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THE MIDDLE-AGED MAN AND THE SEA

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“Got your seat belts on? I gotta say a few things, this locks the door—these two latches here, lemme lock it—flotation devices’re behind the seats, fire extinguisher’s in front of the pilot, OK? Let’s go.”

Layton A. Bennett, founder of the L.A.B. Flying Service, of Haines, Alaska, cranks the Helio’s engine, which catches on the third try. We taxi across the tiny airfield and pivot, the engine revs, and we’re aloft seconds after the plane begins its forward dash. A true bush plane, it doesn’t need much runway.

Layton promptly says, “We’re heavy.” Great. “What you got back there?” I refrain from pointing out that the heaviest single object in this plane is its pilot, a broad man pushing a substantial moraine of belly across his trouser tops.

Joy, Alex, and I had been stowing gear when Layton arrived with an any-landing-you-can-walk-away-from look, his boots unzipped and trousers half outside them, one torn pocket of a checkered sport coat hanging loose. His log of bush flying runs to thousands of hours; so now, says Joy, “Layton is interested only in the more exotic runs”—without benefit of AccuWeather or runways other than the handmade clearings known locally as “airports.” Layton and I were

introduced. He unhooked the plane from its anchor (his motorcycle) and our donkey work resumed while he ran through the preflight check-list.

The aircraft's weight, it seems, had not been worth checking. No one but me seems concerned—least of all our pilot, who shouts a steady stream of conversation.

Joy and Alex are professional guides whose résumés include rivers from several continents, rock faces and ice faces, seasons benign and seasons unforgiving. They are absurdly overqualified for our little jaunt.

Yukon Dave, getting the close-ups of Layton's weathered ears (like tires with 40,000 miles), will foot the bill. His outdoor skills, undiminished by middle age, are primarily moral: tenacity in locomotion, reasonable good humor a reasonable amount of the time, and a knowledge of his limitations. He is determined that any harm befalling him in mountain, desert, forest, or fruited plain will be the result of demonstrable bad luck. It will not be his fault and he will suffer no posthumous embarrassment. His motto: Death Without Dishonor.

Low clouds cover the passes, so Layton swoops along the valleys, following the Chilkat and Tsirku upstream. The Tsirku, our way out, is a braided river—a fretwork in which geological change is on fast forward, looping and lacing through channels sliced in silt carried from its glacial source to join the Chilkat at an alluvial fan three miles wide. Misreading the shifting channels could leave us with no water to float the boat and a long, laden slog to find some. Joy and Alex discuss routes. I feel—not happily, and not for the last time—that I am being cared for.

“Devil's Elbow!” Layton banks steeply to follow the river's bend. “A sweeper!” He stands the plane on its left wing to let us see. Sweepers are the only hazards—trees fallen across a channel that can, with swift slapstick comedy, empty a raft of its occupants. The plane rolls

abruptly right as Layton shouts, “Another!” Joy and Alex, taking care of me, look for river-level indications to serve as warnings.

“That’s the *good* airport over there! It’s 900 feet long!”

Alex thinks he spots wheel ruts among the trees. Our airport is not this good. It is a gravel bar on which, some years ago, a shovel brigade spread rocks. I can’t pick it out until we touch down—a two-point landing to make up for the heavy load in back.

“You don’t want to blow the tail wheel!”

We unload quickly and stand clear as the Helio, scattering gravel, hops into the air. The clouds have lifted, so Layton takes the short way home.

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The Yukon Dave safari was a courtesy call on a countryside that had been slipping past for days as I traveled ferries along the Inside Passage from Seattle to Skagway—a thousand miles of seaway winding through the peaks of a mountain range submerged just west of the North American mainland. The ferries are commuter runs. Mountains on the mainland cut off the coast of Alaska’s panhandle from the rest of the continent; Haines and Skagway are the only towns accessible by road—from one to the other is 16 miles by sea, 359 by land.

Half the ferry’s stern is occupied by an ironically named “solarium”—a glass-roofed deck purporting to keep out rain, and on which sleeping bags are welcome. Traveling there, as a walk-on, was the recommended mode. It would cut the price in half and would be—I was assured, as if it were a selling point—“like Woodstock” (which I’m old enough to have skipped).

