to higher solid ground. After seventy-five yards I edged through a wall of riverbank alder. After one hundred yards the Warnerford River rolled along with an island snug on our side. For the first time since we struck the river, it came as a great relief.

And now, it was time for a physical battle greater than I had ever known. It didn't matter who I was, or what I was, I must provide a demonstration of strength, animal survival, and relentless determination. I had never experienced such complete fatigue, but never before did the welfare of horses and life demand it. The route to the horses was chosen and my axe flew. To this day I really do not know how, how to explain where the strength came from. There simply was none left. At the end of the rope, the barrel dry.

CHAPTER III – GLOOM AND DOOM

The path was opened and on the island we fell into our beds, oblivious to biting insects, emotion and the question of tomorrow.

* * * * *

Like many things in life, hardship becomes relative. The next day, on July twenty-ninth, the four miles of bush that we hacked through, the two times I recklessly swam across Warnerford River to retrieve the white mare gone astray, and the battles with submerged horses and smashed pack boxes as we crossed to a cabin, would have been most men's horror and undoing. For us, it was the familiar continuation of life as we knew it; a struggle for life and destiny without choice. Hardship and human suffering had, by now, become very relative.

Late in the day we looked across the Warnerford River to a point where the Kwadacha River and the Warnerford River came together, and at the point of their meeting was a clearing and a cabin. Lucky and a packhorse and I swam for the cabin from the offside of the Warnerford, testing a crossing for the outfit. Without explanation, Lucky turned stubbornly down river, soon to be swept into the meeting of the two deep, dirty rivers. Frantically I reined him for the point between the rivers and, in our battle, Lucky revolted by twisting under water.

I bailed off Lucky and swam, fought, for the evasive point of land where the two rivers met, but I lost. I was forced into the meeting of the two rivers, clothes and all, by the powerful flow. I had removed my boots but it didn't matter. Lucky's neck and head bobbed down river like a distant cork. I knew my fate. Now I would be swept down-stream in the middle of one great river, as Lucky, too far to from either shore, and no more strength to swim. I drove hard to make the point, new it was hopeless, but drove never-the-less. Just when I knew I was sunk, twenty yards off the point-end of the rivers' meeting, the toes of a socked foot touched the submerged grade of shifting sand, an underwater rise between the two rivers. I dug in with both toes, shoved hard against the current. Incredibly, the river bottom gave

barely enough footing to slowly force myself upstream against the current. Three or four inches deeper and it would have been an impossibility. With very careful and forceful toe holds I gained firm river bottom and reached the shore.

Downstream Brian and Bill rescued the two river-swept horses. They led the outfit into the river as well, upstream from my catastrophe, and after a nightmare battle of submerged horses and smashed pack boxes we climbed up to the cabin side.

The cabin was a picture of serenity, a mocking contrast of the horror we knew. With blankets drying on poles, food strewn on the ground, round mountain knobs protruding all around, and raspberries red in all directions, my musings were crooked and aimless, but vindictive towards fate, that we should know such horrors, that we should be brutalized by fate. The peaceful cabin was stark contrast to death just a kiss away. Caught between a rock and a hard place, a soft place and a river.

JULY 30TH

Bill and Brian built a raft and headed down to Ware to tell the folks not to worry; we are just late. I hope they made out o.k. They should be back in three to four days. The horses need this break badly. Good thing. I rest today. There are two cabins. They are native trapping cabins, rustic, dirt floor, but very serviceable. Many fine raspberry bushes all around the yard. Yum! Yum! Tomorrow I must work on gear. Incredibly fine weather this month. Thank you, God.

JULY 31ST (SATURDAY)

Mostly rested and read today. Ascent of Man and Readers' Digest I have found here. Fixed some gear. Ate too much biscuits and pancakes. It is the horses that need the rest the most and, perhaps, some healing, especially the pinto and the chestnut. They seem to drag their legs more

than the others and get scratched and cut a lot. The shins of all the horses seem stiff and very sore. Horses get penicillin today. I calculated the river crossings and number of times we have hauled horse from graves of mud and swamp. So far, I have swam the width of rivers fifteen times and we have pulled horse out of holes thirty-five to forty times. Hard to know exactly how many. For the first time I am really worried about Brian and Bill. Trying to swim a rushing river with clothes is near impossible. The raft was almost under water, and they had their boots tied up. They could maneuver it, but swimming with clothes is darn near impossible. I will pray for them. Let us not succumb to the fear of danger and loneliness.

SELECTIONS FROM J. BRONOWSKI, *THE ASCENT OF MAN*

“Knowledge is not a loose-leaf notebook of facts. Above all, it is a responsibility for the integrity of what we are, primarily of what we are as ethical creatures. You cannot possibly maintain that informed integrity if you let other people run the world for you while you yourself continue to live out of a ragbag of morals that come from past beliefs. That is really crucial today. You can see it is pointless to advise people to learn differential equations, or to do a course in electronics or in computer programming. And yet, fifty years from now, if an understanding of man’s origins, his evolution, his history, his progress, is not the commonplace of the schoolbooks, we shall not exist. The commonplace of the school-books of tomorrow is the adventure of today, and that is what we are engaged in. “And I am infinitely saddened to find myself suddenly surrounded in the west by a sense of terrible loss of nerve, a retreat from knowledge into, into what? Into Zen Buddhism; into falsely profound questions about, Are we not really just animals at bottom; into extra-sensory perception and mystery. It sounds very pessimistic to talk about western civilization with a sense of re-treat. I have been so optimistic about the ascent of man; am I going to give up at this moment? Of course not. The ascent of man will go on. But do not assume

that it will go on carried by western civilization, as we know it. We are being weighed in the balance at this moment. If we give up, the next step will be taken, but not by us. We have not been given any guarantee that Assyria and Egypt and Rome were not given. We are waiting to be somebody's past too, and not necessarily that of our future.

AUGUST 1ST

Thought I would be much gone by this date somewhere around Thutade Lake, but we are not even at Ware yet. I feel we are behind at least ten or fifteen days by the time we reach Fort Ware, but that is nothing I cannot handle. Rain at last, steady sock in weather, sure nice to have a cabin to use. I have not had this much time for reflecting since...since I was doing grade twelve in summer school, just back from the wilderness of the Yukon when I was sixteen or seventeen. I have made a personal vow today. One that comes from the way I feel, and that I need, as much as in words... to dedicate more time to growing intellectually and spiritually and creatively, and less caught in the whims of superficial needs and emotions. I hope Bill and Brian are safe and in Ware. I hope all family is safe.

AUGUST 2ND

Very worried about Brian and Bill. Rafting is dangerous business, especially on tight corners because you cannot maneuver. So, I went out to clear trail so that I could leave tomorrow and have good travel in case we do not find each other. Then, surprise! I was about four miles down and a big wooden riverboat full of natives pulled up. Then I noticed Bill and Brian huddled in the middle. The natives are Pete, whose cabin I am using, Harvey and his son Ivan, Mary, Pete's wife, and Charlene, Pete's daughter. They are very friendly. I was very worried about being in their cabin and desperately tried to explain to them with sign language and loud English over the roar of the motor that I was sorry for being in their cabin. They

could not understand me and I couldn't understand them, which makes sense as my Sikhanni is not quite up to snuff. Then, at the cabin I rushed in to get my stuff and they said, "No, no, stay. We no use cabin. "They camped under tents and mosquito covers. They stay in cabins all winter and by summer are glad to be in the tents. Then I tried to apologize for eating their raspberries so nicely planted. They thought I was crazy and tried to tell me that it was God who planted them, and they didn't eat them much. I couldn't believe it. They didn't bother eating them, just bannock, moose and jam. I asked Ivan why he never ate the berries and he swallowed one to convince me he could. Interesting people. Bill bought the gas in Ware, fifteen gallons for seventy•five dollars! (1982). Then Pete charged fifty dollars for the trip but he was coming to hunt moose anyway. What a sharpie. In the boat I yelled questions to Bill about Fort Ware. The last question was a loud, "Well, what do you figure? Gonna go on?" I thought that with the new spirit from civilization they might continue. He nodded. "We decided before what we're doing. "I wasn't sure what he meant, thinking maybe they would continue, so I asked him again. He looked at me and said a brief "No. "I was disappointed and yet, after all of the wondering and debates, somehow relieved that the situation was clear. I can tell already that we are doing our own thing. Me preparing to go on and them thinking toward civilization. Harvey said if I have cut to where they picked me up, we have free sailing to Ware. This land is a bitch, but we won. There are some men and many horses who can't say the same.

CHAPTER IV

MAN WHO DWELLS IN ROCKY PLACES

Remarkable - 1982 and the greedy hands of civilization forgot about the mountain village of Fort Ware. I had the distinct notion that if we had ridden in here fifty years ago not much would be different, except perhaps an odd bench, wheelbarrow, or moose meat drying rack. The Sikhanni Indians have been here longer than anyone knows. Alexander Mackenzie heard of them and Samuel Black, the first white man who traveled to the headwaters of the Finlay by canoe, met them. Even in the one mile by two-mile reserve their independence was apparent. They scattered their dwellings in the need for elbowroom.

The village was modest, a couple dozen dwellings along the Finlay River two miles down from the Fox River and just above the White River (another name for Warnerford). The one hundred and fifty-odd residents snuggled their cottages into stands of trees or grassy glades, then pounded footpaths into the dirt as lifelines joining the main paths that had a greater purpose. They lead to the store, the airport, or the mobile phone. Any five-year-old had mastered the communication network but my short time here would just make it fun trying.

Brian and Bill had a campsite and we dismounted next to an old abandoned school in the heart of the village. Brown-skinned, brown-eyed, black-haired children giggled with our arrival and peeked shyly from behind trees, buildings, and each other, then ran by in a dare from peer pressure.

“Hi,” I smiled and waved as a little one rattled by. “He,he,he,he” he ran and hid. Adults moseyed about or sat on stools and stumps pretending no mind to the odd guests.

Everyone was so casual, so unhurried and so relaxed! It was like each said, “Don’t tell us where you come from or what goes on out there. It never did me no good, I don’t car and I’m not going to start now.” Cruise missiles are about to be tested and all John Poole could do was sit there on his wooden door-step scratching his neck, with one foot in the dirt and a roll-your-own spinning in stained fingers. “That moose meat looks nearly dry; maybe take it down tonight. River looks not too bad. Maybe set a net for grayling tomorrow. I’m surprised Pete got moose in one day. Too much happening now. Don’t like summer; too busy.”

They were so obviously basic, so in tune with their surroundings, so peaceful. They were an insulting contrast to the intense worrywarts that we had become. Their acceptance of this life was so subtle, yet so astounding. How could they be so peaceful and happy? They had nothing - an old shack for a seasonal home, a few rough tents, maybe a wooden boat and a thirty-thirty with a box of ammo. Even as I wondered this brief affront I knew that my impulsive observations were very wrong, so narrow, so white European, so western civilization.

They had everything in their complete and timeless world; everything that their ancestors had and, they hoped, everything that their children would have, with the peace of mind to know it and treasure it. But there was talk of a new road.

My emotions changed from pity and wonder to embarrassment. An old lady in a grey overcoat and a wrinkled cabbage-patch face, her head covered with a brightly flowered kerchief, sifted by without so much as a glance or a nod. She had seen too many like us. Please old woman, look at me. I’m not like the rest. I can love your children for what they are.

“Hello,” I said. She walked by without so much as a nod. Face it, whiteboy. It’s you who is the fish out of the water. Another child ran by smiling and laughing. I smiled back.

We led the horses to the airstrip and turned them loose. They hopped several yards then snorted at the old piles of manure, horse droppings from resident herds that would soon be our troops company. “Go!” I screamed. “Holidays! Rest you suckers!” And the horses dashed away in the fields with a new spirit.

“Where’s the store?” I asked Brian who was turning to walk back to camp.

“Over there. That white building. I don’t think it’s open now.

Never know though.”

“Right on. They have chocolate bars?” “Just a few kinds.”

I ran over, swinging around aircraft fuel drums, and then jerked harshly on the locked door. I pushed the door, widening the crack and sticking my nose in the door jam. “No use. I can’t even smell them. Geez.”

Back at the camp a half a dozen teenagers sat on the stumps around the fire. They watched Bill and Brian stirring the stew. “Oh wow! People!” I thought. I edged into the campfire with my best Indiana Jones nod for hello. I was cool but would rather have been down on my knees begging them and tugging on their jeans to talk with me. “Hi,” I said in case they didn’t catch my nod. They nodded hello and the young girls giggled. I smiled an immediate response to their giggles, then checked my fly. My zipper was all the way up. I looked up at the sky. “Looks like it’s going to rain. Not nice like last week.”

The guys nodded and the girls giggled.

“You live here?” I had already asked about the weather. The four girls giggled and the two guys nodded. The younger of the two lads was a sharp looker with keen and attractive ancestral features. He oozed pride and fire in an uncommonly serious face. His black hair lay gently past his shoulders and responded to the light breeze. A dark brown Stetson should have been

eccentric, instead it was fitting, and he knew it or he wouldn't have worn it. I sat beside him on a small bench, and said, "I'm Stan."

"Herman....McCook," He kept his hands crossed in his lap above crossed legs.

"Oh ya?" I was mildly surprised. "The Chief, Emil, isn't he a McCook?"

"My brother."

"Your brother? He must be pretty young for a chief."

"Thirty-six," a gal with a particularly square and plump face said softly. She added "He been chief from twenty-three," and all the gals giggled and leaned against each other.

"Gee, that's something; pretty young."

"Where you goin?" The girls were getting brave and more at ease. "That way" I pointed west and chuckled. They giggled.

"You're gonna hit the ocean if you go that way." Another gal joined in and again they giggled.

"I hope so." "What for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing really. Big holidays. Taking some pictures. Just like being out here."

"Funny place for a holiday; rather go to James," a shy gal spoke up then hugged up against her friend with embarrassment, or pretended embarrassment.

"Fort St. James? Nothing there but dust and bars!" I said. They all laughed and Herman said, "That the idea."

"Where you from?" someone asked. I poked at the fire as it grew brighter in the premature grey evening.

"I was from Hinton, by Jasper." They did not acknowledge. "Half- way between Prince George and Edmonton."

"I heard that place," one girl whispered to another.

“What do you do here?” I asked. The girls giggled and the two guys were still expressionless. Finally, a lean girl with hawk features said, “nothing, can’t you see?” and they joined in laughter.

“Play hockey?” I thought they must play hockey in the long winter. “No, play hookey.” They couldn’t stop giggling but I didn’t want them to. It had been a very long time since I heard the warm sound of laughter and it would take some doing to fill my quota. “Really, no skating?”

“Not much, little bit.”

“Have you heard of Wayne Gretzky?” I asked as if I was changing the subject. They looked at each other and shuffled a bit. The stocky quiet boy mumbled to Herman, “That guy with the gas station there, by Fort Nelson there...”

“Really?” I was taken by surprise. They shifted uncomfortably and glanced to the ground.

“I heard,” Herman said without expression, “some kind of hockey player.”

In an instant it began to rain and they talked of leaving, then someone suggested I sleep in the old abandoned school behind us because it had a big stove. Then someone else suggested we all go inside because it had lights from the generator. We hustled into the abandoned building behind us.

Children’s toys and soiled books lay tossed about. The girls cleaned space for my stay and the hawk-faced girl came out of a dark adjoining room with short planks of one-by-six for firewood. “Here, let me take that,” I said, and carved splinters of wood, settled them into the stove and flicked my Bic. The wood smoldered for a minute then died. Four giggling brown-faced girls and one concerned white face stared into the dark stove hole at my failure.

“Let me,” someone said. “No, no, I’ll do it.” I sliced some more shavings. We huddled around the stove again. As I reached down to light the fire again the girl on my left moved close and her leg rubbed up against mine. Her touch sent weird emotions reeling through me. It was the first human

touch for weeks, weeks that felt like months. She closed in on a personal space that had not been crossed for a long time. My heart had hung onto clear and strong memories of the last time. My body flushed with feeling. “You’re some kind of sorry guy,” I said to myself. “Get a hold of yourself.”

The fire went out again and the girl and the guys laughed openly but harmlessly. “Who starts your fire for you in the bush?” the hawk- faced girl said and they giggled. I was painfully embarrassed.

“Old Indian trick. I carry a can of gas.” And they laughed some more. The hawk-faced girl persisted. “C’mon, let me. What do you white guys know?” She took a pile of sheets from the Prince George Herald and crumpled them into balls. Inside of a few minutes she had a blazing fire. They were good-hearted people.

Morning songbirds chirped hello in the sunshine. The weather did an about face into an unexpected blue-sky delight. The Finlay rolled along refreshingly clean and happy. The Jim VanSommer house was not so unlike the others. It was what one would expect along a British Columbia fishing coastal village waterfront - an elderly paint- worn four-room log bungalow. What I expected of the only white resident on the reserve, the helpful person Brian and Bill described as the man whose house held the cherished mobile radio phone, was some-thing of a robust mountain man dedicated to life in the wilderness.

I knocked on the open screen door while examining the interior. An enamel coffee pot sat on the wood stove and breadcrumbs were scattered around a breadboard with half a loaf of homemade bread and a large can of Top Value strawberry jam. The smell of raisin bread led to coffin bumps under two spread tea towels on the counter. I knocked louder, “Hello?”

“Come in. I’ll be with you in a minute,” a voice called from a joining room and with the voice buzzed gurgles from a mobile phone.

A lean, grey-haired man, slightly shorter than myself, came into the room, noticed me and provided an unassuming smile.

“Hello,” he said, watching for my reaction and giving no indication of surprise at my arrival.

“Hi,” I reached out my hand. “My name is Stan. I’m the other third of that debatable horse trip.” He smiled and I continued, “I thought I’d better introduce myself and ask a few things.”

“Oh sure, come in, sit down.” He shifted a chair between the end of the table and the wall then quickly wiped the breakfast stains and crumbs from the table with a damp dish rag.

“Coffee?” He was already reaching for the pot. “Oh sure, thanks,” He poured a very full cup. “You got a big job here running the only phone.” “A pain in the butt most of the time.”

“I guess.”

“Someone’s got to do it, I suppose.” I thought he really didn’t mind. Maybe he was even proud of the importance.

“Sounds like quite a trip you’re having.” “Ya, it sure has been.”

“By the sounds of things, you’re planning to go on.” It was apparent that news in Fort Ware didn’t need a printing press.

“Well, I think we’ve been through the worst; no point stopping now.”

“How’s the horses? What’s your partner’s name there? Bill? He doesn’t seem to think they can go on.”

“There’s one there that will have to stay behind, a white mare. But if we give them a week or more off, they should be okay. I guess there’s some horses here in the village.”

“Oh, there’s a dozen or so around; not much for horse country.” “I’ll say.”

“That Bedeaux country must be quite something, Louise’s dad used to go up that way.”

“Oh, who’s that?”

“Louise’s father, my wife’s dad, used to go up that way in the forties and the fifties.”

“Oh? Trapping on foot?”

“No, no, mostly for moose meat, with horses. At that time the trail wasn’t so bad. It’s those damn burns.”

“Isn’t that something. We saw some of his blazes.”

“Sounds like hell now though, burns and deadfall. You know your friends, your companions, were awful down when they came in here that first time.”

“Well, I guess you had to be there. It was pretty tough.”

“No thanks, here by the river and airplanes is just fine with me.” The door opened and the young man who could have passed for a college student came in.

“Donny,” Jim said, “This is Stan, one of the horse travelers. Stan, tell him how this country is for horses! He keeps talking about bringing more horses in.” His son grinned and a little spat of snooze showed against his lower teeth.

“Geez” I thought, “too early in the morning for snuff.”

“Well,” I said as Don sat in a chair next to me, “I don’t know what it’s like west. I hope it’s better, but where we came from sure isn’t horse country. It’s terrible. Never seen anything worse. You’re thinking of bringing more horses in?”

He nodded his head. “Yup, it’s not so bad west, or up the trench, up the Fox. Maybe some cows too.” Cows! I hoped he was only dreaming.

“Yeah, well,” I said, “I don’t know, but it’s nothing near as good as it should be when you get south-west to the Thutade Lake area. What’s the winter like?”

“Bad,” Jim said.

“Oh c’mon not that bad,” Don disagreed. “This year we’re going to bring in more feed. What are you going to do with the horses?” His eyes watched me carefully.

“Well, I guess four will have to stay behind. It doesn’t sound like Brian and Bill are going to change their mind. If they do, we’ll have to find someone to buy at least one horse.

Don smiled, "Oh ya, lots of people. Horses are hard to buy out here."

We chatted about the country and the people and then about the country again. They could not tell me much and suggested I talk to Charley Abue and Tommy Poole. In the meantime, the conversation turned to the Bennett Dam, built down the Finlay. It had created British Columbia's largest inland lake, Williston Lake, and had choked the mouth of the Finlay with dead trees so that free trade by riverboat was now impossible. Jim grew red and contained his anger about the plugging of the river. He reached for the bottle of rum we sprinkled in our coffee and talked about a riverboat he had built in Prince George that now sat useless outside.

We walked outside to examine the dying white elephant. It was a beautiful aluminum thirty-footer; fifty thousand dollars wasting on a remote river bank. Legal battles with British Columbia Hydro over the livelihood they had ruined came up empty. If they allowed compensation for Jim, they would set a precedent for hundreds of others who had had their dreams dashed by flooded land and debris. Man against the bear; a no-win situation.

It was proving to be a tremendously worthwhile visit with helpful and willing people. What the reserve store could not provide, Jim suggested I could find in the old Hudsons Bay trading post next door. It was closed in 1956 when the fashion fell out of beaver felt hats and now was used by Jim as the post office and storage shed. Jim's wife, Louise, joined the party and told me about the number of girls who had been getting pregnant lately. "From thirteen and up," she said. I told her not to look at me; I just got there. She asked if I had brought contraceptives because there was a lack of them in the village. It was a major part of the problem. I said no, but don't worry about me. After hundreds of miles on the back of a horse, my ying-yangs had rubbed off. She continued to tell me about the twelve or more babies she had delivered impromptu on the reserve. Then we changed the subject and talked about when the Hudson Bay set up in the 1914s during a time when the children were starving.

"By whose standards?" I said. "Vancouver's?"

We talked about the drinking problem when the men came back from the forest fires, now blazing rampant north of here, just inside the Yukon. We finished the coffee then got up and stretched.

Before going outside again to inspect the shed, Jim pulled out a copy of Samuel Black's diary of exploring the Finlay. "Take it," he said. "I have others." I wasn't sure about that.

We searched around in the old log trading post. The dim light that struggled through the door was helped by tiny rays that shot through cracks between warped logs. Jim had to deal with my endless questions.

"What's in there?" I pointed to a sack among sacks. "Beans in that one, I think, kidney in some and pinto in others."

"How long have they been here?"

"Oh, I don't know, long as I've been here. I guess since '56 when the trading post closed. They last forever those things." "I untied a cotton string and shoveled handfuls into small cloth carry bags. "Do you think these beans could be here from trapping days?"

"Some of this stuff is; some of it's not any good anymore, but those beans are still good. Some of the fellows still use them in the winter."

By the time we had finished our negotiations I had tallied a bill for ninety--nine--sixty, for goods including beans, flour, dried soup mix, a pair of wool pants, a green and black Mackinaw coat, a pair of rubber-lace boots and most precious, a pair of 7x35 binoculars. I was in business. Not only could I eat but enjoy the mountaintops as well! We were neighbors for at least one week so the goods could be picked up later.

Jim closed the lock as I examined a graceful mountain ridge two miles beyond the river. "Ever see caribou up there on that ridge?" "Oh, used to once in a while; mostly just the odd Indian now." "Really? Hunting? Moose up there?"

"Marmots, they really like those marmots. They get those roots up there too."

"No! You're kidding! Marmots?"

“Sure, they’re supposed to be pretty good. They burn ‘em whole in a fire then peel back the burnt skin, or sometimes they gut ‘em and clean ‘em.”

“Oh gross. You try it?”

“Not when I was sober anyway. Those roots are good though.

Someone was telling me the grizzlies eat the same ones.” “Jim, tell me something. Sikhanni. What does it mean?”

He smiled. “Well, in the Athapaskan tongue, it’s supposed to mean the ‘man who lives in high rocky places’.”

“That’s what I heard. That’s a funny thing, I guess.” “What’s that?”

“What it means, Sikhanni.” “Oh?”

“My name, Stanley, means ‘He who lives in high rocky meadows.’” He stared at me and there remained a long silence.

We dallied on the riverbank then I remembered why I had come in the first place. “Oh! I forgot! Mail. Did you get any mail? For me?” Without hesitation he patiently unlocked the door again and we sifted through a box of unsorted mail. .

“You know, I don’t recall any letters,” he said as he closed the lid on the box.

“Yeah, I guess not. I was just hoping.” He looked at me and knew it wasn’t a telephone bill I hoped for, but left it at that. I carried my home sickness out of the suddenly stifling cabin and aired my wounds with a walk along the riverfront.

Far downstream the wide river met mellow, green-topped mountains in the horizon. The broad treeless river bank, the intermittent gardens and fields and the wide blue-green Finlay, open under a grand opera sky. It was a breathtaking comparison to the choking valley still fresh in our memory. I walked slowly to catch the dawn of a new awakening. It was a revival of clear spirit and just the medicine to overwhelm the end of a wicked chapter.

I walked along the open bank past a new mobile trailer, past a well-used horse corral with slipped grey rails and past a bumpy brome grass field,

brown on the humps and green in the dips. The tall grass must have hidden all sorts of adventures for children. There were half a dozen river boats, some soaked with water, their bows nosed onto the bank. Others rested, rippled with black tar caulking and trimmed red and green.

I walked past a cottage with a 2x4 railing twisted to the ground. Laughing coursed through a broken window and, from the next house, a cassette deck blurted Bob Seger. Then there was a grey shed, toppled on one corner and threatening a rotten upturned boat that had grass climbing through its cracks. Here I turned inland with a new goal, the store.

There were several Coffee Crisps, a dozen Sweet Marie and a few Jersey Milk. “I’ll have two of each of those,” I said to a middle-aged native gal who wasn’t happy about much.

The shelves were stocked with leftovers. My first sweep was for observation and wise choice, but it ended with the conclusion that what the locals most needed they had already taken. “Thank heaven for Seven Eleven,” I mimicked under my breath as I passed up the Worcestershire sauce and ladies’ napkins. I did manage to snaffle rice, canned sardines, peanut butter, strawberry jam, baking powder, margarine, cooking oil, brown sugar, two pounds of dates and a pound of block cheese.

“I guess you’ll be getting more stock in?” I said to the gal, hoping she would say yes, in two days. But her eyes never left the till keys and her lips the last crab apple.

The campsite was quiet. Brian and Bill and I hadn’t been seeing much of each other now that my time was occupied with acquiring goods and information and their time was spent preparing for home and the next possible flight out. The village was lazy in the hot midday sun and I may have shouldered the biggest decision for ten miles in any direction: chicken noodle soup, or beef vegetable? It was definitely a chicken noodle day. I turned over duffel bags and boxes. “Where’s the pot? Never mind the pot, where’s any pot?” No amount of searching in the area turned up a cooking pot.

“What the heck’s going on? Maybe they took them to wash.” I picked at a can of beans. Where were the children? It would be nice to have some company. “I hope they’re not afraid of me.” I lay upon doubled horse blankets for a doze. The cotton candy explosion above didn’t, for one second, bother the hot rays of sun. “My, what a nice change of life.” I dozed off.

A door slammed and it was just in time. It had been a terrible nightmare. There I was, spread-eagle naked in a burning desert with tight leather thongs to, the stakes. Five bronzed Indian maidens danced around me singing and smiling while removing their clothes with taunting gestures. It was driving me mad with desire. Then they bent over me with their naked breasts waving and hands about to caress my hair. Suddenly, screams of rage pierced the skies and I jerked my head up to see a hundred savage braves screaming over a hill toward me. “Help me! Help me!” I cried at the maidens as they looked down at me. Their teeth turned black and tumbled from their mouths in slow motion. Then they grabbed my hair and jerked my head to the ground. In the dusty turmoil pain rang across my head as grubby hands hacked off my scalp with a dull knife. Then a door slammed. I jumped up.

“Vooroom!” an airplane zoomed low over the buildings. Children and parents yelled at each other as they appeared on countless paths, all heading for the main artery that led to the airstrip. Choke, choke, putt, putt, putt, rrrrrummmm, rrrrrummmm. Jim started the old International pickup and I wondered how he got a vehicle in there with no roads — likely on a boat. Two kids ran by with a dog nipping at their heels. The dog had waited all day for the airplane. “Stop dat!” Someone screamed at the dog. “No!” They never broke a stride. By golly! There was something to get excited about at Ft. Ware!

Squeek, squeek, errrrr, squeek, errrrr. Jim’s truck rolled along beside me. “Goin’ to the plane? Get in.” I hopped into the truck. The box was loaded with gear and residents. A dozen people gathered near the door of the Otter plane.

A keen looking white fellow was chatting lightly with an native I believed to be Emil, the Chief. “Excuse me, by any chance is there a package for a Stan Waichuk?” The pilot pointed to the gear pile, then resumed his discussion.

I made my way to the gear pile that everyone was pulling apart. “Don’t get your hopes up,” I contained myself. “You know very well it’s only a hope; maybe the next plane.” I looked under and behind everything that remained but there was no box with my name or anything even close. A brave face belied deep dissapointment.

“What you lookin’ for?” A curious girl I had not seen before asked. “Oh, just a box. I thought maybe a camera should be here, but I guess not.”

“What’s that over there?” she pointed to a black square case rimmed with shiny metal.

“Oh God,” I mumbled as I walked slowly over to the box. “Could it be?” Too afraid to pick up the handle I bent down and stared at the tag. “Rush, Fort Ware via Fort St. James for Stan Walchuk. Cordillera Expedition.”

I was faint. If I screamed in the crowd they would surely think me a crazy man and move me across the river. Carefully I carried the case through the crowd and toward camp. “YaaaHoooo! HeeeeYaaa!” I screamed, then ran as if the angels whipped my heels. In the privacy of camp I flipped the lid and there sat a beautiful 16mm camera, complete with filters. Tears welled back in my eyes and I lay back for an hour of consideration.

Horse tracks dotted the cat trail. I wondered if they were part of our renegade band. Must be a nice change dashing around with new friends without one hundred and fifty pounds on their backs. I also thought that some were still too sore from scratches on their front legs to enjoy it yet. Back up one mile, along the White River, I swung onto a well-worn footpath that hugged a high ridge overlooking the river. It was still brown and ugly. There, Pete and Harvey sat on a picnic table beside their tents.

“Hello,” I said as I set my camera and tripod down. They nodded.
“Nice place here.”

“Quiet,” Harvey said. “Not so much people like town.”

“Not so much people even in town,” I laughed and they smiled. “Big moose?” I noticed slabs of meat hanging on two poles over a smoke bilge.

“Cow.” Harvey said.

“Maybe four-five,” Pete added. “No calf?”

“No calf.”

“You hang meat different than what I’ve seen before.” I walked over to examine the slabs. They had sliced the hams thin like they were unrolling a giant jellyroll. “Not very hot.” I held my hand over the smoke.

“No good hot.” They came over to the drying rack and Pete tore off a chunk and pressed the cross section with his fingers. “Smoke keep bug away. No cookem, cookem bad, dryem good.”

“How long?”

“Maybe two day. Good now.” “Add spice, sugar?”

“No need,” Pete said and we sat down again. Then I noticed Peter’s wife sitting on a blanket in a three-sided white tent behind us. I nodded hello but she indicated nothing.

“How trail?” Harvey said. “Trail?”

“Trail you come down.”

“Oh, good, much better. Last ten miles much better.”

Pete was a solid citizen. He always knew where his family’s food would come from and how his energy would be spent. It was as important for Pete to know where energy should be spent as where money would be spent, perhaps, more important. I wanted to find something they would be excited to discuss.

“What kind of animals do you trap?” “Uh?”

“What kind of fur you trap in winter?”

“Uh, Marten, sometime lynx, sometime wolf.”

“Oh, good season for lynx last year,” I stated and Harvey and Pete both nodded.

“Make good last year.”

“In one year, how much trapper make, if good year?”

“Good year, maybe two thousand. Make two thousand last year.” As we talked about trapping and the country I set up my camera for a pan shot of the river. At the same time I examined their camp. It would be easy to say that one could have walked into this camp twenty, forty, even a hundred years ago, and little would be different. What was there to be different? The old white canvas tents had not changed since the turn of the century. Pete’s wife still sewed her dresses from dark blues, purples and browns with little flower patterns as they have for fifty years, much like the Ukrainian and Polish settlers on the prairie. The dark work clothes that the men wore were timeless as well and the hand made quilts and wool blankets could be seen in many Remington paintings. Winchester had altered the thirty-thirty lever action little in who knows how many years. The .300 Savage lever action that leaned against the tree, designed early in the second quarter of the century was another indication not much had changed. Now was the time to capture this lifestyle on film.

“I am taking pictures to show children in schools. It’s o.k. to take pictures of your camp?”

“No,” bellowed the lady as she got to her feet. “No take picture here. No want no one see.”

I was flabbergasted. She walked away. “Why?” I asked Pete and Harvey.

“No want no one see what here. No want nobody come here. No want change. This good place.”

“But it’s just a picture?”

“I know what outside. I see what like in city. Now already come trouble in town,” Harvey said.

“Any time come back from city, bring drink and fight. No good.” I made my way back to the camp. These were a quiet unassuming people and they had the right to decide their own fate, and my movie film.

The strong feelings against the evil of white ways did not come from assumption, but the many bruises they had received in the past. They were not a grudging people. There was much more at stake in this town than met the eye. The elderly had witnessed the drunkenness, fights, apathy and suicides from alcohol from their experience; these were the blessings of whiteman. They carried their ancestry with every gesture and word and it would be ridiculous to think they could assume any type of an attitude toward industrialization, at least not with the elderly.

Talk of a road had been going on for some time. When I mentioned this to Pete and Harvey, they said, without question, “Make all no good.” The younger generation, with blue jeans, government firefighting jobs, and ghetto blasters had come to know the meaning of “want” in a new perspective. Their dreams were of cars, parties and other advertised passions.

I took the long way back keeping an eye open for horses while turning the meaning of our discussion over in my mind. There was a small commotion in front of a nearby house. I altered my route and turned a corner coming upon a sight that will remain forever engraved. On a black horse, wearing a dark hat, coat, and jeans, sat a very tall, proud, and tough looking native. About him milled half a dozen dogs packed with what seemed great burdens of goods and bedding, each dog lashed firm with a large cotton rope. He was straight-backed and fiercely handsome and not to be taken lightly by those around him. In another time and place, he would have been a warrior. He was a wild man. The tatterings of the rugged wilderness may have dented his gear but never his lean firmness. Perhaps, in his own way, he was a warrior, a Don Quixote of the new world. “Where did he come from?” I asked someone.

“Up the Fox, the trench; he camps there.”

Back at the campsite Bill and Brian had collected an evening group of visitors, among them Herman and the girls of the previous night. It was a friendly evening. Sometime during the discussion Brian and I managed a trade, my break down survival 22 that had been carefully wrapped in my top pack for Brian's chaps and Hudson's Bay axe. Later, I was asked if I had met the chief, so he would know my intent. I was upset with myself that I had not yet made the effort. It was on the agenda for first thing tomorrow.

Tomorrow came and it was another beautiful day, already hot and dusty at ten in the morning. Word was that Emil was making some phone calls at Jim's, and that it was his day to order groceries from Prince George. He was. He paid no mind to my presence as he conversed with a store in Prince George. Closer to the end of the conversation he looked at me and nodded a smile. Finally he put down the mike.

"Uh, hi, my name is Stan." I put out my hand and met the soft motionless handshake that I had, on other occasions, mistaken for lack of interest. I had since come to know it as the normal greeting with whiteman; the noble purpose and strength from gentle and unassuming first meeting. He smiled.

"Uh, I'm with the other fellows who came to see you, Bill and Brian? I should have come to see you sooner, I guess."

"That's o.k." His accent was a practiced English. "How long do you plan to stay here?"

"Oh, well, Bill and Brian are planning to leave on the next plane they can get out on. Maybe the plane that will bring in the fire crews tomorrow. I guess I'm gonna go on, and the horses could use some more rest."

"Well, that's o.k. Just so I know. You come by horse, you stay as long as you want. Where you staying now?"

"Oh we have a spot by the old school there."

"There's a better place. You can wash clothes there and there's a bed. Just go next door here and there's a trailer. It's better," he smiled. "Oh gee, that would be great! You know, maybe I should pay for the use."

“No, no, don’t worry. What are you going to do with the horses?”
“What do you mean? Here? Now?”

“When you leave, you taking them?”

Oh no, I thought, he doesn’t want them left behind. “Oh well, if you want, I can take them. I was hoping maybe someone would want them. Some of the guys say they would like to keep them here. Is that all right?”

“Sure, sure. I would like maybe one or two myself.” “Oh good! Have you seen them yet?”

“Yes, that spotted one and that one that stays with it.”

“Oh boy, those are nice horses. Probably the best blood of the bunch, but their legs are sore. They need a break. I was thinking of leaving those two so they can get better.”

“Sure, they can stay.”

“I hear the winter’s are not too good here?”

“Oh, not too bad. This year we’re gonna bring in some feed.” “Oh, the band?”

“No, Donny and me.”

“That’s good. That’s what he was saying. But it’s a long time until fall. They will be o.k. by then.”

“Just sore. I looked close. Don’t look too bad.”

He wanted the horses and in our talk we established that he would keep the two he liked and bring feed in for them. I changed the subject then and asked about the country and people coming to the reserve.

“Emil?” I asked. “You know, I really don’t want to be a problem. I’m wondering, do many come and stay on the reserve, I mean like us, by horse or on foot?”

“No, not many Stan. Sometimes nobody for a few years. For now it’s o.k. but at the meetings there is talk of papers.”

“Meetings? Papers?”

“Yes, band meetings. The last one at Laird the chiefs talked about people who are not part of the reserve would have to fill out papers to stay.”

“Oh, do all chiefs feel that way?” I was concerned.

He laughed. “Don’t worry about this now, just stay as long as you need,” and he smiled again.

I thanked him and headed out for a look at the trailer accommodation. At the corral next to the trailer a group leaned on the rails and rallied instructions to a tangle of people and horses that kicked about in the dust. I walked up between Herman and Don. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“Wild horse,” Herman said.

“No,” Don looked accusingly at Herman. “Not wild, I rode him all last year.”

“Ok.” Herman said. “Just wild this year.”

“You’re a cowboy,” a gal piped up and I looked to see the happy girl who had pointed out my camera case talking to me. “You ride him.”

“You kidding? If I killed myself I’d never forgive myself, not now.” Three screaming youths wrestled with the stubby buckskin, one dangling on the end of the lead, one jerking a handful of mane and the other one twisting the horse’s face trying to insert a bit. All of them were dancing and yelling whoa! whoa! whoa!

Here was my chance to redeem my tarnished image after failing with starting the fire. “Here,” I slipped between the corral rails. “Let me.” I took the lead away from a subdued group of young Indians. “Whose horse?” They all looked at each other then a young lad said, “Dunno, just horse.”

“Here,” I said and tied the horse to a worn tree. “I’ll show you how to put a bridle on.”

“No tie tree!” The same lad was horrified. “Why?”

“He pull, break rope.”

“Oh, a puller, hey? O.k.” I took a thick yellow nylon rope and fixed a makeshift nerve line halter. “First,” I advised everyone within fifty yards.

“There is usually no need to fight with a horse. Just use your head. Better to be firm than fight with the horse.” I motioned the bridle toward the horse’s mouth and, sure enough, he fought like a mad animal, then

jumped forward again as the nerve line bit behind his ears. The kids jumped back, terrified, then picked themselves up and cleaned off the dust. Everyone laughed except the horse. He stood with a good amount of slack in his lead.

“O.k.” I continued. “Now don’t give the horse a chance to toss his head up and all over the place when you put the bit in his mouth. Do it like this.” I put my back against the chest of the horse, hooked my right arm over the horse’s snout, pried my left thumb between his teeth forcing open his mouth, and slipped in the bit with the same hand. Then I lifted the headgear over the ears of the subdued horse. He knew we meant business.

The children took turns sitting on the horse while we chatted about nothing, then I walked through the open door of the trailer to examine my home for a few nights. As far as the other houses were concerned, this trailer was an oddball, something from the Sears catalogue. After all, it had metal siding, molded frame windows, contained shiny metal sinks, nurses’ cabinets under lock and even a washer and dryer that joined the few light bulbs in town to suck energy from the diesel generator.

The main room held the dryer, washer, sink, nurses’ supplies and a white arborite table. Joining the main room on the west was a small kitchen and, on the east, two small bedrooms were furnished with two grey-blanketed single beds in each. Flop, I bounced back on one of the mattresses. I closed my eyes until my pupils dilated then pretended I just woke up. Walls, walls, and more walls, all around me were walls, and just above my nose someone had built the ceiling a hundred feet too low.

“God, how can people live in buildings?” I wondered. But the bed was beautiful and the sheets delightful. I ran my finger along the folded edge of the white cotton. Bright sun beamed through a window and burned a square on the opposite wall. I looked at the other bed. A duffle bag and soft backpack lay there. Then I closed my eyes and meditated myself into a hot bathtub and thought of past months, a dozen friends that I would party with

after putting on my cool duds. “I wonder if there’s a band in the Timberland tonight? Oh wow, it’s nice to lay here on this bed.”

“Hello!” A girl’s voice pierced through the bedroom door from the main room.

“Damn!” I thought, “Leave me alone for awhile.” “Hey Cowboy, you here?”

“Geez,” I got up, rubbed my face, practiced a smile and opened the door. It was the happy girl. “Hi,” I said.

“I came to talk with you, Cowboy.” No need to beat around the bush. I thought she must be a character. She looked like one. Kind of like Rodney Dangerfield in a round, native body. It was impossible for anyone to be as serious as she looked. She smiled widely and I imagined she was blushing.

“Oh good,” I laughed. “I’ll make some tea, unless you want coffee?”

“You make, I drink.” She sat down at the table. “You speak good English. Are you from here?”

“Everybody’s from here. Nobody stays here. I went to James to school. My sister lives there.”

“But you came back.” “Cost too much to fly out!” “Really?”

“No.” She watched me get the cups out of the cupboard. “Emil say you could stay here?”

“Yea, sure good of him.”

“Not everybody here good you know.” “What do you mean?”

“Lots more trouble when the men come back from the fires and from towns, more booze and money.”

“That’s what I hear. Sure quiet now though.” “You seen that funny guy?”

“Who?” “Your buddy.”

Why would she call Brian or Bill funny? It’s me who’s the crazy guy going on alone. Maybe she was talking about me! “You mean my friends Bill and Brian?” “No, no, the funny guy.”

“You mean me?”

“Man! You white guys get pretty weird out here. Not you! The other one. The one who stays here”

“Oh, I didn’t know. Is there someone else here.”

“Oh, you wait, everybody laugh about him. You can’t believe it. He talks like real English. Big accent and he walk and go out like stiff board. No one can believe what he does.”

“What do you mean; like what?”

“Oh, just things. You wait, you see. No one can believe it.” “Well what! What can’t no one believe?”

“Oh just everything. First he comes from Ft. Grahame by horse. He walkin’ and leadin’ old horse. People been coming that way for hundred years. Old McCook got house and field that way. Trail’s big like this room and he comes in town all torn up and talking like crazy man that he got lost and mosquitoes nearly kill him and he all wet and mud from head to toe. Everybody run to hide then laugh at him, poor guy.”

“How long did it take him to get here from Grahame?” “Bout two weeks. Take me three days with broken leg.” “You walked from Grahame with a broken leg?”

“Man you silly, guy. Just wait when you meet him. Good thing he tall. He almost touches roof.”

“Why?”

“Melvin was down by river, by White River when he came to cross to town. Melvin say river so high he would not cross with camel. Then this English walks across pulling horse. Pretty soon water up to his neck but he still coming. Melvin say he not know what to do. But he make it. Man, he a crazy guy.”

“Yea, I guess so.”

“Someone tell me you going alone. You not scared?” “Of what?”

“I don’t know, Sasquatch.” “I’ve met them before.” “Don’t lie to me.”

“We’ve already been through the worst.”

“You white guys got lots to learn. What for you travel alone?
What you need is woman.”

“For what?” She looked at me and would have burst out laughing if she had known me better.

“For what? Man you are dumb.” I drew a smirk across my face. “It’s been so long, I forgot what it’s like to be with a girl.”

“Boy, I got just the girl for you. Maybe you seen her already.” I doubted it. Truth was, I suspected that any girls found pretty by whites didn’t last long in Fort Ware, opting for the lights of civilization. Ft. Ware appeared barren with passionate possibilities. “Oh c’mon,” I rebuked. “Don’t fool with me; that’s not a funny topic. Things are tough enough as they are.”

“No, no, I’m serious. Oh she is just beautiful; you know how they say, like Indian Princess. Full round lips, beautiful long, black hair past shoulders,” and she indicated the flowing length of her hair.

“Really? You’re pulling my leg. How come I haven’t seen her?” “Oh, she not come to town much. She like the bush, just like you.

She stay up the river about a mile from town, where the Fox comes in. Stay with her father. He not too well now. Used to be chief.”

“Really? What’s her name?” I watched her carefully to see if she was stringing me along, but she was dead serious and her descriptions were vividly interesting.

“Laura. Laura Poole. Oh you have to meet her. She so slim, so pretty, you will just fall in love.”

“Really? Sounds like a nice girl.”

“Oh, very nice, you know, how, like they say, uh, caring? Sexy?” “Sensuous.”

“Yes, like that.”

“If I went for a walk up there, her dad would probably shoot me.”

“Oh no, no, you should go. She doesn’t come to town much.” “Well, c’mon, let’s go for a walk.” I felt like I was a big kid and she had just given me ten dollars to go to the candy store. “Well,” she said, “o.k.”

I felt suddenly foolish. I had not even asked her name. “Boy, I don’t even know your name?”

“Doreen. You’re Stan, yes?”

“Right.” I got up and walked to the door. She just sat there solid faced.

“Let’s go,” I wondered if there was some problem, then she burst out laughing, shaking from head to toes.

“You turkey!” I cried. “You sucked me in!” She tried to stop laughing and turned around so she would not have to look at me and then laughed harder. “I told you! It’s not funny. Geez, I don’t believe this.”

I was right. She was a Rodney Dangerfield in a round Indian body. We spent an hour trading tidbits about where we came from and who we were. I had a notion that we had not seen the last of each other as she said. “Well, I see you later. Let me know if you find the Princess.”

Back at the campsite I rounded up my gear and moved a load to my bunk, then came back for a second load. Bill and Brian sat beside the campfire.

“When do you expect to get a ride?” It was a stab at communication. Our lives had grown surprisingly distant in a short time, but, not to our surprise, there was little now to discuss. I could only guess the feelings they must wrestle with, both now and back at civilization.

