

Tom Moran

## The Way North

*Fairbanks 0 miles away, Deadhorse 496.1 miles away: Fairbanks. Located in the heart of Alaska's Great Interior Country ...*

*... In June and early July daylight lasts 21 hours and 48 minutes—and the nights are really only twilight.<sup>1</sup>*

Most of the times in my life I've seen 3 a.m., I've come at it from the other direction. Rousing myself regularly at that hour for my new job proves both an exercise in self-control and an object lesson in over-the-counter chemistry. Tiny pink knock-out capsules for the night before, then after dawn come chalky yellow caffeine tablets, morning-after pills for those whose greatest indiscretion was ignoring their bedtime.

Dressing in a daze in clothes meticulously laid out the previous night, I follow vacant streets to the industrial annex of the airport, park in the shadow of a control tower, and walk into a building stitched coarsely together of red ATCO trailers. Exactly seventy-five minutes later, the trailers disgorge a klatch of tourists, shuffling in canvas shoes and sun-visors toward a rumbling twenty-four-seater bus. They look as groggy as I am.

I perch behind the wheel, clad in olive dress shirt, khakis and nervous smile.

*F 2 D 494.1 Stoplight. Johansen Expressway west to College Road, Peger Road and University Avenue; access to Home Depot, Lowe's, Wal-Mart and other "big box" stores.*

I am not allowed to call them tourists, even if a cursory glance in the interior bus mirror confirms the accuracy of the term. But the sets of mostly graying, mostly American, mostly middle-class, mostly couples

1. Excerpted from The MILEPOST® 2007 Edition with permission of the publisher. The separate mileage figures provided in the guidebook for the Elliott, Steese, and Dalton highways have been consolidated here for simplicity into the total mileage between Fairbanks (F) and Deadhorse (D).

behind me on the big blue Northern Alaska Tour Company coach are not to be called “tourists,” they are “guests.” Indeed, to string my laundry list of suggested euphemisms together, I am not “driving a bus full of tourists on a day-long trip, past a slice of concrete hell”; rather I am “operating a coach full of guests on a robust adventure, past Fairbanks’s newest retail area.” As with any moment of my day, I am presented with a clear-cut choice between being truthful and being agreeable.

These cheery terms have been recommended to me during guide training, a lengthy process of instruction and indoctrination by enthusiastic and loyal employees. Some of the terminology I take no issue with—I suppose they *are* guests, after all—but one rankles me the most: “adventure.”

We will spend the next day or two, these guests and I, traveling up a road. A rough road, to be sure, an isolated road, a beautiful and challenging road, but still just a road. The people sitting behind me will warm their seats until we reach the wayside at the Arctic Circle, or the truck stop at Coldfoot, or the end of the road at Deadhorse, after which point we will turn around and drive or fly back. Along the way they will enjoy several meals, visit some points of interest, and go for a couple of brief walks.

This is not an adventure.

Now, were we to make the same trek on unicycles, that would qualify. Alternately, were I to, say, sink a tire into the Dalton Highway’s soft shoulder, sending handbags and fleeces and digital cameras pitching abruptly down into the woods until we alight in a soggy grove of black spruce trees—that would also meet my minimal requirements. But otherwise—no matter what is promised in our breathless company pamphlets—it’s not an adventure, just a long day in a bus.

I mean, a coach.

*F 43.6 D 452.5 Begin long 6 percent downgrade next 2.2 miles northbound to Gold Creek.*

Timing:

Hit them with the logistics of the trip first, early in the morning: Where to throw out their trash, how far we’re going today, what’s for lunch. Reel off a concise-but-colorful history of Fairbanks before it fades in the rear-view mirror. Explain Fairbanks’ gold mining history as we pass the rusty mine hole north of Fox, check; slow down for the cheeky “Welcome to Olnes City, Population 1” sign, check; explain how the permafrost under

us influences the composition of the spruce and hardwood forest we're passing through, check; "reset expectations," check.

