

Joseph Enzweiler

We'll Meet Again

I see mostly mud in old black and white photographs from *Alaska Geographic: Trail of '42*, the building of the Alaska Highway by the Canadian and American armies as the only land route to Alaska, since an invasion of that territory by the Empire of Japan was feared. Adak and Attu in the Aleutian Islands had already been occupied by Japanese forces, threatening supply lines up the Pacific Coast. That first road was little more than a bulldozed clearing, the spongy taiga of the boreal forest scraped aside into berm piles, leaving a crude silty trace through wilderness, conforming to the folds of a hundred mountains, over a thousand unnamed streams on corrugated bridges of spruce and lodgepole pine. The images from '42 show a stripped, hurried scar stretching on and on past shattered heaps of trees, as crews of men labor with chains and levers to extract trucks drawn down to the axles in muck.

Yet it took only eleven months to complete, a miracle of human will, this tortuous conveyance through the Subarctic—from Canada's Dawson Creek north, and from Delta Junction in Alaska south, the soldiers and engineers of both countries meeting finally, shaking hands at Contact Creek. When the speeches concluded on that windy hillside, flags run up, and bottles of champagne popped, the continent became, by the smallest fraction, tamer by man's ambition.

My journey thirty-three years later wasn't as bad as all that, though a part of me, in retrospect, would like that very much. My car would not vanish nose first into cold autumn quicksand, though being a Vega, such an event in the long run might have been a blessing. I'd never live in tent cities with gangs of men, swapping stories of home over evening K-rations, in encampments like Burwash, Tok and Destruction Bay (named for a violent storm that roared in off Kluane Lake one night and flattened the place). No matter when we live, the dramas before us feel larger somehow, more charged with moment. There I'd sit among them, Depression-era faces bumming a smoke, crew foremen in dark wool coats and fedoras, a

war raging that had to be won, and a road to push through with machines testing their diesel hearts against a rugged continent.

We live constantly in history, if only we knew it. I kept no journal in those years, no receipts or gas log growing quaint with age, no sign at all I'd ever been that way. It's each ordinary moment I want back again, if only in blurred photographs taken with my Brownie Instamatic—a view of my car in mud, a few self-portraits along any lonesome stretch of highway, and the highway itself looking more like a million lakes, mirrors for the clouds, than a true way north.

I think it unlikely I'll repeat the tired cliché to children of my friends—how, as a child, I walked six or eight miles each day to school, barefoot in the snow, as one of my father's racing-pigeon buddies, astonishingly, used to tell with high seriousness. I won't brag about winters of old, winters twice as cold as those since whomever I'm talking to was born, or about the value of a dollar, good penmanship and an old-fashioned education, back when Eisenhower was President and my mother had to wear a hat to church and I accepted my corporal punishment across the knuckles (without ever once considering litigation) beneath the godly crack of Sister Mary DeLourde's twelve-inch wooden ruler. That said, I could be bragging just a little when I tell you how it was driving the Alaska Highway in the summer of 1975, might lapse a wee bit into hyperbole, but only enough, I hope, to coax more truth out of memory: that road was one long damn endless mess!

For fifty years, the highway's reputation preceded all who drove it. It was commonly understood you'd be involved in an assault, the gauntlet, a test of people and their machines. This veneer of myth and high drama provided lodges along the way a brisk seasonal trade in postcards and decals, scenes detailing the grime and automotive hell of travel for amazed relatives back in California to ponder, or stuck on the vehicle's rear bumper as a certificate of achievement, the motorist's purple heart.

By the 1950s the highway was deemed adequate for adventurous souls, smooth enough in places to cruise at thirty or even forty-five miles per hour! Steel bridges slowly replaced wood, though it took another four decades for its thousand switchbacks, dips and hairpin turns (wash-outs flagged red)—and especially every for-no-reason-in-the-middle-of-a-perfectly-good-straightaway whoop-de-do to the left or right—to at last be straightened out. The story goes that these had been built on purpose to break the line of fire on troop and supply transports in case of strafing by Japanese machine guns.

In 1968, oil was discovered in Prudhoe Bay. After years stalled in congressional debate and the issuance of permits, construction began on a Great Alaskan Pipeline that would one day carry a ceaseless river of crude oil from the Arctic Slope eight hundred miles south to tankers in Valdez. America was thirsty. Long gas lines back home, oil embargoes, trouble in the Middle East, all threw shadows of fear and panic across the nation. And the boom was on. Like the Trail of '42, here was a new enemy to conquer, a new timetable to beat. The contract for manufacture of the 48-inch pipe was awarded to a Japanese firm (now there's irony for you!). A few of the enormous structures destined for the Arctic coast, modular camp facilities, flow stations and pumping complexes, were pre-fabricated and barged north in their entirety up the west coast, through the Bering Strait and Arctic Ocean to Prudhoe Bay. But all the rest of it—machine tools from Milwaukee, high pressure gas line out of Los Angeles, from Tulsa giant spools of wire, steel cable from Kansas City, precision valves drop-forged in Cincinnati, generators, cook stoves, dining room chairs and tables, pans and kettles and the prime rib and king crab that would cook in them for workers up and down the line; from a hundred American cities, diamond-tipped augers to bore through frozen river beds, concrete, cinder block, insulation, nuts and bolts, trucks and toothpicks, knives and forks, the big stuff and the small stuff, a million necessities adding up to make oil flow at last ... Alyeska, the consortium of oil producing companies, hurried it all north as fast as it could roll on 18-wheelers, funneling the needs of one of history's great engineering feats up a single unpaved road, winter and summer, night and day, for three years. Time became money. The sheer volume of truck traffic in relentless numbers, thirty and forty tons apiece, barreling up and down the Alaska Highway, deformed and tore it into a twelve-hundred mile minefield of nasty, corrugated rain-filled holes.