Every Friday summer evening the S.S. Columbia leaves Seattle for its week-long round trip to Skagway, the panhandle’s northernmost town. The equinox was approaching—Skagway

losing six minutes of sun each day—when I queued to scramble for deck space on the season’s next-to-last run.

Once ticketed, we humped selves and packs aboard, up three flights, around the snack bar, and up once again. Deck chairs were quickly claimed and freestanding tents, some fresh from the showroom floor, pitched just aft of the solarium’s roof.

The engines throbbed, the ship slid from the pier, and on its PA system Johnny Horton whooped *North to Alaska*. The sun was setting, the mainland disappearing from the ground up until the Coastal Range was just a jagged outline. When the peaks went dark we ducked out of the wind, one by one, and tucked ourselves into sleeping bags, snug and separate until morning.

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Saturday, the sun preparing to rise: We are in the Strait of Georgia, between Vancouver Island and fingers of the BC coast. Islands poke through the sea, thick to their tide-lines with hemlock and spruce. Patches of fog squat in the mainland valleys and the sky is gray. Fishing boats will soon be at work, trolling from long slanting booms. The mainland’s snowy peaks offer a show of scenic majesty that will soon become wallpaper (foretaste, perhaps, of the downside of Heaven, a morning of bliss followed by an eternity of PBS). By mid-morning our Woodstock has begun domestic settling-in—reading, chatting, making temporary friends.

Cabin passengers, who need not rise with the sun, begin to invade our space. They study conspicuously disregarded signs stating that the DECK CHAIRS (including the one to which I have moral title) ARE NOT RESERVED, and that one is NOT to LEAVE BELONGINGS ON them. They get the message: These are our subway grates. Back off.

At the railing, I scan sea and shore with my monocular. Three sleeping bags are lined up beside me: for grandpa, grandma, and baby. Grandpa is Wayne Johnson, of Petaluma, California.

Wayne admires the monocular. I am pleased. “When you’re hunting,” he pats his shirt pocket, “you could keep it right in here.” Putting the glass to his eye: “Lets you see what you want to kill.” Wayne is a rancher and bow-hunter; his herd dog is below-deck, in Wayne’s truck. He will spend two weeks in the bush, hunting “moose, caribou, maybe bear.”

“How do you kill a bear with an arrow?”

“I suppose I’ll find out.” A moose, he says, can be shot and not know it—then crumple, arteries severed. “Those arrows are mean.”

My afternoon is spent reading Martin Amis’s *Money* and glancing from time to time at scenery. Toward evening the walls close in. The cloud ceiling falls in pieces. Some settle on our narrow iron ribbon of sea. Others, suspended, partly screen the mountains—looking like a cartoonist’s take on heaven, minus winged harpists.

Soon after dark the rain begins. The “solarium,” not content with passive irony, begins to leak. Sleepers beneath drips relocate. Others will pay for dry selves with soaked belongings.

We reach Alaska shortly after sunrise, docking at the island town of Ketchikan. The rain occasionally relents to a kind of falling fog pitched to tourists as “Ketchikan Mist.”

There will be a four-hour layover. Waiting buses offer trips to the Totem Pole Park. I go to church, fond of these out of the way congregations. The Roman Catholic parish of Skagway, at the end of the ferry line, totals eleven families. A circuit priest visits on alternate weekends and in his absence a communion service is held (all squared up, we are assured, with Rome). When I reach Skagway, four of those families will be joined by me and two dozen lusty-singing,

baseball-hatted geezers from a cruise ship. We will “offer our own petitions in silence” and the Detroit Tigers will receive a discreet boost.

By the time Mass ends in Ketchikan the “mist” has considerably thickened. Fully rain-suited, I kill an hour on the street between the ferry terminal and the cruise ship dock. All the parked cars have Alaska plates and dealership decals from the lower 48. Not too many people, one gathers, are *from* here.

By the time I return, the solarium has acquired a third-world look: clothes drying on rails and hooks, meager possessions being patiently sorted. New passengers have boarded, including—middle-aged nightmare—a group of teenagers possessed by near hysterical talk and laughter. Family discount, please: We’re the Mansons.