“Maybe tomorrow,” Brian said, then added. “We’d be gone now except that the plane today was a government charter; couldn’t take passengers. There’s supposed to be one coming tomorrow bringing back firefighters. It should have room going out.”

“Yea,” I said. “I guess it should be almost empty going out.” Bill was not saying much and it was a cinch that the many reflections and skeletons from the development of our journey seated heavier in his mind than the more passive mind of Brian. Even when I felt the need for their company,

it was apparent nothing positive could come of it, at least not as far as the continuation of the expedition was concerned.

“Your camera work?” Bill asked.

“Yea, it’s actually better than the one I had.”

“That film’s pretty important to you, eh?” I wondered what he was driving at. “It seems to be getting that way, more and more.”

“More important than us going on together it seems.” “What in the world has the film got to do with anything?”

“Well,” Bill was consistent with his point. “If it’s not so important, I’ll think about going on.”

“What are you saying? Do you remember that morning on the White? You and Brian were talking about how the film was a lot less trouble than you thought it would be? Remember? It was just like running ahead and taking pictures?” I was upset. “Are you serious? You want to go on, but only if I don’t take my camera?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I think we’ve talked about it enough. As far as I’m concerned, the film has nothing to do with anything except sharing it with people when the journey is over.” I was hurt and confused that the camera had become twisted with the journey itself.

Bill was steady. “Would you be going on if you didn’t have the camera?”

“I would have ordered one in and waited for it, and yes, if that didn’t work, I’d still go on, even just for the trip, and to share it on paper.” I was adamant. It was a topic with a foregone conclusion. I gathered my gear and moved to the trailer.

Tea was a good idea. It would soothe the wounds that opened from the unpleasant discussion. Maybe our relationship with the journey was like relationships between lovers. Maybe our expectations had not been properly founded in attitudes about the woods, peace, courage and life in general. Instead perhaps they were assumptive dreams for personal gain.

Like those lovers, perhaps we did not have the important basic foundations, only wishful thinking. Certainly our lives in civilization that we had left behind could not provide the foundation and fortitude for life in the wilderness. But that was true of us together; I hoped not of us alone. It was over as far as WE were concerned, even if we did not want it to be.

Before jumping into bed that night I met the English, Ian. He would have had little trouble landing a headwaiter's job in the vicinity of Westminster Abbey, but his plans to follow the Rocky Mountain trench to the Yukon were in jeopardy before he even began. He wore baggy brown corduroy pants, bolstered a huge Bowie type survival knife and talked incessantly about "this forsaken country", his past job as a tour guide, and his ex-wife from Denmark that he married because he liked her father.

After a lengthy talk he decided the trek he intended up the trench was not so very important, as long as it was a significant journey. Did I want company?

Ian was finding out what countless others had learned in the desolate north country; that soul-searching in the wilds is a mighty lonely business. I thought that a thousand miles of rugged adventure was proving similar to loving a woman, according to the Eagles, "She can't take you there if you don't already know how to go," My subtle hints at rebuttal of the idea of his company did not take hold, and it became apparent that, like his relationship with nature and the passage of his person in the wilderness, he would only hear what he thought was fitting. He did have a good heart. Even Doreen knew that.

The weather had been so hot for so long that it felt like it had never been any other way. The morning of the August seventh was in perfect suit. I stretched in the doorway and observe several residents doing nothing. They must wonder why the stranger does not use the good weather for travel. They should guess that I dallied for the horses sake and that I must fill my need for human company before striking into the unknown alone. And it

truly was the unknown. Nobody had provided worthy and specific information about my trail west and south to Thutade (Too-taa-dee) Lake.

The horses had improved noticeably with the five days of rest. Slowly my gear was repaired, reinforced or replaced. Jim and Don took it upon them-selves to machine a new stock bolt for my shotgun. Lucky had crunched the butt of the gun against trees on several occasions and finally snapped it off altogether. During my preparations I had harvested bits of information with an intense level of curiosity but little of it was truly valuable. “Talk to Charley Abue or Tommy Poole,” they would say.

“Alright, I will.” I babbled to myself as I unraveled criss-crossing paths enroute to where Charley was supposed to live. I walked through a stand of poplar and suddenly intruded upon a meeting of four gentlemen sitting on huge peeled logs, part of a large unfinished structure.

“Hello,” a chunky man said. “Hi,” I replied. “Nice day today.”

“Nice day all week,” he answered and smiled. The others were typically expressionless.

“You that guy who goin’ to Thutade?” the big man quizzed. “Yes, I am looking for Charley Abue or Tommy Poole.”

“I’m Charley Abue,” the big man said proudly. “That’s Tommy.” He indicated a slight man with weasel features whom I was told was trustworthy but looked to me as someone I would not recommend as clerk in a jewelry store. The other two gentlemen were elderly and all were unassuming. This must have been a meeting of purpose called between the wisemen of Fort Ware.

“Emil said maybe you could help with some information about the trail to Thutade Lake?” I directed the question to Charley who appeared to be the elected spokesman, or perhaps the only one who could speak fluent English.

He looked at me with clear, piercing brown eyes. “What you doin’ out here? You lucky to be alive now.”

I stepped back and looked at each man's face. They provided no indication of their feelings. "I'm heading west to Thutade. We already came through the worst. It's better country ahead." Who needs this crap? I thought, damn them if that's their attitude. I'm not going to back off like a scared Ft. Ware dog with my tail between my legs. They know darn well we've already been through the worst.

"How many horses you kill?"

I cringed on the inside but stayed relaxed on the outside. What was he trying to prove? Maybe he's wondering what I'm trying to prove?

"None. We killed no horses."

"Maybe you go on, gonna kill horses." "Maybe, I doubt it."

"That bad country, burns. Nobody travel that way with horse. Only some-times dog. Sometime Tommy." He looked at Tommy.

"Yes, I heard Tommy has a trap line over Bower Creek down the Finlay." Tommy made no movement. At least I could appreciate the fact that Charley would talk with me. A temporary silence was not a positive step. I looked at Tommy.

"Do you go that way in the summer?" I asked Tommy. "Sometime, maybe next week."

"How far? To Thutade Lake?"

"No, cabin ten mile up Bower Creek." "How far is it to Thutade Lake?" "Maybe seventy, maybe eighty mile." "That all?"

"Don't go that way. Go only to Finlay, forty mile."

"Is there a cabin where Bower trail meets the Finlay?"

"Yes," Charley interjected. Perhaps he was a self-appointed spokesman. "A good cabin. From there it still long way to Thutade. Maybe hundred-thirty, hundred-forty mile from here."

"A good trail?" I asked Charley. He sighed and shook his head. "No trail. Never make it; you go home like your friends." For a brief moment I wondered if his notions revolved around the fact that if I left they would get to share my horses, but I chuckled against his comments instead.

“No, that’s o.k. I’ll go on. I just thought maybe you could help.”
“People don’t travel much on land no more. Airplane, river boat.” “Is the burn past the Fox very bad?”

“Trail by burn,” Tommy said, “o.k. to my camp on Finlay. Good to Bower Creek.”

“It’s an old burn now,” Charley added. “Started by Japanese.”
“Japanese?”

“Balloon.” “Balloon?”

“In war, Japanese put balloon in air with fire bomb. Wind blow high in sky across ocean then drop and start big fire. Lots balloon.” I shook my head at the incredible possibility. “Isn’t that something!” I looked at Tommy, “Is there many bogs over Bower Creek trail?”

“Not many. No big trouble,” he replied.

We talked for several minutes with most of my questions bouncing in the hollow chambers of an information vacuum. We were statues in each-others future; stories for the perennial curiosity of unborn grandchildren two worlds apart. For now there were no terms of mutual trade, no purpose that we could share. Their Indian assumptions and my white assumptions were tickets for the freedom of exaggeration and postulation. It would provide the leeway needed for great stories that would root and multiply at my departure.

We all left the meeting knowing it had been a fateful gathering of those with no need to mince words and play with integrity. We were satisfied and I turned to leave.

“Cowboy,” Tommy barked. I turned and looked at his beady dark eyes. “Be careful.”

I walked back to the trailer and put on a pot of tea. As usual the door was open and the fresh air and sun danced about the room. “Hi!” a tiny voice squeaked and I turned in time to catch a round face disappear from the doorway. In a minute Doreen walked in and sat down.

“Whew,” she wiped her forehead. “Some kind of weather, huh? Should be makin’ miles.”

“Yea, should be. I’m glad you’re here. I want to ask you some things.”

“Me too. You first.”

“Well, maybe it’s just me, I don’t know. I was just talking to Charley Abue and Tommy Poole. First of all I asked about the trails and Charley says. I can’t make it, and its a hundred and thirty or forty miles to Thutade Lake. Tommy says it’s seventy or eighty, and it’s not too bad going. Like, what’s happening here? Then Charley starts telling me I’m gonna kill my horses when he knows dam well we already went through the worst. Then he says go home, like the rest of my friends. What the hell am I supposed to think?”

“Stan, do not worry so much. They just talk. They travel to trap and hunt, but not so far. They do not know so much away from river. Do not worry so much.”

“Maybe, but they seem pretty convinced I’m not gonna make it. I get the feeling they’re taking bets behind my back. They got no reason to think I’m gonna kill horses. I’m here, right?”

“You not understand. Everybody who come here with horse kill horse. German come in here three years ago, leave his horse. But he kill one. That Frenchman before, I not know what his name...”

“Bedeaux?”

“I not know. He had many horse. He leave some in bush. Some he shoot, some die in swamp. Old McCook say he find ten horse tied to tree just bone and halter and saddle. Frenchman he leave on boat. People say he kill over sixty horse. Not blame them, Stan. They not know different.

“Well. I guess so.”

We chatted for a while and I could tell she was building up to some big question that she was afraid to ask.

“So what did you want to ask me?” “You married?” she blurted.

“No.”

“Oh! I was just wondering.” She sat back and thought for a moment.

“You ever want get married?”

“I suppose I will. I like children.”

“Would you marry Indian girl?” A dandy question.

I grinned from ear to ear in a flash, then said confidently. “If I loved her, sure I would.” My answer drew lines across her face as if it was a dead horse laid in front of a hungry mink.

“What would you do if you married Indian girl?” “Oh, smoke moose meat and make babies. I guess.”

“Oh Stan, don’t kid me. Be serious. Really, what would you do?”

“I am serious. What else would I do? Probably stay out here some place and smoke moose meat and make babies.” My words must have held some serious implications and the mink had not begun to eat.

“Stan, I want to say something, but you have to believe me.”

I laughed, probably because I was truly afraid of what she was going to say.

“Sure, like the Princess.”

“No, serious.” She was dark with concern. I scrambled in my wit for an appropriate sentence that would take her out of her corner if she so chose.

“Would you marry a white guy?”

“Oh yes! That the only kind!”

“What? Oh, c’mon now, you can’t generalize like that. There are all kinds of good and bad people, Indian and white. There are some real nice guys out here.”

“You just not understand. You just not understand.”

I thought maybe I did; that white guys talked to their women as a friend and that Indian men treated their women in a more “functional” manner, less philosophical, not apt to be both friends and lovers. “What do you mean?” I asked. “Explain it to me.”

She prepared her thoughts and began to speak, then shut up quickly.

“Hello?” Melvin, her husband, walked in. We exchanged casual greetings then they left. One hour later Doreen was back and sat down with full intention of resuming where we had left off.

“So, what new. Long time, no see,” she said it as if it was an expression recently picked up from the Prince George ‘in’ crowd. She grinned.

“Nothing.”

She noticed some biscuit crumbs on the table. “You ever eat bannock made by Indian girl?”

“No, but tell me, what’s in it?”

“Ohhh... you have to try. Nobody can make it. Nothing better.”
“Well, tell me how to make it?”

“What tell, I cannot tell, you have to know.”

“How am I gonna know if you don’t tell me! What? Flour? Baking powder? Sugar? Raisins? Fried in butter?”

“Something like that.”

“What do you mean, something! What’s different?”

“Yes, same, but different.” Why is it that women all over the world have the God-given right to make sense when they make no sense at all?

“I make you some. My sister makes the best.” I had seen her sister, a very young girl prettier than most and quiet enough to wonder if she spoke at all.

“Stan, I want ask you something, something big.” “Same as before?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“My sister, she go with you.”

Oh geez. My body flushed and my legs tingled. I had to say something but instead my mouth acted like the last trout face I had tossed into the grass.

“Uh, Doreen, did your sister say she wanted to? I mean she never said nothing to me.”

She was an excited little girl. “Oh she go. You not beat her in the bush.”
“Why would I want to beat her?”

“Man, you silly. She make best partner. Never complain, best cook. Yes, she go. You need somebody.” For a fleeting moment she made sense and then for a hundred reasons, not one of which I could think of, I knew it was crazy.

“How old is she?” “She be sixteen, soon.”

* * * * *

Blue bottle flies buzzed and hopped about like miniature army bombers. Where they flew to and from made no sense. The sun waxed the porch-step and seared the soul of my left foot. I stretched it onto the dirt. A hundred yards down the river a group had gathered to welcome friends or family who jumped out of a yellow and orange single-engine Otter floatplane.

On the bank-top Bill crammed his large duffel bag. There was no point in me sticking my nose in their departure plans. On the other hand, not bidding each other farewell after what we had been through together, in spite of our separate destinies, would be unforgivable. Inside of a half an hour the group swelled and luggage popped through the hatchway. I joined the group and helped stuff the Otter with gear.

The plane was loaded and the crowd climbed back up to the bank-top, except for Brian, Bill and I. We stood in a wooden riverboat that acted as a wharf and bid our final farewells. We choked back a multitude of emotion as we gripped each other’s hands, the last sharing that we would know. Between our pride and the spurting prop, nothing remained but goodbye.

“So long, take care, good luck”. It was feeble, but it was all there was.

The next four days settled in my stomach with lonely prospects, restless turnings, and an overdose of peanut butter and jam. Get fat, I told myself. In the event of injury or sickness those stored molecules of fat could prove life savers.

I discovered two more cartridges of penicillin in the bottom of my daypack and shot the neck muscles of four horses, just in case. The blue block salt that drew morning horses from visible distances like flies to strawberry jam had been licked away or lost in the rivers, except for a fist-sized chunk. A bag of Sifto coarse salt, soaked in warm water then dried rock hard, would fill the missing link.

My face had become a familiar sight in town and it was time to lower my profile lest my stay wear out its welcome. This allowed for plenty of time to hash out Samuel Black's journal. It was a journal full of prize items and it was surprising that the first whiteman to penetrate the Finlay River country in 1824 did not find his way into a greater number of history books. Incredibly, his group is the only outfit to have reached the head of this Finlay River, Thutade Lake, by canoe. Ordained by the Hudson's Bay Fur Company and self-interest, his task was to search the upper Finlay for fashionable beaver fur, and to study the feasibility of a permanent trading post.

He was a large imposing man, active yet sure and resolute. Slow in speech, but quick-witted, he was called a suspicious man, trusting few. Zeal was his favorite word and a notable past time was reading classic literature. He called the Sikhanni (The cannie to Black and his outfit) lazy and indolent "who will not move a step over their usual routine and would rather starve than use exertion to live better." I supposed they did not have enough zeal for Black's favour. I mocked these white labels so typical of early European charter all over the North American continent. Pete and Frank would have fit his description to a T, but I knew damn well that Black would have starved light years before Pete and his family would go hungry in this environment.

As Black polled his canoes upstream on the Finlay they found the bulk of the Sikhanni population at the Finlay headwater. According to Black, they were a motley crew that existed by eating Hedyselum alpinum roots, squawfish and grayling netted with twisted willow bark mesh nets, and

caribou herded into rock and log entrapments above tree line. They also fished with line and lure, using fine caribou babiche for the line and a gull's head as the lure. The raw full skull was the bait and the up-turned bill was the hook. They wandered extensively in co-operation with the seasons and caribou or moose availability, collecting few personal possessions. They responded weakly to Black's call for gathering beaver pelts in exchange for trade goods.

If their vicarious lifestyle told its plight with ragged clothing, few possessions, indolent attitude and hunger, it was the saving grace from the devastation of whiteman's diseases. The lack of interaction between whites and Sikhannis saved the Indians from the small pox that devastated villages across the continent and killed thousands. Perhaps two dozen Sikhanni died from small pox just after the turn of the century, but by then, immunization was available. Geographically, the Sikhanni were far enough into the mountains that the value of their pelts depreciated with the profits of the middlemen who were needed to transport them to distant trading posts. If they made an attempt at transporting the goods themselves, they met hostile defense from their Athapaskan-speaking plains brothers. The Hudson Bay post that was finally established at Fort Ware in 1927 etched a meager trade, acting as much as a social aid post. When it closed in 1953 the independent Sikhanni did not flinch.

The moose meat and flour would come; it always did.

In the early fifties an old Sikhanni man, believed to be in his eighties, walked into the log trading post one fall day. He asked the trader for one box of bullets for credit, a standard he came to expect once a year. The Bay auditor happened to be standing at the counter griping about board debts and extensive credit lines. The auditor bluntly told the old man, "No." The old man said, "I old man now, but still kill sheeps with bow and arrow. Go now, make bow and arrow." And he walked out of the post for the last time.

From all of the information I had gathered, it was apparent that there were many more people on the trails through the eighteen hundreds and

through the depression years than there were now. The first powerboats struggled up the Finlay in 1916. Before that time the Indians stuck to the land. White birch for canoe making was virtually unheard of and, if they needed to cross the deep rivers, they did it with rafts. Since the fifties the trails were at the mercy of nature. It was likely that the trails were worse now than for the past five hundred years or more. And yet, there was not a path I could travel that had not known the tread of a Sikhanni moccasin. It was time for the final preparations.

Horse tracks are the best indicator that somewhere ahead, the animals frolic in the flesh. In and around Fort Ware horse tracks and people tracks would have led scout Jerry Potts into an insane asylum. The horses were not near the airstrip or the store, and they did not wander over to Pete's camp. I had determined that much. They must be in between somewhere. Two hours of straining eyes and ears finally produced the gray flash in the trees that was Speck's hide. I walked up to the horses, frustrated with their truancy, then noticed the missing bells. "Where's your bells!?" I yelled at the innocent horses as if they had guilty fingers. They looked at me with big round eyes.

I had transferred the three best halters and bells to the three horses that would continue, Lucky, Speck and the young Appoloosa named Apache. Now only Lucky had a bell. I stomped back to the trailer. Nearly three hundred miles and now they lose their bells? No way! Somebody swiped them. And what about those missing pots? Some children played along the trail.

"You see my horse bells?" I barked accusingly. The munchkins would have scrambled away if they thought I couldn't catch them.

"No... no... we go look..." and they ran away. I stomped into the trailer. Doreen was there.

"Geez, that makes me mad." "What's the matter Stan?"

"First the pots go missing and now two horse bells are gone." "Maybe they fall off."

“Not two of them fell off.” I found a chair and sat down. “I ask around,” she said. “I try find.” I knew she would.

“So,” she asked. “When you leave?” I was about to tell her then caught myself. If I told her when, I would find her sister on my doorstep with packed bags. Perhaps it would be wise to sort of sneak away.

“Oh, three or four days. Why?” “I been thinking lots.”

“Oh?” I said. “I guess we need some time yet to decide about your sister. Maybe she wants to think about it some more. What would she do at the other end?”

If Doreen spoke her mind, she would probably say, “That’s your problem, she be your woman.” Instead she said, “Yes, I been thinking.”

Great, I thought. Think common sense.

“Yes, I been thinking, me and my sister both go with you.”

Holy jumpin’ Jeremiah. No wonder I haven’t seen Melvin around lately. Oh man, my gizzard groaned and moaned.

“Uh, you want to go all that way? All those rivers? Can you swim? Gee, through all that bush?”

“I think it best thing.”

“Maybe your sister should tell me what she thinks.” She knew I was stalling and began to withdraw from my rejection. She knew she had been too bold. She must wonder what in the world got into her. We were equally ashamed and neither could come up with what to say. I did not want to lose someone who had been my friend, even for this short time.

“I go now, talk to my sister. See you later, Stan.”

The day before I was to leave tossed mercy out of the window. After checking the horses, I heard Emil and Melvin off of the trail in a grove of poplars, fast into some heartbreaking family talk.

Melvin complained bitterly and was on the verge of tears. Emil gave the understanding that a brother could and when the rustle of the leaves died, my untimely eavesdropping found these words in the wind. “What am

I going to do?” he sobbed. “She can’t be happy for nothing, nothing ever good enough...”

He complained under Emil’s understanding guidance. I entered the trailer as cold as ice.

Inside the trailer a middle-aged woman jammed clothes into the washer and jibbered unpleasantly at her young girl. A tough and rough husband sat at the table, a wet pouting mouth hurling words unseen by his glazed eyes.

“Hey!” The man screamed at me. I turned around with my heart looking for a new home. Slobber drooled out of the corner of a wet mouth and a blip of snot stuck on his face as he shook his head crazily. Drunk. His wife stopped jibbering but still stuffed clothes.

“Youuuu....sonamabitch!”

“Me?” I pointed weakly to my chest. He leaned and weaved and the stale stench of booze and smoke lighted in my nostrils.

“Youuu....sonamabitch whiteass!” I tried to pretend it was all taken in stride but the truth was, I was frozen to the spot. Ignore him. I forced myself to take a step for my room. “Hey!” he screamed again. I turned and took his insult. The little girl melted out the door.

“Youuuu... cocker sucker! Whadda hell you doin’ here?” He punched the sky madly with his fist. Holy geez, I figured this was gonna happen sooner or later. I looked at the woman pleading for help, but it was my guess she had known her share of beatings.

“What’s the matter?” I asked politely hoping that perhaps he had the wrong guy. Maybe he needed a friend.

“Youuu....bastard,” he unloaded his mouth with hate. “Youuuu. murderer!”

“I think you make mistake. Me not murderer.” I said. He sliced his arm wildly in front of him like he was about to rid the world of a murderer.

“I know you. you killem horse!”

“I kill no horses; who told you that?”

“You!” He shook his fist and rose halfway out of his chair then collapsed back down.

“You no fool, you sonamabitch Horse got no leg I gonna shoot em. shoot all horse!” He waved away all the horses.

“Shoot them! What for?”

“Whadda for... whadda for you killa horse!”

“Why? Cause their legs are sore? If you got sore legs, then somebody shoot you too?” I gambled a reverse attack.

“Youuuu!” He rose partway, then flopped back down. Holy geez. This guy is nuts. What if he has a knife.

“I get gun shoot you, shoot your horse!!”

“Listen! Those horses have hard trip.” Why was I even trying to reason with a drunk. Maybe he reminded me of some friends I used to have. “Those horses doing good. I take three and rest stay and will be good.”

“Me game guard!!” he yelled with matter-of-factness. “Me have permission, shoot all horse!!” It was a bad joke from a bad drunk.

“Who gave you permission?” “Gooberments! Me Frank!”

“Listen Frank, you shoot my horses, you shoot me first!” “Gud dammit... Good!” He stamped his fist onto the table.

“You miss, and I shoot you!” He jerked his head back as if he heard something for the first time, then screamed madly and tried to get to his feet.

“You cockera sucker... me get gun... shoot you!” “Good! Me go get chief Emil!”

He sat back down and grinned like he just beat me in a chess game, then turned his face once again into an ugly contortion. “No Gudammit chief here... me Frank!”

“Look Frank. Me go tomorrow; don’t need no trouble on the reserve.”

“Sonamabitch reserb, me no live no sonamabitch reserb.”

“Where you live?”

“Across river you sonamabitch!”

“Look, I don’t know why you’re so mad at me, but I’m leaving tomorrow. I’m going now.” I turned my back to walk out the door. “Stay!” he screamed and I stopped again, half expecting him to hit me with something.

Suddenly, like a white knight to the rescue, Ian stumbled through the door. He had left two days earlier, heading up the trench, north on the Fox River trail, the best trail in the country. He staggered and held onto the doorjamb. His light green shirt was soiled and torn in several places. A red scratch ran down through the dirt on his cheek. Frank sat back with his mouth agape. The world must be coming to an end! Another whiteass! Two on the same day! A windfall!

Ian babbled incoherent about bush and hell, both words twisted around in a sentence that ran on forever, oblivious to the mad glaze in Frank’s shocked face and my presence. This place was getting crazy and I bolted out of the door as Ian sat down beside Frank. God have mercy.

“Youuu sonamabitch!!” Frank yelled at Ian as I ran out of the yard.

“I’m getting out of here,” I mumbled to myself as I looked for a place to hide. I found a carpet of red needles under a big pine and hid in the bush for the afternoon. It could have been a good nap but big red ants crawled up my leg just enough so that wondering about the next one made sleeping impossible. Along supertime I went back to the trailer, confident Frank had gone back to the other side of the river.

He had, and in his place at the table, sat a big, round-faced RCMP officer in full dress. He wolfed down a full course meal of potatoes, vegetables and fresh fish.

“Hi,” I said as I walked in.

He nodded. “You must be the fellow heading out tomorrow with the horses.”

“That’s right,” I wondered what else he had heard. Was it paranoia?

“You here for awhile?” I said, wondering why I was even asking. “Regular visit.” His fork never broke a stride and he didn’t seem like he needed or wanted my company.

“Nice fish. Catch ‘em yourself? Grayling?” “Can’t come to Ware and not go fishing.” “Out front here?”

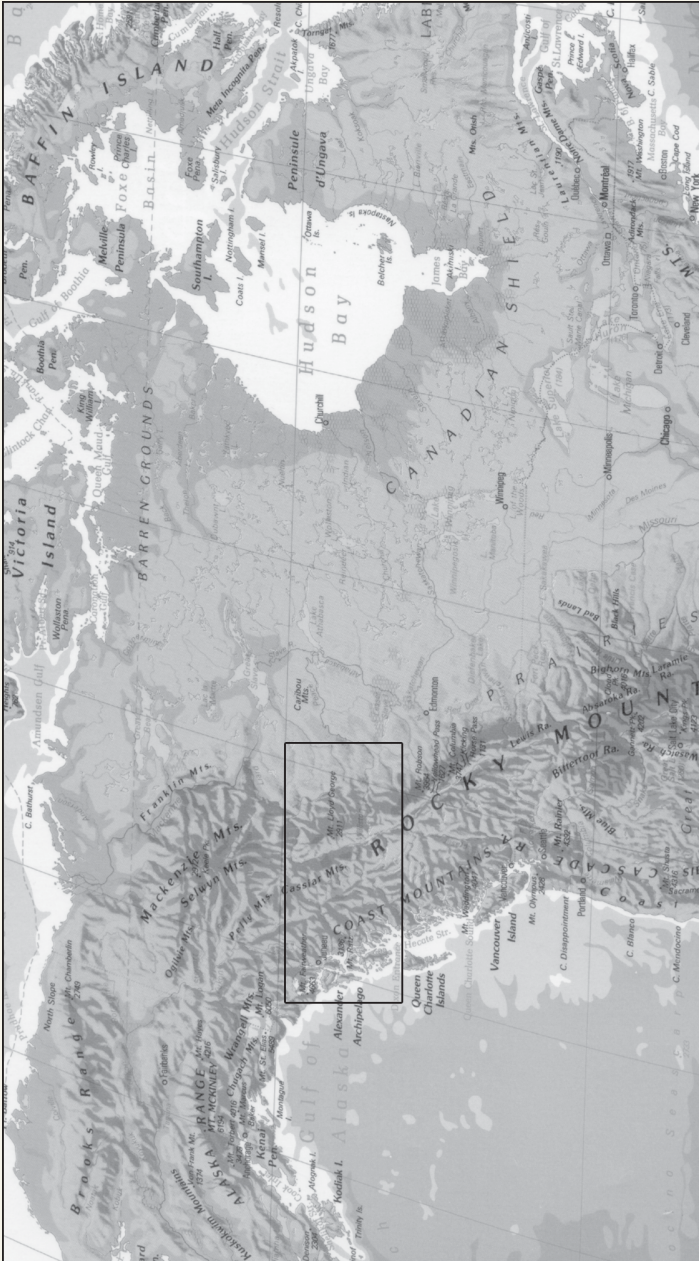
“Up at the falls. You know you shouldn’t be here.” He had not changed his business voice. He appeared to have some Indian blood with his dark hair and skin and I wondered if his brass ruled his mouth.

“Oh, why is that?” My day was about as low as it could go. “It’s a reserve. They have rules here. You need permission.”

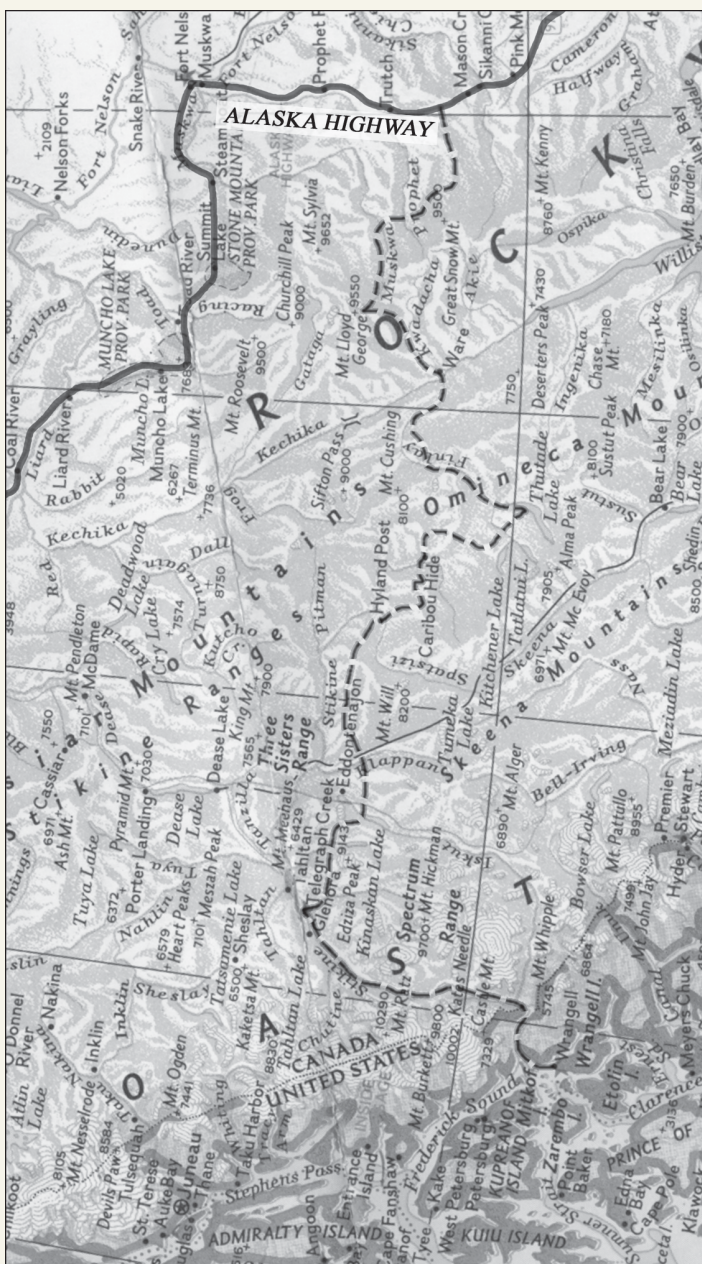
“Yea, well, Emil said stay as long as I need. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“You’re lucky you’re leaving tomorrow. I got my responsibility.” “Yea, maybe if it’s raining, I’ll go fishing tomorrow.” I shut myself in my room for the night.

CORDILLERA



CHAPTER IV – MAN WHO DWELLS IN ROCKY PLACES



CORDILLERA



IMAGE GALLERY



93 year old mountain man Felix Plante taught the author a few things, but there was no way to prepare for what was to come.



Introductions with Jerry Aven at Trutch Lodge on the Alaska Hwy.

CORDILLERA

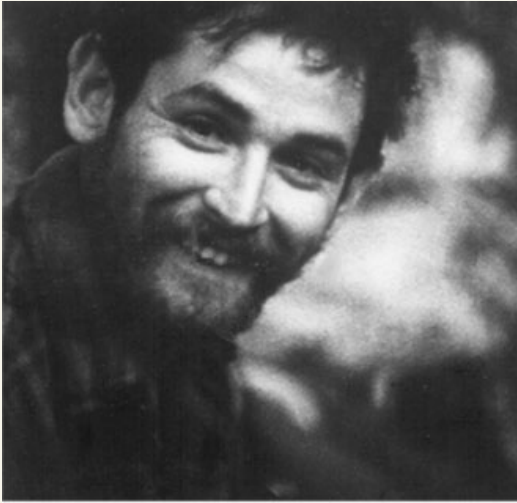


Still in the flat country, as far as we could drive was a crack in an oil road. Off we go!



Leaving the flat country and into the first ranges of the Rocky Mountains.

IMAGE GALLERY



We teased Brian about rubbing cream on his sunburned ears, and only one day in! the sun was our friend for the next three weeks. If it had rained those first few weeks we would have been dead in the water, likely very literally.



Carving a spoon because the author forgot his cutlery. Being absent minded is not a good state of mind for a journey like this!

CORDILLERA



Easy for Brian and the author to smile, filled with optimism
and still wearing clean clothes .



A celebration at the Keilly Creek cabin.
We had overcome some challenges and life was good.

IMAGE GALLERY



Bill making the first repairs, and only three days in.



Heading up on to the Besa Plateau was exhilarating with incredible 360 degree views.

CORDILLERA



Our first pass and our first triumph. We named it Wolfe Pass in honor of Brian, since he nearly 'bought it' on the Besa River, our first river crossing.



Bill poses for a picture

IMAGE GALLERY



Charles Bedeaux, on the left, poses with the camera crew on his ill-fated expedition.



Bedeaux was literally an economy boost for Edmonton and the towns he past through enroute to Dawson Creek, BC. He hired dozens of helpers, purchased a huge amount of supplies, and literally handed out free money, at a time when many had none.

CORDILLERA



No sooner did Bedeaux meet the mountains when the Citroen half-tracks grounded in the bogs and were left behind. With no communication, his cutting crew cut a wide swath for another sixty miles before they received the news.



Bedeaux's enterouge continued up the Muskwa River with about 120 horses.

IMAGE GALLERY



Bedeaux met the horror of the burns and bogs. We would meet them too. Before reaching Fort Ware they kill, lose, or leave behind more than sixty horses. Old timers in Fort Ware told the author that for years after Bedeaux pulled out of Fort Ware they would find horses that had been tied to trees and left. Nothing but halters and bones.



The heat brought on forest fires.
We fell asleep nights worried what might come in the night.

CORDILLERA



The Muskwa river rose, and the horses were stranded. Bill tied a rope to the author, who slipped into the freezing glacier water, and thankfully had to swim only a short distance.



At first the trail up the Muskwa River appeared to be well used but soon we began endless battles against brush, bogs, and river channels. High water from glacier melt prevented us from checking for a better trail on the other side.

IMAGE GALLERY



We stumbled upon a partly built cabin in a remote location. Those first few days of hardship on the Muskwa were exhausting to the point of passing out with fatigue, but only foreshadowing of what was to come. Good thing we did not have a crystal ball.



Forest burns were hot, black, and filthy. Rock hard branches tore at clothes, gear, and skin.

CORDILLERA



The upper Muskwa is wild and hard country with rugged mountains and dark forests.



Bill scouts ahead to find a route through a treacherous canyon.

IMAGE GALLERY



At first rivers were refreshing in the hot sun, then became deep and swift,
each crossing was a great risk.



We imagined Bedeaux Pass as the crown jewel, alpine Shangrila, discussed it often, dreamt about it, heralded it like the Lost Arc. When it came it was mostly nothing, a path through the willows with decent but limited views.

CORDILLERA



Before reaching Fort Ware horses were wrestled out of bogs thirty to forty times. It honestly cannot be imagined, you had to be there.



Exhaustion came in degrees. There were mornings when the author rose at first light from his sleeping bag, then would waver dizzy and nearly fall, from a deep fatigue that refused to quit.

IMAGE GALLERY



There was nothing to smile at, nothing to feel good about, no end to the suffering that we had hoped for each day. Only natural that friction between the members elevated, ideas of quitting took root.



The rivers constantly toyed with lives and smashed or lost gear.

CORDILLERA



Over and over horses struggled from the grip of the rivers. Sometimes horses just quit, but with rest and perseverance we rescued them and lost none.



A trapping cabin across the Kwadacha River and a great hope of a trail near the cabin. The author crossed the river and it nearly claimed his life, the closest he has ever come to dying in a river, after a lifetime of crossing rivers with horses. No trail. But wild raspberries.

IMAGE GALLERY



1980's Fort Ware on the Finlay River. A relaxed, timeless place. At that time possibly the only isolated native village in the Rocky Mountains.



The locals in their remote tent camps did not want the author to take pictures. This camp photo is similar to those camps the author road through.

CORDILLERA



Jim and Don vanSomer machine a new bolt for the stock of the authors
shotgun.



A crowd gathers to welcome a plane, one of the few good reasons for
excitement.

IMAGE GALLERY



Chief Emil McCooke studies a list while ordering supplies on the mobile radio phone.



Ten days in the village were a blessing, time for the horses and myself to rest and recover, and to repair gear. It is a wonder these pack boxes made it to Fort Ware at all.

CORDILLERA



Final farewells were not traumatic. Bill and Brian had decided to fly out long before reaching Fort Ware. Each person had the right to make their own decisions.



Surprisingly, an Englishman named Ian had come up the Finlay River leading a pack horse. His trip had been by road to a village down river, then by boat, then on foot on a good trail. He headed north on a very good trail. He was back three days later, all beat up. The locals made fun of poor Ian.

IMAGE GALLERY

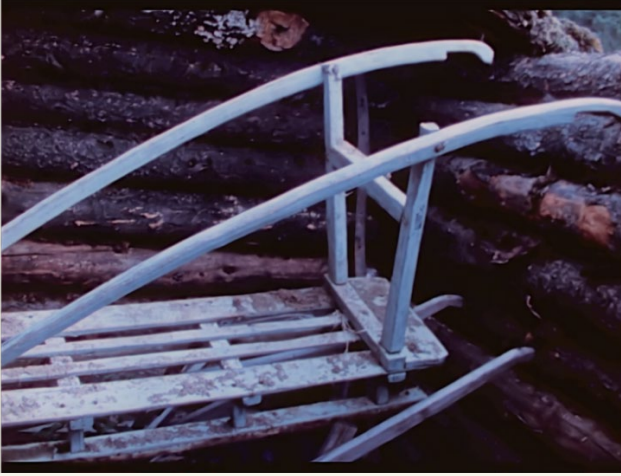


At first Bower Creek trail was well trod, ancient footsteps of the nomadic Sikhanni Indians travelling between Finlay River country and Spatsizi country.



Investigating a remote cabin on the Finlay River with a fallen roof.

CORDILLERA



An old timer in Fort Ware told me that there was talk of going back to dog sleds, cheaper and more reliable than the snow machines that were making their way into the village. It never happened. This sled was in great shape, ready to mush.



This was the last true bog that challenged the horses. A sloppy, sucking, spongy mess by most standards, the experienced crew powered their way through and said farewell to bogs.

IMAGE GALLERY



The author rode timeless miles in grand forests along the Finlay River.



Sometimes they rode several miles in a stretch on gravel bars or in the river itself. Always the river sang its lonely song.

CORDILLERA



Ron Fleming provides advice that adds four hundred miles and Spatsizi Plateau to the expedition.



Being told that we could not continue on our chosen path was a blow that seemed insurmountable. A cowboy Humpty Dumpty I had fallen off my horse and broke into a thousand pieces. It took time, reflection, deep thought, and a few tears, to pull myself and the journey together.

IMAGE GALLERY



From Thudate Lake the author wound up through old burns toward a pass over rounded mountain, burns that were easy navigation compared with the Rocky Mountain burns.



I did feed Supper, but not much. She ate better than I did — fresh meat of mice and ground squirrels and marmots, and select plants like blueberries.

CORDILLERA



Heading up to the high country for the first time in four hundred miles with great anticipation.



Just as there are divine moments in life that remain in our hearts forever are there places of hallowed ground that are enchanted. This little pond tucked in a pocket of alpine held me spellbound with no explanation why.

IMAGE GALLERY



The amazing beauty of Firesteel Pass. Pastel flowers of all designs colored waved and danced happily across broad basins. Horses frolicked in the open meadows they loved so much.



Fog hid all past fifty yards. They walked and rode for hours then were surprised to find someone's fresh tracks; They were their own.

CORDILLERA

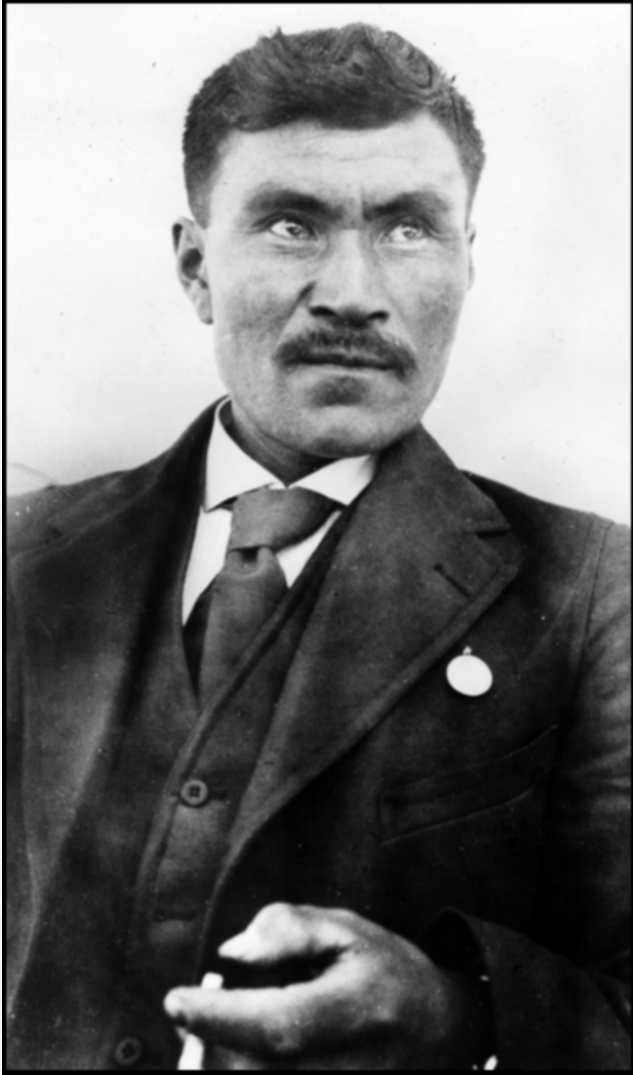


We did not live off of the land as much as I would have liked. Fishing was spotty, a few to eat at Thudate. But Super and I pigged out on the Firesteel River which was on fire with excellent fishing.



Idyllic grassy draws in the heart of the Cordillera.

IMAGE GALLERY



This was Gunanoot country. Simon Gunanoot, the incredibly elusive fugitive. The author spent a night at an old camp with an old fallen corral on the remote upper Ross River. Metsantan natives told Tommy Walker that the camp was a horse camp of Simon's and his brother-in-law, Peter, during the years they were on the run.



\$1,000 REWARD \$1,000

The Government of the Province of British Columbia hereby offers a reward of **ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS** for the arrest of

SIMON GUN-AN-NOOT and **PETER HI-MA-DAN**
(both Indians of the **Kispiox** Tribe),
or for information leading to the arrest of said Indians.

The sum of **FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS** will be paid on the above-mentioned terms for the arrest of either of the said men.

The charge against them is that the said Simon Gun-an-noot and the said Peter Hi-ma-dan, on the 19th day of June, A.D. 1906, murdered Alec McIntosh and Max LeClair, near Hazelton, British Columbia.

By Order.

F. S. HUSSEY,

Victoria, B. C.,

Superintendent, Provincial Police.

August 9th, 1907.

IMAGE GALLERY



The abandoned Sikhanni village of Metsantan.



Exploring the abandoned village felt like shaking hands with ghosts and asking permission to enter homes and bedrooms and backyards, to learn how life really was.

CORDILLERA



Moose numbers were low in the Metsantan area during the late 1940's. Starvation and suffering set in. The government facilitated an exodus, mostly on foot, from the remote village to the more accessible village of Iskut sixty



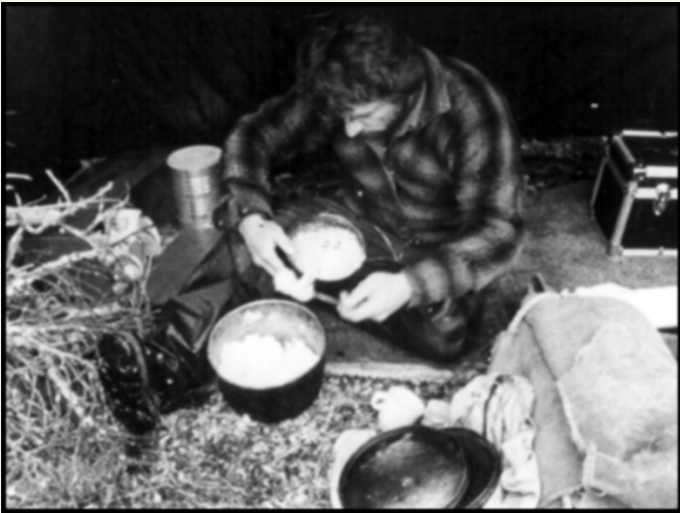
miles to the west.

Louis receives the author's epitaph.

IMAGE GALLERY



Caribou Hide



The pudding package said 'use cold water'! Is this cold enough!

CORDILLERA



Mid-September froze everything that stuck out, particularly the authors fingers and generous nose.



The caribou were like ghosts, popping in and out of hidden draws.

IMAGE GALLERY



Six days they wandered on the top of the world, snow one day,
none the next



An angel for Spatsizi

CORDILLERA



A final farewell before dropping down to the Ross River



Hyland post

IMAGE GALLERY



Rita on the cookhouse porch



A much needed bath in freezing water

CORDILLERA



Cold Fish Lake and Tommy Walker cabins



Packing caribou off the mountain

IMAGE GALLERY



Hiking high country to find Stone's Sheep



Meeting Alec Jack, former Sikhanni Chief who appeared to escape aging for about forty years!

CORDILLERA



At Cold Fish Lake the horses and I experienced a deep fatigue that a brief rest did not ease. Still well over two hundred miles to go!



Saying farewell to Supper at Tatoga before heading out on the final leg of the journey.

IMAGE GALLERY



On the final leg, even the rough spots were fine compared with earlier in the journey.



A narrow log walkway built by the Iskut Band was intended for foot travel and put a good scare in to us!

CORDILLERA



Two moose sniffed the authors head then tripped on the tent ropes, and abrupt and startling 'good morning'.



The author found a section of telegraph wire. An amazing story.

IMAGE GALLERY



It was a time for great reflection. If not for it being October, the author would have, very literally, turned and headed back. He felt little need to re-join societies rush ever again.