Rain's a good place to start. If other details are a blur on that first journey, I certainly remember rain. For nine hundred miles it came down, big thick rain, sideways rain, cold and turgid with winter. It fell and fell and it was always wet, except in high country where it hailed, and once fell overnight, feathering the land with late summer snow, melting by day to those brown murky pictures from the war. And I remember trucks, not the kindest combination, especially for a young fellow on his first trek to the New World in the modest cocoon of a compact car. It was enough that I rattled and bumped the hours away, each mile stretching into dread for my engine, tires, a broken hose on the axle-busting sink hole just up the bend. It was enough to weary out the inexhaustible miles of forest tangled

to mist on either side, converging at the vanishing point, a scene replayed hour after hour, day after day, burning itself forever into memory.

But then, out of nowhere, an angry steel cage, the sudden grille of a semi bore down in my rearview mirror, fog lights blazing, so close on my ass I could read the word "Peterbilt" on its radiator, imagined the cussing high up behind his windshield, a young guy most likely my age. Time was money. I hugged the shoulder, such as it is was, and hung on as a steel hurricane roared around me at sixty, seventy miles an hour, in its wake a typhoon of water and gravel slurry off the rear wheels like cosmic dirt from a comet. It's why the Vega's windshield soon resembled a star chart, dings and nicks and supernovas portraying an ancient story, the cost of battle, randomness of Fate, scars no self-respecting vehicle on the Alaska Highway in those days, down deep, was not proud to display.

A trucker's wall of wind could blow me off the road, not that I could see the road by then, sliding blind to an angled stop. "Son of a bitch" or some such thing came out of me as windshield wipers frantically squeegeed mud across the glass. I got out. Red tail lights vanished far ahead in a receding whine of shifting gears. I swabbed the headlights, kicked mud off the tail pipe and checked for drips, leaks and other broken bones even though I had no tools and charged forth on luck and hope. I lit a smoke. The forest listened all around me, without judgment but for the fine tapping of rain. Then off again. In no time, two miles or three, Cyclops was back in my rear view, time, time, money, money, inconsolable and mad.

The fun began at Mile 93, an unmarked spot of near magical significance, the place where pavement ended. Not that "pavement" by then was much to shout about. I'd been nervous about Mile 93 ever since I pulled out of my parents' driveway three thousand miles ago, the exact moment when the solid line became a dash and the world as I knew it ended. My young sense of the North placed it beyond the capacity of machines and men to tame, where thinning human resources were fed into the vastness and devoured. The years would prove me wrong, for machines make the world smaller by and by, grant us the illusion that we're in control, and conceal our fear. But as I clunked across that first gravel mile, it seemed we humans had met our match, as rain melted this road away, ice and rain and the lust for oil.

Good thing I followed the ritual of all smart travelers. I attached a screen mesh on the Vega's grille to catch bugs and protect the radiator

from flying rocks; screwed plastic globes over the headlights and tied a rubber mat under the gas tank using bungee cords; packed flares, two flashlights, a handful of white plumber's candles, socket wrenches, tire chains, a handyman jack and two spare tires. Conventional wisdom knew it was crazy to head up that road with only a single spare. My precautions were modest. I beheld tourists from Florida and Texas leave Dawson Creek so decked out with prophylactic flaps and fog lights and guards of every sort, a dozen gas cans strapped to the roof and sheaths of wire mesh so extensive they resembled the broadcast transmitters for Radio Free Europe, vehicles so armored against the full dread of catastrophes that if this had been the twelfth century, they might have been setting off to recapture the Holy Land.

To assuage our fears, garages and repair shops prepared you for your ordeal; at least one resident sourdough checked your clearances, sold the shields, guards and gizmos needed to survive and in most cases, with a knowing chuckle, old road warrior that he was, passed along bits of wisdom free of charge. Like the carriage trade, these shops are all gone today; there's simply no need. Gone too is the café talk once overheard at every muddy stop up the Great Highway, reprieves from the wilderness to meet a human face or two and take in gossip of the road. In the first years I drove it, the highway was a litany of washouts, blasting zones, hellish detours and miles of pilot cars, dozers and graders running full bore, who may or may not see me far below in my metal steed. But we rattled on—Fireside, Teslin, Pink Mountain, places that with time acquired texture, and now and then, a memory.