We leave Ketchikan just before noon and cross the floor of an open cylinder of sunshine. The deck fills with people. Its waterlogged carpet steams even as we approach another dark curtain of rain. I rent a blanket from the purser. I’m leaving at Petersburg, I say; will there be a rush to return the blankets when we dock?

“Not many people get off there.”

Attractions, it seems, are blessedly absent, thanks in part to the absence of cruise ships, which aren’t nimble enough to negotiate the 20-mile Wrangell Narrows that separates Mitkof Island from two others. The Columbia snakes slowly through by using her side-thrusters, extra propellers set at right angles to the keel.

Petersburg advertises itself as “Little Norway” and, if that’s not discouraging enough, as “Alaska’s Best Kept Secret.” Promotional literature lists among the town’s attractions its new water treatment plant (non-functioning and the subject of a lawsuit).

The channel is so narrow that Petersburg looks like a river town until you notice the fishing boats tied up at its outer docks, their prows like puffed chests. The oil-slicked backwaters float a weird variety of home made boats-in-progress: plywood-doghouse-topped, Baptist-pulpit-bearing.

I've booked a B&B that overlooks the narrows. It's attached to a souvenir shop. At sunrise sea lions are often busy on its rocky beach. Luckily, they fail to show and I can sleep late.

Donna and Fred, two Long Island lawyers, have also stayed the night. As we eat our breakfast of waffles and jam, float planes boom across the harbor, then Doppler overhead to make the Sky King sound. We are hungry for nature—bears astride whales, seals balancing eagles on their noses, nature in the raw. A commercial fisherman will later set me straight about seals. In a few moments one of them can take a bite from each of 50 fish, and a herd can ruin a \$3000 net. The natural enemy of seals, he says, is the Uzi—a fact that no longer bothers him.

On a rainy Monday morning, craving nature in the raw, Donna and Fred and I rent a car. The local concept of “rental car”—or of “car” as such—is more relaxed than we're used to. For instance, we're not supposed to lock the doors, as they might not reopen.

We are after bear. Neither Donna nor Fred has ever seen a wild one. (Hunter S. Thompson said that one can't presume New Yorkers to be acquainted with any animals other than people, roaches, and poodles.) We head for the dump. On the way, I retail my modest but endlessly interesting adventures with black bears in the lower 48. There are no bears at the dump. We try the salmon ladder. No fish, ergo no bears.

We rumble over logging roads toward the south end of the island, which seems to be the habitat of just one creature—a bird, squat and butch, Jimmy-Hoffa-like, with a stylish flat-top. A

Teamster Bird. We study it through a scrim of rain and fogged windows, as it perches on a rock on a beach our map calls Woodpecker Cove. The Teamster Bird, we conclude, is a sea-going woodpecker.

From a lay-by on Mitkof Highway, a quarter mile of Fish and Game Service planking leads across a muskeg bog to the Blind River, and there we connect—four tall trees with one bald eagle apiece. Aquiline behavior is confined to the jeweled swiveling of huge white heads. The downpour is steady. Goretex'ed head to foot, I am comfortable enough, but Donna and Fred are soaked. On the drive home I extemporize a lecture, possibly underappreciated, on the care and selection of rain gear.

We dry out, finish the day with a good dinner of halibut (the local fish), and say our goodbyes, having night ferries to catch. Mine is a 40-hour milk run: Kake, Sitka, Angoon, Tenakee, Hoonah, Juneau, Haines (and the L.A.B. Flying Service).

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The unloaded Helio hops back into the air and soars straight away. Layton, disappointingly, does not circle back to make the Sky King sound; but he *has* left wheel-grooves in the sand. Now I can tell it's an airport.

We pitch the tent; rig a tarp awning 30 yards away, beside the fire; secure the food. The food box is, I hope, sufficiently smell-proof to attract no bears. It's kept far from the tent and Alex keeps handy his pump action shotgun, a model known as The Persuader. The neighborhood is reassuringly free of tracks and scat.

Our camp is separated from LeBlondeau glacier and its outwash flat by a terminal moraine, from which the ice has receded a good distance and through which a glacier-fed stream

has cut a channel on its way to join the Tsirku. The alder is too thick to bushwhack and the possibility of hidden bears a little too unnerving, so we head for the glacier along a game trail by the stream. When the trail plunges into the brush we pause to shout and sing, announcing our presence and inviting nearby animals to make dignified retreats.