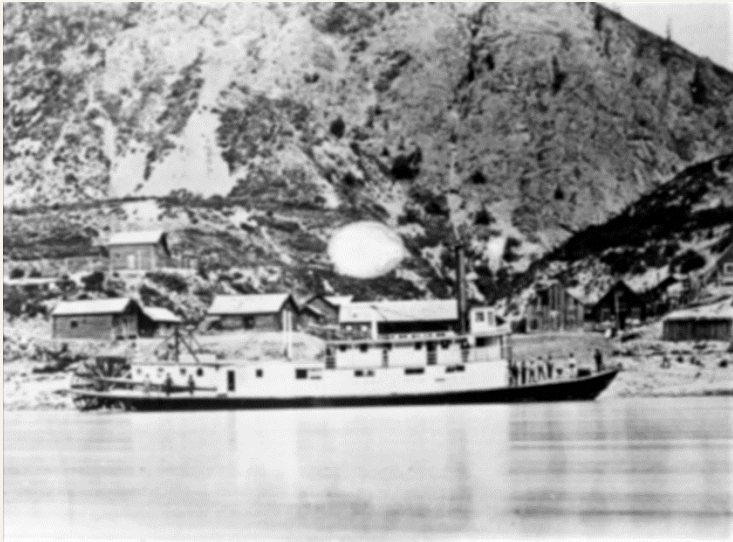


Telegraph Creek. The lower town.

CORDILLERA



During the Yukon gold rush Telegraph Creek was the upper end of the Stikine River navigation.



Telegraph Creek has a long history as a staging area for the Gold Rush and outfitters.

IMAGE GALLERY



Loaded up and heading out on the final one hundred seventy-six-mile leg.



Stikine Rapids

CORDILLERA



A bear swam out to say hello.



A bull moose responds to a cow call.

IMAGE GALLERY



The author drifts down the mighty Stikine River.



Great Glacier is one example of why it was necessary to complete the final leg to Wrangell Island by canoe.

CORDILLERA



THE PACIFIC!



The author paddles the 15-foot canoe relentlessly across five miles of open seas to reach Wrangell Island.

CHAPTER V

TIME IN A RIVER

The Finlay River is the true headwater of the mighty MacKenzie River, that immense slug of water that drains half of Canada north to the Arctic Ocean. It may come as a surprise for those who recall the Laird, the Peace and the Athabasca Rivers as the familiar MacKenzie drainages. But if the distinction of the true headwater falls on the longest watershed, then the Finlay earns the prize, hands down.

The river was happier than others we had known, clean and bubbly between wide spread banks. And the banks were firm, so even if the timber was large and given to falling across our path, the solid banks and clean water provided relief. The Fox River only one mile from Ware was wider than expected.

“Whoa,” Lucky reined up. I looked back for the cause of a minor nuisance. “Hey Speck, how come your bell is dinging?” I dismounted and firmed up the leather tongue that held the bell dong.

“Boy, that Doreen is quite a gal” I inspected the other bells for security.

“Here Stan, I find your bells,” she had said. She was much more of a person than met the eye. I hoped she would use that address of mine. It was one thing for her to say she and her sister had too much to do, they would stay behind. “My Grandmother sick now, needs me,” she said. But it was another for her to give me a pair of white caribou hide mitts, chewed and tanned by her grandmother, and a black and gold toque with a maple leaf that said Ski Canada.

The horses were strong but the swift Fox River swept us down several yards before we pushed out the far side. Swimming came easy for the

packhorses without pack boxes. Like Tommy said, the trail had not been used much, but it skirted the old burn.

“Whoa,” I dismounted and struck heavily at a tree that breached our path. The residents would appreciate this big tree cut out of the way. Maybe they would talk about me someday. “That one guy, remember? The one who made it to the ocean. He was not so bad. Tommy says he cut the trees from the trail and even up Bower Creek.” My face flushed with a different possibility. “That guy remember? He was a good guy. He cut the trees from the path. It’s too bad what happened.”

Along mid-afternoon I rode through a poplar forest flat next to a steep clay riverbank. The trail improved and in a dozen yards the horses snorted at the appearance of a small wall tent camp. Tommy Poole bent over some dead branches then whacked them with his axe. He must have seen me coming.

“Hello,” I said as he put down the axe and sat on a stump. “Lo,” he nodded.

“Nice camp, your family here?”

“Yu,” he nodded. I looked around but saw no one, then my eyes stuck like glue and Tommy knew why. Nothing grabs my sense of adventure quite like the massive swirl of a mountain ram’s headgear, and it was a dandy. “Boy, nice ram.”

“Yu.”

“Can I see?” I had already dismounted.

The freshly cleaned skull shone white and the graceful outward sweep of the horns told a hundred stories in the dip of each annual groove. Ten years of stories.

“Tommy, I’m really surprised. The people tell me sometimes they climb up from the river, but I am very surprised to see such a big ram here.”

“Yu, beeg one.”

“Boy, I’ll say.”

“You shoot him above the river’?” “No, up Bower, same place you goin’.” “By your cabin.”

“Higher.”

It was forever a wonder how great the mass and density of keratin is. I picked them up one more time, running my fingers over the multitude of rings, a perfect symmetry between the two horns and about thirty-eight inches around the curl.

“Yup, a heck of a nice ram.”

I continued my journey along the Finlay keeping an eye out for the Massettoe family that camped somewhere ahead. The source of the Finlay is Thutade Lake about ninety river miles upstream. The northern most bend in the river could be cut short by leaving the Finlay and heading west by southwest over a pass, then back down to the Finlay as it came from Thutade Lake from the south. It was a section of the old Caribou Hide Trail, the primary east-west route travelled by wandering Sikhanni, from Spatsizi in the west to the Peace River in the east. All I had to do was cross the Finlay at the mouth where Bower Creek spilled into the Finlay.

Five miles past Tommy’s camp I came upon the Massettoes’ camp. I knew nothing of them but that, like their brothers, they preferred the natural life.

“Hi,” I said to a young, strongly built man who threw back his tent flap at the sound of horse hooves.

“Hello,” his English sounded good.

“I’m wondering how far to the turn-off to Bower Creek, on the Bower Trail? Far?”

“No, not far, maybe two, maybe three miles.” “Is it easy to see where I turn off this trail?”

“Look hard to left. Maybe some trees fall down now. Don’t go that way much no more.”

“Are there tree blazes?”

He thought for a moment then shrugged. “Not look for couple years; should go there sometime.”

I thanked him for his advice, wished him well, then saw Speck poking his nose around one of the tents. “Speck, let’s go!” He jumped and tripped over a guy rope jerking the tent. “You stupid horse.” He ran into the bush and crashed through the trees in the direction we were heading, then sulked at my insults.

“Thanks very much again!” I rode off. Speck fell into line behind Apache, swaying his head to and fro with the rhythm of our gait, ignorant of his rude behavior back at the camp. He didn’t care one iota about rudeness, not today, not tomorrow, not yesterday.

What a great day! What a great life! The sway of the saddle felt like a lost friend, a precious friend. I swear when genetics gave out social compliance, at least as far as industry was concerned, it gave me instead a horse bug, a craving for life under canvas, and a love of saddle leather.

“Yahooo!” my sappy grin reached above the heavy clouds, “Mama don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys....”

The trail was easy to follow through the soft moss and giant timber, and stayed that way as we led away from the river, but in a direction of the same favour. “There’s a young man that I know... His age is twenty-one... some-day soon... goin’ with him... some-day soon...” my voice rang through the forest in song. Several miles peeled away gently.

“Whoa!” the trail began to peter out and now headed sharply up between two steep slopes ragged with great toppled trees and dark mosses. “You guys rest,” I tied the horses and headed up on foot with shotgun in hand.

It was odd how the trail lost itself so suddenly as it wound up the rough draw. I couldn’t hear the river anymore. Up and up I climbed and once on the forest roof, there was no trail at all. I headed south on a high shoulder toward the river and soon the distant cacophony of water painted a powerful picture. I stood on the high shoulder of a great rocky bluff with the river

foaming through countless chutes and drops. It was Cascade Falls. I had ridden much too far.

The sky grew late and on my way back to the horses, I reminded myself several times that I was indeed a fool.

At the horses, the late sky and big forest brought worried thoughts about an early restful camp, a promise I had guaranteed myself for the remainder of this adventure. A singing fool one minute and a lost one the next. So much for the best laid plans.

Sure my voice is better than David Bowie's but he wasn't looking for the Bower Creek trail. Never mix business with pleasure. I strained my eyes on both sides of likely trees for an axe blaze as I headed back. After half an hour and only a short distance from Massettoe's camp, I knew I must have passed it by again. We headed into the forest one quarter mile closer to the river and, once again, headed upstream, hoping to cut the path that led to the river and across to the mouth of Bower Creek. Hardwood ridges and draws turned here and there and soon my upstream travel was turned inside out. The dull light and missing sun offered no help.

I headed in a direction toward the river, but after turning off and on paths I found myself back on the main trail. I muttered curses and cut back into the woods straight for the river, picking landmarks and keeping them with a strong mind. We hit the bank then rode downstream for a half mile with no sign of Bower Creek coming in from the other side. One more time. There's light for one more try. Back to the main trail. "That damn trail has to cut off somewhere." Shadows grew all around and each side of any tree looked the same, a dark place between a darker place. Alder and fir branches slapped us and pounded my bent cowboy hat. "C'mon! Where's that main trail?" I rode along a ridge and reached out for a branch that I had broken off an hour earlier. "Damn!" Pain came from my foolishness and the loss of my direction, manifested in loneliness.

It was dark.

The horses heaved and sighed with the burden of pushing brush, their heads low, now dripping from the light drizzle. “Oh guys, oh man. Humph.” I shook my head at my foolishness. “I’m sorry. I really am.” I slipped off the saddles with no pack boxes and lay the pads on the ground under a big pine with tent boughs. “Man, look guys, no food. I’m sorry.” I tied the horses. I gathered fuel and started a small flame.

“Here fella, come here,” the hairy dog waved its tail briefly then cowered coyly. “Shy little girl aren’t you Hairbrush?” Then the Siberian cross came up wagging its tail looking for food. Petting was something it they had lived without and had little use for. “Here, Hairbrush, come here. Sorry gal, no food.” How could I do this to Doreen’s dog first night out? Forgive me Doreen.

“Man, is it cold tonight?” The flames kicked up and I lay next to the fire, my face hot and backside freezing. I rolled over and my knees chilled and buttocks burned. “Real good, Stan. Some smart guy. Take the easy way.” I remembered what Donny had said, “I’m going fishin’ up the river. I’ll take your boxes and drop ‘em off at Bower Creek.” “Great idea” I had replied. “Give the horses another day off. Heck, I’ll be there just after dinner. Only fifteen miles from here.”

I shook my head with disgust. “Real good plan, Stan. Make a new plan, Stan.” I rolled over and my summer pants seared against my skin with collected heat. Once more I rolled over then stumbled about collecting firewood, feeding it at arm’s length. It was a vicious routine: turn over, frozen on one side and cooking on the other, and then turn over again. A horse whinnied somewhere, somewhere in the great land where even great men must feel very lonely, very humble, and nights very, very long.

The morning would never have come had I not so carefully coaxed it. At first it was only a dream, then as I shook with deep chill, it became an imagining and, with the jitter of a restless eye, it settled as a conscious thought. Finally, with both eyes open, a thing became a tree.

It was time to see the Massettoes, truly the first time someone's advice would make a significant difference. I could have found the creek mouth on my own, but I needed someone to scare away the unexpected demons of loneliness. Demons that the long night brought and I knew would bring again.

Demons that the good people in Fort Ware held at bay while my spirit rested. No matter how embarrassing, it would be worth it.

I led the horses and dogs through the grey forest, careful to avoid drippings from the nights' drizzle. Fog wrapped the woods and the big, countless, mind-boggling wooded dips, but in a few hundred yards we stepped onto the main trail. I had learned a good lesson, but wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps that each day I should be as grateful to meet the dawn as this day, a day when life came so softly. I rode solemn over the saddle horn. Each stretch after each bend was carefully screened for signs of a leaving trail.

Something moved. Ahead, on the trail, something moved. I reined Lucky. He was made of the earth. His movement flowed over the ground, his eyes focused on the path, each step of his moccasin felt gentle and sure. He was not a man but an animal, a cat, a hunter, a Sikhanni, the man who dwells in rocky places. He had not seen me. His eyes found the shiny beads of water that crouched shimmering on the leaves across his path and, with a delicate willow wand, he tapped them to the ground, again, and again, hardly a break in the flow of his motion. His light green shirt and grey flannel pants were dry. He seemed to smile as he came forward. Tap, tap, tap. Now only ten yards distant, I wondered if he was blind. He was old, so very old. He stopped, then looked up at me with no surprise. He had known I was there all along. "Uh," he waved his wand back down the way he had come. I followed the man, the animal who held no hesitation and no words, back to the old Massettoes' camp.

Seven or eight people sat around the campfire including the young man I had met earlier with his family. The old man retired to his tent. I edged

boldly toward the fire for a taste of precious heat. It was a brutally cold morning for mid-August. I felt very foolish.

“No find Bower Creek?” the young man asked. “No.”

“Maybe grown over too bad.”

“I think so, I looked pretty hard.”

“Want tea? Sit.” I had not eaten for at least twenty-four cold hours, and the hot tea was the vital lift I needed.

“Honey?”

“Yes, please.” The drink sent waves of life through my chilled body.

“Your father?” I asked about the old man. “Grandfather.”

“He seems so healthy. How old is he?” They talked to one another briefly in Indian, then said, “Eighty-six.”

I shook my head in amazement. “That’s something. Do many people here get to be eighty out here?”

“If not die,” he said and they chuckled. “Does he stay out here?”

They looked at me with wonder. “I mean does he go to Ware?” “Not much. Too much people.”

“Really? That’s something. Must be tough.” The young man nodded.

“Does he ever go out to see a doctor, to Prince George?” “No.”

“Never?”

“Never go out. This home.”

I stared into the flame; amazed at the history this old man must know.

“My name is Stan. I know that you are Massettoe but I don’t know your first name,” I said to the young man.

“Jim,” he said and the others paid no mind while they sat, watching the flames as they had for the last five hundred years. We sat for several minutes without saying much then Jim talked in Indian to a gal I thought must be his wife.

“I have not been that way for awhile. I will go with you to see.” I mounted up and he led out on foot. After a couple of miles, he turned into the forest.

“This the trail?” I could see no indication of a trail in this place that I had ridden past at least twice.

“Yuh,” he said as he tapped drops of water from the bushes in front of his path with a short stick. Once or twice I thought we rode on the faint depression of an old path. I asked several questions and he chose which ones to answer and which ones to ignore. We walked through the forest much longer than the map indicated we should, then finally came out on the river bank.

“Is the trail so poor up Bower?”

“No, people take boat to creek then walk up Bower.” He turned to leave. No sooner had the plod of his steps faded when the drone of a boat engine came from down river. A wooden boat with two dark figures rounded a distant bend. Two hundred yards downstream they beached on the opposite side and I knew it must be Bower Creek. I loosened the cinch, stripped down to my light blue T-shirt and hung my boots over the saddle horn.

“Hiya! Let’s go!” We drove into the water, into what was by far the widest crossing yet, a couple hundred yards across. There should have been the tension of fear, but in the strong force of life that tingled inside of me this morning, I knew that it was not a morning meant for death. My body pulsed a new strength. “I’ll swim the damn thing if I have to! Hiya!”

We pushed water for twenty yards then found our swimming legs. The powerful river swept us down but we kept a steady course for the far side. The two Indian men stood with arms down, gauging my progress, a sight they had probably never seen or would see. Cold clear water swirled around my groin but it only added to our bravado. Another time, another place, another person, another horse, and the wide, cold river could easily have become the bane of death. Today, with the practiced courage of Lucky, it was one cup of animal strength from a gallon of courage.

We clattered over the round river stones. “Yahoo.” I gave a subdued victory call and waved my hand at the visitors forty yards away. They stood passive and, as I rode closer, I noticed one had a gun in his hand.

“Hello,” I looked down at them.

“Hello,” the taller one said and the other nodded. “Gonna do some hunting?” I asked.

“No.” the one with the gun smiled. “Oh, uh, just gonna do some shooting?”

“Yuh,” the taller one said and they both smiled. Geez, I thought, what if these guys are related to Frank. The taller one was lean, well muscled in his upper body and very handsome with an attractive face, a reckless carefree face. As usual, a fine quality cowboy hat topped his head. These people took pride in their quality hats and the Four Star Stetson that I wore always put me low man on the totem pole.

“Where you goin’?” He asked.

“Over to Thutade Lake. You know anything about that trail? You headed up that way?”

They sat on the edge of their weary little wooden boat. It had no seats. Instead a couple of planks lay across port to stern. The floor was drowned with water.

“Been over to the Finlay?”

The tall one answered, “Spent one winter at a cabin there at Fishing Lake. Had ten beaver and one sack of flour to eat, never do that again.” They both grinned. I joined them in their thoughts, “You must have got pretty skinny.”

“Yuh, wind blow me back to town,” and they laughed. He continued. “Never go that way with horse. Some used to. One outfitter ride somewhere there. Lots deadfall for horse but you make it o.k.”

“You goin’ that way?” I asked hoping to have company. “No,” they grinned at my ignorance. “Fish pools below.”

“Well, why don’t you stay for dinner, as soon as my boxes show up.” The quiet fellow pointed to the far side of a big shore-washed log where the red top of my pack boxes showed.

“Great, I’ll put some coffee on.” It was good to have company my own age that talked on the same wavelength. They sure didn’t seem to give a hoot about much. Must be the wilderness life. I gathered a campsite and they talked as they turned over the old boat. The worn green bottom was riddled with brown patches of plywood and tar. “Where’n the hell you get this boat any how?” the tall one asked.

“Under that old shed.”

“Christ, got too damn many holes.” “That not the trouble.”

“Whadda hell you mean, nearly drown comin’.” “Trouble is, all hole on bottom.”

“Man, you’re nuts.” They laughed and shoved each other. “Coffee’s on,” I yelled and they came over.

“I’m Harold Poole,” the tall one said. “This is Harry Massettoe.” “Massettoe? I just came from Jim Massettoes’ camp.”

“My brother.”

They drank a cup of coffee then walked back over to the boat. I searched the pack boxes for broth ingredients. Ping, ping, ping, they zinged .22 shots off the stones. Zap, zap, zap, the semi-automatic stung the river. Tired of their fun, they came and sat down for another cup of coffee.

“So, what do you guys do out here all summer?”

“Not much, we just came here, don’t stay much.” “Oh, got jobs in Prince George or James?”

“No,” they grinned, then Harold aimed the gun at a black knot on a white poplar tree. Ping, ping. Bark flew from the knot and they laughed.

“Give me.” Ping, ping. More bark flew and they laughed again. “Not working, eh?”

“No,” Harold grinned. “Just came in from fightin’ fires for a couple weeks. Before that I was doin’ time.”

“No, really? Steal a car or something?” “Naw. Killed a guy. Not so bad though.”

Holy geez. “You’re kidding, right?” I truly hoped he was kidding. I was suddenly struck with the thought that he was hiding, and that I was one unlucky guy.

“Were you, uh,” I had to keep the conversation going, convince them I cared. “Were you in a long time?”

“Long enough.”

“So, uh, what happened?”

“Dunno, drunk, told me I hit the guy with a tire iron, bugger died on me. Guess I did.” They laughed again.

“Oh shit,” I mumbled under my breath. “Harry here, got out last week.”

“No, no, really,” I stood up and grabbed the pot of coffee. “Here, have some more coffee. Supper will be only a minute.”

They stood up. “We go fishing. Be back soon.” They pushed off, laughing and rolling the little boat with about three inches of freeboard. It looked mighty shaky with them sitting above the boat on those planks. As they careened past I yelled, “You got no life jackets!”

“What that?” they yelled back and laughed, then gave the engine what for. I knew it, what if they’re related to Frank. I could see the headline now: Habitual Convict Puts Bullet Through Campers Head. Reason Unknown!

While the soup broth simmered I searched for and found the trail that led up the creek. It was well used and a good indication that people had frequented the area for many years. A number of years ago R. M. Patterson boated up this way and wrote a book about his findings. He came upon a Sikhanni family on this very bank and immediately a young girl, who appeared quite famished, walked up to him and said, “Good Morning, I’m starving.”

Quite taken back he generously donated what I recall was the better portion of his already rationed supply of slab bacon. As the family did not speak much of anything, he was surprised the little girl spoke such clear English.

A little later the girl came over to chat and once again spoke clearly, her entire English vocabulary: “Good morning, I’m starving.” As the saying goes, first things first. Perhaps someday I would get the chance to ask him if the little girl looked like a Rodney Dangerfield in a round Indian body.

Inside of an hour Harold and Harry cruised down the river and, I hoped, would keep right on cruising. Instead, they beached the boat in front of the fire. They hefted up a string of about a dozen grayling and rainbow trout on a willow branch, then tossed a few to the dogs. They crunched them down with tremendous urgency.

“Say, you did real good, eh?”

They sat by the fire and I dished out portions of broth and macaroni dinner.

“No, no, that’s enough!” Harold held up his hand after a mouse portion.

“What? It’s supper. Have some more.”

“No, gotta watch my body. Keep slim for the girls,” He patted his very slim belly. They ate quickly and sipped a cup of tea, then jumped into the sorry boat.

“Gotta get back. See you, good luck.” There goes one heck of a nice criminal, nicest I ever met. I waved goodbye. Harry sat in the boat and Harold bent down to push off then he stood up and looked at me.

“You meet Alex Abue?”

“Charley’s boy? Kind of a big guy?” “Yeah.”

“Yeah, a real nice guy. We visited one evening.” “He shot himself yesterday.”

He shoved off.

It was the first time since riding up to Wolfe Pass, our first climb into the high country, that I smiled for a steady mile. The trail was almost rock hard and, in places, a blind elephant could have waltzed through the ponderosa pine, and over a carpet of bright white lichen to boot. But in two miles, the smile wiped from my face.

We rode into the end of a mile long half-moon opening. Its' center shone silver with a lake and the edges green and brown with clumps of peat bog. Early afternoon heat burned off the final wisps of morning fog. It was a place to search the distant shore and forest edge for the rack of a mammoth moose, or mule deer buck. On our right was the lake and on our left a wide flat-bottomed bog that lay a great distance back into the thick spruce forest. The trail chose the pinch between lake and bog to cross. Someone lay rails over the muck for foot passage. Likely Tommy on the way to his cabin. But the horses were not prone to hopscotching over four inch rails so I dismounted.

“C’mon fellas, don’t look like we’ve got much choice.” I led them over the rails. Lucky’s feet struck the first logs and opposite ends popped up and rolled apart. He leaped and ran forward with me scrambling out of hoof range, but I was too late. He clipped my heel and threw me to the side, then pounded his way through the muck and into the solid willows. Apache stopped cold, up to his knees in mud.

“Get goin’!” I yelled. Speck, in a fury of grabbing mud and logs drove head-long into Apache’s rear, throwing him to the side into a watery muck. With plate-sized hooves, Speck slogged through the muck and joined Lucky in safety: Apache lay on his side, struggling under the weight of his pack.

“Hang on, stupid!” I removed the boxes and dragged them through the mire onto dry ground.

“C’mon fella,” I grabbed the halter and pulled. “Let’s go. Fight dammit!” I yanked and he struggled, then quit. It was no use. I would have to dig him out. With my hands I shoveled muck from under Apache but, with

each effort, the mud and water sloughed back in. Within a half an hour my arms hung like Kermit the Frog and there was nothing to show but mud that was a little thinner than before I started. It was no use. I would have to pry him out. I found some long poles and wedged them under this belly and wrenched down on them. “Hiya! Get goin’, c’mon, go! go!” He struggled then sank deeper. Snap! The pole broke. I sat back in the muck. It didn’t matter. I was all mud anyway. “I don’t believe it.” I wiped sweat from my eyes and mud from my cheek. “I don’t believe it.”

I climbed out of the mess and found two large coils of rope. The best way to pull a horse out of the mud is to cinch the rope about his chest just behind his front legs. I dug more mud in an effort to get the rope under his chest and could only reach half way down his body. I lay the rope over the end of a stick then shoved it down to the bottom of the horse, but I had no way of getting it around the bottom and up. The more I dug the deeper he sunk. I lay back with exhaustion. It was no use.

“What now?” I fought the tears. “Damn you, why now?” My limbs did not want to move and the puffy white clouds that rolled along so peacefully were in another world. I sat up and screamed, “You want to die! You want to die?” I grabbed a broken log and screamed murder while smacking his rear. “Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!” I smacked him again and again, then collapsed over his barely exposed body and cried.

“Now what, smart guy? Now what? You’re real cool when things are fine, eh cowboy. Now what smart ass. What the heck, it’s only a horse, eh? What’s one horse? Even if he has hauled your life through hell. So what, big deal. What’s the big deal if you kill a horse? You bastard” I struggled to my feet, grabbed a rope and tied it to his halter. I sat on Lucky and wrapped the other end around the horn. “You want to die! You want to die! Not in that hole buckley. I’ll break your sonofabitchin’ neck first!” My foot drove hard into Lucky’s side and he lunged hard against the rope. “Hiya! Hiya! Hiya!” I whipped him with a branch. He lunged again and again, driving and twisting against the rope. He reared high into the air with the

pull of the rope lifting his front end up over the power of his muscular hind legs. Whump! I hit the ground. Lucky stood trembling and Apache had not moved.

“You think it’s a joke!” I uncoiled the remaining rope and tied one end to Apache and the other to Speck. My weakness came second to what I now planned and I managed to swallow a lump that formed in my throat. We would suck him out or break his neck.

Lucky and Speck lined up as a team and the devil himself opened hell on their heels. I screamed and drove my pole at their backsides like a wild man.

The rope sung with snap and tension and I turned to see Apache shoot ten yards out of his grave like a ball of bad spit. I helped him to his feet where he stood shaking so bad he was in fear of collapsing. I rubbed his ears. “I love you, you dumb bugger.”

It was a devious trail, one minute etched into the solid ground from a century of Indian passage and the next minute lost in soft spruce moss or a grass draw, or, again, in a deadfall tangle. At least the trail remained true upstream against the creek. My guesses were all it took to pick up the path over and over again.

I whistled. “Here girls!” The dogs were gone again. They were forever dodging in and out of the forest, gone and reappearing inside of a few hundred yards. A squirrel rattled fifty yards off and a dog barked. “C’mon girls! Let’s go!” They were good company. Just to know they were here was a presence of life worth sharing, a living distraction to remove the edge from loneliness. Their little grey bodies floated between the trees like little wolves. Their noses were awful good at catching up to the horses.

By early afternoon we had picked our way fifteen miles. Mountain streams are master chameleons, one stretch deep and quiet, the next crashing over boulders, the next a lazy pool. In a wide grassy bend the creek drew shallow over small red stones covered with pretty green slime. Across the creek the point of the bend looked a level grass harbour. Mountains

looked down and round clouds tickled their tops. We crossed to the grass point and made camp.

“Here you go, gals. One pile of mush to go for you, and another for little Hairbrush.” The little hairy dog bellied coyly to the ground and wagged its tail but did not come for the food. I backed off. Affection was an alien demonstration. The dog was a survivor. It slunk to the food ever careful of my motive.

“You’re a shy one, aren’t you, Hairbrush.” They gobbled their food, then looked at me wondering when the main course would be served. “Man,” I shook my head and dumped another pot of oatmeal on the cooking fire. “I think you scrawny mutts got worms.” I lay another portion of porridge on the ground and, for the first time, was allowed to touch Hairbrush. She wagged her tail, then rolled belly up with submission. It was not something she trusted herself to do, like a child shell-shocked from numerous beatings. I rubbed her belly. “That’s O.K. gal; we’ll become buddies.” They were good company.

The mellow brook with its grass banks and the high streaked clouds that reflected shades of violet from a forgotten sun was the perfect compliment to the still, pine-scented evening air. Cross-legged I sat, a position of meditation and counseling in relief of the aggression and frustration from the tough day. The soft earth was a warm comfort. A stone slipped from a precarious hold and cracked down to a new precarious place. This land was my land, and the programs in my mind were tuned in perfect harmony with the evening show. We had become brand new partners.

The morning was cold. I wrapped myself in the green plaid wool jacket purchased from Jim. The sun lit orange peaks and foreshadowed a hot day. “It’s about time,” I gathered twigs from under a large spruce and started the morning fire.

Just another rolled oats morning. Just a splash of water, a grab of oats and a sprinkle of raisins, then a five minute simmer. Sploosh, grab and... and... where’s the raisins? “Where’s the raisins? I just put them on the

pannier.” I looked around for the dogs, but they had not been around for some time. “What the heck?” I searched the boxes but found no raisins. I shoved the pot over the coals. “Dammit, no raisins.” I looked behind some trees; no dogs and no raisins!

We rode a difficult route up the valley. High green and brown slopes started high from scabble rock under piercing cliffs, then curved down into still distant evergreen. The cliffs closed in on the valley and the big broken boulders under the cliffs began to harbour shadows, cracks and holes. In the distance, the valley split, one creek and draw coming from the south and one from the west. The trail would stay with the west fork.

Although I had scanned clearings and open stream banks for Tommy’s trapping cabin, it had evaded me. I guessed it should appear before the creek split. Two trees grew close to the trail and threatened the pack boxes on Apache. We looped around. Crack. Speck crammed between the two trees then stuck fast.

“You stupid horse; you’re getting dumber instead of smarter.” He sighed deeply then blinked his big eyes at me. “Don’t you feel sorry for me?” he seemed to be saying.

“Get going!” I yelled and he pushed ahead at my cry. Crash. One of the trees was dead and it began to topple toward me.

“Hiya!” Lucky bolted ahead. Whap. A medium-size branch stung my back. For the third time in as many days Speck bulldozed trees that threatened my existence. This time it was much too close.

“What the heck’s the matter with you? You want to kill somebody?” He was getting lazy and rather than walk around the tight places, he pushed through. Too smart for his own good and too lazy for mine. If Speck was a man, he would have been an executive of a macaroni factory.

The trail turned into some deep woods. It wound deep and dirty through naked, spindly branches with busted fingers. Black and grey lichen draped the crooked fingers pretending they were cobwebs and an old man’s beard. The midday songbirds stopped singing. It was a dank place.

There came a small clearing of tangled thickets and we rode through. An uncomfortable presence bid my attention and I looked over my shoulder back into the clearing. A large elevated growth of moss was out of place. We turned and rode up to what appeared to have been a cabin, or something. Like a sorry Hobbit hole dug into a moss hump. It was lower than my height with what must be a roof weighted with years of sod and live mosses and weeds. One small window and one small door offered the only clue that it may not have been built by a troll. It was three steps across and four deep. It wasn't very big, but neither was Tommy. It would be easy to keep warm in the winter. My God, how long that winter would be!

The trail led momentarily along a high bank then broke into a willow flat. "Whoa!" we stopped. I shook my head with uncertainty. "Of all the luck. I was sure we had beaten the fires." The valley and, particularly, the north slope showed the black devastation of a recent burn.

We chose to ride below the burn but the trail was intent on arguing and, it pulled up the slope into the burn. To my disappointment it led a winding path directly up the north slope. It didn't make sense. The route was up the valley. Why in the world does the trail head up the mountain? I dismounted, tied the horses and walked with the dogs up the mountain.

The sun was hot and the fresh burn dusty. My coat and chaps waited patiently for my return somewhere down the trail. I grabbed a log and lifted myself over, smudging a black streak on my pants. "No way, you ugly burn," I dusted off the black mark, and moved carefully along, avoiding the burnt timber that reached at me. This was not going to be a filthy repeat of the horrible days once conquered.

The trail appeared more traveled than made sense. The scrapes from an axe ticked the trees every few hundred yards. I stopped and examined the head of the long valley, my lofty perch a worthy lookout. A couple of miles up, the trees and burn gave way to green brush and alpine that was leading me into a rocky draw between mountain peaks. In the sweaty black heat, I pushed onward and upward. The trail was so plain, even as I entered the

door between two canyon walls with a powerful bellowing stream that pounded out between the cliffs. This was impossible. The trail must have turned up the valley somewhere back down the trail. Who could have made this trail? Was it Tommy, looking for sheep meat? Making axe blazes on a game trail?

I descended and, once again, made my way up from the valley floor, scrutinizing every possibility for a path up the main valley. Once again the cross-fallen burnt timber blocked the possibilities. I kicked the dirt with my last reserve of energy, puffing from the hot, fruitless climb.

“I don’t believe this crap.” I stood looking at where I had to go and where I was. I sucked back a slug of saliva and hurled a deadly spitball at the bright orange flower on a stock of fireweed. It whapped a petal and slid down yellow and black. There were two choices: find strength and curse my way madly down the frustrating burn and find, or flop down and pick a bunch of early season blue berries. I flopped down and caressed the round violet fruit, then smiled and popped them, one by one, into my mouth. “Who needs a damn trail anyhow?”

The horses and I stood by the rushing valley stream. “Alright, forget the trail, find a break in the trees and give her.” We walked along the trail until a tiny opening between two big cottonwoods welcomed my plan. A huge live tree had fallen in front of the cottonwoods and we crept around it. “Hey!” I jumped with confused surprise. “Why you rotten bugger!” We stepped onto the lost trail. The big fallen tree hid the trail perfectly.

What remained of the day waned rapidly as did the stream, now only fifteen yards of white foam rushing between large boulders. Along the stream grew big timber but several yards away, the trail lost itself in a harsh consistent mix of deadfall and brush.

“Whoa!” We stopped on the stream bank and, for the third time, thought about crossing to what appeared easier travel on the far side. The rushing water foamed around boulders but, for once, we could force our way around the bigger stuff.

“Let’s go.” Lucky snuck between two large trees and slid ten feet down a steep black particle bank. His feet groped and slid around the big round stones. Water flew up against his knees and roared above my advice, “Take it easy fella, lot’s of time.”

Suddenly a tremendous crack jumped over the roar of the stream and I pivoted in the saddle. “Oh no!” Speck had bulldozed a huge dead tree and its’ gnarled trunk and limbs sailed for the water.

“Oh no!” I watched in horror as the dogs swam in the raging current directly under the wicked falling tree. Slap. It struck over both dogs and they disappeared in the foam. In a flash the Siberian surfaced and swam for the far bank. The seconds were minutes and I strained to see Hairbrush. In a brief moment, where the stream dashed around a hard bend, I saw the silver glimpse of the dog struggling for the shore, then, with the turn of the river, she was gone.

“Hairbrush! Here girl! C’mon gal!” Evergreen branches slashed my face as I raced down the bank. “Here gal!” The roar of the river smothered my yells. Whump. I fell hard on the soft moss. “Here girl!” I picked myself up and ran down the stream. An hour later my search lost hope. Camp was made.

It was a sad fire. “Hi there girl” The Siberian wagged its tail then perked its ears into the woods. I looked but saw nothing. “That’s O.K.. gal. She’ll be O.K. Maybe she’ll make it to Ware. Only forty miles, girl.” The dog wagged its tail.

The sleeping bag did not want to keep me warm. My mind rolled with the loss of Hairbrush, twisted in with this wild, lonely land. Even if Hairbrush was alive and headed back down the trail, it would be a long hungry path with wolves, coyotes, and the Finlay River to deal with. It was a hard country. What a cowboy said to me onetime – life is tough south of the Brazos. All around were the bones of death. It was not something difficult to accept, it had been this way for some time, forever if I was a Sikhanni. The thought of my own death was not fearsome at all, perhaps

because the possibility had been grappled with time and again through the hell we had known, or perhaps intuition and optimism convinced me that the Cordillera journey was of a substance larger than life itself.

Bad weather rolled me out of my sleeping bag and robbed my expectations of sweeping alpine pastures and haunting mountain summits, the first alpine since Bedeaux Pass, one hundred and twenty miles ago. Rather, my raincoat sagged with the weight of a persistent drizzle. Water rolled off my hat brim and crept through the hatband to soak my hair and trickle cold beads down my neck.

My hunched back straightened from its stiff set and I looked up to catch a mountain peak between blocks of cloud. I hunkered my extremities to keep the heat and let my rubberneck hang my head. My fist clenched then flexed to keep circulation and a trickle of water rolled from the cotton gloves down the noodle reins. "Tick me off," came so quiet that Lucky did not bend an ear. We rode over the hard ground of the pass, weaving easily through bunches of stunted white fir and shin tangle. This place was the epitome of mountain glory for a saddle club trail circuit. I knew it, and wished dearly I could have seen it, if only for memory that would help ease the sixty miles of river bottom that lay ahead.

With Bower Creek behind and the solid divide underfoot, we turned our mind to examine the coming descent, a difficult sorting with my ears in the clouds. Bower Valley headed west by south then turned south at the divide, a direction we kept for a half-mile. Then we took a hard right turn and found the swampy beginnings of the new creek that would lead us down to the Finlay. In the next eight miles we must descend the altitude it took the last thirty to gain.

I reined Lucky to a stand. The packhorses swiped wisps of grass. The path we picked up and trusted could have been one of several that led down the valley. Now we sat at the head of a sloppy looking moose swamp. The path we rode on split into a dozen ruining the belief that we chose the main route down.

“Whoa! up” Lucky reached out for more grass. The grassy bog meadow appeared tricky, and strange somehow. “What the...?” The two hundred yard long watery sump was at a considerable downhill grade.

“How in the heck?” I was dumbfounded. Here we were on the edge of an obvious swamp that was obviously downhill. Why didn’t the water drain down! “This is nuts!” We chose a path through the grass that had the most use, probably the stomp from moose hooves. We battled our way through, leap-frogging from one soft place, over a softer place, to another soft place. Steam rose from the horses whose exertion was great. It was good that I chose the horses with the biggest feet. Once through the moose swamp, we rode through stands of dwarf alpine fir then square into another moose swamp. All afternoon we wished we had the snowshoe feet of mountain caribou. The creek that crept along its bank squished with bog.

“Stupid creek!” I yelled. “Haven’t you heard of normal banks!?” We didn’t know what time it was when we hit the solid timber, but it was about the same time the grey drizzle gave way to a foreboding black storm cloud and pounding rain. It had never rained so hard. We walked down the steep ridge in heavy fallen timber; the little flooded stream rushed a hundred yards below, down a steep log-strewn willow hillside. Boom! Boom! Boom! Thunder hammered above. Somewhere there must have been lightning. Our pulses and pace quickened with the command of the thunder. “C’mon you jerk!” I cursed Lucky as he balked with one leg over a big log.

I jerked hard on the lead and he crow-hopped the log.

We slogged along in our misery, soaked from my underwear to my deepest thoughts. My foot slipped on a wet log tossing me off balance onto the ground. Lucky held up while I felt the bruise on my shin. How many kinds of misery does this country have? I wandered carefully for a quarter mile. How many kinds of misery is this country holding secret, to spring upon nimrod people at the worst possible moment? It grew especially grim as the sun went down. I tried to think of a worse possible moment.

The race against the falling night pulled at what will power I had remaining. We bungled through the slippery wood-wrecked timber. We had to make the Finlay River by dark. It was a place one could live. This place was impossible. We fronted a tangle more massive than the last, and stopped. Through the driving rain the down slope remained a mystery, but it was worth a try.

I dropped the reins and scrambled down the steep willow slope, slipping and sliding, dodging and jumping logs. My foot skidded clean off a big log and jammed my crotch. "Ohhh..." I moaned, picked myself out of the brush and skipped down the hill in pain. Up the other side gave no sign of a trail and the hill drove brutally upward to a point where climbing it to the ridge made no sense. Back in the willow-choked bottom I found a faint trail and decided it was worth a try.

The horses angled down with front legs reaching out stiffly and back legs buckling under in an attempt to slow the treacherous descent. At times they jumped over logs at impossible angles. Lucky and I made bottom. My chest heaved and sighed for air lost while I scrambled wildly in front of Lucky. As usual, the decision wasn't questioned, just lived with.

Speck stood and observed the drop, then edged down what appeared a tough route. As usual, the big, strong animal came through. Apache followed our dirt thrown trail. Several yards from the bottom he hurried a step, tripped over a hidden stump and bowled end-over-end to the bottom. I scrambled through the brush. Fear rolled in his eyes and he craned his neck, then whinnied for the other horses.

"Get up," I encouraged his butt with my boot. He gathered his front legs under him, struggled to a clumsy stance, then dropped back down as the pack boxes weighed heavily to one side. He struggled against the slipped saddle and boxes. "Whoa there fella; let me get that."

I slipped off the boxes and re-saddled and packed the horse. "What bullshit," I whined in a very gloomy and very depressing place. The walls of the ravine pressed in on us.

The willow path was fine for a couple of hundred yards, then the steep banks on either side bolted ragged rock over the valley floor letting only the stream pass through. We were forced to fight back up the treacherous valley wall and, once again, pick our way on a path through the timbered prison. Darkness fell hostile against my will and the grueling day sapped every ounce of energy up until the last possible moment. Then, when the world finally fell to shadows and ghouls, we stumbled over the hummocks of a large grassy glade. Behind lofty black trees, a silver ribbon rolled silent. A square blob peaked above the silver reflection, the Finlay cabin. We had made it.

* * * * *

The cold drop of water smacked my face and I awoke instantly. It was not the first; my forehead and the locks of hair were quite wet. I lay snug in the warm bag and called back the memory of the past day. It was a clear memory, yet dream like or more accurately, a nightmare.

Long rough-cut boards all in a row reached down from a gaping hole in the roof and dropped to the dirt floor of the cabin. The dirt and sod from what used to be half a roof piled at the foot of the planks. The heavy earth smell flooded my nostrils. Light drizzle persisted and soaked the boards, soaked everything, and a puddle of water settled into a dirt depression that was the floor. The door was closed. I wondered why I had bothered to stay in the cabin at all. An old board table straddled my body acting as a tent from the dripping water.

I shifted my stiff body and a cold wetness bothered my left foot. Water rolled down a table leg and drenched the bottom corner of my bag. Impulsively my foot withdrew to warmer depths. Against the inside wall were the three dogsleds I had piled one on top of the other. They were graceful works of art. Wooden rails, struts and runners had been hand carved and shaped into both mild and drastic bends. Two were plain wood and one was painted a bright white. It was in fine shape with taut leather lacings. And now they were put safe in a dry comer.

Did Tommy use the sleds? The men at Ware talked about using the dogs again because they were more reliable and cheaper than snow machines. Geez, I hope Tommy doesn't get here some bitter winter night half frozen and need a snug cabin. This place is a disaster. When the roof fell, it busted the stove and permitted a four-footed rodent raid.

What a miserable day. I snuggled deep into my bag. A new drip from the table pestered my bag. It would only add to the dampness and that was no big deal. Ding, ding. A horse bell rang faintly from a far corner of the meadow. The dank earth smell would not leave me alone. It was ugly and wet in here.

"I wonder what time it is? This weather is going to last forever. Coming up is another one hundred and twenty minute hour." I fell asleep.

When I woke nothing had changed. Maybe it rained less. Boredom and the dank cabin forced me from my bag. Breath streamed from my mouth, "God it's cold." I slipped on my wool pants, wool jacket, rubber boots and shoved open the door.

From the doorway I swallowed a grand view of the elusive and wild Finlay River. There is a song that every wilderness river sings. Once heard, it lives eternally in the soul of the wilderness wanderer, two-footed or four. It lures them over hill and mountain, bog and briar, then bends an ear and borrows time. It is a song of life, that which is above the inanimate, that which continues bold in spite of callous bulwarks of mountains, soil and stone; that which pulses with the living. Only the river rises from nowhere and gives the moose, the deer, the hawk, the duck, the mink, the fish and man, the water that is life's blood. It is a song that keeps spellbound those humble and not. It is most significant. It is the finest song of life itself.

Low clouds hung a roof over giant evergreen trees. Thick grass with tall weeds rimmed riverbanks and sandy islands. The green-blue river came from a distant bend, curled a slow curve, fooled around in a black swirl in front of the cabin, then slid in between gravel elbows into somewhere

beyond. I stood and listened to the first lines from its elusive song, felt the chorus and knew it would last forever.

Snap, the dry branch broke crisp from under the big boughed spruce and I dragged an armful of fuel across the meadow, careful to avoid wet grass. A horse bell clanged from the far end of the big stump filled meadow. The horses perked their ears at me and three heads mimicked a frightened group of deer ready to bolt. One armful of dry branches were all the pancakes needed. The dog ate them plain and, on mine, I loaded scoops of peanut butter and jam. Coffee simmered pleasantly and I sat on my bag to avoid the smoke that billowed through the gutted roof. Quite a sight if someone walked by. Fine with me!

The cabin had nothing positive to offer. At one time it would have made a kind reminder of people left behind, but now it was simply dark, dirty, wet and stinky. I set my Whelan under a big fir tree and moved in. The day crept slowly by. There was the rain skittering from the sky, the rain clouds that changed slowly to keep my attention, the rain that dimpled the water and battered broad spineless weeds, the rain that dripped from pine boughs and, most pitifully, the rain that rolled off the fly of my Whelan. I crawled into my bag and fell asleep once again. I woke around suppertime. Nothing had changed.

“I wonder if there’s fish in the river?” The dog wagged its’ tail. I stood up to fight the boredom and it worked. The fishing rod had somehow broken its tip and I cut off what remained past the second- last rod guide.

“Ask me if I care,” I fixed a small gold spinner to the end of the six-pound mono. Fifty yards upstream I slid down the dirt bank to a small gravel point. The little spinner crashed only ten yards out. Gloved hands cranked the handle and the little spinner flashed a strobe glow. The dog barked and interrupted the stillness. A dark bolt shot from the depths, eliminating the flash.

Wham! Wham! The rod jerked stiffly against the fish and with a few turns of the reel, I tossed it ruthlessly onto the ground. “Amazing.”

Grayling were always a wonder; a sailfish replica with a gracefully arched back and a huge flag fanned dorsal fin. "Here, you bottomless pit." The dog was more excited about the catch than I was and gobbled it down.

Keeping busy was probably the best remedy for aimless thinking; self-pity. The weather was not for hire. It had a will of its own. My final conscious thoughts decided that I would travel no matter the weather tomorrow. There were too many miles to travel.

* * * * *

The fuzzy brown mouse must have twitched its whiskered nose and breathed a hundred breaths when the dog's stiff legs pounded on the tuft of grass. Most likely it trembled fearfully when the dog drove its snout into the hiding place and snorted. Absolutely it dashed in fear for a few frantic strides before the dog pounced on it. Definitely it gave a final squeek as it kicked its feet and flopped its tail, squiggling down the dog's throat. That much I heard.

"Will the dog follow me?" I questioned Emil. "What if I go a few miles and it runs back and takes off?"

"Will you feed it?" he replied. "Yes, sure I'll feed it."

"Then it will follow you anywhere."