If the waitress tells me "The fellas say it's pretty rough for twenty miles," I'll ask around until I hear the thing I want, then not believe it anyway. "The fellas say it's not too bad." Deep down, I knew it didn't matter. I am *here* and need to go *there*, on the only road there is. Believing never stopped the rain or mended holes, but it was in the asking that made me part of this human company, and the journey felt less alone. We were souls connected by a scatter of log cafés full of banter and refills, sandwiches and bland assurances. Our noise itself became the meaning, and the vast northern forest, for an hour, narrowed to the size of a table, ham and cheese on toast, coffee black, two sugars, the weary look in faces just like mine. That too is gone today, the weariness of faces.

The Alaska Highway today is a sweet thing, a surface known as a chip seal, gravel bonded with tar and calcium chloride to absorb water, rolled smooth and even striped. "It's like a superhighway" people say, and it's true. Certain miles remain unchanged—the long climb up Steamboat

Mountain and the dynamited ledge around Muncho Lake—but mostly the road is realigned; a thousand hairpin bends and red-flag washouts, the swells and dips granting the land its ancient contour are all forgotten, relics of another time. I'm glad for it I confess. Long past the need to feel heroic, it's a big relief to drive an ancient truck like mine, twenty-six years old and counting, and never fear for an axle busted in a murky hole two hundred miles from that cup of coffee while I hurl indelicacies at the Queen, Parliament and Jesus Christ. Never again will a hundred and fifty pounds of silt braise to the undercarriage like I found on the Vega at Tetsa River my second day out of Dawson, a mass so dense my gas mileage dropped by a third, the exhaust pipe choked down to the size of a drinking straw, mud I got down on my knees to hack off in gigantic slabs with a crow bar, Canadian mud, some of it still clinging to the recesses of the frame twenty years later when the car and I said goodbye.

Nor will I ever again be rescued by four guys from New Brunswick in a green Ford Econoline van, pushing me from deep sand at Mile 597, handing me an orange and thermos of coffee for two of my tins of oysters. I'd like to think they took out a pint of Seagrams and passed it around on that misty northern afternoon in the brotherhood of a moment. Five miles on, *they* were the ones stuck. I came up behind them, we laughed all over again, then put our backs to it.

And yet, despite some nastiness along the way, all in all we loved it, we travelers, loved the adversity from which we sculpt our memories and tell our stories, the enduring grime of it, the mess. For us, time was *never* money; even bitching about it was one joy of travel, pushed by Homeric winds ever around the next bend, and the next. We were drivers after all, not heroes, our caked-on grime a temporary credential displayed with proud nonchalance at journey's end before it was off to the ceremonial car wash. We'd earned our bumper sticker "I drove the Alaska Highway ... and survived!" How different from today: "I drove the Alaska Highway ... and Loved It," the market niftily adapting to new realities, shedding the old road's image as grim romance. No catastrophes now, no meteorite showers off crazed semis, blowing Vegas and Pintos aside in the Darwinian tide of progress. These days everyone takes VISA and, like the road, expectations are streamlined. Even my windshield has learned to forgive, wearing its cracks and glassy stars like a veteran of some distant war, a cause someone once believed in.

Up the same road as the truckers and dreamers came the fortune seekers, like the men eighty years before them climbing the White Pass into the gold fields of the Klondike, today rushing north for huge paychecks

working the pipeline camps. Many lived in their cars until freeze-up and snow, only getting out at the bitter penniless end of autumn, never called out from the union hall, slapping on the rear end of the old sedan "I drove the Alaska Highway ... Yes dammit, both ways," the lament of disappointed pilgrims heading home to Tulsa in their year of discontent. All over town, Alaskan cars let you know what they thought of the hoard of strange creatures in Stetsons and pointed boots who came and built the line, circling our wagons with a smug: "Happiness is 10,000 Texans headed south with an Oakie under each arm."

No one waves today when they pass; we're blurs speeding by in sunglasses. After all, what's the point? We, who once stopped to pass the time of day and let the dust plumes settle behind our rigs, now approach each other at a combined one hundred miles an hour. Faces are subliminal images, suggestions, like the naked woman in the ice cube in a bourbon ad. For rural people where I grew up, waving as you pass is acknowledgement, a communal gesture, even toward a stranger, if only by an index finger lifted from a tractor's steering wheel. In northern British Columbia, the road itself, not farming or labor, formed community. Rough hours and rough miles spoke a common language. We went slow, we met, sometimes barely speaking, aside from the mud and dust of a world bigger than ourselves. So long. Have a safe trip. I wish you well.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. It's still rainy August, 1975. I've left pavement and the car's suspension begins to shake. That first journey, like a piece of torn paper, is hazy at the edges. Places had no history for me yet, no personal milepost to know them by. The towns and hours in my mind's journal, like images in a funhouse, bend and elongate on the polished surface of memory into what I believe and need, and so they become. I want to scroll back now and take the ride from its start, and for a little while forget what I know and drive north again with a clear empty face believing, as I want you to believe, that what I say is true.