Somewhere amid the soft green peaks of the White Mountains, I summon my best customer-service voice and say six words no one wants to hear: "This is not a wildlife tour." All of those moose and bears and caribou and (sigh) polar bears aren't going to stand by the side of the road and wave at you, I explain. They're going to stay the hell away from the dusty, noisy, dangerous highway overflowing with semi trucks. I soften the blow: I remind them they will make it to the point most of them are here to see, the Arctic Circle, and that along the way they'll experience sublime vistas, local color, and a blizzard of information about the trans-Alaska oil pipeline and everything else they see. You'll all get your fill of wildlife at Denali, I note, if you haven't already. Most nod in ready assent.

It is an approach perfected over the two decades of the tour company's existence; it feels awkward, difficult, but it almost always serves its particular purpose—except for the unfortunate day when, five minutes after I finish the speech, I swerve hard to avoid nailing a cow moose with poor reflexes and a talent for irony.

*F 49.5 D 446.6 "Welcome to Joy, AK" (sign). According to local resident Joe Carlson, JOY has a population of about 15 people and about 67 dogs ... Arctic Circle Trading Post to east was built by the Carlsons, who settled here with their 23 children (18 of whom were adopted).*

I spend twenty minutes before arriving at Joy discoursing at length on the wonders of the Carlson family's off-the-grid wilderness lifestyle. By the time we pull into Joy for a fifteen-minute round of frenetic T-shirt-browsing, the guests expect to encounter Grizzly Adams with a shotgun.

What they get is an affable-to-a-fault grandpa, stage center of the first stop on the Arctic Circle Adventure as brought to you by the Northern Alaska Tour Company. A few years ago, when Joe's conveniently-located general store/souvenir shop was on the verge of going out of business, my employer (or rather, "Sukukpak, Inc.," which owns NATC) bought the place and put him and a steady stream of his daughters to work as employees. In a state already overrun with amusement park rides masquerading as culture, this unspoken arrangement gives me pause.

But it's hard for me to get too riled up about it at this stage. Joe's Santa beard, his gregariousness and easy enthusiasm, his charming and polite daughters win me over as much as they do everyone else on the bus. Plus, T-shirts aside, Joy is the real deal, a ramshackle debris field filled with

old hubcaps, four-wheeler bodies, and the occasional wildlife carcass. The ripe outhouses are also legit, and as we drive away I explain to the often-nonplussed tourists the myriad advantages of the privy over expensive, wasteful, stinks-up-the-house indoor plumbing.

I mean it, but am met with disbelieving stares. Most of the visitors seem happily aware they're on the outside looking in at all of this, like gawking at a striking watercolor or a museum diorama. Nice place to visit, wouldn't want to live there; Joy is to be admired in brief before the docent shuffles them further through the wing.

I shrug and offer them Wet Wipes.

*F 73.1 D 423 Road forks at junction of Elliott Highway with James Dalton Highway ... Turn north for Dalton Highway to Yukon River Bridge, Coldfoot, Arctic Circle and Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay ...  
... The Dalton Highway is unique in its scenic beauty, wildlife and recreational opportunities, but it is also one of Alaska's most remote and challenging roads.*

I had only driven to the beginning of the Dalton three times before the summer, always headed further down the Elliott Highway. Already eighty miles away from anything; I had stared at the impressively steep hill that marks mile zero of the "Haul Road," watched the trucks rumble by, and saw the stark line where the pavement ended. Maybe next year, I thought, never truly meaning it.

Four years later, first impressions bore out. The first twenty miles of the Dalton are the worst of the entire road, a nightmare stretch of steep winding hills, blind curves, sheer drop-offs, opaque fog, and washboard gravel. My survival strategy for this two-lane from hell has been battle-tested over the two decades of the Northern Alaska Tour Company's existence: I pop in a movie. While the passengers sit glued to the screens for a hokey documentary on gold dredges or a dated pipeline propaganda video, I enjoy twenty-six glorious minutes of leeway, free to shut off my microphone and to focus on the road.

We bump, we rattle, we slow down and keep our distance when tractor-trailers rocket by in choking clouds of dust. When we reach the incongruous five-mile stretch of crumbling pavement at Mile 18, it feels like we've just floated up onto a cushion of air.