Now I knew how the dogs around Fort Ware survived. The dog's victory renewed its vigor and it pounced stiff-legged on another mouse-smelling tuft of grass.

We rode the Finlay River for many days. There was the ten-mile stretch when we rode on the forest floor, dodging big trees, odd piles of debris and bog. There was the five-mile stretch when we rode in the river itself or on the network of long gravel and sand bars. There was the time when the river was deep and we were forced to continue at the foot of a steep mudslide, scrambling for a half mile in the trackless muck that dropped without a foothold into black swirling water. Often were the times when nameless streams spit into the big river and dared us to cross their

stony chaos or cruel mud. We did. During all of these times tall cottonwood and evergreens river side sentinels guarded my treasure, marching with me, neck to neck, for seventy miles. The mountains were perfectly beautiful and perfect companions. Once we thought we found a trail and gave it our trust, climbing and turning upwards to a place where we looked eagles in the eye. I laughed when it ended in a moose slough but when we turned to head back down the path we found that it served an honorable purpose. To the west of where we first met the river rose a spectacular array of saw-toothed mountains, so jagged and steep that a person standing on one of the many points could not step in any direction without tobogganing non-stop to the bottom. The map said they were the Chukachida Mountains. It was a good name. The name meant nothing, but said everything.

On and on we rode on the Finlay, and for many days it sang to me the song that the Sikhanni, Samuel Black, the VanSomers, and I had come to know. One day the map told me to leave the river and avoid a monster waterfall and I did. It was then the sun began to shine. It was then that another terrible burn tried, once again, to trick us and wreck our legs. It should have known better. Soon we would reach the place that perched alert on my tongue. For two weeks my tongue was ready for action. With victory over a big hill I shaded my eyes and gave a salute..

“There it is! Thutade Lake!” The horses perked their ears toward my glee. “Thutade! Thutade! Thutade!” We rode to its shore. Close by, the Finlay River rolled out over the lip of the lake. I had learned a song I will never forget.

“Hey there fellas, we made her! Yes, sir!” The horses drank from the lake and soothed their scratched legs. The Finlay was only a fraction of what it would become and its’ glory was now second to that of the huge shimmering lake, a lake that coursed eighty miles before accepting a creek at its southern head. Round mountain bumps cast evening shadows onto the water and I knew that no matter how beautiful and inspiring, I could see only

a pittance of its true wealth. “Gidee up, let’s go!” Speck jumped out ahead of the outfit and plunged into knee-deep water.

“Hiya! Get your butt in gear!” I yelled as Speck balked knee deep, midway across the lip of the river’s beginning. Then suddenly, in a terrible swallow a nose beyond Lucky, Speck disappeared. Then Lucky dropped and disappeared into a watery cavern. Freezing water strangled and choked me as water sucked me under. With frantic strokes I pulled for the surface. With my head barely above, I struggled madly against the current and against the weight of boots and clothes. As fast as my body won over the shock, I banged a knee against an underwater shelf of rock, then pulled myself to shore. I climbed onto a big flat stone. The horses climbed out of the river fifty yards down. I shivered with shock, cold and disbelief. Thank goodness the horses didn’t drown. Speck stood trembling with the saddle snug against his belly and the pack boxes flipped onto the ground.

“Oh my God! My camera!” Water streamed out of Apache’s pack boxes. I dashed across the neck-breaking boulders and tossed the camera and film from the pack boxes. The camera was dry in its case. A plastic bag had opened and water crept through the tape seals of four rolls of film. That made eight filmed rolls now lost to water damage.

I looked at the cause of our demise. Incredibly, the water rippled out from the lake a couple feet deep then, like over a table ledge, dropped into a bottomless cavern. Little puffs of cloud rolled across the sky. The Finlay River could not say farewell without a good joke. It had a bad sense of humour.

The big fire crackled cheerful messages to anything watching around the north end of the lake. I moved the water-fogged binoculars back from the intense heat of the open flame. The tumble in the river had caused considerable damage. .

“Let’s go fishing, dog. See if that big hole is good for anything else beside drowning horses and people.”

I hopped onto a big boulder and peered down into the dark hole, then tossed the spinner upstream letting it sink into the depths. I began my retrieve and the lure came flitting out of the deep hole. Nothing. I cast again and again then turned my attention to the wonderfully rounded mountaintops. Bump, went the tip of the rod. I tugged back setting the hook and, after a brief battle, landed a small grayling.

“Here dog, supper time.” She gobbled down the fish. “Mutt. I’ve never seen a dog with such lousy table manners.” She perked her ears wondering if I would toss her another fish.

I cast again and let it sink good and deep. Instantly and with a great surge the stiff rod doubled with a strike. “Holy geez!” The rod weaved and buckled as the fish rushed and twisted.

“Yahoo! Look at this! One world record grayling coming up!” In a streak for the surface a big dark form telegraphed its enormous size, then again dove into the depths. “Yahoo! I got you, you sucker!” Again I battled him to the surface and this time managed to flip it onto the boulders. “Get away from there!” The dog yapped wildly attacking the thumping fish. I jumped on the fish with my boot, holding it at bay. “What! You’re no grayling!”

A round mouth stuck on the end of the fish’s face like a toilet plunger. “Fish lips! You bugger!” But it wasn’t a sucker either; suckers have their lips on the bottom of their snout. “Are you good to eat?” I asked the fish with throbbing lips. It didn’t answer me so I stuck my forefinger into its sucker mouth to see what it felt like. “Man, what a weird fish; c’mon dog, let’s go cook him.”

The dog gladly ate half and after ten minutes showed no signs of poisoning so I shoveled myself a plate full. The white flesh crumbled nicely from the bones. It was delicious. After supper I carried a full pot of chocolate pudding to a gravel point that nosed into the lake. I sat down for the perfect evening.

The sun hung bravely onto the hairline horizon of a great lake. It clung to the earth with golden fingers that tried to find me but faded into a mirror. The big round islands and hills cast colorless shadows, blobs of black, onto the pallid sheen of water. Mosquitoes gathered in reckless flocks, humming to and fro, reading an insect sentence written on the lake bottom. Big blue dragonflies with oversized wings skimmed effortlessly over the lake, the envy of any helicopter. A swallow fell from the sky in the blink of an eye, laughing while scooping mosquitoes with an insatiable funneled beak. Slowly the golden fingers slipped their hold on the day and in from the east came the timeless blessing of a chocolate goodnight.

“Where is it?” I felt for it with my toes. “Always at the bottom of the bag. Silly little yellow pillow.” I warmed it with a hug then laid it gently under my face. The gentle feminine fragrance was gone. I turned the pillow and there, yes, I smelled it, I think. “It’s so beautiful.” I could remember the delicate perfume. Imagine it even if it was gone. And I could remember her too. Yes, I could. “Why? Why?” I tried to pull her close to me, but it had been so long ago, so very long ago. “Please, try to understand.” So many hundreds of miles, every tree, every river and stream, every stone. So many traumas, so many many highs, so many new memories. “But I can remember what we were, dammit. I can. And I will.” I remembered her face. I remembered her touch. I remembered some lines from a poem I wrote for her:

Was it spring or summer when love began?

Did you measure the height when loves heart soared?

Was it winter or fall when love died?

Did you measure the depths of rain when it poured?

But years go by and wisdom knows.

CHAPTER V – TIME IN A RIVER

*That rains bring blossoms from seeds past sown, So I plant a
seed, a pearl, to reap dances of love. Our symbol, our home, let it
be known.*

So from here and from there, From now and from then,

We will dance with the lovers, My friend.

I remembered. Yes, I did.

CHAPTER VI

HEART OF THE CORDILLERA

Smoke curled from the confused wind then reversed completely. “For crying out loud!” I gagged and jumped from my sleeping bag to escape the choking billow of smoke. My eyes stung for the third time this morning and gave me a good excuse to wash my face. The cold water felt good. I combed a healthy growth of hair.

I sat back and studied the fogged-in lake, then searched my face for morning pimples. There were none. It was amazing how clear my complexion had become out in the wilderness. Come to think of it, a deodorant problem did not even exist. I was surprised, considering the two or three days of struggle and sweat between changes of clothes. Had I gone three days in the city under such hard labour, I would certainly have stunk to high heaven. I was virtually odorless except for smoke and spruce pitch on my clothes. “You know something,” I pondered. “I don’t think I saw a bathtub in Fort Ware, yet I do not recall a single person with body odor or bad breath, with the exception of Frank the drinker.”

An engine broke the silence. An airplane? I looked up but the sky was plugged with cloud and fog hugged the lake. The noise grew steadily louder then broke from the fog. It was a grand mirage - people! I cleared my throat. “Testing, one, two, three, testing, testing.” My throat worked. I stood up and waved at the three people in the wooden skiff. They saw me and turned directly in.

Two were men and one was a woman. The boat ran onto the stony beach. In it was a bow and arrow, a modern recurve bow. “Must be a bowhunter. The one with the black cowboy hat must be the guide,” I

thought. The guide jumped out and I helped him drag the boat a few feet to solid ground. They all climbed out.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hi,” the guide answered. “Doin’ some campin’?”

“Yes, passing through.” Must be his outfitting area. I hope he doesn’t feel I’m intruding, I thought.

“Looks like you’re doing some bowhunting.” I said.

“Yeah,” he nodded at the hunter, then continued. “Where you comin’ from? Fly in?”

“No, no. I came by horse, heading through to Stewart.”

He studied me for a moment. “From Germanson Landing?” “No, actually from just north of Fort St. John.”

Again he studied me for a moment, no doubt wondering if I was for real. “From the Alaska Highway?”

“Yeah, three of us. But I’m the only one left.”

“I’ll be,” he smiled. “You’ve come one hell of a long way.” “Yea,” I smiled back. “If you’ve got a minute, I sure could use some advice. With the trails, I mean.”

The bowhunter stepped in. “I bet company wouldn’t hurt either.” He laughed and we joined him.

We walked up to the camp and I put on a pot of tea. We introduced ourselves. The guide-outfitter was Ron Flemming, part owner of Love Brothers and Lee Outfitting Service. The bowhunter was Larry DeAlva and his wife’s name was Lil. Ron called the dog over. “Here there, c’mon.” He patted his thigh. The dog did not respond. “What’s your dog’s name?”

“Not my dog.”

The three of them gave me a sidelong glance. “Well, actually it was given to me in Fort Ware. I guess it doesn’t have a name.”

“Here, Supper.” Ron called for the dog.

“Supper?” I looked at him wondering if he wanted to eat dinner. “What do you mean, Supper?”

“You never know.”

We howled with laughter; all except the dog. I pulled out my map and we sat over the maze of rugged wilderness.

“I figure to head this way here.” I followed lines and dots with my forefinger. “Over on this trail, along the lake, south, then over Groundhog Pass, then over to the old Telegraph Line trail then to the Stewart Highway.”

Ron sat back on his haunches and pulled the brim of his cowboy hat low on his forehead.

“No.”

I stared at him blankly. What was that supposed to mean? “No? What do you mean, no?” I sat back as he stared blankly at the map. He just doesn’t understand, I thought.

“Is there a problem there somewhere?”

“There’s no trail there. People haven’t gone that way for fifty years. It’s all grown over. It took them years to cut out that Telegraph line.”

“Well,” I cleared my throat trying to assimilate what could not be true.

“Well, I’ve already gone hundreds of miles with nothing for trails. I guess it won’t be any different.”

“You don’t understand.” He found the courage to look me in the eye. “That’s getting into the coast mountains, wet, so thick it’ll take you a day to cut a few hundred yards.”

Confusion and shock took over my mind.

“If you have another year, maybe. You know what Devils Club is?”

“Huh? Uh, no, I don’t. I mean, I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, it’s so thick those thorns will tear you to shreds.

Your horses won’t have a chance.”

My mind whirled. My heart skipped and raced. I was speechless. I spread my legs and put my face in my hands. Think, think. This can’t be what it seems. This can’t be true. There must be some way out, some

explanation. He just doesn't know what I've been through. "Well, uh, I, uh, I don't understand. There must be some way. I mean, there has to be."

He flushed with my insistence, like I thought him a liar, but he was not an insensitive person. He understood the gravity of this conversation and my predicament.

"Well, Stan, I don't know what to say. I've lived and worked here for seven years. I know that country. I've been there. There's not even any sign of some of what the map shows, and if you find those trails, they are gonna be worse than before they were cut the first time. Thicker. Maybe if you went part way and wintered over. I don't know. But not this year."

He looked over to Larry and Lil, "Well, you almost done tea?"

I was desperate. Sweat beaded under my heavy cotton shirt and rolled shivers down my skin.

"Nowhere? No one has ever gone through anywhere here with horses?"

"I didn't say that. There's a guy from Germanson Landing that has gone through here a couple of times, maybe more. I think the last time was a year or two ago. Apparently some young fellas tried to go through this year."

I relaxed my clenched fists. "Where?"

"Over to the Firesteel River." He looked behind us and pointed out a high mountain pass to the west. "From there you go up the Sturdee Valley and Lawyers Pass, then over to Spatsizi."

It was too much for my crowded mind to comprehend. My eyes clouded and began to tear. I could not think. I could not talk.

"Well, I guess we'll get going. Maybe we'll check back with you. If you decide to go over to the Firesteel, Bill Love should be at our cabin there. He'll give you some good information. So long. Take care and good luck."

I bore the weight of the map to my sleeping bag, then stared at it. I tried to dispel the words and lose the pain, but it stayed. The map lost meaning, my vision blurred with tears and my mind swam with confusion.

The map was a distortion of meaningless lines and dots. “No. No. No.” My head bobbed back and forth. “No!” I screamed and tears fell like Finlay rain.

One hour later I awoke. The map lay scuttled in the dirt. I shook it clean. There they were, just as before. So many days, countless times, I ran the treasure of their sound through my lips: Groundhog Pass, Gunanoot Mountain, Nass River. No more. I lay back in emptiness, hollow from my marrow to my fingernails. The adventure had just been ripped from my heart. Thoughts formed on my lips.

“Could he be exaggerating? Lying? No, what for? He was not that kind of person. Something has to happen; my God, something has to happen. It can’t be over. Please, it can’t be over. Ha!” a thought laughed on my lips. “Ha ha ha ha ha!” I laughed insanely. “It can’t be over. I’m in the bloody middle of nowhere! What am I going to do? Lay down and die? Ha ha ha ha ha ha,” I chuckled uncontrollably.

I stopped myself.

“You dumb bastard. A dreamer’s dream to be, those beautiful maps. So much planning, so much talk. You borderline madness. Not very damn borderline, if you ask me! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” I laughed until I cried.

Alone for a couple of weeks with the deepest peace on earth, company for a few minutes, company that I had so excitedly welcomed. “Wow! People! Oh great! And now, you fool, alone, with nowhere to go. Why in the hell did they have to come here anyway? Oh don’t be so stupid. He was just trying to help.”

I hugged the little yellow pillow. Day became evening and the evening became night. “Mom? Laurie? Len? Ed? Dad? I’m here; I’m here. I’m alive. I’m O.K. Please don’t worry. I love you.” And the world was gone.

* * * * *

The horses walked gingerly in the quick sinking sand and gravel of Thudate Lake, each hoof creating a small round lake of its own. At a bend, the lake shot inland creating a narrow bay.

“C’mon boys,” I felt brave. “Let’s see if we can ride across the bay and save a quarter mile.”

We rode into the lake a hundred yards then turned back before we drowned altogether. Getting wet did not matter. Rain pattered steadily from high clouds. A few yards into the woods we struck a good trail and followed it faithfully. Inside of two miles we received a good drenching from dark clouds that rolled over the trees spitting their wrath. I shivered from the damp chill that always managed to crawl under the rain jacket. Maybe they would invite me in to the cabin for a coffee. I watched carefully between the trees. It was a terrible day for travel and, if I rode past the cabin, my night would be a dreary ordeal at the very best.

Dark clouds grew darker and joined forces to spill sheets of water. The green cotton gloves refused to hold any more water and drained a steady flow. It was fitting but I was sorry to see the leaves, packs, horses’ noses, and my hat, do the same.

“Geez.” I hunched into a stalwart form against the horrible weather. I knew I should have camped one more day! I must have missed the cabin. “Damn!” I looked for shelter from the rain and the possibility of a camp. The trees opened and stumps that had known the bite of an axe or saw-blade dotted the thin forest. The trail turned into a wide path, then turned into the potato peels and tin cans of a dumping place.

“Whoa!” The horses lifted their ears in several directions. Rain spattered and jumped off the shiny skins of two colorful little airplanes. Maybe it was weather for ducks, but not for Cubs and Pipers. “Hello!” I bellowed. The bolt snapped open and Natalie stuck her head through the door.

“Hi!” Her cheery smile was more than I could duplicate.

“Easy for you to smile.” I wiped wet hair from my eyes. The door opened and Noel filled the doorway.

“You’re not going to head up the mountain, I hope,” he said loudly above the patter of rain.

“Naw. Thought I’d borrow your plane instead.” “That’s worse yet.”

Natalie put her coat on and stepped out. “Well, you better come in and have coffee. Butch wants to meet the crazy guy who’s going to the ocean on a horse.” “Sure, twist my arm.”

We tied the horses then looked up at the solid sky and decided to remove packs, saddles, and hobble the horses. Inside, the little one- room log cabin was a rainy day delight. Heat radiated from the crackling wood stove. Fragrances of breakfast pancakes and coffee filled even the cracks between the warm logs. It was the perfect setting for the sharing of the human condition and promotion of kinship. We chatted heartily over coffee and sometime during the third pot, Butch decided to spark his plane and sneak out to Prince George under the lifting cloud ceiling. About the same time, I decided to accept an invitation to stay overnight.

“Sure, twist my arm.”

“You know,” Natalie reflected, “It’s always amazing to see a rider or hiker when you fly over.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it seems impossible that they’re going to get anywhere. It seems so slow. Maybe we’re just so used to flying.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.”

“Oh, I’m sure I would. If we flew where you came from, it would be just about impossible to imagine.”

“So,” Noel floored a thought. “You must have pretty good maps.” “No! Like I told you back at camp, I can’t go where we planned.” Natalie beamed with surprise. “No maps? That’s terrible.”

“Not to where I’m going. It shouldn’t be so bad. It sounds like lots of open country.”

“But Stan...”

“Yea, well, I’ve been through that. It’s too late for that.” Noel put on a coat and headed out the door.

“Let me go get my air maps. I think I have one from that way somewhere.”

When he returned, we cleared the table and spread out a map that covered the Stikine River country to the Spatsizi Plateau.

“See,” Noel said. “We’ve landed at Metsantan before. It is a very beautiful country.”

“That’s what I hear. Lots of caribou up there?”

“I guess that Spatsizi is something else when they group for mating around mid-September.”

It was a tremendously exciting thought. Majestic stags with flowing white capes and crowns of monarch antlers, each antler a wondrous five-foot sweep of delicate fingers on flaring palms, and at each base, a butterfly brow like a bizarre hat broach designed for vanity and show.

“I guess you should be up there by then. Do you think you will make it by then?”

“I don’t know.”

“You know,” Natalie wondered, “You could have gone straight west from Fort Ware and saved a lot of miles rather than coming so far south.”

“Yea, I know.”

“So,” Noel still pondered my plans. “When you get to the lower Stikine, are you going to be able to ride to the coast?”

“I don’t know. Maybe have to walk or canoe.”

“Boy, if I remember correctly, it appears nothing but cliffs and glaciers coming right down to the river.”

The day wore on and all the while the rain fell on the mountains. All the while it fell on the lake, the feeding horses, on the little red and white Super Cub and on the little cosy cabin. The cabin fire glowed heat and the

log walls glowed comfort and our faces glowed with warmth and laughter. Maybe our faces glowed from Noel's bottle of rum.

We staged board meetings on the decline of the British Columbia caribou herd. We held company board sessions about the fall of British Columbia mining, in particular, the Endako mine where Noel was one of the lucky few in management that remained employed. We solved national trauma when we reached unanimous decisions about the plight of the wilderness Indian. Finally we voted two to one that Natalie should forget about the airplane and her fear of water so that Noel would have a mate on his sailboat. Then, in a cruel turn of events, they voted two to one that I should have an emergency beacon like a D.O.T. beeper that Noel had in his plane. "No!" I rebelled viciously then poured another slug of rum into the pale coffee. "No way!" I flexed my biceps. "No way, armstrong or nothing." I sucked a chest full of air. "No chain saws, no radios, no beepers, nothing."

"No girlfriend?" Natalie said.

"No, like I said, armstrong or nothing." I swallowed a snort of rum. "So, tell me. You ever have to use your beeper?"

"Ha!" Natalie cried. "Tell him. C'mon, tell him."

Noel guffawed. "You were supposed to forget that. You don't really want to know."

"C'mon, eh? Tell me. I didn't ride five hundred miles for nothing." "It's terribly embarrassing."

"Good."

"Well, it's really nothing. I just left the D.O.T. on by accident before I went to work one day."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. On my way home this huge army Buffalo roars over, circles and lands."

"Where?"

"Oh, in a farmer's field." "No, really?"

“Yeah, out jumps all these uniform types. God, it was embarrassing.”

I howled with laughter.

Sometime during the darkness we ran out of most embarrassing stories to tell. Next we ran out of rum. Finally, we crawled between the covers of our respective bunks.

“I guess you can knock off the light,” I said to Noel just as he snuggled in.

“No, Stan,” cried Natalie. “Those are dangerous words.” “Why?”

“I’m telling you, Noel’s not the mild person he seems.” “Oh?”

“God, Nat,” Noel moaned. “Leave me alone already.”

“Last time he was here and someone said that, he blew the lantern off the wall with his big game rifle.”

“No! You?” I looked at Noel.

“It’s that damn rum.” “Natalie?”

“Yes, Stan?”

“Will you put out the light?” “Yes, Stan. Good night.”

I decided if I ever became a millionaire I would build a house just like this. The next morning came in a hurry. We loaded up on my pancakes after I made the mistake of offering to make them.

“You know,” I said, matter of fact, as I brushed my teeth. “The only fun in being alone and all is brushing my teeth. Trouble is the bristles are all worn out. Look.”

They stepped over to observe the toothbrush then howled with laughter.” “Here, Noel, go ahead, feel it. It’s great.”

He took the orange toothbrush in his hands then fondled the full breasts, slim waist, round buttocks and long, thin legs.

“Oh, that is great. I’ll have to get one.” He handed it to Natalie and she fondled it as well.

“That feel good?” I asked.

“Oh, take your silly brush!” She flushed, then shoved it into my hands.

It is likely that back with the invention of man, burned forests made a pact with the sun. “I’ll rip up their gear and tear up their legs, and you turn on your heat and gag ‘em.”

Every time we entered a burn, the sun came out, and lately, if we hit dreary forest, it rained. But today was one day when the joke was on the old burn. The sun was a very welcome change. It was an old burn that had turned gray and given ground for greenery. It was hardly a horror and the sight of horse scatterings on the trail drew a great grin across my face. It was the first time since hitting the Muskwa, three hundred miles ago, that people had traveled with horses in recent times. This horse manure was only a couple months old.

Without so many words, each dawn and dusk had come to weigh in my mind and heart as a burden of uncertainty. The expectation of toil, frustration, and pain from the next day’s trail-less country had become a cross I expected to carry. And now, so unexpectedly, so suddenly, the cross was gone and the new spirit that sprouted so abruptly meant very plainly that it was the coming of the Third Chapter. A new beginning to what was not an ordeal any longer but rather, a pilgrimage, a way of life.

Enough tears had been shed over losing dreams and goals. No more worry about the ocean; just being here was enough. This grand country was enough reason for living. No more worry about hell on earth. If anyone had traveled here before, it would be our highway. The cloak of this Third Awakening was a good feeling. It would be the time of the animal, the flower, the great open meadows and mountain plateaus of the Cordillera Divide. If the world would have suddenly relapsed two hundred years, I would have rode into a Sikhanni camp and lived with them, or without them, as one with the earth. Civilization would not miss me and I would not miss it.

“Hey, hold up!” Lucky fought the bit then stole another bite of grass. With binocular vision I studied two likely valleys we could head up. For now the trail smacked into the side of a small lake, leaving me with the choice of right or left. “Must be the place,” I smirked a cynical grin. If the cowboys from Ft. St. James took three days to find a way up these mountains to the Firesteel Pass, then this slough must have been their first major test.

“C’mon, let’s go!” We picked our way around the north-end and untangled the trail once again. “I swear, boys, we’re so used to smelling out trails in these birds’ nests that we’d have no problem following an Amazon monkey in a rain forest.”

The feeble trail twisted and turned recklessly through the old burn, climbing steadily from one terrace to the next. Once again the trail crept off on its own but this time we did not pick it up in a one-half mile search. I dismounted and shouldered my axe.

“Supper! Let’s go for a walk.” I sat down and removed my chaps. “Here, girl!” The dog did not appear. “Now, where the heck did that dog go to?” I walked back to a rise and found Supper in a little dip with her head stuck in a shrub.

“Supper! What the heck are you doing?” I walked down to the truant mutt.

“Well, look at that.” The shrubs were loaded with blueberries in the deep purple stage. Supper was a practiced journeyman and nipped them in rapid bunches with mechanical jaws.

“You don’t mind if I join you eh, Supper?” Supper wrinkled her brow at me.

“No.”

I sat down and reveled in the scrumptious flavour. It was a wonderful break from the bland monotony of bannock and broth.

* * * * *

Bonk. Apache bounced off a rock wall.

“Careful!” I yelled above the roar of treacherous water.

Like cockroaches we skimmed our way between sharp stones and squeezed our way between the shrapnel of canyon walls. Treacherous water sprayed the horses’ legs and wet the daytime heat with a fine mist. Willows leached from pocket holds in cracked boulders and tickled us from strange positions. The constant thunder of foaming water unsettled us but after a hundred nervous yards we crawled out of the cataract.

It was a sneaky route at best, intended for the sole use of the person who designed it, if someone did, and not for wandering adventurers. There had not been any horse manure for some time. If the three cowboys quit and rode eighty lonely miles back to Germanson Landing, this sneaky canyon and elusive trail would have been a likely place for a major argument. Somewhere on this mountain-side they struggled to find the route with one of them finally quitting. By suppertime we made the final evergreen fingers of a huge open basin.

“Over here.” Lucky turned into the biggest clump of dwarf Alpine fir. “How’s this for good grazing?” I asked the horses, but they already munched mouthfuls of high country grass.

As far as the eye could see dwelt the treasure of the elite Five Thousand Feet Plus Club. That heaven sent alpine fraternity of fanning knee-high evergreen so rudely called shintangle, those hardy thickets of white fir that spent two hundred years-worth of minutes and seconds just to shield a caribou from the wind; the hundred kinds of grasses that tickled the angels’ feet and the yellow and green mosses who were the first to arrive, providing colourful carpets for baby Marmots to wrestle and tumble upon. As if this wasn’t enough, the Club welcomed split milk to feed the mammals, white sheets of fibrous caribou lichen splattered here and there wherever a caribou would choose to feed. And never a meal without a performance of red, blue, violet and yellow flowers, bobbing their heads and dancing, arm in arm, at the slightest cue from the wind section.

I stood back and drank the finest bowl of clear water punch I had known in some time. I had been kindly invited to attend three square miles of the elite Five Thousand Feet Plus Club. It was our first honest meeting since the first week of our journey.

Whack, whack, whack. “C’mon you bugger.” The nearly dead fir branch refused to break free. With considerable effort, a half dozen armfuls of stub-born white fir found their way to the campfire. The evening was much too precious to waste by the fire and I piled the vegetables into a pot for broth, then dug for the block of cheese Natalie had given me.

“Supper!” I sifted through the sortings of both food boxes. “Where’s my cheese?!” The dog thumped a friendly tail from under a prison of fir boughs. “You stole it didn’t you?” The dog slunk out of sight behind the clump of fir.

“You rotten dog! It’s been you all along, hasn’t it? My raisins, my two blocks of dates, and now my cheese. You snake!”

I pouted at the maddening thought that my prize food, the delicacies that made bachelor cooking bearable, were gone. Not just gone, but being digested by a dog stomach. Yucch! It was an unbearable thought. I shoved the pot to simmer and grabbed my binoculars and shotgun.

A five-minute walk from camp put Supper and I above the last dwarf fir. Supper romped around like a farm dog scaring gophers. I scowled at the dog for wasting precious cheese energy with such foolish play. Under a smoke sky in the far east horizon lay several loaves of bread, all light brown on top and gray on the bottom. The jagged mountains were gone. Six miles back at the foot of the valley, between the two mountain shoulders that welcomed our passage, lay a slip of silver. Thutade Lake.

The binoculars transformed every curiosity into an explanation. My horse buddies looked like funny giant blobs contorting into odd monsters with their movement. Through the binoculars they became silly horses tossing their heads and rolling in the fields of endless grass. I studied the many draws and glades for caribou or the possibility of a grizzly. It would

be nice to know if one was in the vicinity digging out roots or marmot dens. Finding one would mean an extra supply of firewood and careful positioning of my gun.

We climbed for a few more minutes and met the flat plateau which would lead me to the valley that dropped down to the Firesteel River.

“No problem,” Ron had said. “Just head northwest and you’ll pick up a creek that will take you down to the Firesteel.” All around the plateau rose islands of mountain peaks.

“Hmmm,” I pondered through the binoculars, “Looks more like ‘malice’ in wonderland than no problem!”

The evening settled gracefully and just below the plateau on my way to the horses, I stumbled onto the finest garden pool in the entire country. I dropped to my knees in silent grace for the priceless gift. The finest gardener would have found the pond difficult to improve upon. It was hidden under a chocolate brown bank. A tiny crystal stream split a green moss hill and dropped a bubbling fall over red stones, churning cup-full’s of water like a bathtub faucet. Around the pool grew sedges, mosses and grasses in yellows, greens and rust. One could almost have jumped across or chose to dive into the bottomless crystal water. I held my face under for a minute then sat back and ran the water through my hair. I had, this day, found the only reason I would ever need for living.

It would be vain for one to extend swimming in glory for the sake of glory itself. It would be selfish for one to stand aloof over beauty and drink the pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself. In this alpine theatre, all that lived joined in the harmony, but none were more appreciative than the horses.

They rolled and shook with glee, a communion between hoof and mouth and endless grassy fields. They renewed the ancient genetic bond between the prairie and the galloping spirit. They were shadows of power and animal beauty as the sinking sun hid the valley, then lit a candle in the distant background mountains.

I returned to my bed and found it especially soft on the mountain moss. Falling into a deep sleep was an easy thing to do. Sometime during the uncertainty of the black night, my face felt the frosty wet bite of snowflakes, and I snuggled down out of sight into a fitful dream. Again at dawn, the dream spit cold tidings on my face, but this time I awoke to the reality of the falling sky.

“Oh... no... “ I rolled over and hid from the white plight that ravaged the mountain slopes. Huge snowflakes pelted the ground mercilessly, blinding any hope of travel. I remembered the uncovered wood that would, by now, be good and drenched. No doubt the dead wood laid about was also soaked. Summer glory in the evening and a Christmas present the next morning.

“Forget it, go back to sleep.” I did, until noon.

The world was deathly still and completely white with cloud and snow. Darn near impossible to tell where mountain slopes and peaks ended and the sky began. I rolled over to relieve cramped muscles but instead, squeezed a full bladder.

“Geez,” I stood up in black and yellow sport shorts, a very stark contrast in the world of white. “August twenty-sixth. How in the world can anything live up here?”

I leaned over the edge of the nylon lean-to then aimed a deadly accurate shot of urine at a fir branch bud. My aim went next to a little purple flower, then worked up the length of a tiger lily stalk. “Geez, I’m good.” Hundreds of miles of pee practice made me a gimmee for an accuracy contest against a spitting cowboy. Boy, I’ve heard of duck calling contests but I wonder if they have pee-shooting contests?

Inside last night’s pot was last night’s vegetable broth and it was good enough for a bedtime snack. At suppertime I woke again to melting white mottled mountains. Thick fog hid all the peaks and the pass as well. My canvas-covered sleeping bag was surprisingly warm and the air was surprisingly cold. Once again I was forced from my sleeping bag.

“I know its here somewhere!” I grit my teeth and scrambled through the tops of both packs and, in frustration, stuck on freezing rubber boots and stomped through the grass to the closest downwind fir tree. The snow numbed my feet and naked hair sprung horizontal off dimpled legs.

I squatted where there was no chance of a surprise tickle, then checked over my shoulder to make sure no one was coming. “Hmm, hm, hmmm, hm hm hmmm... She’ll be comin’ round the mountain when she comes... she’ll be comin’ round the mountain when she comes... she’ll be comin’ round the mountain, ... ohhh... If one unrolled a ball of twine around the entire earth, and made that represent man’s time on earth, the time since the invention of toilet paper would cover about a foot. The other 99.99999 percent of the time woman and man used moss and big soft leaves. There were no leaves up here on the mountaintop, but the moss was wonderful, soft, clean, and damp. Its’ only drawback was its ability to sprout green and yellow willnots.

The peanut butter and jam lay heavy on the old chunk of bannock. The kindling smoldered for five minutes and now died altogether. It was not worth the hassle. I stretched to catch a glimpse of the horses and caught a brown movement between fir trees a quarter mile below. The grass was much better and land much more level than down in the timber, so they would stay.

I crawled back into my bag and found myself wide-eyed and my mind full of stories. I remembered the day along the White River when I told Brian and Bill I was gonna ride no matter what. “Haha ha ha,” It was so hot and we hit a chunk of good trail. “I’ll be damned if I’m gonna walk again all day,” I yelled back at them, then jumped on Lucky and rode a hundred yards before hitting an alder thicket even the rabbits avoided. “Hiya!” I yelled and gritted my teeth and dug into the saddle as Lucky closed his eyes and pushed in. Twenty yards later I hit some air and stopped to assess the damage. Geez, they laughed. The first laugh I had heard in fifty miles. My shirt was hanging in pieces on the branches and I was naked and scratched red from the waist up. Gaud that was hilarious.

“I wonder if I’ll have any trouble getting down to the Firesteele River.” Geez, this boredom is driving me crazy.

My thoughts rolled on. “You know, it’s just like the time you spent most of three months in the hospital when all there was to do all day was lay there, sleep, and lay there some more. It is as though your entire existence was in the hands of someone or something else. Like waiting was really possible only because that little stone of strength in the pit of your gut knew that someday, somehow, one could direct one’s own life once again.”

Maybe that was the major difference between life out here and life in the city. In the city it was I who directed, demanded, and planned, not only my life but sometimes the activities of others. An existence that to a great extent be controlled. But out here the world itself, Mother Nature, the weather, the travel conditions, directed my existence. It was “I” who must obey and accept a humble disposition impressed upon me. And in this acceptance one was able to understand the beauty of vulnerability; the strength, satisfaction, glow, that one felt from not only surviving but thriving in a harsh and natural environment. The greatest power and peace now came from accepting that life as a simple wilderness being meant becoming a tiny cog in a great timeless wheel. It was not so bad.

The next morning came sloppy and fog-ridden. The ground was mottled snow and soil. I sat up with a start then jumped from the bag. “Crazy! This is crazy, it’s gonna last forever!”

I tied the pack boxes shut and rolled the sleeping bag impossibly small. “If I’m gonna wait until this weather breaks,” I convinced myself, “I may as well wait below instead of on the top of this stupid mountain.”

The leather rigging was stiff and cold and the horses were much less excited at the thought of traveling than I. With stiff, wet hands, the animals were packed with slow deliberation.

“The Firesteele is supposed to have good grass. You’ll like it there. Trust me.” I gave them a lawyer’s smile. We struck up for the pass and avoided the pretty, small pond. It would not want to be seen on such a sorry day.

Unlike the meadows on the way up to the pass, the pass was covered with firm ground. Lucky pulled up to the level grade with the ease of a powerful hind-end. We rode over stones and clay with anything fifty yards or further a complete shutout from the fog.

Lucky pulled his lead to the left and I tugged the rein to correct his error. A few more steps and again he took head to the left. "No!" Again he forced me to correct his lead.

"We're headed north and west dummy, not south!" Again he pulled left, this time fighting the reins, so I kicked his flank and plow-reined him straight.

Maybe it's not his fault. Maybe the cloud has befuddled his bearing. Maybe the cloud that pinned us down like a great grey thumb has befuddled all of our bearings. As long as we rode on the flat, everything was just fine. The time to worry came when we headed down a grade that could be the wrong valley. From each pass began a dozen streamlets and draws and valleys, and this one was no exception.

The air was thick and stifled my thoughts. I strained a guess through the mist, wondering if our downhill ride was the right valley. Ahead the land rose again and we climbed out of another dip. We continued. Speck roamed off to the right with a confident stride. Did he know something I didn't? We swung to the right and dropped down a steep grade. Half a mile later we picked up a ragged precipice on our left.

"Whoa!" It didn't look right. No, I don't like it. "Speck." The horse stopped and I turned Lucky back up the hill. Reluctantly Speck and Apache followed.

We rode another half mile of flat then again dropped down a consistent grade. Speck faded off in the fog and did not reappear.

"Whoa, Lucky!" Click, click, click, click. The horse hooves came along faithfully then Apache floated out of the mist. He stopped stiff-legged, snorted at the apparition that he thought we were and bounded back into the fog.

“You stupid horse!”

“Let’s go,” Lucky trotted to head off Apache then coralled the displaced horse and led him back down the slope. The moss was firm and the grade not drastic. “I think we got her boys!”

A fir tree lay in ambush in a bank of fog then jumped out suddenly just to spook Lucky and Apache: We rode past a pleasant little pond under a brown hill then continued down a tiny stream into some clumps of fir.

“Hey, whoa!” The horses perked their ears wondering what my excitement was. “Look at that. Unreal!”

A grey ash campfire pit and some fresh wood chips lay about a small campsite riddled with footprints. I dismounted and bent over a track in the snow. “What?” The tracks looked familiar. I turned around and lifted my boot. It made the same print. It was my camp.

* * * * *

There are many unidentified energies and many unanswered questions about common energies, like magnetic energy. We know it exists but, unlike radio and light energy, cannot measure its wavelengths. There are the many energy phenomena held dear by space cadets like ‘aura’, extrasensory perception, telepathic communication, telekinesis, and ‘sixth-sense’. Why do some people, under adverse conditions, seem to possess the uncanny ability to judge direction? It is not only the pigeon and goose that monopolize polarity. It could be said that those who practice the ability, those who live and work in the out-of-doors, are prone to a ‘solid sense of direction’. Buy why? How?

* * * * *

It didn’t matter much, not now, anyhow. We were totally turned about so that the one resource left in our bag of tricks was something called intelligence. Perhaps it was my past experience as a surveyor that made the

message click. From the position that I knew the camp laid, I lined up a large stone in a west-by-north direction. In the thick blanket fog we could see but forty or fifty yards, so just before reaching the big stone I focused on a clump of sod fifty yards further and, in a direct line with myself and the stone we leap-frogged in a prophetic game that took us, inside of half an hour, down a solid grade.

As we welcomed the first dwarf fir and I was about to receive my reward for winning the game, a breeze kicked up and cleared a view into another gorgeous Alpine basin. From its headwater a mile to our left, it led directly into the timber of a distant crosscut valley I knew to bear the Firestele River.

My binoculars picked up a disturbance on a lower scrub-grass terrace. Lucky nudged my backside with his big nose and bumped my brow to the binoculars. "Hey!" He nosed me again then rolled his eyes with jealousy as his buddies ripped mouthfuls of grass.

"O.K., O.K." I hung the reins and let him feed. There it was again, the rapid flash of white dots. In the magnification of the glasses, the shutter flashing transformed into a flock of ptarmigan. They dashed through the air with high-strung wings, then put them on cruise and darted around willow tops for a landing.

"Wow, right on." "Uck, uck, uck, uck." Another half dozen hit the air close by and flashed the sky with white-brown patches.

"Neat!"

We headed for the valley but no sooner had I passed the ptarmigan from my mind than a clump of willows warned me of visitors. Uck, uck, uck, a covey cackled from the bush.

"Hold still, dummy." I whispered in Apache's ear as I slipped the camera from a pack box. The brush was damp and quiet and my stalk was nothing short of sneaky. I found a skulking bird in the viewfinder. A second bird stepped out and bobbed its way onto an open stone shelf. Perfect. It filled the lens nicely. With each step came the dip of the fanned, mottled

white and rust-brown tail and the head and neck that alternated a backward jerk with a look for nickels. After exhausting a three-minute roll of film, it skittered out of sight.

We could have ridden around the head of the huge basin to reach the far shoulder but chose to cut across instead. We rode down through a dozen gardens of rich grasses and spicy flowers, then along the big shoulder heading for the Firestele. As we picked our way just above the tree line we enjoyed the symphony of a dozen streamlets that cascaded from the top of the round-backed mountain, and along a hundred feet of broken precipice. It would have been fun deciding which stream gave the finest performance but our minds stayed busy dancing over flat, slippery and sharp-edged stone that had been tossed down from the precipice. A stone let go forty feet above and crashed down, putting a spook in the horse.

“You silly boys.” They were forever running from ghosts.

By late afternoon we stood high on the end of the big finger looking three miles down onto the Firestele River. We began our descent and, at first, dodged small clumps of fir. Within a hundred yards we walked headlong into a wall of spruce and fir. It was so thick it was embarrassed for its refusal of passage to others, and hid on this one steep part of the mountain. Here we go, around that tree, between those branches, back over there, between those two trees, right over top of that small one, around that big one, no, no, good, let’s turn around and go back through there.

The steep slope became something of a cliff with grass under solid spruce. We were forced to side hill treacherously over downed trees and around slabs of stone. Soon it became impossible with the spruce growing from merely dense trees to a fortress wall. I rubbed sweat from my face then sat by a small rocky stream and washed in the cold water. The refreshing bite of ice-cold water was just the ticket for cleansing the spirit and giving new cause for hope. The small stream dropped foam and water between large flat chunks of shale. The entire creek bed was but five feet across, jammed between the spruce as it dropped as a jagged frothing trail. Maybe

we could walk down the stream, over and around the big boulders? Above me the horses propped their legs with difficulty on flat stones and would have boycotted the entire journey had they known what I planned.

“O.K. boys, ready?” They twisted their ears at me. My rubber boot gripped a wet stone then slipped across, stretching my groin painfully. “Ohhhh!” I bent in pain. Lucky hauled back on the lead rope.

“C’mon, stupid!” I jerked him ahead and we scrambled carefully down the frothing stream. Constantly we slipped and danced and jammed our feet into crack holds, but we dropped directly down. Trees hugged the stream stone like a prison, but after one mile we found room to squeeze out of our confinement. No matter how steep the moss and grass, and how thick the trees, it was a great relief to be out of the leg-wrenching boulders.

The clouds worsened their threat and blobs of rain dropped aimlessly. The valley floor looked up at us from what seemed a stone’s throw but between us was a forty-foot precipice. Speck edged his nose over and probed a foot toward the edge.

“Hold on, dummy!” I tied the horses, withdrew the axe and battled a path through steep timber a quarter of a mile along the cliff top, then down to the valley floor once it petered out. We landed on the flat and breathed sighs of relief. The horses shook themselves and searched for a mouthful of grass to forget their problems. We were lucky, darned lucky.

“Here fella,” I rubbed Lucky’s snout. Lucky was a good name.

For endless days desert windstorms can blast and obliterate all that lives, so that a person will take refuge and plead salvation from the cruel sand in the sky and earth. The seven seas have their gales, wind, water and tide unite in a battering horror, throwing hundred foot walls of water to crash against punitive structures that fishermen call seaworthy boats. And the north mountains have their storms. An endless howling black sky that rains wet and cold so that a native hunter knows there will be no more summer and takes refuge in sturdy shelters until, some-day, both the sun and animals can move together again.

For the young and restless these are testing times, the measure of patience. For the elderly whose sunken eyes sense the coming of the turmoil, these are but recurring cycles, a time when old men sit together and nod, thankful for both their wisdom and the supply of dried meat and fish. There could have been no place finer than the grand meadows along the Firesteel River to wait the storms of the northern mountains. There was shelter, fish, pine wood for fire, a mile long grass glade interspersed with pine trees and a horse meadow that could have been planted by a philanthropic rancher. So many times circumstance had provided for me the perfect fate.

It was a different smell, no fresh air, no spruce, no smoke from the campfire. Instead it was cabin smells that met my nose. I opened my eyes and knew it had been a good sleep. The cabin was so very still and so very cosy. Morning light filtered through the red and white patterned curtains. “Ummmm...” My arms, legs, back and mouth stretched good morning together. Thunk. My knuckle rapped the log above my head. “Owwww...” I kissed it better. “There.” I looked up at the opened beam ceiling and smiled. It had been a good decision accepting the hospitality of the Love Brothers and Lee. The fateful meeting with Ron looked better all the time.

From my bunk I scrutinized the contents of the 16-foot by 20-foot cabin. A big wood stove occupied the far corner with the door to its left and a big window to its right. On the window ledge and on the shelves below the window spread a raft of cooking supplies. At the foot of my bed began the opposing window and below it a large sturdy table that could seat the hunters and guides in one sitting. The wall logs were thick, smooth, and tight, and the roofing planks were snug. They built a sturdy cabin.

Thoughts of breakfast led my bare feet over cracks in the plank floor. My nose pried the curtains apart. “Oh, no...” The world was white with snow! My thoughts turned to life in the cabin and after looking through some magazines I watched little batter bubbles rise slowly then burst at the top, healing themselves at first, then finally leaving open sores. The golden

pancakes turned easily and each flip emanated bursts of aroma that together with warmth filled the cabin with good tidings. On the table sat butter, syrup, jam, peanut butter, fried canned meat, ketchup, mustard and a *Readers' Digest*. The small piece of pancake and butter settled softly in my mouth. The bites were rapid at first then slowed until each one matched the turn of a page until page 142. It was an article by Charles Malik; a Lebanese philosopher. It was titled *To Know The Truth From The False*:

There is truth and there is falsehood. There is good and there is evil. There is happiness and there is misery. There is freedom, and there is slavery.

There is that which ennobles and there is that which demeans. There is that which conduces to strength and health and there is that which conspires to weakness and disease. There is that which puts you in harmony with yourself, with others, with the universe, with God and there is that which alienates you from yourself, from the world and from God.

There is when you want to dance and sing and there is when you have no desire to move or look at anything. There is when you love children and old women and flowers and the drifting sands and the raging waves, and even the rocks and stones, and there is when you hate everybody and everything - above all, yourself. There is life and fullness of being and there is tending subtly, gradually toward nothingness and death.

These things are different and separate and totally distinguishable from one another. Truth is not the same as falsehood; happiness is not the same as misery. We will not be far wrong when we say the first elements of all these pairs

CHAPTER VI – HEART OF THE CORDILLERA

come from the living God, and the second elements are from the devil.

The greatest error of modern times is the confusion between these orders of being. There is no power on earth or in heaven that can make falsehood, truth; evil, good; misery, happiness, slavery, freedom. And yet what do philosophers tell you in the great centers of learning. They insist that everything depends on what you mean, on how you define the thing, so that truth properly defined could be falsehood.