I reached Wonowon, the first stop on gravel, twenty miles an hour the entire way. It felt I'd been bouncing, fishtailing and splashing along for hours. Twice I thought I broke an axle. For a little insurance, I prayed the Our Father. It took a few more years to hear that Wonowon was some drunken man's slurred naming of the pullout at Mile 101. So when I reached its rainy lot with a relieved sigh, after what felt like an hour blooded in battle, I was stunned to see on the odometer that I'd gone all of eight miles! Good God, I asked the dashboard, is this some cruel metaphor for life?

Then a curious thing happened. Out of the cold unraveling wet of autumn, I felt how dry the chair was in the little log café, pulled back the fine embroidered window lace and stared across the lot. I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich, lit a Players from its flat box, peeled the little cuplet of cream into my coffee, read jars of apricot jam and marmalade in French, and I realized I was happy. I'm just a young guy who happened this way; maybe I could live here and work in back, meet a girl. It's such big country. Of course I pulled on my jacket, of course it's raining, and I must be on my way. Take it slow and the hours pass surely enough, mile after mile compress behind me, and I don't die as expected. Each stop, at first one more bead on my worried rosary, grew into pleasant occasions to rest, replenish and imagine, with diminished fear, assumed ever deeper into the North. Sure, it *is* a metaphor for life, a single road, shake and rattle most of the way, but there's beauty too if we know how to be there, and the patches at our feet that trouble us are also reflections of the sky.

Along a high rolling ridge, I came to Trutch, a hundred miles on, a wide truck stop overlooking the vast Minaker River valley. For years I kept a blurred square photograph of that fantastic expanse, a reach of Nature so wondrous, I promised myself to stop each time I returned here, beside the guard rail, green trash barrel, muffled distant generator, and whisper a prayer of thanks for my life and the chance to gaze upon such creation.

In the 1980s Trutch was abandoned, and a new highway cut in the valley far below, its coarse blaze visible even in '75. I've not been back on that mountain since, but a sign points anyone curious to the "Old Alaska Highway," thirty unimproved miles on the rolling high ridge. I'll drive up there one day when I admit I'm not in such a big hurry after all, ride the swells and hairpin turns of first journey and pull into Trutch's broken lot of buildings, their roofs softening with time, a ghost town, walk among the worn out trucks and road machinery reclaimed by willows. I'll recall the years when this place teemed with big Cummins diesels idling in the rain, a hiss of air brakes, men in a hurry, chaining up, a smoky café full of voices long retired or passed away mingling timely news with the aromas of supper. Unless graders keep it up, the way past Trutch will erupt in saplings, breaking it apart at last into forest; buildings become soil, ancient machines rusted iron under a funeral of leaves and moss. And that will be that for the presence of man.

After fourteen hours bumping under wet, low-hanging sky, Prophet River, Pink Mountain, Sukani Chief, three hundred miles straight north out of Dawson Creek, Fort Nelson came into view. End of my first day. In

August this far north, twilight lingers long past ten. A smell of natural gas drifts by. A kid with long stringy hair filled my tank at the Husky station, looking off with some urgent place to be. I gazed up past the aquamarine glow of evening where a white light curved, like a curtain in a soft breeze. The first aurora borealis I'd ever seen. I breathed the cool air, even grew a bit dizzy, for all of this felt like a mild hallucination.

I wonder where I slept that night. Likely a turnout west of town, some unmarked pullout against the dark skin of the forest. Those minutes grew intensely quiet as rain tapped the Vega's roof. My car had earned its sleep now; with headlights off like the soft close of an animal's eyes. I curled up sideways in the front seat against my winter coat. I had no idea tomorrow I'd make the long climb up Steamboat Mountain where last winter, I was told, a young trucker with forty tons of pipe destined for Prudhoe Bay made it nearly to the top in a heavy snow storm, stopped, set the air brakes, hitched a ride back down the highway and flew home to Los Angeles. He'd signed on for more than he could handle. He didn't want to die up there. No idea Dall sheep descending from the high country would stop me along the turquoise water of Muncho Lake, or with winter so close now, the snow-dusted granite thrusts, in purple and red, of the high Rockies would seem to me the utterance and jut of ideas themselves. Yet working from a box of expectations, I sailed right past Liard River Hot Springs, a mistake never repeated, for its hot pools became a respite from travel, as they'd been for silver miners generations earlier. One year I soaked all alone in its sulfur waters, three in the morning and twenty below, a full moon over birches bearded with frozen steam, and contemplated, for an hour, the enormous country I trusted with this thin shell of skin, the delicate line between life and death.