I mention my whistle, which I sometimes remember to carry in the crowded Eastern woods. I could be blasting away on that. “That’d probably be pretty good,” Alex says. He’s being polite but I regret that, by leaving the whistle behind, I have missed my opportunity to make a contribution. (We will not see any bears. They are busy getting fat in the clear streams running with salmon.)

We circle around the ice cave from which the stream emerges and onto the glacier’s lower slopes. The footing here is good—a blanket of dirt, lots of grit embedded in the surface. A glacier melts back at the same time as it slides forward, and debris that has been squeezed onto it by a glacial confluence or deposited by rock slides from enclosing valley walls concentrates like the dirt crust on curbside city snow.

Glacial ice is hard, dense, and slow-melting (much prized for beer coolers). It is the product not only of cold, but also of stress—which, by altering how it absorbs or scatters light, makes the depths of glacial ice swimming-pool blue. Water-filled hollows look like Jacuzzis. There are empty holes, too, without discernible bottoms.

As we climb higher, rocks slip loose to skitter past us. The ice becomes more tightly squeezed; the buckling surface looks as if it might be in pain. Easy walking ends at an ice fall, a heap of broken knife-edged slabs flanked by unpleasant drops. I’m content to turn around.

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A remnant of the storm that shook the tent all night persists at dawn. We lie snug in our sleeping bags, pretending to wait for a letup—then accept our fate and, in rain of varying intensity, break camp, rig the raft (which seems to have a slow leak), and push off. We'll meet our pickup 20 miles downstream, just below the junction with the Chilkat.

The river is up: slices in its banks look fresh. Its load of silt turns the water gray as used paint thinner and hisses as it scrapes the raft's skin. The temperature is, I'd say, forty-five degrees—as is the slant of the wind-driven rain.

To minimize counterproductive effort I paddle only when yelled at, a technique I have also found useful in canoes. When yelled at to back-paddle I comply with vigor, despite the likelihood that I will pitch backward onto the deck. Mostly I bail and stare through the tunnel of a tightly drawn rain hood. I point out wildlife (eagles and moose). I flex my stiffening fingers, watch for bears, and review the symptoms of hypothermia—neglecting for some reason to throw in The Seven Danger Signs of Cancer. On command I pitch backward onto the deck. How is it going, I wonder, with the great DiMaggio.

Beyond Devil's Elbow lies the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve, 75 square miles that will soon be the residence of three to four thousand wintering eagles. Scores of early check-ins are now visible in the trees (white dots high in the upper branches) or perched on driftwood in the flats.

The river begins to widen and in its open reaches stiff winds threaten to stop us dead. Paddling is a welcome source of heat. Communication, aside from paddling instructions, deteriorates to lame jokes about the weather.

As we land the rain stops. The wind calms briefly, then begins to scuff up white caps on the river. The ferry ride to Skagway will be bumpy.

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Skagway, northern terminus of the Marine Highway, is authentically bogus, a theme park version of its heyday as a deep water port for Klondike minerals hauled over White Pass. When mining slowed and the freight railroad shut down, Skagway hooked itself to the heart-lung machine of tourism and became Prospector Town—encountering which threatens my will to live. The antidote to despair is plans, dedication, and purpose: I will go North. My land is there, two non-contiguous square inches of the Yukon once purchased from the sponsors of *Sergeant Preston* for 50 cents plus four Shredded Wheat box tops.

When mining revived, a road was paved across the pass to join the Klondike Highway. It's traveled by huge ore trucks and by tourists—including, mayhap, others searching for their land.

Several calls are required to locate what seems to be the last remaining rental car in Skagway, available on terms far less favorable than I've gotten at New York City airports. When I show up 15 minutes later there is no car. I make what, for me, amounts to a scene. I say:

“That's not very nice.”

Three employees are soon shouting at one another. I must try this more often. The manager takes me outside and points at a mud-spattered Chevette.

“This used to be one of my rental cars. A girl from Anchorage kind of slid off the road and dented it, just kind of slid off, scraped a tree, and kept right on going. It's muddy from all that construction over in Canada.”