* * * * *

“Here fellas!” The fields of green grass and willow were interspersed with green gnarly Jack Pine. The fields seemed to head forever along both sides of the river and I hoped the horses had stayed in this country. With hobbles in place at least they would stay on the cabin side of the water. It was a pristine river, not wide, maybe fifty yards, but riddled with deep swirling pools.

“Here fellas!”

The wand tapped the wet willow that crossed my path shattering water from its resting place. My boots crunched heavily in the wet snow leaving rippled footprints. The air was fresh and clean.

Something moved across the river. I dropped behind a willow. I slipped off my dark brown cowboy hat and separated willow leaves with the wand. A dark blob took a minute to move and became a cow moose stripping off the tops of a tall willow bush. The willow shook and rattled as her big mouth wrapped around a branch then hauled back, stripping it clean. Rather than chew each load, she crammed her big jaws full and forced the load down to the first of her four stomachs. She romped around the big willow until it wept naked, then attacked another. Nothing concerned the gangly moose but filling her belly with twenty-four pounds of leaves and twigs. Nothing

distracted the tall moose, not the broken sky turning, the snow slipping or wind whipping; not even the small flock of whistling ducks that zoomed between her big ears. Nothing.

The horses all had their heads simultaneously smothered in tufts of grass, something a herd of deer would never do.

“Hi!” I barked. They jumped five feet into the air, something deer would do.

“HoHo!, sucked you boys right in. Thought I was a Sasquatch, eh?” I held the chunk of white salt in the air and they came on the hop. Speck lurched in first, licking with a big, fat, sloppy tongue. He tried to nip off chunks. “No, sucker face!” Lucky threatened Apache with bared teeth tossing his neck before taking his turn with the salt.

“O.K. guys, enough.” I shivered and buttoned my top button against the cold. The warm cabin waited.

* * * * *

AUGUST 28TH ON THE FIRESTEELE

He took me by surprise and I had no choice. His ruddy hair-covered face stoned me with shock and fear. I did not know the man. I could never have known one so wild and set with grim determination. I dove for the razor and, as my hand wrestled for the handle, his square jaw laughed at my effort and, from a breath away, his eyes held me frozen. But I was no puff either and, in one hard drive for his throat, I left a swath of white skin. He was finished and we both knew it.

For old times sake, I stopped at the moustache. The long lost friend smiled at me but he was not the same. I wished I had not found a mirror at all. It wasn't just that he had a new line creased at the corner of each eye; the crow had landed some time ago. No, it was deeper than that. Something in the non-assumptive set of his face, something in the eyes themselves that spoke of experiencing those things rare, known to men of the mountian;

from one who has lived life breathing the rarified air of high mountain places.

The cabin was cold. A luring call sounded from high in the sky, sending my pulse racing and screwing a hot smile across my face. Could it be? Could it be the geese were on the move already?

Zzzzzink. Zzzzzink. The number eight bastard file sang against the fine tempered steel of the Hudson Bay axe. My grandfather showed me how to file an axe properly with the axe firm on the knee and the file biting hard against the edge at a consistent angle. No one could work an axe as fast or as sharp as Mike.

Thunk. The axe head set a deep blow in the block of pine but it did not split. The heavy block swung high over my head and struck the splitting log hard on the heel of the axe head. It split in two. Whack. Whack. There were four pieces. My grandfather showed me how to split wood. Not like most who stand the blocks on end on top of a big stump, wasting time balancing the piece and risking a miss that could drive the blade into a leg. Instead he lay the flat side down with one end raised slightly on a ninety degree, flat laid splitting log. With one deft blow where the block lay on the log, they split clean and easy. Mike had no time to fool with wood and in one afternoon the pile was as high as a man. Yet, as I watched from the farmhouse doorstep, I guessed he enjoyed the hard drive of the axe, along with the fresh smell of the white wood he piled so high so fast. There is something in working the harmony of mind and muscle that keeps one strong.

Whack. The half block split clean but one-half jumped out from under the roof overhang. I dashed out into the cold rain and retrieved the wood.

Whack. A poor hit. Maybe I thought too much about when the miserable weather would end.

Whack. A chip flew and frightened Supper as she dozed on the horse blanket. She skulked off around the corner of the cabin and was not seen until late afternoon.

AUGUST 29TH ON THE FIRESTEELE

Each day holds a unique event. Early in the morning an outboard engine penetrated the cabin walls, sending me into a frenzy of cleaning and putting misplaced items back where they belonged. Then I rushed outside in time to greet Bill Love, and Larry and Lil. Bill is a slight, handsome man who appears in exceptional climbing shape at sixty-five.

“I hope I’m not imposing,” I apologized. “Did Ron mention I might be here?”

“Said you might. At least you picked good weather to be in a cabin. I imagine the grass for the horses is about as good as anywhere.”

Tonight Bill and I slept in the cook house but I am guessing he wished he had sent me to a cabin as I pestered him to no end. He has provided a clear description of the trail through Sturdee Valley and Lawyers Pass, but feels skeptical about my chances of reaching the coast by horse. I told him I would walk or swim if I had to.

Apparently his sister and brother-in-law rode through this country up to Metsantan in 1939 and much to their dismay, found the land barren with wildlife, nearly no caribou and moose at all. He feels it was natural animal cycles, the result of wolf-kills. The Sikhanni Indians were starving then and Bill says although they may have cleaned out the game around the village of Metsantan, they were mostly starving due to the animal cycles. There were thousands of caribou and moose by the mid-sixties but they are on the downhill swing again. Bill claims the wolf population is high and a local gold mine that has airplane activity could also be responsible for the decline of caribou.

There was no limit to my curiosity. “I read you guided well-known bowhunter Fred Bear for grizzly?”

“Oh a few times. A darn nice fellow. Visited him in the States once.”

“Did you use a back-up gun?”

“Didn’t really need one, he’s one heck of a shot with a bow. He took a few bear with me.”

“How many grizzly kills do you think you have guided for bow and arrow grizzly hunters?”

“Oh,” he paused to think. “Oh, I’d say seventeen or eighteen.” “That’s incredible. It’s amazing you’re still alive.”

“I’d say the same for you. How’s the river crossings been so far?” “Oh, some better than others. That one at the end of Thutade Lake was a real humdinger.” “End of the lake?”

“Ya, jeez, just where the Finlay rolls out. Honestly, we really went for a swim.”

Bill began to laugh then held up.

“You know, that little hole has been the grief of more than one outfitter. I think it was that fellow from Germanson landing who crossed there got such a surprise his packhorse had a heart attack, died, and proceeded to float away belly up. Lost the pack and all.”

“Unreal.”

“You ride past that big waterfall?”

“Avoided it.”

“A fellow flew into the end of the lake there with a canoe. Him and his son and their dog canoed down the Finlay for about two miles, then heard the roar and saw the water disappear. As fast as they could, they bailed out and barely made shore. The dog and canoe went over.”

“No. Really? What happened to the dog?” “Don’t know, fed the Dollies for awhile I guess.”

Fred Bear selection from a popular outdoor magazine:

“A good sow grizzly followed by a small cub put me up a tree in British Columbia a few years ago. It was a cold, wet night. Every time I moved, she would confirm her presence below with a series of huff, huff, huffs. She didn’t leave until 8:30 a.m.

Another year, in the same area, two bowhunting friends were charged without provocation by a sow grizzly with a small cub. Bill Love, their guide, stopped the animal with a head shot at twenty feet.”

We ended the evening discussion with a very sad hunting story. The way I understand it was that he and his hunter were still hunting up the Firestele, staying higher in the woods. Another guide with another hunter walked below up along the riverside, hoping that if they spooked a moose, it would run up to Bill and his hunter and vice-versa. Bill and his hunter had traveled about as far as they were supposed to and sat high on a wooded bank waiting for their comrades. As the other guide and his hunter approached the meeting place, the hunter gasped excitedly that he saw something move and brought his gun up to shoot. The guide barked, “Just hang on...” “Boom.” The 30-06 bullet smashed through Bill’s thigh, then crashed into his hunter’s chest and heart. The hunter died almost immediately and, Bill would have, but for the femoral artery being an inch from the gaping wound. What a terrible thing.

AUGUST 30TH ON THE FIRESTEELE

They returned from the mountain today and saw only four small caribou. I made a pumpkin pie and Bill fried mountain goat meat. It was tender and delicious, the opposite of what I had so often heard. Cold, windy, and now rain.

AUGUST 31ST ON THE FIRESTEELE

Nice this morning, for an hour or two. Just enough time to catch a creel of fourteen inch Rainbow Trout. Talk about good fishing! Every time I pressed the camera button and hastily ran into the water to catch a fish, I caught one. Every time! Until I had enough on film. Supper eats the raw fish like candy. What a gross dog.

SEPTEMBER 1ST ON THE FIRESTEELE

Ugly, ugly, ugly. I am extremely restless. The horses are getting a good rest and good grass. I had been meaning to corner Bill about an amazing story and finally did.

“Bill?” I asked as he washed dishes and I dried. My barrage of questioning was the price he paid for being an approachable person.

“Uh?”

“We were supposed to go past Gunanoot Mountain. Is it named after Simon Gunanoot?”

“Used to be part of his hide-out I guess, mind you he was all through here.”

“Pierre Burton wrote about him. I thought it was incredible. I mean, how could he escape for so many years? Honestly, it makes the mad trapper look like going to the corner store.”

“Never mind on the run, he raised five children and made a lot of money trapping and selling furs at the same time.”

“I just don’t understand, you’d think the R.C.M.P. could have ambushed him or something.”

“Oh they tried alright, the R.C.M.P. the local police, and even the old F.B.I., Scotland Yard, and bounty hunters.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Well, there was a lot of doubt about how guilty he was. Mind you, the locals were pretty sure he killed the guy. Old Simon was a pretty respected and feared person. No one was about to turn him in for fear of ending up like Alex MacIntosh. You know, Simon had a store and a farm along the Skeena River there.”

“How long ago was that?” “Oh, summer of ‘6, I believe.”

“And he spent, what, thirteen or fourteen years out in the wilderness?”

“Something like that. And raised five kids in the meantime.”

I shook my head with amazement.

“What do the locals think was the reason he killed the guy?” “Oh gee, who knows. Probably mostly liquored up. Back then,

you know, Indians were off limits as far as booze was concerned. I guess there was something of a fight between the two before Gunanoot went home to get his gun. Something about the other fellow fooling around with Simon’s wife. He was one tough customer, alright.”

“Unreal, and when he gave himself up he was acquitted.” “Well, who knows, even if they did have enough evidence the judge would have considered the fact that he was living like a scared rabbit for fourteen years.”

“Scared rabbit? I heard he would sneak into the camps of those people who were on his tracks and help himself to supplies. Not exactly scared if he raised five children and set up a fur-trading link to the outside. And the time the cops got a tip he was at his home place with his wife, Sarah, and he hid in the root cellar when they stormed the place.”

EXCERPTS FROM *TRAPLINE OUTLAW* BY DAVID WILLIAMS:

LETTER FROM DANIEL MCPHAIL TO R.C.M.P.
SUPERINTENDENT HUSSEY:

Simon acted strangely. He came to our camp as we were about to leave it. Simon commenced crying, and said he had killed a white man at Hazelton a short time before he came to Bear Lake. He said the white man had treated him badly and said something about his wife too. I think Simon said he had shot and killed the white man, and that whoever said he had killed two white men lied. Simon acknowledged killing one white man. He might have said MacIntosh was the name of the man he murdered, but I cannot remember about this as I did not know MacIntosh. I think MacIntosh was the man Simon referred to.

SIMON GUNANOOT TALKING TO HIS SON:

Just don't get mad at anybody else ... It doesn't matter how mad you are, especially fighting over a woman ... Don't do it. There's lots of womens in the world, and I went traveling all over the place, and it's no use getting mad over one woman. Don't get mad and don't start fighting. I spent sixteen years altogether out in the bush on account of being a cranky man. I'm lucky I got out of it. I don't want any of you boys to do the same thing.

SIMON GUNANOOT'S LETTER TO THE COURT OF LAW:

... I never kill no boyt (nobody). I not steal. I am not bear false witness. I remember of god. I ton (don't) want lay (lie). God know I never kill on boyt (anybody). I believe in god of heaven. I am through the merits of Jesus Christ. I never get troubled for anny boyt and I lover all the white men.

I sir good Boy.

SEPTEMBER 3RD ON THE FIRESTEELE

Fall woke up this morning and lifted the blanket of fog when it stretched its arms. I stood mesmerized under blue sky in the early dawn. At eye level, the willows shone wet, steam curled from the river, trout disturbed mirror reflections with dapples, ducks and geese and eventually a gargling flock of cranes, pierced the skies southbound. The woods have begun to sag, but I stand absolutely exhilarated. Morning cold has burnt green Fireweed leaves red and they set the ground ablaze. Frost has touched saucer mushroom tops and bent them into melted bowls. Tall stalks of brome grass that waved happily all summer now weep brown and spineless. And most

obvious from the army of willows patrolling the riverside is the miraculous change of clothing from olive drab to amber alert. And to warn of the coming winter, they launch white fuzz puffs into the sky to stick on everything and bother my nose.

Everything is on the move. The plants are getting ready to hide and the animals fill bellies in preparation to run or fight. Ducks that I cannot recognize swim over a hundred shadows and keep me occupied attempting to record film footage with a special meaning; a special message beyond 'just ducks swimming'. Well, just before the sun sank under the pine trees, I was rewarded with footage that is a pure treasure. As the camera rolled along, there were a million tingles climbing my backside. Oh God, I hope it looks the same on film as it did through the view finder. It began innocently enough with a big duck simply paddling along from right to left between some willow bushes. Then suddenly, just before the duck swam behind a willow, the scene turned to dark shadows of black and blue and the water sparkled with big diamonds. It was beautiful.

* * * * *

We rode out in cloud and wound up in drizzle. A map would have told me to stay along the Firesteel River banks until reaching the open Sturdee Valley, but with high hopes and a good song, we tried to cut over the foot of Rognas Mountain and drop into the valley proper. It was definitely a rash decision and not the first time I chose the bad company of soft moss and deadfalls. But we were now in horse country and we managed to penetrate ten miles up the open valley by suppertime.

The mountains on either side of the Sturdee Valley are giant round bumps so that between the open pastures on the mountaintops and the open pastures of the valley, the trees find themselves in a space only half a mile wide at the mountain base.

A stiff breeze rattled the Whelan tent and lifted the campfire. Beans simmered as beans must and I dug into the saddlebag to pick at a slab of

dried fish. From habit I pulled out the map, but it ran into plain white somewhere around Thutade Lake. Titillating chills beamed along my spine to my scalp. Only a fool for adventure would be glad he had no map. The thought of traveling map-less anywhere we damn well pleased in this graceful land was exciting!

The horses' manes and tails waved like flags of equine advertising but they were not selling anything I didn't already have. Auugh! A wham of wind drove my hat back and rammed the string against my throat. I turned around to catch my breath and walked backwards until I reached the shelter of a tree. "Too bad," I mumbled to myself. To the south, beyond the headwaters of the Firesteel River, I had managed but once this day to glimpse a delicate display of dimple mountains, like a pregnant sow turned upside down. But not now; the barrier layers of black and gray clouds were much too ugly.

It was early but maybe if I crawled into the bag and toyed with my bean broth it would be a good enough evening. The heavy waist belt dug into my back uncomfortably. I undid the pouch belt that held the four camera batteries and shoved it deep into the warm bag. No matter if I rode, ate, slept, and hiked with these clubs around my waist for eight hundred miles, they were my friends and had to stay warm. The night caught me by surprise and I sank into a deep sleep.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

"Ahhhhh!" I cried and opened my eyes in the black night as it hammered my face then suffocated me.

"Holy geez!"

Whoosh, whoosh. Even in the night the big blue demon darkened the sky and roared above me. The trees bent and moaned in the gusts of wind.

"Damn." I sped from my bag and wrestled, barefooted, against the wind and rain to salvage the battered lean-to. With pegs, logs and stones in place I sank back into a deep sleep.

Two major thoughts accompanied my every morning since our departure, even those that found me deep in the bunk of a cabin. First, during the hazy moments that fall somewhere between sleep and consciousness was, “Where’s the horse bells?” and second, after rubbing the sleep from my eyes and watching the trees sway and clouds roll by,

“Where’s the horse bells?”

There were no horse bells this morning. No big deal. I rolled over and found another hour’s rest then plugged through the morning chores. Somewhere between scooping a pot of water and sipping coffee I stood and stretched a look north up the valley, but saw no horses. Somewhere between rolling my sleeping bag and blowing my nose, I looked south down the valley, but saw no horses.

Willows sprayed water on my rain pants and after a thorough search north, none of the trail held horse tracks. A brown spot looked suspicious just inside a distant wood but the binoculars turned it into a stump. Back towards the south I searched the many caribou paths including the trail we rode in on. Sure enough, the horse tracks headed in two directions, coming in, then going away. “Those silly buggers!”

The horses had been extremely camp-worthy but the fall crisp air robbed the grass of green energy and vitamins. Maybe after six hundred miles they understood that our journey was not a normal summer holiday and struggled for their health. Let them revolt but let it be for the moment.

I bent down in the soft dirt to catch my breath and examine the tracks. My mind clouded with concern. True to my plan of rotating the hobbles I took a chance on hobbling only Speck last night and now, each front foot strode a few feet. I stood and stretched a sore back as I looked down the valley back the way we had come but saw no horses. They were on the move and now, so was I. The meadow was as solid as a cow pasture, the best travel and most miles per day since our departure. Good for running.

Sweat built up from under my rubber jacket and rolled from my brow. On the fly I dropped to my knees, sucked a slug of water, and ran. One mile,

two miles, three miles, and, with each swing of the valley, came a hectic search and darkening concern.

“Damn! All of these lost miles.” Each day and every mile was a notch on my saddle, and now the trees, stones, and streams mocked my return.

At four miles I rounded a bend with high hopes then held back more tears of frustration. No matter how hard I looked over the miles of open meadow ahead, I saw no horses. Suddenly a stick broke in a hollow off to my side. “You buggers!”

“What’s up boss,” they seemed to be saying as they threw up their heads.

“I thought I could trust you!” I stepped toward them and they stepped into single file and headed off, with Lucky in the lead. “Lucky, you rotten turkey!”

I waved a small chunk of white salt like a flag. True to form, Apache turned for the salt and Lucky followed. Speck just stood and whinnied for their return. So, what were they thinking? That they could run away and live happily ever after, that’s what. Speck finally came in at a rush to get the first lick.

“You buggers!” I scratched their ears as they licked the salt. I hopped on Lucky bareback and used his mane for a bridle. Inside my socks it was red feet and a blister or two that throbbed. “You better believe I’m gonna keep an eye on you boys from now on.”

* * * * *

There is a piece of land, no, two pieces, one on the Sturdee Valley and one on Lawyers Pass, that would tickle the curiosity of any geographer attempting classification. It wasn’t just that the ground was caked hard and cracked with sand. And it wasn’t just because grass sprouted in tough little islands or long brown wisps. Neither was it the sparse bunches of thistle and prairie weed that imitated cacti. There are other places so flat that horses would stare over great distances just to wonder what might come. But these

places were on prairies, not in mountains. With a little imagination we rode in silent awe of what could have been a desert continent.

“This O.K. fella?” I lifted my feet on top of Lucky’s neck then leaned back with my hands on his rump. He was a good camel and, no doubt, smelled better, excluding the fart sessions. Farting has too long been abused, lowered from a bodily function of purpose performed by animals since the invention of animals themselves, into the calloused, rude, and stinky act blamed on a low life. Someone, perhaps someone with noble intentions who understands the true benefit of a good fart, could aspire to return its meaning to levels of integrity. Maybe do a thesis for example, possibly a study on the benefits of farting during sessions in the House of Commons, on the Senate floor perhaps.

To begin with, fart is not fart at all, but in proper terminology, it is ‘phart.’ Any idiot can see that a word beginning with ‘ph’, as opposed to ‘f’ has been derived with the consideration and workings of scholars and deserves similar honor. Furthermore, the definition of phart is not ignoble at all: PHART defined: Fert, fart, ferton; kin to expel intestinal gas from the anus - usu. Likely to cause digestive flatulence; pretentious without real worth or substance. Considered by some to be vulgar.

Pharting has always been a very major part of life. If the true value of a relationship is to be measured by anything at all then it must be measured by two persons sharing the most delicate, sensitive and rarely discussed personal secrets, of which pharting is one. If one cannot share these depths, then that relationship lacks depth, will fall awry into the ditch of broken dreams. I credit my long-time deep respect of pharting for rescuing me from a certain hapless engagement.

It went like this: lovers partake in a phenomena known as the ‘Deep Vee’. It stems from the deepest root of personality; the uncovered gut of sensitivity. In the instance of my salvation, it went like this. Susie and I lay side by side as we had on numerous occasions since our engagement. We had just crawled into bed, but because of the distance dealt from daily

reality, we had not yet touched. It must not be too abrupt or too inconsiderate. Susie initiated narrowing the Vee with small talk, just as she had on numerous other occasions. This was my signal to delicately slide my left foot along the back of her left calf, just as I had on many other occasions. Then Susie turned to her side and placed her right arm on my chest as I slid my right arm under her neck. A few more words and we sealed the Deep Vee with a kiss. Now, in the deepest clutch of our exposed souls, all was ready for straightforward and sincere sharing.

“Susie?”

“Yes?”

“Uh, I want to tell you something, uh, it’s something very important; very important to me. I guess I need to share it with you.”

“Yes?”

“Well, uh, you see, its really important to me that our love knows no boundaries. I mean, well, I want to be comfortable with you, no matter what, when I phart. In fact, if our timing is good, I’ll cover up for you.”

She was silent, then turned away. “I’m tired, Stan. I want to go to sleep.” Shortly after, we parted and went our own ways. I owe my life to the phart.

* * * * *

“Whoa” We held up on a small rise. Like twenty-five miles should, the panorama changed dramatically. It came as a surprise since we had grown so used to round topped mountains. Now, these are mountains! They were tall, flat-sided, jagged spire, giant grey saw-toothed mountains, and their kin. There was a familiarity about them and, after my mind reorganized the past month of travel, they fell into place.

“Yes, that’s them.” They rose above their neighboring ranges and loomed in the distant northeast. It was what would have been the distant northwest as I rode up the Finlay.

“Chukachida.” I rolled the romantic sound through my lips.

CORDILLERA

We rode swift and steady and the miles peeled away under foot. Caribou paths etched into the flat ground from hundreds of years of travel from one mountain draw, across the Lawyers Pass meadows and into an opposing mountain draw. Often they angled seemingly aimless with the length of the valley, into a valley dip; back up along a valley ridge, through a hollow, and up to an opposing ridge. There were hundreds of trails and we were on but one. We chose to stay with the path of least resistance and shortest distance and least bog, forgetting why or where a caribou would roam.

Then there were grassy ravines and all of them pleasantly set with Ponderosa pine. The draws came at us from all angles but it was all in good fun. Here and there and everywhere, a new ravine, a new pond, a new clump of bush. Always there were ducks of different varieties and songbirds to welcome my arrival. I sang endlessly with joy and thanks and not once did the horses complain.

Mind you, Supper did spend some time on the far hills. Late one afternoon I climbed along an open meadow to a bald hill. In front lay a treasure that I knew was the heart of the Cordillera. I wrote a poem.

*At last dear horseman, you have come. Through river and craig
you have run. Few have known this pleasure,*

*Many miles guard my treasure, Welcome, he who bet wisely, and
won. See the meadows for sleeping,*

For riding, for eating,

Silver ponds for your draught, Use them cleanly.

Stay, not briefly,

*Rest, and see my clouds play, They dance with fall colors, The
finest ballet.*

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*But you ride, such folly dear horseman. You run through the
doorway of heaven. My gifts you cannot share,*

Your harvest but a stare,

You come wisely, but leave, still a poor man.

We drew nearer and nearer to a great east-west wall of mountains that would soon force us to the left or to the right.

“Push straight ahead.” I assured myself, “because under the big mountains, there must be a trail that travels east and west.” There was, and it was a good trail. It led to the west in perfect fashion through hard meadows and stands of pine and poplar. Then, one early evening, something struck my face. It was warm and it made me happy. Brilliant bright beams from a ball of fire scared away the tenacious cloud the worlds ceiling Bluebird blue. The small stream we were following suddenly disappeared with a rise of land and we witnessed a fine drama within nature’s watershed.

Now, all of the streams would flow west into the Pacific Ocean, so that the water we drank this morning headed east and north acting a thousand stories before reaching the Arctic Ocean. Water we would drink this evening would head west and act a dozen stories before reaching the Pacific Ocean. With the sun setting cheerfully over a new mountain horizon in the west, I held my terrific anticipation. Then, just as I expected, it was there. Perched on an open hillside above deep blue, shimmering waters sat a collection of weathered buildings. Metsantan Lake and the abandoned village of Metsantan.

CHAPTER VII

SPATSIZI

The damp needled soil livened my sleepy, warm feet. A flashy red bird flitted across the lake path at eye level then hid in nearby evergreen. “Chee, chee, chee, de chee chee,” he talked to the brilliant morning sun and, without waiting for an answer, flashed red wings and was swallowed by the dark forest. A smile framed my mind as it would frame anyone’s mind living a fresh morning under pastel blue skies. I looked to the lake but could only see romantic mountain breasts in the distance. Fog rafted over the hidden lake and candled above the trees into the heavens.

I hopped from the soft trail onto a flat sun-struck stone. “Chicka dee dee, dee. Chicka dee dee, dee,” rang what seemed a bird meeting from back near the old plywood A-frame cabin. Near the cabin hid other structures as well. Someone had built a hospitable arrangement of dwellings along the lakeshore, down from the abandoned Indian dwellings, handy for float planes and fetching water.

The natives were more concerned about keeping the purity of the lake and living higher and closer to the Good Spirit than the lake being handy. One of David Thompson’s Pacific-bound traveling companions tossed a hefty leg bone into the Bella Coola River after supper one evening only to receive the screaming end of an enraged native, who promptly dove into the water and retrieved the bone. He was absolutely shocked and disgusted that anyone would insult the Good Spirit of the clean water that gave them life.

I studied the array of buildings.

No outhouses. What the Indians may have used for outhouses remains a mystery, but most obviously, it was a choice between random defecation

on the forest floor, which would have created mine fields for locals, or the digging of pits and storage of moss toilet wipe. Perhaps eating an irregular meat diet required sporadic toilet duty and gave a solid feces that needed no wipe at all. However, after witnessing the doings of Supper and Hairbrush, I guessed, rightfully I believed, that dogs were the cleaning crew that patiently waited close by while humans performed their bodily functions. Thankfully, someone had more recently built an outhouse behind the A-frame. Beside the outhouse stood a solid shed and what appeared a smokehouse. It was much too fine a morning to explore the cold confines of the wooded sheds.

Multiple ripples tickled the soggy grass-riddled shore from a windless blue water lake. Tufts of sod bet my feet they would twist and topple if I dared step on them and sometimes they won. A tease of grass jostled and a desperate brown toad, fearing the pound of my walk and my dark shadow, struggled for the water. My foot shot out and blocked his dash, and, in the confusion, he clambered onto my bare arch. In a flash my hands scooped up the struggling toad. His naked eyes blinked profusely and his warty brown chest heaved. His long, hind legs looked like the perfect things to grab onto. I wondered if the starving farm boy from Saskatchewan who died from eating raw frogs legs from his farm slough could have known why he was ill when the doctor's probes drew a blank. "He should have seen the black spots caused by the parasite," my parasitology professor said. I wondered if it would have made a difference to the hungry boy.

"Go kill some mosquitoes." The toad drove his frog legs against water and swirling mud before disappearing to black depths.

It was the second moose antler that had been shed in shallow water and very rotten compared to the first. It was rotten with green slime, brown sludge, black mold spots and red oxidation. I picked it up by the rough burr and watched as mud swirled and silver sheets of water rolled across the flat palm and ran a dozen silver trails off a dozen short tines.

“Holy Geez,” I dropped the antler and crouched. Like a Black Angus coming to drink, a cow moose strolled carefree from the forest edge across the small finger of lake. She trotted over to the open shore, then like a hippo, plunged straight into the lake. The moose submerged her head so only her shoulder-hump stayed afloat, then lifted her drenched head and switched her ears like window wipers. Again she dropped her head under; this time staying under for what seemed an impossibility. Each time her head rose a rush of water slid down threads of water plants that slurped into her chewing jaws like so much green spaghetti.

After each submerged search for vegetation came a stream of water plying down the moose’s bell, that useless looking beard that epitomizes the oddity of the ungainly creature. “What in the world does that bell do?” everyone asks. Remember, now, that unlike human beings, real animals live in a natural world of survival of the fittest. Each structure and function is the result of years of genetic planning for the perfect match with habitat, and the building and operation of each structure demanding a ration of precious calories and energy. There just is not any room for wasted energy since the penalty for waste is death. The hollow hair, the majestic antler, the stilt legs, and the tireless, erratic mating behavior, are all in the master plan for survival. So what about that hanging piece of hair-covered skin?

Suddenly her head jerked up and around, leaving both of us squinting into the forest behind her. Like a clown joining an act on cue, a calf moose trotted out of the woods and plowed into the water. Together they fed and romped a hippo delight in the disturbed water, giving me a half-hour of animal joy.

It was time to explore the village. I walked up random trails headed for the summit of the knob hill to the north. Trees gave way to thick tangles of rose and willow then in another hundred yards gave way to grass and shrubs that mixed freely with the scattered ruins. I walked softly to a stuffy rectangular log cabin but, in the final few yards, fell into a confused frame of mind.

It was my right for eavesdropping that I questioned, my right to explore the depth of a human condition from a time and place lost to the past. My hand reached out to touch the heavy log walls but fell short. It was obviously a place of spirit, a place for echoes from the undead dead.

I turned and stood silent at the sight of hanging doors and busted hinges, toppled gray logs, a rusted wash basin, and an upside down table. Again I reached out to touch the log wall and wondered if they would mind. My hand followed the log to a paneless windowsill and I found myself standing in the growing shadows of the coming evening. Everywhere the shadows grew long and peaked, eating up grass and shrub, broken grey furniture, grey poles with rusty nails, rusted five-gallon pails and odd containers.

Excitement held my senses sharp as my face filled an empty window and invaded an ancient privacy. It was a single room with a rough-hewn plank floor and an open-beam ceiling. An old forty-five gallon drum had been converted to a stove but now rolled over with its feet stretched into the air and a belly full of ashes. Spilled ash mixed with scatterings of a broken bottle and, together they slipped through wide cracks in the floor. Two rough, board bed frames hugged the far wall and a bench had fallen over into mouse scatterings. An 'Export A' tin sitting high on a shelf provided the excuse I needed and I walked through the doorway and plucked the can off the shelf. I shook the dirty contents and stirred up some rusty nails and a brass of an empty rifle case. I rubbed it clean and held it to the window light. '303 Savage' the stamping read.

The late afternoon wasted by and with each ruin I guessed about the way it might have been. I settled into the debris of an old barn that must have been one of the first to fall. Now it was only a footing of rotten logs on three sides. Whatever roof there might have been could have lifted off with the last spaceship. The square dirt floor allowed gangly weeds to sprout from its hardness and a stand of dazzling orange fireweed took refuge in a sheltered corner. An old high-topped black rubber boot with road map

cracks lay half buried in sod. I pulled heavily on a leather loop but it stuck fast in the dirt. With a great heave it gave and I toppled over with a big horse collar and uprooted weeds for my prize. Leather straps wrestled it back to the ground and with further excavation I sprung free the lashings of a rotten harness.

I sat back and shook my head. Perhaps they dragged the logs to the building sites with horses, but where did the horses come from? Maybe they came from the Peace Country in the east, up the Finlay somehow. Maybe they came from the early outfitters in the Telegraph Creek area. Or, maybe, they came later from The Hyland Brothers or Tommy Walker who brought outfitting horses to this country in the forties, but by then, Metsantan was on its last legs.

Metsantan must have been the last stand of the wilderness Sikhanni. They developed none of the arts of civilization. Why change what is good, real, life? They did not choose to learn purposefully about the horse, the chainsaw, or welfare, but as they were in tune to accepting the grim reality of things, they must have entered their new fate passively. Animals, and for that matter, the old Sikhanni, did not pull rank or position, they simply had a place in their surroundings, a niche, and were consequently subject to their surroundings. Hierarchy in the animal world is not assumed by choice but a position in a process. It is modern man who builds hierarchy and structure for self-material gain and the need to 'reach' that higher level.

It has always amazed me how we, the reasoning being, cannot reason with earth at all. Instead we play our games over and above nature's natural protective feedback systems. We elevate ourselves to an assumed position of reasoning, a dishonest reasoning by building an artificial and temporary niche with electric and gas warmth. We feed the multiplying billions with machinery and pesticides, delaying starvation that has always been the natural and just way of things, and create a false impression of leisure time by outdistancing past food-getting chores and survival. We use that time to spur on the technological cancer. It would be unfair to call it cancer if it could

be stopped, or even checked, but there are no indications that it can or will. Self-justification is the easy wheel by which those most reasonable become those most unreasonable. Metsantan was, very simply, an Indian place out of whiteman time. But there was much more here than the crucifixion of an ancient heritage by modern buildings, tools and assumptions. The Sikhanni were hunters tied to the culling of caribou herds and moose. Their idea of ‘wise use’ was not a product of their ideals about their ‘right of use’ or of their estimates of today’s needs and tomorrow’s demands. These are whiteman’s devices for white-man’s uses, and by whiteman’s comprehension. No, the Sikhanni did not assume the privilege of playing keeper of the animals in attempted co-operation with civilization, human’s technological decisions that affect millions of animals. No, the Sikhanni lived and died in numbers tuned in with the population cycles of their prey, much as the wolf.

In those days the value of a cloven hoof animal was intrinsic unto themselves as a cog in the wheel of nature, unlike now when their worth is decided by a value system devised by contemporary society; loggers, miners, farmers, biologists, politicians and pimps. Resources do not exist in their own right in the modern world, but in their assessed value. The moment we see usefulness in something it has become a resource, regardless of what is right or what is naturally destructive, or what is sacrilegious, or what removes the birth rights of the animals. It is now an asset to be drawn upon as civilization sees fit, notwithstanding rebuttal from pockets of conscientiousness in the form of government wildlife offices, living room animal lover groups, or conservation clubs that swear by the wilderness while living by the engine.

The trail was obviously one of significance as it gained definition to the West. This could be the way I would head for the plateau. Around a bend and through a collection of large fir put me under a big, lonely, steeped-roofed building. It was very solid.

“Eek.” The heavy door opened and spread a beam of light across the wooden floor. A mouse skittered across the floor and blinked between two logs.

“A school!” An old green chalkboard was nailed against the far wall. At the head of the room sat a wooden teacher’s desk and in disarray around the room, toppled student benches and tables. Someone had stolen the picture from a broken picture frame hanging from a nail. Just like my grandparents’ biggest grainery, the open beam ceiling stared down over large open rafters.

I sat back on the old teacher’s chair and thumped my boots on the desk. “I say there, now you brown-faced lads and lasses,” I dawned a heavy English accent. “We’ll have no more spitting on Johnny and tying Sarah’s dress over her head. You got that.” The class flashed ten sets of white teeth. “Alright Polly, cat, spell cat once more.”

“C.A.T.”

“Good.” Charley shuffled uncomfortably behind Polly. “Charley, your turn, spell, supercalafragalisticexpialadocious.”

On the way back to the A-frame, I inspected the cabins once again, this time with Supper’s company for ten minutes before she got bored with my philosophy. I sat on an old clay and stone outdoor oven that had fallen mostly to pieces. This time the turnings of my mind gave way to the strong presence of a peaceful evening. It could have been the blood red sunset streaked with black strings of cloud that somewhere were white. It could have been the blood that paddled lightly in my soul called an affinity with those now gone. It could have been that I am a hopeless wilderness romantic:

Here we sit.

So far away, so ignorant of it. Buying pleasure, selling habitat.

Thinking that ‘we’ are where it’s at.

CHAPTER VII – SPATSIZI

*Life's new run and mornings new dawn, Should eternity cry
sanctity,*

In the beauty of each one.

*And as kingdoms ruin as history has shown, And when we as
man no longer own,*

*Then we will know, as we have known, The splendor of a
mountain home.*

* * * * *

Supper lolled in the late morning sun. She jumped up and snaffled the pancake from my hand. Sun bounced off the doorstep and it was a nice place to waste the morning. Supper licked her lips for the last crumbs, yawned, sighed and curled back into her warm dirt depression. A big black fly buzzed between her ears and with the camouflage of closed eyes, Supper's white teeth flashed at the bug. The buzzing stopped. I thought Supper smiled as the big black fly kicked its black, hairy legs in her mouth for the last time.

A Stellar's jay dipped along the lakeshore then, sure enough, wove under the pine trees and landed on a bare limb near the old shed. I peeked around the cabin and saw three or four types of songbirds pecking at the grain. The old shed held abandoned horse treasures including worn horse shoes, horse shoe nails, an old leather halter, some frayed cecil rope, and a few shovel piles of grain. Some of the grain worked its way out onto the ground, or maybe the grain was the scatterings from the birds who had worked their way into the shed. They ate in shifts with some spying from lofty tree tops for danger, some yelling from low branches waiting for confidence, and some madly gobbling grain between frantic glances for predators.

It had taken only one hour for the message that I had dumped a load of grain onto the ground to get chirped about bird town. Now they threatened to flood the banquet. With each slow step I angled closer but

before I could position the camera the birds scrambled in a big whirl of wings.

“Never mind, they’ll be back. Just get the camera set up,” I said to myself. I focused on the grain, tested the batteries, and tightened the grip. “O.K. Better grab another roll of film now that you’ve got the chance. One roll will never do. Quickly, before they come back.” I turned to dash for the door.

Whack!

Pain shot across my head as I staggered and fell to the ground in a flood of stars and a swim of water. “Ohhh.....”

I rolled on the ground tears streaming down my face and pain ringing through my head. I lay on my gut and grit my teeth in anguish with my hands over my forehead. It was a wonderful fireworks display; millions of titillating stars and clusters of colorful explosions. Watch the stars, forget the pain. “Ohhh... Ohhhh...” I rolled over on my back and forced an eye open to see tree tops swimming in the sky then drown in tears. “My...God...what...happened...” I rolled onto my stomach. My hands felt soggy and I forced open an eye. My hands were red with blood. I crawled into the cabin and lay with my face rocking in pain.

“I’ll be good, honest. I’ll be good, I promise, I promise, please, let me get better. I promise, I promise...” I imagined pretty things, happy smiles and colorful things, then tried to dull the throbbing blood that ebbed in my face. Time crept along like a razor through my mind and in a half an hour, I reached for a napkin, wet it, and washed the blood from my face and hands. I searched for a broken slice of mirror and examined a big, dark red gash angling across the upper bridge of my nose. “Who in the hell did this to me?”

I forced my dizzy body over to the camera and scared away a happy lot of birds.

“Well, geez.”

A square plywood bird feeder struck a sharp angle off a heavy branch.

“Geez!”

“Wilderness traveler battles seven hundred miles of canyon, bog and deadfall, defying danger and defying treacherous odds, and gets wiped out by a bird feeder!” I crawled back to the cabin and spent the afternoon feeling sorry for myself.

Erk. I slipped a crack in the door and discovered another gathering of red, yellow, and black and white birds. I had bothered them enough and they deserved to feed. It had been a long and hard August and early September. Leave them be. Most of them had starred in my movie already.

A red-brown streak sliced the air from one tree to another. A squirrel? No, it was too long and skinny. Then with silly exaggerated humpback bounds, a weasel dashed into a pile of stones and popped his head from a hole, searching for a striking place at the birds. He was on the prowl, a miniature evil, death to the feeble, death to the beautiful, death to all with warm blood to drink. “Pop, pop.” His round furry head disappeared and appeared from another hole just that fast. “Pop.”

“Boom!” I smashed the door open against its moorings. “Scram birds!” They fluttered a great fluster.

“Cheep!” The weasel screamed at me and ran into the woods.

* * * * *

The main path past the old school rose to a treed hill at the west end of the lake then dropped to a small gully and up past another cabin. Satisfied that we had found the trail that we would ride out on, I turned back, but not on the path.

The lake shimmered silver between the trees. I ambled like an old man and found lots of toadstools and mushrooms with pink tops and white gills, but these I either ignored or kicked and watched them explode through the air. The wrinkled morels and the big orange-topped ones with soggy unders always seemed best at hiding, even in the middle of nowhere. The mushroom hunt allowed the evening to sneak in unawares but finally an

orange color snuck from under a rotten log. Inspection revealed a matriarch mushroom and her children but when I busted her top like a wafer of bread, it sent a skinny, white worm into burrowing antics. I kicked the big mushroom like a football.

Close to the lake a willowed hill hid what, at first, appeared to be a dilapidated fence. There were seven fences, and within their boundary were crosses. Cold wind tossed my hair and gray clouds erased any chance for evening shadows. Careful of where I stepped, I walked closer to the graves. One big evergreen sprouted straight from the head of one grave and someone had tied a yellow plastic ribbon to its bough. It was a frightening contrast to the solemn presence of death.

The dead lay side by side in two rows and each grave mound had been adorned with a surrounding square picket fence with spiked tops sharpened to spears of different designs. Some were round spears, some were arrowhead spears and some were rounded spears with holes drilled through them. Likewise, the crosses were handcrafted and engraved with grooved curves, and peaks. The first grave lacked the fine adornment of a fence and a plain, aged cross fell over the vague mound that was flooded with green grass and weeds. The second grave had a fallen rotted fence with heavy corner posts still white and standing tall with sharpened points. The next was overrun with raspberry bushes and a big grey cross leaned precariously. I reached over to rub the grit from the subtle engraving of an epitaph, then held back. The wind drove a stormy black and grey sky from the west. I buttoned the two top buttons of my coat and shook some warmth back into my body.

The next grave stood in the middle as the patriarch. The tall pine with the yellow ribbon grew straight from the cross and talked freely to the sky, with high boughs that spoke riddles with the wind. I leaned far over the fence and tried to decipher eroded wordsetched on the old cross but the dim light kept them from me. I crossed my hands and bowed my head in prayer. Not a prayer in a denominational sense, not a prayer for forgiveness, and not

a prayer for direction, but with an air of respect for a person whose life I could only now understand, only now after hundreds of miles of bush beating and mountain living.

I entered the grave and bent over the rain-battered words. “Louis, Died November II, 1932, 85 years old”. Again I felt the words, though this time, with passionate fingers that moved delicately in a brail search of the spirit of a man that had truly lived wild and free. I tried to bridge the gap to an old man’s soul. I imagined he was there, as he came upon this place from a great pilgrimage to make a stand in the way he knew best, and he set about with determination. He was there. His eyes were set deep in the search for a fat caribou. He was there with his back bent against the full power of a mountain storm. He had a funny smile when his wife yelled at the children who stole honey for their bannock. And, he was there with grave wrinkles when the children reached for shelves that held no bannock at all. Then he heard a noise and looked into the sky and believed a God with great white wings came down to the lake. He knew a great change came with the wings. And as always, he smiled, but never as before because was he so tired. Then, at last, he lay down to count loved ones as they walked by in a great exodus.

I gave him an epitaph: *Born of Blood, From the bread of the Metsantan. His Blood Now Bread, Giving Birth on the Metsantan. Amen.*

And the beautiful evergreen centered in his grave grew much stronger and much prouder than any evergreen from any grave, and its boughs cast out to the wind and, with the wind, talked riddles of life and love.

* * * * *

If it had been a poor day perhaps I would have gathered the horses and headed for the Spatsizi Plateau, but it was a terrible day. Besides, the horses were tired of looking at my face, and me at their butts.

The sharp metal handle dug into my red fingers and a cold slap of water jumped from the bucket and stung my leg. I changed hands and settled the

swishing water. There was no hurry to get back to the cabin with the fresh pail of water since the day crept by so slowly and the cabin walls had shrunk the cabin to closet-size.

There was the moose rack that someone had nailed onto the tree. But was that plastic bag there before?

Setting down the pail was a fine relief for my numb fingers. The small white plastic bag slipped easily off the antler tine it was pierced with.

“Hey!”

There was something inside the small white bag but the knot forced me to tear a clumsy hole.

Thump. An apple bounced to the pine-needled ground. Thump, thump.

“What the...,” I bent over and picked up what must have been a magician’s trick.

“No! It can’t be “

I unraveled the small white paper note.

“We knew how much you liked your toothbrush so we thought we’d fly it here for you...”

I fondled it gently, the full breasts, the round buttocks, and the long, graceful legs. My goodness it was good to have an old friend back. My goodness, you just don’t know what you’ve got until its gone.

“... Here’s some cheese and crackers. Only one apple left. Good Luck! Give us a call when you get back. Bye for now, Love Noel and Natalie.”

I held the old friend tight, so very tight, and I felt warm inside, so very warm. A tear grew in my eye as I sat under a tree and then another tear came. When I sat in the cabin there were many tears. They were tears that were made for crying, tears born from more than sentiment for a toothbrush. And that the toothbrush was much greater than just a toothbrush. And I knew that I had all day to carry the pail of water to the cabin. Another day came moody and unhappy, but so what. There was a date with a caribou that we had to keep. The horse tracks led clearly back down the trail we had

come in on, but there was not so much to be concerned about I thought, since there were rich meadows only one-half mile back down the trail.

The trail was black and soggy around the northeast end of the lake then sunk brown through patches that led into timber beyond the lake. It was good to walk and it would be good to stick to saddle leather again. Three deadfalls straddled the path at ten-foot intervals.

“Mark, set, go!”

My legs pumped a hard twelve-second; hundred-yard dash then stretched a mean hurdle.

“One.”

“Two.” Whump!

“Ohhh...” Dirt clogged my mouth and it drooled and out spit black globs. “Ohhh...” My right leg pained. I sat up and glanced at the damn tree. The sneaky bugger had a hidden branch on its backside. The pant leg slid up gingerly and revealed a big red shin scrape that shone with clear ooze. I limped down the trail. Life can be depressing sometimes.

The trail wound through small fingers of forest and through small patches of willow and meadow. The horse tracks stuck to the trail and that was a bad sign. One-half mile later the throbbing in my leg stopped and I began to trot, very carefully. I wondered if I would always be a stupid sort of guy, or just for the first half of my life. I didn’t wonder long; there were horses to catch.

Sweat began to roll under my shirt and the sky turned from the north awfully gloomy for only mid-morning. I began to run over the steady tracks of the horses and then stopped to watch a large bird lift itself off a tall, gnarly pine. The big hawk displayed a terrific wingspan as it began to curve great upward circles. Then, as it curved closer, it revealed a distinct golden spot for its head.

“That’s no hawk!”