Mile 500. After fifteen hours, my wallet had burrowed into my butt and my right knee, tensed on the gas pedal all day, sharpened with pain. Mile 600. Weariness burned my eyes as I bumped the last two grateful miles into Watson Lake, my first stop in the Yukon, sixty degrees north, another magical line cut through the forest as far as one can see. As drizzle faded to black, I bought a hamburger from a girl at a roadside shack about to close for the season and set my tent up in a campground next to a carpenter from Yellowknife, on his way to Haines Junction for work, traveling with his twelve-year-old son. He brought a six pack of bottled beer from his truck, brewed back home, he said, though alas the brewery that very summer went out of business. Here was the last of it. Tasted real good too, around his fire, a sled dog on the label above a shield

splashed with color like a coat of arms. I felt on my way to being one of them; my story was new, but I made it this far and might honorably join my journey with theirs. Darkness closed around us. Leaning at the fire, we ate and talked of our homes. I thanked him. "Just pass it on," he said, "that's the code of the north." When I told him and his boy good night, he turned and assured me, "We'll meet again. If you live in this north country long enough, we all meet again." I think of that carpenter about every year, a young father, his son now in his forties, older today than we were that night. Maybe we *did* meet somewhere down the line, passed by each other on a street in Whitehorse, Dawson, Inuvik, our faces older and long forgetting the fire, the good beer, one night in long-ago August.

Swift River, Teslin, Johnson's Crossing. Time was measured in mountains and miles with an hourglass full of rainy holes. I crossed desolate ascents of tourmaline and granite, cathedral-like in the mist, across high-shouldered rivers where unnoticed over a gentle rise, their waters turned and faced the Pacific. I must have stopped in Teslin, Jake's Corner, Iron Creek, somewhere the morning of the third day, sat warm and dry with little food for an hour, bought a few colas for the road, pulled over and taken a nap, thought, wondered and stood amazed, but I have no memory of it. Strange what we keep of the past. Entire days can be lost, weeks and months of our lives disappear, yet a woman in a phone booth one South Dakota night, two dragonflies rippling a sky-blue pond, a carpenter with hometown beer and minutes beside a fire, a girl's green earring as she brings me rhubarb pie out of a driving wind, build a place inside for no reason, except that these might be the seconds when we stop hurrying long enough to recognize, astonished, that the world is looking back at us.

Old Milepost 810 leaned over, 845 tilted in a green pool of water. Only seventy now to Whitehorse. It was still a time before kilometers took hold in the wilder reaches of Canada, out of old habit and even a spirit of independence from government back east, so the old wooden posts hung on, leaning, gone, toppled by decades, but a living reminder, the last believers in the trail of '42.

The sky brightened to the west, and the road climbed, making its slow ascent to the Coast Range. A white disk of sun burned behind clouds and a fine rain slanted down, full of silver light. The dark, heavy time felt days behind me, the spruce forest great with rain and mist, skies thick

as lead. The car's suspension, my mind too, averaged out the corrugated washboard miles into a single event, small disasters run together and rendered inaudible. Both of us just didn't care much by then, rattling up the highway buoyant, full of faith. Thirty-five miles an hour, a land speed record. Toss an empty cola can on the floor. I'm going to make it, and the day feels almost beautiful.

At the Airport Chalet in Whitehorse, I parked among the big rigs and stepped up on the boardwalk. A tall woman in a fine blue suit at the motel desk was speaking French. I sat with my cheeseburger, gravy on the fries, the surefire sign of Canada's high culture, and watched the wind socks blow from the east. I left three singles for a tip, a young Queen Elizabeth peeking up from beneath the saucer. Six hundred miles to go. Headlights on. I felt so good, I'd drive all night.

Just when everything seemed certain, the road drying up and a band of blue sky on the horizon, out of town a mile or so stood the silhouette of a beautiful young woman with her thumb out, backpack on the ground, her long hair backlit by the evening light. Now in my fifties, and except for emergencies, I am certain I possess the discretion, that doubles as wisdom, to smile as I go by. In my forties, probably the same, but not without miles and miles of regret, then later I'd write a poem about her. But I was twenty-four! At twenty-four, a decision of this magnitude did not pass remotely near the higher brain. My hands did the rest and before I knew it, the Vega coasted to a stop on the shoulder. This would be great.

Road etiquette requires a basic decency, studied nonchalance, an openness to adventure. Take things in stride is a nugget of wisdom that continues to arrive across the years, sluiced through experience. But on that evening, I was the new guy on the highway of life as I reached and pushed open the door. My rider grabbed her pack and slipped in.

"Hey thanks man," shaking my hand. "My name's David."

"Life ain't all romance," my old friend Dick Hague has a man named Happy Jim Windlan say in a poem. The distance between our choices and what flows from them we measure as luck or Fate. So after all the little cracking noises in my head grew quiet, like a chiropractor working on my expectations, I figured this was meant to be. Though my soul cursed a little, out of my mouth came "Hey, I'm Joe, where you headed, partner?" and the Vega eased away, releasing full control back to me, toward a slow unintended sunset.