*F 108.7 D 387.4 Pipeline parallels highway about 250 feet away; good photo op.*

Standing on a convenient mound of dirt beneath the oil pipeline, I toss around numbers like I was actually competent at math. Three-quarter-inch pipe, imported from Japan. Eight hundred miles long. Oil travels at four miles an hour, taking nine days to reach Valdez from Prudhoe Bay. Those fins on top of the supports? They're for a radiator system that keeps the permafrost from melting. How about that?

Sometimes they smile and nod at my discourse, comprehending, not really caring, or possibly both. Sometimes they fire off questions, most of which I can answer. Why's half of it underground? Will they have to take it down when they're out of oil? And almost every day: How do you provide security for an eight-hundred-mile-long pipeline snaking through the wilderness?

"Well," I tell them, "you don't." It's true. They fly a helicopter over it daily, they have flow valves they can shut off, and that's about it. It fascinates me, this obsession with security. Is this what people talk about, I ponder? Endlessly alternating between complaining about the price of gas (as these Winnebago drivers invariably do) and wringing their hands about losing our supply?

I do what I have learned to do in this job: I tell them the truth, narrowly constricted. The pipeline was designed to transport oil. At this, it has done very well.

*F 114.8 D 381.3 ... Small crosses at this turnout and along this highway are memorials to those who have died in accidents on this road.*

Also inevitable: someone loudly and decisively concludes that they could have saved \$149 and driven their own car or camper up the Dalton. Sure, I tell them. People do it, and sometimes they drive all the way to the end of the road at Deadhorse with nary a problem. Sometimes, of course, they blow tires or suspensions or radiators and need to get towed 250 miles. Sometimes—I am tempted to point out—even the truckers who get paid to drive this road, the ones who have done it a hundred times, they slide off corners, they lose control on steep hills, they disappear over an embankment and are found a few days after freezing to death. We drive a 400-mile-long graveyard, lined with crosses denoting the final rest of people who fought the Haul Road and lost.

No one wants to hear this from their bus driver, though my passengers may gather it from my pursed lips.

*F 137.6 D 358.5 ... Yukon River Bridge ... This wood-decked bridge, completed in 1975, is 2,290 feet long and has a 6 percent grade.*

I downshift to first and saunter down the incline of the bridge, letting everyone relish the view: Glimmering in the sun, dark and brooding in the rain, the half-mile-wide Yukon flows swiftly westward, curving gently around the low hills on the horizon. Sometimes as we cross I will talk about salmon, or point out the security cameras and spotlights on the bridge, the decaying wood on the platform. Sometimes I just let the river speak for itself.

It is here that the Dalton gruffly, belatedly, starts to fulfill its promise.

*F 138.2 D 357.9 Yukon River Camp on west side of highway (food, gas, lodging) ...*

I try to explain why almost all of the buildings north of the Yukon River, including those at which we now stop for lunch, are trashy ATCO trailers. How hundreds of these trailers, left over from pipeline construction camps, were offered at auction for pennies. How they're historic by local standards. I point out that despite the low ceilings, the shabby exteriors, the puddles in the dirt parking lot, that this rest stop is sanitary and well-run, not to mention home to the only flush toilets for 115 miles.

Those that don't accept these conditions, don't say anything. Most guests are sporting and cheerful about their tours, much more so than I had imagined before I took the job. Perhaps this is because the reservations workers back in the trailers in Fairbanks make a point of not sugar-coating anything. Perhaps it's because the people on the tour have paid so much for it they are determined to have a good time.

Probably, though, it's because I had expected a stereotype. I girded myself at first for "tourons," ignorant, truculent, abrasive boors, intent on demanding everything and learning nothing.

But I don't get them. Sometimes people are disappointed or dismayed, usually when their spouse had done all the vacation planning. Sometimes people get irate at the necessary speed with which they shuffle through our stops. Sometimes there are dumb questions, too, and—even worse—dumb attempts to engage the driver in policy debates, about everything from Native culture to Arctic oil drilling. I gain aptitude, hurriedly, in the twin fields of "hiding my opinion," and, more importantly, "abruptly changing the subject."

But I am happy, on the inside, because at least they're paying attention.