The big eagle soared carefree loops over my head and asked what I was doing in its territory. If it could sweep baby sheep and deer off their hooves

and drop them to their deaths, it certainly had the right to ask what a stranger was doing here. The big Golden Eagle floated into a bright cloud that hid the sun and, once again, I ran, this time as fast as an eagle, I imagined. Somewhere, halfway through a stride, my eyes caught a glimpse of a barred feather tossed to the ground but I did not stop.

As usual, the horses were in their tracks. We trotted back in a hurry and my mind stayed alert. It was not difficult to be alert bouncing bare-back on a horse.

“Whoa.” I yanked Lucky’s mane hard and came up with a few strands of hair. I threatened Lucky with his life should he run away then dismounted and snatched up the feather. It was an eagle feather all right. It looked smart in my hat and it was grand that I had come by it honestly. I smiled at Lucky wanting at least some acknowledgement, some sign, that it was indeed a fine feather in my hat. Lucky farted what I will swear was a laugh.

“You jerk,” I grabbed a handful of mane to jump back on. “Your whole life is one big fart. I fart, therefore, I am. Let’s go. Hiya!”

We rode around the hurdles.

* * * * *

A tiny, hazy Metsantan Lake melted into distant mountains and meadows a long way back in the eastern distance. The living dead of Metsantan drew upon my spine another chill and one-minute silence became a farewell. In the words of Peter Ustinov: “One feels what is buried here continues as a subterranean colloquy (conversation).”

I bent down and scooped a handful of snow, bit off one corner, then again stood still in attention of the wonderful enchantment. It was wonderful how lovely the graceful greens and greys were from the rounded mountains around Mestantan. Mountains that bubbled muted reds, greens, browns and purples as far as sixty miles were nothing less than a revelation. The calm sky kept a silver ceiling and gave the mountains a blanket to sleep

with. We climbed all day and soon we would be on top of the world, on top of the incomparable Spatsizi Plateau.

High places scare people. High mountain places send the minds of common men reeling into fields of self-doubt and send their bodies into a pressured sweat. “Gawd, that was something!” the sheep hunter, the macho mountain climber and the Gorilla hiker, tell their cronies back home. Possibly, the sheep hunter followed the footsteps of a guide and when the thin air played tricks with his mind, he babbled about the office and sweated at the thought of his wife cheating with his neighbor. Possibly, the mountain climber clawed the final cracks for the summit, he wondered what the heck he was doing out there anyhow. And the hiker sat by the campfire of wilderness solitude and when the night dealt the loneliness that is meant for all, he found himself forced by nothingness to reflect on his life for the first time in years, hating the guilt, in fear of the loneliness. Possibly, they scrambled back to their vehicles then puffed out their chests and with brown, hairy faces boasted in public gatherings. The thin, heroic air of high mountain places is much too rarified for common men.

Two steps from the lean-to gave me a good view of my position on the steep alpine slope that dipped and drove down the east side of Spatsizi Plateau. Jump of point for a wind sailor.

“What a place,” I shook my head and wondered at my dilemma and the horse’s predicament. They had to be there somewhere; I just let them go. I scanned down the steep slope of alpine fir and grass. It was a place befitting a mountain sheep, not a horse. Where were they? I just heard a bell a while ago. The Stikine River was hidden far below by a false ridge but its memory was clear. It was so blue and clean and so full of jumping fingers of silver trout, but it had been tricky to cross with deep swirling pools.

“Humph.”

I wiped my cold, runny nose. “What will the Stikine be like to cross two hundred miles down-river? And the trail up here, now that was something else! It was a darned good thing we looked until we found it. I

mean, we almost tackled the plateau without the help of a trail. I mean, it seemed so open. Wow! Would that have been a disaster! The Sikhanni must have taken years to hew a sliver path through walled fortresses of thin-stalked, thin-branched alpine fir. Damn good thing the horses could smell a trail from a forest. Where are those silly horses? Is that them over there?"

I fitted the binoculars to my eyes and one-quarter mile below caught two white ears above a wall of fir and then I noticed Speck's white rump move between evergreens. They could have been mountain goats. The feed was poor on this slope but the coming night forced our stop. If they headed back down to the Stikine River, it was something I deserved. I wrinkled my brow. Once more, before darkness brought the night, I thought to drink from the scenery but found three miles of fog rolling in from the northwest with deceptive speed. Half of my revelation was gone and the other half going. A cold, wet snowflake sat on my nose.

I turned and looked at the sorry lean-to strung between two head- high dwarf fir then looked above, up past a quarter mile of ebbing fir and alpine grass onto a barren ridge. Its ominous grade and the coming darkness stymied my curiosity. Did the plateau go on forever just over the ridge? I looked over the distant mountains and shook my head. How I ended up camping on this forsaken cliff, I'll never know. Snowflakes and hunger erased any thought of climbing the ridge for a look.

There was no bannock left, no water, and every stick that looked dead bent like wet licorice. Murphy's Law lives in high mountain places. Cold fingers found little comfort in damp gloves and I tossed them aside then dug clumsily through pack boxes for food I knew I would not find. The more I dug the more frustrated I became and, in a minute scrambled both boxes upside down.

"Damn!"

Wham! I slammed a box lid violently then sat back with remorse. I knew it wasn't the food that hurt; it was being alone. It was forcing the horses to forage in this terrible place; it was having no fire to warm up a heart. It

was that every damn thing made me so lonely. I opened a box again and stuffed a package of instant butterscotch pudding in my coat pocket then grabbed a pot and a metal cup. Around a patch of fir there was a stubborn patch of icy snow that had been there for who knows how long.

I bent over the patch of snow a lonely and solemn figure as my leather chap-covered knees dug deep in the snow. The coming night was a robber, stealing anything good worth thinking about and anything worth hoping for. I tried to spit but choked and a half-hearted gob spidered to my chaps. With each frustrating scoop of my tin cup my heart warded off a crippling loneliness.

I wiped a tear from my eye that I blamed on the cold wind but knew better. My cold feet followed each other to the place of my sleeping bag. I set the pot down and buried my face in my hands.

“Oh, God.” Tears slid down my cheeks and I did not want them to stop, there warmth was at least something, something human and alive. It was time for them, and maybe they were long over-do. Dear God, it was so lonely. I lay back on my empty sleeping bag. It was always so empty, always so empty. There was so much I wanted to tell someone, so much I wanted to give, but there was no one.

“Oh God, please, someday, please, let me know the love I want to give.” I cried freely in my world of sorrow until the emptiness became nothingness; then lay limp until my stomach demanded a stronger approach.

I dug out the package of powdered pudding. It looked so stupid, so ridiculously stupid. “This is nuts,” I chuckled then tore wildly at the little box with bitter teeth. The powder looked so stupid in the pot, so empty. I set it between my legs and stared at it. For five minutes I wanted to do something with it, but the hollow sadness in my stomach refused. My stiff fingers picked up the empty pudding box, dropped it, then picked it up again. I brought the fine print close in the dim light and read the instructions. “Use cold water.”

“Sonofabitch” With a big spoon I threw some snow in the pudding and stabbed crazily.

“This cold enough?!” There was no echo.

“This sonofabitching cold enough!!” Somewhere a caribou must have perked its ears.

There can be nothing lonelier than burrowing cold, wet and hungry, under the dark eastern shadow of the great Spatsizi Plateau. It is a place that will strip you clean and lay you down in a vacuum. I was an exposed soul shed of all pre-conception.

I was ready for Spatsizi.

The white morning came as no surprise but it was a surprise that I was toasty warm in my dacron bag. It was also a pleasant surprise when the ting of a horse bell barely pierced through the big falling snowflakes. Must be the storm that held them tight on this steep mountain slope, I mused.

The campsite was awfully depressing but a neck stretching inspection revealed a dry bag and a nice level place that I had chosen for my bed. I smiled. What more could I want? The weather would break some day; it had to. I hustled myself from my warm bag knowing that I had to eat something. If prompted with determination, even wet wood will bum. If prompted with great deliberation and two big chunks of white petroleum fire starter, even wet alpine fir will burn. But damn, it was a pitiful fire. My hands hovered square in the lock of the orange flame and did not feel warm until the count of ten.

“Hmmm...” The big spoon shoveled another load of oatmeal porridge laced with brown sugar into my mouth. The bowl warmed my lap and the cup of coffee warmed my thighs.

Ding, dong. The horses fed somewhere below. I ate my bowl of porridge slowly, playing with white and brown swirls and contemplating the open snow-covered countryside with glassy morning eyes. It was good we did not travel further the night before, because fifty yards uphill the pitiful scatterings of fir disappeared to barren grass. I did not

feel like hurrying so it was good that there was nothing to hurry about. Truth was, the horses and I could not remember finding anything worth hurrying about for as long as we could remember.

“What. Holy geez.” A cow caribou grazed as she crossed an opening between two trees twenty yards in front of the lean-to. Was she blind, or what?

“Unreal, unreal.” I babbled to myself and fumbled with the camera and tripod as she lowered her head out of sight then stopped moving when she glanced around.

A calf caribou doddled twenty yards behind its antlered mother. Like a wolf moving in for the kill, I slipped between evergreens looking for an ambush spot ahead and downwind of the caribou. I readied the camera and scanned the smallest spaces between branches for a brown movement, and she appeared. She nibbled grass at a steady amble and would have made a perfect double for one of Santa’s reindeer. But she was not one of Santa’s reindeer and my every movement was timed for perfect camouflage. Now broadside at fifteen yards she would notice the slightest movement. “Bzzz...” the camera sung quietly. She lifted her head, twitched her ears, and stared directly at me. It was not quiet enough. I froze my eyelids for what felt an eternity. Finally writing me off as a weird tree, she plucked at a scattering of white caribou lichen, then glanced around to check her calf now close on her heels. The camera hummed on.

“Wow! What great footage!” I would have smiled but for fear she would see my mouth move. With each step her split snowshoe hooves splayed and floated effortlessly over the soft mountain moss. With each step she grunted, clicked her hooves, grumbled one of her four stomachs and actually farted like a contented farm cow. Absolutely rude table manners for such a graceful looking animal. The wind carried me a subtle scent something like the thick musk of an elk crossed with a domestic cow. She stopped and steadied her back legs then squatted in a strange gesture.

“Weird.” My camera hummed away. “Man, great footage.” Suddenly an enormous stream of yellow liquid shot from her rear- end.

“No, oh no! I don’t believe it. You dumb caribou.” A waterfall of pee cascaded across the middle of my camera lens as it hummed along in perfect harmony with the biggest pee I had ever seen.

* * * * *

The binoculars felt snug and special as they hung around my neck under my plaid wool coat. “C’mon.” Lucky pulled back on the lead rope jerking my arm. “C’mon!” I turned to continue and he yanked back on the rope again. “C’mon!” I looked at him fiercely then noticed the reins had dropped to the ground and jerked his mouth down as he stepped on them.

“Sorry,” I said and picked them up, wrapping them around the horn. He snorted at me. “Sure.”

In the cold slippery snow it was too steep to ride up to the ridge, but the warm walk was just as well. Nearing the ridge top the snow deepened but its difficulty went ignored as my mind’s eye surveyed the distant mountain tops that came bobbing into view with the bounce of each step. Just when the view was about to get interesting the hump of the true ridge loomed ahead and blocked the view, and promised more sweat. We laboured up and up and left behind the mosses and grasses as our footsteps dug below the snow and kicked up a fine following of dirt. Once again the distant mountain summits bobbed into view and grew larger with each step. This time there was no cruel surprise.

There are no great mountains on Spatsizi Plateau. Metamorphism had taken away all that we came to expect from mountains; their rugged peaks, their looming power, their treacherous cliffs, and has swept them and our expectations away. The world was hiding Spatsizi. One thousand square miles of prairie had been taken from honest places and dropped into a cradle of six thousand-foot mountains. And its treasure was hidden well for

countless centuries from all but the tenacious Sikhanni. Mountain normality was gone.

If the geography knew no limits it also busted every chain wrapped upon me and provided a limitless freedom. Gone were the boundaries; the tall trees, the dark shadowed valleys, the humiliation from boastful mountains and big rivers. Gone was everything that earth had created to confine the spirit of man. There could be no limits in a place where angels feet could dance waltzes, where the animals were pure, where a wilderness traveler could shed ever-callous layers that technology had crusted upon him. It was a place that was spiritually incomparable. Everything that was evil, artificial and fearful, was remote from this timeless plateau.

This was my time. Not a time to worry about frozen hands and feet as I paced over the frozen barrens. Not a time for a hungry stomach as we were in a place with no hope for a fire. Discomfort had evaporated into a light-headed meditation and curious inquiry; to wander in search of something but uncertain of what it was, or maybe to bathe in the pot of gold that I secretly searched for and possibly found. Spatsizi *was* a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, for the right mindset. And time to soak in its essence so that never, by no man or woman, would the memory be washed from my being. I offered my soul for the taking and believed it was taken. It was my time.

From the ridge top there were two great basins that rose to low passes at a dozen places, and each place was the beginning of another basin that dropped down into another basin. Eventually we would ride down the Ross River and to Hyland Post, and that meant heading due west to hit the head of the river. Unfortunately, there was no exact due west, just likely bowls and basins and streams that were nearly west, or not so nearly west. Choosing the right pass from the likely ones would not be easy. There was no hurry and the decision would be easier as we approached the horizon.

A cold gust of wind struck us from the front. Auugh! My hat blew off and caught my neck. From the saddle bags I withdrew a long brown scarf and wrapped my hat snug to my head.

“Hey,” We stopped and I pointed and the horses looked. Like sentries headed for battle, dressed in the finest chestnut coats and white collars, a band of eight caribou cut a string across a knob two hundred yards to our right. From the tops of their heads grew four-foot antlers stark against the white snow. They circled a big loop to the west and, with no apparent concerns, drew closer to our outfit. Lucky snorted and tossed his neck at these strange animals, but they paid no mind. Apache whinnied hello and they stopped in their tracks. Speck jogged toward them for several yards then decided any horses looking so foolish would be a disgrace to be seen with. “Far out...” They trotted off on their aimless way.

I thumped my stiff hands against my waist. Maybe I should remove the camera in case of a good opportunity for good caribou footage. “Naw, later.” There would be plenty of opportunity.

We rode on and dropped into the head of a huge four-mile-wide stretch of grass. As we rode, there came the unmistakable spots of distant caribou as they pranced about in small groups. There were at least a dozen standing and laying in edge timber down where the drainage stream gained definition and cut through clay banks. A few hundred yards to our left, four cows and two calves ran to and fro like nervous dogs. Toward the two peaks that we rode shone the white capes of two groups of caribou and I suspected they were bulls. My stiff hands thumped against my waist for circulation and my feet stamped at the ground. Maybe I should get the camera ready in case they were big bulls? Oh, what the heck. It’s so darn cold and they’ll stay put for another half mile.

Breath coursed from Lucky’s nostrils and it would have been interesting to know if the horses questioned this icicle weather on September fifteenth. My hands moved up to shelter a red frozen nose. “Can’t be winter yet.” It was the first time my feet clubbed numb from the cold. We pushed on, the horses and I constantly scanning the open pastures for treasure. For over twenty years I had been conditioned to look upon anything within one hundred yards with interest, from passing motor

vehicles, to corner stores and pretty girls. For six days anything from one hundred yards to infinity was looked upon with interest.

“Was that a big bull?” A caribou dipped behind a stunted fir tree in the distance.

“Hang tight, Lucky.” After a few paces the binoculars came to my eyes. It was only a small bull. According to hunting guides in the Mackenzie Mountains of the Northwest Territories, caribou bulls come in three sizes: Eylmers, Wilburs and Busters.

“Geez, look at that one!”

“No, don’t shoot, it’s only a Wilbur!”

“Wilbur! Where? Cripes, the caribou is getting away!” “No!”

Boom! “I got im’. I got im’.” “Gadzooks man, you shot a Wilbur!”

Don’t ever shoot a Wilbur and expect anyone to take notice. Now, a Buster, that is the prince of the plateau. I dropped the binoculars then lifted them again to scan some country. A willow stick looked blurry only a few yards away. “Willow! There aren’t any willows up here!” I dropped to my knees and cast saucer eyeballs at a great antlered tree feeding its way out of a depression five yards away! I could have tossed a hat on that rack! Two more sets of antlers came into view and I looked frantically back to Apache who had my camera. I bellied, reflex tense, back to the horse. One false sound and that would be all she wrote. Speck farted. The caribou jerked up their heads, rolled the big whites of their eyes and pranced away like Lippizan Stallions without tails. With cantaloup hooves splayed wide, they floated over the soft ground. My God they were beautiful. With warm hands I removed the camera, just in case.

With the evening came the thought of camp. Now, even with the unveiling of Noel’s map, it was difficult to choose which pass to head through toward the west. I tightened the six-pound battery pack that loosened around my waist and sat down to study the map with contour lines that began about where I sat. These green and brown contour maps appear nothing more than lined confusion to some, but to adventurers maps are

romance. Precious bibles without boundaries, the multitude of lines and colors transform experience and imagination into images of valleys, slopes, cliffs, streams and vegetation.

It was a choice between the left side of one of the many humped- back summits, or the right side. The day had been much too harsh to melt anything and the bleak evening weather made the stark white countryside a grave place to spend a night. The left side of the summit was closer and should get us to a campsite sooner. We ascended the six thousand foot pass and found ourselves pinched between a white carpet and a white wafer ceiling. As we descended the far side the ceiling dropped and eliminated all but the hazy willow and fir strewn valley below us. The swish of brush against our sides was a warm homecoming feeling.

It had been a hard day. The caribou had tallied well over two hundred and then some.

Cluck, cluck, cluck.

A covey of willow ptarmigan scrambled under the willow brush. The final tally on willow ptarmigan was somewhere in the thousands. Each horse was tied firmly to a sturdy tree and the shotgun slipped smoothly from its scabbard. The Remington Wingmaster ejected three slugs and took three number six upland loads. Each step was planted with care and each moment the shotgun pointed three- quarters ready. Timing is a big part of life and it was the birds time to make the first move.

Cluck. They were close and I snuck three steps closer then stood ready. "C'mon, flush."

Cluck, cluck.

I stepped two more and with a heart stopping flutter, two birds shot up from their hold at twenty yards. Boom. One dropped and the gun swung for the other. Boom.

The warm birds were kind against my cold hands and, with deft probes, the hot skin peeled away from the delicate flesh. The stomach skin broke easily enough and my hands dallied in the warm guts and chest cavity.

The little fire grew into a big fire, a friend to repel the lonely late evening in a place where cold clouds hid the scenery. A wolf broke a mournful howl not too distant and, several others took woeful turns. Chills crawled along my spine and I stoked the fire.

Waking up in an open front lean to provides a view, a prediction for the coming day. Each morning is the dawn of a new beginning. On this day the beginning came mellow with heavy boughs of snow bent soggy to the ground. The white knobby mountain across the valley rose smoothly with patches of yellow sun warming the slope. Goose bumps gathered on my legs as the new beginning called for a new change of underwear and wool pants.

“Eeee...” I pulled on the cold underwear while studying the great dropping valley as it slipped distantly between sharp mountains with heavy forest and a long dark lake.

“A lake? What lake? There was no lake on the map, was there?” My eyes darkened with concern over the unfolded map. Something had gone wrong. Somehow the land did not sit right but thankfully we now had the map on our side. “There’s the mountain I went around.” My finger cruised and I spoke to an imaginary somebody.

“Somewhere there, anyhow.” My finger dropped down to the Ross River then slid between my lips. What went wrong? I looked deeper into the contour lines wondering which draw sucked us down falsely. There was the knob we decided to ride left around instead of right, and there was the river. My finger made perfect sense then wandered to other possibilities. Could I have gone south? I studied the sky for the sun and it appeared to hide in the same direction as the valley led, south. Once again my finger began from the previous days camp then hugged every possible pass to the south and promptly fell down to a creek, and there was the lake. Laslui Lake, long and stuck between sharp mountains. My finger searched for a name for the creek and found it. Worry Creek.

“Worry Creek? Worry Creek?” We were lost on Worry Creek!

Not funny.

The next day we rode up Worry Creek. The sun burned off thin cloud and sent a glistening brilliance off the snow. The wide and gentle valley found us as colorful camels on a white desert. The higher we rode and closer the pass came, the flatter the basin went, and it would have been a wonderful day for a toboggan party. Grass patches fought through melting snow so that in one day Spatsizi rolled over to show its brighter side. We were pleased with ourselves. Yes, by golly, it was a wonderful day to be lost on Worry Creek! Lost? Who was lost? What difference did it make if we were here or there? The Pacific was west; Coldfish Lake northwest and there were two pack boxes with food and grass as far as the eye could see.

“Lost?” Davey Crockett said when someone asked him if he had been there before. “No. Just bewildered once or twice.” I knew exactly what he meant.

There were countless things to wonder about, but the most obvious was where in the world were the caribou? We did not see one caribou after seeing more than two hundred the past two days! Was the basin too open? But before any major conclusions could be drawn, we were under attack!

“Whoaaa!” I stammered in major shock. It was incredible, as if we were seeing things. The horses stood as mesmerized as I. We were the prey for a wolf attack! With amazing ground-eating speed, three wolves rushed at us from the mountain shoulder one-quarter mile to our right. My hand slid forward, slipped the gun from its scabbard and popped the safety.

“This can’t be happening.” At four hundred yards, they raced as streamlined demons. It was happening. Just as I shouldered the gun the incredulous happened. Two hundred yards away five big wolves shot from a hidden draw in full flight and sliced a right angle straight for an interception of the three charging wolves. They collided on a dead run and exploded in a mess of fur, snarls and yells. As if I had sent a powder charge after them, they gathered themselves and ran for their lives, back to the safety of the mountain shoulder. I shook my head in disbelief.

“Giddyup.”

There were a dozen guesses to explain the incredible wolf attack, but only one explanation that made sense. The three wolves looked smaller and were probably younger. They must have thought us vulnerable caribou and gave chase, perhaps wishing to drive us in a loop to the waiting five adults. Being closer, the adults must have discovered the folly of the plan and desperately ran to save the youngsters, giving them what-for, at the same time. What an amazing display of social intelligence.

We rode on for a few miles and then I saw them. Fourteen wolves strung along the same shoulder to our right, walking along with us as bold spies so commonly depicted by Apaches in a cowboy movie. On they walked at our side, from black to white; them watching us and us watching them. I could understand those who know the wolves of the barrens when they say, “when a wolf want a caribou they go and get one.” Fat, skinny, old, young, whatever suits their fancy and their luck. They were the death masters and I found no justice in denying the obvious. A herd of caribou caught in the open grass of Worry Creek could only wonder who would feel the fangs first. To say that wolves kill the young, old, or weak is true. To say they kill *only* the young, old, or weak, is nonsense. Their kills include many healthy adults as well. At the wrong place at the wrong time.

It was the mating ritual that brought caribou from summer hiding places to the danger of wide-open basins. Spatsizi was playing Russian roulette with the caribou’s life at stake. It was one awful price to pay for sex once a year.

All told, we wandered six days on that eastern section of Spatsizi Plateau, snow one day, none the next, dropping here and there to a camp, hiking and riding into forgotten basins and drinking from nameless rivulets. Finally the day came that we should drop into the head of the Ross River. On this day I sat and, on a grand mountain that knew no beginning or end, I drank a heady potion of vista from the Spatsizi. My apprenticeship was served and Spatsizi was a stern master. We rode and saw endless mountains. Spatsizi had given us the grandest sense of freedom we had ever known.

As far west as the sun allowed, I saw the wind gather poems from convoluted mountains and on and on they came, teasing at my hair with their rhyme. I lay back in a patch of mountain snow and, with outstretched arms, wove an angel for Spatsizi. Bidding the plateau goodbye we slid down an abrupt mountain, down to the fine meadows and open forests of the upper Ross River. Spatzizi would remain a jewel in my treasure chest of memories for as long as I would live.

* * * * *

“Whoa!”

I turned to examine Supper as she was led reluctantly by a leash tied to Apache’s pack box. It would have been a crime to allow a domestic dog to run loose on the plateau terrorizing the caribou, so Supper had forsaken her freedom for a few days. She sat and hung her soggy pink tongue. At first she fought and struggled against her leash and the power of an uncaring Apache but she had little say in the matter. Then she wound up under Apache’s legs a time or two until she learned about nicer places to stroll. It was probably the first and only manners Supper had ever learned.

Now we rode in the confines of brush and trees which meant that if Supper strayed from the trail around the side of a tree that Apache did not, the dog would quickly become a canine ping and the tree a wooden pong. I watched carefully to see if the dog had the smarts to stay on the proper side of the trees and, at first, it appeared that she did.

I straightened in the saddle. “Giddyup.”

“Yipe!” I jerked myself around in time to see Supper yanked over the wrong side of a scrub sapling, then shake herself and resume her smiling disposition. “Get the message?” I asked her. “Giddy up.”

I watched her closely and she strung faithfully behind like a mini horse in tow. She was not a dumb dog.

The Ross River had a horse trail that led downstream to Hyland Post, at which point the river drained into the Spatsizi River. Lucky dropped his

nose to inspect an old horse dropping then snorted. Speck and Apache followed suit and, with renewed vigor from their find, they set a fast pace down river. We settled into the valley floor and crossed the clear blue Ross River then plodded carefree down the good horse trail. A good horse trail! A clear blue sky could not have been more clear or more blue. It was not candy blue, not powder blue, not robin's egg blue, but true blue.

“Yipe!!”

Apache yanked back hard, burning my bare hand with the rope. “You stupid horse!” I turned and screamed, then jumped from the saddle. “Oh no”

Supper had gone around the wrong side of the tree and was driven against it like a ball against a bat. She lay flopped unconscious on the ground.

“Oh God. What did I do?” The rope collar had been tied with a bowline knot, a knot that lashes mega-ton ships to their moorings; a knot that cannot slip. Supper kicked with strangling convulsions. The cord dug deep into her neck.

“Oh God.”

Frantically I dug for the knot but it was too tight and now she gasped in weak spasms. A trickle of blood rolled from her nose. There was no alternative. It was too late for time. I grabbed my hunting knife and sliced into her neck down to where the rope was. The knife cut deep but had no effect on the limp dog. I felt the cord and cut hard.

Pop. The taut, biting cord sprung away. Her mouth and eyes lay stoned open and my palms pumped on her chest. With each desperate push grew a terrible sickness in my heart. After what felt forever, her eyes blinked and her mouth moved. Her chest rose and fell and, incredibly, as if it had been a huge horrible joke, she jumped up, wagged her tail, and hung her panting tongue as if she had just completed a long, happy run. I sat back in disbelief.

“You’re one tough dog.” I shook my head. She would have been terribly missed. Perhaps she knew how important she was.

The horses fed on meadow grass so totally oblivious to the life and death drama. It is true that animals have an innate fear of danger, but do not worry about the possibility of death.

The morning came clear and lazy, and, but for the fact that the horses had wandered off again, it would have been the perfect beginning for the perfect day. One mile down river the trail held no horse tracks and neither did the valley. Two miles upstream there were no horse tracks. It is so easy to give trust horses beyond common sense. The horses were my friends, but only to a point and not above their stomachs. Lately when they went missing the feelings of abandonment lay heavily upon me with a sorry and confused loneliness. I ran back to the lean-to and settled the confusion down with leftover coffee. Where were the horses? My head jerked up. A horse bell rang from behind a clump of tall willows. The horses were fifty yards from my lean-to.

* * * * *

“Hey!” I screamed.

The young lad sprung to his feet and ran back and forth along the riverbank like a fox in a cage. Finally he stopped and shaded his eyes. I sat sturdy with the deep brown Spatsizi River rolling swiftly between us.

“Where do you cross here?” I yelled for the second time across the wide formidable-looking river.

“Ay?”

“Where - do - you - cross?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I dunno, here, maybe!” He pointed to his feet. Well, if I drowned, at least there would be someone to bury me.

“Gid up.” We hit the water and, with solid stone footing, pushed surprisingly strong against the fast current. Halfway across, the brown water

leaped from the stirrup to the seat and just before the far side rushed over Lucky's backside and around my waist. But we smelled the shore and pushed out in a spray of water straight over the saucer eyes of the young lad.

"Where you from?" His gaping mouth stammered for a realistic response before I disappeared as an apparition from a John Huston cowboy movie.

"Oh, a ways. You live here?" I pointed to the arrangement of buildings over looking the river from the bank of a grass flat.

"No." He dropped his gaze to the ground as if it was an embarrassing question.

"Just workin', sorta." He shoved back a lick of black, shiny hair with a stubby hand.

"He's not here now and I don't care." "Who's not here?"

"The outfitter. He's got moose hunters up the river. His wife's here though. She's nicer, I guess. She's cookin'."

Lucky tossed his head in fear of the big cookhouse then snorted our welcome. The door opened slowly and I straightened my back as a middle-aged woman stepped around the door. She squinted and forced an undecided smile from under short sandy hair. She struck me as someone who lived in fear of what her husband might say and how much food was in the freezer.

"Hello," she offered. "Hi."

"Where you headed?"

"Well, Telegraph Creek, eventually." She nodded faintly.

"Kind of a nice place here. You live here year round?"

"No, just come out to Hyland for the hunting season. It's the Collingwood Brothers' hunting area.

"Oh, the Collingwoods here?"

"No, you'll see them when you go to Coldfish Lake. They have a base camp just past the far end of the lake."

We sat silent for a moment and I glanced at the setting sun, then at the sagging horses. It had been a long day and my subtle movement asked for an invitation to stay.

“So, how far you heading tonight?” She asked.

“Oh, boy, it’s been a long day, a long two weeks! It was pretty rough on the plateau. The horses sure could use a break.”

She did not acknowledge.

“I guess I’m thinking we had better stay for the night anyway.

The horses could use the good grass.”

“Well, I guess so. My husband isn’t here now. He won’t be back until tomorrow. Well, hopefully he won’t mind. That cabin has a spare bed. Come in for coffee.”

With cups of hot coffee we sat around the big wooden table and the cheerful guide was a sane balance for the speechless youth who programmed my every move. The cook rambled about the far side of the kitchen counter sorting fresh baked bread and biscuits and washing dishes. It was a fine log cabin with an upper sleeping deck but the six Coleman gas lanterns perched on a wooden shelf needed explanation.

“How come so many lanterns?”

“Oh, sometimes it’s easier to bring in new ones instead of fixing old ones.”

“So, I’m told that this place is where Tommy Walker, the first outfitter in this area, used to winter his horses after the hunting season?”

These were questions of history only the cook could answer. “Yes, but actually Hyland Post was started as a trading post by the Hyland brothers back in the thirties.”

“Oh, yea, did the horses do alright here?”

“Sometimes. There is less snow here than at Coldfish Lake. Mind you, they lost horses to the winter more than once. Even tried to fly in hay during the bad times.”

“Boy, that would be awfully expensive. It would sure be something staying here every winter watching the horses.”

“You should talk to old Alex Jack. He was the chief at Metsantan. He can tell you all about this place. He came from Metsantan to work for Tommy Walker.”

“From the abandoned Indian village?” “He was the chief.”

The next day fell from another part of the planet, with heat that was a stunning contrast to the deep freeze the plateau provided for us. Dust followed my footsteps around the side of the cabin and a big black fly jumped off the thermometer to a sun struck log. The mercury held fast at seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

“Unbelievable.”

Dust followed my footsteps over to the gear pile. I hung the damp saddle pads, clothes, and sleeping bag, from the struts of the tall doghouse cache then made a thick bowl of butterscotch pudding. Later I joined the residents for a late pancake breakfast. After breakfast the wrangler and I split a pile of wood and told dumb jokes. It was fine to have company.

Sometimes in the early afternoon a boat engine broke the silence and I sat at a distance watching a group of hunters and guides jumped out of an aluminum riverboat. Around mid-afternoon a plane engine broke the silence and a group of new hunters in clean khakis tossed luggage from the twin-engine plane as the old hunters, in ruffled khakis, stuffed luggage and caribou and moose antlers back in. The new hunters and guides jested with chatter and smiles and by now it became apparent that the biggest and fattest man was he who pulled the punches around here. In an effort to earn my pancakes I wrestled and rolled a twenty gallon fuel drum from the plane to the cabins then returned for a second. That was when I noticed her watching me.

She was blonde, petite, pretty and, if she was the wife of a hunter, I could not tell which one. From fifty yards I guessed she had eyes for hire. I rolled another drum to the cabins. .

The afternoon and early evening slipped by content and hot with few surprises, including the Louis L'Amour cowboy book that allowed the hero to save her father's ranch, win her heart and shoot big Bart dead. Everyone was happy, except me. Who was that blonde girl? Aren't they going to invite me into the cabin for supper? I guess they're too busy. I sat on the front porch until the blonde girl finally came out.

"Hello," she smiled with some sort of accent. "Hi."

"Sorry, I do not talk such good English. You work?" "No, no, just going through."

She looked around at the wilderness and laughed. "Through? To where through?"

"West, to the ocean. To the Pacific Ocean." "Which way?" She questioned with a smile.

I pointed west and smiled at her candid curiosity then asked her where she was from.

"Germany."

Early next morning there came a knock at my door. Her smile was a warm start on the day. I had been alone so long the need for company felt like an obsession. I needed others to believe in my journey, my purpose, otherwise how could I justify my value to myself and others. Her warm smile reflected my emotions in that they were both touched with vulnerability. Her name was Rita.

"They say come for breakfast. Come."

It would have been more comfortable if I had known these people and introductions in the busy dinner room seemed out of place and awkward. The big man who was the head guide did not cast a happy shadow and appeared uneasy with my presence. Thankfully it was only the guides who sat at the table and had not yet eaten. Pretty Rita sat in a chair and studied the foreign men with a calm intelligence.

“Another pancake?” the cook stood over me with a hot frying pan. “Sure.” I took two. The big man glanced at me then opened his mouth for everyone to hear.

“Should be a good week. The bull moose are starting to move now. If that big bugger will show himself...”

“Was a nice looking one that went out,” Rita’s industrial husband added politely. The guides all nodded but the big man carried on.

“Fifty two. There’s bigger.” The guides nodded.

I pushed my plate away and sipped coffee, wanting a polite opportunity to escape from the cabin. Heading out again on the carefree trail was going to be a welcome relief considering my discomfort with this group.

“So, when you heading out?” The big man looked at no one and I looked at the guides to see which one would answer. He turned his puffy red face and glared at me.

“Oh! Tomorrow I guess. I would leave today but the horses need a good rest. The grass sure seems good out here.”

“Don’t need no horses bringing that runny nose fever in here.” “What?”

“You heard me.”

“Look I don’t know what you’re talking about but they got pneumonia shots and fever shots.”

“Humph.” He did not want or need my answers. I picked up my coffee cup in the hopes of letting the conversation slide.

“So what are you doin’ here?”

The room fell silent. I put down the cup.

“Oh, a pretty long trip actually. I came in from the flat country, just north of Ft. St. John.”

“What for? Pictures?” He had seen my camera. “I can tell you right now there’s no damn money in pictures. There’s nothing you can do that hasn’t been done ten times better already.”

“Well, yes, that’s true...”

“You think you’re some kind of photographer? Well there were some of the best photographers in the country in here before you were born. I know some of em.”

The air was ugly and tense and my body grew weak and my mind dizzy. My mouth moved in defense but my heart had been brutally severed by a guillotine.

“Oh, it’s not really pictures. I mean wildlife pictures. It’s kind of a story, sort of, for kids and things.”

“Humph.” He placed my insignificance on the floor foreveryone to see then crushed it with his insensitive boot. He turned away to bellow his mindless chatter to those who had paid money or were being paid money.

I slunk outside in a groggy haze. The sun beat hard and added to surreal senses. The whole world disappeared when I collapsed on the horse blankets with my arms over my face. Maybe he was right. What do I know about making movies? About pictures from some bush? About what people who live for car payments and rock videos will want to see? Maybe I am just a nobody. Maybe I think too much. Maybe I’ve been kidding myself too long. Maybe he’s right dammit. But why did he have to be so mean about it? In front of everyone?

A shadow fell over me. “Stan?”

I peaked from under my arm and she stood an uncertain blur through my watery eyes.

“Don’t worry about him. What does he know.” “I’m o.k.”

“I think it interesting what you do. I think you very interesting.” I sat up and rubbed my eyes dry.

“I guess maybe I take things too personal some time.” “Ah, yes, do not worry about person like him.”

I smiled and she sat on a pack box.

“You what they call cowboy?” she quizzed with complete seriousness.

“Huh!” I chuckled as she washed away my sorrow with one sweep of her kindness. “Not really. I just like wild places. I like horses.”

She nodded at my black camera case. “Your camera?” “Yes.”

“Can I see?”

“Sure.” I opened the case. “Look very nice camera.” “Thank you.”

“You make movie before?” “Small ones.”

“I think many people will watch. In Germany many people will watch.” “It’s too far away to know.”

“Tell me,” she looked deep into my eyes. “You not scared?” “Oh, it’s not so bad. What’s to be scared of?”

“Oh, I think you very brave. Very much brave.” I gazed into her warm heart.

“Tell me,” she insisted, “about you. You born in Canada? Your parents born here?”

“My mother was born here, on the prairie. My father spoke mostly Ukrainian but was born in Poland and came to Canada when he was five years old.”

“Oh, oh, a Polsky.” she giggled. “How nice.” “You been there?” I inquired.

“Oh yes, my husband, he hunts much places.” “You go hunting with him many places?”

“Oh yes, I like to go see very much. I not hunt much. Sometime hunt if not too hard,” she smiled. “We just come from Africa.”

“You like it there?”

“Oh yes, much different like here.” “Oh?”

“Oh yes, much people help. How you say, waiter?” “Porters.”

“Yes, yes, every night nice clean sheets. How you say? Linen?”

Always want give nice food. This place too wild for me.” “You work in Germany?”

“Work? Oh no, no work.” She dropped her eyes to the ground. “Many years before I work. In bank. Married lucky man.”

“Rich man.” “Yes, good man.”

“He had an account in the bank where you worked?” She looked at me hard-faced then smiled, “Yes.”

So tell me, when you came to Canada did you land on the east coast first in Newfeeland, or did you fly to here direct?”

“What this you mean New fee? We land Toronto.” “Oh good, it’s a strange place that New fee land.” “What you mean strange?”

“Oh, it’s a funny place, very confusing. You see, the people there, they got nothing to do so all day long they run from house to house with a glass of rum in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. All the time they talk jibberish that no one can understand until everyone and everything is totally confused. In fact, the only way you can tell one Newfee from another is by the kind of fish they carry in their wallet for identification.”

“You joking at me.”

“No, really, it’s amazing. Most of us in the rest of Canada figure they would all still be over there if not for that one guy who made it to Ottawa in the winter of 1926.

“One guy?”

“Yea, he was playing hockey on the frozen St. Lawrence and got a break away.”

“You silly guy.” She began to laugh but a held back. “You will take picture here, yes?”

I looked at the big yellow ball that held promise in the clear and calm sky. “It is going to be a beautiful sunset tonight. Yes, I will take some pictures.”

“Yes, it is so lovely. I will watch. I will help. Yes?”

She was a kind spirit and sensuous as well. “Good thing,” I thought as I dozed off for a noon nap, “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Late in the afternoon the head honcho plugged up the river with the hunters and guides. Hooves pounded past my head for the third time in less than a half an hour and I sat up to see Lucky chase down a pretty mare while snorting and swishing at the hordes of black flies. The flies had been

revived by the priceless Indian summer. Speck lashed his heels at a foreign gelding then attacked a mare as if she was a female caribou in heat.

“Stupid horses.” Running their nurtured bodies ragged was not only futile but a waste of precious energy.

* * * * *

“Whoosh! Get away!” The incessant black flies surged around the camera lens and our heads in hordes. She giggled.

“Can I see?”

“Just a minute; let me focus.”

Leaning into the viewfinder always gives one the attitude of creative significance; how to balance the shot with or without the tree; how much of the tree; with or without the mountain bluff; and what impression is that duck going to have. There were wide-angle lenses and the filters for that leading edge. What reality was and what the pictures would some-day imply could never be quite the same, so we had to be sure that differences were differences that would tell the story.

“O.k.” She bent into the viewfinder.

“Oh, Stan, it is so beautiful. Such a lovely night.”

It was. The sun burned orange and cast an eerie glow over the meadow, brown with fall, and over the poplar trees, gold and yellow with fall. A tall pine in the meadow that had been spared the saw reached up to prick the setting ball of fire. It was a lovely night.

“Can I press button?”

“Sure, it’s all yours.” She clapped her hands like a little girl. “Ohhh, it is so beautiful. Will it look like this?”

“Well, of course. I think.”

All evening and even after the sun sank below the field edge we talked and teased away any cares that we may have brought with us. We both knew and we both opened our arms to the greatest purpose of the evening; sharing each other’s secrets and assuring each other from misgivings.

“Let’s go have coffee. This bugs is too bad.”

In the cabin she made herself comfortable on a couch and I picked up a guitar leaning in a corner.

“Oh, Stan, you play guitar?”

“A little. Are there any song books around.”

“Sure,” the cook chimed from behind her counter and ran to retrieve *One Hundred All Time Favorites*.

“Oh” Rita clapped her hands. “I am so excited.”

I opened the book to *Heard It In A Love Song*. “You hold the book and turn the pages and I’ll sing.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I’m gonna be leavin at the break of dawn... wish you could come, but I don’t need no woman taggin’ along...” The guitar sprang the final chord and the dying vibes sunk into the walls. She stared at me glassy-eyed with her heart undoubtedly probing taboo depths. I had seen that look before. I think it was when Scarlet O’Hara gazed into Rhett Butler’s eyes just before they conceived Bonnie.

“Well, maybe that is enough.” I reached to put the guitar down. “Oh no,” she cried. “You are so good. Oh how good you are. You must play some more.”

“Oh, alright.”

“Mammas... don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys...”

Sometime that night I went to bed and, sometime later, I went to sleep. For a long time I lay awake half expecting Rita to slip into the room in order to discuss Polish-German relations, and I was in fear that she would. But dawn came and she never did.

I tightened the last cinch before breakfast. Before we could slip away, a cabin door creaked in the silent frosty morning and a solemn Rita came softly through the grass. Her eyes burned intense with some important dimension. I slipped smoothly into the saddle. She reached up and rubbed Lucky’s nose, then stroked his mane.

“You are leaving, yes?”

I busied myself with my saddlebags and gun scabbard. “You must leave so soon?”

“Yes.”

She reached up and placed her delicate hand on my arm and I stopped fiddling with the saddle bags. She looked deep into my eyes.

“Stan? You have my address, yes?” I nodded.

“Stan, you must believe me when I tell you what I say.” There was no denying her porcelain face. “You come to see me in Germany. You can have anything... anything...”

I nodded.

“Gid up.”

Lucky walked off powerful and proud in the crisp dawn. His flared nostrils spouted steam and his black hooves sent white frost into the air as sparkling powder. I sat a straight backed, lean and mean, and rode with rhythm, fearless nose into the wind of nowhere. It was not I who rode for the German Lady but Don Quixote who would send her home with a distinct impression of what is a Canadian. So I believed.

I did not look back and I could say that I was cool, but that would be a lie. A rocking saddle sexually arouses people but an already aroused person getting into a rocking saddle can be uncomfortable. There must have been some mountaintops and we must have crossed streams but my mind floated to other places.

On a good trail it is forty-five miles and a two-day journey from Hyland Post to Cold Fish Lake. A large stream drains the plateau from the northwest and dumps into the Spatsizi River one day’s journey from Hyland Post. We made camp in a pine glade on the close side of the big stream. It was good to be away from those people. The axe bit hard against dead sticks and logs and it was so good, so simple, so healthy. The armful of wood smelled friendly, as if saying welcome home.

From the lean-to side of the fire, the stew stirred happily but the twisting fall wind turned a leg of smoke into my face.

“Ahhh...” My eyes watered and I jumped squint-eyed for the far side of the grill. “Damn smoke!” The faithful summer Westerlies had turned into deceptive fall whatevers. In another blast the wind straightened and drove the smoke into my face once more.

“Ahhhhh!” I cried and dove for the pot of stew. “Enough!” The stew and I ran for the stream bank to have dinner well away from the devious wind.

Smoke, you wretch, you devil's stink, From earth and logs you rise,

Born of warmth or too many flies, The plague of adventurer's eyes.

Could we choke your laugh we would, Cut you clean both fore and aft,

Instead you follow, sneak on our backs, Gags and cries from your filthy path.

For fire and hearth many have died, Frozen stiff with cold and clear eyes,

Others saved from fires' delight,

Alas bittersweet, smoke side by side.

No words, no heaven No threats, no lies,

Will stay your advances, Till you join those in hell.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT STINKING LAKE

The first rays of sun ran through the woods turning the frost-covered ground into diamonds.

“Leave me alone, already.”

Whoosh! My hand slapped at the nasty rose bush that tangled my hair. Frost shattered down my neck and I retreated deep into the bag.

Fall was not so bad, once the sun got its feet on the ground. There were more meadows down-stream than last night made apparent. Lately the horses had been playing dirty pool each morning by hiding behind anything worth hiding behind.

“Hey fellas.”

We were out of horse salt so my hand crumpled and waved a light blue T-shirt in a perfect salty fashion and the horses hopped around several big logs on their way to the major disappointment.

“Good boys,” I slipped a lead onto Lucky and removed their hobbles. They had been taken but did not pretend surprise at my sleazy tactic. Enough, they thought, of this endless ordeal. Enough, they thought, of standing around just to get caught every morning. Enough, I thought, as I stuffed the phony salt into my pocket.

The horses eyed the small hammer nervously.

“Hold on, fella,” Lucky gave his back left foot willingly and sure enough, it was two missing nails that caused the rattle.

Whack, whack, whack, whack. He stood well as the nails were driven and clinched. Now only a thin band of iron with nail heads worn to stubs, it was incredible that the horses had thrown only three shoes in the entire

journey. Maybe if they had not been working so steadily the hoof walls would have outgrown the horse-shoes, but as it was, they were good for the remainder of the journey. Dennis Welsh, the farrier from Jasper, Alberta, had performed an admirable job.

Something ugly happened to the trail as it struck a treed bog, but something pretty happened to the scenery as we stood high in a pine forest overlooking the brown Spatsizi River.

I slid from the saddle, stood on the edge of a two-hundred-foot dirt slope, pried loose a big red boulder and watched it careen down the path of least resistance. Big puffs of dirt bucked from each jump of the boulder, and it bounded between the walls of two eroded hoodos before plunging into the brown water with an enormous splash. We continued south along the big ridge then stopped abruptly on a great point atop a slivery, foaming, white stream that cut from the west and dumped into the Spatsizi River. Tall bold red mountains looked down at us from across the creek and promised they would accompany us as we turned west. It's the red mountains, they said, that turns the goats red and gave the Indians a fine reason to this 'the land of the red goat', or, 'Spatsizi'. I assumed it was the iron in the mountain that joined with the oxygen in the air to become the orange/red colored iron oxide. So, I was entering the land of the rusty goats.