David was a welder's apprentice, just eighteen, an Eskimo kid from Barrow training in Fairbanks, hoping he'd soon be earning big money on the Pipeline. He was exactly the sort of homegrown young man the

unions sought to fulfill a broad policy of local and Native hire. We talked and laughed for a hundred miles, picked sardines from the tin with our fingers. The land grew immense and black; stars blew between the clouds. Mountains beyond ascended ten thousand feet from a vast glacial valley of the St. Elias Range, reaching to the Pacific, end of the continent, the border of a dream.

I remember white horses grazing at the roadside, their manes coarse and tough from the winter. I stopped for caribou to cross the road, as long as it took, for they were on ancient time. The highway divides in Haines Junction at the blinking yellow light, the first for a thousand miles. Straight to Haines, Alaska and the ocean, or right to Fairbanks and a long ascent onto the rugged plateaus of the western Yukon. We got out to pee, both of us talked out, and stood awhile feeling the wind in our faces. Stars were out, Polaris higher than I'd ever seen it. Deneb in the Summer Triangle too low. The constellations I learned as a boy, they were all here, but shifted, as if I'd traveled to a far part of the galaxy. I could have used two fingers held up to the sky to measure, as I did on my folding map, the inches travelled from home. Stunted aspen moaned as if haunted, clinging hard into rock, hardscrabble lives conformed to a life given, of struggle and hanging on. Something terribly human in that sound.

For thirty years I've come back to one of the world's magic places, Kluane, the Yukon's largest lake, set up my tent along its south shore of anemone and dwarf fireweed, walked for miles among the cast-up leavings of water and time. Blue the color of glacial ice, restless, lashing the shore by day, it seems the water knows something immense and essential to tell us, but when the sun sets behind Sheep Mountain and the wraith of yellow silt blowing off the Slims River subsides, the surface grows polished, expectant. Bone-white driftwood makes a quick fire, its tortured grain a wooden history of the forces of Creation. Over there the Pleiades are up. Not a soul for fifty miles. Beyond my little camp the water stretches out tense and black, cold as an anvil at the beginning of time.

But I could know none of this that first night. I saw only a pool of darkness, which in the moon's frail light shone on the mountains the faintest color of plum, dusted at the top with autumn snow. I rounded the shore past Silver City, an old mining camp, windowless and empty today, but that year one café hung on, serving the most fabulous homemade pies. I crossed this causeway where the Slims emptied into the lake and waves lapped high on the shoulders. In the fog and cone of headlights, I felt I was floating, the gravel sustaining me could disappear and I'd soar into space, tires spinning in a void, just stars and moon and a silver Vega, untethered

from earth and desire, finding the inexpressible peace Saint-Exupéry's doomed pilot knew in the acceptance of his own death as he circled his plane higher and higher, spending his last fuel under a brilliant moon over an ink-black Brazilian jungle.

Telegraph poles, remnants of the war, leaned in log cairns, their lines long gone like the urgent voices inside them. Green glass insulators were still screwed here and there to wooden cross arms, these too disappearing in a slow attrition of years, lost under the sand or scavenged for souvenirs. Timbers subside on their rusted bolts, at ever steeper angles, to wash onto the shore, at last, as driftwood.

In Burwash Landing, a Canadian flag snaps over the constable's office. A few lights dot the wooden government buildings in Destruction Bay. "Mr. Ready Kilowatt," a little man cut from sheet metal with a round smiling head and lightning bolts for arms and legs, emblem of rural electrification, welcomes me with a polite reminder to slow down through town. Three in the morning fatigue, static on the radio from a long forgotten station in Prince George or even Seattle, its faint hiss reaching for something too far away, mist pooling in the night, the highway's roll beneath me, these are the Yukon of my memory. Mr. Ready Kilowatt with the frequency of RCMP radio. Maple leaf flag straight out. A single light. Everyone asleep. A minute, then wilderness again.

I felt free of everything left behind. An emigrant on a great crossing over the swell and fall of ground, the map forgotten, slipping down somewhere at my feet. I thought of Lulu, her face so close to mine for one night only in this life, and I tried to let her go into the largeness of the Yukon (though I'll keep her always, won't I, she won't be lost), remembering seconds at a window beside her stereo's tiny blue lights and nothing to tell to each other. Her image wavered like a desert city, and her kiss replayed in my mind, a house I enter by way of dreams. Unfinished things. Back home, summer heat still stirred the silver maples. My mother's hand raises from the porch to me in the last year she was well, waves from the shores of home, knowing as I could not then, family's inexorable bindings. But I am going, I said again, I am my own creation, catching in the dashboard's plastic, my fervent unshaven face. My God, the Yukon! I lit a cigarette and cracked the cozy window, shearing off a night wedge of air. The car inside smelled faintly of sardines. Alaska by tomorrow. In the passenger seat, head leaning on a heap of clothes, David began to snore.