*F 156.9 D 339.2 ... Begin steep descent northbound followed by steep ascent; dubbed the "Roller Coaster."*

By now I have related to everyone the story of the Dalton Highway: How the Atlantic Richfield company found oil at the Arctic Ocean margin; how they plotted out eight billion dollars' worth of pipeline; how, dollar signs in their eyes, the oil giants took five months to punch a straight line of loose gravel through 350 miles of rolling wilderness.

Coming out of a stand of black spruce, the bus suddenly tilts abruptly downward. The grade is maybe a dozen degrees, but as the dip ahead of us fills the windshield, it might as well be sixty. Before us is not so much a valley as a canyon, and whistles, then awed silence, come from behind me we inch down in first gear. "This," I say into the mic, "Is what I mean when I say the Dalton was not built to highway standards."

Near the bottom, I pop back into second then into drive, gravity on my side now, and rocket back up the far wall. I love the moment. Back home, driving on interstates and ring roads and suburban cross-streets, I wonder whether some of their minds will drift back to this day, and perhaps lurch a little at the memory.

*F 180.3 D 315.8 Turnoff to east at crest of hill for Finger Mountain BLM Wayside. Improved rest area with two outhouses, parking, interpretive trail.*

For a time, the trees are gone; at Finger Mountain, a stack of granite rubble beside a rise in the road, the view stretches past a landscape of low grasslands and brush in every direction. It's a faint harbinger of the landscape to the far north, but for most of the people that follow me on a five-minute walk to take in the view, this is the closest to the Arctic tundra they will come.

Most tours go as far as the Arctic Circle—almost visible now past the rocky horizon—before turning around; others as far as Coldfoot, eighty miles up the road. The only guests who make it all the way to Deadhorse have plunked down close to \$1,000 for the two-day journey and return plane flight. As the summer progresses, the latter group grows in stature in my mind. They become the intrepid travelers, the ones with Arctic dreams in their hearts and some untrodden far horizon glowing in their eyes. They deserve my highest level of respect.

In fact—I must continually remind myself—they’re just the ones with the most money. These people crawling around on top of the outcrop, the ones who will soon turn around and suffer through another nine hours on the road rather than spring for a return plane ticket, these Filene’s-basement vacationers: they are my peer group. If I were visiting Alaska in their situation, intent on making it to the Arctic, I might take the same tour.

Now, sitting on the other side of the steering wheel, mentally divvying up passengers by the expected size of their tips, I am amazed how easy this is to forget.

*F 191.9 D 304.2 ... Road descends 9 percent grade next 2 miles northbound. Watch for soft spots. Pavement ends.*

Northbound, this summit offers a first glimpse at the blue granite crowns of the Brooks Range, lined up expectantly on the far horizon. Southbound, the hill called “Beaver Slide” is the longest two miles on the highway, a relentless climb that reduces a twenty-five-seat bus into a Tonka truck, flailing impotently against gravity. The first time I scale it with passengers, I feel obliged to apologize; halfway up the muddy incline the bus—floored—has fallen below twenty miles per hour.

“Don’t worry,” I promise. “We won’t have to get out and push.”

The laughter that comes back is a little more nervous than I’d like.

*F 194.3 D 301.8 Turnout at pipeline access road and gravel pit to east. Moose and bear frequent willow thickets here.*

Generally, no one else on the bus has ever done this before. If I forget that fact, then the “tundra walk” that we all undertake on a soggy patch of ground just south of the Arctic Circle comes across as a perfunctory poke through the underbrush.

But I find somewhere to bury the weariness. I laugh off misguided comments about the deadly bears lurking behind every berry bush. I watch for the wonderment in people’s eyes as they first walk onto the tundra, bouncing around on mattress-soft soil. I chuckle with them, not at them, when they lean over to take photos of the small hole I dig to showcase the permafrost soil a few inches below us. I suppress my natural instinct, which is to scoff at the notion that this is a sad excuse for an expedition, being as it is all over so quickly I don’t bother turning off the bus.



*F 199.6 D 298.5 Turnoff to east for loop road to Arctic Circle BLM Wayside  
...Stop and have your picture taken with the sign. The well-known Arctic  
Circle sign with big blue earth on it shows you are at N66 33' W 150 48'. At  
this latitude, the sun does not set on summer solstice ... and it does not rise on  
winter solstice...*

The Arctic Circle moves.