For over seven hundred miles now I had practiced holding my head under water on hot days, defied common sense by flashing my eyes open under water for what I thought was an inhumanly long time, in hope of seeing a fish. The first laps of Coldfish Lake welcomed us and my head stayed under water until it could have turned blue, but, no fish. One day, just once, I will open my eyes and there will be a fish. And then it will all have been worth it. Even a sucker, dammit.

The water drained rapidly and I slung back the shaggy mop of hair to study the lake again. According to Fred Bear it was more beautiful than words could describe, and I agreed that it stole attention like no other. As the sun ran east to west from dawn till dusk, the lake tossed a mirrored

reflection of red, green and purple mountains, a towering conglomerate of brothers to play on the lake.

Oh! A big silver trout leaped from the glass water, a mirror of what mankind should be, a minor disturbance for a short time and a short distance.

If the fine trail along the lake was an indication of the horse trails developed in the area by Tommy Walker, the original outfitter who arrived in 1948, then this country held some of the finest trails I had yet known.

The sun still burned high as we broke into a clearing above a collection of cabins and corrals, some old and some new. The first thoughts were curiosity. Why was the arrangement built perched like birds nests on this slope than on the level at the end of the lake, where the airstrip could be seen shooting a half-mile back? No matter why, it was just that much more unique. The cabins rose above the lake in the twinkling sun, with a gem of a lake and a grand array of mountains for each cabin's picture window.

We rode as eaves-droppers along-side a window of the largest cabin and caught a discussion, then silence. They must have heard the horse's whinny. "Anyone here?" I asked.

A round faced, curly haired fellow cracked open the door and stepped out.

"Howdy," he nodded.

"Hi."

"Where you come from, you doing some hunting?"

"Well, no, actually we've come away, from just north of Fort St. John."

His smile dropped from his face and he looked back in to the cabin.

"Hey Roger, get out here. You gotta see this. Let's give this man a hand."

Rogers steps came to the door slowly and he bent to get under the six-foot plus door frame. The two of them tied up the packhorses to a tree and helped unpack, keeping me under a steady barrage of questions and warm

comments. The horses hopped along a two-hundred-yard trail headed for the grassy air strip but stopped short to nibble on some seasoned lakeside clover.

“Whew!” I removed the dark Stetson and plopped it on the red and white checkered plastic table-cloth.

“A hot one eh!”

“Yeah,” Rick agreed. “Hard to feel like hunting.”

“I guess.” You don’t think he’ll mind?”

“Why should he, its for public use.”

Roger added a deep voiced observation. “He’s just with the Government for the summer, I guess. Seems to be a young guy taking forestry or something at university.”

The door opened and a grinning, young, blonde-haired man in khaki clothes who looked like he’d been playing in his dad’s closet stepped into the room and sat down at the end of the table.

“This is George,” Rick introduced us.

“Hi,” I nodded but it was to far to offer a handshake. He continued his grin.

“Who’s horses? They your horses?” His grin was perennial.

“Yeah.”

“Pretty nice-looking horses considering how far you’ve come,” Rick added, hoping that the young man would pick up on the amazing story but he just nodded and continued to grin.

“You come to go hunting?”

“Oh, no, just passing through.”

“You plan to stay?”

“For a bit, looks like a nice place to rest for awhile. The horses need all the good grass they can get.”

“Better move them to the airstrip, eh.”

“Oh, they are, they’re just hobbled, they’re on the way there now.”

“Maybe, well, better take them down there anyhow.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Rick shrugged as an innocent bystander. "Like, uh, they'll be there in a few minutes."

"These cabins are for public use, people walk on these trails. I don't really feel like cleaning up a mess."

My face turned red and my hands began to tremble with white knuckles pressed against my coffee mug. "There's old horse poop all over here!"

"That's the outfitter. He comes here to meet his hunters. You gotta permit for your horses?"

"Eh?"

"A permit for your horses." He straightened his grin for a moment."

Excuse me."

Outside the world was peaceful and calm and the late season sun cut a blue sky that held tidings for family barbeques in far away places. I bent down, removed their hobbles, walked them fifty yards, put on the hobbles, and doddled back toward the cabin in an effort to accept what could not be understood. From across the lake sounded the hum of an outboard engine and a small dot plugged at the head of a rippled Vee. From the cookhouse porch watched another government official with a similar costume but a taller fit dock the boat. I moved humbly into the cabin and sat down with Rick and Roger as George went out to greet his master.

"What's this guy like?" I quizzed my reinforcements.

"I don't know."

They both grinned. It was a family affair with the head advisor and his female kin. The lean man came into the room and introduced himself.

"Those your horses on the air strip?"

He looked at all of us for collective questioning.

"They're mine."

"Well, you better, keep an eye on them in case a plane comes in."

"Eh? You expecting a plane?"

"Well, they come in once in a while."

"Oh, well, I'll keep an eye on them."

"Fine. Do you have a permit for the horses?"

"No. How in the heck could I? There wasn't exactly a toll gate at Caribou hide."

"Well, you're in Spatsizi Park now and horses need permits."

"I've got three horses, and there's an outfitter here that has, what? Forty?"

"He's got a permit."

"I see. Can you write me one then, if it's not too expensive."

"Oh, it's not expensive, but they're back at Dease Lake."

"I see."

He walked over to the window and looked out at the yard while the gals prepared supper.

"That your dog?"

"That's Supper. Used to be the Chief's dog at Fort Ware."

"Maybe you'd better tie him up."

"Eh?"

"Well, there's people walking around here. We don't need him making a mess."

My face turned red and my fingers pressed white against the coffee cup.

"Her."

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time, it's just that some don't appreciate having those sorts of messes to deal with."

"Who? We're in the middle of nowhere!"

"It's a nuisance, that's all. The other week we were in Edziza park, flew in by chopper and, out in the middle of nowhere, there was this dog manure on the trail."

"Edziza? There's no dogs out there! It was a wolf!"

"Well, maybe, but there was some family out there with a big St. Bernard just before us."

"Excuse me."

* * * * *

Take a good look at mountains because what you see is what no one has ever seen. In the shutter of a second there is a metamorphosis, a subtle yet persistent transformation, what an earth geographer would call erosion from the almighty force that mountains have reckoned with since Pangea: Water.

My lips touched the crystal stream and caressed the gentle liquid to and fro before sucking down a refreshing drink. Like every other drink from the countless streams, rivers, ponds and lakes, it was unlike any other. There was a certain texture depending on the plant life and detritus, a certain body depending on the type and amount of mineral content, and definitely there was a presence of iron rust in this stream. Odd how through the hundreds of miles of rough living from chores, pack horses, fighting brush and washing dishes in freezing temperatures, one anticipated and treated each new stream with an uncommon sensitivity. As if it was the arrival of my person to Eden, the water cleaned and refreshed, and always lay naked waiting for a touch. There were no lovers out here to nibble ears with, to dance tongues against, to whisper delicate secrets to. There were no little children to hold hands with and cuddle. There were no outlets for a wilderness traveller to exercise the dear side of life, the sensuous facets that a person of depth knows to be healthy; except for water.

I bolted back onto my haunches.

"Hoowooooo." My eyes shot back and forth along the rugged mountain cliffs to catch the wolf.

"Geez," I scrambled up the stream bank on to the Alpine grass and flopped onto my belly beside the camera. Sure enough, the world had sent the Stones sheep ewes on the move, now out of good camera range. The camera lens snuck through some standing strands of brome grass and

hummed a memorable recording as the sheep nervously strung up along side of grass heading for the safety of broken cliffs.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. My chest pounded against the soft ground. "Ha," I grinned at myself. No matter how many wild sheep I see, no matter how far they are from my lens, they send my heart skipping. Mountain sheep are living proof that some men never grow up.

Finally the sheep were swallowed by broken boulders and the camera stopped singing. I sat up and looked down the long four-mile valley glad that it was down hill on the way out. It was a pretty valley with little streamlets cascading down from snow patches all around and especially from a snowfield at the head of the dead-end valley. The streamlets cut dozens of ditches through the flat valley floor then joined to pass through evergreen scatterings and a ragged evergreen forest low in the far distance. In the furthest distance the trees lost resolution and became a green matt that blended perfectly with the grand flat-topped mountains of Northern Spatsizi Park.

Through the binoculars the mountains in the north regained resolution and the hazy blends of brown, grey and green, revealed distinct valleys with forests, basins of grass and rough edges along the down sides of the rounded tops.

"Hmmmmm," I pondered the likely places to find a Stone ram. Somewhere in that group of mountains Fed Bear arrowed the largest Stone ram (at that time) ever killed with a bow and arrow, excluding of course, the natives who had more immediate reasons for arrowing sheep. I had seen a picture of the spectacular sweeping horns from this monarch and a tingle spilled through my spine. It was a tingle that had run its course many times and one which always brought back memories of the first time.

There was a spring when the grass turned green and the geese flew north over a wide-eyed sixteen-year-old, beckoning him to follow. It was a year when testosterone ruled and school was left behind. A season when western winds brought tidings and noses were for following. I hit the

highways, hitchhiked to the Yukon with the hippies of the late 60's. Managed to get deep into the wilds, a day that I climbed a wild Yukon mountain hidden in gray empires of mist, in a search of what they called Stone's sheep. The day my lungs burned well past a reasonable effort, when finally perched on top of the world all was unveiled. Pinnacles and crags and countless nooks and crannies and remote valleys carpeted greens and browns, with silver streams and still ponds like luring liquor. Slowly, slowly and slowly, spires of mist wove and curled against the ragged mountain face then opened as curtains for a stage, revealing three Stone's sheep rams, monarch kings with grand sweeping horns. Many times I wished it had never happened because there are more important things in life, and places much less lonely, but tell that to a sixteen-year-old with wind at his face, stars in his eyes, a penny in his pocket and a heaven above.

It was only noon. The backpack fit nicely and complimented the effortless gait down the gentle valley. Maybe Rick and Roger would be alone and we could talk about things.

"Yo! Anyone here?"

"In the cookhouse."

Rick and Roger sat at the kitchen table sipping coffee, twiddling fingers and staring out the window.

"You see my horses?" I grabbed a coffee.

"Did this morning. They were feeding up by the old corral."

"Really? They came into camp on their own?"

"Where did you go?" Rick asked.

I sat at the table and pointed through the window to a hanging valley across the lake. Roger thumbed his way along a topographical map.

"How far?"

"Oh, to the head of the valley."

"Rick, look at this." Rick straightened his glasses and stuck his nose at the map.

"God man, it's five miles to the head of that valley." Roger shook his head and they stared at me.

"You mean you went to the head of that valley and back? Rick, what time is it?"

"Not even two."

"And you left when? Around ten?"

"It's actually a pretty good trail."

"Christ man," Roger shook his head. "Remind me not to go hiking with you." Roger reached to pour me a coffee.

"Did those horses have hobbles on them?"

"Gee, you know," Rick said as if it had been on his mind anyhow. "They didn't seem to. I didn't know if they were supposed to or not."

"Oh God, no."

Someone else had to drink the coffee.

Worry turned the afternoon into a run. It was difficult even after all considerations not to feel spiteful toward the renegade horses. It was mind over matter that kept my red, exhausted legs faithfully drumming along the lakeside trail back to Hyland Post, over roots, stones and bog. Only when hungry trout dimpled the final reaches of the lake did an excuse to stop strike my mind and kill my locomotion. Sweat rolled down strings of hair and stained a dark heart on my light blue T-shirt that bragged "Busby Hotel Drinking Team". Cold water drove away the heat as my head dropped into cold depths. I looked hard but there were no fish. Just once....

Ten miles now and the horses had not stopped to feed, plowing instead directly down the trail in a telling intent. Two miles of bog lay waiting for my legs and forced me to the ground twice in fits of painful exhaustion, the second time with my face to the sky wondering if the sun had, in fact, gone down or if clouds had rolled in. The afternoon jaunt was gone, grave curses and threats about horse hamburger rolled through my bull headed mind. .

Where did that stretch of trail come from? I don't remember that downed log and was that creek here? I thought maybe I passed it already.

The big brown Spatsizi River rolled through the deep valley and the exposed ridge brought a cold breeze to partly erase the heart shaped patch of sweat on my T-shirt.

It was obvious the temperature was dropping – but no worries, it had been such a great weather.

"Where the heck are those damn horses. I'll kill the and on and on the bull ran, aware of the impending darkness, and with a steadily ebbing strength. "Let the horses run away for twenty miles, I'll get 'em and we'll know just where we stand, boy will we ever. This is one bush boy who's not afraid of the dark." And indeed the darkness was falling because the next stream was heard before it was seen.

Sploosh, sploosh, sploosh, sploosh. Ice water grabbed bare shins sending chills deep and driving steam from my nostrils.

"Geez, at least I could have put on my pants instead of these silly black and yellow sport shorts."

Big meadows opened wide and washed the grass and poplars with a surprisingly bright pink evening glow. A warm shelf of night air settled and hung over the meadows providing enough of an excuse to walk and search the meadows. "The horses must be here," I wheezed through tight lips and pounding chest. "There's the meadows where we camped last night." I pointed half a mile distant. "Half-way to Hyland Post, twenty-five miles. Damn! Yes, and there comes the hum of the big stream we camped beside. My God, what if the horses crossed and gave her for Hyland?" Carefully I scanned every glen and every glade that tucked into poplar and evergreen. It was a strangely calm and bright late evening.

"You'd think," I mumbled to keep myself company and shake off a lonely swell. "You'd think I'd at least have grabbed a pack of matches."

I walked on, turning about in little circles, backward and forward, twisting and begging my eyes for a glimmer of hope. This pocket of warmth was unreasonable in the cold evening, and the pink glow from the dead sun was surreal. My wide eyes pivoted about in the eerie glow.

My dilemma was real, but the surroundings magical, transformed into some sort of natural fantasyland with capacity for wonder but not fear. I walked slowly in a world that suspended time and calmed every concern.

I stopped. Rimming the big meadows stood tall trees, some leaning and laying. Glow did not enter the forest so any penetration met grim shadowed things with naked limbs screaming from the loss of their leaves. A rattle in the air turned my gaze to seven white poplar trees standing bold and silver, alone in the field. From their branches sang a steady symphony of a million tiny golden tamborines. Their music stole my attention as something that was not dead at all but very much alive, as if they sang for me alone a lullaby of this fine place. I turned to walk away and then turned backward as if the white trees with the singing leaves could follow me if they chose.

Whump. I tripped to the ground then sprang to my feet, running in an instant. With heart pounding, I glanced at the trees as they fell behind. "They can't have leaves, the leaves fell of the trees weeks ago!"

At the edge of the dark woods I stopped to catch my breath and settled the pounding in my chest.

'Ding', floated softly from the dark forest. I heard it, a bell, from the woods. Did I? I stepped into the dark twisted forest with blinders, diving straight ahead to where I thought the bell chimed from. Straight through the forest I pushed busting brush away and then it came again.

Ding, clang.

"Hello boys." They stopped grass-filled jaws mid-way between chews. I grabbed Lucky's halter.

"Let's go."

We slipped silently through the meadow with the make-believe light. To our right a big valley coming from the northwest ran back to a dark uncertainty.

It was strangely calm, so very strangely calm. I stopped dead and jerked myself around. The horses looked too. There they were, the seven white singing trees, elegant with smooth curved branches, alive and happy

in the face of barren fall. And they sang like a million golden tamborines even when I wet my finger and it grew slowly cold on all sides; no wind. My chest pounded trip-hammer hard. They were messengers of beauty in a time of little and they weaved their music with a bold courage in defiance of normality.

I slung myself over Lucky and held onto his blonde mane.

"Let's go." We rode through the meadow but before entering the dark woods turned to faintly listen, once more, to the singing trees.

In the beginning the powerful sway of the horse was a welcome relief, a fast change for pounded legs and a wrenched gut. The feeble moon gave nothing to the black forest and the stars that glistened close in the crisp fall fell as icicles to my spine whenever they were caught between trees. Thump, thump, thump, thump. The horse's hooves pounded, hollow in the forest. My hands took turns clenching a fist-full of mane. With each rise and fall my thighs forced a leg-cramping strangle-hold against Lucky's ribs.

Tarump. A root tripped Lucky's feet and his knees buckled to the ground. On and on we picked our way through a dark forest that we thought could be no darker until it became black. The dull roar of a river rose from a black cavern deep along our left.

"Whoa." Breath must have lifted from my voice to disappear into the emptiness. The insides of my legs warmed against the horse but that was all, and it was not enough to stay the chills and pimples that wove along my bare skin. Time to walk.

Whump. My legs buckled uselessly sending me to my rear, then tingled with a hundred needles.

A willow bush sprung like a rooster's tail above my head and I snapped a four-foot branch with a fork on the down end. Snapping off the small-forked branch left a fine hook and it held firmly through the halter ring.

"Let's go." I led on with stick in hand.

Spoosh, sploosh, sploosh, another stream washed grit from my runners but now the icy grip passed simply as another hurdle. At the times when

few things tricked our feet, we walked on the trail, and at the times when shins banged and scraped and feet tripped, we walked off the trail. It was then that we wandered as erratic drunks.

In an endless roll my mind pulled thoughts from warm memory and forced them to stay against their passing will to run. There would be solid ice morning and maybe there was already. This thought was driven away. There were no pockets to check for matches so my frozen hands rubbed against my shorts searching for hidden pockets. There were no hidden pockets.

Slurp, slurp, slurp, suck, suck, we were in a bog now.

Whump! I fell and writhed away in a panic as Lucky knocked against my backside.

"Whoa! Dammit, move back." I dug the lost running shoe from the muck and slipped it back over my left foot.

Logic is an approach used by people with a choice; to be logical or not. Now, there was not a logical decision to be made. There had not been a meal since morning and the cold emptiness within grew a greater threat than the cold emptiness in the sky. Precious calories spilled into nowhere with each step that begged me to stop, but there could be no stopping. A numbing gloom grew in my cowering head but it shook free and, once again, I egged on mechanical legs and chased away the grip of the frozen night. It was not a place for logic.

I stopped and beat numb arms against my side. "Oh!" Specks big white eyes knifed through the dark and startled gasps fell from my throat. It was hopeless. "See what you did?" I huddled against Lucky in an effort to steal warmth. There were no choices.

"The cabin... Let's go."

The miles crawled through no one's memory in a rhythm that came from someone's footsteps. Twenty miles to go, then nineteen, then eighteen, then seventeen, then...

We stood high on a great point overlooking a sea of oil that echoed from its depths a rivers' roar, and the finer hum of a creek coming from the west. Mountain peaks shouldered away the moon and stars from across the sea and I knew that somewhere there must be a goat with red hair. Twelve miles to go.

Thoughts blurred and dulled until they were not thoughts at all but senseless messages that had no beginning, no purpose, and no ending. Plunk, plunk,

plunk. My feet numbed from the cold until bruises held no pain. "Quit? I Quit!!" I would have yelled but the energy was not there. I squinted just in time to catch the brunt of a scratching spruce branch. We stopped. We stood and stared into nothing. Four miles back I stopped listening to aching legs begging me to stop but now they buckled to the ground without asking. On all fours I rested my aching cold body and crumbled soil between fingers. It felt nice. I pulled myself together again and somehow plugged on.

Nothing existed; all was black, so all was gone. No sun, no pretty places, no birds chirping, no thoughts, emptiness. And my senses were useless in the vacuum, my person shrunk to a hollowed effort, an automatic step and another, again, again, again and again, in dazed hopelessness.

We stopped and the horses twisted their heads alert. There, over there, they looked into the black, look over there. I saw something. There? Again. An orange flicker. A flash? I rubbed my eyes. It was gone. "Let's go."

I was losing my mind. The thought shook me, and its' adrenalin warmed me into a laugh.

"Ha!" To not only rob my senses but to steal my sanity! Sure, kill me if you can, but play tricks with me? "Ha!"

Lucky jerked the stick from my hand and once again darted his ears toward the hidden forest. Yes, there it is again, the flicker, closer now, a dancing flame? Bigger and brighter, gone and back again.

"No!" My hand grabbed Lucky's halter madly and jerked him along. He tossed his neck and threw me to the ground.

"No!" I gathered my legs and the stick. "Settle down, it's nothing." Lucky calmed down and we led out, but the trail turned us frightfully to where the flame sprang. On I forged, battling my eyes against the delusion that tricked us. But there it was again. The flame ducked and danced delights in the trees, sometimes yellow and sometimes red, sliver shooting into the sky then dropping to the ground. The trail turned closer and my eyes struggled away from the spell.

"EEEEheeeeeeheeeeee," Speck whinnied.

"No! c'mon. Let's go!" My eyes stole toward the flame and there it was again, it held steadily as a keeper. My breath came hard and loud. Suddenly a horse whinny muffled through from far away trees and Lucky jerked back, breaking my trance.

"What... it can't be....."

"Heheeeehheeeehheee..." my horses' cried to the trees beyond the flame.

A voice broke from the fire.

"Hello.., anyone out there?"

I rubbed my face and eyes.

"Wha... What?"

A shadowed movement cut a pencil in front of the fire. Oh, that fire looked so very, very good; so tempting, so warm, so unreal.

We walked, and it did not disappear, and we stood full-face in its luscious heat. It was then that two lean, rough-faced men in tattered clothes and beaten hats stepped in front of the flame.

"Hello," the shorter of the two said with a weather-beaten smile. Eyes glistened through shadows that cut from under a crooked cowboy hat that had a bite of brim missing.

"Hello."

He measured up and down my hairy legs, black and yellow sport shorts and dirty T-shirt.

"Never quite saw no one before come from outta nowhere in a frosty night in gym shorts. Not at midnight lease ways." He grinned ear to ear.

"Oh, ya, well, the horses took off."

They glanced at each other, but the tall man with the gaunt, drawn-out face and tinder black hair seemed incapable of expression.

"I mean, the horses took off from Coldfish Lake. It was a nice day. They broke their hobbles. I guess you know that. Didn't think they'd go so far."

"You must be nearly frozen. It might be a good idea to stay a bit."

"Yes, thanks."

The hot metal coffee mug sent only a tingle through my numb fingers, but oh, that liquid sent a fire to spread life into lost corners.

"Thanks for the coffee."

The tall, gaunt man nodded without taking his glassy-eyed gaze from the fire and the other stuck his hand across the feeder log.

"Brad Callison's my name. This here is Al Rammisky."

"Hi," I reached to shake the hand of Al who seemed to miss the opportunity. "A big fire, I've never seen a campfire so big before, not that I'm complaining."

"Don't fancy small ones much," Brad grinned. "Keeps things human." He stood up and rolled a five-foot tree stump into the blaze that jumped to the tree-tops with new energy.

"Especially tonight," I agreed.

"You know, I've come about eight-hundred miles. I don't know if you can believe this, but I have not even once met anyone on the trail, I mean, outfitters and pilots in camps and maybe a cabin or two, but never like this. What I mean is, why tonight? I mean of all nights, why now?"

Brad shrugged with amazement. "That's something alright. So, where you headed?"

"Pacific, I hope."

"Pacific. Ha! You kiddin', where?"

He sloughed off the thought and ignored my stare.

"Well, that's the plan. Across the Cassiar Highway at Iskut then across the northern edge of Edziza to Telegraph Creek. I'm hoping we'll be able to ride down the Stikine River aways.

"Ha, you heard of Cal Callison?"

"No, who's that?"

My dad. He's a pretty well-known character in these parts. He came up country back in the depression years and rid through same as you're trying.

"You're kidding. Did he come up the Peace?"

"Yup, and up the Finay. Back in them days there was lots in the bush travellin' all through here, trappin', pannin', huntin'. Didn't matter what, at least out here you had a full belly. No money in town anyhow."

"Is that why you're out here? To go where your father was one time?"

"Hell no, hey Alex?"

Alex smiled from another world. "No," he said, then took up with the fire again.

"We're just a ridin' through, a little pannin' and a lotta lookin'. Gold."

A motley canvas tarp straddled a pole as a shelter over a couple sleeping bags and grey blankets. A wire-handled billy pot hung from the high end of a long black stick and bent into the lick of flames. Four battered pack boxes served as our chairs.

"That's it? A big holiday?"

"What else we need?"

"No argument from me. Where you from?"

"Oh hell, I'm from all over. Where you from again Alex?"

"Saskatchewan," Alex said.

"Yeah, a farm there someplace."

"Really. Interesting. So what made you come out here?" I directed to comment at Alex.

Brad studied Alex for a minute.

"How'd it go that mornin' Alex?"

Alex shook his head a bit but the big whites of his eyes stayed mesmerized by the dancing flame, stirring who knew what memories from who knows where. "I dunno, don't remember."

"Well, near as I can figure, I was crawled under my truck and was a bangin' on a muffler."

"Where's this?"

"Oh, just off main street, Quesnel, British Columbia. Well, near as I can figure, I was bangin' on the old buggy. Sunday mornin' I think it was. Hung over somethin' fierce, as usual. Hey Alex?"

Alex grinned and displayed a great gap where two teeth should have been.

"Well, near as I can remember, I rolled out from under the buggy and here's old Alex a layin' by the curb. Hello! I says. Ole Alex says nuthin'. Gawd he was in bad shape. Hung over somethin' fierce. Alex, I says, I know where we can get us a coupla horses. Let's take us selves a trip. About like that. Hey Alex?"

Alex grinned into the fire with the same glazed, saucer eyes.

"Next thing you know, here we are. What, about six hundred miles I figure, before we're outta here. Hey Alex?"

Alex hugged his far-off memory, wondering when this nightmare would end, I guessed. "Yu," he grinned.

"Well, you must be awfully tired, damn cold too. I think its time to turn in."

They opened sleeping bags and blankets and I crawled in between, to much the beggar to ask when they last changed underwear. It was warm enough. I had survived to face another day. Everything would be fine, just as the singing trees knew it would. The stars gleamed happily and it looked so good we drank them face up and wanted to swallow it all.

"Brad?"

"How far? How far did your dad go to the west? lskut? Telegraph?"

"Hell no, clear to the ocean."

"No. Down the Stikine River?"

"Oh hell, in those days there was lots that travelled and kept the trails open."

"That can't be. I mean, it just can't."

"Christ man, it's my father."

* * * * *

The pencil flipped lightly, then resumed its tapping softly on the wooden table. Catching up on the diary was always such a necessary pain. The big window provided borders for two sets of mountains, the real ones and the ones mirrored from the lake, either right side up on Kodacolor. Of all the millions of windows, could there be one that offered a finer view? I pondered. Well, maybe a window on a Gondola lift somewhere in the Rockies; perhaps an airplane window dipping over the rugged Alaskan coast. Or maybe a one-way window in a woman's dressing room.

I bit the pencil. Such a peaceful morning and so many reflections. My God, the beginning of the journey was a long time ago. It seemed like another year when we stood on a windy Wolfe pass. Like another journey when Greg Cranston's boat skipped over a lake as a grand mirage. Was it me who blasted a tree in two? I wiggled my toe. Did I lose that toe-nail? I'll have to check it again tonight to see.

It was so precious to be alone in the pleasant cabin. Great, I thought when the officious group decided to spend a couple of days hiking from the end of the lake.

'See you later' I had said to Rick and Rodger as they plugged off on foot with rifles in hand to search for caribou bulls. The diary was such a nuisance.

AUGUST 30TH

Spent the day sitting in the cabin staring out of the window, just like grade one ... two, three, four ... etc. Outside, everything is beautiful. Through the window I can see the horses feeding. They seem to have big bellies of brown fall grass but are losing weight on their butts and shoulders. As I look out of the window now they appear downcast compared to before the trip but I suppose if they have the energy to runaway to Hyland post, then they should be able to go on. Hey, looks like two horses walking over to my three, must be Collingwood's horses who have a camp three miles towards Iskut. No! They got big antlers

I grabbed my camera and ran down to the air strip, then promptly scared the beegees out of two big caribou bulls, and managed nothing for pictures as the two big antlered racks floated over seven-foot willows into the distant brush. Dejected, I sat on a log by the lakeshore and tossed stones into the lake, not even bothering to skip any. A big black crow laughed above me and I cawed back. He flew away. I stood up to amble back to the cabin, then decided to skip a stone instead. I stopped cold.

"Boom." A shot echoed faintly from the mountain behind camp. "Boom, boom."

There is more than one way to tie caribou antlers to the top of a horse pack but the main thing is to prevent them from slipping a tine into horse flesh. "Toss me that end there." I pointed to a loose end.

Six foot seven Rodger reached a long arm over. Never, never, had I seen a man so tall as to look down on a diamond hitch, unless maybe one packing a Shetland pony. Rodger twisted his concerned face over the strange diamond shape arrangement as a surgeon operating on a gizzard.

"Rodger," Rick shook his head for the fourth time, "I'm telling you." "OK already, I believe it."

"But honestly, you should have seen what it was like to sit on those pack boxes."

"I believe it already."

"And the power of those animals, right over those bloody willows, like a caterpillar."

Rodger looked at me and shook his head in disbelief.

"Here pull this one here," I singled out a loose line.

"I hope Rick mentioned that we're paying to have you haul down the caribou."

"Oh ya, who knows, maybe a movie theatre down the trail."

I tied off the final knot with two half-hitches.

"I guess you got to have a special permit to hunt on Spatsizi hey?"

"We got drawn," Rick acknowledged.

"How many caribou do you think are shot every year?"

"Oh, they've done studies here," Rick maintained. "You see, the only place people can land to and from is Coldfish lake. It's illegal to land anywhere else. So between the game checks at the camp there and the registration they know how many are killed pretty well."

"How many is that?"

"I guess it varies, sometimes fifteen or sixteen, sometimes twenty odd. Far cry from the wolves that take about one hundred and fifty to two hundred a year.

"How do you know that?"

"Oh, they've done all sorts of studies out here. That's what the Biologists say anyhow."

"Well," I led out ahead. "Let's get off of this mountain. It's almost dark already and it's five or six miles to the cabins."

"You're the boss," Rick chimed. "You lead, we'll follow."

We struck out with Speck and Apache, both loaded to the hilt, down steep grass and shale faces then into the forsaken shin tangle and finally into dense willow. Dark covered the mountain and our race with the black allowed no mercy for tired legs. In the silent night we listened to each other trip, tumble and curse. After an especially rugged stretch, or after a deviously sharp turn, I stopped to catch the faithful plod and struggle of

Rick and Rodger pulling up the rear. Once in awhile a straight stretch tossed away caution and my long strides came easy for a few hundred yards, but then it took a few minutes to regroup.

"You guys o.k. back there?"

Silence prevailed.

"Hey! Can you hear me?"

"I'm o.k." Rick bellowed, then struggled through a fir tangle I had walked around.

"Wait up, I don't think Rodger is doing so good."

"What's the matter?" I mocked with little sympathy. After all, with his long legs, he should be down the mountain already.

"I'm alright, I'm o.k., keep going." Rodger strained through gasping breath.

"We gotta go hard guys, at least until we get to the main Valley Trail."

Without sensible hesitation, we plowed down the inky mountain until a mean thump and crash ruined success.

"Stan!" Rick screamed from behind clumps of ten-foot willows. "What's the matter now?"

"It's Rodger. He fell. He can't go on." "Whaddaya mean? We have to go on."

"He can't, he says just go on and he'll camp and come down tomorrow."

"What! Geez man, it's only a couple more hours. Rodger! Can you hear me?" A wheezy voice barely reached my ears.

"I'm o.k., you... you go on. I'm o.k."

"Why! Just get a rest and we'll make it. It's only a couple hours!" Over a silence mumbled a low-key talk between friends. "Stan," Rick yelled.

"Ya!"

"Rick's got a heart problem." "Eh?"

"He's got rheumatic fever."

Midnight on the side of a remote northern mountain is a lonely place to die, even if you are one who revels in the heroic air of high mountain places. We rested, and made it.

* * * * *

The gray blotter sky shoving from the west skid over the Spatsizi all morning. The horses and I put our backsides to a wind that scuttled down the airstrip in brief blasts. Lucky and Apache stood heads low and Speck picked at sparse blades of brown grass. For an hour, we shared the unkind afternoon and I tried to tell them, tried to make them understand, that although we had to push ourselves with determination for countless miles, I really did love them. Apache jerked a leg up in a passing daydream and stumbled when the hobble caught. Those bloody hobbles. It wasn't fair, but necessary. The sky was so ugly and really did not intend us any future favour. "I don't want to go on anymore. Enough."

What for? What is it all for? We're tired dammit, so deeply tired, and it is so nice here, so peaceful. Tommy Walker knew that. The Sikhanni knew that. What does the Pacific mean that is not vanity or proof of the same? And what about that Brad Callison? The nerve of him. Ha! As if his father making the land crossing to the Pacific was a big deal.

"C'mere fella, let me scratch your ears."

I bent down and removed Lucky's hobbles. "It's time to go."

* * * * *

"Whoa Lucky."

Again the trail struck off at an odd direction, this time turning north up an adjoining meadow.

"What in the heck is going on here? Giddyup?"

We stayed with the big east west meadow then struck a false-banked deep-water creek.

“Just like Alex Jack said.” We had ridden at least twenty miles and probably not even ten on the map.

“Hiya.” Lucky plunged saddle deep in the mud bottomed creek and slugged through, then hauled us out ten feet later. I looked down at my right leg.

“Damn.”

Water ran in my boot and now it bit my foot with deep cold, and a half day to travel yet. I shivered under dull skies then turned to yell at Speck who had not yet slugged through the creek. Speck picked his way around until he found the creek sifting along as a gravel wash and now he stood ankle deep in the creek, eating green stream bank grass. Speck was a big pill to swallow.

“Oh, no.”

Wet pants sponged water up my thighs. My hand dove into my right pocket and retrieved the white folded note. It was dry, thank goodness.

There was a time when good campsites were hen’s teeth, but now they were hen’s eggs. Every hundred yards a good one appeared. Today’s campsite was a dandy, a fine place to think about nothing. I bellied over the carpet of grass, then brought up the binoculars, filling the lens with beaver fur. “Chaw, chaw, chaw, chaw,” the piggish brown beaver flashed big rodent teeth deep into a white poplar sapling. With little else on the beaver’s determined mind, it gnawed clean through the two-inch sapling in ten minutes. “Amazing.” And I thought people were industrious. Well, yes, but what would the world look like if it had been built by people teeth? On the pretty little pond the beaver hauled the leafy stick through the water in a direct collision course with a ten-foot mound of mud and stick. I lay back and stared blankly at the evening puffs of cloud that rolled over...

“Muuwaaaaaaa,” groaned from the willow flat behind. I flipped to my kneecaps and popped my eyes over the brush.

“Holy jeez.” A big bull moose shoved through shoulder high willows enroute for the pond. Palmate antlers dished fifty inches across and shone red from the dozens of hours of waxing against red willow and dogwood bark. His swollen neck sent stud hormones into his crazy eyes and steered his brain for a one-way collision with sex. I bellied forty yards back to the big blue lean-to and spent the final moment of twilight sitting on my sleeping bag in a staring contest with a moose. No, the moose was not sitting with me on the sleeping bag, but with the twinkling stars above, the red embers glowing their last, and crunching footsteps in the woods, it was a consideration.

* * * * *

“Eight! Eight! Yahoo! Countem! Eight!” Yes, there were eight bright orange high bush cranberries snuggled in my hand. Lucky snorted with disgust at my success. “Didn’t see that bunch, eh sucker? Led you right up to them. Yahoo! A record.” As usual, we had not broken a stride as I edged the unsuspecting horse close to the bush, then swooped my hand at the bunch of berries as an Osprey diving for the kill. For three hundred miles I rode in attention of coming berries then edged Lucky over and scooped up a handsome reward of the tart berries that tasted like rotten toe jam. For two-hundred and fifty miles Lucky hated my tricks and our game, so he struggled to swing wide of the berries and quite often succeeded. But now, ha! not four, or five, or seven, but eight berries! Ha! And those times when we both saw the berries and Lucky fought to swerve wide, I hung from the stirrup like Annie Oakley after a handkerchief. Ha! Eight! He snorted and I knew he hated me for breaking my record of seven berries.

“Whoa.” A big berry squashed in my mouth, puckering my cheeks inward. We stood high on the great ridge of a pleasant poplar forest. For a dozen miles westward dropped an endless golden fall forest, as if the floor had been yanked from under a carpet. In the far west, the forest rolled against precious Iskut mountains with style and grace. The tall round-shouldered mountains huddled this day in a friendly meeting to decide what

colors to wear. Some came in dresses of green, orange, or yellow. Most of them wore white caps and had gray, olive, and red draped around their shoulders. Blue mist air bent evening sunrays and dazzled a dozen slopes with spotlights of white.

The last berry squashed in my mouth. Seeds that had been pocketed in hamster fashion were singularly cleaned and crunched. It had been a very long day that began with a two-mile muskeg forest containing a dozen lousy paths to choose from. And now, we should have been happy knowing we crept down to the Klappan River but instead lines of concern drew taught across my forehead. Somewhere between those mountains and us lay the Cassia Highway; a narrow gravel road, really, but some sense of civilization with square doors, clocks, television, tourists with white faces full of sugar donuts, and heaven forbid, vehicles. I remembered them but could no longer relate to those cars and trucks that whipped along asphalt snakes in-order to get vacationers to where they just passed.

“Giddy up.”

It was one of the most honest trails of the Cordillera consisting of fine hard ground and open poplar woods sprinkled with well-balanced stands of willow, dogwood, alder, cranberry, and white wolf berry. Poetic justice for the partridges as they loved to eat the white wolfberries.

The orange over ripe high-bush cranberries hung just off the trail and Lucky spied them and snorted. I did not know why he snorted and I did not see the berries. My mind must have been occupied with the coming civilization as we drew nigh along the clump of berries. Now, Lucky is a smart horse, and he knew that if he shied away from the berries, I would most certainly twist his lips back in their direction. He hated this game. But he knew, damit yes, he knew. He knew by the way the reins dangled loosely, by how each knee hung carefree against his ribs, and by how the spineless rider felt like a blob of jello on his back. Damn rights he knew I was thoughtless and did not see the record-breaking bunch of berries coming.

“I’ll get you sucker,” crawled through his thick skull. And at the precise moment my hand should have dashed out to grab the record breaking bunch of berries, he must have thought, “Take this!” and he sprang bronc backed four feet sideways away from the bush. Later, I checked for broken parts, picked myself up off the ground, and ran to catch my horse.

* * * * *

How could anyone be so stupid? My grip tightened on the saddle horn and a spitball hurled at the ridiculous flat-topped grade. You could have pushed a baby carriage two hundred miles down that railway grade without fear of being nailed by a train. There were no tracks, never would be I heard. Something to do with world prices and politics. Tell that to a million acres of trees. I spit on the grade, looked both ways, and crossed. We picked our way down from the grade onto the gravel bars of the big and bold Klappan River.

“Speck!”

Speck hit the dark deep Klappan River like it did not exist. “Speck! Wait! Stupid!”

Speck plunged ahead then swam like a dog.

“Jeez, that horses exasperates me.” We rode up and down the shore testing likely places to cross, then set up the tripod and camera when we found one. With one third of a roll remaining in the camera, it would run out and prevent needless waste and yet catch the action. The film was on ration, had been the whole way. We scrambled over round silver stones, then slipped into the powerful current and deepened to a bottomless swim in fifty yards. Lucky powered us forward for another fifty, then struggled up a dirt bank to the poplar flat. I tied Apache to a tree.

“O.K. fella, hang tight till we get back.”

Lucky hit the river without question, driving back for the side we had just left. It had taken a few hundred miles and some persuading, but Lucky

finally accepted that when the funny little black box stayed behind and buzzed on the bank, it meant we would cross three times; across, back to the camera, and across again. To risk my life, he thought, it must be a very important little box.

Suddenly, a pounding splash closed in behind us and I turned in my saddle.

“Speck! You stupid!” Speck splashed in behind us, wanting to help pick up the camera.

“You idiot!” Speck lunged downriver and as we crawled out, he found footing a quarter mile down. I shook my dumbfounded head. Never, have I seen a horse that liked swimming rivers. Speck was Percheron crossed with Labrador Retriever.

On the way back the river plowed against Lucky’s exhausted muscles and drove us down a hundred yards down before we climbed out. I pulled the map from my coat and wondered blankly about the meaning of the new kind of ink for the trail we now struck. It was double lined, wide, and wound from the Cassiar highway in broken dashes. ‘Truck Trail’ the reference section said. We rode a quarter mile through the woods, then stopped suddenly with my eyes forced to the ground.

“Unbelievable.”

I slid from the saddle. The track did not jump or walk along at all. It rolled along. My hand reached down to crumble sharp squiggles of mud jutting up at odd patterns from the ground. There were no dents in the mud ridges that could have been animal, no multiple pock marks where the thing might have fed. It just rolled along with a parallel double-lines through a twenty foot wide slash. How long, I wondered, would it be until we found the strange track maker? A chill spilled down my spine to join my wet legs. It was all so very sudden and frightening, and it needed thinking about. We set up camp, drafted an enormous fire, and my mind wrestled circles around the civilized world and the civilized person that so long ago I had left behind.

And as my mind reeled my eyes stared stone-faced at echoes of shadow and fire that danced on the down-trod rails of an old horse corral.

* * * * *

Not a grizzly bear, not an exploding grouse, not even a spaceship could have so completely frightened the horses and I. And such a dilemma it was being sandwiched between a cliff face on one side and the ragged boulders of Tatoggo Lake on the other.

“Oh my God, here comes one.”

The lead was firmly wrapped around the horn twice and I held tight.

“Easy now, fellas.” “VAAAROOOOOM!”

Bonk! Bonk! Apache and Speck dove against the cliff, hammering their boxes, then climbed Lucky’s rear end.

“Gadzooks man, how anyone can stand those things I don’t know.” “VAAAROOOOOM!” Another car sped past spitting gravel and choking us with dust. Welcome to the Cassiar Highway. I hated it already. One year ago, I would have loved it. We rode one mile,

rounded a bend and looked up to “ESSO -Coffee Shop”.

Lucky reined up at a telephone pole. A Chevy pickup sat on one side and an empty stall on the other.

“You boys be good.” I tied them to the pole and they snorted at the Creosote preservative that leaked from the big pole. A clumsy blue Oldsmobile plunged into the empty space and four doors flung open and out jumped two yammer-ing children, a middle-aged male banker type under a Dodgers baseball hat and tinted glasses, and a gal with a fat white legs rippling from under blue cut-offs and wearing white slippers.

“You kids behave now, you hear? We’re tired of your fighting.” The little pumpkin girl clutched a rag doll in one arm and shoved the boy with her other, then ran. “Mama, mama, Jimmy makin’ fun a Henrietta.” “Jimmy, you leave your sister alone or you’ll get a good slap.” Jimmy ran after his sister as the lady grabbed for his arm. He screamed, “She stuck gum

on a my G.I. Joe. Cry baby, cry baby, cry baby!” He stuck out his tongue, put his thumbs in his ears and he twiddled his fingers. The big woman puffed her red face, a face born to scare children with.

There were two truckers in the coffee shop, a couple of hunters in red vests, and an older native lady with a young boy. We all sat at little white arborite tables with wire legs. A hair-dyed blonde with a tire iron face hooted from the far side of a hole in the wall that must have been the kitchen, to a skinny worn out woman with tight curly brown hair and brown plastic glasses. “I don’t give a damn what he says, I ain’t got no tomato paste and I can’t fix no damn spaghetti and tomato sauce. What does he think? I’m gonna drive to Smithers?”

“You tell him,” the skinny one piped. “You tell him, ‘cause I ain’t gonna tell him nothing. Still didn’t tell him I gotta go to town next Friday.” She poked her glasses back up her nose. “What?” the other lady gasped. “You didn’t tell him? You’re not gonna make your tests yet. You shore taking chances with your health.”

“Oh, I’m goin’. I’m goin’ alright.” She beat on a table with a wet rag until it was clean and shiny. “Just didn’t tell him yet.” She looked over at me and bolted like she had just discovered a startling new fact.

“Something to eat or just coffee?”

“Oh, a hamburger deluxe with fries, and a coffee, and those six Eatmores to go.”

We rode back down the highway because we heard there were some cabins for the night and some good grass for the horses at Tatogga Service.

“That one there,” the girl pointed to a fine log bungalow with a far-reaching porch roof propped up on each corner by a pole that grew from each corner of the big porch. “That’s a new one and it’s got a wood stove. It’s been awfully cold at nights.”

“Ya, I know. It looks just fine, thanks very much.” She walked back to her restaurant.

A big truck hauled down the highway once again frightening the horses into crow hops. "Let's get you boys unloaded. Look at all that nice grass." Lucky was tied to a tree and Apache and Speck to each corner pole of the cabin where the pack boxes were handily plucked off and thumped on the porch.

"Prrrrrrr" a truck dragging a boat crawled from a forest meadow and rolled past a tree with a sign that read 'boat launch'. The truck rolled past the rear of the horses, then suddenly, like the truck was the great ghost of horror, Apache broke into a frenzied panic, fighting wild against the pole, which was the roof support. The roof bounced up and down, convincing Speck that it was indeed a horror that rattled his tree and they both yanked madly.

"Pop!" Apache's pole yanked and flew from under the roof and whacked him over his backside.

"Pop!" Speck's pole dropped like dead wood and bonked him on the noggin.

"Bung!" The big corners of the overhanging roof dropped and sagged like third-world tits.

"Oh, my Gawd."

In fits, they reeled on the timbers, discovered they planned to follow, and bolted into a gallop with bent necks.

"Bonk, bonk, bonk," the big timbers plowed the earth and bounded into the sky.

"Wait! Whoa! Whoa! Stop!" They harrowed grass, splayed trees, and disappeared into the distant forest. The dust settled. I looked up at the service station and brought my chin back into place. No one was looking. "Oh God" I ran.

* * * * *

Water. I need water. My legs were forced from the sleeping bag onto the frozen floor and my hands fell to the bedside to steady another dizzy

spell. The dimly lit room swam in a hot fever that burned my face and throbbed in my head. Ohh....” My stomach sat on the verge of throwing up what remained to throw up. Long johns clung as sopping rags of sweat. “Crack.” The thin metal Sierra cup broke a crust of ice and dipped a drink from the bucket. Three swallows struggled down against the pain of a sore swollen throat. A stone of strength struggled out of delirium and wondered for how many more days it would last. Sweat beaded from exertion as my faint hands dug in pants pockets and pulled the white note. Leave it alone already, I thought, and I unraveled the creased and worn paper. The words were still clear. I smiled.

Exhausted, I crawled back into the bag. “Huh”, thought you wouldn’t get sick, telling everyone you met how you’d never gotten sick out here no matter what you did because no matter how you abused yourself, there were no bugs to catch. Well, welcome to civilization. Dreams with floating messages and places with cotton clouds and singing winds lulled me once again into timeless horizons that turned with the world.

* * * * *

By golly! Old Alex Jack was right. The Iskut Indian band had indeed improved the trail to Buckley Lake which was a good two- thirds the way to Telegraph creek. And what a spectacular valley!