We must have slept somewhere on the Canadian side, an hour to two, Snag Junction perhaps, once holder of North America's record cold temperature, 81 below zero Fahrenheit, though Northway reclaims the

honor by one degree, now safely back on the American side. Maybe David and I ate breakfast in Beaver Creek before the final twenty miles and our passage into Alaska; he combed his black hair, I retied my boots, but no details remain. I'll never know. Then it's light and I'm handing the officer my driver's license at the little white shed atop a rise. Maybe I planned to mark the minutes and first mile in "The Great Land," as the Chamber of Commerce calls it, but my ritual got lost some place in the backseat among clothes and empty soda cans. Where am I from, he asks me. Where am I bound? What did I acquire in Canada? "A lot of mud" would be the honest truth, staring through my 9 a.m. fatigue, "I acquired a lot of mud there, sir." No, we play it straight. "You have a safe trip now," and just maybe "Welcome Home." Where was home? Somewhere behind me down this road, or ahead in the imagination? There'd be no ceremony, no kissing the ground, no Cortez claiming the New World for the old; it wasn't my style. No bump of air shook the car as we crossed a broad cut of stunted trees, the International Border, government's reminder that this is *us* and that is *them*, correcting one of Nature's conspicuous failings. A large sign of an RCMP constable and an Alaska State Trooper side by side in their red and blue uniforms assures travelers of law enforcement's fraternity, regardless which side of the swath you're on. I simply noted it and rolled off the hill. The power of the journey was in getting there.

The Yukon I've always thought grand and intimate, but climbing the high ridges east of Tetlin Junction, on the American side, lakes and forest reach all the way to Mt. Sanford and Drum in the Pacific Rim of Fire, 200 miles and more, a geography so suddenly new it might have been decreed so by an act of Congress. The return to "pavement" turned out to be the nastiest stretch of all—a minefield of asphalt fractured and heaved by permafrost, erupting in chunks and sinkholes. I dodged and weaved my way to Tok, an old construction camp and now the dog mushing capital of Alaska. Along the way I witnessed road signs shot all to hell, one of the beauties of freedom of speech, American style. I'd learn this is how some real Alaskans express their feelings about "government intervention," even if it's only the imposition of a speed limit. Threats to constitutional rights in the Great Land are occasionally answered with hot lead and, in this case, provide the chance to get in some target practice as well. It rained again as I drove past Cathedral Rapids, country I have always thought holy, an emptiness of dry gravel beds and mountains towering into mist. A bull moose charged across the road, his hind hoof pinging off the car's front bumper, waking me from the hypnotic road and that slingshot urge to get to the end. It's the last thing I remember; then I'm driving up Airport

Road, Fairbanks in the dust and hustle of the Pipeline years. I made it, the end and the beginning.

The size of a continent lodged in my bones and muscle that not even a very long sleep repaired. Weariness in the knees, the eyes, the mind. Glancing backward on my map to every town and outpost, the rivers I crossed, Liard, Peace, Nisutlin, the long-ago meals and nights asleep in a bucket seat, silt and weather and the bearing down heat of giant trucks, the washboard muck, I whispered to myself "Lord, I'm not doing that bullshit again as long as I live." Then a couple of weeks pass, a month, and muscle memory fades, the second by second immersion in events as they're lived dims, the potholes, each curse launched on the Prime Minister, postcards scribbled at a brief formica table, sandwiches and scrambled eggs and coffee cup oases out of the chill, waitresses named Corrine and Peg, a bullet-ridden road sign, all compress into a wafer so thin I could believe that time itself does not exist. I look up from my map and down the road that brought me here, where the accordion folds of a thousand more adventures lie ready. How could I have imagined? I want to do it all again.

In thirty years I've made as many trips up and down the Alaska Highway, in every month of the year, all weather, alone and with friends, June's midnight light, December's minus forty when nothing exists but a long tunnel opening in the headlights and closing like a purse behind me, when fatigue turns thoughts into black raven wings flashing across the windshield. KING from Seattle a thousand miles south fades out and in, trying hard to reach me with news of rush hour traffic and basketball scores, a mild alien world, its faint signal reflected off the starry Yukon sky. Smears of moon drifting yellow over the Endicott and Coast Range, Cassiar and Chugach as grainy hours rolled on, I hummed a song to myself out loud or held my own conference about the year's passionate concerns long resolved and forgotten. Thirty years old. Forty. I am fifty now. No matter. When I pull over for the night, rivers still trace a cold confluence to the sea, waters eternal over stones, washing my mind until I sleep.

In the face of change, the deeper journey remains. The road can always be the one you want. Miles are still miles at any speed; yellow aspens burn in the sun and winter winks its blue-white hours; willows enclose a wolverine, a moose looks up at thunder. The generator at Coal River growls in its valley as it did thirty years ago, its light the first for a hundred miles, a beacon, a small rescue with food and human faces. The mighty Liard will never modernize its cold embrace or the Tanana unbraids its silted channels in the light of progress; the Yukon will have its way. Wild

lavender blooms again next summer above the Donjek River whether I stop to gather it or not. Night follows day. You'll stop in the dark as travelers did fifty years before, so tired that for a second the snowy spruce become elegant spires of a Swiss canton. Breathe the cold air, wake up, feel the warm car hood. Autumn stars scatter over the Ruby Mountains like spilled glass, the most beautiful night you may ever behold. They take half a life to gather, memories like a pocketful of colored stones. The world goes on, but they are yours.