It's an arbitrary line in the first place, based on meteorological facts that have mostly theoretical application: unless you're standing on a flat plain at sea level, the whole notion of twenty-four hours of light and darkness at the solstices just doesn't work. It also means that the circle isn't two feet wide, as the ceremonial sign posted there suggests, but more on a magnitude of miles. And since the earth wobbles slightly on its axis, this line isn't even stationary. All of this, of course, somewhat serves to deflate the experience of crossing the circle, so I speak not a word of it.

It was suggested in guide training that I use the lead-up to the Circle to emphasize the long and arduous struggle we've all undertaken to reach this mystical line. As per my definition of "adventure," I flat-out can't do this. So instead I simply offer some facts and let the implications speak for themselves: Of the 6.5 billion people on earth, maybe 3 million, 0.3 percent, live this far north. Of the 1.65 million people who visited Alaska last year, maybe 20,000 got this far. Voila; we're intrepid by association.

Next comes the red carpet, an NATC trademark that I grab out of the rear of the bus and ceremonially unfurl so everyone can cross the line in style. Then, while the passengers are busy commemorating the occasion with an endless string of photos, I dash back to the bus, machete through several layers of plastic wrap, and swiftly prepare between four and twenty-four plates of chocolate cake, each topped with a dollop of Cool Whip. Running back outside, I proudly pass out NATC's *pièce de résistance*, a celebratory serving of "Tundra Mud with Permafrosting."

I can't say this name in earnest, though I try. What emerges is a tiny morsel of honesty whelmed in 100-proof irony and set alight. Over the summer, I gradually gain skill at modulating my tone, leaving the guests with a sense that I know that all of this—this cake, this red carpet, "permafrosting"—verges on the ridiculous, but that they paid for this trip, they're likable enough, and I'm not going to lump the universal malaise of the service industry on their shoulders.

This is exactly what I'm shooting for.

*F 214.2 D 281.9 Large turnout with ... information sign naming mountains at Gobbler's Knob ...*

If we've made it this far, it means I'm not on the one-day tour, which involves an abrupt and unceremonious about-face directly after the Arctic Circle for the robust ride home. Instead, we're off to the truck stop at Coldfoot for the night.

After hours spent traversing the low, forested hills of the Yukon uplands, we round a curve and before us heave the southern flanks of the Brooks Range, a 130-mile-wide chain of scree-covered massifs dwarfing the dwindling forest. In the middle of a broad valley ahead sits Pump Station No. 5, a sprawling complex of factory buildings built to regulate the oil pressure in the pipeline. A former resident of the area, an elderly Native woman who now lives in Juneau, rides with me one day and tells me a story:

"The Alyeska pipeline folks at the Pump Station there always send a helicopter out to the town of Wiseman to bring a guy dressed as Santa, to give the kids gifts. One year the pilot was a rookie, couldn't find the airfield, and spent a while hovering and passing over the town before he eventually landed. But there was an old hippie in town with a marijuana grow, and when he saw that helicopter swooping and passing back and forth, he panicked and he burned his whole crop!"

I love the woman, who seems to have the whole of Alaska writ in the lines on her face, and I love the story. From that day on, I tell it almost every trip: because it is funny, but also because I want to see how my mixed bag of guests will react to some lightweight drug humor.

In return, I am met with stony silence from some of the more staid Midwestern God-fearers, set off by the guffaws and giggles of everyone else. This as expected, but still makes for a novel dynamic to observe *in situ*. A divided America, united on the Haul Road.

*F 249.4 D 246.7 Turnout.*

Headed southbound with a group of guests who had just flown into Coldfoot, I see a road grader working in my lane on an incline. I can't see over the hill ahead; I call the grader driver on the CB radio, and he tells me to pass him.

So I swerve carefully into the oncoming traffic lane. As I speed by the grader, I realize the guy in the cab doesn't have any better view of the road ahead than I do. He could quite easily have sent me into the path of an

oncoming semi truck, and in fact, he had—one hurtles by us maybe thirty seconds after I hurriedly clear back into the right lane.