“What! Was I seeing things?” I jumped from the saddle onto the open side hill and stomped on a tuft of short curly grass. Another one! And another! There were grasshoppers all over! “Incredible.” ‘Boink. Boink’ Grasshoppers in the northern mountains? In October? I gazed up the dry grass slope and compared it with a half dozen others. Sun and warm wind caressed my ears. My blood flowed alive and my stomach tickled with happiness. It was good to be healthy again. I mounted Lucky and looked back east at the breathless fall display. All day long we rode on a superb trail, the best yet, and most of the day we edged along the top of the high south ridge of the Klastline River valley. As far as one could see dazzling leaves

painting the world with spots and blotches of red, orange, yellow and brown. A warm western wind brought friendly collections of earth scent and tidings of rotting vegetation. Perhaps Ocean rains pestered the coastal mountains but just west of the Cassiar Highway things were warm and dry. Even the leaves clung to limbs two weeks longer than back at the Spatsizi. We turned west and stayed with the trail, winding steadily through groves of poplar and fir until darkness forced us beside a great fire.

The sleeping bag lay open to the stars and the tall cheerful fire. The nylon lean-to stayed stuffed away on such fine nights. Left over bannock filled the one plastic bowl. "Humph." Have to stop making so much bannock with no Supper around to devour them. I loaded jam on another, then gobbled it down. I had been so hungry lately.

A mournful wolf howl cut the night air, this time much closer than the last. Carefully, my fingers ran across the axe-blade and it was plenty sharp. It was discerning how the horse bells barely penetrated the timber now that there were only two bells and two horses. Mind you, packing and unpacking was much easier with one packhorse instead of two. Flames and smoke twisted around, then attacked my face and it was a good time to crawl into the bag and watch the fire eat the final bolts of woods.

"Oooooowwoooooooo." I jumped up and searched the woods. The wolf was close, just past the horses, too close. "Just leave my horses alone."

I lay back and gathered the night sky. The big dipper was always a comforting friend, and as usual, the North Star sat up from a line drawn along the end of the dipper cup. It was so quiet, just not the same without Supper. "Poor Supper." Oh, well, her time on the trail was nearly done anyhow, and the owner of Tatogga seemed like a kind fellow. His plan to use her to breed sled dogs was reasonable, but holy Jeremiah, I nearly fainted when he brought out the humungous St. Bernard cross who was to be Supper's mate. "Poor Supper."

* * * * *

Was it a chance worth taking? What if the bridge over the canyon gap was only a rumour? No one seemed certain. What the heck.

“Gid up.” We took the right fork in the trail, the short cut towards the bridge. We plodded over pine needled forest for a few miles, then at last found the air damp and drumming from a crack in the earth. We broke from the forest and stood at the head of a forty-foot wooden boardwalk spanning a wicked gorge that squeezed a raging Klastline river.

“Geez,” I studied the log boardwalk as chills spilled along my spine. The walk was six feet across with nothing on either side but echoes and scary space. Why didn’t they build some handrails on the darn thing? It’s those silly natives. They say they make great steel workers on thinned beamed high rises a half mile up in the sky. Apparently, running in front of angry tomahawks on skinny trails for hundreds of years is just the training needed to walk six- inch beams with no fear.

“OK boys, put your faith in me.” I dismounted and wrapped Speck’s rope to a peg, then rubbed Lucky’s nose for good luck. I stepped gingerly on boards that sat on stone, then continued over those that sat over nothing. “Be cool, Lucky, if you jump you go by yourself.” Like an afternoon stroll, Lucky followed with not a moment of doubt. Mist stuffed the air and my eyes fixed on the far bank. Each step matched the thud of my heart and seconds doubled with tension, but Lucky followed with not a moment of doubt. With a great sigh of relief, our feet struck soil.

“Whewh!”

Lucky sniffed the ground and snorted and I scratched his nose. “No!” My mouth dropped. “Oh, my God.”

Speck had unraveled his lead rope and plowed onto the bridge, jerking his head and neck and prancing wildly as he stepped on the dragging rope. “You stupid horse!”

With clubbed feet, he jerked his way along, pausing midway to peer over the edge as a tourist in awe of Niagara Falls. On and on he doddled and

jerked until once again my heart began to beat. Finally, his feet hit ground and I grabbed the halter and twisted his nostrils.

“Speck, one of these days you’re gonna get it.” I just didn’t know what he was gonna get. He whinnied to Lucky and grabbed a mouthful of grass.

There was a reason to the rhyme of the river roar. It had to cut down through a thousand feet of stone before crashing into the mighty Stikine River. But our route was west and the river cut north, so west we rode, along sullen black mountains that rolled high over spruce forest to the south. It was the northern edge of Ediza Park, a park that contained Canada’s youngest volcanoes.

“Darn.” I squinted beneath the thick cloud and mist that settled in with the afternoon. From pictures I had seen, I knew that the high mountain valleys of Edziza were gentle mosaics of colorful grasses and lakes, but from here it appeared nothing more than raw misery.

“Gid up.”

‘Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.’

“Whoa up.” It was odd indeed. Not only had the trail all but disappeared, but now we found ourselves stumbling over strange black stones, some bare to the wind and some smothered by a thin skin of moss and lichen.

“You gotta be kidding.” I slid from the horse and inspected a fist-sized stone that mimicked a frozen black sea sponge. I stuffed a few in my saddlebag. Lava stone would make a fine souvenir.

Again, I tried to study the hidden mountaintops but to no avail. From the mountaintops the liquid magma must have swept down with complete devastation. The odd shaped man-sized boulders that joined the trail a quarter mile back were actually chunks of lava. I shook my head with wonder. What a sight that would have been. Now, toothpick trees snuck up from chance cracks and places untouched by the lava. “Weird.” I straddled Lucky and struck out. Now the trail broke a hard left and wound up a steep wooded slope like a big snake on ‘Snakes and Ladders’, up and

up through the woods to who knows where. No way we would have accepted this lung-tearing trail had not the pounded dirt trail been so explicit. But it remained a question until finally we topped level in a wooded flat. We rode a half-mile west, then halted at the edge of the world. At our feet lay a silver sheet of water, framed on either side by timbered hills. Beyond the lake, the world dropped to nothing and would have stayed that way but for the foreboding wall of mountains soaring above with cruel climates and wicked peaks. Brutal jagged spires sawed back and forth with ice on frozen crags. Tall and unforgiving as none had been; the coast mountains.

It would have been a happy lake but for the assault from those cruel peaks that spied from vulgar heights. Even the lakeside grass had run to places more freindly to raise children. But it was late and time to set camp, and as each night along the Klastline River, the wolves howled my bedtime story. And now, as the late brooding sun spilled pale moods between gray gloom peaks, the wolves had singing partners in various directions. It sounded as if they had just made a kill.

As of late, each sleep was welcome to a mind that grew weary with miles and a heart that clung to the final words of a chapter of life whose profundity could never be repeated. My journey was coming to an end. There was no escaping the subtle message that reeked from dead leaves and grasses, and from the weight of fall's sky. There was no escaping a question of gravity: How would I handle civilization? Did I even want to leave the wilderness? What would my reason for living be once my pilgrimage was at an end? Could my soul find a new beginning after the end?

Autumn colors the land and clouds the sky,

*Brisk breezes bite green and summer has gone by, Should we ask
why?*

*Blossoms then cherries lay down when cool days grew, Now
pumpkins must provide fair stew.*

CORDILLERA

Is it witches who bid fall ripe or who? But Wait!

Are we so shallow that our hearts cloud with fall's sky?

*Can minds relish blossoms through winter and spring? When
chill has been spent are there rainbows ends we may tie?*

So, let's join hands and sing, THANKSGIVING!

The daytime air over Buckley Lake stood careless this night and all the heat snuck away to leave the morning with none. Even the warm dacron bag, canvas cover, and wool blanket could not keep the cold at arm's length. In the pre-dawn my eyes blinked a frightening picture of towering icy peaks that reached frozen fingers into my neck. I pulled my toque snug and rubbed my socked feet together, then jumped with a start. "Moowwaaaaaaa," bawled a moose from across a fifty-yard finger of lake.

"Moose." I cupped my hands together and tried to imitate the sex driven moose.

"Moowwaaaaaaa Moowooooowaaaaaaa." Nothing replied and after several scrutinizing minutes, nothing resolved from the dim forest across the water.

"Ohhhhhh." I shivered and crawled back inside the bag to allow the sun a chance at life. The new sleep was a fine second effort, but it did not last long.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch."

"What? Again?" My mind floated back to the conscious world and monitored the horses as they ignored my headspace and fed around the lean-to. They had no respect for property or privacy and if good grass grew from a tent peg, it too was fair game. Sleep struggled with the feeding horses and nearly won when "Strruungggg" a foot tripped on a tent peg. My eyes jerked open.

"Those stupid hor..."

Two sets of moose nostrils blew steam breath into my face. They were smelling my head!

“Holy geez...“ I was paralyzed. The two cow moose never paid a cent for the show, but enjoy it they did, with blinking eyes and twitching mule sized ears. Finally, they tired of my boring performance and ambled ten feet to browse on willows.

“So much for sleep.” I reached from my bag with my Bic and set the white chunks and kindling ablaze. I struggled into cold clothing as the moose inspected my underclothes with munching jaws.

‘Whack, whack, whack’. The axe busted through inch thick ice, then splashed water that froze on the blade in an instant. It was well below zero, unquestionably the coldest morning of the journey.

An early start for a north country October is nine o’clock and the dying sun leaves little time for supper at six. Well rested we were, but not beyond the confines of our weary bodies and quiet spirits.

We rode along the north shore of the mile long lake, then unraveled a twisted trail at the far end that tried to dodge lake bog. Finally, we struck a well-pounded forest trail that was barely strewn with intermittent logs and brush. We dipped stiff-backed in and out of hardwood draws that could have been somewhere in Kentucky. Even the drumming of a grouse failed to capture our imaginings and we continued to plod faithfully under grey skies.

“Whoah.” I dismounted and slid the axe. Fat willows bent harshly across the path and we could have walked around them. “Whack, whack, whack, whack,” I pounded on a dozen for twenty yards until sweat beaded on my forehead. “Got you buggers didn’t I?”

It was the last time. I slipped the axe into the sheath.

Somewhere in the hardwood forest, about twenty miles before the native village of Telegraph Creek, is a fine hard grass meadow with a sluggish creek that bothers the southwest edge. A pine needled mound juts in from the west and when one sits on the soft-needed ground under the wide skirted pines, with the golden meadow all about, one feels the place was made for rest and reflection. Peace and good tidings have always dwelt here and always will. If a wolf should choose to kill a moose or a coyote, strangle

a rabbit, they should do it elsewhere. Rip Van Winkle would have liked it here.

At four p.m. I lay my bag open to the stars and collected wood for a grand fire. From four thirty p.m. until forever, I sifted through the significance of my pilgrimage, and if some things rooted certain, more things would forever remain a mystery. There were some circumstances for understanding but more for accepting.

The hours disappeared with cross-legged meditation. The spirit of my person drifted and floated as a current that mingled with the earth and sky. Being alone so much leaves a lot of time for sorting thoughts. I had adapted well, broken the mold of civilization. I was fortunate to have escaped death. I truly belonged, I had accepted the power, space, humility, and loneliness, of true wilderness.

But there was a deep unrest that was more than being tired. I did not want to leave this place.

I did not want to leave this meadow because it was my home. In the times of loneliness, who did you turn to? It was the fire. When my world came crashing around my shoulders with hardship and pain, who stilled my grief? It was the sun. When the stern face of the storms plagued me, who was there to give me shelter? It was the spruce and fir with their backs of cover and scents of comfort. When trauma and confusion stole my spirit and spilled hope to the ground, who returned joy to my heart? It was the singing birds, the funny squirrels, the jumping fish, and the majestic caribou. When authorities controlled my life and were displeased, who returned the solace and comfort? It was the eternal hymn from beautiful mountains and silent woods. I just felt right to be here, and the coming civilization offered no comfort.

Mother nature was very wise. She let the past be the past and brought no worries to my future. She let me live each second as it came and asked no more. In every moment, she lay quietly beside me. In her bosom there

was no cynicism to tarnish my feelings and she never laughed at my fears. She accepted me as I was, with all of my sins and all of my faults.

Author unknown:

As the soul of a man rose to heaven, it looked back to see the chapters of his life unfold as footsteps in the sand of a great beach. During those times that were happy, there were two sets of tracks in the sand, his and someone else's. During those times when trouble filled his life, he saw that there were but one set of tracks in the sand. "God," he asked, "What is the meaning of those tracks?"

"My child, as it is said, it is done. It is I that walked by your side through your life."

"But, God." The man grew dark with concern. "There are only one set of tracks when I was troubled. Why did you leave my side at those times when I needed you most?"

"Those are not your tracks my child, it was then that I carried you."

* * * * *

Once again the next day we rode in silence on the good trail. Gloomy skies shrouded our journey in the mixed poplar and fir forest. Today we would reach the Tahltan Indian village of Telegraph Creek on the Stikine River. Fifteen miles before Telegraph Creek, we broke into a strangely wide slash, as if we walked out onto an Alberta seismic cut line. Very old axe cut trees and saplings fell rotten and moss covered next to severed stumps. Curiosity pulled for the story that hid at the back of my mind and as we rode down the center of the slash, the story surfaced to my tongue, "The Telegraph line!" Of course! It was a familiar story. After all, our original route was to strike the line and follow it for eighty miles before hitting the Cassiar Highway two hundred miles south.

Two thoughts were immediate in my mind as we rode down the cut. First was the incredibly grand scale of it all. Imagine the manpower necessary to overcome all types of geography imaginable, hack through

forests, penetrate range after ragged mountain range and hang wire on trees and poles for a total distance of 20,479 miles! I studied the winding slash. Each fallen tree we rode past had been someone's major exertion, but in the total scale not even fathomable.

Second was the obvious fact that the line was simply a dinosaur, useless in the modern world of telephones and sub-surface cables. But when Perry Collins, wealthy American banker and promoter, explained his great plan in a book published in 1860, he lived in a world of communication via the wire and Morse code. Perry Collins dreamed of a cosmopolitan link from Cape Race, Newfoundland to San Francisco to British Columbia to Alaska to Bering Strait to the mouth of the Amur River, U.S.S.R. to Irkutsk to Leningrad to London to Cape Clear, Newfoundland. Ten years, millions of dollars, and thousands of men later, another far-sighted gentleman, Cyrus Field, laid a cable across the Atlantic Ocean with the help of the S.S. Great Eastern, and the Telegraph line was abandoned. Soon after, the telephone and the wireless drove the entire story quickly into history. I was disappointed. I surveyed the clearing and the immediate forest. It must be the Telegraph Trail, but where was the wire? We rode for a few miles along the cut with my mind turned to other thoughts when suddenly a thin grey strand slipped through the trees eight feet above the ground, then fell under brush to disappear. I dismounted and took the wire to hand. It looked and felt like number nine fencing wire, but with a softer ply. I snapped a small coil and stuffed it in my pocket with the lava rock.

All afternoon we wound steadily downward through hardwood and all afternoon the sky warmed until we stood witness to a miracle of mother nature. In the microclimate of the Stikine river valley, we were in a place out of season with warm coastal winds bringing warmth from the ocean. Green leaves still stuck to thick healthy poplar and green grass hugged the horses' ankles. From a landing on the riverbank, we held the perfect view of the Telegraph Creek village, home of the Tahltan natives.

The village lined the far shore for a quarter mile, then punched inland until its back was pressed against the base of steep grass slopes and cliffs that rose five hundred feet to the level heights of the new town. It was from the new town that one could see the modern world rise in the form of communication antennae and a huge satellite dish.

It had been nearly an hour now that we stood just looking, waiting, with apprehension. Enough, I thought.

“Let’s go.” I forced Lucky into the water. In six steps, he dropped to his belly with the brown current swirling patterns on the down-side.

“Whoa.” I turned and looked at Speck. He held back on the shore and made no effort to follow. Once again, I studied the river and became fixed with the wide, swift, brown field of water that rolled past like a great, muddy field. It was awesome; deep, powerful, and swift. Speck did not move.

“What’s the matter, Speck?” I just sat mesmerized and confused. Suddenly, a black spot appeared downriver and ever slowly moaned its way along to finally become an aluminum riverboat.

“Yo” I yelled and waved my arms. The boat cruised towards me, then pulled alongside, idling against the current.

“Look like you got a problem” A big man grinned a mile wide. “Ya, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“Horse cross here before but water high now, big difference.” “I see that. What if we put the gear in the boat, then swim the horses across.”

“Give it a try,” he grinned and powered the boat’s nose to the beach. Go ahead, make my day.

* * * * *

The tiny clear bubbling stream was made for drinking and could not have lived like this anywhere else. Certainly, there are creeks that wind through towns and cities, but they are commonly stagnant affairs, wrought with draglines, cement and gabions. There are some that run clear and swift over round stones in towns where people live, but they remain so only

because their size makes them difficult for man to abuse. This little stream was clean, honest, and it lived with people in a town. It boiled down a canyon that cut the cliffs behind town in two, then rambled between houses, along roads, through grass, flowers, weeds, shrubs, and assorted back yard gizmos.

Behind a big brown house, an old native lady scooped a tub full of water from the stream, then dumped in a load of clothes. Up the gravel streets I picked my route from the memory of their words. It was fitting that the eighty-year-old lady should live high in the old town above all else. She had been around a long time. I dropped to my knees and dunked my face under the crystal stream, then rubbed away the dust from the hot day. From my haunches, I studied the pretty white frame house that peeked above a trimmed hedge.

“Must be her house. I hope she’s home.”

The wood door was open, but the screen door closed. “Knock, knock, knock.”

“Just a minute. I’m coming.”

A spry attractive lady who appeared to be in her early sixties bounced to the door in a bright dress, and smiled through the wire screen.

“Hello, may I help you?”

“Uh, yes. Is Agnes Ball here?” “That’s me,” she smiled politely.

“Oh! Well, I’ve come, uh, to talk about, about the country I guess, and about the river. You see, I’m headed through.”

“Oh, come in, you must be the fellow my son mentioned.”

“Oh, yes, I talked to Bobby on the phone. Actually, he was interested in the horses, but it sounds like a fellow from Iskut has already spoken for them.”

“Oh, what’s his name?”

“Al Adams. He seems like a very nice fellow and he and his family have a real nice ranch there.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard of him. He works for the Highways.”

“Yes, that’s him. One of my horse’s stayed behind with him already.”

She readied a teapot and put cups on the table.

I clenched a cup with tense fingers. “I understand your husband was one of the first outfitters in the area?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’m wondering if, uh, well, it’s not such a big deal but, did he ever ride down the river to Wrangell, Alaska?”

“Oh! No! Of course not. That would be impossible.”

“Oh! But I’ve heard this is one of the routes the Klondike gold rush people used in the old days, since 1897 or something.”

“Yes, that’s correct, here and up to Skagway and over the Chilkoot Pass. But they came up here with paddle wheel boats that sometimes took weeks to arrive from the coast with big loads. On foot is out of the question. The mountains, they run square into the river, and the canyons and glaciers. It is one hundred and seventy-five miles to Wrangell, you know.”

“I see. How long have you been up here?”

“Oh, dear. I came as a young teacher and I suppose I have been here most of my adult life, off and on. And my husband, George, well before that.”

“No one? You mean no one has gone through by land?”

“I am afraid that would be quite impossible.”

“But, I met a fellow, Callison I think his name was. He said his father rode or walked to the coast back when the trails were better.”

She poured the tea and smiled gently. “Are you heading down now?”

“Yes, I suppose, but I wanted to ride.”

“Well, you’ll understand better when you go down.”

“Ya, I guess.” I forced a quick smile. “If I’m gonna go down, I’d better find a canoe.”

“Yes.” She sipped her tea.

* * * * *

Dan Pakula had been good to me. “Sure,” he said when I asked him if he could help with a canoe. “We should be able to fix up something. Why not come over for supper and we’ll talk about it.” I did, and together with his fine wife and two beaming daughters, we shared a genuine Stikine River salmon netted from his fishing boat. Now he gave me a tour of the upper town. As he chatted lightly to a road crew alongside the Tahltan Indian Band office, I set up my movie camera. School was out and the paved road was trampled by a string of youngsters that punched by in bunches of twos, threes, and fours. They bounced along with fine smiles and appeared slim and attractive compared with the Sikhanni of the interior, but that is from a whiteman perspective. Definitely, they wound into the fabric of western society with a greater enthusiasm, at least it appeared so as the gals dawned designer jeans and tail combs. “Hee, hee, hee, hee,” some girls giggled with surprise and turned away with embarrassment as they found themselves the subject of the camera buzz.

“Hey!” A big hand clamped on my shoulder and pulled me around. My heart flipped with surprise and fear as my nose fronted an angry-faced native that was bigger than I.

“Whadda hell you doin’?” He spouted.

“I’m sorry, I mean, I’m just taking some pictures.” I shriveled as he looked at the shiny metal multimedia camera with the big lens.

“What pictures? You with those guys for the dam?”

“The Hydro dam? No! I’m just on holidays, taking some pictures, honest.” He stepped back and studied me.

“You not with B.C. Hydro?”

“No, no.” I began to breathe normally. Dan stood off to the side chatting, oblivious to my peril. “I’m just passing through, came on horse. Heading down the river. You must be the chief?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “Ya.”

“I’m Stan, I guess I should have come to see you before taking pictures.”

“Ya, you should,” and he walked away.

* * * * *

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“I see you’ve already got the horses.”

“Ya,” he led Lucky to the rear of the truck. “That speckled one was wrapped up in his pegging rope.”

“Oh, well, he should know better by now.”

Al Adams swung open the tailgate of the stock rack and the horse walked in. “So, when you get up to our place with the trailer, I guess we can talk then. When do you expect that will be?”

“I’m not sure, a couple of weeks I suppose, before I get a ship to Haines, then get down the Alaska Highway and back.”

“Well, we’ll see you then I suppose.” He fastened the gate shut. “How was the truck ride in here?”

“You been on it?”

“No.”

“Well, not many others have either. It’s going to be a bugger getting them out with those hills and those hair-pin turns.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“Well, we’ve got to get going, it’s a long trip ahead and it’s already getting late. Good luck.”

* * * * *

The imaginary saddle shifted and without stopping a minor adjustment was made. The small water bottle slid easily from the imaginary saddlebag. Not that one became especially thirsty on such a cloudy day, but swishing water in my mouth and spitting deadly streams was at least something to do.

“Yi!” Again, I rocked precariously in the saddle as we jumped up and down. “Geez man, be careful.”

I aimed a jet of water at a stick floating in the brown river water, then looked up. “More rapids ahead!” The paddle dug deep and with a few firm strokes, the fifteen-foot canoe cut along the bank. Hardy types had etched fields and homesteads out of the river flats for the first ten miles, but that was fine so long as the poplar flats could enjoy the dry warm microclimate. Three Sisters Canyon changed all of that.

I led the canoe over the simmering water until the granite face of sister number one-towered fifty feet above. ‘Whack, whack’ the paddle beat scratch marks through green and yellow moss and algae that rooted in cracks of the great precipice. ‘Ucnk, unck’ echoes floated back softly from the river shore. Sister number two was cracked, brown, ominous, and frightened me from her side as the water that boiled at her feet hammered grit at the underside of the canoe like a sand blaster. Sister number three was the greatest island bluff of all, because once past her gates it was the true Stikine River of the coast mountains that one met, and the true power of the western winds that one battled.

“Woooooff,” a brutal blast of wind hammered my eyes shut. “Woof, woof,” recurring gusts came in waves of grit-filled wind that wrinkled the water, stole my breath, and bulled the canoe’s bow to the side.

“Augh!” My hat blew back and caught my neck.

“Damn.” I leaned against the paddle and with hard strokes did battle for ground lost to the head wind. Four days they said it would take to reach Wrangell, Alaska, by canoe. “Ten,” I mumbled, “if it don’t stop blowing.”

Beyond Three Sister canyon lay not only the brutal wind but ragged snow-capped coast mountains and thick damp fir and cedar forests. Now and then wooded flats accompanied the river but, now, mostly it was the severed feet of mountains that broke jagged over the water. It would have taken a climbing rope to follow the Stikine on land.

On and on, without rest, we rolled to the hum of the great Stikine River, its width broadening ever slowly with each bend. The bold, spike-peaked, snow-ridden, coastal range rode along on either side and blocked the sky and sent chilling winds through the green plaid wool coat.

On and on we paddled in silent awe of the big country. Big mountains, big river, big trees, and when we grew familiar with the bigness, I decided what was the biggest wealth in the Stikine country; water.

Water was the greatest treasure and it always began where one could not reach it; from the massive ice fields and from the skies. Huge saddles of ice propped themselves between peaks, then spit a hundred silver threads of water to crash over ragged precipices and to land unseen behind distant forest. From gaping jaws that dissected mountains, water gushed. Through busted boulders that carpeted every stream, it rushed. At every turn and twice in between, water smashed from the mountains into the mighty mother river to be swallowed without a trace. And as if that was not enough, every mossy bank, every grassy bank, and every rocky bank, shed token payment to the mother. From the rock banks, the water dripped. From the moss banks, the water slipped. From the grass banks, the water dripped and slipped, all day and all night.

But the river begged for more. It was insatiable and with the rains that spilled from my rubber coat, I too gave to the river.

One morning, a big bull moose groaned from across the river, and I cupped my hands and moaned until it dove into the water and swam over for sex. One day I stopped to make tea and stood under great jungle leaves and two hundred-foot Douglas firs, each tree with enough lumber to build a family-sized bungalow. One day, a brown, black bear swam out to say ‘hello’ and I said so long. One day a great bald eagle lifted away from my camera lens and said ‘no’. Always, always, and always, the river, it flowed.

In a hard rain between rains, I approached a sorry cabin that clung tenaciously to an eroded bank and in the dim interior a horseshoe was nailed

to a wall log. With a pen was scribbled “Stan Walchuk- By land - October 11, 1982”.

Wider and wider the river grew, taking all that its soldiers spew. Now a half mile wide in width, the river forced the mountains to retreat and slithered ahead as a straight-backed serpent eating all in its path. Giant fields of ice with foreboding names like ‘Flood’ and ‘Great Glacier’ hung high in the sky a mile wide and rolled down to the river tossing ice and silt from its feet.

Then the fog bound sky dropped for good. It hid all but the banks and compressed my thoughts to nothing. If not for the warmth that spilled from the west, my cold and wet hands would have stiffened to clubs. The silver canoe sped along from the efforts of the river, and a good thing it was, as my heart and mind stalled short of effort.

Gone was normality. There were no crisp mornings, no horse bells, no trees to fight, no caribou to search for; nothing. All was dreary, all was fog ridden, all was cold, all was damp, all was listless, and all of the clarity of my mind’s eye swam away in the dull brown water. But in the pit of my gut had been seeded the gift that would keep my person a stalwart form. Faith was no longer at the mercy of man or beast. I felt that I was unshakeable as I had already been shaken to the limits. Unswervable as my destiny rooted in gravity greater than gloom, although gloomy, it was.

One morning a big grey log rolled from the depths, then turned an animated loop and stared at me with big black eyes.

“Holy jeez. A great grey Seal!” I turned my head a few inches then continued solemn in the gloom, a gloomy person fitted into a gloomy world. Later that day, the river grew unreasonably wide and tricked me to its center before dumping gusts of wind at my face.

Waves jumped up and splashed my legs, my arms, and even my face. “You bastard” I screamed and paddled fiercely with the energy that I had hoarded for six days. Over and over the swells the silver streak shot forward, ducking behind one island then sneaking to another in an indomitable fight

westward. Again and again, my arms dove the paddle into brown depths. “On the right, one, two, three, four, five, six... now the left, one, two, three, four...” With one hand paddling and the other bailing, I battled to stay straight to the wind.

“You bastard!” I screamed at the relentless gales of wind. And my arms continued the battle. Soon they wrung as wet on the inside as the outside.

Larger and taller the islands grew and then I glanced to find the north shore missing in merciless cloud.

“Damn you,” I wailed as another breaker smashed into the bow of the tiny canoe. Six big rollers bowled at me, watched my twisted face, and laughed. I dove behind a big island, then dropped my arms in anguish as the canoe nosed up a stony beach.

I hung my head and cried.

“No,” I said then rubbed my eyes, then looked to the skies. Trees blasted to and fro and ugly cloud wafted over the treetops.

I collapsed back with exhaustion. “No.” I sank to another world then lay back on my bedroll and fell into darkness.

* * * * *

The seagull did not care much what it ate; fish scraps when it could steal them, some garbage dumped from a herring boat, and if pickings were slim, perhaps a water shrew. When the wall of cloud slipped overhead and was suddenly gone, like a quilt of fleece pulled from the earth, the white beady-eyed gull cocked its head with delight. Too long, it thought, that I have stood with cramped legs on this shelf of rock waiting the storm. Time to send these graceful wings back into the air.

It sprang from its feet and spread its wings to the sky just as the brilliant afternoon sun struck the rocks. All along the seashore it cruised. No sense bothering the boats in the harbour, few had done any fishing as of late and there was too much competition there anyhow. No, for now I will search the

ocean shores for a scrap or a shrew, maybe even glide up the big river a stretch.

The elegant gull tossed and turned, tilting its slim wings this way and that, cocking its head at the best angle for sighting a tidbit. But as it sailed around the backside of its favorite big island, the island stuck square in the mouth of the big river, it braked madly and screamed curses of fright.

“EEEEEEEEEEEE.” My eyes jumped apart and I jerked up to my seat. “Ohhh.” My stomach muscles pained. Sun warmed my face and from its brilliance soared a white gull.

“Unreal...” I ran my eyes to the blue sky, then along the ragged shoreline that cribbed tall timbered islands and distant rocky bluffs. The seagull wove above and I shielded my eyes to catch it.

“A seagull?”

Something was amiss. The blue sky was much too blue. An energy electrified the air. The river climaxed from its perpetual motion and now only throbbed with anticipation. My chest heaved from the moment. Was it the sun that woke my senses and burned them keen with its fire? What was it that weakened my knees? And the air, what happened to the air? It was not just that the skies had parted, and the wind had died. The air, it walked in and sat down like a king from Atlantis.

I turned my nose to the air and with short breaths caught the heavy smell.

“It stinks.” The murk swam through my nostrils and toyed with my mind. “Stinks?” My nose twitched.

“Oh, my God.” I scrambled to look west, but trees and boulders hid all.

“Stinks!” Shock jolted my body.

“You not go to ocean!” Old Alex Jack chortled. “Indian not go ocean. Go Great Stinking Lake!” Shivers ran along my spine.

I ran to the water’s edge. “Yes, yes, great stinking lake!” I scooped water to my lips. It was fresh. “Darn.” The canoe shoved off easily and we

careened around the edge of the Big Island, then studied the country. All about there were islands. I sucked in a huge breath of air and grinned.

“Stinks! Stinks! It stinks! My God it stinks! Salt! Beautiful ocean salt ... and algae ... and seaweed! And, and, and...”

I lay the paddle down, then searched for the two shores that had confined us for so many days.

“Oh my God.” They were gone. The river held no boundaries, each bank that had run west now turned north and south to lose themselves in convolutions of ragged shoreline. My face fell fully to the west with awe. Shiny water and clear sky mulled with blue mist air, altogether running from me to the lost horizon.

But there were green island warts protruding all about and in their independence the mainland had cast them out to fend for themselves.

I scooped another handful of water. “Fresh, still fresh.” I drove hard with the paddle.

There were many islands, but only one that could be Wrangell Island, Alaska, the great long one melting blue-black five miles to the southwest.

“Now.”

I dug deep and hard with the paddle, grim and determined, sure and steady. Across the open water my arms powered and the silver streak shot. Swells of water that must have gathered the rhythm of their roll somewhere in the blue distance lifted and dropped the little vessel. At first, the swells came modest, but as we forged into a gap between two islands, they heightened to roller coaster frights. But on I drove, counting on one side then the other, to one hundred, to one thousand, and after I stopped to cruise a moment’s rest, over again, to one hundred and to one thousand.

Soon, anytime now. The water is brown but test it anyhow. I dipped my hand and touched the fresh water to my lips. “Fresh, still fresh.”

Again, I drove the paddle deep, harder than the last time. Lungs drank heavily from the thick air and it filled my senses with calm and my muscles

with strength. A smile began, subtle but it lingered until it fixed firmly; for one mile, then to two. On and on I drove relentlessly.

It was time. There was no need to look up at the sky. I was riding in the sky, skimming over rolling cloud. There was no point looking up to see if the heavens had truly opened. The doors were straight ahead.

On and on I delivered, then glided for a moment to set the camera on a duffel bag to sing its final song. “Click, click, click, click, click,” the last roll was spent.

I scooped water to my lips. “Fresh.” I leaned hard against the paddle, and it bent a bow with every bite. Still the air thickened, its heady position now reeling euphoric swirls that stood my hair on end and beamed radiance from my face.

“My God.”

It was happening, it was happening. “My God.” It was happening.

Past a round island I dodged, then broke over the finest silver sheet of sea silk I had ever seen. It went on, simply as nothing can: Forever. With the passing of the island, the glistening sheet spread endless beyond imagination and each dig of the paddle sent my senses beyond my person. I paddled an entity unto space, and freedom, in a timeless dream.

White wisps of feather cloud spread wings to watch. From my body lifted the skin, flesh, and bone, and the aches were gone. The deeper the paddle drove, the lighter it lifted. The deeper the paddle drove, the more sensational were the spires of glory reeling magically to the heavens.

Electric energy vibrated in each and every cell and between each and every cell ran waves of euphoria.

“Now,” I thought, as the water looked back with blue eyes. “Now,” I thought as tears blurred my vision.

“Now,” I dipped my hand to clear water as the canoe slid silent. “Now,” the water touched my lips, then once again, and to confirm what I knew, again. Salt.

“THE PACIFIC!” “THE PACIFIC!!” “THE PACIFIC!!!”

I screamed ...

...Until I paddled toward big Wrangell Island and I looked up to a collection of tiny fingers of people peering down over white rails, down the side of a monster cruise ship. Curious people stared wide-eyed at the tiny silver rider below with his brown hairy face, cowboy hat, and riding chaps, who they must of thought a madman. Until then, I screamed. I screamed and screamed and screamed again, and found no reason to stop and so I screamed ... THE PACIFIC!!!

We drew nigh on the gray wooden wharfs that held confusions of every sort of ship and boat. Through the maze, I landed behind a wooden shed in someone's back yard. No doubt, inside of this shed, that footed tufts of quack grass and bordered a caragana hedge, could be found a tumble of old boards with protruding old nails, a couple of battered gas cans, a box of dirty bolts and screws, a couple of tattered life jackets slung on a nail, some grimy tools strewn on a beaten work bench, and a retired outboard leaning in a corner.

I studied the house and the curtains were drawn tight. I dragged the loaded canoe alongside the shed.

“See the Byfords,” Dan Pakula said. “Leave my canoe with them. You can trust them. They're good people.”

The Byfords were not home. That was good. I gazed down the grass slope to the paved street befuddled with cars and houses. There was too much here, but I would confront it alone, now.

My rubber boots crept softly over the cement sidewalk. “Zoom, zoom.” Two more cars whizzed past. They were all over the place. Houses were all over the place. Everything was all over the place. My eyes jerked back and forth. A man slammed a truck door. Look at all of those dials and gauges on that dashboard. There, in that big window, I saw her push the curtain apart to spy on me. “Mind your own damn business.” My rubber boots crept along in rhythm with the swish of riding chaps. I shifted my brown Stetson cowboy hat and scratched my forehead.

The houses gave way to large sidewalks and big fronted, big windowed stores. People mingled all about under shiny signs. Two men chatted on the sidewalk ahead. I crossed the street. Pebbles bit into the soft worn rubber boots as they crept along. There was the hotel the girl mentioned, just ahead.

Two people talked to the woman behind the shiny desk. They were gone. I stepped up to the shiny counter.

“Hello.” The chunky, curly-haired woman said. She pulled a cigarette from her mouth and pounded it against the ash tray.

“Well, can I help you?”

I cleared my throat.

“Ye...mmm, mmmm.” I cleared my throat. “A room. I would like a room.”

She shoved a card at me. I took a pen.

Name: Stan Walchuk.

Address: Entrance, Alberta, Canada. Drivers License Number: None.

She read the card and shook her head. “You look a little rough to come in on a plane. Mind you, them ships can be a little grueling.” I dug for some of AI Adams’ money and plopped it on the counter.

“Thank you.”

The soft rubber boots crept softly over the fine carpet, up the stairs, and into the room where I stood.

My hand reached for the T.V. knob. “No. It’s too soon.”

I stepped in the washroom, disrobed, sat on the edge of the tub and turned on the ‘Hot’ tap. A miracle happened. No fire, no dipping a pot in a lake or stream, no carrying, no waiting. Warm water came out of a pipe like magic!

It ran down my hand and I giggled as my eyes watered with emotion. I cried. Finally collected myself.

“Amazing.” I had just discovered the hot bath. “I’ll make a million.”

I sank into the luscious water. “Ohhhhhh ...” So nice, so precious, so incredible ... that man could make hot water come out of pipes. I soaked and soaked, and slowly, all of the Cordillera grit washed away.

Forgotten songs hummed from my lips. “Songs! Music!” I jumped from the tub, splashed water all about, thought of mom, and turned on the radio knob. Voices jived from the little box. “Yi!” I jumped and grooved to the tune I had never heard, then slipped back into the tub. Words ran from my mouth to crash against the bathroom walls, and, ohhhh, the silky soap ran across my skin. Hey, this civilization is not so bad!

My mind turned to girls. It had been a long time. I ran my fingers through my beard. Everything was clean but the beard would have to go, and it did. I stared into the mirror and ran my hand over the smooth, almost baby-like skin of my chin and neck. I was not myself, or was I? I forced eye contact and scared myself. There was a new depth, a new dimension in my face, but of what? I searched for answers or some grounds of understanding, but none came.

“This is dumb.” I finished washing up. Well, at least I know one thing; I will have to be a very flexible person, headed right smack into inner Vancouver, and now, right downstairs to the pub! People! A bottle of beer! Girls! Dancing! Laughing! Yahoooo! After I get some new clothes.

In between the pub and the dining lounge sat a dance floor, but it was quiet at eight in the evening. I glanced around to find a middle- aged man in rough demins, two male punkers, and oh, look at that pretty girl. I stepped one table closer to the girl and seated myself with a good command of the dance floor. I’m ready, by golly, you betcha I’m ready! Yahoooo! Bring on the beer, the spizaz, the glamour!

I dug a hand into the pocket of my new jeans. It was there. Oh, here she comes. She said she was attractive and she sure is. Maybe she doesn’t have a boy-friend. She smiled.

“And what can I get you?”

“Well, uh, do you know...?” I fumbled in my pants and pulled out the tattered white note. “Do you know, uh, Sandra? She cooks for the Collingwoods in Spatsizi country.”

“Sandra? Where?”

“Spatsizi, it’s in the northern B.C. interior. She’s got sort of brown fairly long hair. Quite pretty. You’re name Jenny?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she sent a note with me, to give to you.” “Oh, o.k.”

“Here.” I handed her the note that read “PONY EXPRESS” on the outside.

“So do you want something to drink?” “Oh, uh, sure, yes, a beer.”

“What kind of beer?”

“Oh, uh, any kind.” She tightened her lips. “I mean, uh, a Miller, ya, I’ll have a Miller.”

She walked away, but I spied on her every move. She set down the tray, grabbed the crumpled chips bag, dumped it in the garbage, unraveled the note, “Hi Jenny — Sandra” and crumpled it to the garbage.

She brought me my beer and I downed a half bottle. She didn’t care. She didn’t care one damn bit about me or my expedition. Why the hell should she? Why should anyone? No one cares. No one knows. If they did know they wouldn’t believe me anyhow. Well, I don’t give a damn either. I just won’t give a damn. I downed the beer and she brought me another. I didn’t tip her; witch.

Jeez, that girl sitting there is sure pretty. Look at that guy and girl who just came in. They must be in love. Look at them laugh and hold hands. They’re sure lucky. I drank a gulp of beer. Jeez, that girl sure *is* pretty. I wonder if she sees me? Man, such pretty blonde flowing hair and those tight black pants. But, oh, how her low-cut sweater reveals major cleavage. Oh... you know what I just did? You bet, I just became the only living person to make a wilderness crossing of the entire North American mountain system. Can you imagine that? Over one thousand wilderness

miles; across rivers twenty -two times; through eleven mountain ranges; over fourteen mountain passes. You don't know, do you? Jeez, she's pretty. She glanced at me. Hey! She looked at me, yes, yes, she did! I drank some beer. Smile, smile at her, now, she's looking this way, now. I smiled, hard.

She caught my silly grin, took her jacket, and walked out the door. I swallowed, and drank some beer. "You stupid idiot." No one cares. Big deal, why should anyone care anyhow? No big deal. I drank the beer and ordered another, then another, and another. My face covered dizzily to the floor in drunken stupor.

Suddenly lights flashed from a brightly lit box. Music sprang to the air. Lights glowed, lights flashed, lights flew, lights dazzled brilliance all about the dark! Orange! Yellow! There and here! Gone and back again! They streaked to the sky and dropped to the ground, then dashed shadows with the dark. Dancing. Around and around the lights ran, and oh! It was a grand fire! Oh! I wonder where the horses are? I strained into the swimming fire shadows. I haven't heard the bells for some time... I hope they're alright..... Oh, my God... I hope they forgive me... please, please, forgive me... I love you, you know I do... I'm sorry... Apache... Speck... Lucky... I know you saved my life Lucky, I know... Oh, God, please... I'm sorry... I'm sorry... Oh God... I didn't want to sell them... I love you... I love you... I'll always... always.....

* * * * *

There is a land,

Where canyon and peak, Are past and beyond.

Where freedom pulses, In the veins of a hand.

And the clouds echo shadows, Of a thousand valleys gone.

Where the King mourns untouchable, Leader of the band.

And it beckons 'Come Back' And I shall, I'm a man.

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

This edition is the third printing of *The Cordillera Expedition*. It is the best edition. It has more information, more color images, and it has been re-edited. I have also added more detail and clarity.

If you find the attention to detail surprising, keep in mind that I wrote the book immediately after the journey, with a detailed diary in hand. Writing this book while it was still so fresh in my mind was like living the experience over again. The book was written in late 1982 and early 1983, and only now, in 2022, have I actually read the book. I was caught off guard. Anyone revisiting an Expedition of this magnitude would expect to experience emotion simply from diving into memories, but it was much more than emotion from memories.

Although I lived it and wrote it, I did not expect to get so entirely drawn into the reading experience. It was as if I was reading someone else's writing and was captivated by the magnitude, depth, and detail of this adventure. During public showings of the movie while on tour, I always said that the Journey was much larger than life, larger than my life, as if it was divine somehow, as if it had a direction and destiny of its own - providence. While on the journey, it *did* feel that way, it had too, what choice did I have? It was either completely believe I would make the Pacific Ocean, or quit. Crossing rivers more than twenty times, narrow escapes from death or injury again and again; like a revolver with a magazine that held six bullets and putting in one bullet then pulling the trigger ten times and it doesn't go off. Truly, by the time we had reached Fort Ware I felt that if I was going to die it would have happened by then.

Now that I have lived most of the rest of my adventurous life, having been charged four times by Grizzlies, etc. etc., I feel very fortunate, blessed,

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that I am still here enjoying life and able to share these stories with you. I believe it would be selfish and vain to believe in an elevated pre-determined destiny while so many people in the world suffer and die at the hands of cruelty and tyranny through absolutely no fault of their own, never having the opportunity to fulfill life at all. However, in the course of living life, I have been reminded again and again that there are energies and forces in play that have directed life, events whose explanation appears beyond chance alone. The Randy story, the last story from my book *Common Man/Uncommon Life*, felt like a deliberate message convincing me that fate was more than chance.

The Cordillera Expedition was a pilgrimage that brought convictions to bear: First, believing that *mother earth is truly our mother*, and the importance of spending time with this mother, with our feet in the dirt, face in the sun, and hands on all things natural. Understanding the workings of nature and our respectful place in that natural world. This does not end with hugging Winnie the Pooh or chastising those who hunt and fish. It does mean living a natural, healthy, and active life, which is easier said than done with technology in our hands for hours on end each day. And with job pressures, time restraints, financial and personal difficulty. But that does not change the fact that we have choices. Small steps are still steps, and they can take you to good and new places, forever.

Second, when you are alone in mountainous wilderness with hundreds of miles to go, and no GPS, no Sat phone, no first aid kit that was lost to rivers long ago - one's value reduced to an insignificant being at the mercy of the immensity of wilderness, you will become a 'renewed' person. You will find a connection to goodness that you may have lost when you stopped sucking on the teat, or lost your mom's home cooking. You can be reborn with the understanding that your purpose in life, your reason for living, is connected to a belief in goodness that is connected to the earth. The alternative to faithless living in the wilderness is emptiness, being a lost soul. When you are alone with nothing and no-one you begin to realize the

importance of believing in goodness, what is food for soul and spirit. What else is there? What will be your reason for living? Money? Power? Prestige? Vengeance? So often in life, taking a step backward may actually be taking a step forward. I believe it would be difficult to read this book and not have a sense, an understanding, of why I have written these last words.

I believe you will find, or have found, this book out of the ordinary, a very unique experience, a story that is not easy to forget. A book reviewer for a newspaper did a lengthy review for my book, *Common Man/Uncommon Life*. At the end of the review, he said: 'After reading this book I kept asking myself, how could this person still be alive? It was difficult to imagine...' And that reviewer never even read *The Cordillera Expedition!*

You see, there is a pattern here – living life face to the wind, through love, hell, and high water, and all over again. Maybe the pattern is based on a belief that life is for living, not for worrying. Have a Happy Life!

AFTER THE JOURNEY....

I caught a ship to Haines, Alaska, then rode a bus back down the Alaska Highway to Trutch Lodge. In early November, under a blizzard and freezing temperatures, Margaret slugged her way up the Alaska Highway then down the Cassiar Highway to Al Adams' ranch at Iskut, BC. There it was decided that the horses and horse trailer should remain. Supper lived at Tatogga Lodge and gave birth to pups one year after the journey.

Through the hard labor and creative intelligence of Vancouver film workers and the National Film Board, the *CORDILLERA!* Expedition film was produced superbly and has been telecast to millions in several countries.

It was only through the generosity of the staff of the Film board, filmmaker Charles Wilkinson, singer/performer Valdy, and many others, that this film was made at all. It was their generosity that led to me earning

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Best Documentary and Best Producer awards. The making of the film is a story in itself. The movie has aired nationally on CBC four times and has appeared in over two hundred public and theatre presentations. It is likely the longest wilderness journey ever filmed and a true adventure classic that continues to instill emotional presence in its audience.

The Cordillera! Expedition movie and the authors biography can be found at www.vistapublishing.net

May the Good Spirit of Life bless you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stan Watchuk Jr." The signature is written in black ink on a white background.