The Fairbanks I found was not the tent city of my imagination, raw sepia faces, a hungry place, a modern Klondike or Nome of a century ago. Just an average evening in a functional town of apartments and hurricane fences. I pulled into Dairy Queen on University Avenue, and history started over. 8:26 in the evening on my wrist watch, exactly 8:26, a time I've stored in a little compartment for anniversaries. Black coffee with two sugars and whatever David wanted. Between this moment in a gravel lot under a red neon sign blinking its fine line of "Brazier Foods," and the little jig my friend Dick Hague and I danced in the St. Gertrude church parking lot behind my house in Cincinnati that hot July day when the call came and I knew I'd be on my way to Alaska, no time had passed at all. Fourteen days, good-byes and tanks of gas, mountain and prairie, a blue thunderstorm over a beet field in Minnesota, wind scything Saskatchewan wheat, a final game of pool in Chamberlain for old time's sake beside the stand-up piano, mud and rain, faces along the way I'd see once in my life—none of these seemed real. I rolled down my window. Birches had begun turning gold. I smelled the high bush cranberries fermenting in the chill, an earthy signature of the northern woods in September, an indelible memory, sour and sensual, the way morning should smell after a night of love.

David had nowhere to go, so we camped that first night beside the Chena River, making a nest in the Vega's seats, our bodies cramped around boxes full of socks, underwear and pictures of home, notebooks full of poems, anthologies, Japanese haiku, the Iliad, a treatise on General Relativity, "How To Make a Telescope," and a pile of paperbacks about Indians and our nation's history of broken promises I found both shameful and compelling at that time in my life: "Black Elk Speaks," "Dispossessed," "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee."

In a few days David went his way, but not before I made the mistake of loaning him my car one night, which I angrily discovered in the wee hours, guilty as sin in a "No Parking" turnaround in front of Wood Center

on campus, the car so stoned it was unable to move, two wheels on the sidewalk, disgorging him and three blissfully altered young ladies fresh from their villages, drawing in their wake a cloud of marijuana and the reek of spilled beer I could smell in the carpet two years later. The next night I found him, unconscious on a lounge sofa, drunker than I'd ever seen a human being, his breathing shallow and erratic, face slack like a dying man. A long time I sat and spoke his name, my hand pressed on his back. It was October 21st, my twenty-fifth birthday. I watched the Cincinnati Reds defeat the Boston Red Sox in Game Seven of the 1975 World Series, an historic first live event ever broadcast to Alaska, a series some claim is the greatest of them all. I had borne the heartbreak of Carlton Fisk's eleventh inning blast in Game Six that sent the series to a seventh and deciding game the next night which, as Fate saw fit, aligned the stars and planets for the ultimate moment of triumph to come into conjunction with the day of my birth. In the morning, he was up and gone. Thirty-two years later I ran across his obituary in the paper. I can see it's him, now shorn of the splendid hair, but the same easy smile. He loved to fish, jig and traditional dance, loved his two daughters, it said, the joys of his life, then a six-inch column of all who loved him.

I thought of the moon over Kluane, the miles we talked and slept in our clothes, the beautiful silhouette that fooled me west of Whitehorse in the setting sun, splitting a last can of sardines, the night the Reds won it all. I tried to fill in the arc of his life. Now there you are David, looking at me from a sheet of newspaper. It's true, like the carpenter said, we meet again.

I'd find the Klondike, one moiling for oil instead of gold, Dawson's prospectors now in hard hats and company shirts, its dreamers not slogging a grim ascent on foot up the White Pass beside their wrecked, discarded horses, but gliding in on 747s. Those who lived here before the Pipeline hunkered down and waited it out, knowing that the old life had gone forever. Fairbanks would emerge in a handful of years utterly remade—atop the wild horses of change it little comprehended and less controlled—into a future that, because of its surefire belief that the money would never run dry, it didn't much bother to shape.

From the hill, I saw a city reach toward the vast Subarctic. Chill settled in, September was near. Streetlights winked toward the distance like arms embracing all that Fairbanks hoped one day to become. Pipe yards sprawled under mercury lights, what they held soon to be assembled into wealth. Checker cabs worked the side streets, mining the night for

cash. Prefab houses, merchant's eyes, the city, all had a feel on the skin of finely serrated metal. The old, scoured by a raw tide of crude oil to feed a thirsting country, left behind a formless prosperity, delirious hog heaven affluence, but no quiet within it, not yet. No mirror to look in, no written history to know how we came this way. Down the hill in all directions, I saw only motion and the promise of motion, change, trucks, hungry faces and a surefire belief in the grind of machines.

When the thrill was gone, what remained became home.