The Japanese hipster riding in the seat beside me taps me on the arm and points at the oncoming semi, and his disbelieving expression tells me all I need to know. “Don’t worry about it,” I tell him, not believing it myself. I return to narrating the geological history of the Brooks Range, but for miles, if not days, I am distracted and perturbed by the crash that wasn’t. I remember, a little too late, one of the more valuable things that NATC has drilled into me: bring them back to Fairbanks disappointed and irate, bring them back at 4 a.m., but whatever you do, bring them back.

*F 253.6 D 242.5 Coldfoot Airport.*

On the sunny, windswept tarmac of the Coldfoot airstrip, I parse out to the departing passengers their official “Arctic Circle Crossing Certificates,” taking the occasion to remind them of the terrific day they’d all had and, less directly, how they should all now lavish me with cash before boarding. I thus enter the inscrutable world of the Tip, in which the people who seemed disinterested slip me \$20 and ones who seem to want to adopt me leave me empty-handed. I shove the money in my pocket without looking, wave as the plane shoots off into the summer sky, check into my hotel room, sign a time card, and exhale.

I am now free, usually with a roughly twenty-four hour layover in the glorified truck stop at Coldfoot, remarkable mostly for its dramatic siting at the heart of the Brooks Range. Most days I arrive too exhausted to do anything but ravage the dinner buffet and pass out at 9 p.m. But when I find the energy, there is an easy trail through the woods leading to a peaceful river bluff, and there is a climbable mountain peak in every direction. After hours of perpetual motion, Coldfoot’s most sublime pleasure lies in forging ahead at my own pace.

*F 257 D 239.1 ... loop road to Coldfoot (pop. 15); food, gas, lodging, post office, phone.*

I take off my boots, roll up my pants, and slowly force myself across a wide bend in Slate Creek. My bare feet ache from cradling the rounded, loose rocks and my legs are numb from the water by the time I reach the other side and begin to hack my way up the dense mountain underbrush. Two hours later, I stand on the summit of Coldfoot Mountain, sheltering myself from the harsh wind behind the cellular repeater and admiring a

commanding view of the pipeline, the road, and the endless summits on either side.

Another two hours on, legs scraped and bloody from bushwhacking through alder thickets, boots muddy from slogging through swampland, I arrive back at the river. The wide, shallow ford sits off to my left, but I decide to shorten the ordeal by crossing at a narrower spot.

Fifteen feet from shore, the bottom drops from knee- to waist-deep, and I lose my footing. Everything goes under but my head as I drift swiftly downstream. Kicking and pushing against the current, one hand still grasping my waterlogged footwear, I finally haul myself up, coughing, on the sharp granite boulders that buttress the Coldfoot airstrip on the far side of the river. I wring out my sodden clothes, squeeze what I can out of my boots, and trudge the half-mile back to the clothes dryers at the Coldfoot Hotel, squishing loudly all the way.

That, I think with soggy conviction, was an adventure.

*F 270.7 D 225.4 ... Wiseman Street ... leads 3 miles south along the Koyukuk River to Wiseman ... Wiseman (pop 17), 3 miles south of the highway, is a historic mining town on the Koyukuk River established in 1908.*

Cruise line money doesn't stay in Alaska. It ends up in Florida, or Seattle, or Holland, and much of the time that's not just the price of the cruise, it's also the cruise-line-owned hotels, restaurants, and shops that line every tourist spot from Ketchikan to Barrow. When passengers ask me why I took a job with NATC, I tell them it's because it is a real Alaskan company, founded by four high school friends from Fairbanks, three of whom still run it. This is all true, and I very much like and respect all three guys, who work as hard as anyone there.

But my anti-corporate pride gets harder to stand on as the summer progresses. NATC's parent company, I learn, owns practically every way station along the Dalton route: The lunches visitors buy at Yukon River Camp, the souvenirs they pick up in Joy, the hotel beds they occupy in Coldfoot, all spring from the same source.