“It runs good?”

“Runs fine.”

I look at the dents. They look like dents you could dent and then slide off and keep right on going with. For some reason I think these thoughts with the pronunciation of Dizzy Dean: *slid* is *slood*, rhymes with *good*, which is how the man says it runs.

“Just these dents here? And you’re sure it runs OK?”

“Hey, I’m not the one without a car.”

I take it. The Alaskan concept of “insurance” seems to be as informal as that of “car.” This works, I think, to my advantage as I leave unsigned several lines of the rental agreement that alienate some of the juicier Natural Rights of Man.

Out on the curb an overalled youth is cleaning my car’s headlights, wiping silver-dollar-sized circles free of mud. I dismiss him. Dirty lenses concern me less than the cracks I now notice running three-quarters of the way across the windshield. Prioritizing the dent question caused me to overlook this detail, whose discovery plunges the will to live toward a new low.

More hesitation. More stewing. What the hell. I drive off and know instantly, with insane clarity, that this thing I have just done is a very stupid thing. The steering will fail on a switchback, the windshield will implode, car and driver will be humiliatingly rejected at the Canadian border, death and dishonor await. (As I recross the border an American customs agent will say: “I thought it was a rental car, but for a rental it looks kind of ... rough.”)

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The Chevette wheezes up White Pass. Across the canyon I see the ruler-straight cut of the old railroad bed, like a seam at which the mountain has been zipped together. Waterfalls fed by high snow fields smoke through the trees. The car vibrates in some weird mode that causes the shift lever, slowly and steadily, to unscrew itself. This hint of malignant purpose is unsettling; but the weather, at least, at last, is fine.

Clouds immediately cover the sun. Fog seeps across the pass and down the highway. Periodically, I screw the gear shift back into place. I have done a stupid thing and will suffer dishonor and death, not necessarily in that order.

On top of the pass, the Chevette stops straining as the highway flattens out across a rocky plateau. The fog disperses to reveal a scene of desolate romantic beauty—a profusion of ponds, scattered stunted trees making moderately successful assertions of the Life Force. I am disposed after all to live—disposed, even, to be on vacation.

The highway continues through the northwest tip of British Columbia, past the lakes from which the Yukon River begins its 2,000 mile S-bend to the Bering Sea. Lakes, trees, and sky shine in glossy postcard colors. The view east is sketched in charcoal, shadowy mountains topped with snow.

Just past the border of the Yukon Territory, the land opens up in CinemaScope—a plain burst by great humps of treeless mountains. Seventy-five miles further I reach my first junction: route 1 meets route 2. In this part of the world road numbering makes minimal demands. Route 1 is the Alaska (née Alcan) Highway, route 2 the Klondike Highway from Skagway. The road leaving Haines is successively Alaska 7, BC 4, and Yukon 3. Yukon 5 branches from 2 toward

Inuvik and the Beaufort Sea. My road map of Alaska, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories needs double digits just once: Alaska 10 is a spur off the highway from Fairbanks to Valdez.

At the junction of 1 and 2 an insanely optimistic hitchhiker sticks out his thumb. He proves to be a gold miner of the modern sort, operator of a multi-ton, many-hundred-horsepowered, hydraulic simulacrum of a prospector with a pan. He, too, is bound for White Horse, capitol of the Yukon Territory and home to three-quarters of its 25,000 souls. I leave him downtown, which is new and neat: offices, a quiche bar, a bookshop, McDonalds. The Yukon River is a few blocks away.

White Horse, just below the sixty first parallel, was the furthest north I'd ever been. Yet nineteen-twentieths of Alaska, an area more than twice the size of France, lies north of it; and outside a few pockets it is and always has been devoid of human presence.

I park near the river, scuttle down the bank, and dip my hand into its cool water. A few miles downstream the Yukon will churn through White Horse Rapids, the last big obstacle on the way to Norton Sound. Here, where a real adventure could begin, Yukon Dave has reached the end of his line. At 6 a.m. the non-guerilla air arm of L.A.B. will leave Skagway for Juneau, first of a series of quick hand-offs that should get him home by midnight. For a moment he delays, riffing the water's surface, sending a tiny wake down the royal road to the vast interior—down the Yukon River, running broad and clear.