This even goes for the most atmospheric spot on the Haul Road, the rustic gold rush town of Wiseman. People still live year-round in this collection of falling-apart cabins nestled on a bend in the Koyukuk. There is still a working gold mine down the road. Those are real moose antlers and wolf skulls playfully adorning the house of Jack Reakoff—but Reakoff also spends his summers employed by NATC, walking visitors around his home and the village's church and museum four or five times a day. By

the time visitors reach the museum, they're walking on a parcel of NATC property that makes up a sizable chunk of the town.

This irks me, and I feel like a hypocrite if I don't tell the guests this, especially if we've already had a frank discussion of the cruise lines. So I usually do, slipping it in after a telling phrase like "In the interests of full disclosure..."

What surprises me is they don't seem to care one way or another. I never decide whether to be relieved at their lack of indignation or annoyed at it.

*F 317.3 D 178.8 Last spruce tree prior to crossing beyond the tree zone in Arctic.*

The Farthest North Spruce Tree on the Dalton Highway Corridor (as it is so named) grew for centuries in one of the toughest environments imaginable for a tree. Then, three or four years ago, someone cut a ring out of the bark, killing it. It still stands, brown and spindly, a reminder of anonymous thoughtlessness.

Were it just a mile north, the elements would have finished the tree off long before the vandals: as we near the continental divide, the climate grows too harsh for any trees at all. No more yellow birches, gently quaking aspens, even sickly black spruce. Just mountains and undulating soft green tundra for 180 more miles.

This moment alone makes Deadhorse worth the trip. After 300 miles of landscape by degrees—shallowing hills, growing massifs, gentle gradations of forest and river—change strikes all at once. Up until now, we could have been driving through the Rockies or the Cascades. Now we're in Alaska to stay.

"Welcome to the real Arctic," I tell them, knowing it myself to be true.

*F 324.3 D 171.8 ... Begin long, steep (12 percent), winding, uphill grade northbound to Atigun Pass.*

During my first trip over 4,800-foot Atigun Pass, the Department of Transportation is wetting and grading the highway. As I try to climb up the narrow string of road, hemmed in by sheer mountains to my left and a straight drop-off to my right, I slide all over the place. Too fast and I risk losing control; too slow and I get bogged down in viscous, swallowing mud. I can hear my passengers holding their breath, imagine them crossing

their fingers, eyeing the dents on the guardrail. I stay to the middle of the road and pray that the truck traffic slacks off, just for the next few minutes.

Atop the pass, Dall sheep crowd the road. A simple sign notes the continental divide; from here on out, the rivers flow alongside us to the Arctic Ocean. Back down a roller coaster slope and we reach the postcard-perfect Atigun Valley: Mountains buttress the road on either side, bisected on occasion by river valleys streaming into the hazy distance. No more trees to block the view, just a straight shot of road, river and pipeline coursing through the rounded vale as we follow it toward an empty horizon.

By this point my finely-honed narration has petered out, giving way to informal conversation or no talk at all. In Atigun Valley, I usually can't think of anything to say that wouldn't be drowned out by the silence.

*F 358.8 D 139.3 Side road leads southwest 1.5 miles to Galbraith Camp airstrip and Alyeska buildings; 4.2 miles to old camp pad and camping area...*

Six people, not counting me, sit at the rough campsite at Galbraith Lake eating bag lunches: two spectacularly permissive middle-aged parents, their two daughters and their two sons. The children are all younger than ten. They can't wait to get to the hotel. It's still 140 miles away.

It is my first-ever two-day tour all the way to Deadhorse, and I want to scream. At the children whose only means of communication are whining and crying; at the parents who quietly allow their sons to beat each other with the caribou hooves outside Jack Reakoff's house; at myself for not finding a different summer job. But I cannot yell at them. Should I? Could I? Would it jeopardize my job? My potential \$100 tip? Does it matter? Has anyone, ever, told these children to shut up? Told them "No, you can't have that?"

Later, in the decrepit hotel in Deadhorse, I politely eat dinner with the family as the children sit glued to a giant cafeteria TV. At one point, the commercials come on and one boy delivers his mother the most ridiculous in his long series of requests and demands.

"Mommy, can I have Cigarrest?"

She snorts out a "No." I want to laugh and sob at the same time.

A week later, on another trip, I travel down from Deadhorse with three intelligent, engaging older couples. These six thoughtful adults and I will eat and talk and laugh together, and when I drop them off in Fairbanks they will exchange phone numbers with each other and give me

phenomenal tips. This is not a dream; it happens. I know this now. A week prior, stranded in Deadhorse in the child-fueled nadir of my summer, I only knew I wanted it to end.

*F 379.1 D 117 Pullout used by hunters in caribou season.*

The Brooks Range doesn't peter out or fade away: there are mountains and then there are none. In their stead rises a rolling plain of gentle hills and dales stretching to the horizon, painted a rich dark green. It could easily stand in for northern Iowa or Nebraska, hardy short grasses and caribou lichen substituting for the corn and barley. Bluffs blur in the heat haze in the distance. If it were not so foreign, the landscape might seem boring; but the spot we are in, the knowledge of the incredible isolation, undercuts it, hushes us.

I can imagine the tedium of the long-haul trucker, traversing this landscape twice a week for a decade. For now I remain rapt, taking in the hills with the same vivid interest as the camouflaged hunters, crossbows in hand, stationed at the end of every pullout.

*F 436.7 D 59.4 Last Chance state wayside ... Panoramic views, weather permitting, of Arctic coastal plain.*

One day a full-length Princess Cruises bus beats us to the lone outhouse and twenty people wait in line. I apologize to my female guests for the wait and cordially suggest that the male ones go find some cover. I peer through the tinted windows of the behemoth Princess bus, forty-four cushioned seats filled with graying, sedentary cruise-buying units, and I ponder if this summer has deflated my stereotypes of tourists, or merely deflected them.

The road bottoms out at sea level on the endless flat of the Arctic Coastal Plain. I slow down and encourage everyone to keep an eye out for wildlife. It isn't that there is more wildlife out here; there's just no longer anything in the way to keep us from seeing it. We speed on; caribou and musk oxen graze beside the gravel. We don't need road signs to pick up on the fact that we are nearing the end.

*F 496.1 D 0 ... Northern end of Dalton Highway. Continue on this road until you reach a stop sign, where business signs will point you in the direction of various services ... Since Deadhorse in no way resembles a traditional town, it's hard to know when you are in it ...*

*... For security reasons, travel north of Deadhorse, including visits to the Arctic Ocean, is limited to commercial tours.*

Guests, despite my attempts to forewarn them, are aghast at how ugly the mirage of oil towers, storage silos, and gray modular buildings that constitutes Deadhorse truly is. "It's a company town," I explain, steeling them for it. "Don't expect anything." And yet they do, perhaps transposing it with Barrow, which, ugly though it may be, is at least an actual town where people live. Deadhorse is like the rear end of a gas station, spread over 100 miles and manned by 5,000 greasy pump attendants.

Like it or not, it's where we are. I check everyone into the trailer hotel, share a dinner ladled beneath heat lamps, and drive the group down to the one gift shop; then we traverse the few roads open to the public on the lookout for caribou hiding out from mosquitoes on the gravel pads. With literally nothing else to do, I spend the night watching sports on cable TV.

The next morning, we meet after a fatty buffet breakfast to board an officially chartered British Petroleum bus driven by a grumpy propagandist. We are shuttled eight miles to the shore of the Arctic Ocean, and tepidly dip our toes in at the edge of a sandy beach trucked in to cover up the thick, dark shore mud.

One August day, I turn from the shore to see a passenger from another bus turn to a companion and drop to one knee. She says yes. I suddenly remember where we are.

My final night in Deadhorse comes in mid-August. At midnight, the sun low, I throw on a too-light jacket and start to walk. Past the hotel lobby, the storage sheds, the above-ground sewer lines, the shallow ditches lining the rough gravel roads, and onto the dry and dusty tundra. I walk a straight line until the din of generators starts to fade behind me.

I stop, turn around, look at the lights stretching along the horizon, and I think of the soft shoulders I've skirted, the sharp phrases I've bitten off, the half-dead mornings I've endured to make it here.

The generator kicks, hums. The sun draws low. I feel the wind slap my face, and I start the journey home.